LIFE

Hands up
Robotic help for stroke survivors

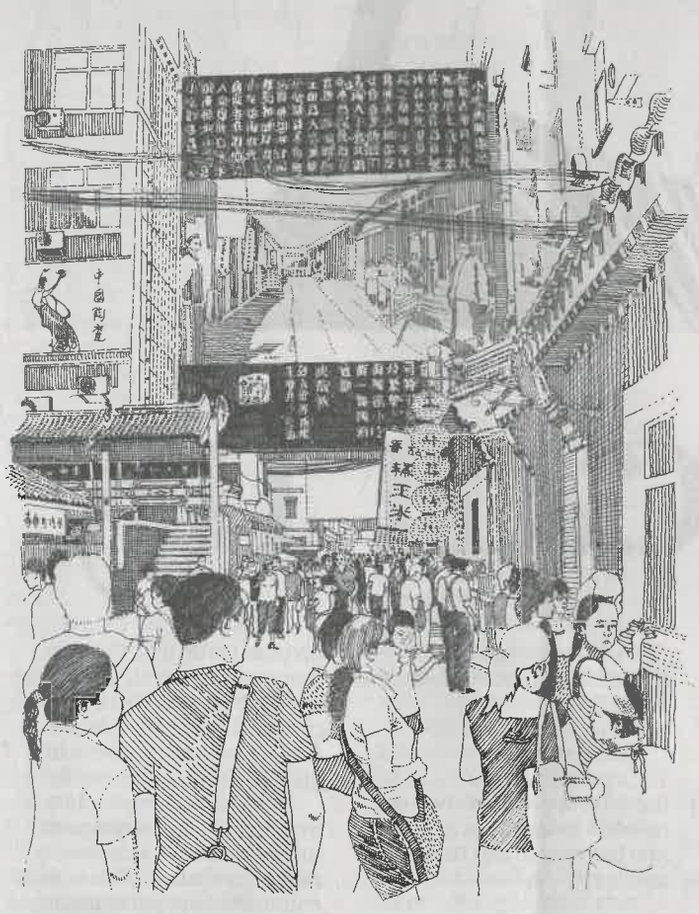
> TECHNOLOGY & DESIGN C10

Starter's orders
Culinary incubators for restaurateurs

> FOOD & WINE C8

Posh frocks
Beckham scores at New York fashion week

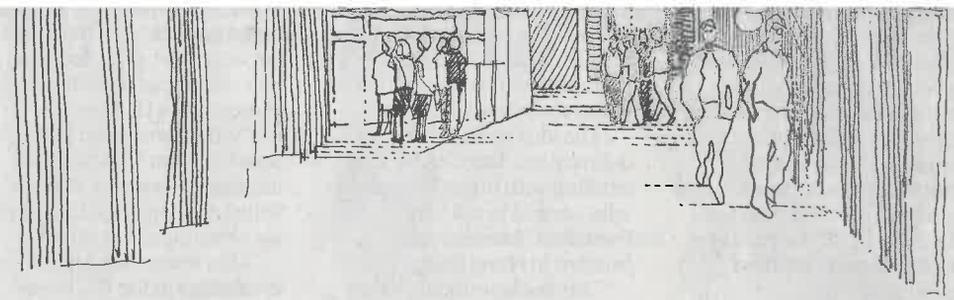
> LUXURY C9



Cookson Smith's sketches of (from left) Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar; Beijing; and Macau. Below: Cookson Smith.
Photo: K.Y. Cheng

DRAWN FROM

EXPERIENCE



There's a buzz about some Asian cities, says urban planner Peter Cookson Smith, who explores the changes in his new book. And Hong Kong could do better if officials took a more bottom-up approach, he tells
Christopher DeWolf

Peter Cookson Smith has been working as an architect and urban planner in Hong Kong since 1977, but it wasn't until 10 years ago that he discovered a sad deficiency in how urban planners are taught.

"I realised that nearly all the textbooks we use are Western textbooks," he says.

Very little material dealt with the unique development of Asian cities. That left Cookson Smith with plenty of questions: "How did our cities evolve in the way that they have? How and why do they look the way they do? And where are they going in the future?"

He decided to do something about it. In 2006, Cookson Smith published *The Urban Design of Impermanence*, a collection of sketches and essays that examine how Hong Kong came to be the city it is today.

He expanded his focus to the mainland in 2012, with *The Urban Design of Concession*, which delves into the forces that shaped treaty ports such as Shanghai, Guangzhou and Xiamen.

His latest book goes further. In *The Urban Design of Intervention*, released this week by MCCM Creations, Cookson Smith analyses over 20 different Asian cities, from Lahore to Seoul, by way of Calcutta, Bangkok, Penang and Taipei.

While Hong Kong does not figure much in its pages, any local reader will be tempted to draw conclusions about how our own city has evolved in comparison with its neighbours.

"With Asia you can't generalise – it's massively diverse – but there are commonalities between cities," says Cookson Smith. "There are threads that link them together."

