

Dean's Roundup

Friday August 23rd, 2013

Roundup: *Ceiling function*, the mathematical operation of rounding a number up to the next higher integer.

Roundup: a term in American English referring to the process of gathering animals into an area, known as a "Muster" in Australia.

Rounding up: when a helmsman cannot control a boat and it heads into the wind

Roundup: the plan for an invasion of northern France by Allied forces during World War II (Wikipedia)

Dean's Roundup: part blog, part bulletin; part honour roll

Dear All,

Reading about DUPAD's praiseworthy Western Harbor Front master plan triggered thoughts that will take formal expression in two forthcoming Faculty symposia. First, on October 26th, the Eric Lye Memorial afternoon-forum will reflect on the role of the master plan in planning, designing, building and managing Chinese cities (**'Miracles and Mirages'**, after the title of Professor Lye's last lecture in the Mainland). Second, in a symposium being planned by Cecelia Chu and Natalia Echeverri, discussants will explore multiple realities of **'The Speculative City'**. When Cecelia, Natalia and I first started talking about their conference idea with this title, I naïvely assumed they were talking about financial speculation. They weren't – at least not directly. They were talking about imaginative speculation; the production of speculative designs, spaces, futures. At first, this seems an example of miscommunication across different cultures, paradigms and languages. But the ideas are profoundly linked in ways that we shall hopefully explore in both symposia. Referring to the professional task of guiding the development of a constantly evolving, self-organising historic city like Paris or London, somebody once said 'the future can't be predicted it can only be invented'. An ancient proverb reflects: 'man makes his plans but God directs his steps'. The idea of designing a city is paradoxical; almost to the extreme of being oxymoronic. How can you design something that is characterized by spontaneity, surprise, informality, complexity? Here is the hint of an argument for applying design only to the lowest tier of spatial resource allocation problems: the building. But, of course, there are strong, long-standing (but not unassailable) arguments for applying design, as a method of coordination, at the block, neighbourhood, city and regional scale. And thus we have speculation of imagined futures at each of these various scales. Guoyan Zhou, Professor of Urban Planning at Hefei University once suggested to me that 40% of Chinese master plans are out of date or otherwise irrelevant before they are completed. Master plans allow for grand speculation; and when they are not prematurely out of date and do in fact successfully shape new additions to cities, the speculative cities they create provide new canvasses upon which society arranges itself. Master plans are, indeed, speculations in the eye of the designer and the spontaneous way in which land is subsequently used, re-used and re-ordered in the years to come may or may not have a close correspondence to the vision of the speculator.

Compared to the 'place speculator' (architect or 'material culture speculator'), the financial speculator's role in city building is typically shorter-term. It is the coming together of the short-termism of capital and the long-term legacy of the built investment that gives rise to many of the problems that urban planners try to tackle (retrospectively or in advance). From a planner's point of view, this is a rationale for master plans. From an investor's perspective, a master plan can add private value to a site. From a public planner's or urban designer's point of view, a master plan can add social value to a collection of sites. From an architect's point of view, working on a particular site, a master plan can both constrain and liberate. The master plan for the redeveloped Liede urban village (*chengzhongcun*) in Guangzhou, for example, gave the architect freedom to design buildings way above the legal density (because this was the only way the

municipal government could generate funds sufficient to compensate the villagers who had to be relocated). And so design speculators and financial speculators come together.

Nothing makes this point more powerfully than the so-called *tallest-building index*. It has long been observed by economists that the commencement of work on the world's (latest) tallest building regularly precedes a major economic crash (first popularized by investment analyst Andrew Lawrence in 1999 following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis). Think for example, Singer Building, Empire State Building, Sears Tower, Petronas Towers, Burj Khalifa and the Shard, respectively started just before and completed just after the financial crises of 1907, 1929, 1973, 1997 and 2007. The theory is simple: low interest rates and cheap credit means lots of footloose investment funds; land is always a good investment in boom times and centrally located land is even better; return on central land is increased by building ever higher; the confident mood of investors at the peak of a boom tends to push technological solutions to the edge, often leading to new construction technologies and new design possibilities; just as all this self-reinforcing optimism pushes the logic of real-estate investment to its extreme, the bubble bursts. The doors to the latest tallest building in the city, country, region or world, are nearly always opened on the way down.

