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ISSN 1561-781-5
9 771561 781004
HK$80
RMB80
US$11

PETER COOKSON SMITH

Hong Kong-based architect Peter Cookson Smith, founder of one of the first planning and landscape consultancies in the city, met *hinge* to discuss his new book, The Urban Design of Concession (see book review pg. 58) and share his extensive knowledge of architecture in China.

hinge – Can you tell us how you first became interested in design?
PCS – Well, as an architect I was always interested in art and design, but studying architecture I became increasingly interested in urban planning and urbanism, not just from a design perspective, but also from a social and economic one. I studied architecture in the UK, and ended up at the Architectural Association where I went on to study town planning and urban design. I worked as a consultant for a number of years in America, the Middle East and Japan. I came to Hong Kong to do a project for the firm I was with in the UK, and then came back in 1977 and set up a design and planning company - URBIS. A lot of our early work was for government, which was essentially producing planning and urban design frameworks for some of the early new towns, but we also carried out development investigations into all manner of things – village development, conservation, agriculture and even feng shui. As part of the new town programme we also started doing a lot of landscape and environmental work so we never have been an architectural firm; we specialize in planning, urban design, a bit of economic planning, landscape and so on. Those were our beginnings and I suppose we have just refined our approach over the years. The fact that we are a bit hybrid has done us a lot of good really - if you specialise too much in Hong Kong you can find yourself hung out to dry sometimes, when times get tough. I've been based here virtually all the time but we obviously now carry out a lot of work in China and the region.

The link to China came pretty early on. As I say in the introduction to my book on China, my first day here in Hong Kong was the day Mao Tse-tung passed away on 9th September 1976. This was a watershed in modern Chinese history, so I suppose I can fairly honestly say that China began a long process of change on the day of my arrival. The border remained closed for a number of years however and it wasn't until 1984 that Deng Xiao Ping eventually announced that China was introducing an 'Open Door Policy' and encouraging free trade. I was working in China in the early 1980s for the government, with some Chinese American planners. It was a time when China was still incredibly poor. I mean we talk about the astonishing modernisations but I remember being in Shanghai even in the mid-to-late 80s when at 6 o' clock at night there was no electricity at all. Very clearly China has done remarkable things in an extremely short period of time, but it was the elusive past associations with Western urbanism, and how this came about, that has always intrigued me.

I have always been a little bemused that to a great extent we still teach urban design and planning to students from a Western perspective using predominantly Western textbooks. There is in fact very little written about Asian urbanism. My first book on Hong Kong, The Urban Design of Impermanence, was a bit of a one-off really. It was a matter of putting sketches and several essays together to describe but also visualise the essential characteristics of a high density Asian city. The notion of 'impermanence' underlies the urban design language of Hong Kong to a significant extent through its patterns of change and temporality. So in writing about Asian cities it is a matter of hitting on one or more things that encapsulate their evolution and personality.

h – Tell us a little about The Urban Design of Concession.
PCS – When I started this book I scratched my head over whether to include Chinese cities in a book on Asian urbanism, but that was just impossible. China is too big and diverse a subject in its own right. The question then became how to explain the historical imprints and transformation ingrained within the cities, and also their commonalities.

The idea of the Treaty Ports seemed a good place to start, primarily because in the mid-19th century, when the process started, China wasn't really very well urbanized. Probably only 5% of people lived in cities as opposed to 50% today, so China hadn't really changed much for 2000 years whereas Europe had a long history of city building. While China had in the past established an enormous mercantile reach as far as Alexandria, Antioch and Venice, the curtailment of international trade by sea and the disbanding of its naval fleet had an enormously destabilising impact on Chinese entrepot cities. But this virtually coincided with the European Enlightenment, rooted in an urban-based theologism, and a Eurocentrism in relation to the arts and science that viewed the non-European world as semi-barbarian. Perhaps by fateful coincidence China felt much the same way about the West under the 'Mandate of Heaven', so that both sides viewed each other from largely incomprehensible perspectives. So scholastic and Confucian traditions in China, with a history of scientific thought that evolved only within a protected elite, collided with new forces of social revolution in Europe – with emerging calls for the universal rights of man – and shaped further by urban industrial capitalism and the industrial revolution. America at that time hadn't really embarked on long-distance trade trajectories and adventurism; France was in the middle of a revolution, but Britain in particular was in the middle of another revolution – an industrial one. So this idea of looking at city evolution seemed very appropriate to a situation that hadn't really changed much and where Western involvement in the concession areas were the beginnings of, I suppose, the modern urbanisation process in China.

