

# Introduction

Most developers would argue that a great design begins with a great concept – that form should follow function. This section follows an abbreviated process to produce a Preliminary Concept and Design Program – initial ideas to support the architects developing the Masterplan

## Questions

Before we plan the Central Waterfront, we should consider three questions:

What do we want to do at our waterfront?

- Eat?
- Play?
- Work?
- Live?
- Stay?
- Socialize and entertain?
- Study?
- Exercise?
- Reflect?



And who are “we”?

- Families from Kowloon?
- Government workers from Tamar?
- Executives from Central?
- Tourists from Tokyo?
- A couple from Mid-Levels?
- Business travelers from Paris?
- Students from the New Territories?
- Visitors from Macao?
- Convention-goers from Shanghai?



Then – what facilities will we require?

- Open-air restaurants?
- Parks and paths and public spaces?
- Low-rise hotels?
- Performance venues?
- An inner harbour?
- Shopping?
- Residential and office buildings?
- Museums?
- Transit stops and public parking?

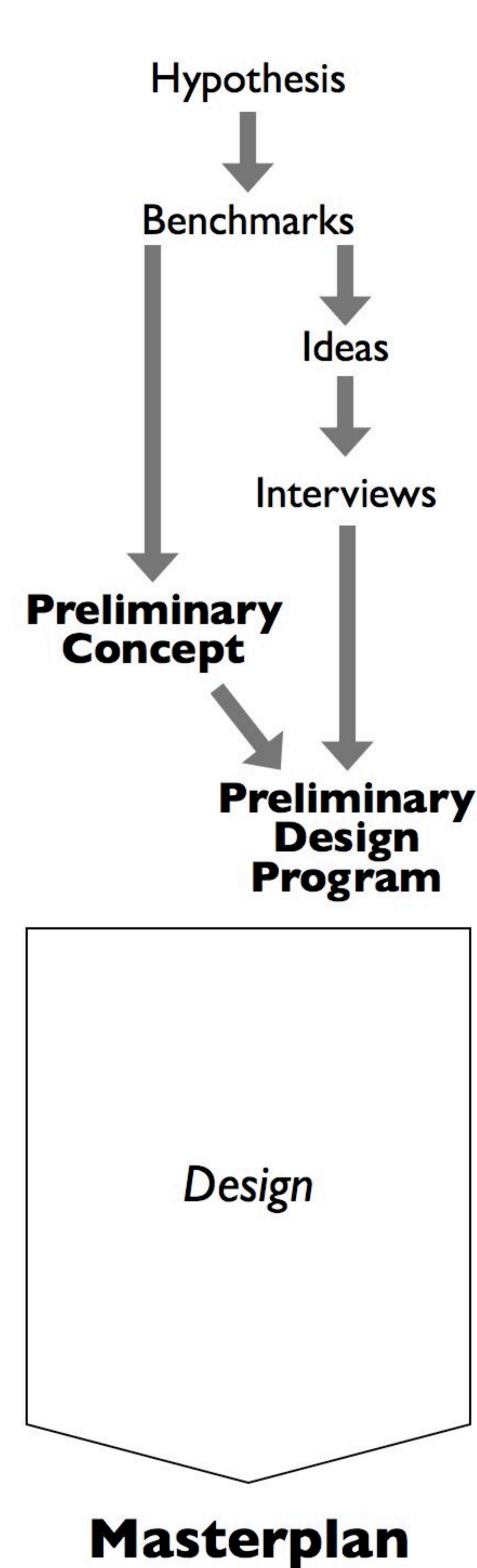


## Process

A significant amount of space is designated for development along the Central Waterfront. Ultimately, most of that development – say, 80% – will take the form of low-rise office, residential, hotel, and mixed-use buildings. We refer to these buildings collectively as the **Foundation** of the future waterfront development.

The waterfront will also include highly public attractions (retail/entertainment destinations, museums, etc.) and signature elements that will play a significant role in defining and activating the waterfront. As this design competition calls for an initial vision rather than a detailed solution, we have focused on these uses – in particular on the larger, highly public elements, which we term **Anchors**.

We have followed a simplified process to develop the Preliminary Concept and Design Program found at the end of this section.



