

RTHK Radio 'Viewpoint' August 2001

- John Batten, Director of John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong.

After arriving in Hong Kong in 1992, I found a job and next day rented a flat; my criteria for the flat: cheap, large-ish, walking distance from Central and old (for its bigger rooms and higher ceilings). Somehow, I forget how and why, I was drawn to that no-man's land of old-ish flats and streets between Caine and Queen's Roads. It's technically Sheung Wan, near the antique shops of Hollywood Road and Cat Street; though, in older maps and references it is known as Tai Ping Shan. I like this older name: 'Tai Ping Shan'; it sounds established and solid and reflects back to a pre-colonial Hong Kong.

Directly behind the Tai Ping Shan area is The Peak. Looking over Tai Ping Shan District from The Peak clearly shows a unique area - there are very few new tall buildings in this area; most buildings are old and of five or six floors in height. So, from The Peak, the Tai Ping Shan area appears much like a grassy flat plain surrounded by a forest of tall and straggly trees. And that is intriguing - why has it not been bulldozed and re-developed?

The reasons are simple: the flats in these buildings are all individually owned and predatory developers find it difficult to consolidate building sites. The area's hilly topography is a disincentive for developers: flatter, more accessible sites are readily available in the New Territories. However, the main reason for the area to retain its unique feel is that it actually has bad 'fung shui'. The area's many temples, the large Tung Wah Hospital located in the midst of the district; coffin shops lining the lower parts of Hollywood Road; and, antique shops offering 'dead' furniture and artifacts are all pointers to Tai Ping Shan's bad fung shui. It is also rumored that the dragon living on The Peak has a 'flight path' through the Tai Ping Shan area that continues down towards the Harbour and eventually passes through the gap (for that purpose?) of the Shun Tak Centre's twin towers.

Stumbling around this area reveals a village-like Hong Kong. Built on a hill-side, Tai Ping Shan has lots of lanes, pathways and steps without the smelly presence of cars. Here, people use the streets as an extension of their homes: people sit under clotheslines, play mahjong at shop entrances, extend their businesses into the streets, Mandarin peel is drying in the winter sun (ready for Lunar New Year use) and the car-less streets are safe for children to play in.

The buildings in Tai Ping Shan are of the aggressively pragmatic style seen throughout Hong Kong. Rectangle-shaped brick and concrete blocks of flats of a height acceptable to their stair climbing inhabitants; with a roof on which the top floor occupants put their washing and each of the other floor's inhabitants place their TV arials. The basic rectangle shape of the flats has been embellished over time with parasitic-like illegal additions: balconies, protrusions, wire cages, washing poles, pot-plant holders, signs, and, finally, wires and cables that seem to have no obvious use. Each addition is an attempt to extend a small flat's living area into free and vacant space. These illegal structures are now vigilantly being

asked to be removed by the same Building Department that allows Hong Kong developers to build absurdly small new housing.

Hong Kong's government officials, who have ultimate power over the way our urban landscape looks, consider areas like Tai Ping Shan old, dirty and an opportunity for development. Hong Kong's landscape has developed as a pragmatic response to urban planning needs and problems related to housing and transportation, but little attention is placed on our urban streetscape - thus you have wide concrete, tree-less spaces totally inappropriate in our hot summer weather.

It is our urban streetscape that influences people's feelings about their city. However, the person 'in the street' has little influence on our modern urban design decisions.

It seems bizarre that it is in Hong Kong older areas - areas that historically have been minimally planned by government - these older areas have a quieter and more liveable environment.

This is not a plea for the nostalgic past. I know our older areas may also have rats, congestion, rubbish – but often the planned alternatives is simply bad architecture and denies Hong Kong's cultural allure. The challenge to Hong Kong's urban planners is to preserve the best features of our older urban areas with simple modern improvements and tree planting.

And as reminder to our government officials who are visiting Macau to see 'how they do it'. I remind them of the words of the traveller/writer Norman Lewis, who wrote in his 1997 biography *The World, The World*:

“...those parts of the world where I have travelled most happily, are those countries which had most preserved their peculiar style and character, and... those that seemed hardly worth a visit ... were those that had succumbed to a flaccid and joyless prosperity which they were doing their best to export to the rest of the world.”

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