

New Town planning in Hong Kong

The case of Sha Tin

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Abstract

Previous narratives suggested that Sha Tin New Town was the model New Town in Hong Kong. This study looks at its formation process from the perspective of planning politics. It unravels how colonial power dynamic between multiple politico-economic interests influenced planning ideas and the built environment of Sha Tin and its later New Town. The examination of archival documents and other materials unmask the shifting rationales of urbanising Sha Tin from socioeconomic-oriented to political-oriented. The drivers of landscape transformation evolved from local-led, ad-hoc government-led to mainly government-led. Based on various contextual and temporal constraints, planning officials skilfully shaped a high-density urban form of Sha Tin New Town and attempted to transform the nature of New Town to achieve the strategic objectives of colonial government. Meanwhile, exploring shifting priorities of land use within New Town accounts for the need to catch up in New Town formation. Additionally, based on declassified archival material, this study could offer a historical and narrative-driven account to fill a research gap in the formation of New Town in post-war Hong Kong.

Keywords

New Town planning, Urbanisation, Planning ideology, Policy diffusion

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INTRODUCTION

In the eyes of the public, Sha Tin was perceived as a successful case in the modernisation process of New Territories in terms of the growing sizes of both the population and the urban area. Sha Tin grown from a rural township with 22,000 inhabitants in 1961 to a New Town with 692,806 inhabitants in 2021. With a total area of 6,940 hectares, the total development area of Sha Tin (including Ma On Shan) has been growing to 3,590 hectares in 2021.¹ However, is there any grounds to justify such widespread discourse? This study attempts to demystify the planning politics of Sha Tin New Town in a historical-specific manner. Given valley terrain constraints, this study examines how pro-development land interests, including colonial government, negotiated with each other towards planning motives, visions and objectives of the urban form of post-WWII Sha Tin and its New Town over time. Meanwhile, it investigates the shifting priority of land use, landscape design and the shifting nature of New Town for the sake of identifying official priorities and strategies for town development.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT IN POST-WAR SHA TIN

In the aftermath of WWII, Sha Tin Valley functioned primarily as a typical agricultural area with only two major government interventions. At that moment, colonial government focused its efforts on developing an entrepot economy for post-war recovery in the main urban areas, and had no intention to initiate socioeconomic development in rural New Territories. Still, it only developed necessary military land and diffused self-help ideas for post-war recovery. The former meant the construction of Sha Tin Airfield in 1949 to react to the communist threat, while the latter indicated the much more powerful initiative of local private land development to transform the local landscape.² Mr Den Lau, the youngest son of local landlord Mr Lau Hey Shing, reclaimed his inherited fields and acquired the land near Sha Tin Railway Station to produce the flatland of a new market town in 1949, speculating on the economic prospect of a market town in the 1950s.³ During 1950-56, a modern market town, known as Sha Tin Market Town, was built. It comprised 120 village houses and a Sha Tin Market with water, sewage and power access. As a source of land production, Mr Den Lau donated 4,000 sq. ft. of land to colonial government for the creation of the market.

The broader context of satellite town formation in the early 1950s was situated in the influx of Chinese immigrants, which increased the population of Hong Kong from 600,000 in 1946 to 2 million in 1950 and 2.6 million in 1956, resulting in widespread expansion of squatters across the territory.⁴ In 1952, the foreseeable prosperity of Sha Tin Market Town and the long-standing reputation as a resort destination during the weekend prompted both unofficial legislator Mr Dhun Ruttonjee and leading businessman Mr U Tat-chee to seek to build a residential area to accommodate low-income white-collar population in Sha Tin. Subject to the concern of overcrowding, the latter worried that if Sha Tin became a government-led project, it would likely be designated as the site of resettlement estates for the grassroots.⁵ In June 1954, the South China Textile Company also proposed to develop a garden

suburb. Though the pressures from real estate interests prompted the making of the Outline Development Plan for Sha Tin, colonial government expressed a strong intention to develop New Territories to facilitate industrial expansion via the form of satellite towns during the early 1950s. Thus in 1954, in addition to the proximity of Ngau Tau Kok, Kwun Tong was selected. Financial Secretary Sir Arthur Clarke rejected the garden suburb proposal and explained that Sha Tin could only be a future dormitory and recreational area. Owing to the official priority of land development, no comprehensive plan was made for the New Territories in 1954.⁶ Both politico- economic interests shared a utilitarian ideology for Sha Tin's development, though their specific objective did not fully align.

