

## **The Photo-Opportunity: Building Identity at a Snap**

*By Peter Benz (Academy of Visual Arts, HKBU)*

For you to understand the opening and background of my following argument, I believe it is good to note that for the last ten years I've been living in Hong Kong, working at one of the altogether nine local public universities. Five years ago, as part of the institutional development of my faculty – the Academy of Visual Arts – we've opened an “off-shore master-programme” in Shenzhen, China – which sounds much more adventurous than it actually is, as Shenzhen is only about 30 minutes and one border control away by public transportation. Because of this new programme, I've been commuting between Hong Kong and China once or twice per week for the last four years; more importantly it gave me the chance to get to know average mainland Chinese students, designers, curators, people, but also the Chinese “operation system” more directly and intimately than I would have without it, as despite the geographical proximity the relations between Hong Kong and Shenzhen – and the mainland in general – are generally affected by mutual misunderstanding.

I hope it to be common knowledge that Hong Kong used to be a British colony until it was returned to China in 1997. In some ways you may imagine this process to be similar to the German reunification in the early 1990s, though in most ways it's entirely different. Yet, in terms of the respective rejection of the people from “the other side” it is uncanny to note the similarities to the West vs. East controversies 15, 20 years ago in Germany: the mainland Chinese are supposedly uncivilized, uneducated, and ignorant locusts who don't even know how to queue for the bus, while the Hong Kongers are considered ungrateful, arrogant, and opportunistic dogs who bite the hand that feeds them.

In this atmosphere of tenseness and high-flying tempers, the notion of “identity” has become a major point of debate, in which symbols and images as well as their perceptions and interpretations play a key role; it is in this context that the following considerations are set.

### *A Can of Cigarettes*

Not long ago, during a break in one of my classes in Shenzhen, I noticed that one of my mainland Chinese students was smoking a Chinese brand of cigarettes sold in a tin can, rather than the usual cardboard pack.

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Fig. 1: Can of cigarettes of the Double Happiness-brand

While this in itself initially would only warrant a brief glimpse of attention, what got me excited was the imagery on the can: a photo of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour. The picture shows the Northern shoreline of Hong Kong Island from a raised viewpoint on the Western part of the island, and – very remarkably – it has the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre at its centre (Fig. 1). Please keep this image in mind, and we'll return to it again later.

#### *A Quick Experiment*

Now, I'd like to invite you to do a quick simple experiment: take your mobile phone, laptop or other device to access the internet, and search images for a city plus the term "skyline" – any larger city will do. I've tried this with many places before, but for demonstration purposes I've chosen "Frankfurt skyline" here.

Look through the resulting overview of images carefully. Very likely you will note a significant number of pictures shown as top search results – often as many as three quarters of the result – are taken from the same point of view, despite they're by different people on different dates at different day times. Given the

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unlimited number of possible viewpoints to take pictures of Frankfurt's – or any other – skyline: how did this come about?

*The Photo-Opportunity*

In the case of Frankfurt the photo showing up 10 out of the first 16 results is shown in Fig. 2. Obviously, a major reason why so many people choose to take this photo is because it's a good picture.

The city centre of Frankfurt from this view condenses into one clearly distinguished photographic object, with a certain immanent visual rhythm, a distinct profile, an actual skyline. This photo object is presented within a spatially defined setting, almost appears elevated as if on a pedestal or stage. The sky behind the skyline creates a natural, more or less dramatic background against which the buildings become clearly visible. And: there is an un-obstructed view of the photographic object that even integrates further compositional effects e.g. through the vanishing lines as provided by the river banks, the historical bridge in the middle ground as a contrast to the glass-and-steel towers in the back etc.

Apparently all these photos were taken from the same photo spot that seems to almost guarantee a perfect shot under any circumstances: a photo-opportunity.



Fig. 2: Frankfurt von der Deutschherrnbrücke (Photo: Schlurcker via wikimedia.org) and Google map of Frankfurt Osthafen (screenshot from 19 August 2016)

That leaves two questions: How do all these photographers – professionals, amateurs, tourists alike – know about this spot? And why do all of them fall for this photo-opportunity despite it's obviously not unique and therefore special?

The first question is easy to answer: because it's on the map. You may try it with whatever city you've tested on your mobile device before, but for Frankfurt the evidence is in the map in the lower section of Fig. 2.

