From South to North: Studying the Urban Transformations from Land Reclamation in Wanchai, Hong Kong

Lam See-ching Sharon
5540984
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Supervisors: Charlotte van Wijk and Didem Yerli

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study urban and social impacts brought about by land reclamation in Hong Kong since the early 20th century. To do so, this paper focuses on Wanchai, a coastal district in Hong Kong which has experienced dissimilar development in its Northern and Southern parts over a series of expansions into the harbour. This paper contributes to the ongoing debate about land reclamation as a place-making strategy for future growth by highlighting how the developments on new land, directly and indirectly, impact that of old existing communities.

Keywords

Land Reclamation; History of Hong Kong; Port Cities; Urban Morphology

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Introduction

The urban development of Hong Kong has always been bound up with water: its deepwater harbour serves as an embodiment of Hong Kong's port city identity and has rendered its economic prosperity. At the same time, since its early days, coastal reclamation has been a go-to strategy for creating new spaces for urban growth, despite posing permanent damage to the marine heritage. It could be found that core urban nodes and landmarks (eg. port facilities, the airport, new towns, theme parks and major commercial buildings) are mostly situated on reclaimed lands. Hence, this paper identifies Hong Kong as a city of reclamation.

Nonetheless, land reclamation is a controversial topic in society, among environmentalists, government planners, developers as well as taxpayers. To add to the ongoing conversation, this paper aims to study the urban and social impacts of land reclamation, in particular how the new developments compare with the old existing communities. As a case study, this paper focuses on Wanchai, a historical district in Hong Kong which has experienced dissimilar development in its Northern and Southern parts after a series of expansions into the harbour. The purpose of this research is to provide a historical reference when it comes to evaluating the legitimacy of future reclamation plans for the city.

The first chapter begins by providing a general understanding of the history and reasons behind Hong Kong's dependency on land reclamation. It will then be discussed how capturing new developable space from the "unclaimed" waters could be perceived by some people as a place-making strategy that avoids the controversies of redeveloping old districts.

The second chapter discusses in three phases the history of reclamation in Wanchai since the early 20th century and how they have been driven by different factors. The final chapter will further make a comparative analysis of Wanchai North and Wanchai South in terms of their urban morphology, development pattern and social disparity. In doing so, this thesis seeks to explore the conflicting forces taking place within the larger district of Wanchai, for instance, the displacement of traditional clusters in the South as an indirect result of reclamation occurring in the North.

This paper will bring together existing research and literature on the topic of land reclamation in Hong Kong, and then produce a focused study on the Wanchai district. In terms of primary sources, old maps and photos will be used to provide a visual reference for coastline and urban transformations. Before-and-after photo comparisons can also highlight the impacts of historical reclamation in the present day. The author's own experience growing up and living in Hong Kong for 23 years will also provide some insight throughout this paper.

Chapter 1: Hong Kong, the City of Reclamation

This chapter will provide an overview of the history and role of land reclamation in Hong Kong over the past century. It will also explain the main reasons behind undertaking extensive reclamation and its distinction from alternative development strategies.

1.1 History and Overview

Often recognised as a skyscraper city, Hong Kong should also be known as the city of reclamation – not simply because it has undertaken extensive land reclamation, but because this practice has played a vital role in supporting the city's urban growth. According to the Civil Engineering and Development Department ("CEDD") (2017), as of 2016, reclaimed land in Hong Kong amounts to 6,954 hectares, equivalent to more than 6% of the total land area and 25% of the city's built up area.[1] Secretary for Development Michael Wong stated that 70% of the city's commercial developments and 30% of its population is housed on reclaimed land ("Only reclamation can create new land," 2021). Evidently, land reclamation has been instrumental, if not indispensable, to Hong Kong in becoming one of the most densely populated cities and the international financial centre that it is today.

Figure 1.1 ***Extent of land reclamation in Hong Kong***
From [Map of land reclamation in Hong Kong], in "Hong Kong's Land Reclamation: Past, Present and Future," by C. DeWolf, 2019, (https://discovery.cathaypacific.com/hong-kongs-land-reclamation-past-present-future/?lang=zh-hans).

[1] Hong Kong has a total land area of 1,114 km^2, of which only 25.1% belongs to urban built-up land. The remaining 74.9% is zoned as not-for-development or non-built-up area which includes country parks, wetlands, reservoirs, etc. (Planning Department, 2021).

Once a fishing village, Hong Kong became a British colony in 1841 and served as an important entrepôt in the Asia-Pacific region. In its earliest colonial days, illegal reclamation works were carried out by marine lot owners along the coast, largely associated with port development needs, for example, the construction of warehouses and quays for their vessels. Later, with the expansion of trade and population, the colonial government began actively proposing large-scale reclamation works to alleviate urban problems, despite facing some resistance from private commercial interests at first (Hudson, 1970). Most notable was the Praya Reclamation Scheme (1889-1904) which added 24 hectares to the shore of Central (Wordie, 2002), now known as the central business district of Hong Kong.

The post-WWII decades saw the colonial port's transition into an industrial and manufacturing-based economy, then eventually into a finance and services hub. Throughout the years, the pace and extent of reclamation followed that of economic and urban growth, producing land to meet demands for the construction of office towers and new towns. Approaching the 1997 handover of sovereignty to China, however, reclamation in Hong Kong has slowed down significantly due to increased public awareness towards the preservation of the city's natural heritage and pressure from environmental groups. To limit further reclamation within Victoria Harbour, the "Protection of the Harbour Ordinance" was set up (Ho, 2018). Nonetheless, the government has continued to actively explore alternative sites for reclamation as well as the option of constructing artificial islands offshore, claiming that the sharp reduction in reclamation has only aggravated land shortage and is not a practical course of action for the city (Development Bureau, 2013).

1.2 Concentration of Urban Growth on Reclaimed Land

Victoria Harbour is a natural deepwater harbour separating Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Both sides of Victoria Harbour have been extensively reclaimed over the years, and the city's major urban and business activities take place along these two artificial harbourfronts. **Figure 1.2** shows the clusters of urban growth in relation to areas of reclamation (shaded in yellow). In particular, located on the northern shore of Hong Kong Island are Central and Wanchai, two of the busiest business and political centres of the city, benefitting from reclaimed land for erecting their commercial high-rises and government offices.

To the north of Kowloon, new towns were built in the New Territories through reclamation, providing homes to nearly half of the local population. The development projects alleviated the population boom aggravated by an influx of migrants from mainland China in the 1950s and 1960s (CEDD, 2017). Some other key infrastructures and attractions, such as the Kwai Tsing Container Terminals, Hong Kong International Airport and Hong Kong Disneyland Resort were also built on reclaimed land.

As identified above, Hong Kong's core nodes and landmarks, namely its central business district, new towns, infrastructures, port facilities, etc. are concentrated on reclaimed land. It is therefore fair to say that land reclamation has been a place-making practice integral to the economic and population growth of Hong Kong. It will be almost impossible to picture how the city would have developed if the land on which these buildings sit had not existed.