In the late 1950s, for the ongoing needs of squatter resettlement and industrial expansion, Town Planning Office confirmed that Tai Po, Gin Drinker's Bay (Kwai Chung), Sha Tin, Castle Peak (Tuen Mun) and Junk Bay (Tseung Kwan O) were the recommended sites for the new satellite towns. Due to financial constraints, New Territories Administration indicated that only building one satellite town at the same time was feasible and the choice would not immediately fall on the site requiring extensive reclamation. Since clearly defined boundaries of Sha Tin New Town are shaped by natural topography (the valley with Shing Mun River, the Tolo Sea and steep Kowloon foothills), constraints of vulnerable ground levels and poor ventilation were essential clues to determine the urban form of Sha Tin.⁷ In view of this, when colonial government invited Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick and Partners as the consultant for the upcoming New Town development, a separate feasibility study was requested to be conducted for the necessary reclamation in Sha Tin as well.⁸ Unsurprisingly, Tsuen Wan (including Kwai Chung) was selected once high flooding risks in Sha Tin were considered. Nonetheless, this feasibility study marked the beginning of the detailed planning of Sha Tin New Town, taking into account various context-specific constraints.⁹ Through reclamation, the plan in 1959 envisioned the production of 239 hectares of land to accommodate a population of about 275,000. A natural town centre was developed as a major shopping area, surrounded by low- density residential areas. Industrial sites would be located further on the reclaimed land, complemented by public open spaces.¹⁰ It roughly set out the prototype of nowadays' Sha Tin New Town.

In 1959, the primary focus of the official land policy in the New Territories was to serve the water consumption needs of the urban areas, which led to the Plover Cove Reservoir project involving Sha Tin. The resultant construction of Lion Rock Tunnel prompted the production of a more formal town development framework, leading to the implementation of the first statutory planning process in March 1960. The revised New Town layout of 1961 was designated to accommodate 360,000 people, significantly larger than the existing population of around 22,000 in 1960. The major revision was the development of a 'green' housing and industrial New Town via the provision of green belts and ample open spaces.¹¹ Also, this 1961 plan largely outlined the scale of reclamation that would eventually characterise contemporary Sha Tin New Town. Unsurprisingly, this plan drew criticism in mid-1961 from the Hong Kong Society of Architects, who criticized the destruction of recreational resources of regional significance. Consequently, this plan was put on hold. But these primarily set out today's recreational space and reclamation approach for Sha Tin New Town. As of 2019, approximately 39% of Sha Tin New Town area was zoned as green belt.

The preservation of large-scale green belts could be attributed, in part, to the ad-hoc land development for the establishment of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1963. Driven by the Cold War mentality, colonial government was concerned about political risks posed by the return of local Chinese secondary school graduates who received higher education in both Socialist China and Taiwan, thereby confirming the formation of a Chinese University in Hong Kong in the late 1950s. When Chung Chi College planned to build a permanent campus site for residential- and non-residential students, it decided to move to a location near the railway station in rural New Territories. In 1955, colonial government granted 10 acres of government land in Ma Liu Shui and confirmed the construction of Ma Liu Shui Station (now University Station). Later, in the name of forestation, Chung Chi College submitted a lease application for an additional 30 acres of adjacent land to prevent urban tycoons from building their luxurious houses. Surprisingly, Governor Grantham offered a counter-proposal to lease 300 acres of land, later called Chung Chi Shan. In 1961, the Chinese University Preparatory Committee considered five potential locations for the university, including Hong Kong Island, Whitfield Barracks, Lung Cheung Road, Clearwater Bay Road and Hung Mui Kuk. In 1962, while the Committee proposed the dual-campus solution (the existing site of Chung Chi College and Hung Mui Kuk for another two colleges), the political challenge of clearing Hin Tin Tsuen and Sheung Keng Hau soon eliminated this feasibility. As a result, Chung Chi Shan was confirmed as the site for the Chinese University.¹² In short, this outcome was largely driven by political urgency and the efforts of Chung Chi College. By and large, before 1964, the development of Sha Tin was still left mainly to private land actors.