One of those threads is the role of outside forces – what Cookson Smith calls "catalytic processes" – that have shaped Asia's urban life over the past several centuries.

One of the earliest of these was Chinese immigration to Southeast Asia, which established trading links which the Spanish and Portuguese capitalised on when they arrived in the 16th century.

This eventually led to the ubiquitous Chinese shophouse, an especially adaptable structure that combined home life and business, while also catering to hot climates through its "five foot ways" – sheltered walkways that could be up to 10 degrees cooler than the sun-soaked street.

Colonialism was another major factor, as the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch imposed their respective philosophies on urban order.

In Macau, meandering streets meet in front of Catholic churches, where they broaden into public gathering spaces. In Manila, by contrast, the Spanish imposed a rigid street grid as found in all of their colonial settlements.

Often, colonial rule led to new architectural styles, such as Indo-Saracenic Revival, a 19th-century trend that blended Mughal architecture with Gothic Revival and neo-classical styles. In the late 19th century, it spread from India to British Malaya, which is present-day Malaysia and Singapore.

Although Cookson Smith was already familiar with many of the cities in his book, others were a mystery until he visited.

"If there was an open space of four or five days, I would book the cheapest flight available, go to a place and just walk and walk," he says. This proved especially rewarding in Calcutta, a city he initially approached with trepidation, given its reputation for squalor.

"What strikes you first of all is how nice the city is. It's a city of streets and places, and what they call the Maidan, this big open grassland."

Cookson Smith's flânerie revealed another quality shared by most Asian cities: a rich, pervasive streetlife that blurs the lines between public and private space. "The streets are the living room of the community," he says. "The public realm in most of Asia is very dynamic, and it is dynamic because it is flexible. People colonise space for all sorts of things."

The informal economy plays a large role in that liveliness, with street hawkers turning roads and squares into shopping centres, eateries and gathering spaces.

"In most places there is an acceptance of the informal economy, because there has to be – so many people are working informally," says Cookson Smith. (In Bangkok, nearly two-thirds of gross domestic product is generated by the informal economy, according to the Rockefeller Foundation's Informal City Dialogues project.)

"In more sophisticated places there is a measure of control, and whether that is too heavy-handed is the question."

One of the places that has embraced informality is Taipei, where street hawkers can be found on nearly every corner, and grassroots cultural groups are revitalising derelict old buildings as part of an official urban regeneration initiative.

When Cookson Smith first visited Taipei in the late 1970s, he thought it was "incredibly backward". Today, "it has improved on almost every level," he says. "A lot of the change has come from simple economic progress – people are better off than they were."

At the same time, he says Taiwan's democratic reforms led to a change in Taipei's approach to urban planning, with more emphasis on measures that improve quality of life.

We have nearly 80 kilometres of harbourfront, but you can't get to most of it
PETER COOKSON SMITH

In recent years, Taipei has opened bike lanes, converted vacant lots into parks and encouraged small-scale urban inventions, such as the conservation of the Treasure Hill squatters' village. The city's public bike-sharing system attracts 60,000 users a day.

"Cities seem to go through a certain threshold where people's expectations change for the better and then you get certain initiatives," says Cookson Smith.

He points to Seoul's Cheonggyecheon project, in which an elevated highway was knocked down to reveal a long-hidden stream.

"In the past, Seoul was grim, but now there's a nice buzz about the place. Cities have got to evolve so that citizens take pride in their city, and politicians respond by proposing the right things," he says.

That brings Cookson Smith to what he says is the lamentable state of Hong Kong, where the streets "aren't looking so good these days". Hong Kong urban planning is "top-down," he says, with "ridiculous" public consultations that don't amount to anything and little concern for what citizens actually want. "We haven't turned a corner where we have anything close to bottom-up planning," he says.

Cookson Smith sits on the Harbourfront Commission and he cites the city's dysfunctional relationship with Victoria Harbour as an example of where things have gone wrong.

"We have nearly 80 kilometres of harbourfront, but you can't get to most of it," he says. "And when you can get to it, there is not much there. A promenade is better than nothing at all, but you don't go to a promenade just to look at shrubs and concrete.

"Other cities like Singapore and San Francisco and Auckland have done very well to introduce a degree of informality – things like restaurants and so forth."

Cookson Smith says the culprit for Hong Kong's urban planning woes is a government that cannot think laterally.

"In terms of diversity and interesting character and accessibility, you really need to think in a holistic way, whereas in Hong Kong, we tend not to do it. There are a lot of silos in government," he says.

A prime example: the grey metal fences that line every street in town. "The Highways Department just decided to do it. Nobody had any say in that at all. I haven't met one person yet who has had anything good to say about it."

Though Cookson Smith has C.Y. Leung's ear on urban issues – he is a member of the Commission on Strategic Development, which is chaired by the Chief Executive – it is a broader audience that he hopes will read his book.

"What I hope people will draw from it is a recognition of some of the issues facing Asian cities," he says. With more than half of Asia's population soon expected to live in urban areas, it's necessary to understand how they came to be – and where they can be taken in the future.

life@scmp.com