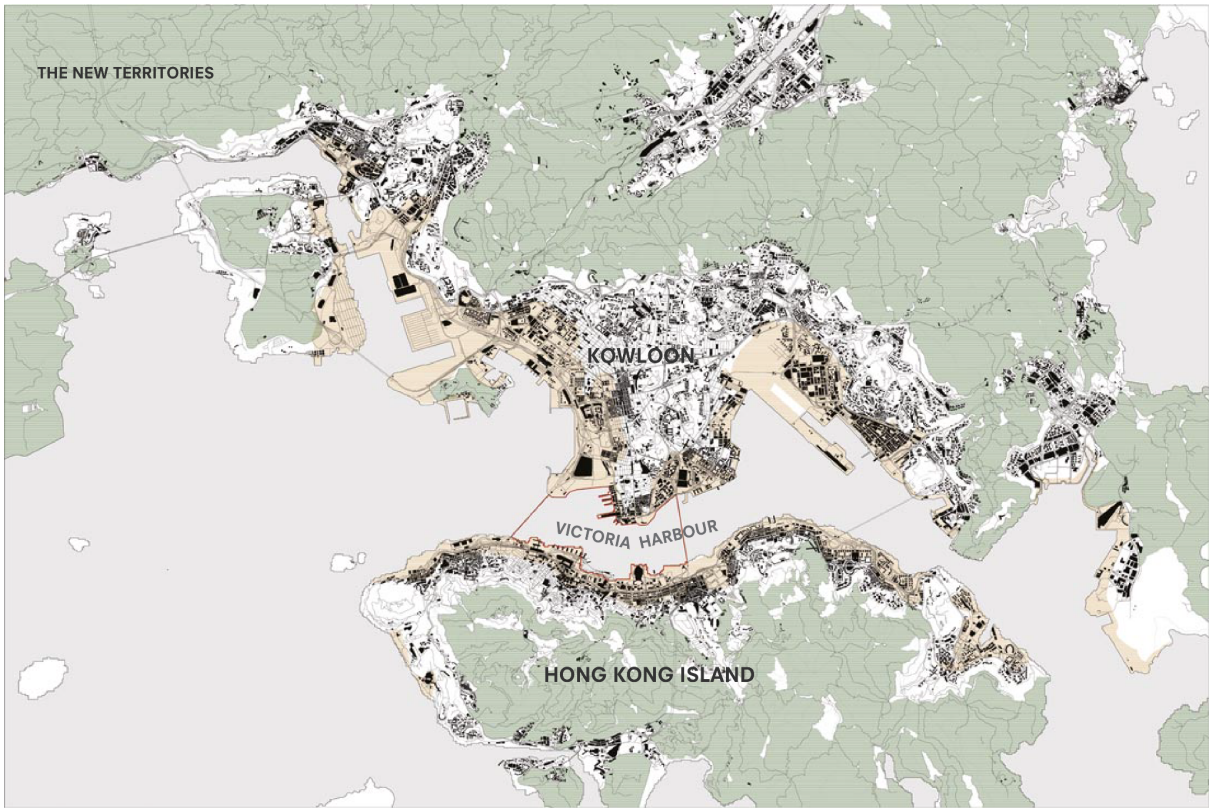

Figure 1.2 ***Relationship between land reclamation and urban growth***
Adapted from [Figure-ground map of urban growth in relation to reclaimed land], in *Terra-Sorta-Firma: Reclaiming the Littoral Gradient* (p.79), by F. Masoud & D.R. Brent, 2021, New York City: Actar D.

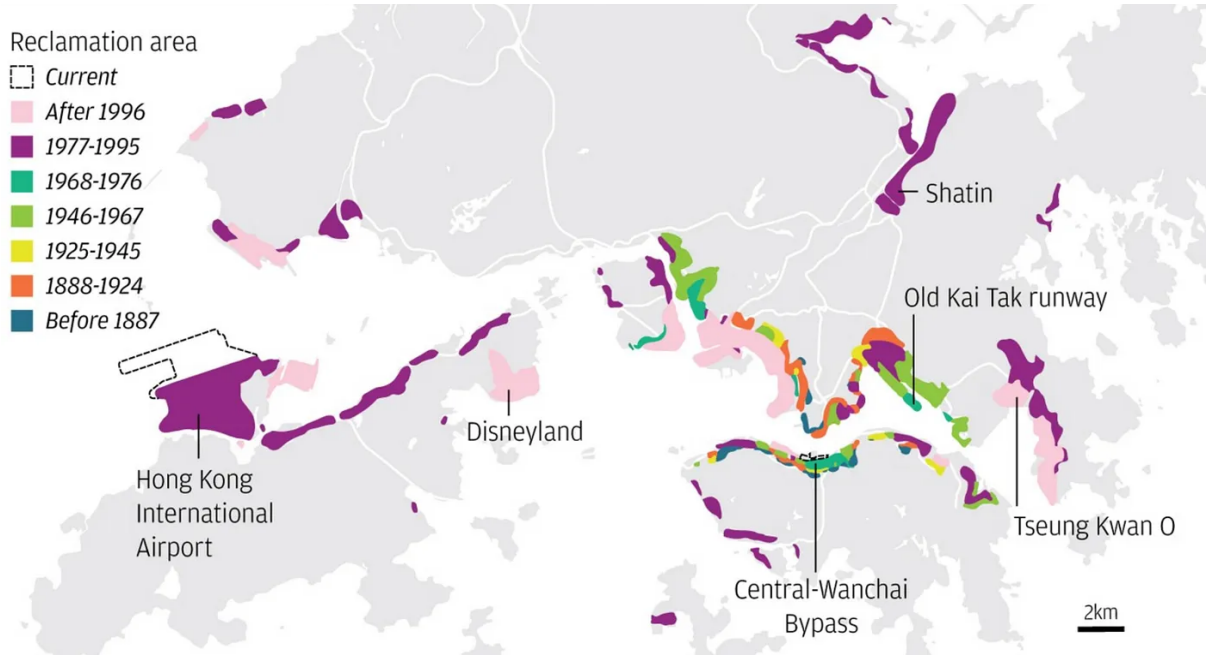

Figure 1.3 ***Major infrastructures on reclaimed land***
From [Reclamation in Hong Kong throughout history], in "How Hong Kong's first land reclamation project sprang from a devastating fire," by N. Ng, 2018, 10 Dec, *South China Morning Post*.

1.3 Reasons Behind Dependency on Reclamation

Anthropogenic expansion of living space into the natural waters is not unique to Hong Kong; it occurs widely in many island and coastal cities, motivated by different historical and contextual circumstances (Masoud and Brent, 2021). Hence, it will be useful to understand the factors specific to Hong Kong which contributed to its dependency on reclamation.

First and foremost is geographical constraints and land shortage. A city made up of islands, Hong Kong has a mountainous natural terrain. This makes it challenging to find suitable flatlands for new constructions. The lack of space has prompted the city to develop vertically and densely, but it is still not enough. As such, extending its territory into the surrounding waters has become a necessary strategy to overcome land deficiency, so as to handle the huge population and also to account for growth in the long term.[2] Prospects about the future growth of the city are closely associated with land reclamation.

Secondly is the government's profit incentive. According to the land policy in Hong Kong, all land is owned by the government and leased to private developers "for terms of 75, 99 or 999 years" (Lands Department, 2017). In other words, the government is the biggest landlord of the territory, while also holding administrative power to control the development agenda of Hong Kong (Ng and Cook, 1997: 5). Land premium represents the second largest source of government revenue, amounting to 16% of total revenue in the 2020-2021 fiscal year (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2021), and initial leases from "new" land generate the majority of lease revenue. It is therefore more profit-making for the government to push for reclaiming new land rather than developing already existing leased land (Ng and Cook, 1997: 6).

1.4 Reclamation and Other Land Creation Strategies

Hong Kong's reliance on reclamation should also be examined in comparison with other land supply options. As proposed by the Hong Kong government there are six approaches for increasing land supply to meet long-term development requirements, namely, "resumption of rural land, redevelopment, land rezoning, reuse of ex-quarry sites, rock cavern development and reclamation" (CEDD, 2019).

The most obvious difference between reclamation and these alternative strategies is that it concerns the direct production of more land reserves, while the rest are only based on modifying existing land uses. For this reason, in a forum to promote the government's latest mega reclamation proposal "Lantau Tomorrow," Wong, the Secretary for Development, claimed that reclamation is "the only way of creating new land" to address land shortage ("Only reclamation can create new land," 2021). Reclamation also provides flexibility for the government to rearrange existing land functions and improve living conditions. By relocating unpleasant or industrial facilities to land reclaimed in outlying areas of the city, valuable spaces in urban centres could then be released for other uses (CEDD, 2019), for example, to build more housing.

[2] Government projection of population to reach 8.1 million by 2041 (Census and Statistics Department, 2020).

It could also be argued that reclamation prevents the social conflicts that come with redevelopment, land rezoning and resumption since the process does not directly involve the rehousing or displacement of existing residents and businesses (Grydehøj, 2015). Urban renewal projects are often met with local resentment and are a trigger for protests. Moreover, negotiations with the local community are a time-consuming process and compensation to affected residents is costly. In this regard, making new land instead of disrupting the old is allegedly a damage control strategy.

In this chapter, it was discussed how reclamation can directly increase land supply for catering development needs. By the means of capturing space from the originally uninhabited harbour or sea, minimal disruption is posed to existing urban communities (on the other hand, disruption to existing marine habitats is a huge controversy, but will not be the focus of this paper). However, is this really the case? Could reclamation still be an indirect threat to the livelihood and well-being of local communities, as a result of urban transformations that are ultimately brought to surrounding neighbourhoods? The question of reclamation and its impacts on urban development will be discussed in the following sections, taking the district of Wanchai in Hong Kong as a case study.

Chapter 2: A Brief Chronicle of Reclamation in Wanchai

This chapter will summarise the three waves of reclamation taken place in the Wanchai district of Hong Kong, spanning from the 20th century to the 21st century. These stages of development will be taken as a point of departure for understanding the different morphological transformations experienced by the Northern and Southern parts of Wanchai respectively.

2.1 Introducing Wanchai North and Wanchai South

In 1841, the British occupied Hong Kong Island and settled on the northern coast along Victoria Harbour, which was instrumental to its development into a maritime trading port (Ho, 2018). Wanchai is situated east of the first British settlements in Sheung Wan and Central, from which urban developments began to spill over during the early colonial era. Due to its strategic location, Wanchai has taken a centre stage in major reclamation and development projects of the city over the years. The present-day urban scene is characterised by a co-existence of old and new developments, the conglomeration of residential, commercial, cultural and administrative land uses, and a mixed community of grassroots and affluent families. In recent years it has become a rapidly gentrifying district.