The ongoing influx of Chinese immigrants led to significant overcrowding in urban areas, marked by the proliferation of squatters and private tenements. This increase in population requirements prompted colonial government to make a critical decision in 1964 – All future land development would be at the full urban area densities, thereby confirming the establishment of two future New Towns: Sha Tin and Castle Peak. These decisions were driven by the need to meet the public housing targets through high-density resettlement estates. Subsequently, the revised plan for the first stage of Sha Tin New Town expected that 350,000 out of 395,000 residents would be accommodated in resettlement estates. In the mid-1960s, the powerful influence of urban interests on New town planning was evident when the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club, a long-standing social club of colonial elites, proposed building a new racecourse in Sha Tin New Town. Through the formation of a capitalist city-state, Hong Kong was characterised by *laissez-faire* governance, which was shaped by official reliance on merchants, industrialists, and bankers to steer the economy. In 1969, the Land Development Planning Committee, the territory-wide official committee of New Town planning, considered that the land allocation for the pavement might be too high. Nonetheless, the alternative of roads replacing the pavement might reduce the size of saleable land. Immediately, the District Commissioner of the New Territories, Sir Donald Luddington, raised concerns about whether the size of saleable land could meet the land exchange commitment.¹³ Land exchange, involving the resite of existing villages to another location, facilitated the preparation of the sites for the planned land use. This negotiation process between the affected landowners and land officials in each resite case might modify the planned land use in the town layout. Hence, when land officials navigated the planning and formation of Sha Tin New Town, the powerful urban and local rural interests showcased their strength in these processes.

In 1971, various planning ideas were first introduced in the design of Sha Tin New Town. Government town planner Mr E. G. Pryor advocated the development of a “balanced” community with a mix of different social classes. He argued that incorporating a combination of public, public-aid and private housing was crucial to reproducing a multi-class New Town environment, which help raise potential community leaders to handle future social problems in Sha Tin.¹⁴ Besides, in order to develop a New Town with a modern standard, Pryor also proposed the idea of an ‘integrated’ and ‘self-contained’ New Town design. This concept involved the inclusion of low-cost resettlement housing, private commercial and residential areas, industrial areas, markets, schools, roads, car parks, cinemas and other public services. These ideas were seen as a diffusion of the experiences gained from long-standing British New Town programmes. In 1972, the proposal for a cultural centre and three tertiary education institutes was also introduced for Sha Tin New Town.¹⁵ Subsequently, the overall town design of Sha Tin New Town was slightly adjusted to the formation of a number of different-type residential areas, the main high-density urban core connected to an open space system and three main industrial areas. This necessitated the development of a high-capacity transportation network, which set out the nowadays’ linear-based town structure. However, subject to the difficulty in determining a suitable reclamation method, no further progress was made, and only the Maunsell Consultants Asia was appointed as the consultant in 1973 to provide the layout plan for Sha Tin New Town.

POLITICALLY DRIVEN NEW TOWN PROJECT

In July 1971, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Sir Murray MacLehose discussed the political agenda for the upcoming governorship of Hong Kong. In order to enhance the likelihood of continuing colonial governance after 1997, they decided to develop a ‘modernised’ Hong Kong via urbanisation strategy prior to sovereign negotiation in the 1980s.¹⁶ When the 10-year Development Programme (also known as the 10-Year Housing Programme) produced both permanent housing and resettlement estates in the New Towns, colonial government attempted to strategically create a substantial gap in the living standard between colonial Hong Kong and Mainland China, thereby boosting the legitimacy of colonial governance and the bargaining capacity during sovereign negotiation process. The means of zoning effectively produced spaces for urban housing, village housing, and country parks in this programme. In other words, the motive of developing New Town shifted from the growing need for industrialisation to a politically driven modernisation agenda.

In this regard, the year 1974 marked the genuine commencement of the Sha Tin New Town program by creating the New Territories Development Department and inviting private land investment, as 42% of the targeted proportion of private housing had been set since 1971. Since the international oil crisis created economic recession and budget deficits in 1975, colonial government needed private capital to assist in financing reclamation and some basic urban infrastructures required for New Town formation. This allowed a successful public tender for the present-day City One Shatin in February 1975 under the lease conditions for reclamation and the construction of school sites, drains, sewers and car parks.¹⁷ Thus, mobilising private land development to align with long-term land interests in New Town enabled the growing power of private developers in the formation of Sha Tin New Town.

In response to the uncontrollable influx of immigrants, the consultant report led to the final major revision of the Sha Tin New Town Outline Development Plan in 1977.¹⁸ With a growing target of accommodating 500,000 people, Sha Tin New Town was confirmed to be extended to Ma On Shan area. Additionally, the Prince of Wales Teaching Hospital replaced one of the proposed sites of tertiary education institutes. The principal objective of Sha Tin New Town was to provide accommodation and local job opportunities. To elucidate, the self-contained elements were fully articulated in the following visions.