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Somebody<sup>1</sup> declared the Deutschherrnbrücke in Frankfurt – the photo spot for all the pictures discussed above – to be a “scenic spot”, which is why it is highlighted as such on Google- and other maps by a little camera-icon<sup>2</sup>, thus immanently suggesting a photo-opportunity. When zooming into a map the scenic spot markers are amongst the first to appear, thus finding photo-opportunities isn’t a problem. Question still is: why do so many people follow the advice of this symbol?

Already in her classic essay collection *In Plato’s Cave* (1973) Susan Sontag defines picture taking as the ultimate outcome of tourism:

*“Photographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had. [...] A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs.”<sup>3</sup>*

With today’s wide spread availability of digital cameras, camera-equipped mobile phones and other devices, even more people regularly produce continuously increasing numbers of photos. A new dimension to Sontag’s equation was added in the last decade through online image distribution opportunities, in particular of social networks and photo-sharing platforms. Taking a picture, and posting it on the Internet proves one’s presence at a location; the more spectacular the picture, the more prestigious to have been there. A good photo thus equals touristic status, which makes a well-placed photo-opportunity irresistibly alluring as it offers added value beyond the mere captured memory in less time (for looking for a good position), at less risk (of failing to get a good picture), and usually at no monetary costs.

Let’s pause for a moment and let this line of thought sink in: people are looking to take good photos, so some unknown kind spirit points them to the right place, possibly even arranges for a convenient viewing platform, good accessibility by public transport, and maybe even wifi-access? For free?

### *The Catch*

Well, there is another, more complex and ambivalent side to the photo-opportunity: control. Contemporary ‘icono-obsession’ has not gone unnoticed also by architects, city planners, and in particular urban

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<sup>1</sup> The marker at Deutschherrnbrücke, Frankfurt was first added as a “tourist attraction” on 23 August 2015 by A Google Maps User, which is an aggregate pseudonym for anonymous contributors. It was turned into a “scenic spot” by user frequent\_cycler\_ffm on 18 April 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the camera icon used in digital maps to mark “scenic spots” distinctly differs from the more abstract and neutral symbol as used in traditional paper maps. The design of the symbol alone already indicates a change of purpose and intention of the scenic spot.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave”, In *On Photography* (London; New York, NY: Penguin, 2008), 9.

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management, as photos/looks can dramatically influence public acceptance of new infrastructure, and/or affect the international image of a city or region – as impressively shown by the Guggenheim in Bilbao<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, control over photographic imagery of buildings and cityscapes in professional magazines, official publications etc. is common professional practice of the field<sup>5</sup>: every architectural firm, every city promotion office will have professional photos ready for use at any time and occasion it might be needed.

However, it is of course a lot more difficult to control the average citizen/tourist who will take pictures at whim, and publish them on all sorts of platforms on the internet, thus contributing to a gradually developing grass-root perception of a building and/or city.

Difficult... unless one employs the behavioural tools of the photo-opportunity: Take a fairly coherently designed built entity, place it on a slightly raised platform in front of a more or less homogenous backdrop, provide an un-obstructed line of sight, and on this axis – preferably in a distance that suits the focal lengths of the most common cameras – put a scenic spot marker or – more sophisticatedly – install a visitors' platform. Soon after tourist coaches will begin unloading their passengers there, and a little later Facebook, Instagram, Flickr and their likes will be filled with variations of the same recurring photo.

If this sounds too simplistic: Take the time to search images of successful examples of 'iconic buildings' online, and evaluate them on the photo-opportunity criteria outlined above. In case you have even a little more time: look up satellite images of the same buildings, but this time focus on the place opposite to the building, at the other end of the visual axis. You'll usually find a platform, promenade, or other kind of view point in convenient distance.

Again, for demonstration purposes I'd like to analyse the Sydney Opera House, the mother of all iconic buildings: same as before when searching for images of the opera house through Google, one will get – of course not exclusively – three prominently recurring shots: one straight from a viewpoint at the West of the opera house roughly from shore level; from elevated shot from a North-western vantage point; and one South-eastern view, again from shore-level with the Harbour Bridge in the background (Fig. 3).

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. "The Bilbao Effect | The Economist", *The Economist*, 21 December 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21591708-if-you-build-it-will-they-come-bilbao-effect>; and/or Chris Michael, "The Bilbao Effect: Is 'Starchitecture' All It's Cracked up to Be?", *The Guardian*, 30 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/apr/30/bilbao-effect-gehry-guggenheim-history-cities-50-buildings>.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Benedict Loderer, "Die Kommunikation ist ein Teil der Architektur: Benedikt Loderer befragte Jacques Herzog", *db-bauzeitung*, no. 9 (1999): 20–21.

