

Future Proofing Hong Kong:

From Aspiration to Implementation

April 2025



COVER: AI generated future Hong Kong

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About the Urban Land Institute

The Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organisation comprising more than 48,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute's mission of shaping the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. ULI's interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific regions, with members in 84 countries.

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Executive Summary

BREAKING DOWN SILOS: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO URBAN DEVELOPMENT

ULI and Arup hosted a workshop on 29 November and 6 December 2024. Our goal was to address a fundamental challenge in urban development: the tendency for expertise and decision-making to remain isolated within professional silos. By bringing together around 40 participants from diverse fields—including developers, financiers, engineers, designers and academics.—we created an environment where cross-disciplinary innovation could flourish. The two-day format, focused on real sites in San Tin and Sham Shui Po, allowed participants to move from theoretical discussions to practical solutions.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR INTEGRATED THINKING

Future-proofing Hong Kong's built environment requires us to move beyond treating sustainability, social impact, nature, and economic value as separate challenges. Workshop discussions revealed how integrated approaches can unlock overlooked opportunities—preparing assets for increasingly complex regulations while enhancing their appeal to tenants and investors, enabling operational efficiencies while strengthening community resilience, and creating distinctive spaces that are better positioned for the future of urban development.

BARRIERS AND BREAKTHROUGHS

Through structured exercises and facilitated discussions, participants identified key barriers to integrated urban planning: regulatory frameworks designed for single-purpose solutions, traditional financing models that struggle to value multiple benefits, and organisational structures that reinforce siloed thinking. The workshop generated innovative approaches and practical solutions to overcome these challenges, from new models of public-private-collaboration to creative financing mechanisms that capture multiple value streams.

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS FOR DECISION-MAKERS

This report synthesises key learnings from the workshop into practical recommendations for industry leaders. The solutions developed for San Tin and Sham Shui Po demonstrate how integrated approaches can be applied to both new development and urban regeneration. By understanding these insights, decision-makers can better position their organisations to create value while contributing to a more resilient and sustainable Hong Kong.



“It was marvellous to witness the well-rounded proposals from various teams after two days of hard work. The program is a testament to how cross-sector collaboration can lead to highly innovative solutions that benefit both people and planet. I am delighted that Arup can provide this kind of platform together with ULI”

Michael Kwok, Arup



Photo: © Alex Lau (LT)/Arup

Introduction

Workshop Objectives

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

We recognised that urban design and planning expertise has often been siloed, limiting collaboration and innovation. To address this, we aimed to promote a more holistic approach to urban development.

CREATING CONNECTIONS

The workshop provided a valuable opportunity for our multidisciplinary community to come together. By facilitating discussions among various stakeholders, we aimed to enhance collaboration and find effective ways to engage in meaningful conversations about urban planning. Together, we can foster a more integrated approach to urban development that benefits everyone involved.

Workshop Format Overview

PARTICIPANT DIVERSITY

The workshop welcomed around 40 members, including engineers, developers, designers, consultants, asset managers, investors, and academics. This rich mix of expertise created a dynamic environment for collaboration and learning. We had guest speakers, and presentations were purposely kept short so that speakers could join as group facilitators and encourage active discussions and implementation of the presentations into the various group proposals.



Photo: © Alex Lau (LT)/Arup

THEMES AS SILOS

Over the course of two days, we engaged in deep discussions centred around four key themes: climate, people, nature, and economy. By examining these themes, we aimed to break down existing silos and encourage holistic thinking in urban design.

A special thank you to our presenters from Arup, City University of Hong Kong, Chinese University of Hong Kong, JLL, The Nature Conservancy, Nuveen, and University of Hong Kong for sharing their insights on these topics.

CASE STUDY APPLICATION

To ground our discussions in practical examples, we focused on two very different sites: San Tin and Sham Shui Po, each location with its own unique development challenges.

GROUP-SOURCED PROPOSALS

Participants were placed in four groups and were tasked to employ blue-sky thinking to create proposals that would incorporate all the themes into a holistic solution for a specific site.