I am watching the progress of Changsha's 838m 202 floor prefabricated *Sky City*, to be constructed in 9 months, with some trepidation. Not only with an eye to the heightening risk of another European banking collapse but also to the similarities with Titanic – biggest ships being another bubble phenomenon associated with boom times...

On a more upbeat note, many congratulations to all those listed below (especially to Anthony and colleagues for their master planning scheme!).

Chris

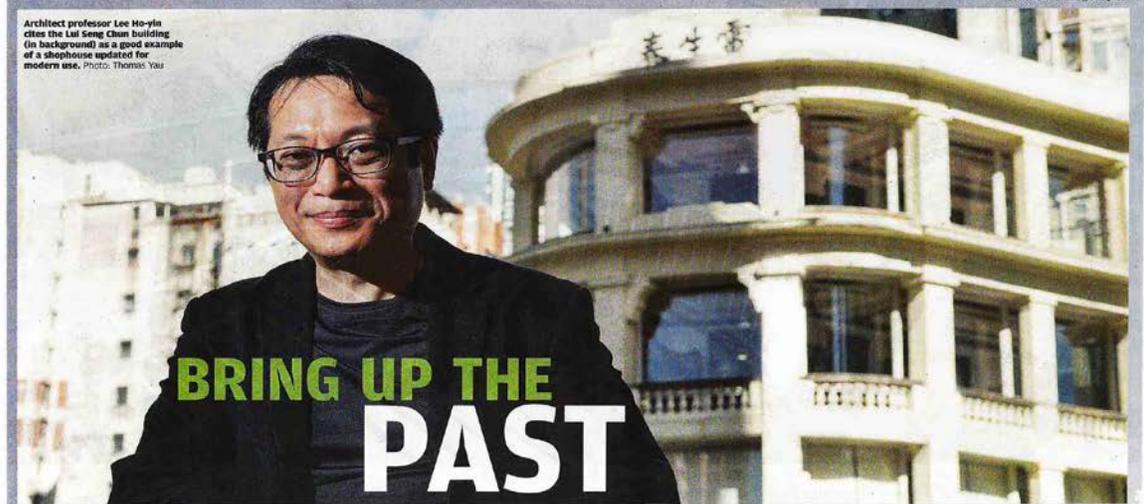
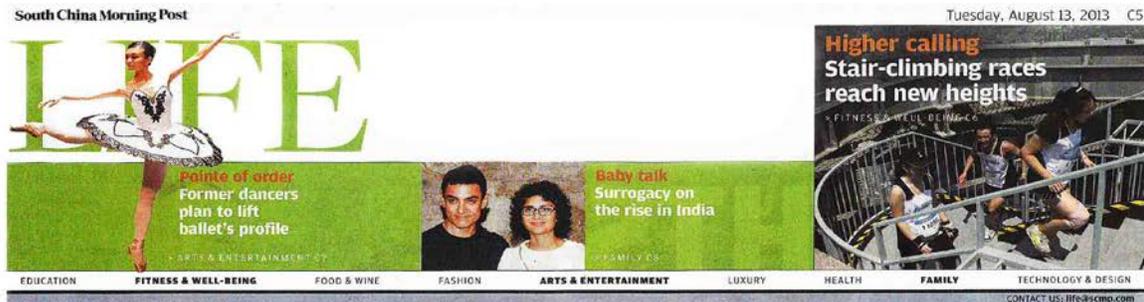
Department of Architecture

I. Ms. Tris Kee

- presented a paper "Adaptive Reuse of Industrial Buildings to Affordable Housing" at the Asia Pacific Network for Housing Research Conference 2013, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- was invited to teach a summer studio workshop at the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, August 22nd and 23rd, 2013.

2. Dr Hoyin Lee

- appeared in a full-page feature on the South China Morning Post, in which he talked about the concept and feasibility of integrating architectural conservation with small-scale, non-demolition-based property development by means of refurbishing early post-war *tong lau* (Chinese shophouses) as high-quality boutique apartments on August 13th, 2013



Development houses have the character and charm that high-rises lack, but desperately need legal protection, writes Bernice Chan

Swedish designer Helen Lindman has brought an impressive transformation of the Sheung Wan tenement building that she bought three years ago. Previously a dingy, dimly lit, six-storey walk-up, 11 Upper Station has been turned into a stylish, bright and airy residential block, comprising two duplexes and a top-floor suite.