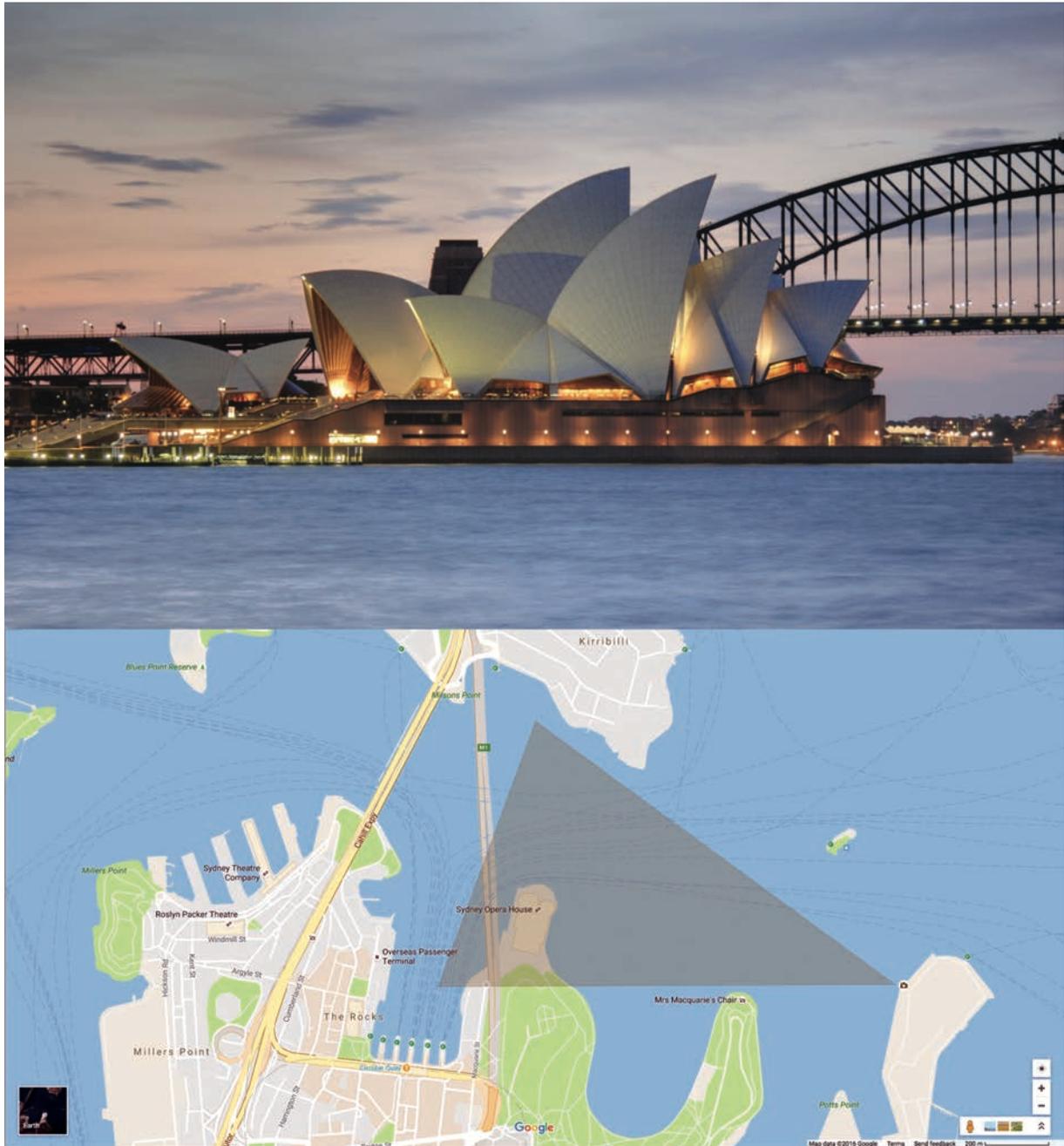


Fig. 3: View of Sydney Opera House from the Southeast (Photo: Adam.J.W.C. via wikimedia.org) and Google map of Sydney Harbour (screenshot from 22 August 2016)

Referencing these views with a map, shows two of them marked with a “scenic spot” (Fig. 3). Zooming in on the locations via Google Earth reveals that all three of them feature dedicated viewing areas/platforms: a circular platform protruding into the harbour North of the Overseas Passenger Terminal<sup>6</sup>; the elevated shot is

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taken from a visitors' platform on top of the North-Eastern pylon of Harbour Bridge; and the last shot being from a spot called Farm Cove on a small peninsular East of the opera (Fig. 3).