Climate

Addressing Current and Future Climate Impacts



Over the past 30 years, the Greater Bay Area (GBA) has experienced an accelerated warming trend, with temperatures rising by 1.6°C—higher than the global average increase of 1.1°C. This rise can be attributed to several factors, including urbanisation, industrial activities, and changes in land use. The increased warming has resulted in a higher frequency of extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, heavy rainfall, stronger winds, and elevated storm surges. More intense short-term precipitation will challenge water resource management and drainage systems, while heatwaves in urban areas with high humidity pose significant health risks. Most economic losses from natural disasters are linked to storm-related events, particularly tropical cyclones (typhoons).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Revise design standards** to include future climate and weather considerations for new projects. Conduct early risk assessments of environmental impacts, such as using flood maps when evaluating potential locations. Use assessment results to inform and revise design standards for new projects
2. **Consider development areas from a district-wide perspective** rather than focusing on individual buildings, and align development goals with long-term objectives instead of short-term gains, shifting from a cost-driven or lowest-price bidding approach to more comprehensive evaluations of climate impact.
3. **Embrace a regenerative design approach** that enhances environmental and social values alongside economic benefits and connect this with investment products to secure financial support.
4. **Implement a carbon tax and provide incentives**, such as gross floor area concessions for green spaces in buildings. Ensure that climate targets and disclosure requirements are embedded in legislation.
5. **Encourage the private sector to take the lead** in mainstreaming climate risk while aligning the interests of private stakeholders, residents, and the environment.



“I thoroughly enjoyed the past two days. The first day established key concepts about climate, nature, and good societies, creating a solid framework. The second day focused on relatable case studies from Hong Kong neighbourhoods, fostering engaging discussions among diverse professionals—engineers, designers, architects, and developers. This format prompted us to consider the present and envision the future, helping us identify necessary actions for implementation. Overall, it was an inspiring experience, empowering us to make a positive impact on Hong Kong’s future. Thank you!”

Pritya Widiarta, HSBC



People

Creating Inclusive Spaces that Foster Health, Wellbeing and Social Cohesion

This part of the workshop centered on understanding people—who they are and how the built environment can better serve a diverse population. We explored the connections between urban health and density, the significance of designing for active mobility, the importance of accessible green spaces, and the need for gender-responsive and child-friendly urban planning.

Research from the University of Hong Kong using extensive health data from both Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, has demonstrated that the built environment (including density and green space) is closely linked to population health, encompassing physical and mental well-being as well as social connectivity. Urban designs that promote active living, foster a sense of community, and encourage social interactions have been shown to help mitigate various chronic diseases.

In Kowloon East, Hong Kong's most densely populated and economically challenged district, the most vulnerable groups include aging population, low-income women, youth, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Workshops conducted in this area have focused on these groups, aiming to involve them in innovative solutions while equipping them with skills and economic opportunities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Advocate for government incentives** to create inclusive communities that address the needs of diverse groups, including the elderly, children, and people with disabilities.
2. **Explore public/private partnerships**, like the East Kowloon Energizing Office model, to foster collaboration between the private sector and facilitate progress at the district level.
3. **Allocate sufficient time for community engagement** to bridge gaps between implementation and community needs and establish a feedback loop to test and refine projects.
4. **Enhance walkability** by eliminating barriers and providing improved signage to create direct routes for people to reach their destinations.

