

# The Hong Kong Scene

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**Being a description of the visit to Hong Kong in April 1982 by the President of the Institute, Mr P E T Spencer, and the Deputy Secretary, Mr P A Lancaster, with information and viewpoints on the current Hong Kong scene which may be of interest to Quantity Surveyors.**

## Arrival

There are many reasons why the over-worked word 'spectacular' can fairly be applied to the Crown Colony of Hong Kong, but none more so for the intending visitor than the arrival by Jumbo Jet. The descent starts over the Chinese mainland Province of Guangdong where, through the intermittent cloud cover, small villages situated in the valleys between the hilly terrain are pinpointed by means of the smoke arising from their cooking fires. Many of the 236 mostly uninhabited islands and islets surrounding the Island of Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories, then come into focus, as the aircraft commences its final let-down to the 11,000 ft finger-like promontory jutting into the Bay that is the runway of Kai-Tak Airport. As the aircraft skims across the harbour nothing but water, and what appears to be a dangerously close junk or container vessel, can be viewed from the windows, on each side so that it comes as almost a surprise that the aircraft eventually touches terra firma.

Of the world's 650 Airports, Kai-Tak is rated as No. 2 amongst the 19 most dangerous airports listed by the International Federation of Airline Pilots Association but, in fact, has an excellent safety record. In 1980, some 68 million passengers passed through the Airport which can handle 5,000 passengers an hour. Saturation point is likely to be reached in 1985 if the present rate of growth is maintained, and it is therefore not surprising that a feasibility study is being conducted to provide Hong Kong with a second airport by 1986.

## Transport and Accommodation

The easy way from the Airport to your hotel is to engage the services of that very efficient organisation, the Hong Kong Tourist Association, who provide charming young ladies to conduct you through the Airport terminal buildings to a waiting car. This, therefore, may perhaps be the moment to refer to the very frequent and efficient public transport systems provided in the Colony. Big buses, similar to London double-deckers, stop at franchised bus stops and are interspersed with small 14 seater mini-buses which cannot use the big bus

stops but can pick up and discharge passengers wherever stopping is not prohibited. Lovely, old-fashioned, double-decker trams cover the whole of the North Coast of Hong Kong Island at a fixed fare of 5p, and a ride on a top deck ought to be a 'must' for the visitor who wants to see something of the life of the ordinary inhabitants, particularly the colourful markets which appear to be situated along practically every side-street. The fastest means of transport is the new and still expanding Mass Transit Railway (Tube) which only costs 32p for its full present route from Hong Kong Island, under Victoria Harbour to Kwun-Tong in the New Territories. The scenic way to cross from Hong Kong Island to the Kowloon peninsula is the long established Star Ferry which costs 4p second class and 6p first class. There are also, of course, ferries to the outlying islands and jetfoils to Macao. Finally, the Peak Tram, which has been in operation for almost 100 years is used by residents for everyday transport but, for visitors, is a steep and exhilarating funicular ride to Victoria Peak from which, on a clear day, magnificent views of the Colony can be obtained.

Further illustrations of the spectacular are undoubtedly provided by the plethora of new, many-storied, hotels which have been built in Hong Kong in recent years, most of the biggest with their own enormous, inter-linked, shopping centres. One such, was the New World Hotel chosen by the President and Deputy Secretary, which was built in 1978, containing 735 rooms and a 5 level

shopping centre with 300 shops selling everything from massive rosewood dining tables to the usual tourist trinkets.

## Getting Down to Business

It was, however, soon time to turn to business, and the first function on the programme involved the Deputy Secretary who met members of the Hong Kong Branch Junior Section to talk to them about the Board and Committee structure and the role of the staff in the administration of the everyday business of the Institute. The opportunity was also taken of advising the Junior Section of those parts of the Unification talks with the RICS that involved the continuing progress of their careers in the profession. In a lively session following the address, he answered questions on a variety of topics, education and training, not surprisingly to the fore. Particular thanks were due to Wally Vick, Past Chairman of the Hong Kong Branch, who chaired the meeting, and to Mr I Ho, the Chairman of the Junior Section, who had made the arrangements.