1. to produce a balanced society with a mix of different social classes and meet the basic needs of all residents
2. to provide a wide range of housing locations and types, as well as job and education opportunities
3. to develop a strong sense of belonging to the New Town
4. to create a safe and convenient transport network
5. to achieve efficient resource utilisation
6. to develop an attractive town

As the first public housing estate in Sha Tin New Town, Lek Yuen Estate was completed in the late 1970s. According to an interview with the Assistant Director of Housing, Mr D. I. McIntosh, its population density is half that for newly-built housing estates in urban areas at that time, and the allocation of 4.8 acres of local open space. A lower population density reflected the improvement of the living environment, whilst the provision of local open space aimed at encouraging the formation of community spirit, thereby developing a strong sense of civic pride.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the first Sha Tin shopping centre in New Territories introduced air conditioning as a means to achieve a sense of modernity and attractiveness.²⁰

In July 1979, the Senior Town Planner of Sha Tin New Town Development Office explained a directional shift of Sha Tin in the 1980s – from both industrial and housing-oriented to pure housing-oriented. In contrast to other New Towns (say Tsuen Wan), industrial production in Sha Tin only played a complementary role.²¹ On one hand, it was influenced by the broader trend of deindustrialisation since the late 1970s. On the other hand, it was shaped by the vision of creating a ‘cleaner’ Sha Tin New Town via the implementation of stricter environmental requirements. The new factories in Sha Tin were subject to the lease conditions that only coal gas, petroleum gas, natural gas, and electricity were allowed to be used in fuels and industrial activities. Factories were required to install approved pollution control equipment for the disposal of toxic heavy metals and strong acids or alkalis.²² Meanwhile, colonial government demolished existing industrial undertakings and the farms within the New Town area. For instance, 70 small factories, pigsties, and poultry farms in Pak Shek village, involving 4000 working people, were demolished in 1981.²³ Unsurprisingly, about 60% of industrial land in Sha Tin was still idle in 1983.²⁴ Concurrently, after the introduction of China’s Opening-up policy, Sha Tin’s strategic location, with its railway connection between Guangdong and Kowloon and its proximity to Kowloon, combined with the completion of the Tolo Highway in 1985 and the permanent Tai Wai Station in 1986 enabled significant growth of Sha Tin and Tai Wai. Consequently, commercial development and various forms of urban housing had increasingly become the central focus of Sha Tin New Town’s evolution.

THE SHIFTING PRIORITY OF LAND USE

Based on the planning document from the 1960s, the production of the New Town building was unfolded over four distinct stages. After forming the land and basic urban facilities, the initial stage would concentrate on public housing, schools, and industrial areas, which served to reproduce factory workers and the entrepot economy. The second stage would provide roads, public spaces, and government amenities, with the goal of attracting private real estate investment. The third and fourth stages would see private housing development, followed by commercial and hotel development.²⁵

However, in the 1970s, the evolving governmental rationale and actual progress of the early development in Sha Tin New Town modified the priority of the land use development schedule. Large-scale land resumption and reclamation started in the early 1970s, and the first public housing estate in Sha Tin New Town was built concurrently. After the government encouraged private housing development, the late 1970s witnessed the development of the first wave of private housing in Sha Tin New Town, including the landmark middle-class residential estate of City One Shatin. In the early 1980s, government investments in amenity facilities, for example, Sha Tin Town Hall, Sha Tin Central Library, and Sha Tin Park, demonstrated the objective of producing a self-contained new town. Simultaneously, private developers exhibited political confidence by building several shopping malls with office apartments. Furthermore, the planning and development of Kau To area in the early 1980s, which emerged as a low-density residential area for the upper-middle class, coincided with the completion of the new Racecourse in 1977. From the above evidence, it is clear that the higher priority of private housing served as the modified sequence in the overall production process of Sha Tin New Town. This shift was likely driven by the government's need to accelerate modernisation progress prior to sovereignty negotiation.

LANDSCAPE DESIGN

In 1974, Maunsell Consultants Asia proposed a podium-cum-bridge scheme as a space-saving technique to facilitate the construction of a high-density, modernised new town in Hong Kong. This design approach was not entirely novel, as the first well-known podium design for a housing estate had emerged in Mei Foo Sun Chuen in 1968. At that time, this design resulted from new planning requirements for open space and ventilation for the issues of deep floor plates, lighting, and ventilation. Later, the podium design was further adopted under the modernisation vision championed by Governor MacLehose. This vision sought to improve the living conditions of local residents and foster a stronger sense of belonging to the new town. As a modern imagination of a middle-class community, podium design shapes a convenient and safe living environment. Given the limited land area and the significance of efficient circulation for both vehicles and pedestrians in the town centre, the continuous podium deck and multiple pedestrian bridges were built as a covered walkway for the provision of all-weather, convenient access to generate a natural pedestrian flow and achieve vertical segregation.²⁶