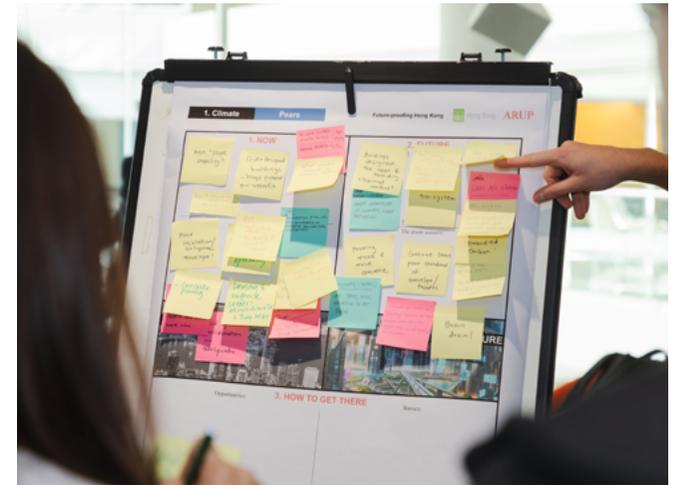


Photo: © Alex Lau (LT)/Arup

Nature

Leveraging Nature-based Solutions to Unlock Multiple Benefits



The estuaries of Hong Kong, where rivers meet the sea, include areas like Lau Fau Shan (part of Northern Metropolis) and consist of mangroves, seagrass, mudflats, and shellfish reefs, providing vital habitat and refuge for a diverse array of wildlife, including birds, fish, invertebrates, mammals, and plants. However, they are vulnerable and face significant threats from pollution and reclamation, receiving minimal protection in Hong Kong.

Nature-based solutions are strategic actions that harness natural processes to tackle challenges such as climate change, food and water scarcity, and disaster risks. In urban areas, green spaces serve as the lungs of cities, reducing pollution while offering recreational opportunities and promoting biodiversity.

The estuaries also act as coastal defenders, protecting shorelines from erosion and storm surges, absorbing substantial amounts of carbon, and supporting marine life. Case studies highlight oyster farming in the mudflats of Pak Nai, which boasts a history spanning over 700 years and is a significant part of Hong Kong's heritage. Beyond serving as a food source, oysters create reefs that improve water quality by filtering pollution from fish farms, contribute to habitats in a network of bays and estuaries that protect our coast, and offer opportunities for ecotourism and regenerative aquaculture.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The private sector and government should **involve nongovernmental organisations and local communities early** in the planning process to gain insights into their perspectives and challenges.
2. Establish **clear standards for eco-tourism** in Hong Kong and consider making the northern metropolis a model for the Greater Bay Area.
3. **Foster private investment** by incorporating climate change projections and principles of restoration ecology into the design of nature-based solutions, sustainable agriculture, and resilient community development.
4. **Create a stronger connection** between high-level strategic planning and tangible activities led by local stakeholders.



“The format was effective, especially with the guest speakers sharing insights between breakout sessions. The discussions with participants from diverse backgrounds were particularly valuable. This workshop was unique as it intentionally mixed different perspectives, fostering creativity and leading to solutions that wouldn't typically emerge from a homogenous group.”

Harry Ha, CBRE

Economy

Embedding Sustainability to Optimise Value Creation



Sustainability is a crucial value driver for tenants and end users. But what factors should we prioritise? Beyond climate resilience and energy and waste management, we must also consider health and wellness, amenities, placemaking, cultural and community experiences, technology, and security. By going beyond mere compliance with regulations, upgrades aimed at enhancing value can meet end-user expectations while increasing net operating income. This approach helps avoid stranded assets, mitigates climate risks, and generates social benefits for the surrounding community.

In the investment landscape, the growing demand for sustainable spaces, coupled with only about 5 percent of buildings in Hong Kong meet the highest sustainability standards, creates significant opportunities for value creation.

While new buildings have great potential for sustainable design, studies indicate that 90 percent of existing buildings in Hong Kong will still be in use by 2050. This underscores the importance of retrofitting to preserve and enhance the value of the existing building stock. Case studies from Seoul, Singapore, Sydney, and Hong Kong demonstrate that retrofits can lead to increased rent, occupancy, valuation, and climate resilience.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop a **straightforward retrofitting rating system** or **minimum operational performance certificate** for buildings and districts. This system should highlight opportunities for investment and value creation.
2. Compile and reference a list of **successful methods from other markets** that can be adapted to Hong Kong with minimal risk.
3. **Propose a clear pathway for collaborative communication** between the private and public sectors, and advocate for enhancements to the Building Inspection Scheme to incorporate various sustainability factors.
4. Promote ongoing **market research to identify emerging “mega trends”** specific to Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area, focusing on changing customer demands and the impact of technology, so that building features can be effectively adapted.