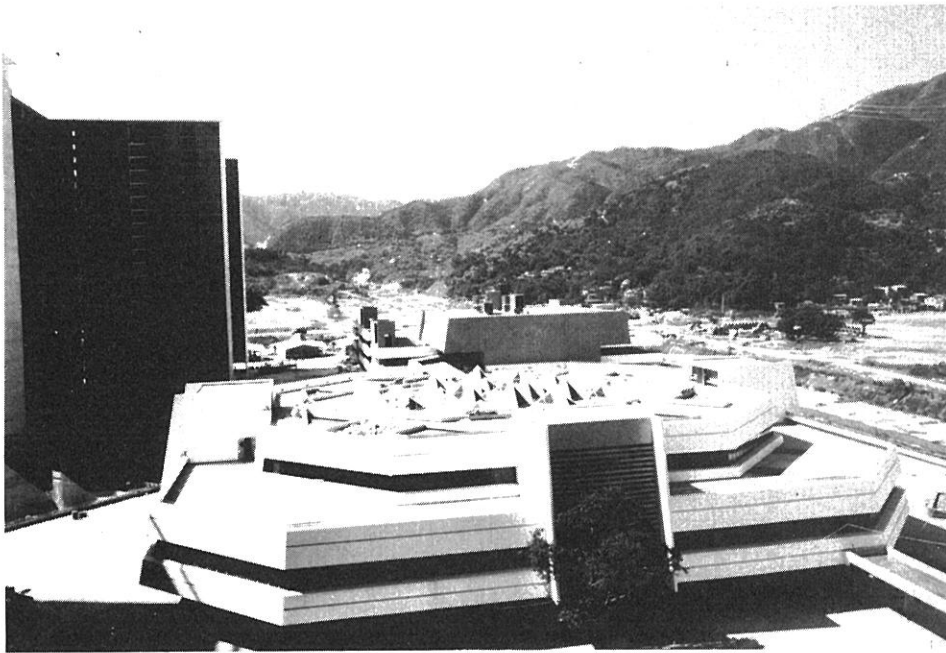
The following day the President, supported by the Deputy Secretary, addressed corporate members of the Hong Kong Branch on the progress of Unification discussions with the RICS, and answered questions, the debate being lively and helpful.

With a visit to the new Mei Lam Estate having been arranged for the following day, it was hoped the weather, which had so far been of the 'monsoon' variety, would relent, but unfortunately, on the day chosen for the visit the weather was even worse than previously and the President and Deputy Secretary were thankful to be issued with sou-westers, oilskins and gumboots.

The Mei Lam Estate, Phase I, is part of, possibly, the most dramatic new town development now taking place in the New Territories being built at Sha Tin. When the author last visited Hong Kong some years ago, Sha Tin was a small fishing village surrounded by rice paddy fields. Now, however, the population of Sha Tin is about 157,000 and, when the new town is com-



*Hong Kong's Victoria Peak offers one of the most spectacular views of Victoria Harbour*



*Sha-Tin new town, High Rise flats and Shopping complex (foreground)*



*Mei Lam Estate—Phase 1, Sha-Tin New Town (General View)*

pleted, it will accommodate some 756,000 people. Some 104 hectares of new land have been made available for this expansion programme, consisting of both public and private housing, community facilities, industry, and open spaces. Major engineering works completed include the formation and surfacing of land in various planning areas, reclamation at the mouth of the Shing Mun river, fresh and salt water reservoirs, a new railway station forming part of the modernisation of the Kowloon and Canton Railway, with an associated podium for buses and elevated roads and footbridges.

The Mei Lam Estate is one of 7 now being built at Sha Tin, which aims to produce not less than 28,000 flats. Phase I of the Mei Lam Estate consists of 6,000 units in the form of three blocks of high rise flats of 22 and 24 stories, and expected to house some

30,000 people. The flats under construction, which were visited are very small by British standards, being between 30/35 square metres and consisting of a small living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. Although very basic, however, the general standards of workmanship and finish are reasonably good and, of course, constitute a vast improvement on the housing conditions which the prospective tenants are likely to have experienced in their previous accommodation.

The flats are being built under the auspices of the Hong Kong Housing Authority, a statutory body set up in 1973, responsible for co-ordinating all aspects of public housing. The Housing Authority is building domestic flats of widely varying sizes, amenities, and rent levels, and also has a Home Ownership Scheme which enables

lower income families to buy their own flats at reasonable prices. Any family of three people, or any three unrelated elderly persons, or a married couple who are Hong Kong residents can register on the waiting list for public housing. Bearing in mind that the population of Hong Kong is 5,147,000, with a density of 12,250 to the square mile, it is not surprising that the waiting list for public housing is long, 481,800 families having applied for housing since 1967.