The extensive renovations took a year to complete. Now finished, both duplexes have been rented to tenants attracted to the district by the mushrooming independent cafes and quirky shops turning it into a hip hangout.

Although their HK\$7,000 monthly rental seems pricey for a *tong lau*, Lindman says the renovated space offers an appealing alternative to soulless high-rise apartments.

"There is definitely a demand from expats," she says. "I came to Hong Kong in 2006 and fell in love with the city's *tong lau*. I feel it is important to maintain them as part of Hong Kong's heritage, but they are becoming harder to find. It is too easy to bring in the bulldozer and build another high rise. My ongoing vision is to preserve these buildings, not as monuments, but as live-in homes, reviving them, helping to revitalise the living communities in which they are set."

While Hong Kong's first *tong lau* emerged in the late 19th century, most were built after the mid-1950s to house a wave of post-war mainland migrants. But in Hong Kong few of these buildings remain, unlike in Macau and Singapore, which have preserved entire streets, even neighbourhoods, featuring this distinctive period architecture.

Several factors conspire against their survival, not least the absence of a comprehensive conservation policy, and banking rules that make financing of *tong lau* purchases — and their revival — more difficult than for other properties.

Only a handful of people have both the enthusiasm and means to revitalise the city's surviving *tong lau*. Most of

them, such as Lindman and American advertising executive Dare Koslow, are expatriates.

"Westerners seem to appreciate the unique architectural style of *tong lau*," says Katy Law, Nga-ning, convenor of the Central and Western Concern Group. "But many Hong Kong people don't know how to preserve old buildings and would rather build a new 10-floor high-rise. They are only thinking of profit. Foreigners want to preserve things and put a lot of loving care into it."

Sitting in a small coffee shop in Tai Ping Shan Street, just steps away from 11 Upper Station, the conservation activist says the neighbourhood appeals because it maintains a sense of community. The area was among the first to be settled by Chinese immigrants during the early 1850s and its network of small back and side streets is largely unaltered. Residents and business owners (which are mostly small enterprises) tend to know each other. And renovating *tong lau* to update facilities is one way to preserve the urban fabric, Law says.

Ten years ago the neighbourhood around Tai Ping Shan Street was quite run-down, occupied mainly by car repair and woodwork shops. "Now you're seeing galleries, cafes and bars," she says.

Lee Ho-yin, an assistant architecture professor at the University of Hong Kong, says the biggest difficulty in saving *tong lau* from being demolished to make way for high-rises, or from being ruined through neglect, is that most are private properties. There is little the government can do to make landlords save the buildings.

We have to change people's thinking so that renewal projects do not just cater to big developers

LEE HO YIN, ARCHITECTURE PROFESSOR

However, institutions issuing *tong lau* mortgages to personal buyers will provide loans of up to 70 per cent on the condition that the sum be repaid by the time the building is 60 years old. So someone who takes out a loan for a 54-year-old *tong lau* has six years to pay it back.

Lee, who is also director of the architectural conservation programme at HKU, says *tong lau* should be updated for use. An excellent example is Lai Seng Chan, a heritage shophouse in Sham Shui Po that reopened last year after a HK\$29 million facelift; its upper floors are now taken up by a traditional Chinese medicine centre

operated by Baptist University, with a herbal tea shop on the ground level. "When you enhance the value of the building through use, it adds heritage value to the building," Lee says.

"However, the Hong Kong development approach is high land property prices and big development... The demolition of street blocks may give Hong Kong people the impression of development, but it is only one kind of change. Since in 2003 created opportunities for (alternative) developments (where property prices crashed)," He cites entrepreneur Alan Le Yung-Kit and Darin Woo, whose design and development firm Blake's bought and modernised several *tong lau* properties, including Two Twelve Six on Hollywood Road.

"These developments don't involve demolition," Lee says. "We have to change people's thinking so that renewal projects do not just cater to big developers."

One way to retain *tong lau* is to restrict developments in certain areas. Not only will this moderate building prices, but also help retain the neighbourhood feel.