Successive phases of reclamation since the 20th century have shifted the original coastline of Wanchai northwards into Victoria Harbour (**Figure 2.2**). Looking at the map of Wanchai, it is not an exaggeration to say that half of it sits on reclaimed land. The reclamation history of Wanchai could be divided into three periods. Each marks a turning point in the urban development of the district. The following sections will provide a chronological overview of the respective stages of reclamation and discuss their impacts on urban morphology.

As a case study, this thesis will analyse the overall district of Wanchai by making comparisons between its North and South. The major thoroughfare, Gloucester Road (green line in **Figure 2.2**), will be taken as the North-South division line. Wanchai South is partly natural land of the island and partly reclaimed in the 1920s. On the other hand, Wanchai North was reclaimed entirely during the second stage of reclamation in the 1960s. In terms of urban morphology, it could be seen from the plan that the scale and size of built forms increase from South to North. The southern neighbourhood is characterised by blocks of smaller footprints, whereas the north features more extensive clusters of building complexes.

Figure 2.1 ***Location of Wanchai on map of Hong Kong***
Adapted from *China Hong Kong location map* [Map], by M. Dörrbecker, 2010, Wikimedia Commons, (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Hong_Kong_location_map.svg).

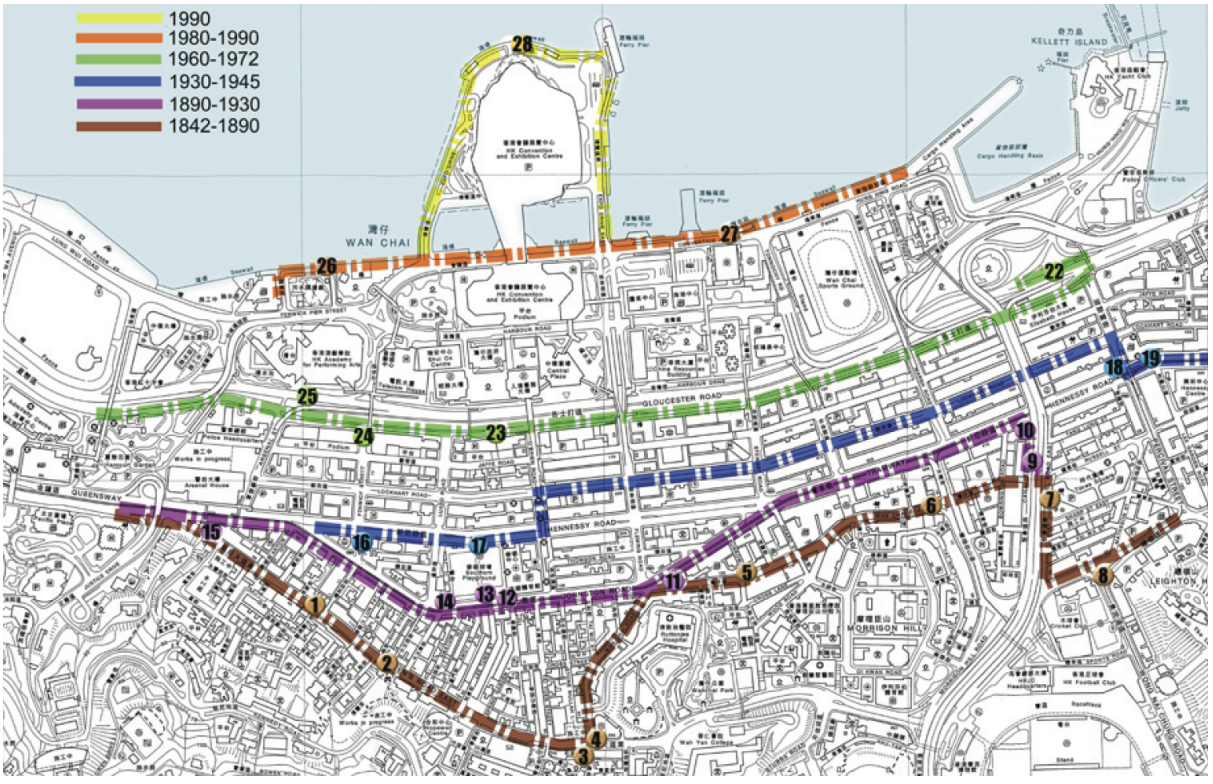

Figure 2.2 ***Northward shift of Wanchai's coastline***
From [Map of Wanchai coastline], in *Wanchai Coastline*, by Wan Chai District Council of Hong Kong, 2007.

2.2 Stage One: Praya East Reclamation Scheme (1921-1931)

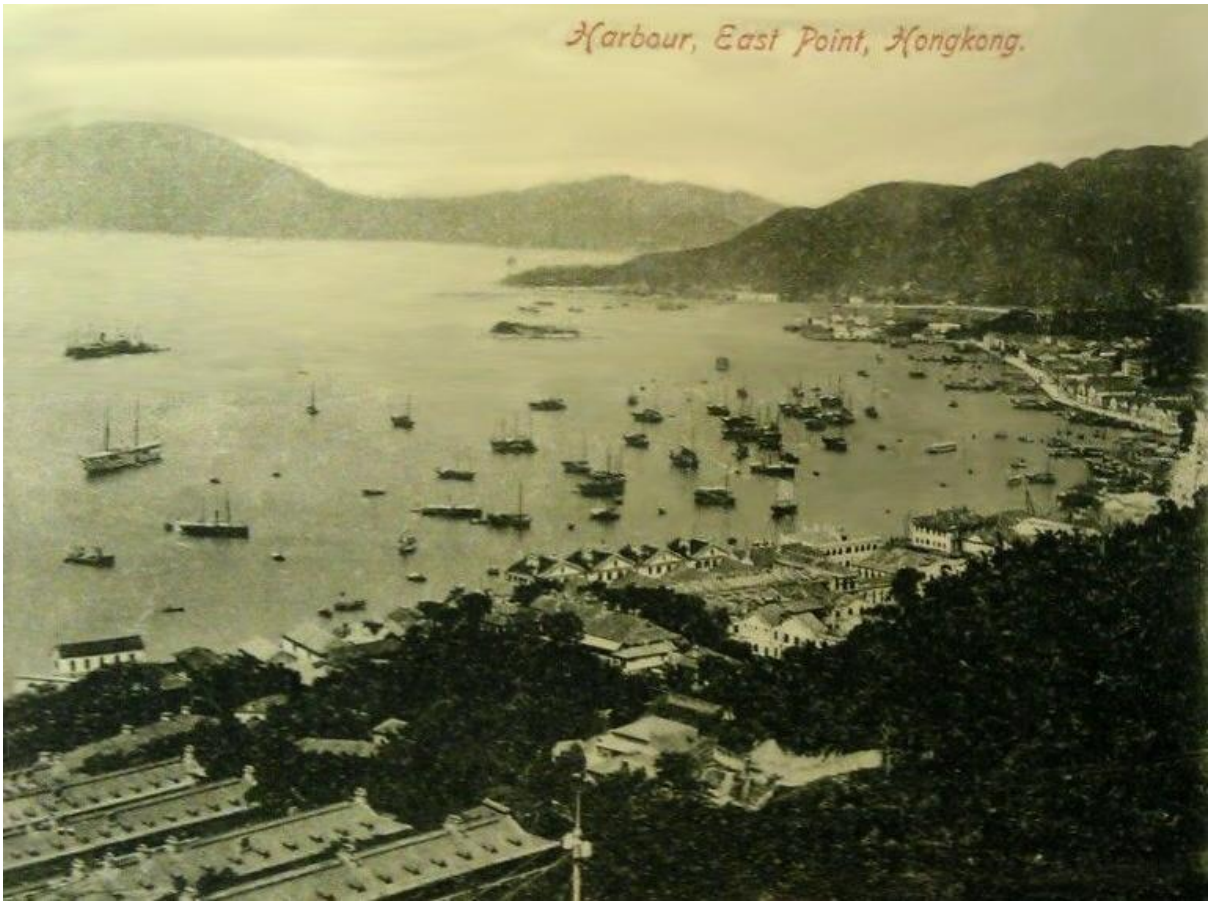

Figure 2.3 ***Arc-shaped cove of Wanchai, 1910***
From [Wanchai coastline in 1910], in "Wanchai Coastline 2: Praya East Reclamation Scheme," by J. Yu, 2022, (https://www.patreon.com/posts/wan-zi-hai-xian-61529833).

Wanchai was one of the earliest developed districts since British occupation and has mostly been inhabited by Chinese people. **Figure 2.3** shows an early impression of the Wanchai coastline. It was characterised by the arc-shaped cove which gave the district its name, "Wanchai," literally meaning "a Little Bay" in Cantonese (Wan Chai District Council, 1992). However, after years of substantial reclamation and the consequent streamlining of the shoreline, this cove is no longer present.

