

## Basketball Courts in Hong Kong: A historic and socio-political perspective on social infrastructure in a high-density city

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### Abstract

Basketball courts play a unique role in Hong Kong's high-density urban fabric, offering opportunities for sports and socialising in every neighbourhood within the territory. This study examines their historical roots and development in colonial Hong Kong, increasing socio-political significance, and widespread urban integration through contemporary urban planning. It investigates how basketball, introduced in 1918 by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), became a cornerstone of community life, particularly in public housing estates and New Towns developed from the 1970s onward. The analysis highlights the interplay between government policies—such as the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines (HKPSG) and "Sports for All" initiatives—and grassroots demand, revealing tensions between standardized provision and localized needs. While basketball courts are celebrated as cost-effective social infrastructure fostering health and community bonding, the study finds tensions around spatial inequities, rigid planning frameworks, and the underutilisation of school facilities. Case studies of innovative court designs demonstrate adaptive strategies for inclusive public space in constrained environments. Ultimately, the study positions Hong Kong's basketball courts as a microcosm of broader urban challenges, offering lessons for equitable, participatory planning in high-density cities worldwide.

### Keywords

Basketball courts, urban planning, sports sociology, urban studies, recreational infrastructure policy

## Introduction

Amongst the characteristic urban scenery of Hong Kong, with its dense urban neighbourhoods and high-rise towers clustered between mountains and waterfronts, basketball courts are a familiar feature. The courts are popular spots within the city's constrained public spaces, providing opportunities for sports and socialising within every community. Living within one of the highest-density cities in the world, most Hong Kong residents can find sports and recreational facilities within walking distance; moments for outdoor exercise within hectic urban lives. Surveys have consistently found basketball to be the most popular sport amongst young people, contributing to small-scale 'pocket parks' being the most frequently visited types of open spaces in Hong Kong (LCSD, 2008; Lai, 2018).

The interplay between the widespread incorporation of basketball courts into Hong Kong's urban fabric and their ongoing popularity could be seen as a success story for city and public space planners, offering valuable lessons for similar cities across the world. There must be an intricate chain of events behind this achievement, about how the complexities relating to city planning, neighbourhood and public space construction have been solved. There are several intriguing questions around how Hong Kong's basketball courts, together with its other distinctive types of urban spaces, have their roots in the unique history and development of the territory.

## The historic roots of basketball

The origins of basketball as one of the most popular sports across the world can be traced back to the introduction of physical education in schools and colleges in the United States, in the period of the 1830s to 1920s. Within this time, gym classes gradually became mandatory in the majority of the country, incorporating different sports and exercise in primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities (Verbrugge, 2012). Outdoor sports included baseball and football, while winter-season indoor activities included calisthenics, a program of exercises design to improve health and body strength originating in Germany and Sweden (Munrow, 2013). As calisthenics proved unpopular with students, the Canadian physical education instructor James Naismith was tasked in 1891 to invent a new, more interesting physical activity. The game of basketball was introduced at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, as a less injury-prone sport compared to football, using a football and two fruit baskets attached to the balcony railings of the gym hall. The objective for the students, divided into two teams of nine, was to throw the ball into the opposing team's basket, without running while holding the ball. Physical contact between players was not allowed, and a system of penalties for such events, administrated by a referee, was included in the rules. In the early stages, the game was paused each time a point was made, to retrieve the ball from the basket using a ladder. Soon after, the bottoms of the baskets were removed (Grasso, 2010).

The YMCA, short for 'Young Men's Christian Association', played a major role in spreading basketball throughout Northern America and the world. As early as 1893, a basketball tournament was held in Paris, France, while YMCA officials introduced the game in India, Japan and Persia in the same period (Arceri, 2015). In China, the YMCA were allowed to settle in treaty ports starting from the late 19th century. The first official branch was opened in Tianjin in 1895, while a branch in Hong Kong was opened in 1901 (Polumbaum, 2002). The YMCA became highly influential in China and Hong Kong as

in contrast with previous Christian missionary groups, its approach was not founded on a belief of moral or racial superiority but instead aimed to find points of synthesis between Western and Chinese values and cultures. As local YMCA organisations were not funded or controlled from abroad, they quickly transformed into indigenous movements supported and managed by Chinese residents (Xing, 1996).