The flats on the Mei Lam Estate were for the lower end of the market, that is for renting only. The Estate was being designed as a total community concept, that is with its own commercial shopping complex, carport, schools, clinics, and open spaces for recreation, and there was no doubt that a lot of imagination had gone into the design, in particular the use of coloured panels on the flats, the shopping centre, and in the general ornamental work situated in the open spaces around the complex. The President and Deputy Secretary were received by the Architect and the building team and were greatly indebted to Mr K K Chan of the Hsin Chong Construction Company, and a member of the Hong Kong Branch Committee, for having made the visit possible, and for their very kind hospitality.

### **The Building Scene in Hong Kong**

This is an appropriate moment to make some comments on the building scene in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Government's largest single item of expenditure is normally on public works covering land reclamation, port, and airport works, roads, sewers, bridges, tunnels, the supply and distribution of water, and construction of public buildings. For the financial year 1981/82, the approved fund for the provision of public works was £453m, some 18% of the Government's total expenditure.

The building boom which has been going on for some years continued into 1981, but has been proceeding at a reduced level due to the pressures of inflation, and in particular the rapid increase in labour costs which, during the 12 months to mid-June, 1981, rose by 16%, with a 7½% increase in the cost of basic materials. However, as has been previously mentioned, a massive building programme which has revolutionised land usage to a degree unprecedented anywhere in the world, is continuing, with the Hong Kong Housing Authority constructing something in the region of 35,000 flats a year. Bearing in mind the methods of construction used, which are still to a considerable extent 'traditional', the speed of erection is remarkable, but is certainly needed as, at the end of 1981, there were still more than 163,000 families on the waiting list and an estimated 144,000 families living in squatter huts. In order to meet the continuing pressure of demand, it will therefore be necessary to maintain the current high rate of production for many more years. All this speed is not achieved without cost. Between 1976 and 1980, no less than 16,000 accidents resulting in death or injury occurred on building sites. The number of workers rose from 10,000 to 40,000 in 1980, with the casualty rate doubled. This high accident rate is, however, not too surprising bearing in mind that many

building workers are illegal immigrants and agricultural workers, unfamiliar with mechanical equipment and the hazards of working on very high buildings in very confined spaces, and with an apparent reluctance to wear 'tin hats'. It must also be said that the maximum fine for convictions of negligence is not much of a deterrent on employers, having only just been raised from £1,000 to £5,000.

I suppose the most striking of the 'traditional' methods, because they meet the eye first, are that all building work in Hong Kong uses bamboo scaffolding. This is easily erected and is very safe. I gather that the secret is in the knot which solves the problem of building safety for a temporary structure, although the split bamboo piece previously used has now given way to nylon cord. Scaffolding workers have a strong union and the erection techniques are handed down from father to son or close relatives. Workers' income is based entirely on supply and demand and the 'spider' workers receive about £18 a day.

Taking into account the nature of the terrain it is not surprising that a large proportion of the building work on Hong Kong Island comprises high rise buildings which have to be set on a caisson foundation, the tallest being the Hopewell Centre on Hong Kong Island, which is 725 feet high.

High rise development is controlled by the Buildings Ordinance. The plot ratio ( $PR \times$  Plot Area = gross floor area of building) can be as high as 15. There are other controlling regulations such as 'shadow area' which is, of course, the relation of the building height to the street.

As an interesting aside on the question of 'shadow area', the latest fashion concerning high rise commercial buildings is to use glass curtain walls. Whilst the effect of these buildings, when standing alone, may be striking, when situated in series, as they often are in Hong Kong, they certainly cause amusement because of the reflections. At one time, there were so many high rise buildings in Hong Kong that one Japanese manufacturer formed a new company for the purpose of supplying lifts solely to Hong Kong. In fact, there are more lifts sold in Hong Kong in one month than in the whole of Australia in one year.

### Hong Kong Branch Annual Dinner

The President and Deputy Secretary's next engagement in their crowded programme was the Hong Kong Branch Annual Dinner which was held in the sumptuous surroundings of Shangri-La Hotel. A large attendance of Branch Members and their guests heard Mr A O de Sales, CBE, JP, a prominent Hong Kong businessman, propose the toast to the Institute. Mr de Sales had had a distinguished record in the field of civil administration, as well as regards his business activities, and spoke knowledgeably about the great improvements, to which he has made a major contribution, in improving housing for the population of Hong Kong.