We began with a **Hypothesis** based on our sense of Hong Kong and our knowledge of comparable projects around the world:

*Hong Kong is a world city. Central Waterfront is its “front door.” Of the numerous redevelopment sites along the harbour, Central Waterfront deserves the most cosmopolitan and urban concept.*

As noted on the following page, we then made certain **Assumptions** regarding the overall project and its target market.

Our Hypothesis pointed us towards specific **Benchmarks** from around the world. We have summarized eight of those Benchmarks on the following pages.

Given the limited time available, we defined our **Preliminary Concept** in terms of those Benchmarks. We don’t propose to copy the Benchmarks; at the same time, we don’t need to “invent” the concept of an active, engaging, urban waterfront from scratch.

On that point, we studied the Benchmarks for **Ideas** that drive successful waterfronts. A selection of those ideas are shown on the pages titled **Potential Program Elements**.

We also conducted a series of **Interviews** with groups that could play a part in shaping the life of the waterfront district – seeking their requirements and suggestions.

With that input and our Preliminary Concept in mind, we completed the process by developing the **Preliminary Design Program** found at the end of this section.

The Preliminary Concept and Design Program fed into our architects’ design work – which yielded the **Masterplan** found in the subsequent section.



## Assumptions

Our program reflects the following assumptions and restrictions:

- We are not bound by previous concepts – but our changes should be, in common-sense terms, “practical and feasible.” (For instance, we should not locate a major building immediately on top of the Wanchai Bypass Tunnel.)
- We should use the entire Gross Building Area (GBA) permitted. While we seek to create a district that is lower in height and density (similar to a European cityscape), we realize that Central Waterfront is valuable real estate.
- We should respect the proposed program for the West Kowloon Cultural District – that is, we should not propose relocating its announced anchor uses to the Central Waterfront.
- Certain uses – for instance, sports and children’s playgrounds – are better delivered at other locations along the waterfront, closer to the residential communities they serve. This assumption frees us to edit the offer at Central Waterfront – to deliver something exceptional, rather than make ill-advised compromises in developing a scheme that aims to be all things to all people.
- Water and air pollution will abate – allowing us to rationally propose activities at the water’s edge, open-air dining, walking, etc.

At this early stage, the public elements of our program envision four principal target groups:

- The entire Hong Kong community  
Central Waterfront should offer every member of the community something interesting and enjoyable – places to walk, eat, socialize, and be entertained.
- Office workers from Central, Admiralty, Wanchai, and the government center  
The waterfront should be a favorite destination at the end of the day – as it is in many cities whose Central Business Districts merge with waterfronts.
- Regional and International Tourists  
The Central Waterfront should top the list for all visitors to Hong Kong – both as an enjoyable place and for the “must-see” attractions it offers.
- International Businesses and Conventions  
The Central Waterfront should exert a disproportionately positive influence on the global business community’s opinion of Hong Kong – replacing slogans that tout Hong Kong as “world-winning city” with something tangible and outstanding.

## Interviews

As noted on the chart on the previous page, we conducted a series of preliminary interviews with potential stakeholders. Some of these are noted below, with our thanks to all for their consideration and helpful input:

- Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts
- Hong Kong Maritime Museum
- Hong Kong Arts Centre
- Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre
- Hong Kong University and the University Museum and Art Gallery
- City Hall
- Ocean Park Hong Kong
- Cafe Deco Group

In the limited time available, we did not manage to contact one critically important group: those involved in planning the public elements of “The Door” – the winning design for the new government headquarters at Tamar.

## Qualifications

This is rough, initial work – supporting a Masterplan exercise, as part of a design competition seeking alternative visions. We should note:

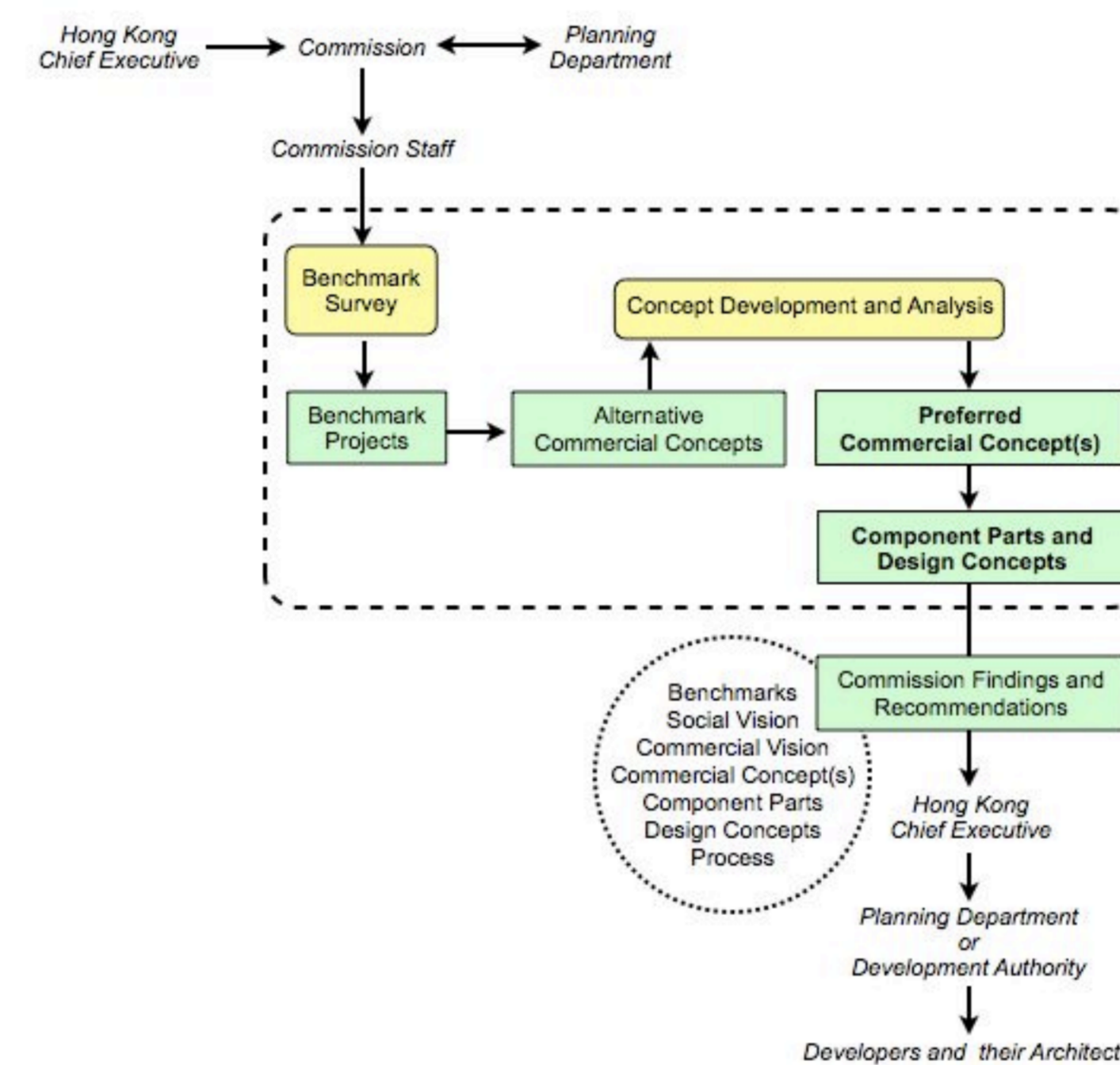
- Our preliminary concept and program are only intended to illustrate possibilities and support our architects’ work on the Masterplan.
- With the exception of the proposed expansion of the Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts, none of the proposed buildings have been developed in any detail. Their feasibility has not been evaluated.
- As noted, we have focused on the more public elements of the waterfront – and not the great bulk of the potential development (the office, residential, and mixed-use buildings – which we termed the “Foundation”).

## A Recommendation Regarding Process

Thanks in part to this competition, Central Waterfront is getting the attention it deserves – not only from the Hong Kong community, but from design and development professionals around the world, who hope to see our waterfront – set in one of the world’s most spectacular urban settings – realize its special potential.

We are now in the end-game – working with the final, permanent shoreline. As C.Y. Leung noted in a recent editorial (*below left*), “There is no room for mistakes.”

A critical question then arises: How can we find our way to an appropriately imaginative vision, when our attention is focused, in part, on avoiding mistakes?



The answer lies in establishing the right process, led by the right people. Our work in the first round of this competition outlined one approach (*left*) – calling for a commission, as once proposed by the Urban Land Institute.