Prior to 1900, organised sporting activities in Hong Kong took place in recreational clubs for the colonial elites such as businessmen,



Figure 1. Sports hall in the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong's Bridges Street Centre in Sheung Wan, Hong Kong, which opened in 1918 (Photo Source: Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong).

military and government staff, which excluded Chinese residents (Bridges, 2011). The YMCA in Hong Kong (Figure 1) opened one of the first sports club which aimed to promote sports to Chinese people, through its newly constructed facilities for swimming, running and basketball (Polumbaum, 2002). The emerging interest in sports amongst the rapidly growing Chinese population of Hong Kong led to the founding of other clubs, including the South China Athletic Club in 1910, later renamed to South China Athletic Association (SCAA), an organisation which achieved a high reputation in both Hong Kong and Mainland China. The SCAA had a major impact on the development of football across China, as well as volleyball, basketball, table tennis, swimming, track and field, and other sport activities (Wu et al., 2021). The YMCA, SCAA and other clubs set up in their likeness contributed to the widespread interest in sports among Hong Kong's younger generations (Yang, 2010), a mechanism which continues until today.

### Political changes in Hong Kong

The Second World War and the Japanese occupation disrupted many aspects of public life, and the massive post-war influx of Chinese refugees caused a period of economic and social crises which severely impacted the development of Hong Kong (Bridges, 2017). The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the subsequent tensions with Western countries led to Hong Kong becoming China's gateway for trade and finance, transforming it into one of the fastest developing economic and

industrial centres in Asia. At the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki, Hong Kong participated as an independent delegation and within the territory (Ma, 2008), and the Amateur Sports Federation & Olympic Committee of Hong Kong (ASF&OC) organised annual sports festivals and other public programmes aimed at promoting sports to the masses (Lam & Chang, 2006).

While the economic prosperity of Hong Kong was steadily improving during the 1950s and 60s, many other aspects of urban life remained stagnant, such as the persistent shortage of housing. The substandard quality of private and public housing available during that period contributed to a growing dissatisfaction with the British Colonial government, culminating in violent clashes and the 1967 riots (Cheung, 2009). The events are seen as a defining moment in Hong Kong's history, as a fundamental shift in government policy came in its wake. After the consistent application of 'laissez-faire' policies during the first 130 years of colonial rule, the new Governor Murray MacLehose, who was associated with the British Labour Party, introduced a wide range of reform programmes which significantly expanded the government's role in safeguarding Hong Kong residents' quality of life. From 1971, Chinese was recognised as an official language alongside English, and a large-scale anti-corruption programme was implemented. Taking advantage of Hong Kong's new wealth as an industrial powerhouse, several major infrastructure projects were started, including the construction of the Hong Kong's Mass Transit Railway.

## Housing reform and improved neighbourhood planning

In response to the overcrowded urban districts in the historic urban core of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, characterised by overcrowded tenement buildings and insufficient public spaces, a massive urban expansion programme was started. Under this 'Ten-Year Public Housing Programme', a series of New Towns in Hong Kong's outer regions was planned, aiming to house 1.8 million people by 1985. This first generation of new towns, which included Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin and Tuen Mun, was built on reclaimed land and designed to offer more spacious urban living, compared to Hong Kong's overcrowded urban core. The International Town Planning Movement inspired layouts of the new towns and their housing estates were aiming to "give rational and idealised form to support their patterns of life and sense of community" (Kan, 1978, p. 160). As part of the Ten-Year Housing Plan, various previous housing departments were merged into a new Housing Authority, which was tasked to deliver housing estates with comprehensive services, including open space and recreational facilities: "The housing in the new towns must be accompanied by a full ration of what is essential to modern life: medical, and secondary as well as primary educational facilities, parks and playgrounds, police stations, markets, fire and ambulance stations, community centres and much else" (HKSAR, 1972).

