

High-density living in Hong Kong

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The urban area of Hong Kong has the highest population and employment density in the world. Measured at block level, some areas may have population densities of more than 400,000 people per square kilometre. As of 2011, there are seven million people for its 1,068 square kilometres (412 square miles) of land. However, more than 75 per cent of this land comprises no-built-up areas. The high concentration of people in just a few square kilometres is due partly to the fact that new town development did not take place until well into the 1970s and therefore most of the population (which had experienced a post-war boom in the 1950s) had to be accommodated in the main

urban area along the waterfront of the Victoria Harbour on Hong Kong Island. The high price of land in Hong Kong also contributes to its high-density development. Those on low and middle incomes, and even some on high incomes, can only afford to live in high-rise buildings. Despite its very high density, Hong Kong is still a very livable city compared to other large cities in the world.

There is a myth that high population density is undesirable and often associated with social pathologies and problems. However, only studies on animals have proven this association. There is little correlation between density and social pathology – deviant behaviour, crime and suicide – when other socioeconomic variables are considered. There are many factors affecting social pathology in which density is just one. Other factors such as socioeconomic background, educational background and the health of individuals are more important variables than density in explaining social pathology.

It is important here to distinguish between ‘density’ and ‘crowding’. While ‘density’ is used to refer to the physical limitation of space, ‘crowding’ is the

actual psychological perception of the limitation of space. Social pathology is caused by the stress and social conflict of crowding, but high density does not necessarily lead to a perception of crowding or stress.

Robert Mitchell found that stress in Hong Kong may be more likely due to inadequate income or forced social interaction between non-relatives in shared flats than density itself.

Each individual may perceive crowding differently. For example, given a fixed density environment, individuals who once lived in a denser environment will perceive it to be less crowded than those who did not. Additionally, studies have shown that Asians and Chinese were found to have a high adaptation and tolerance to crowding. In Hong Kong itself, many studies have shown that a substantial proportion of the urban population did not see high density as a problem, many even preferred the presence of a large number of people. The tolerance of Hong Kong people towards high densities could also be explained by their previous living environments, since many residents are refugees and may have experienced worse living conditions prior to moving to Hong Kong.

High density has many advantages. It can create more efficient land use and is more cost-effective in providing public services and facilities. In terms of transportation, Hong Kong has one of the lowest energy consumption per capita in the world. High density maximises the effectiveness of public transport while minimising the distance between the sites of day-to-day activities. It also reduces energy and infrastructure costs.

The negative effects of density can be mitigated by the design, layout, open spaces, traffic and community facilities of both external and personal spaces. For external space, with a fixed density, people will have a sensation of less crowdedness if there is more open space, less traffic congestion and more community facilities.

Since the 1980s, Hong Kong has emerged as a major commercial and financial centre in Asia. Office space in Central district, for example, has increased through new buildings on reclaimed land and the re-development of old buildings into new office blocks.

Although there is an increase in employment density, there is no major increase in crowding. This can be attributed to better planning and density management. The government has encouraged the construction of public amenities in exchange for increased floor space in new buildings by granting developers a 'bonus plot ratio'. Thus many new buildings in Central have been designed to include public spaces or public passageways. Central is interconnected by a large and sophisticated pedestrian system that separates pedestrians from vehicle traffic, making travelling from one place to another more comfortable and less stressful.

The planning and development of new towns has also improved the high-rise living environments of more than 50 per cent of the people living there. With a density slightly less than that of the old urban areas in Hong Kong Island or Kowloon, the more spacious layout between buildings and well-planned open spaces have made such high-density environments a far better place to live.

Over the past few years, Hong Kong has developed the following planning, design and management measures to continue improving its high-rise living environments:

External environment of buildings

- 1) Better planning and design so that buildings are positioned further apart and have more open space;
- 2) Improved transport management by prioritising the development of mass transit and focusing on pedestrian movement in order to keep traffic congestion in check;
- 3) Creation of space by fully utilising the already-existing areas within buildings, such as roof tops and podiums, and transforming them into community and recreational spaces;
- 4) A trend towards large-scale property developments, which allows a greater consolidation of space in order to provide community facilities and ease of movement between locales;
- 5) The use of new building technology and materials to break the monotony of a district, while outdoor escalators facilitate the movement of pedestrians; and
- 6) Public education campaigns to encourage people to contribute to maintaining a clean environment.

Interior environment of buildings

- 1) Improved building management and maintenance to create a clean and safe living environment;
- 2) New building design, large lobby spaces in large-scale property developments have provided a greater sense of openness in interior building environments; and
- 3) Escalators and express lifts to help people move more quickly around buildings.

Through better planning, design and management of the built environment, Hong Kong demonstrates how a large population can be accommodated in a small area without impairing quality of life. Better planning, design and management can reduce the impact of high density, making the living and working environment less crowded. Citizens also have to be educated to know how to behave in public spaces in high-density areas. Planners, architects, urban managers, communities and citizens all have to work together to make high-density living livable. Experience in Hong Kong shows that high density, if better planned and managed, can be an interesting and pleasant environment. Though an extreme case, Hong Kong can provide lessons for cities worldwide. As the world's population expands and continually urbanises, a sustainable means of accommodating the growing urban population in a livable manner will be needed.

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