

Towards a World-Class Waterfront



The Importance of Concept

The Planning Department's brochure for Central Waterfront envisions a "world-class waterfront."

What could distinguish a waterfront as "world-class"?

It wouldn't be hard to reach a consensus if the question concerned office towers. A mature industry operates thousands of such buildings globally, promoting standards and focusing attention on "best practices."

But no such industry exists for waterfronts, and the relatively few projects of comparable significance to ours – certainly fewer than 100 – vary widely. Rather than provide one answer, they highlight choices:

- Do we want the waterfront restaurants and bars of Lisbon's *Docas* or the promenade of Shanghai's *Bund*?
- An icon like *Sydney's Opera House* or the shopping centers of Tokyo's *Odaiba*?
- Seattle's serene *Sculpture Park* or San Francisco's tourist-packed *Pier 39*?
- The aquariums and museums of Baltimore's *Harborplace* or the apartments and hotels of Melbourne's *Docklands*?



The Planning Department's brochure



This proposal first appeared as an editorial in the South China Morning Post in June.

More generally: *What do we really want to do at Central Waterfront?*

- Eat?
- Play?
- Exercise?
- Shop?
- Live?
- Work?

And who are "we"?

- Locals?
- Tourists?
- Families?
- Yuppies?

Then – and only then – *what facilities will we require?*

- Open-air restaurants?
- Enclosed retail?
- Low-rise hotels?
- Loft apartments?
- Parks?
- Promenades?
- Performance venues?
- Museums?

What do we want? What concept?



Typically, this is where a developer would step in – creating a project aimed at specific users. The fact that, in Central Waterfront, we are dealing with a site that is entirely new, very large, highly symbolic, and broadly public, precludes that.

How, then, should our government proceed? Our Planning Department is expert at what it does, but it isn't equipped for this unusual task. Reflecting its everyday role, it has framed the problem exclusively in terms of design, while skipping the crucial prerequisite: the concept. If our Waterfront is to be engaging and vibrant – a commonly cited objective – someone must first develop a clear concept of the uses and users, then brief the designers on the buildings the concept will require.

Form should follow function. The right concept can easily endure imperfect design (*Lan Kwai Fong*), and good design can make a strong concept stronger (Shanghai's *Xintiandi*), but an extravagant design alone cannot save a problematic concept (the *West Kowloon Cultural District*).

The Planning Department's Public Engagement Process



"Form ever follows function."
Louis Henri Sullivan, 1896

"Form follows function – that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in spiritual union."
Frank Lloyd Wright, 1908