A project that was highly influential in the design of housing in Hong Kong was Mei Foo Sun Chuen, a large private housing estate in Lai Chi

Kok, Kowloon. At its completion in 1978, it was one of the world's largest private housing developments, accommodating up to 80,000 people. The Corbusier-inspired project<sup>1</sup> featured cruciform tower typologies arranged in dense patterns, creating square courtyards in between the towers. The project was conceived as a 'city within the city', incorporating a wide range of facilities such as schools, shopping arcades, and elaborate public gardens and plazas. New large-scale public housing estates completed at the same period such as Wah Fu Estate (1967 – 1978) featured a similar approach to the comprehensive integration of facilities, testing out and setting new standards for the planning of larger new town developments that would follow. The phase-based development of the new towns resulted in a land division of large scale urban plots earmarked for private or public housing, each planned to work as a 'self-contained' neighbourhood unit in case the new town development would be halted. The large scale construction programme of these self-contained public housing estates across Hong Kong gave rise to the first systematic urban planning approach for recreational and sports facilities. Comprehensive estate planning combined the British planning philosophy of self-contained community development with the need to address the increasing aspirations of Hong Kong's working and middle class populations, as the New Towns had to tempt families away from the historic urban core (Chen & Duan, 2012).

In parallel to Hong Kong's urban expansion, a steadily growing economy had significantly improved living standards, which led to increased

demand for recreation and the development of various sport programs and facilities (Wu et al., 2021). A range of new sports facilities were built by The Urban Council (Hong Kong Island and Kowloon) and the Regional Council (New Territories), which both also operated the venues and hosted local leisure and cultural events (HKSAR, 1999). The Council for Recreation Sport (CRS) was established in 1973, with a mission to improve social welfare, support the development of mass sport and contribute to improved health standards amongst the population (Wu et al., 2021). In addition to the New

Town construction, existing urban areas and housing estates were upgraded or redeveloped, in particular targeting the crowded low-cost housing estates which lacked adequate amenities (HKHA 1987). In the new housing estates, to be equipped with well-designed landscaping, playgrounds and plazas, basketball courts were favourable planning elements as their relatively small size was easier to accommodate in the irregular and high-density urban topography of Hong Kong. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. An outdoor basketball court in Upper Shek Kip Mei Estate, 1975 (Courtesy of Ko Tim-Keung).

## Planning guidelines for recreational facilities

The first Planning Standards and Guidelines were part of the strategic plans for the development of the territory, formulated by the British Colonial Office (Lai, 1999). The 1948 'Abercrombie Report' included a range of strategic planning proposals such as Victoria Harbour reclamations and building a cross harbour tunnel, but also set the tone for Hong Kong's position towards balancing economic development with the need to provide public open space. Abercrombie suggested that some disused military sites could be converted to urban recreation zones, but also that the mountain slopes adjacent to residential areas could serve as "rest parks".<sup>2</sup> This attitude was highly influential towards future planning guidelines, cementing a narrative where Hong Kong's space for recreation would always be limited, due to the immovable pressures of urgently needed residential and commercial development.<sup>3</sup>

In 1982, the first separate Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines (HKPSG) were published. The HKPSG contain a set of criteria for determining the scale, location and site requirements of various land uses and facilities, with the goal to control new construction projects and ensure that they include appropriate public facilities to meet the needs of the community (HKPD, 2018). The 1991 'Metroplan' set out some additional guidelines on the size, design and locational criteria for a range of types of open spaces and facilities. These included specific planning directions for sports and rec-

reation, which included basketball courts in 'indoor games halls'. In addition, it was stipulated that "Local Open Space should be located within short walking distance from the residents it intends to serve, preferably within a radius of not more than about 0.4 km. In public housing estates and in private comprehensive residential developments, Local Open Space may be provided on podiums" (HKPD, 1991). These particular conditions highlight the unique characteristic of Hong Kong's scattered and small 'pocket parks', and might explain why so many community sports facilities are found on the roofs of parking garages or shopping malls.