Lee reckons what Hong Kong needs is an army of micro-developers, such as Koslow and Blake's, which seized the opportunity to buy up *tong lau* buyers will provide loans of up to 70 per cent on the condition that the sum be repaid by the time the building is 60 years old. So someone who takes out a loan for a 54-year-old *tong lau* has six years to pay it back.

Lee, who is also director of the architectural conservation programme at HKU, says *tong lau* should be updated for use. An excellent example is Lai Seng Chan, a heritage shophouse in Sham Shui Po that reopened last year after a HK\$29 million facelift; its upper floors are now taken up by a traditional Chinese medicine centre

redevelopment and rehabilitation as its core businesses under the Urban Renewal Strategy promulgated in 2011. "The external relations department says in an e-mail. Law says the problem is the URA doesn't have a conservation mindset — it's just focused on profit-making.

The URA's first attempt at revitalising *tong lau* was the former Woo Cheong Paven Shop on Johnston Road, which reopened in 2007 after six years' restoration work.

"However, it turned into high-end restaurants causing major price increases in the neighbourhood, and now almost all the local shops have changed," Lee says.

"The use of such buildings needs to be carefully considered, because now it only benefits a few people."

Similarly, Lee Tung Street, the small Wan Chai lane that was known for its wedding card shops, has also been obliterated.

Lee believes that Hong Kong needs a fundamental change in its planning system. Well-developed cities have conservation policies under planning departments so there is controlled development. In Lee's native

Singapore, policy makers introduced a conservation master plan about 30 years ago to preserve historic districts, such as Chinatown — a policy prompted in part by falling tourism numbers attributed to loss of local character in the drive to build a modern metropolis.

"Singapore used the power of the planning authority to designate certain areas as conservation areas so they can restrict how much can be built. Hong Kong is one of the few places with a laissez-faire approach, which only benefits a few."

Planning approval processes were not introduced in Hong Kong until the 1990s, he adds. But the 2007 policy address by the then chief executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, which devoted eight paragraphs to heritage conservation, was

a sign of growing concern about the issue.

"You need a strong government to do this [conservation]."

Nevertheless, Lee is optimistic for the future. "You are seeing property developers balanced by the voice of the people. There is hope for change by raising awareness and education. It all takes time. Hong Kong society is reaching maturity and things are starting to change."

The shift in attitude is reflected in increased numbers of postgraduate students taking up conservation courses and growing calls among young people for more culture along with environmental rights and universal rights.

"They are willing to make less money, but have more benefits to society. This is a major change in societal values," Bernice Chan says.



Architect professor Lee Ho-yin cites the Lai Seng Chan building (in background) as a good example of a shophouse updated for modern use. Photo: Thomas Yau

A living room (left) at 11 Upper Station in Sheung Wan (right) owned by Helen Lindman (above). Photos: Michael Perini

Department of Urban Planning and Design

1. Dr. Roger Chan

- jointly presented a paper with the PhD student, Mr. Yi Sun entitled "The Changing Governance Mechanism and Spatiality of Chinese State: Lessons from Guangzhou-Foshan City Region" at the *Inter-University Seminar on Asian Megacities: Asian Urbanism and Beyond* at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 16th, 2013.
- served as the External Examiner to the PhD dissertation of Li Yun, Department of Geography and Resource Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 20th, 2013.

2. Dr. Raul Lejano

- published a paper with details as below:

Lee, E., **Lejano, R. P.**, & Connelly, R. J. (2013), "Regulation-by-Information in Areas of Limited Statehood: Lessons from the Philippines' Environmental Regulation", *Regulation & Governance*, 7(3), pp. 387-405.

3. Ms. Jie Li (PhD student)

- made a presentation entitled "Mega-projects and the Entrepreneurial Local State - Planning the New Towns in Shanghai" (joint paper with Prof. Rebecca Chiu) at the *Inter-University Seminar on Asian Megacities: Asian Urbanism and Beyond* at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 16th, 2013.

4. Mr. Samson Zhuojun Liu (PhD student)

made a presentation entitled "Transforming to Urbanity? Shareholding Reforms of Village Collectives in Guangzhou" (joint paper with Prof. Bo-sin Tang) at the *Inter-University Seminar on Asian Megacities: Asian Urbanism and Beyond* at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 16th, 2013.