The Praya East[3] Reclamation Scheme was initiated in 1897 by Sir Catchick Paul Chater[4] when it was then suspended, having met with opposition by the military for involving the demolition of the Royal Naval Hospital. It was until 1921 when the hospital was relocated to

[3] "Praya East" used to refer to the area of Wanchai. "Praya," meaning "seaside" or "waterfront," originated from the Portuguese word "praia" and was a term used among maritime colonial administrations ("Where the word praya came from," 2017).
[4] Sir Catchick Paul Chater (1846-1926) was a prominent figure in the early development of Hong Kong. Chater was the founder of the Hongkong Land Investment and Agency Co. and the Hong Kong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Co., two of the largest real estate developers in the city. He is also known as the pioneer of the Praya Reclamation Scheme in Central district, which was the predecessor of the Praya East Reclamation Scheme (Waters, 1990; Yu, 2022).

the nearby Stonecutters Island that the project finally commenced (Hong Kong Memory, 2014). The Scheme aimed to provide residential land for accommodating the growing Chinese population, to alleviate urban problems of overcrowding and poor sanitation that have been proliferating in Wanchai (Yu, 2022).

According to the plan (**Figure 2.4**), the original curvy coastline has been straightened out so as to create a more orderly urban grid with more evenly-divided building lots, in light of disputes by land developers regarding the previously unfair allocation of land (Yu, 2022). It could be seen from the plan that public open space provision has been taken into account at the time – highlighted in green is Southorn Playground, which to this day is still an important sports and recreational space on Hong Kong Island.

As aforementioned, the Scheme was proposed by Chater, who was a distinguished private businessman and the founder of the Hongkong Land Investment and Agency Company ("Hongkong Land"). Hongkong Land was the biggest lot owner at the time and held a large number of plots along the Wanchai seafront, as illustrated in light blue markings in **Figure 2.5**. In exchange for helping the colonial government fund the costs of the reclamation project, Hongkong Land had the priority to make an offer for the premium reclaimed lots marked in dark blue (Yu, 2022). This approach of acquiring funding from private developers by allocating them to building plots in return (with a 999-year lease and an additional rent to the Crown) has proven to be successful and financially guaranteeing for the colonial government (Ng, 2008, 172). It could be seen that the private sector was a key protagonist in supporting reclamation projects undertaken in the pre-WWII era.

Completed in 1931, the Praya East Reclamation Scheme extended the coastline of Wanchai northwards from Johnston Road to Gloucester Road, creating 86 acres of new flatland. The construction of 360 three to four-storey tenement buildings began on the reclaimed plots, providing dense living units for the lower to middle class Chinese population, marking the formation of Wanchai's core residential cluster (Wan Chai District Council, 2007). The urban morphology was characterised by a series of standardised housing blocks confined by the urban grid (**Figure 2.7**).

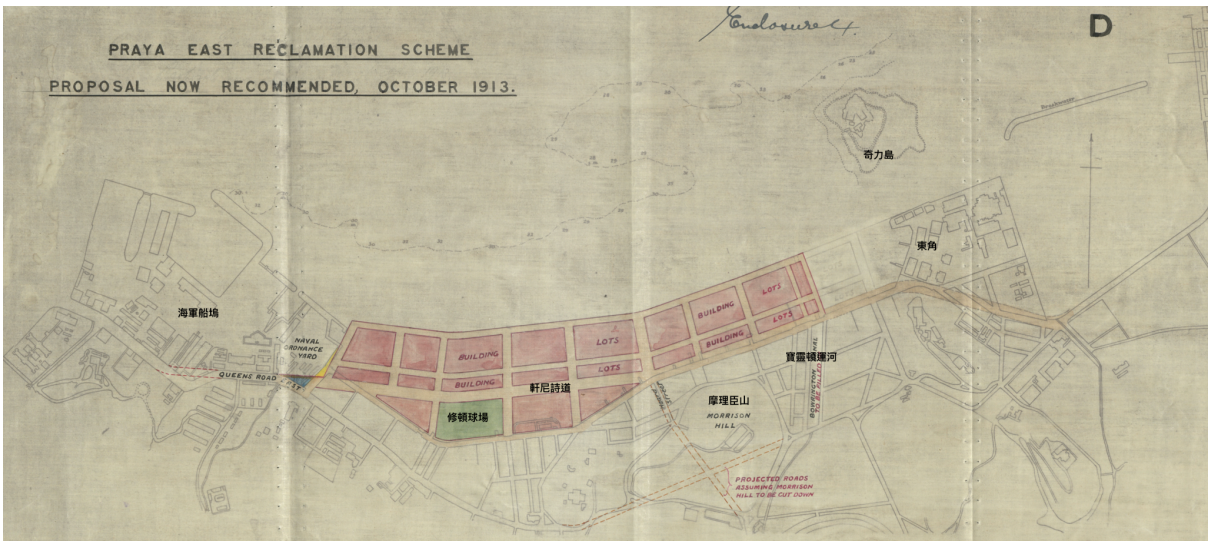

Figure 2.4 ***Praya East Reclamation Scheme, 1913 Proposal***
From [Praya East Reclamation Scheme Proposal 1913], in "Wanchai Coastline 3: Arsenal Street Realignment," by J. Yu, 2022, (https://www.patreon.com/posts/wan-zi-hai-xian-61871617).

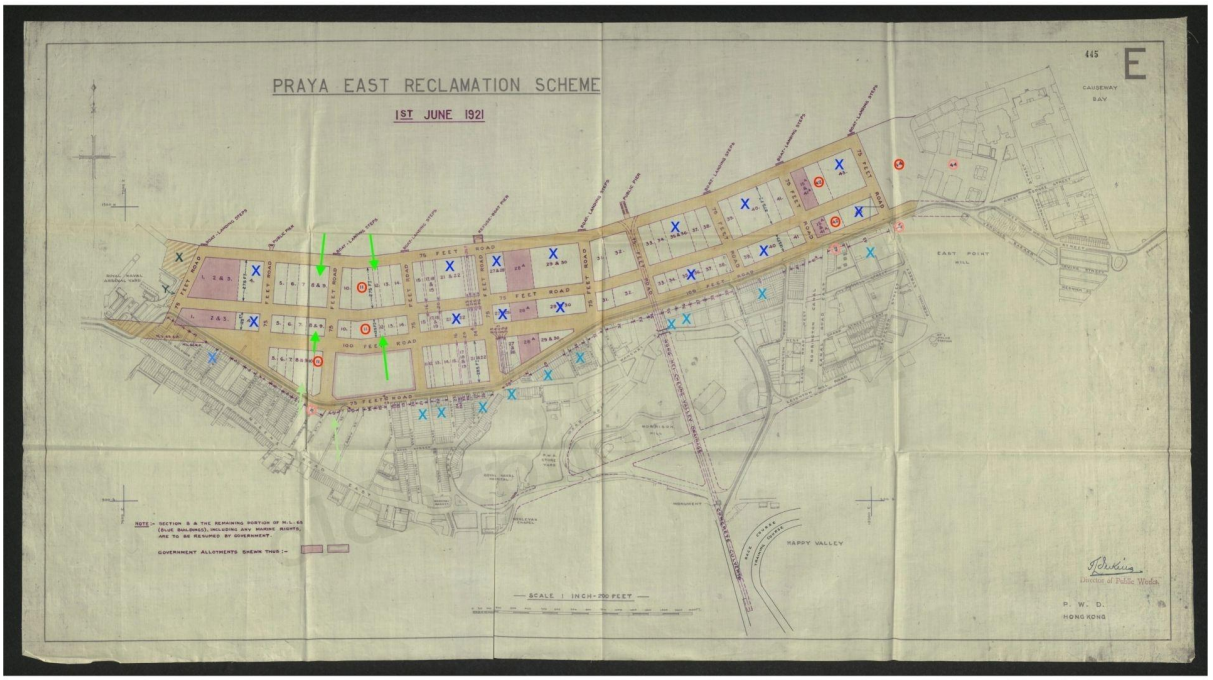

Figure 2.5 ***Praya East Reclamation land allotment***
From [Praya East Reclamation Scheme 1st June 1921], in "Wanchai Coastline 4: Biggest Landlord of Ha Wan," by J. Yu, 2022, (https://www.patreon.com/posts/wan-zi-hai-xian-62282506).

Figure 2.6 ***Completion of Wanchai reclamation by 1929***
From [Looking East from the Peak], in “Wanchai Coastline 2: Praya East Reclamation Scheme,” by J. Yu, 2022, (https://www.patreon.com/posts/wan-zi-hai-xian-61529833).

Figure 2.7 ***Rows of tenement houses constructed on the reclaimed plots, 1930s***
From [Completion of reclamation 1930], in “Wanchai Coastline 4: Biggest Landlord of Ha Wan,” by J. Yu, 2022, (https://www.patreon.com/posts/wan-zi-hai-xian-62282506).

2.3 Stage Two: Reclamation of Wanchai North (1965-1972)

In the few decades following the Praya East Reclamation Scheme which generated land to aid the chronic housing shortage, Wanchai continued to be a crowded residential district for lower and middle income families. By the 1950s, the population density from Hennessy Road to Gloucester Road reached 2,000 people per acre (Ho, 2018: 147). However, in 1965, the colonial government set out a long-term plan for Wanchai which brought about key transformations regarding the district's development (Wanchai District Council, 1992). The areas of land reclaimed during this period will be referred to as Wanchai North.

