A Softer, Greener and Better-Connected Liveable City

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Hennessey Road,Wanchai (source: Author and Irene Liu)

Every morning I ride my electric bike through beautiful tree-lined avenues, animated with dappled sunlight and cool breezes, to arrive at my co-working place. I take the express elevator from the lushly planted open ground lobby, gliding through a 20-storey high living forest, to work in the semi-outdoor collaborative hub surrounded by vibrant local plant species. I have lunch on the rooftop urban farm before heading home early afternoon, followed by dinner on the communal landscaped terrace. After dinner, we jog along the waterfront boulevards before heading home across the local neighbourhood parks.

Other people would conjure up different images of their ideal liveable cities. Mine is very green, accessible, connected, full of vitality and beautifully landscaped places in which I can work and relax. I am connected with nature within and around my neighbourhood. I can get to work and most facilities within a 15-minute walking distance through tree-lined streets with green terraces and breathing facades, no longer dominated by traffic noise, congestion and pollution. I believe these are the key characteristics for a liveable city.

As urban designers, we need to challenge our conventional city environment to create places that are meaningful, memorable and sustainable. There have been intensive debates about a city's liveability in response to the current pandemic, our changing lifestyles and the New-Normal. This is a transformative period and we understand the need to re-address key drivers of urban planning to focus more on wellness, human experience, equity, inclusivity, biodiversity and resilience through a symbiotic and nature-based approach. We can no longer plan our cities based on economics, efficiency, traffic and infrastructures, simply to provide functional spaces to live and work in. We cannot rely solely on technologies if we want to create human-centric cities.

The United Nations projected that by 2050, 75% of the world's population or 10 billion people, will live in cities. For this enormous shift, an additional 0.2 trillion sq.m. of floor space may be required. This is equivalent to building a New York City every month for the next 30 years. Unfortunately, cities also contribute to 75% of the world's CO2 emissions. Ultimately, well-designed compact cities that integrate with and support nature will be one of the most sustainable ways to fight climate change, be Net-Zero and improve our well-being. Cities such as Singapore, London, Paris and New York are already undergoing such key urban transformations.

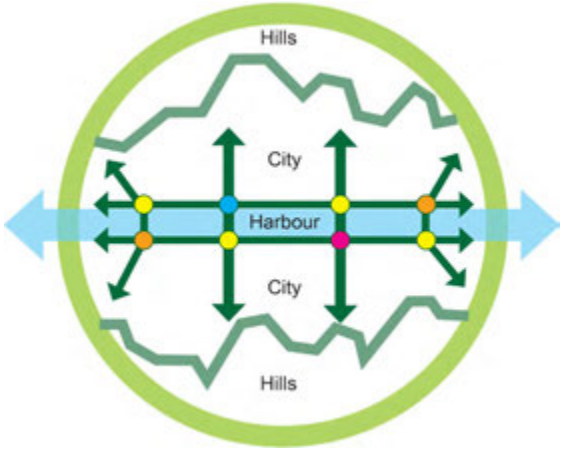
Hong Kong does not score very high on liveability, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index. It evaluates a city's liveability based on 5 key criteria; stability, healthcare, education, infrastructure, culture and environment. It ranks Melbourne, Vienna and Vancouver as the 3 most liveable cities in the world in 2020, with Hong Kong at 38th. However, Hong Kong is also the most expensive city in the world according to the Mercer's

2020 Cost of Living Survey. This miscorrelation between cost of living and liveability has been a key concern for the Hong Kong government. This is exacerbated by our city planning which has been developed largely as individual systems of movement, logistics, functions, open spaces, etc. to not conflict with each other, rather than be integrated with each other.

Surrounded by a rich ecosystem of hills and water, bisected by the Victoria Harbour, Hong Kong is geographically unique. The presence of the waterfront and the hills can be appreciated in many parts of the city. However, despite its proximity to nature, Hong Kong is not a very green city by any standards. Hong Kong still lacks a structured green urban network that interacts directly with our daily lives, such as journeys to and from work. Although we do not have a choice but to build tall, we have a choice to build greener and healthier to humanize our urban environment and to create better well-being and a more equitable quality of life.

I believe that connectivity and nature are the fundamental drivers that shape our liveability, health and social equality. To move towards a softer and greener city, first, let's stitch together our city, waterfront and nature. We could create one of the most extensive networks of recreational green open spaces, our Urban Commons, in Asia. These are places where we share our experience and interests. Second, let's utilize green features extensively within the city. It is widely acknowledged that biophilic design has substantial emotional and physical impacts on our well-being. Hong Kong could be one of the first high-density biophilic cities.