5. Professor Bo-sin Tang

- made a presentation entitled "Logic of Open Space Planning and Development in Hong Kong" (joint paper with the PhD student, Darren Man-wai Cheung) at the *Inter-University Seminar on Asian Megacities: Asian Urbanism and Beyond* at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 16th, 2013.

6. Dr. Fiona Yang

- awarded a research grant of RMB 230,000 by the National Science Foundation China for the research project on "A Study of the Multi-scalar Growth Dynamics of Producer Services and Its Urbanization Effects: From the Political Economy Perspective".

7. Professor Anthony Yeh

- The Western Harbourfront Conceptual Master Plan of the Department of Urban Planning and Design with Prof. Anthony Yeh as PI has been positively received by the District Council as well as the press. The Plan for the Central and Western District Council that covers the stretch of waterfront area in the Western District that includes the Western Wholesale Food Market, the Western District Public Cargo Working Area and the temporary Kennedy Town Bus Terminus at

Shing Sai Street was widely publicized in most newspapers in Hong Kong on Saturday, 17 August 2013. It aims to provide a short, medium and long term plan to regenerate the past glamour of the Western Harbourfront. It will make the Western Harbourfront to be an attractive, vibrant and accessible water front by improving its public open space and converting it into a Western Gateway – a new landmark of Hong Kong.

COMMUNITY



The future of Western harbourfront as envisaged by Hong Kong University and the district council. Photos: SCMP Pictures

Now that's how to make an entrance

Plan unveiled to turn Kennedy Town waterfront into city's glam and green 'western gateway'

Olga Wong
olga.wong@scmp.com

A stunning observation tower, fountains and rows of outdoor cafes. You're looking at the possible future of the Western District harbourfront—a glamorous reinvention of an area arguably lost at the edge of one of the world's most dramatic skylines.

The proposal for Kennedy Town's waterfront also features an urban beach for sunbathing, a floating stage, a playground, sports venues and a tram museum.

Part of the area is already scheduled for a major facelift—with work expected to begin by the end of next year to turn four underused piers that are part of the Western Wholesale Food Market into fashionable flea markets.

There will also be new footbridges built to link Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park with the MTR sta-

tions on the new West Island Line.

However Central and Western District Council asked Professor Anthony Yeh Gar-on of the University of Hong Kong's Department of Urban Planning and Design to think beyond this project, which is being funded by the HK\$100 million Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying gave all 18 districts for community projects.

The new proposal unveiled yesterday will require both public money and determination from the government, acknowledges the council.

All in all, it covers a 2.4-kilometre stretch from Shek Tong Tsui to Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park.

"The plan, which will turn the old waterfront into the city's western gateway, is an important strategic investment in Victoria Harbour," said Yeh.

The university proposal introduces dining, retail and exhibition facilities into the wholesale

market, which currently only operates after midnight. Apart from drawing tourists to the area, the plan also serves the needs of residents, who are short on open space, said district council vice-chairman Chan Hok-fung.

"Over 100 people are sneaking into the jetty and cargo areas every night to exercise, to walk their dogs and to enjoy the sea breeze," he added.

Green features include using renewable energy from solar panels and wind turbines to power street lamps, and using rainwater to irrigate trees and

plants in the new landscape. On the heritage side, a trail featuring the history of the waterfront is being proposed, along with a museum dedicated to the city's 100-year-old tram network, aptly located near the tram depot.

Yeh said the whole project would definitely cost more than HK\$100 million.

Moreover, he believed the area had all the potential to attract the kind of stylish restaurants seen in Cadogan and Catchick streets in Kennedy Town.

But Chan feared the plan would face a number of challenges as it involves relocating a cargo area at the market and lengthening the operating hours.

"It will be hard to convince the fruit and fish wholesalers to hire more staff to run the retail business during the day," he said.

A Transport and Housing Bureau spokeswoman said the cargo area—with 29 berths and 7,000 workers—handles 10 per cent of the city's cargo.

She added that the bureau reviewed demand for the berths from time to time.

The plan, is an important strategic investment in Victoria Harbour

PROFESSOR ANTHONY YEH GAR-ON