Photo: © Alex Lau (LT)/Arup



“I think the format is really useful, to get people together and collaborate in an environment that doesn’t exist in our industry at the moment. Our team was discussing that if clients were willing and able to mobilise this group of people to create that level of innovation and thinking for their developments in Hong Kong, we could help deliver better outcomes for all.”

Mark Lomas, Gowan Projects

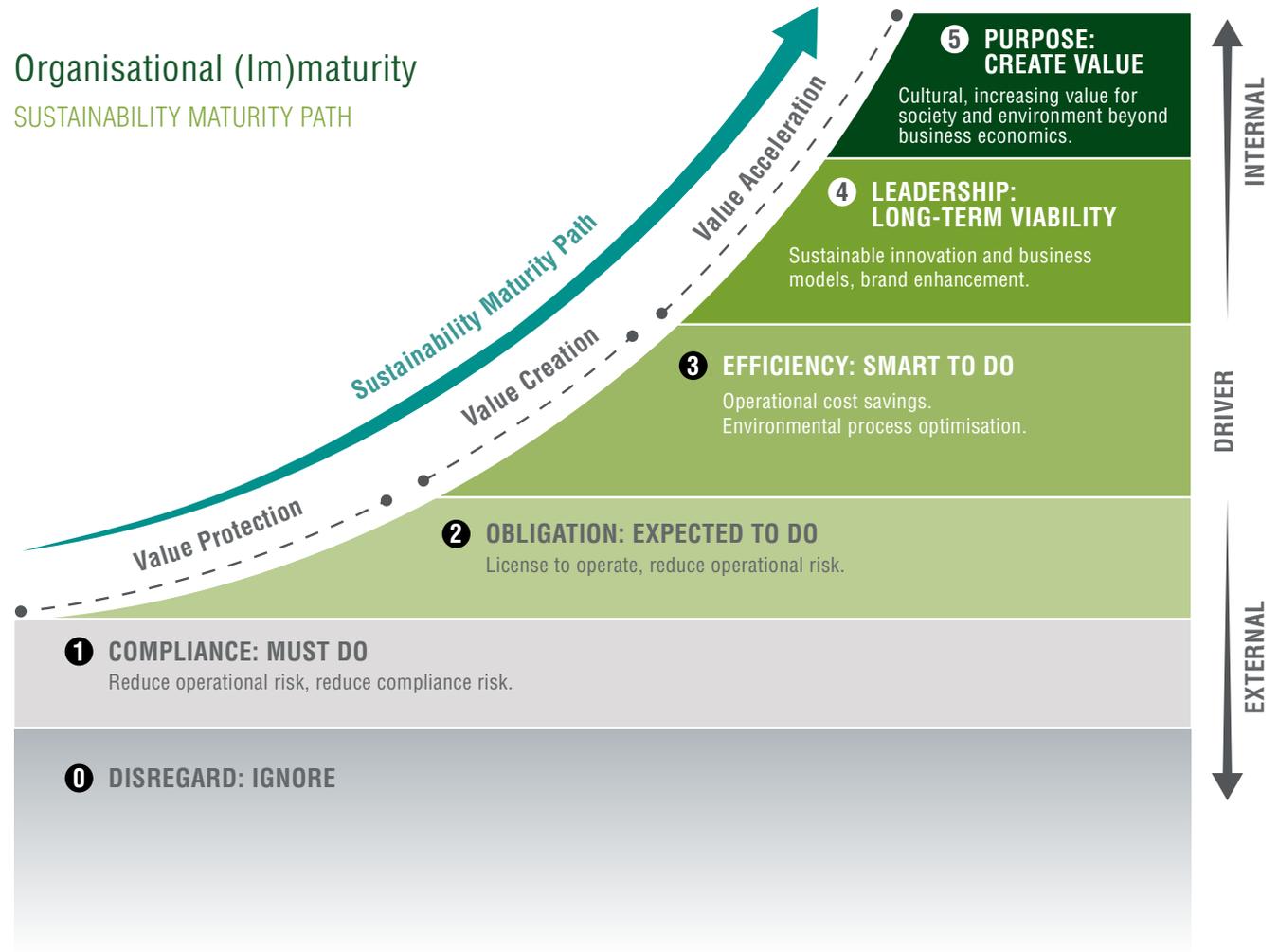
Implementation – Putting It All Together

Imagining Our Preferred Future

We can either continue with “business as usual,” sticking to familiar methods—which is certainly the easiest path—or we can take a moment to envision a preferred future that integrates all the elements we’ve discussed, such as climate, people, nature, and the economy.