## The promotion of 'sports for all'

The sustained popularity of basketball amongst young people, combined with government policies that aimed to provide 'sports for all' led to the further formalisation of 'community sport' as a cornerstone in urban planning policies and regulations. The governments' Community Sports policies are part of the 'triangle' together with Elite Sports and Major Sports Events (CEM), and aiming to "encourage the public to participate in various types of sports activities and develop a strong sporting culture in the community, helping them develop a healthy lifestyle" (Hong Kong Government, 2022).

A new comprehensive HKPSG Chapter 4 on Recreation and Open Space was compiled in 1990, and revised in February 1998 in the light of the key findings of the "Study of Leisure Habits and Recreation Preferences" which assessed the leisure habits and recreational preferences of the people of Hong Kong (Llewelyn-Davis,

1998). The chapter was updated in 2006 to include new planning standards and guidelines for sports centres, squash courts and recreational facilities for the elderly (HKPD, 2015). It gives specific population-based requirements for ‘core activities’, a list of indoor and outdoor sports and recreational activities deemed to match Hong Kong people’s open space needs. The subsection for ‘outdoor facilities’ is shown in Table 1, which includes the provision of outdoor basketball courts across all of Hong Kong.

Core Activity	Population Standard
<b>Outdoor Provision</b>	
Tennis	2 per 30,000
Basketball	1 per 10,000
Volleyball	1 per 20,000
Football	1 per 100,000
Mini-Soccer	
5-a-side	1 per 30,000
7-a-side	1 per 30,000
Rugby/Baseball/ Cricket	1 per district
Athletics	1 per 200,000 – 250,000
Roller Skating	300m <sup>2</sup> per 30,000
Jogging Track	500m – 1,000m per 30,000
Children’s Playground	400m <sup>2</sup> per 5,000

Table 1. Extract from the ‘Standards of Provision for Core Activities’, Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines.<sup>4</sup>

These planning regulations apply to all new urban developments including public and private housing estates, and should also guide the retrofitting of existing neighbourhoods where possible. They are the reason that all public housing estates in Hong Kong contain a certain quantita-

tive mix of public spaces and facilities such as playgrounds, sport and exercise facilities, based on the number of apartment units and their projected population numbers (HKHA, 2011).

It is important to note that while these planning regulations might be based on the honourable intention to ensure a ‘minimum provision’ of leisure facilities to all, they are commonly applied as ‘maximum numbers’ in the high-density development context of Hong Kong. There is little provision to supply more facilities in local areas where demand is high, and the HKPSG provides few qualitative guidelines, such as the spatial setting, combination with washroom facilities, or dual use of sports courts. Scholars have pointed to the lack of user-oriented measures in the HKPSG and suggested that more community engagement and adaptive planning strategies could result in the creation of more supportive public spaces (Ng, 2022). It is also well-known that there are discrepancies between planned and existing amounts of public spaces and facilities, and there is an uneven distribution across Hong Kong. Especially the older urban districts in Kowloon and on Hong Kong Island fall far short of implementing all the planned provisions (HKSAR, 2004). For instance in 2016, it was noted that the Yau Tsim Mong District contains 21 basketball courts, which is lower than the 32 required by the HKPSG. A survey found that many venues are always fully booked, as demand amongst the population has increased since the years in which the planning guidelines were drafted (HKSAR, 2016).