This creates a remarkable theoretical situation: might the photo-opportunity indeed establish the significance of the architecture it puts in scene? Possibly not the actual quality in traditional terms of the building counts, but its staging within its urban context? Thinking about it, this wouldn't really be a surprise as essentially this is what happens all the time at the scale of product presentations and such like: a pompous photo-opportunity makes the product look more desirable than it actually is. Why should this be different for buildings or entire city brandings?

#### *Return to the Cigarette Can*

At this point I would like to return to the Chinese cigarette can from the beginning of my considerations. As mentioned, what got me excited about this can, was the particular image of Hong Kong skyline it featured. Why is that photo remarkable? Because nobody ever takes this picture. By this I don't mean this picture couldn't be taken, i.e. I don't want to imply it to be a fake. A fairly simple triangulation based on the positions of landmark buildings in the image indicates that it indeed may originate from a spot somewhere around Victoria Peak.

Instead my surprise is quite literal: a picture from this position, this angle and height is not commonly taken as it misses the point of Victoria Harbour: Hong Kong Island's breath-taking skyline. This particular shot is exponentially less visually attractive than any shot taken from a position perpendicular to the shoreline, and therefore any "normal photographer" wouldn't bother to take it, as becomes evident through a quick Google Image search of "Hong Kong Skyline" again (Fig. 4).

Essentially there are two common views of Hong Kong only:

- either the picture is taken from the southern tip of Kowloon-side across the harbour, showing the Hong Kong skyline in all its glory as a more or less linear sequence of skyscrapers from left to right (top left of Fig. 4). These images are usually shot from somewhere along the lavish water front promenade in Tsim Sha Tsui, thus they vary slightly in terms of viewpoint and frame, but are nonetheless easily distinguished through their composition; or



Fig. 4: Top left: View of Central Hong Kong from the North (Photo: Gagan Deep Singh via wikimedia.org); top right: View of Central Hong Kong from the South (Photo: Robster1983 via wikimedia.org); and bottom: Google map of Hong Kong Victoria Harbour (screenshot from 22 August 2016)

- the picture is taken from a position in the mountains behind – i.e. south of – the Central-district on Hong Kong Island (top right of Fig. 4). In the latter case almost every single picture – by professionals and laymen alike – can be traced to be taken from the one same principal spot, the Peak Tram station itself or from a small viewing platform located slightly east from the Peak-station. The mountains behind the city of Hong Kong are fairly densely overgrown, it's not easy to find a clear shot of the harbour from between the trees if you don't stay in one of the luxury homes along the mountains' ridge; thus essentially all pictures are taken from this one particular location conveniently provided by city planners.

As might be expected by now, both photo-opportunities are marked as scenic spots (Fig. 4) and additionally tie in with other popular tourist attractions, which explains their overwhelming iconographic success.

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So why then does the cigarette can show a different perspective? It seems to suggest that at least one photographer, and subsequently a graphic designer, an art director etc. resisted the visual power of a photo-opportunity, and gave preference to an entirely different view. Is my theory of the photo-opportunity wrong after all?

#### *The Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre*

I believe the answer lies in the particular composition of the tin can photo. As equally mentioned at the very beginning of this text the student smoking the particular brand in question is from mainland China as is the cigarette tin. And it is essentially this detail that suggests an alternative motivation at work in this case.

The overall composition of the image on the tin can very clearly focuses the Extension to the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (HKCEC) at its centre. This extension was purpose-built 1994 to 1997 by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, in association with Wong & Ouyang as the venue for the Hong Kong-handover ceremony in 1997, when the city territory was “returned to the motherland”.

Because of this important nationalist purpose the entire building and its surrounding are laden with symbolic meaning: to begin with it was built on reclaimed land off the original shore of Hong Kong Island as to be on “virgin grounds” that were never under colonial rule and generally without memories attached to it. The planners pitched the building’s design as the shape of an allegoric seabird taking off over the harbour towards the north (aka China). The HKCEC’s peninsula is surrounded by a series of public artworks themed around the occasion and up until today is the foremost important site for any national celebrations in the territory.