Green System in Hong Kong



Green System Diagram (source: author)

It is estimated that by 2030, 30% of the world's cities will exist in extreme climatic conditions. The benefits of greenery on carbon-capture, noise reduction, climatic control, sense of relief, biodiversity, etc. are well acknowledged. London, for example, one of the greenest cities in Europe, is encouraging more tree planting with a 'Greener City Fund'. The new UK Environment Bill will require all future development to demonstrate Biodiversity Net Gain to ensure habitats for wildlife are enhanced on or off-site. Paris and Madrid both plan to create extensive urban forests around and in key areas of the cities. Hong Kong's urban planning urgently needs a coherent vision that interweaves nature back into the city fabric.

Although Hong Kong is one of the most compact and distinctive waterfront cities in the world, its 73km long harbourfront has struggled to play a key role in our public realm despite it being our biggest public realm asset. Only a portion of the waterfront is designed for nature and the public. Very few buildings or streets can access the waterfront directly even in key districts such as Central, Wan Chai or Causeway Bay. Under the championship of the Harbourfront Commission, Victoria Harbour is slowly going through a series of transformations. To position the waterfront as our prime civic and social destination, we need to have a more unified and embracing vision to form a contiguous city-wide recreational backbone that would add enormous social values to the city.

We need to activate our waterfront with a more creative and greener approach, a richer mix of functions such as cafes, play areas, sports grounds, performance spaces, gardens. We need to soften the waters edge and its microclimate more with landscape. We also need to blur the boundaries between private and public domains to create waterfront 'living rooms' that focus on diversity, vitality and people movement. Los Angeles is planning to rejuvenate most of its 82km long riverfront with public realm interventions. Sydney's Darling Harbour and Singapore's Marina Bay are also good examples of waterfront precincts that have become major heartbeats of the cities.

Hennessey Road,Wanchai (source: Author and Irene Liu)

Green City Trails

Every person or family should be able to access the waterfront easily. We need to improve pedestrian accessibility substantially, especially in the north-south directions, creating a network of green routes through the city fabric. These routes could also link local green trails, destinations, heritage sites and open spaces together. For example, Wan Chai harbourfront could connect with Bowen Road Trail through the historic local market and its small streets, making this a unique recreational experience.

Current wayfinding and connections are often unclear and uninviting, intercepted by multi-level traffic. The re-arrangement of movement will involve long-term re-planning of vehicular routes giving priorities to pedestrians, but it will have long-lasting social and environmental impacts on our city's quality of life. Paris, for example, is now banning traffic along parts of the River Siene on Sundays through extensive local consultations.

Sydney's Darling Harbour (source: Author)

Hennessey Road,Wanchai (source: Author and Irene Liu)

Think of great cities such as London, Paris, Sydney, New York that celebrate their harbours with multiple bridges. Perhaps the most controversial proposal would be a green pedestrian bridge across the Victoria Harbour. It will have substantial engineering and logistics challenges. However, the bridge could be a very bold and impactful destination that completes the network of open spaces and green routes in both Hong Kong Island and Kowloon to become a major linear park, offering dynamic and unique perspectives of the cityscape.

Cities such as London and New York are well known for their diversity of public green spaces that shape their city characteristics. The World Economic Forum has indicated that Access to Green Space as one of the five major inequalities highlighted by COVID-19. These spaces

need to respond better to our local climate, demographics, amenities and accessibility, particularly when we have an increased ageing population and diminishing living spaces. The World Health Organization recommends 9 sq.m of public space per person. Residents in Tokyo City has 5.8 sq.m, Singapore has 7.4 sq.m whilst Hong Kong has between 2.5 sq.m to 1 sq.m of open space per person. We simply need to create more and better public green spaces that are evenly distributed across the city, more accessible, diverse and beautifully designed. In New York for example, Michael Bloomberg created 70 new green public spaces in the city during his mayoralty.

City Green Spaces

Hennessey Road,Wanchai (source: Author and Irene Liu)

Every family or person should be able to access a public green space within a 10 to 15 minutes' walk. Good public green spaces improve societal equality and equity especially in our post-pandemic 'Slow-down' culture. We need to move away from the idea of 'gated' green spaces. We are too reliant on commercial development to provide segregated private podia or resident gardens. We need a strategic review to re-calibrate some of our existing parks to become city foci and community hubs. Well-designed pocket green spaces, such as Pak Tsz Lane Park in Sheung Wan should be encouraged, but more outwardly connected. They are hidden gems as well as potential social hearts. Glasgow, for example, is implementing a 'parklet' idea where most streets will have small pocket communal green spaces for the residents.

While I am not promoting an upside-down city, I believe that green spaces on multiple levels could create a more diverse public realm without draining vitality from the ground. We need to optimize opportunities available within a high-density, high-rise urban fabric to define urban concepts three-dimensionally, utilizing the verticality of our built environment. Recent examples include Singapore's Oasia Hotel where a semi-open foyer becomes a unique elevated green space, and the Park Royal Hotel that utilizes semi-open landscaped courtyards to provide visual and physical relief and a city oasis to enhance biodiversity.