Replying to the toast, the President, Mr P E T Spencer, spoke of the work of the Institute, of the discussions on amalgamation with the RICS, and of the need of the Profession to keep abreast of the rapidly

advancing technology which was now available to them.

The dry wit of Mr George Yeadon, the Hong Kong Branch Chairman, was very evident, as he ably proposed the toast to the guests, the response being from Mr R E S Law, the Chairman of the Hong Kong Branch of the RICS who also referred to the amalgamation talks and, in addition, indicated that the Hong Kong Branch would be kept informed concerning the moves which are presently being undertaken regarding the possibility of setting up a separate Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors.

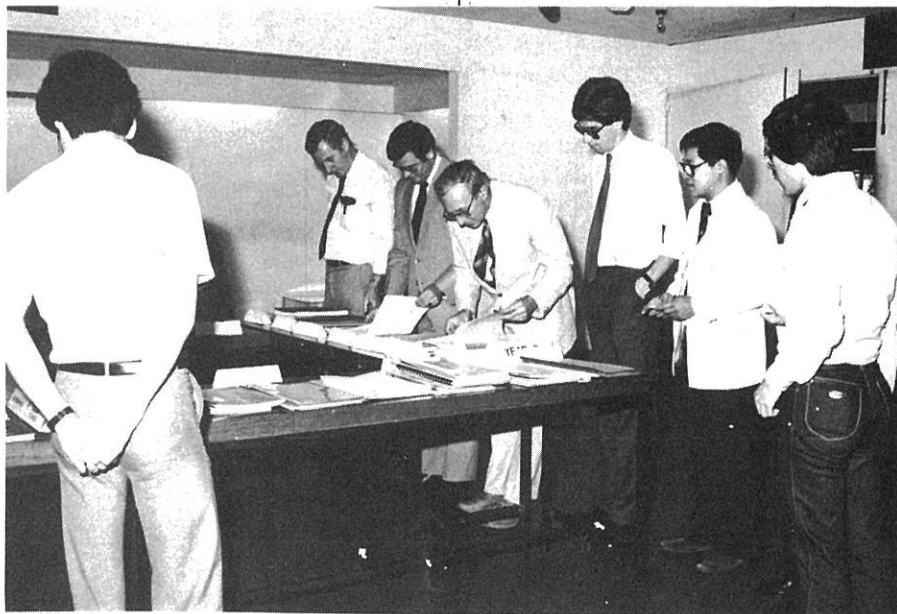
The Dinner gave the President and Deputy Secretary an excellent opportunity of establishing contact with the leaders of the professional, business, and academic community of Hong Kong who attended. Warm thanks were due to Past Chairman, Wally Vick, and his Committee who had made such a success of the function.

### In the 'Groves of Academe'

The trip concluded with visits to the two

academic institutions in Hong Kong with which the Institute has such close links. Firstly, to the University of Hong Kong where the President, Deputy Secretary and Mr C K Ho, HK Branch Training Officer, were received by Professor K C Lye, the Dean of the School of Architecture. It was particularly gratifying to have the opportunity of meeting the QS students and, from the discussions with them, and from the examples of their work which were beautifully laid out for inspection, the President and Deputy Secretary were left in no doubt of the excellent calibre, both of the students themselves, and of the quality of the tuition which they are receiving from Professor Lye and his colleagues. The President and Deputy Secretary were particularly grateful, not only for the enormous amount of trouble that had been taken to enable them to take home an accurate picture of the work which was being done, but also for an excellent lunch.

It was interesting to learn that architects in Hong Kong are known as authorised persons when they are registered, since architectural



*H. K. University—the President and Deputy-Secretary examining the work of Q.S. students*



*Visit to H. K. University (left to right) Professor K. C. Lye (Dean of the School of Architecture), P. E. T. Spencer, P. A. Lancaster, C. K. Ho (H. K. Branch Training Officer)*

engineers are permitted to be registered and to practice as architects and, in fact, some 70% of buildings erected in Hong Kong are designed by engineers. The registered persons were formerly known as 'authorised architects', but objections from the architectural profession have changed this, since many of the projects which mar the local scene are the works of those professionals whose only object is to build as cheaply as possible whilst, hopefully, satisfying the building regulations.

The demand for architectural training is enormous, and there were 2,000 applicants for 150 places at Hong Kong University for the year commencing 1981. There are 575 Members of the Hong Kong Institute of Architects, of whom 351 are registered with the Public Works Department.