*“Since the handover itself the nationalist associations of the Extension have been further underlined and strengthened, and a site has been created for Chinese national meanings which, despite the constitutional fact of the transfer of sovereignty, have (as yet) no easy place elsewhere in Hong Kong.”*

Hong Kong’s return to China up until today is a major propagandistic achievement in the mainland, an image of Hong Kong on a tin of a Chinese cigarette brand call *Double Happiness* has to be understood entirely without irony. For the mainland Chinese the value of a picture of Hong Kong lies in its power to visualise – if only symbolically – Hong Kong’s identity as a part of China.

Particularly since 2011 the mainland Chinese government has significantly upgraded its efforts to inspire a stronger sense of Chinese unity and national pride within Hong Kong’s population. In a surprising

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<sup>7</sup> David James Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), 139.

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misinterpretation of public sentiment those efforts were not always pursued particularly subtly, and accordingly met with ever increasing resistance. By today the situation has escalated into an openly aggressive argument about Hong Kong's identity and geo-political position, including even calls for Hong Kong's independence, which in return now fundamentally rattle mainland China's official self-conception.

In the context of this struggle over Hong Kong's identity images play a vital role in achieving interpretative dominance. Obviously no visual match to the Guggenheim Bilbao of the same year, it is nonetheless surprising to note that not a single of the first 100 search results of Hong Kong's skyline on Google feature any hint of the HKCEC – the only valid large scale Chinese nationalist symbol in Hong Kong – despite its very privileged position right in front of the actual skyline. At best this symbol of national pride is simply ignored, and the various reunification memorials in its vicinity remain exclusive territory for busloads of mainland tourists only.

What's missing is an appropriate photo-opportunity – and I'm not the only one to notice.

Looking at a map of the situation (Fig. 4), it may be noted that straight opposite from HKCEC on the other harbour side a photo-opportunity is already marked<sup>8</sup>: the Avenue of Stars, Hong Kong's (sorry) equivalent of Hollywood's Walk of Fame, located on a concrete runway circumventing the Hong Kong Interconti Hotel. Supposedly this should do the trick of encouraging shots of the opposite skyline, yet apparently it doesn't.

In essence the problem of the Avenue of Stars not properly functioning as a photo-opportunity for the Hong Kong skyline is a planning and design issue. For once it is less connected to public transportation and generally less accessible (e.g. visually present) than e.g. the visitors viewing platform next to the Star Ferry Pier slightly to its West. That viewing platform also is much closer to other amenities like shops, food outlets, public toilets, or even simply shade – summers in Hong Kong can be brutally hot – which makes the Star Ferry viewing platform the natural choice, especially if you merely intend a short stop-over look at the harbour.

Accordingly, the runway opposite HKCEC has to provide additional attraction to draw visitors, thus since 2004 it hosted the Avenue of Stars. That worked quite well in pulling an audience towards this otherwise slightly remote tip of Kowloon, but it effectively was an "introvert" attraction, i.e. it invited its audience to focus its attention within its own spatial confines (Fig. 5), rather than directing the view to the outside, and thus towards the HKCEC.

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<sup>8</sup> The Victoria Harbour marker was originally set by Anonymous3035 on 23 October 2014, and was turned into a "scenic spot" by Google on 28 April 2016. The neighbouring Avenue of Stars marker was firstly posted on 26 March 2009 by Google.

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*Fig. 5: View of Avenue of Stars (Photo: Sebastian Wallroth via wikimedia.org)*

In summer 2015, in a fairly unusual move, Hong Kong's government (represented by the Leisure, Culture and Sports Department (LCSD)) teamed up with the private property developer New World Development to submit a plan for re-development of the entire waterfront of East Tsim Sha Tsui to the Town Planning Board (Fig. 6), where it was subsequently approved without changes.



Fig. 6: Proposed Development of East Tsim Sha Tsui's Waterfront incl. Avenue of Stars and the proposed Development of Salisbury Gardens (Graphics: Hong Kong Town Planning Board)

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The proposal suggests – together with a number of other interventions – to move the Avenue of Stars further east on the waterfront (i.e. to clear out the original runway), and to add shopping and catering outlets at the beginning and end of the promenade, as well as to improve access through Salisbury Gardens (bottom of Fig. 6). In effect these interventions cancel out the current disadvantages compared to the viewing platform at the ferry pier further west.