## Current and future developments

The restructuring of government departments since the 1997 handover enabled the creation of new institutions to promote and deliver sporting facilities in Hong Kong. The Urban and Regional Councils were disbanded in 1999, and the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) was established in 2000 to focus on more sports and leisure affairs. The Home Affairs Bureau's 2002 sports policy review titled 'Towards a More Sporting Future' put landmark policies in place, including promoting community sports, fostering high-performance sports, and equipping Hong Kong to host international sport events (HKSAR, 2002). These policies have set the targets for the strategic planning of sports and recreational facilities at city and community levels. In 2017, the Hong Kong government announced a 'Five-Year Plan for Sports and Recreation Facilities' which include 26 projects for new or expanded sports and recreation facilities, with a budget 20 billion HK\$ (HKSAR, 2022). The 30 billion Kai Tak Sports Park will include an large indoor sports venue planned to host major basketball events (Kai Tak Sports Park, 2024). At the community level, the LCSD promotes school sport and physical education in Hong Kong since 2012, working in partnership with the Education Bureau (HKSAR, 2024). Education and community-based sports promotion could nurture talented young people, which can receive further career development support through the Hong Kong Sports Institute's (HKSII) Elite Training Grants and local training support programmes. The HKSII currently collaborates with nine local universities and

27 local secondary schools to provide access to well-equipped training facilities, advanced sports science support and accommodation (HKSII, 2024).

In 2017, a government-initiated Consultancy Study on the Provision of Sports Facilities in Hong Kong was conducted, with the aim to review the level of demand for various types of sports facilities and revise the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines (HKSAR, 2021a). In this study, it was found that basketball came in eighth place in the ranking of popular activities, with a participation rate of 5.37 percent – amounting to around 400,000 of Hong Kong's 7.5 million residents (HKSAR, 2023b). It was ranked as the most popular ball sport, ahead of football (2.72%), volleyball (1.17%) and tennis (0.74%). The study recommended maintaining the management practices of outdoor courts by the LCSD and at public housing developments, which have no membership requirements and are provided free of charge.

## 200 new basketball courts

As part of the future urban expansion of Hong Kong, several ambitious new New Town developments are planned in various locations within the territory. The 'Northern Metropolis' is an urban region planned in the New Territories section bordering Shenzhen, and is projected to house 1.5 million additional people when completed (HKSAR, 2023a). The Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands reclamation project is planned to accommodate at least 500,000 new residents by 2045 (HKSAR, 2021b). According to the current planning standards, this would

mean that 200 new basketball courts will be built in these new development areas. Besides these 'flagship' development initiatives, there is the ongoing urban renewal of old urban districts, the redevelopment of old public housing and the expansion of existing new towns. Seen together, it becomes clear that there are very significant opportunities for improving public spaces and sports facilities in Hong Kong at a territory-wide scale.

Several important challenges remain for improving Hong Kong people's general quality of life, including access to sufficient public spaces and sports facilities. The government planning vision 'Hong Kong 2030+' states that "in the interest of promoting outdoor recreation, leisure and social activities", the open space per capita in urban areas should be gradually increased to 2.5m<sup>2</sup> per person, through the careful planning of new towns and the retrofitting of the existing urban areas (HKPD, 2016). Scholars have pointed out that Hong Kong has highly limited amounts of public open space per person with 2.7m<sup>2</sup> average, much lower than other high-density cities such as Tokyo (5.8), Seoul (6.1), Singapore (7.5) and Shanghai (7.6) (Lai, 2017). In such constrained conditions, the dual use of sports fields, including basketball courts, would make for more efficient use of limited public space. However, many courts attached to schools and colleges are closed to the wider public, due to security and management concerns.<sup>5</sup> Hong Kong can adopt lessons from international cases of school facilities doubling up social infrastructure for the surrounding neighbourhoods, supporting flexible use, events and