In March 1974, nonetheless, the Principal Government Town Planner and the Director of Urban Services expressed doubts about the feasibility of building three super-blocks (a town centre, a market and a cultural centre) on a single podium.²⁷ The design was subsequently revised to feature a single block of commercial centre and high-rise towers, with the wings of residential/commercial buildings. In February 1975, the Chief Planning Officer of Sha Tin first introduced this revised podium-cum-bridge design as the town centre model during the meeting of the Sha Tin New Town Management Committee, emphasising the rationale of segregating pedestrian and vehicular traffic.²⁸ The podium design was developed to incorporate the future housing development above the remodeled Sha Tin Station, as suggested by a representative of the railway company. However, the Environment Branch later questioned the feasibility of this idea with private developers' involvement.²⁹ The Public Works Department assured that the podium's design would be under colonial government's leadership, with clear lease conditions defining the rights and responsibilities between colonial government and private developers. Later, this podium-cum-bridge design was approved in March 1976. Additionally, this design also catered for possible flooding concerns in Sha Tin New Town, as exemplified by Wo Che Estate, the second public housing estate in Sha Tin New Town.

As the maximum height for non-residential land use was limited to 15 meters or 50 feet, the podium form offered a flat, complete, and barrier-free site. Over time, the podium form evolved into the podium-cum-tower form, where the podia and their surfaces were conceived as an "archipelago" and the footbridges as "the wings" to create a megastructure. The prevalence of the shopping podium, integrated with residential space, eliminated the separation of private and public domains, shaping a new urban fabric in both urban areas and new towns since the 1980s, particularly in terms of streetscapes and skylines.³⁰ This "imagined" boundary production for each megastructure attempted to strategically foster a sense of community spirit in Sha Tin New Town.

THE EVOLVING NATURE OF SHA TIN NEW TOWN

Regarding the evolving nature of Sha Tin New Town, it is worthwhile to examine the planning process for transport infrastructure. According to Galanty, the major difference between a satellite town and a self-contained New Town hinges on whether the built-up population in Sha Tin New Town could work and enjoy urban services within the New Town.³¹ As mentioned in the 1959 Sha Tin Consultant Report, it already pointed out that the forecast population target of New Town was contingent on the capacity of enhanced transport infrastructure with Kowloon. In 1965, while Castle Peak was already envisioned as a self-contained New Town, Sha Tin New Town was still envisaged to rely on job opportunities and urban services in Kowloon as a satellite town. Consequently, the newly built transport infrastructure not only plays a critical role in attracting internal migration and securing the creation of a new community in Sha Tin New Town, but also serves as an internal traffic and long-term commuting channel for the economic well-being of the built-up population. Therefore, at that time, the planned construction of the mass transit line between Sha Tin and Kowloon was seen as the key to transforming Sha Tin towards a self-contained New Town. In 1977, the senior town planner of

Sha Tin even commented that “what appears to be a seemingly higher proportion of the total area allocated to major roads and interchanges”.³² However, actual implementation reveals the shifting priority – While the construction of Tai Po, Sheung Shui and Fanling New Towns was expedited in the early 1980s, only Tuen Mun Light Rail was put into construction till 1985. Despite the land for Sha Tin Rail being reserved since the 1970s, its plan during the mid-1980s was still put on hold, and it commenced construction in 2001. Thus, coupled with the tendency of deindustrialisation and the lagged progress in extending New Town to Ma On Shan, the making of Sha Tin New Town during colonial era may have leaned towards a satellite town rather than a self-contained New Town.

CONCLUSION

This study uses Sha Tin as a case study to investigate how the evolving official motives and rationales of planning a New Town contested with private land interests and how colonial government navigated its New Town project amidst various difficulties and contextual constraints over time. The politically driven modernisation process of the colonial city-state undoubtedly serves as a watershed for planning motives and urban forms of Sha Tin New Town. The planning idea of Sha Tin New Town evolved from a satellite town to a self-contained New Town. The drivers of landscape transformation evolved from local-led, ad-hoc government-led to mainly government-led. Constrained by various contextual and temporal factors, planning officials skilfully shaped a high-density urban form of Sha Tin New Town and attempted to transform the nature of New Town to achieve the strategic objectives of colonial government.

In terms of research contributions, this study attempts to offer a contextual and historical account of the social transformation of Sha Tin in order to debunk the taken-for-granted top-down model of colonial power and the discourse of the model New Town. By unpacking the politico-economic processes of New Town planning and formation, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between official planning visions, private interests and contextual constraints in shaping the evolving urban landscape of Sha Tin New Town. When actual outcomes were revealed to be far from the initial plans, whether the limitations of Sha Tin and other New

Towns could be overcome rests upon governmental motives and techniques and available resources of the post-handover Hong Kong government.

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NOTES

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