There was of course another factor linked to this – that foreign intervention was, by a quirk of history, the catalyst to cataclysmic political changes in China. Within 60 years of the Treaty of Nanking which ceded Hong Kong and the first five Treaty Ports to the British, there was the fall of the 260 year Manchu Dynasty, followed by a great outburst of nationalism, republicanism, and a frantic process of city building and activity. But this was also followed by civil war, Japanese invasion, the Cultural Revolution under Mao and then the new modernisations so you can relate all these things back to the catalysts that were there in the treaty ports. The port cities therefore experienced new types of planning, urban design, building programmes, and modernisation from Sun Yat Sen's revolutionary movement onward, together with the socialist planned economy after 1949. So looking at them and trying to equate the influences that were there, the great political changes, the economic changes, the social changes that had an impact on the physical form and fabric of the cities, was a fascinating exercise. There is this enormous holistic inter-relationship between everything that was going on and how that was translated into city fabric. And of course what was there initially in the old concession and settlement areas was also changing too. You look at the Bund in Shanghai for example that was built primarily in the 1920s and 1930s, but before that there had been another Bund built in the 1870s and 80s, so the story really does relate to growth and change in some of the biggest cities in China. It's a good way of looking at China urbanism, because if you didn't look at the port cities, what else is there to look at? Beijing obviously, and perhaps 19th century Xian and its historical relationship to the Silk Road but they are special cases in their own right. So, that was really how this book came about.

The third book, which I'm only halfway through, is really looking at similar influences within Asia – The Urban Design of Intervention. This examines major interventionist influences on Asian cities through immigration, emigration, colonisation, and of course globalisation. Urbanism in Asia is very much bound up with some kind of catalytic intervention, and very nearly every Asian country has been subject to it, to a great or lesser extent. Of course the colonial influences in terms of city building were arguably the most significant interventionist forces. The Asian city has represented substantial cultural shifts over several centuries providing for different degrees of co-existence and overlap. This reinforces the value of urban places, and promotes the co-existence and interplay of cultural types, even if the processes that have produced actual city identities are relatively intangible. It is therefore best to steer clear of normative models when discussing Asian city planning.

h – It's quite surprising that so much old architecture survived the Revolution in China.
PCS – Yes, undoubtedly a lot was destroyed, but I was also actually surprised how much has remained. It's said that Chou En-lai during the Cultural Revolution actually protected the buildings on the Bund in Shanghai from being desecrated! They wouldn't of course have been easy to destroy as they were enormous granite structures. A lot of the things that were destroyed were the temples and established cultural icons. They were remarkable times that lasted from 1949 until Mao's death, and there were forces unleashed during this period which made no logical sense. For example the purges which started in 1966, forced the movement of professionals and bureaucrats from urban areas to the countryside. With a destitute country there was little in terms of city building. The slogan was 'Smash the Old; Build the New'. It was possible in the 70s and 80s to still meet a lot of the old guys who had been forcibly moved from their teaching jobs at Tsinghua and Tongji Universities into rural areas, and it really achieved nothing but suffering and disaster.

h – It is easy now to forget what the Chinese have been through really.
PCS – Yes the irrational use of state-sanctioned persecution obviously led to a profound disillusionment at all levels, and nowhere more so than in the cities. People who were caught up in it now find it difficult to explain. People have always respected authority and respected the State, something we still find in Chinese society today, which is probably why as well as being a very dynamic society it is also a very respectful one. But having said that, government in China is also very responsive in terms of meeting people's aspirations. There is a possibly unexpected dynamism in the cities because of the system. A lot

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of young people from Hong Kong go up to China and they see new types of urban initiative because there is a 'can do' mentality and a capacity for effective decision-making. In terms of physical fabric and the urban land economy things are possible that are not considered feasible in Hong Kong. The city mayors have an enormous amount of control and therefore they get a lot of programmes underway which are very conducive to environmental betterment, often in a relatively casual way.