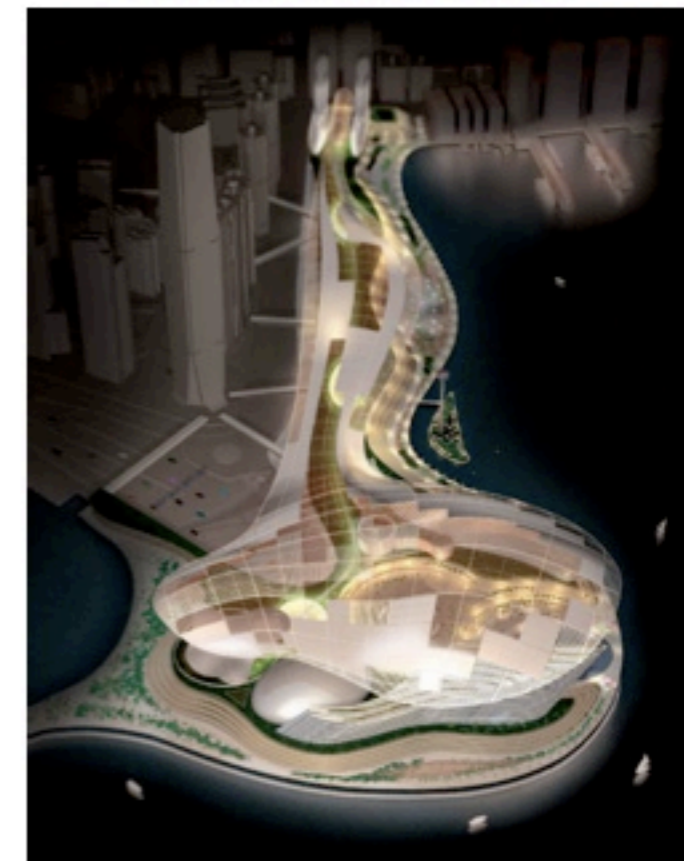
Lan Kwai Fong

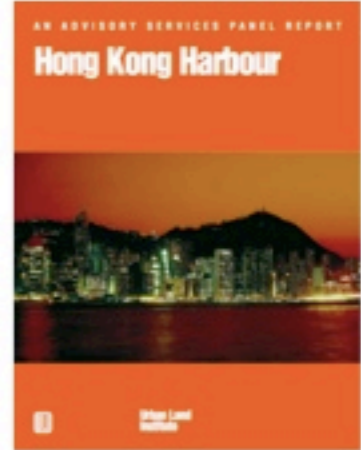


Xintiandi



West Kowloon Cultural District





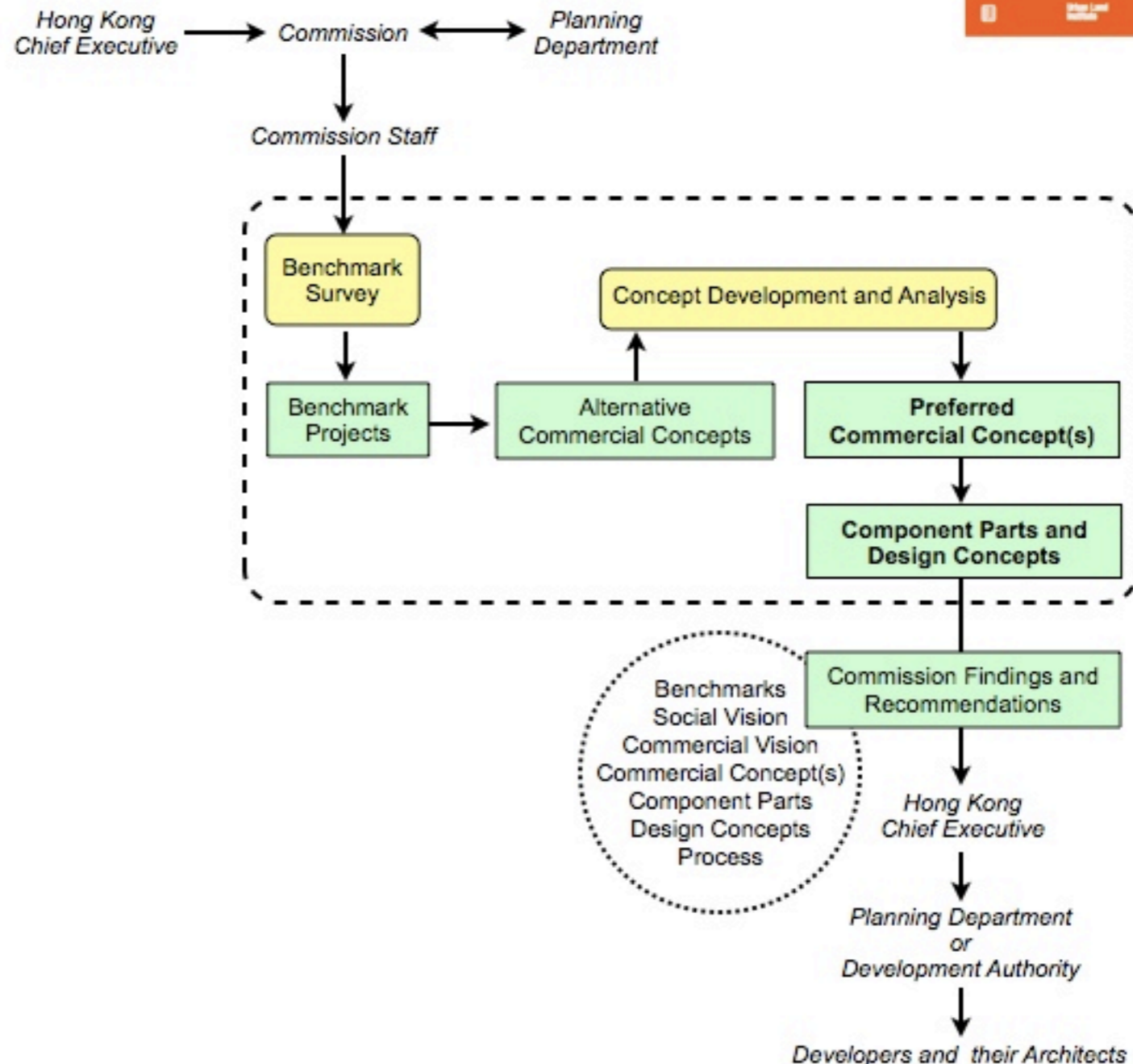
How can we find the right concept? The same way developers often innovate – by studying benchmark developments in other cities, selecting commercial and design concepts that fit, reinterpreting them for the market, and weaving them into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Who, then, can lead the search for our Waterfront concept? The Urban Land Institute, a leading nonprofit, studied the question in 2005, recommending the Hong Kong government take its harbour redevelopment work “to the next level” by establishing one of four entities:

- a development authority
- a development agency
- a specially appointed “czar” or
- a commission

If nothing else, wouldn't it make sense for our Chief Executive to appoint a commission to tackle the question: What concept? After all, Hong Kong has outstanding restaurateurs, creative developers, top hoteliers, etc. Shouldn't people with that sort of experience imagine the uses that can animate Central Waterfront before the Planning Department's engineers start plotting the site's roads?

Such a commission could liaise with like entities in other cities, benchmark comparable projects around the world, identify what works and doesn't, and produce a development solution – a concept – the Chief Executive could strongly endorse.





We read routinely how Hong Kong will need to reinvent itself as China emerges. The harbour that drove our industrial success has tremendous potential to be recast as a symbol of our dynamic, modern, and cosmopolitan city. It would be a terrible shame if design work on its most important component, Central Waterfront, proceeded without our first attempting to answer the question: ***What concept do we want?*** Sitting in the midst of one of the world's most spectacular urban settings, the right waterfront concept, supported by good design, would most certainly rate as world-class. Better yet, it would offer us a great new way to experience and enjoy Hong Kong.