Extensive reclamation commenced in the late 1960s, shifting the previous Gloucester Road coastline up to Convention Avenue. 84.2 acres of land have been reclaimed (Ho, 2018). Unlike the Praya East Reclamation Scheme, the objective of this phase of reclamation was not residential-driven but was directed towards infrastructural, government and commercial development. As shown in **Figure 2.8**, major thoroughfares and flyovers have been constructed here, along with the Cross Harbour Tunnel which constituted an important traffic linkage between Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula. Between the 1970s and 1990s, iconic landmarks like the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, as well as the government towers (eg. Revenue Tower, Immigration Tower) were built one after the other. Wanchai North also attracted many businesses and housed a hub of office towers such as Sun Hung Kai Tower, Great Eagle Centre and Telecom House (Hong Kong Memory, 2014). These new developments taking place on the reclaimed Wanchai North represented an upmarket shift and contributed to a renewed identity for Wanchai, almost like a brush up.

The completion of the Wanchai North reclamation is shown in **Figure 2.9**. A contrast in urban forms could be identified between Wanchai North and Wanchai South (demarcated by Gloucester Road). The street grid and building footprints on the new waterfront are more than twice the scale of former developments south of Gloucester Road.

Figure 2.8 ***1970s Wanchai North after reclamation***
From *1970s Wanchai reclamation* [Photograph], by moddsey, (n.d.), Gwulo, (https://gwulo.com/atom/10938).

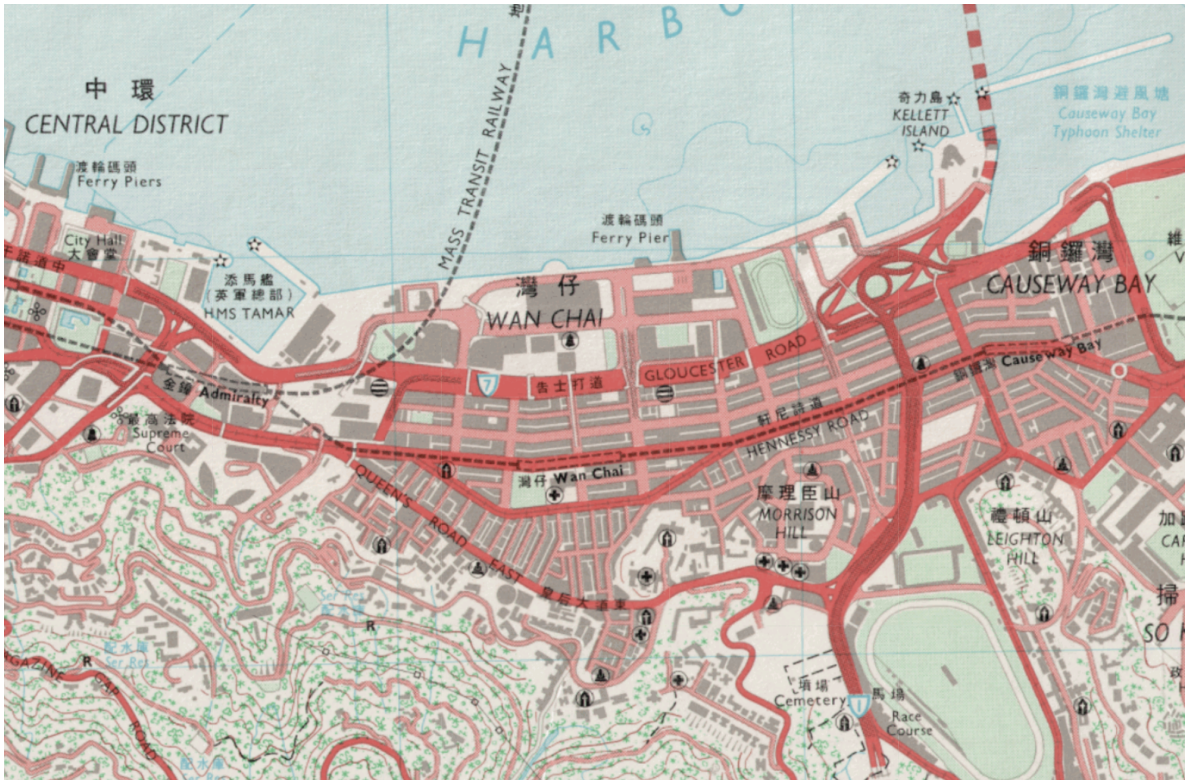

Figure 2.9 ***Map of Wanchai, 1987***
From *The Territory of Hong Kong* [Wanchai] [Map], by Hong Kong Historic Maps, 1987, (https://www.hkmaps.hk/viewer.html).

2.4 Stage Three: Central-Wanchai Reclamation Project (1994-2017)

The third stage of reclamation in Wanchai commenced near the end of the colonial period. It was carried out in “Phase I” (1994-1997) and “Phase II” (2009-2017). They were part of the government's larger planning scheme for the Wanchai and adjacent Central district waterfronts. The main objectives were to create a Harbour Park along the promenades and to create a Central-Wanchai Bypass for tackling traffic problems (Development Bureau, 2012).

“Phase I” consisted of a 70,000 m2 artificial island for building an extension wing for the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. This extension served as a venue for the Hong Kong Handover to China on July 1, 1997 (Ho, 2018).

Figure 2.10 ***HKCEC Extension under construction, 1994***
From [1994, HKCEC Extension under construction], in “The Disappearing Coastline: Wanchai,” by Oldhkphoto, 2013, (https://oldhkphoto.com/lostwanchai/).

Since the mid-1990s, members of the general public and environmental groups have begun questioning the legitimacy of reclamation, as they organised harbour-protection campaigns to advocate against further reclaiming works in Victoria Harbour (Ng, 2011). One of the leading non-governmental organisations was the Society for Protection of the Harbour (SPH), founded in 1995, which eventually pushed for the Legislative Council to pass the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance in 1997 (**Figure 2.11**). Although the “Phase I” reclamation in Wanchai had already been under way before the Ordinance was enacted, it has caused major delays and suspensions of other projects that were pending, including the “Phase II” reclamation (Ho, 2018).

The government's initial scheme for “Phase II” was to reclaim 48 hectares of land, intended to serve the Central-Wanchai Bypass Tunnel, a Harbour Park as well as new residences and hotels. In 2003, the SPH initiated a judicial review against the scheme, to which the High Court ruled that reclamation proposals must demonstrate an “overriding public need.” Eventually, the government made amendments and downsized the project from 48 to 12.7 hectares.[5] Reclamation was carried out from 2009 to 2017 (Ho, 2018).

Compared with the previous stages, this most recent reclamation stage spanned the longest period of time of over two decades, owing to public opposition and judicial processes in between. In terms of urban morphology, this stage did not add to the built landscape along the waterfront other than the Convention and Exhibition Centre Extension. It mainly created land for a transport bypass and other roads, as well as a waterfront promenade for the public. However, at such conjunctions of vehicular use and public use, accessibility issues may become inevitable, with at-grade pedestrian crossings limited by roads passing through (**Figure 2.13**).

Figure 2.11 ***“Save Our Harbour” Campaign Leaflet in 1996***
From [“Save Our Harbour” Campaign Leaflet], in *Court of Final Appeal Judgment, Meaning of "Overriding Public Need"*, by W. Chu, 1994, (https://sph.blob.core.windows.net/media/490/proportionality.pdf).

[5] For further information about the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance and the anti reclamation movements, see Ho, P. (2018). *Making Hong Kong: A History of Its Urban Development* and Ng, M. K. (2011). *Power and rationality: The Politics of Harbour Reclamation in Hong Kong*.