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h – How does this compare to Hong Kong?
PCS – Through 150 years vast numbers of people came to Hong Kong from China as refugees and immigrants, which was why the housing and new town programmes were necessary. People had to be accommodated. It is what brought me here. When I arrived in Hong Kong, a lot of the areas around the urban fringe, even parts of Hong Kong Island were squatter settlements. People were living on boats in typhoon shelters and massively overcrowded tenements. So the programmes did wonders and we now have 10 new towns, but the downside is that for 30 years we haven't been able to lift people through the system by creating better and larger accommodation at an affordable price, so a very high percentage of households are still living in a very basic way. Government is in some ways backed into a corner where it generates substantial sums from land sales and premium payments, but it is also obviously under pressure to maintain property values. Clearly developers will build what they think will sell at the highest rate in every given situation so we've ended up in some ways with a highly functional environment but a very constraining one, and we've now got to the point where people can't afford to get on the first rung of the housing ladder, or if they've got on the rung they can't afford to jump to the next, because we don't have that sort of accommodation available. Compare that with what's happened in the Mainland cities where the average size of a flat is somewhere between 90 and 100sq m. A bit of a role reversal! I think people genuinely live pretty well in Chinese cities now, and that has been achieved within one generation.

The first colonial government discovered pretty early on in the 1840s that it could make a lot of money out of the sale of land. It also needed to do this as the British Government at the time had little interest in investing in the Territory. Within about two years of taking over Hong Kong the first reclamations were carried out in the harbour and government found they could sell land on the waterfront to opportunist concerns, although I think the first lots sold for around 250 dollars in those days. Our lands policy in Hong Kong has been linked to financial policy ever since. This helps to keep taxes low, but of course we pay in another way. We have lost most of our older buildings, and in large part our sense of heritage, while other cities like Singapore have retained much of theirs. Lands factors therefore historically dominate our planning system which in the urban area is carried out through Outline Zoning Plans, although they are actually more concerned with urban management rather than design. If you have a private site and it's zoned for a specific use, and the Buildings Ordinance allows you develop up to a given plot ratio of 10 or 15, then there is an enormous economic imperative towards redevelopment. Urban Hong Kong has been shaped spatially by this process, although only around 17 percent of land in the SAR is actually built on. This impetus towards redevelopment to increased physical densities is why we have never introduced a proper conservation policy to protect heritage buildings. Technically we have grades of protected buildings - Grade 1, 2, 3. With Grade 3 buildings it seems that the policy is to simply acknowledge the inevitable, take a photograph and say 'this is what it used to look like'. With Grade 2 it is a matter of trying to preserve an element of detail, and with Grade 1 we have examples of owners beginning to demolish structures in order to get Government to the negotiating table. It is very sad that we have never adopted a proper protection process and built this into development policy, but of course it's something that should have been put in place years ago when land values weren't what they are today. Instead there is an actual incentive for owners to redevelop in order to maximise technically permissible gross floor area, so there is a sort of a perversion in the whole process, really.

And of course it is not just historically sanctified old buildings that need protection, it is our mixed use urban neighbourhoods, our established communities, and the street oriented matrix of activities in older city quarters that need regeneration rather than the simplistic redevelopment formulae adopted under the Urban Renewal Strategy which has effectively become little more than a financially driven enabling mechanism for private developers. Hopefully we will now begin to see a greater emphasis on "bottom up" community planning, rehabilitation and respect for the values inherent in these situations. There might well be new realms of planning and design work coming out of this that are more community related, and that would be good to see. But of course we have a history in Hong Kong of building up large and bureaucratic department and institutional structures that in practice act as 'silos' and have an obvious self-interest in perpetuating and enlarging their areas of operation rather than subscribing to a holistic solution as to what is best for the city as a whole.

h – It's hard to label you. Are you a working designer still?
PCS – Thanks to my colleagues in Urbis I am still involved in things. As well as work involvement, I sit on various government committees, and have various roles in planning, urban design and architectural institutes. I also sit on the Harbourfront Commission set up by the Secretary for Development. As an office about 50% of our work is still here in Hong Kong and the other 50% on the Mainland and other parts of Asia. A lot of work on the planning side, as opposed to the landscape side, is with waterfront planning and urban regeneration. Probably about half of our work is for government or quasi-government institutional bodies, and half is for private concerns. We're doing a lot of work on Kai Tak for example and we did much of the original studies for the Central-Wanchai foreshore. We're part of the Foster team on West Kowloon, so you get involved on an urban design and planning level working with other architects.