Additionally, the currently entirely bare concrete runway will be planted with trees (i.e. providing shade and ambience) and equipped with outdoor seating, and a large area of covered seating steps are placed at the Salisbury Gardens entrance to the promenade – exactly opposite of the HKCEC. It is easy to imagine how in the future tourists will have a rest from the scorching sun on the steps under the large canopy, and while they do so, look across the harbour, and eventually take a picture. Or, lovey couples cuddling on a bench under a tree by the waterfront at dawn, then memorising the occasion with a picture of the harbour on Facebook.

Now of course, it's difficult to find proof that this proposal is indeed part of a plan to influence the depiction of Hong Kong on social media platforms. Quite in general, such purpose wouldn't be put into the paperwork for any town planning authority; within the current heated political debate in Hong Kong any hint of such intention becoming public would generate a massive backlash, especially as general elections are coming up.

However, there are clues that suggest at least the possibility of such intention. Firstly, there are the proponents of the redevelopment: the government itself in conjunction with a conglomerate chaired by Henry Cheng Kar-Shun, a Hong Kong billionaire entrepreneur<sup>9</sup> and member of the Standing Committee of the Eleventh Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in mainland China. It's also notable that the proposal was passed by the Town Planning Board without public consultation or apparently even internal discussion, a very unusual procedure in Hong Kong.

But also the proposal text as such features phrasings that at least indicate an awareness of the iconic power of the harbour view:

- a reference to the Town Planning Board's own vision statement "to make the harbour attractive, vibrant, accessible and symbolic of Hong Kong";
- for this purpose to revitalise Salisbury Gardens "to serve as a proper gateway to the waterfront".
- the observation that "East TST Promenade enjoys spectacular view of the harbour, yet it lacks the commensurate attractions and activities that attract visitors to explore and linger"; and
- finally the expressed objective to "provide the people of Hong Kong with a multi-purpose leisure

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<sup>9</sup> New World Development has some very vested interests in the development of the waterfront as it currently develops a massive new skyscraper that will be directly affected by its connectivity with the surrounding city.

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destination which is a place of civic pride and ownership for all".<sup>10</sup>

Whether a revised photo-opportunity was intended or not: because of the unusual proceeding of the Town Planning Board, its decision to proceed with the redevelopment caused a public outcry, and was ultimately shelved. Instead the same developer will now only apply "minor upgrades" to the location, which don't require planning board approval. It will remain to be seen what photographic qualities the revamped site will feature after its reopening to the public in 2018.

*What can be learnt from all this?*

I believe there is enough evidence to suggest a direct correlation between the photographic representation of certain "urban objects" – be it individual (iconic) buildings or entire city skylines – and specific locations in their vicinity that serve as photo-opportunities for said objects, and that the design of those photo-opportunities – at all scales from urban planning down to design of the seating provided – has considerable effect on the success of the photo-opportunity, in terms of predefining the composition of the resulting photos as well as of predicting the saturation of public perception with those images.

The relation between the urban "photo-object" and its photo-opportunity commonly is established through a set of characteristic qualities (distance, vista, accessibility etc.) that may justify considering the "photo-opportunity" as an urban typology of its own, but in any case allows for the intentional planning of such setups. The successful urban photo-opportunity thus is an example of a behavioural design intervention that may develop impact disproportionately more significant than the effort and costs needed to set it up.

The photo-opportunity becomes all the more powerful if it is interlinked with online applications: on the one hand by highlighting it on interactive map-applications, and on the other by providing opportunity to immediately upload photographic outcomes to social media platforms etc. potentially with geo-location etc. The internet thus becomes something like the turbo-booster that maximises the effectivity of any photo-opportunity.

The power of the photo-opportunity to communicate a particular view/image – and thus to provide certain control over public perception – in itself is a marketable value, its potential for covered marketing at this point – surprisingly – isn't yet explored and exploited systematically. Indeed, at this moment photo-opportunities are commonly merely side-notes in any urban planning, and in particular their linkage with map markers is essentially unregulated and thus open to mis- and abuse... and to creative interventions.

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<sup>10</sup> Hong Kong Town Planning Board, "Broad Development Parameters of the Applied Use/Development in respect of Application No. A/K1/250" (Hong Kong: Town Planning Board, June 2015).

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