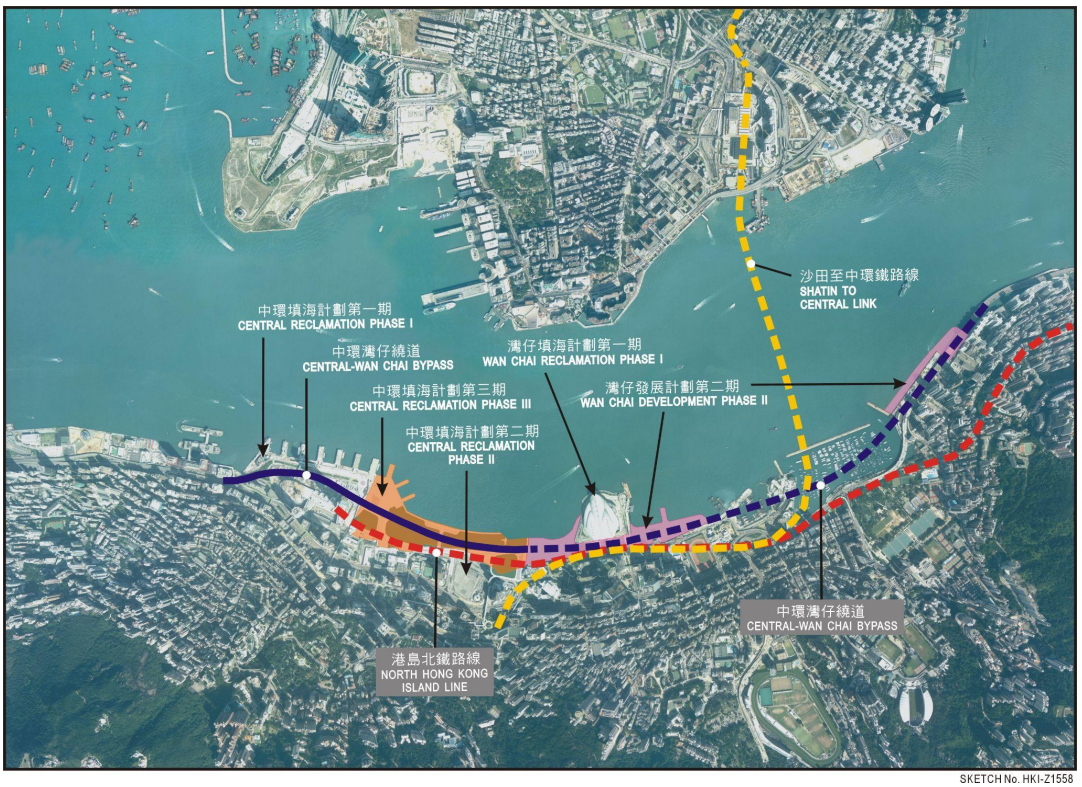

Figure 2.12 ***Central-Wanchai Reclamation Scheme***
From [Central-Wanchai Reclamation Scheme], in "Factsheets, Plans and Map, Review Report," Development Bureau, 2012, (https://www.reclamation.gov.hk/en/basic/plans_and_maps/project/index.html).

Figure 2.13 ***Wan Chai North view of Expo Drive and Wanchai Promenade***
From *HKCEC Wan Chai North view Expo Drive n Central and Wan Chai Promenade Waterfront* [Photograph], by 78 WHEMMO ILekaa, 2020, Wikimedia Commons, (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HKCEC_Wan_Chai_North_view_Expo_Drive_n_Central_and_Wan_Chai_Promenade_Waterfront_July_2020_SS2_04.jpg).

2.5 Impacts on Urban Morphology

The multiple stages of reclamation introduced new architectural developments and land uses into Wanchai. Firstly, a noticeable transformation is of the skyline from South to North, as illustrated in **Figure 2.14**.

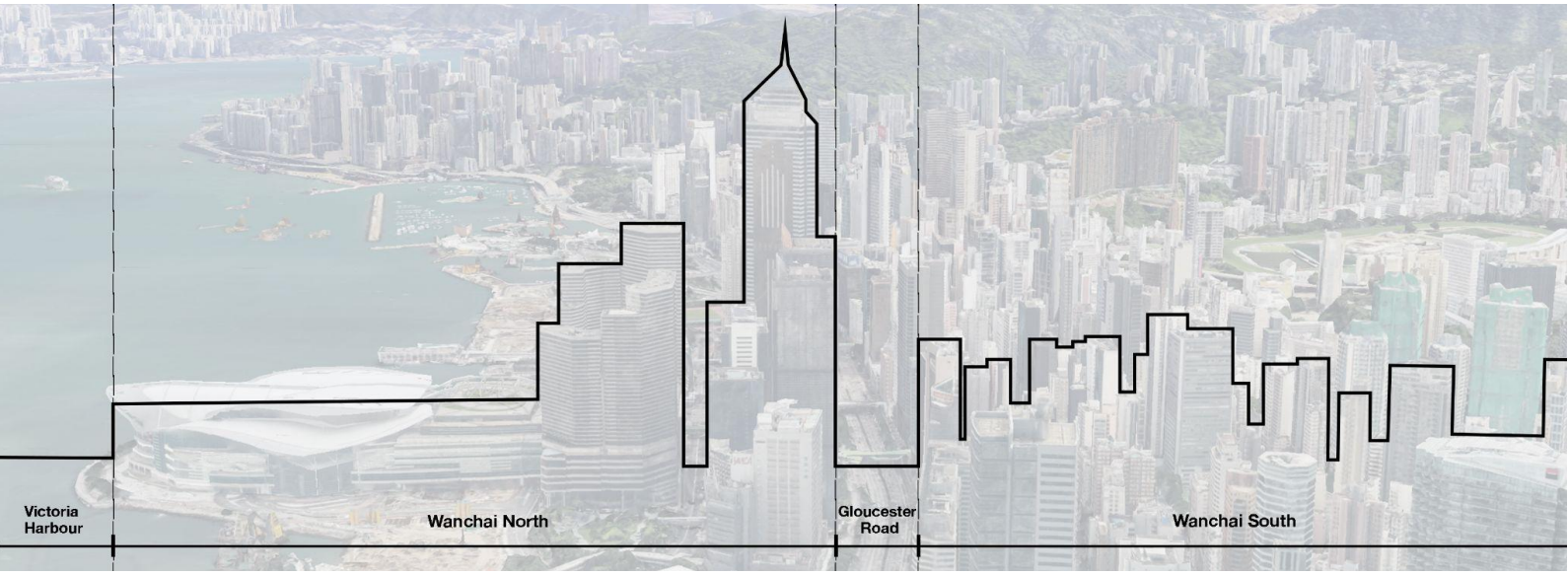

Figure 2.14 *Abstracted skyline of Wanchai with demarcation between North and South*

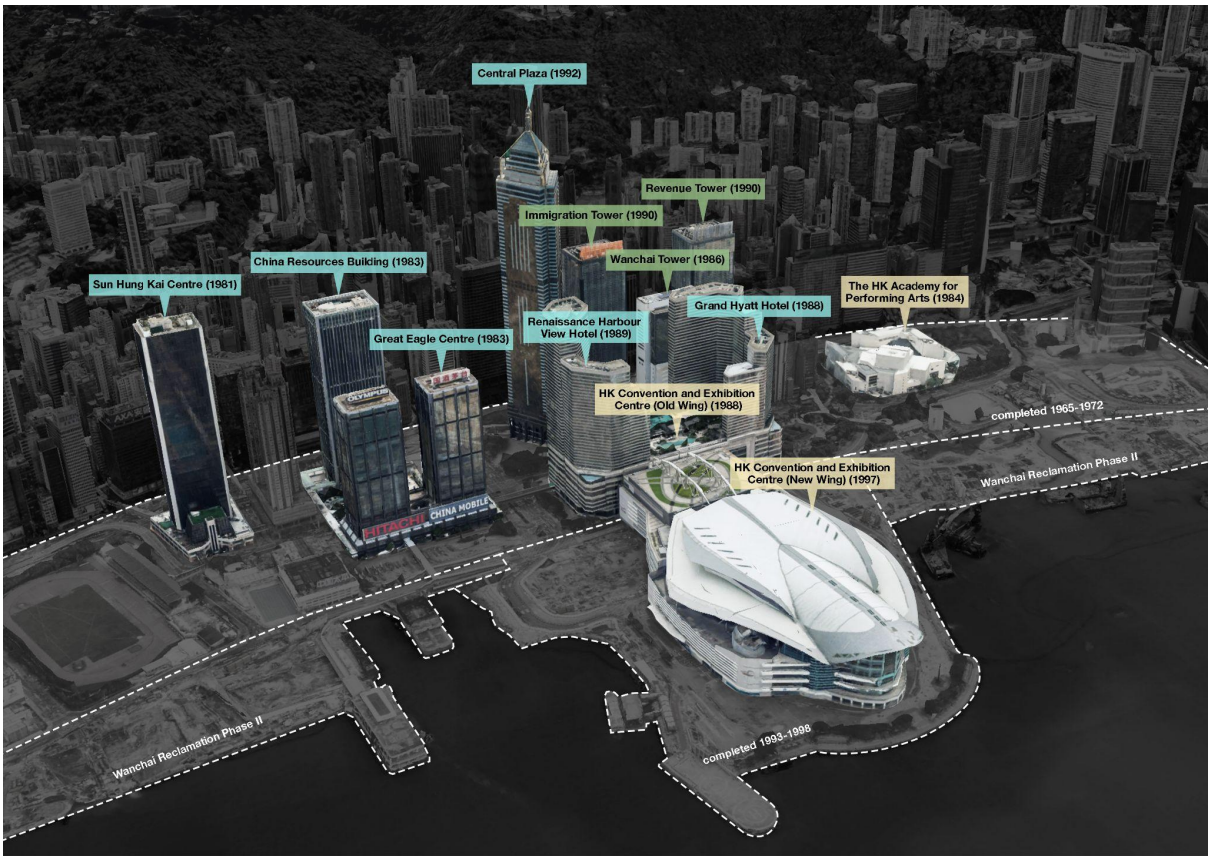

Figure 2.15 *Visual reference of major buildings in Wanchai North*

To maximise views towards the Harbour, it would be desirable for building heights to descend towards the waterfront, so as to preserve the visual connectivity of buildings at the back with the natural setting. The opposite condition is evident in Wanchai, where the inland buildings, furthest away from the water, are shorter. A physical urban barricade has been formed by the row of high rises erected on the reclaimed land of Wanchai North, for example, Sun Hung Kai Centre (1981), China Resources Building (1983), Great Eagle Centre (1983) and Central Plaza (1992), among other Grade A office buildings and hotels (**Figure 2.15**). Due to this skyscraper wall, inland buildings, especially the residential cluster of Wanchai South, have lost distinctive view corridors to Victoria Harbour, which is an important landscape heritage associated with people's sense of orientation and place.