Writing and drawing is something I've always done. When I studied architecture people had to draw - there were no computers at all. And I'm still drawn to the artistic side of design, but I also enjoy writing and researching. I think the key to writing about urban design is to focus on its formative influences – not merely the design but the cultural, social, economic and political aspects.

h – What about books and education?
PCS – I've always felt that if you're a professional person you have a bit of a duty to students to get involved in education and, living in Asia for so long, I've always been convinced that we should really be far more informed and protective of good Asian urbanism. This is not essentially about the historical formality that you have in European cities. If you look at the busiest parts in Hong Kong for example, let alone other cities, they aren't the big parks but the small spaces, the street markets. There's much more of a respect for informality, adaptation and to a large extent indeterminacy. So trying to draw a lot of these things out, describing why things are as they are, is part and parcel of investigation and writing about cities, and this should of course inform the planning process. In Asian cities what might first appear 'organic' in its present state, might just as easily be the result of early settlement imprints, regulatory regimes, land ownership structures, market imperatives and trading trajectories. There is really no systemic theory of urban design.

I started about four years ago putting together a series of books on urban design, and it has involved quite a bit of research but also a lot of walking. In researching The Urban Design of Concession I explored all the cities on foot. Some of the cities I had visited before or even worked there, but other cities I had never been to such as the Manchurian cities of Harbin and Dalian. It was a matter of literally exploring the older parts of the cities with a map. I took 12 cities as being just about the largest ones but at one time at the beginning of the 20th century there were 48 concessions in different places, some were very remote, some were upriver at the top of the Yangtze with only three people living there: maybe a missionary, a commissioner and a representative of the Inspectorate of Customs.

It is quite remarkable the range of things you actually see. The idea was, in a subtle way, to relate the original concession and settlement areas to the modern cities, and one of the purposes of using sketches rather than photographs is that one can relate older fabric to the modernised cities, revitalised urban streets and places. Places like Nanjing Road which formed part of the International Settlement is now the busiest street in Shanghai, while Zhongshan Road in Tianjin still possesses all its wonderful Byzantine roofscape and things like that. Many of the buildings have been preserved but have also been converted, so the older fabric still forms a very salient part of the urban environment.

h – You mentioned that you have taught architecture. What advice would you give young architects or planners at the beginning of their career?
PCS – Well, it's a very good question. I still teach part time. I'm on the Board of the Department of Urban Planning (DUPAD) at the HKU. There are only two universities that have an architectural course and only one that has a planning course so the employment take up is actually quite gentle. The majority of architects probably go into the private sector in one way or another but the majority of planners tend to go into the public sector. Now the Planning Department has about 400 people. A lot of planners work for the URA, Housing Authority, and MTR, and less and less young planners work in the private sector. Even ten years ago I don't think you'd have met many graduates in Hong Kong who really wanted to work in China. Now there is no problem at all. Chinese cities are now more like Hong Kong, and offer creative working opportunities. A lot of people now technically work out of an office in Hong Kong but they're on a plane at least twice a week to cities in China. At least for now there is plenty work around.

But it's important to acknowledge that architecture, urban planning and urban thinking are really serious things and in the West people embark on these sorts of career with a strong sense of vocation. I think it might be something that's a little bit missing in Hong Kong. Undergraduate students will often apply to about five different faculties - maybe law, medicine, accountancy or something like that and architecture is normally not the highest on the list. Generally speaking in the West students begin these studies because they really want to be designers, architects, urbanists, urban regenerators or community planners, so there is a strong sense of urgency and importance in what you do. Here, everything is a little bit perverted by the commercial imperative, and even after qualification a significant number of planners for example veer off on an occupational tangent. It's something that's embedded in the culture of the place, in the culture of affordability. I think this is almost unique to Hong Kong, but there are positive signs that this is changing. The professional institutes play a very important role in both professional training and continuing education, and encouraging excellence through conferences, workshops and competitions. One advantage of our high octane city is that we have to learn quickly to turn constraints into opportunities. In one way or another we need to establish our compact city as a model for high density sustainable living in the 21st century.

h – Thank you very much.