As a preliminary step to that or any other approach, the government should study the processes other cities have followed to create their waterfronts. Successes like Sydney, Melbourne, London, and Baltimore. And cities now in the midst of major redevelopments – like Hamburg (*below right*) and Cape Town.

This is our last chance to ensure that Hong Kong’s waterfront meets the needs of future generations, writes C. Y. Leung

## Harbour masters

The current round of reclamation will be the last for Hong Kong’s harbour. The new shorelines on both sides of the harbour will be permanent. The form and functions of the new waterfront areas will have to meet the aspirations of the many generations to come. The layout, land-use planning, urban design and landscape architecture deserve our utmost care and undivided attention. Public participation is vital.

The Central Waterfront Design Competition was launched in May by Designing Hong Kong, an organisation established to help reach a consensus on sustainable harbour planning among the public, business sector and the government.

More than 80 pieces of design are on display at Central Pier 1, and four of them have been selected for the final stage of the competition. I recommend this exhibition.

Waterfront planning calls not just for knowledge and expertise; it requires an acknowledgement of intrinsic values

to all in Hong Kong. In particular, I encourage parents and teachers to take our younger generations to visit.

As a significant landmark, Victoria Harbour is unique. Any photograph or sketch showing a harbour craning through the middle of a city – with high-rise buildings on both sides and steep hills in the background – readily leads the viewer to think of Hong Kong. There are many other waterfront cities: New York, Vancouver, Tokyo, Singapore and Sydney come to mind. But as a subject for urban planning and design, none has such fine qualities as Victoria Harbour. And it’s part of Hongkongers’ lives: every day, a large proportion of the population crosses the harbour instead of large-scale developments in the New Territories.

Perhaps the irony of Britain’s lease in 1897 had something to do with that mindset. Successive reclamation projects pushed

out the shorelines on both sides of the harbour. Planning and development of the new waterfront areas were engineering-led, practical and utilitarian. New roads, jetties, pumping stations, sewage plants and transformer stations took up logical positions – from the engineering standpoint.

The space in between was designated for residential property or other development purposes. The result was highly efficient engineering, but it had little regard for appearance or quality of life. As a result, many of our waterfront areas are not pedestrian-friendly. Most of them are barren, with a cold, hard architecture. Almost none are softened with greenery. There is little evidence of urban design.

That was perhaps understandable in an era when everything in Hong Kong was considered transient. With the 1997 handover looming, functionality and short-term, tangible returns were supreme. Further, when any new waterfront area would in a few years be obscured by yet another round of reclamation, urban design became secondary.

But the circumstances have changed. Now that we are ending the history of transient harbour reclamation, the new shoreline and waterfront areas will form a permanent, integral and crucial part of our signature cityscape. There is no room for mistakes, afterthoughts or short-term solutions. As Hong Kong is no longer a borrowed place on borrowed time, we must take a broader, longer-term and more holistic approach to our land-use allocation.

The Washington-based Urban Land Institute studied the issue in 2005, sending a team of foreign experts to Hong Kong to offer their views on planning and design. Two of them were first-time visitors. After spending three days on field visits and discussions, they came up with remarkably refreshing propositions.

One thing became clear: waterfront planning calls not just for knowledge and

expertise. Most importantly, it requires an acknowledgement of a harbour’s many intrinsic values. We also need a good measure of imagination and, from time to time, a fresh pair of eyes. Engineering considerations come later.

This is why I recommend the design exhibition, and why it’s important to capture the public’s imagination. If grandparents and grandchildren visit the exhibition together, they might suggest this idea: after improving the water quality, why not reserve part of the shoreline for swimming? Forty years ago we had swimming clubs on the north shore of Hong Kong Island; my generation, and our parents, grew up with them.

Sitting in only one of the many recreational and leisure venues the waterfront could have. The narrow, ribbon

shape of the urban areas on both sides of the harbour means that the waterfront is never far away. With typical Hong Kong ingenuity, we should easily be able to cater to the many needs of all walks of life – from investment bankers in Central taking time off from the office to pensioners in To Kwa Wan strolling with their baby grandchildren.

At this stage, all we need is an imaginative mindset and a new approach. Hong Kong’s new waterfront may take a few decades to take shape properly. But once we get there, the place we call home will truly be the most splendid city in the world. Now is our best and last opportunity.

C. Y. Leung is convener of the Executive Council