Figure 2.16 ***Aerial view of Wanchai waterfront, 1949 vs 2014***
Top: From *Late 1940s Wanchai waterfront air* [Photograph], by Klaus, 2021, Gwulo, (https://gwulo.com/atom/41642).
Bottom: From [Aerial view of Wanchai Waterfront], Google, 2014, Google Earth.

The second observation with regard to urban morphology is the increased diversity in built forms. **Figure 2.16** shows the drastic difference in built forms before and after the Wanchai North reclamation. The top photo shows a standardised tenement house typology, that the buildings had a uniform height and architectural design. In contrast, the bottom photo depicts present-day Wanchai with a more diverse urban fabric, that the waterfront developments each hold a unique architectural expression or a way to stand out from the others.

In this chapter, the three stages of reclamation projects undertaken in Wanchai since the early 20th century have been discussed, explaining how the coastline has shifted northwards over time, encroaching more and more into Victoria Harbour. Each stage has been driven by different reasons: stage one Praya East Reclamation Scheme aimed to create land supply for solving the housing shortage; stage two introduced commercial developments to Wanchai North; lastly, stage three was to alleviate traffic congestion. Consequently, significant changes in urban morphology could be identified, as we observe the difference in the skyline and built forms from the South to the North. The following chapter will further discuss these differences and their relation to district identity and spatial conflicts.

Chapter 3: District Identity and Spatial Struggle

Over the years, physical transformations of land in Wanchai gave rise to two district identities – the grassroots residential Wanchai South and the upscale commercial Wanchai North. This chapter will discuss these conflicting forces and explore the social and cultural changes brought to Wanchai.

3.1 Dichotomy Between the “Artificial” and the “Natural”

In his essay *A City Is Not a Tree*, architect and design theorist Christopher Alexander (1965) wrote about the difference between “artificial cities” and “natural cities” – the former being a city deliberately designed by urban planners and the latter referring to unplanned cities that have evolved spontaneously over time. Under this definition, reclamation without a doubt belongs to the creation of “artificial districts.” Prior to executing a project, the government would pre-plan and determine the different aspects of the area to be reclaimed, from street layout and land zoning, down to circulation routes and population intake.

Wanchai North is an example of an "artificial district" since it has been entirely reclaimed from Victoria Harbour starting from 1965 (Ho, 2018). The district has been pre-designed with specific land use expectations by the government since its conception, which was to create space for administrative and commercial-use buildings. In comparison, Wanchai South is a "natural district" that has grown and evolved over time. Despite having encountered government intervention throughout the years, Wanchai South was not conceived from an official blueprint, instead was developed by the local community that had lived in and used the space. Open-air street markets are an example of informal urban activities in Wanchai South which could be traced back to informal trading activities in the 1920s (Siu and Huang, 2015). Such activities would not have been tolerated or permitted in Wanchai North.

The value of history could also be a point of comparison between the “artificial” and the “natural.” Wanchai North is devoid of urban history before 1965 because it had not existed until then. Lacking ties to historical meaning and urban forms, it was developed like a tabula rasa – an artificial blank slate for realising new ideas and master plans in regards to its functions to serve and role to play within the city. A brand new identity has been imposed upon this vacant land by its planners, which in this case, was the government. On the other hand, being one of the earliest developed settlements in the colonial period of Hong Kong, Wanchai South is home to many historic buildings of the early 20th century. The Old Wanchai Market, Blue House, Hung Shing Temple and The Pawn Building are some of the notable sites on the Wanchai Heritage Trail embedded with collective memories of Hong Kong citizens (Urban Renewal Authority, 2007).

Figure 3.1 ***Historical sites of Wanchai South on the Wanchai Heritage Trail***
From [Map of Wanchai Heritage Trail], in *Wan Chai Heritage Trail Leaflet*, by Urban Renewal Authority, 2007, (https://www.ura.org.hk/f/project/308/eng_final.pdf).

Due to their contrasting degrees of planned development and historical value, there exists a dichotomy between the "artificial" Wanchai North and the "natural" Wanchai South, eventually bringing about dual identities in the Wanchai district as a whole. Spatial observations of such dichotomy will be explored in the following section.

3.2 Dual Identities Manifested in Space

Urban identity refers to the defining characteristic of a place which differentiates it from other places. In *Place and Placelessness*, Edward Relph stated that urban identity is shaped by “three interrelated components, each irreducible to the other – physical features or appearance, observable activities and function and meanings or symbols” (Relph, 1976: 61). The urban forms, heritage, culture and collective memories of a place are important elements that construct its identity and furthermore, people’s sense of belonging to the place. As discussed previously, the development of reclaimed land, as a tabula rasa, is not confronted by historical ties or connections with an existing population. Hence, its identity fails to be defined in this way. In other words, there has to be a new identity imposed upon the “artificial” district, which would be determined by city planners with the highest stakes in making planning decisions. For this reason, there is a possibility that this newly assigned identity does not fit in with that of adjoining neighbourhoods.

The identity of Wanchai South has been derived from years of growth. From its early days, Wanchai South developed as a residential area for the grassroots population. It has a distinctive urban form characterised by tenement buildings (locally called “Tong Laus”) which have commercial activities at the ground level and living units above. Retail stores and restaurants not only serve the community but also activate street frontages, and together with the cluster of signboards suspended from the upper floors by shop owners, they form a vibrant streetscape (**Figures 3.2-3.3**). Ng (2017: 641) described early Wanchai as a district full of "urban commons," consisting of street markets (**Figure 3.4**), vendors and freely-accessible rooftops. These informal spaces have been the result of “natural” and spontaneous growth over time by the local community.

Figure 3.2 ***Streetscape of Wanchai South in the 1970s-1980s***
From *Typical view of Wan Chai in 1970s-1980s* [Photograph], by Klaus, n.d., Gwulo, (https://gwulo.com/atom/24976).

Figure 3.3 ***Streetscape of Wanchai South in 2022***

Figure 3.4 ***Tai Yuen Street Toy Market in the past and present***
Left: From *Tai Yuen Street, Wan Chai* [Photograph], by The University of Hong Kong Libraries, 1984, Hong Kong Memory.
Right: From *Tai yuen street* [Photograph], by Cypp0847, 2019, Wikimedia Commons, (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tai_yuen_street.jpg).

In contrast, developments in Wanchai North demonstrated a discrepancy with the originally grassroots-based Wanchai South. Wanchai North has been planned to serve office towers for private corporations and government administrative use. The resulting street-level experience is much different than that in the South, with modern skyscrapers producing enclosed and impermeable street fronts (**Figures 3.5-3.6**). Another reason for the less active streets is the prioritisation of traffic over pedestrians. Buildings in Wanchai North are connected by elevated footbridges, whereas at-grade level crossings are limited. Connecting people directly between fixed points, the footbridge network is a way of controlling and governing the route of pedestrians (Siu and Huang, 2015). Overall, Wanchai North presents an image of efficiency and a high level of order.