The second visit was to the Hong Kong Polytechnic, where the President, Deputy Secretary and Mr C K Ho, HK Branch Training Officer, were received by Dr Keith Legge, Director of the Polytechnic, and Mr R D Stringer, the Head of the Department of Building and Surveying. Again, considerable trouble had been taken to enable the President and Deputy Secretary to meet the students and to examine some of their work. Both the President and the author were very impressed with the imaginative lay-out of the Polytechnic and with the attention given to environmental problems, and the plans to develop the courses to degree level. The hospitality shown was, again, outstanding, with an excellent lunch, which provided the opportunity to discuss problems and plans with Mr Stringer and his colleagues.

Before returning to the UK, the opportunity was also taken of paying a courtesy call on Mr Brian White, the acting Government Quantity Surveyor, and of exchanging views on matters of common and general interest.

### Some general reflections on the Hong Kong scene

The main impression taken away from the visit to Hong Kong was of a vital, thrusting, but albeit cheerful community, and one which is taking enormous strides to bring about dramatic improvements in the standard of living of the ordinary citizen. Bearing in mind the size of the problem, the progress being made in providing modern housing for the less well-to-do is truly remarkable and this, combined with the continual attempts being made to try and ease the transport problems, will hopefully lead to further improvements in the quality of life in the Colony.

Not unnaturally, the most persistent talking point, when professional business people meet in Hong Kong, is the future of the Colony, in the light of the expiry of the New Territories Lease in 1997, and the recent visit by Mrs Thatcher to Mainland China and Hong Kong has, of course, ensured that this matter is kept to the fore.

From the discussions which your President and author had with people during the recent visit, it would be fair to say that there is a general belief that a satisfactory solution will eventually be found. In recent years, the financial stake which Mainland China has in



*Hong Kong Branch Committee's Ladies' Night*

Hong Kong, has been increasing in leaps and bounds, both in direct terms and in the use of Hong Kong as an entrepot port. This being the case, there are ever-decreasing reasons why the Mainland Chinese Government should want to do anything to disturb the existing economic infrastructure of the Colony.

In this regard, it was interesting to learn that the Mainland Chinese Government is, at the moment, building a number of large, very high office blocks on the Wan Chai Waterfront, using Hong Kong Chinese Building Firms, costing millions of pounds, and concerning which there are no contracts, only "nod and handshake" agreements. The Chinese, in fact, have always, traditionally acted on this principle, the main example being Portuguese Macao which has never been Portuguese otherwise than by just such informal agreements for more than four centuries.

Both the President and Deputy Secretary were most cordially welcomed everywhere they went, and there is no doubt that the visit was very successful, not only from a public relations point of view, but also in enabling the President and Deputy Secretary to have the opportunity to meet and discuss matters of interest with both IQS and RICS Quantity Surveyors, as well as with members of related professions.

The President and Deputy Secretary are particularly grateful to George Yeadon, the Hong Kong Branch Chairman, and the members of his Committee for arranging and, indeed, participating in the programme, and

for the outstanding hospitality which was shown throughout the visit. This was typified by a number of marvellously authentic Chinese meals, culminating in a Chinese dinner at the World Centre Club. This provided the opportunity for the President and Deputy Secretary and their wives to meet the whole of the Hong Kong Branch Committee who were also supported by their ladies, and provided a very pleasant and informal finale to the visit. The President and Deputy Secretary were pleased to have this opportunity of thanking the members of the Branch Committee for the tremendous amount of work they had put in to make the visit a success, and to be able to personally thank such long-standing members as Vic Miller, the first Chairman of the Hong Kong Branch, who had done so much to build up and guide the Branch in the early years. The President later reciprocated this hospitality at a Dinner for the Branch Officers and their wives in the New World Hotel.

Last but not least, the President and Deputy Secretary were indebted to their own wives for their support throughout the visit, which was particularly helpful in alleviating the inevitable social burdens imposed by the necessity to meet so many people in such a short time.

(The author is particularly indebted in the preparation of this article to the help received from the Hong Kong Tourist Association and information gleaned from the book 'Hong Kong Ways and Byways' by Eric Cumine which is a must for anyone really interested in the Crown Colony.)

*Junks and ferries glide past one another in bustling Hong Kong Harbour. In the background is the Island's Central District, at the heart of which is the 52-storey Connaught Centre.*