Pak Tsz Lane Park (source: Author)

Softer Streets

Places such as Barcelona's La Rambla, Paris' Champs-Elysees, Singapore Orchard Road and Seoul's Cheonggyecheon are all memorable urban thoroughfares that engage nature with movement. Streets should not merely be movement corridors with metal barriers to separate people from vehicles, but as destinations that give priorities to nature, pedestrians and activities. Recent events in the city prove that we could actually pedestrianize major thoroughfares without affecting car movement substantially during the weekends. Streets take up approximately 80% of our open space. Imagine if even only half our main streets in Hong Kong werewell-landscaped and without barriers, it would greatly improve our city experience.

A recent urban design competition for Des Voeux Road in Central, highlighted typical problems with our streetscape and potential design strategies to re-balance priorities in our street design. For example, Hennessy Road, a major thoroughfare in Hong Kong, has very little greenery along parts of its 2km length. It focuses entirely on car movement rather than people. There are great opportunities for our streets to become distinctive and memorable destinations, driven by a more natural and humanized approach. Paris is now removing 60,000 car parking spaces and banning car access in major areas on Sundays to create more pedestrian zones and green open spaces through the 'Paris Respire' movement.

Ultimately, we need a softer and greener approach to our architecture and urban planning where streets and buildings need to offer and contribute public open spaces and greenery back to the city, in a dynamic and structured framework. These could be in the form of landscaped ground planes and street frontages, semi-outdoor lobbies, green facades and balconies, landscaped sky terraces, etc. The government needs to provide incentives and flexibility to promote communal green spaces that offer better tempered environment with cooler and cleaner air, better views and reduced traffic noise, that a low-density and low-rise city could not offer. This would support the post pandemic shift in our work-life patterns, increased demand forrecreational spaces, healthier and more flexible workplace.

Buildings such as Jean Nouvel's One Central Park in Sydney, Thomas Heatherwick's EDEN

project in Singapore and 1000 Trees in Shanghai, K11 Atelier North Point in Hong Kong should not simply be seen as design trends but as an evolving approach towards greener living, better biodiversity, and more humanized destinations, inviting nature back into our urban fabric.

Hotel Oasia (source: Author)

One Central Park Sydney

For me, a liveable city is not simply driven by economics, infrastructures and built form. It ought to be driven by our human needs, experience and wellness. As urban designers for high-density cities, we need to bring nature back into every aspect of our urban fabric and move towards a nature-positive society. We need to focus on creating better places for us as well as our flora and fauna. We need to connect public spaces together, focusing on pedestrian comfort and accessibility. We need to think three-dimensionally to create a more diverse green environment. We do not need a wholesale re-planning but we need to start with a cohesive approach that evolves organically and incrementally, based on the city's characteristics. More importantly, we need to work closely and collaboratively with other specialists, stakeholders and city residents.

Imagine, for a moment, walking down Hennessy Road. It is now a multi-layered green boulevard that connects seamlessly with the neighbourhoods. It is no longer dominated by traffic but a beautifully landscaped street with traffic calming rather than street barriers. The pavement width varies to create informal pocket green spaces. It is a unique destination with animated plazas and open lobbies across buildings. There are multiple green facades that breath, respond to the local climate, vary between day and night, and attract biodiversity. Lushly-planted sky terraces that reduce local heat island effects, become semi-outdoor coworking places. They connect across the skyline to offer dynamic perspectives of the most vibrant and liveable city.

One Central Park Sydney (source: Author)

Hennessy Road Image

'Architecture is measured against the past, built in the present, and try to imagine the future.' Richard Rogers.

Hennessey Road,Wanchai (source: Author and Irene Liu)

Dennis Ho Biography:

Dennis Ho is an architect and an urban designer with extensive global experience. He is very passionate about the public realm, place making and how nature works with urban fabric. He has delivered many complex projects around the world, collaborating with international consultants and stakeholders. Dennis was a Principal and Practice Leader at HASSELL, leading large complex projects such as Alibaba Campus in Hangzhou, Mawan Silk Road Corridor and Capital Steel Precinct in Beijing. Prior to HASSELL, Dennis was an Associate Partner at Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, working directly with Richard Rogers on many public realm projects such as was an Associate Partner at Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, working directly with Richard Rogers on many public realm projects such as Shanghai Expo, Marina Bay Singapore and The International Quarter, London. He is a past WANS Award judge and his work has been published in Monocle, SCMP, Perspective. He is a founder of HUBS, a forum that offers collaborative insight into high density place making.