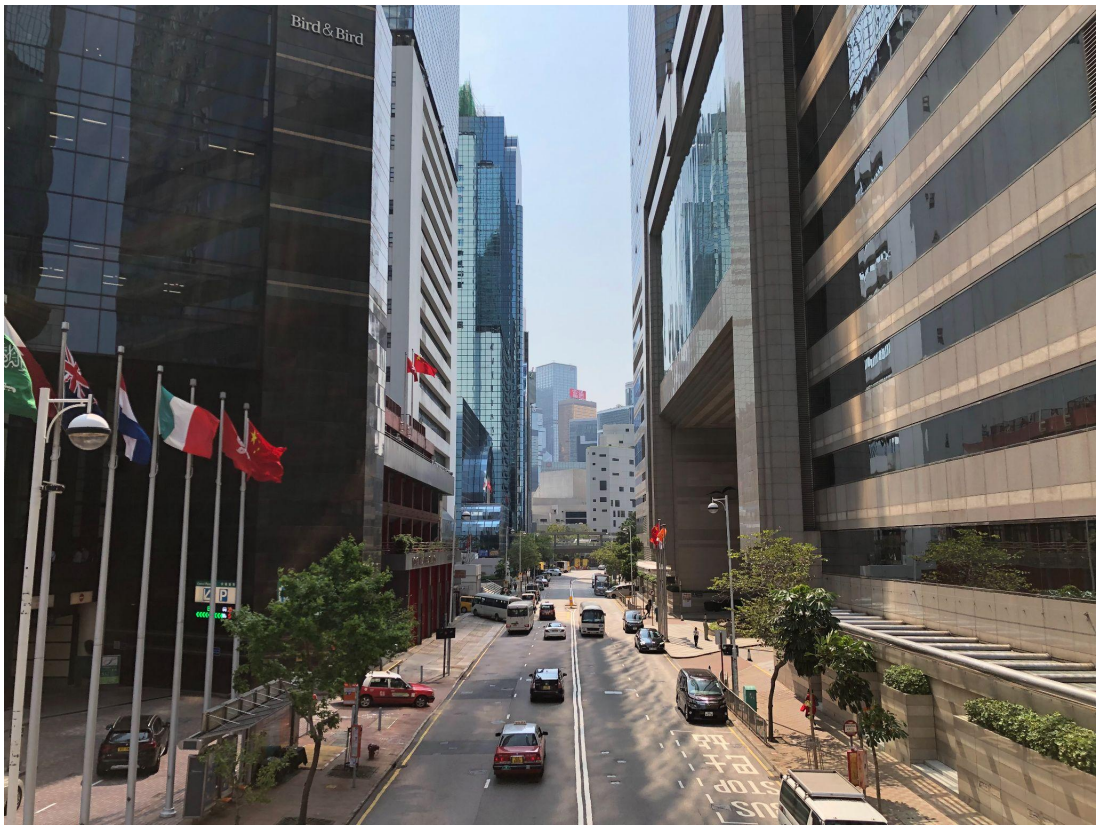

Figure 3.5 *Impermeable street fronts of Wanchai North*
Figure 3.6 *Limited at-grade level crossings for pedestrians*

3.3 Gentrification of Wanchai South

In a way, the series of reclamation have also resulted in a social upgrading process and attracted a new demographic group to Wanchai. Due to the upmarket and elite business environment induced in Wanchai North, a more affluent group of citizens have been brought into the area. Gradually, these developments have begun to spill over to the adjacent Wanchai South, accelerating the gentrification and renewal of the old district.

Lee Tung Street is a typical example of gentrification in Wanchai South. Known as the "Wedding Card Street," it was once lined with tenement buildings home to traditional wedding card printing businesses (**Figure 3.7**). Despite fierce resistance from the public, the entire Lee Tung Street was demolished in 2007 and redeveloped into a luxury shopping and residential zone, renamed "Lee Tung Avenue" (**Figure 3.8**). It led to the displacement of small and family-run businesses as well as long-term grassroots residents (Chen and Szeto, 2015). The redevelopment project not only erased a large part of the local cultural heritage and collective memory but also completely transformed the old district character of Wanchai South.[6]

Figure 3.7 ***Former Lee Tung Street before 2007 demolition***
From *Leetungst* [Photograph], by M. Manske, 2006, Wikimedia Commons, (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leetungst.jpg).

[6] For further information about the Lee Tung Street Renewal Project and its controversy, see: Chen, Y. C., & Szeto, M. M. (2015). The forgotten road of progressive localism: New preservation movement in Hong Kong. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 16(3), 436-453.

Figure 3.8 ***Revamped Lee Tung Avenue***
From [Photograph of Lee Tung Avenue], in "Wan Chai – A Walk through Time," by Lifescape, n.d., (https://lifescape.com.hk/we-build-communities/wan-chai-a-walk-through-time).

The case of Lee Tung Street was only one of the multiple attempts at redeveloping the historical Wanchai South in the past two decades. Ng (2017:644) explained that Wanchai has been undergoing the transformation from a "once poor man's district into an area that is increasingly unaffordable to the local community." The contrasting socio-economic profiles between Wanchai South and Wanchai North have accentuated the social disparity within Wanchai district as a whole, causing a struggle over space by the local community. Located adjacent to each other, the old and new identities coexist, yet the old is under the threat of being displaced by the new due to their disparities in political and economic power.

In Chapter 1.4, it was mentioned that land reclamation might be a way to avoid directly intervening with existing communities the way urban renewal or resumption would, by focusing on developing new land. However, the gentrification of Wanchai South has proved that urban and cultural disruptions induced in adjacent neighbourhoods are nonetheless prevalent as an indirect consequence of land reclamation.

3.4 Disconnection from the Harbour

Lastly, land reclamation is a direct intervention that transforms people's relationship with the water. Over the years, the original coastline of Wanchai has been shifted up north by approximately 1.2 kilometres (Yu, 2013). Certainly, connectivity to the water is not only determined by distance. The degree of publicness along the waterfront is also an important factor. **Figure 3.9** shows that residential land use predominated in the waterfront area in the early 20th century. The houses enjoyed a view of the harbour and the waterfront was easily accessible by people.

Figure 3.9 ***Johnston Road in 1920 with the typical Chinese-style tenement buildings facing the new waterfront***
From *Praya East & Tin Lok Lane looking East* [Photograph], by Herostratus, n.d., Gwulo, (https://gwulo.com/atom/32803).

However, such connectedness to the water is no longer enjoyed by the Wanchai residential cluster after the 1960s. As discussed in Chapter 2, the reclamation of Wanchai North was dominated by commercial high rises and complexes. The land has been segregated into several parcels dominated by real estate magnates of Hong Kong, for instance, Sun Hung Kai Centre (the corporate headquarters of the property developer) and Grand Hyatt Hotel. Although some of these buildings are linked by the means of footbridges, this does not change the fact that public connections from inland to the harbour have become corporate spaces.

According to Grydehoj (2015:109), historical land reclamation has limited present-day claims to a public waterfront since conception. Referencing the "accumulation by dispossession" concept by David Harvey, Grydehoj (2015:97) explained that land reclamation is a means of transforming "a fluid and abstract resource for future public good into a solid and static elite private asset." Therefore, neither the newly created land nor the built landscape above it can ever be democratised or be truly public, for the act of reclamation is by default a privatisation of the public resource. Following this logic, what contributes to the sense of disconnect from the harbour is not only measured in terms of distance but also lies in the private, corporate ownership of space.

In this chapter, it was first discussed the dual identities of Wanchai North and Wanchai South, the former being “artificially” conceived entirely as a tabula rasa and the latter growing more or less “naturally” over time. Then, it was discussed how the physical and social upgrading of Wanchai North ultimately became a propellent for transformations in historical Wanchai South, such as gentrification and a sense of disconnection between the inland and the Harbour.

Conclusion

As a former colonial port city, much of Hong Kong's urban development has been situated along the coast and more so on reclaimed land. Nonetheless, carrying out land reclamation is highly controversial, especially in recent decades. For the most part, disputes come from taxpayers regarding the high costs incurred and from environmental groups which condemn the irreparable damage posed to the marine environment. To add to the existing discussions, the purpose of this research was to look at the impacts of land reclamation from the urban point of view. What are the urban and social transformations brought about by reclamation over time? How does this land creation strategy affect old communities adjacent to the new developments? By asking these questions, this research aimed to provide an additional perspective supported by historical evidence to help evaluate the legitimacy of future reclamation plans for Hong Kong.

Wanchai was the district chosen to conduct the case study because it was one of the earliest settlements to undergo urban development as well as extensive reclamation during the colonial period, hence a representative example of historical reclamation in Hong Kong. During the research process, it was further found that the differentiation between Wanchai North and Wanchai South could be useful for understanding the contrasts between "artificial" and "natural" development. Therefore, conducting a comparative analysis within Wanchai was a good choice for the purpose of this research.

In this paper, it was identified that each phase of reclamation in Wanchai was to create land for different reasons: to provide housing, to introduce commercial development, to alleviate traffic congestion, etc. Consequently, the overall morphology of Wanchai from the inland towards the harbour appears to transition from clusters of residential and mixed-use buildings to large private business complexes, to vehicular roads at the waterfront. This contributed to a sense of disconnection from the harbour.

Moreover, this paper discussed the dichotomy between the "artificial" Wanchai North and the "natural" Wanchai South. The former was entirely reclaimed and developed like a tabula rasa, whereas the latter has undergone historical growth over time. This difference contributes to the formation of their respective district identities. This paper showed how the new Wanchai North developments did not fit in with that the adjoining Wanchai South in terms of urban activities and streetscapes. The upmarket environment brought into Wanchai began to spill over to Wanchai South, accelerating its social upgrading process. To conclude, this paper showed how land reclamation has been a propellant behind urban renewal and gentrification in Wanchai South. Land reclamation does not only concern the planning of new land, the buildings and infrastructures that come with it; it will also affect the district identity and social status of adjoining neighbourhoods.

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