community development.<sup>6</sup>

### Promising new directions

Amongst Hong Kong's challenging high-density urban landscapes, an important set of initiatives has emerged that is at the forefront of innovative thinking around public space design and community engagement. A series of colourful basketball courts has appeared in recent years, created by forward thinking clients and designers working with local stakeholders. The projects are at Kai Yip, Tsing Yi, Siu Hei and Ming Tak, and are designed by One Bite Design Studio, a Hong Kong-based company developing spatial, social and urban innovations. These projects reference the latest international ideas around social and environmentally sustainable design, multi-purpose public facilities and place-specific customised visual design, yet adopt a unique and Hong Kong specific methodology. Located on the rooftops of private retail centres and surrounded by forests of high-rise housing, the projects work with complex challenges including existing structures, limited budgets and regulatory constraints. Yet through a careful approach that involves listening to local residents, community sports organisations and basketball experts, collaborative forms of project development have been established and produced community-specific results. Some sites address Hong Kong's ageing society, incorporating multi-functional and multi-generational games and supporting facilities, such as shaded benches. One court's theme is 'girls' priority', using a gradient of colours representing a spectrum of gender identities, and a large letter 'W' placed



Figure 3. The basketball courts at Ming Tak Shopping Centre, Tseung Kwan O, designed by One Bite Design Studio.

in the centre. (Figure 3) The designers aimed to create an inclusive space where all types of players, and especially girls, would feel welcome and at home (Fox, 2021).

## Conclusions

Compared with the humble beginnings of basketball as a physical education game, its widespread adoption as people's favourite outdoor exercise and socialising activity has made a remarkable impact on cities and societies world-

wide. Basketball has become an integral part of culture, helping to build different forms of communities in different countries while also uniting people across the world. The global reach of the US-based National Basketball Association (NBA) league has further promoted the sports amongst young people, in particular in the age of online communication and entertainment. In parallel to this ability to connect people with a shared passion, the physical courts which are embedded in cities and communities have a

different power, offering high-intensity group interactions which require athletic, technical and tactical skills. The game promotes physical strength and mental health, as team-building improves confidence and self-esteem (Zhang et al., 2020). With their efficient layout and equipment, basketball courts represent one of the most cost-effective forms of social infrastructure, especially when they welcome all types of use and users, free of charge.

The emergence of basketball within the densely populated and mountainous terrain of Hong Kong has placed courts in a broad range of spatial settings, from rooftops to waterfronts and amongst dense forests of high-rise blocks or in surprisingly natural landscapes. The persistence of basketball courts to find these places across the city shows how the desire for community sports thrives, despite or maybe also because of the dynamic and high-pressured nature of the economically driven city. City planners and public space designers can take inspiration from the historic role of basketball courts in urban communities and facilitate a continued process of innovation and participation, to contribute to the development of increasingly healthy and sustainable cities.

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Gallery) for initiating this collaboration.

## Notes

1. Reference is made to the 'Ville radieuse' ('Radiant City') project by the French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier, published in 1930 and featuring a repetitive urban pattern of cruciform high-rise residential towers.
2. Abercrombie, 1948, p. 18, quoted in: Bo-sin Tang and Siu-wai Wong. "A longitudinal study of open space zoning and development in Hong Kong." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 87.4 (2008): 258-268.
3. Town Planning Office, 1974, pp. 43–44, quoted in Bo-sin Tang and Siu-wai Wong. "A longitudinal study of open space zoning and development in Hong Kong."
4. Hong Kong Planning Department, "Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines, Chapter 4: Introduction (October 2015 Edition), page 22 (additional notes removed for simplification).
5. Guangzhou Jiahua Shida Education "Students are given priority for a small fee. Hong Kong universities open sports facilities" (June 11, 2015). <https://www.ceigd.com/article/view?id=546> (accessed January 27, 2024).
6. See for instance: Alisha Butler, Ariel Bierbaum, and Erin O'Keefe. "Leveraging Community Schools for Community Development: Lessons from Baltimore's 21st Century School Buildings Program." *Urban Education* (2022): 00420859221107615.



Figure 4. Basketball court at Tin Heng Estate in Tin Shui Wai, as featured in 'Shooting Hoops', by Austin Bell.

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