On an individual level, we have the opportunity to make choices now that align with our aspirations, paving the way for the transformations and positive outcomes we wish to achieve.

At an organisational level, we can view sustainability practices as a spectrum. On one end, it involves meeting compliance and minimum standards, while at the other end, it means aligning our actions with a broader sense of purpose. Understanding where our organisation stands on this spectrum allows us to identify specific actions that provide all stakeholders with a clear sustainability roadmap tailored to our organisation’s needs.



Source: Sustainability Maturity Path, ©PWC - adoption by Ecochain

Sites: San Tin and Sham Shui Po

ULI aimed for workshop participants to apply their solutions to actual locations in Hong Kong. San Tin and Sham Shui Po were selected for this purpose, as they represent two contrasting environments. San Tin exemplifies a new development area, while Sham Shui Po showcases the challenges of an aging urban core.

	San Tin	Sham Shui Po
Snapshot	<p>How to design and implement a future-proof development in a rural area with significant environmental value.</p>  <p>An aerial view of the wetlands in San Tin, an area that will be redeveloped into the San Tin Technopole by the government. Photo: seasonweb</p>	<p>How to retrofit one of Hong Kong's densest and poorest districts.</p>  <p>Main Street with many stalls in Sham Shui Po. It is one of the poor districts in Hong Kong. Photo: Shutterstock</p>
Location	<p>San Tin is located in the Northern Metropolis, which is a planning area consisting of two district administration areas, including North District and Yuen Long District in the northern New Territories in Hong Kong.</p>	<p>Situated in the northwestern part of the Kowloon Peninsula, Sham Shui Po District is one of the earliest developed and most densely populated administrative districts in Hong Kong.</p>

	San Tin	Sham Shui Po
Population	17,759 (Source: census 2021) Source: https://www.census2021.gov.hk/en/index.html	431,090 (Source: census 2021) Source: https://www.swd.gov.hk/en/pubsvc/district/ssp/ssp-profile/ssppp/
Development area	627 hectares	1,047 hectares
Profile	<p>The earliest significant settlements in Yuen Long can be traced back to the Sung Dynasty. Benefiting from its long history, the district is rich in antiquities and monuments. Many traditional ceremonies and rituals are still observed by the people of Yuen Long. With the development and population growth of Yuen Long town and Tin Shui Wai new town in recent years, the district has transformed into a place of diversity, blending the rural and the urban, the old and the new.</p> <p>Home to Mai Po Nature Reserve and the Hong Kong Wetland Park, Yuen Long is also renowned for its natural scenery and internationally important ecological sites.</p> <p>Source: https://www.had.gov.hk/en/18_districts/my_map_18.htm</p>	<p>Sham Shui Po District was already densely populated back in the 1950s and 1960s. The district has a relatively low household income on average and its elderly population is comparatively large. Many new arrivals choose to reside temporarily or permanently in the district.</p> <p>Sham Shui Po District is probably Hong Kong's earliest industrial and commercial centre. Wholesale and retail businesses of mainly textiles, apparel, piece goods, and nonstaple food are concentrated in Cheung Sha Wan and Lai Chi Kok. With the migration of industrial activities to the Mainland, factories in the district have been changing to commercial, exhibition, and logistics purposes, bringing vitality to the early developed area. Sham Shui Po District is also a distribution centre for computer and electronic goods, and its computer shopping centres are famous to all residents and visitors.</p> <p>Source: https://www.districtcouncils.gov.hk/ssp/english/scenery/highlight_01.html</p>

	San Tin	Sham Shui Po
Government development plans	<p>San Tin Technopole will become a hub for clustered innovation and technology (I&T) development that creates synergy with the Shenzhen I&T Zone. It will also contribute to the development of the South-North dual engine (finance - I&T) for Hong Kong, and become a new community for quality, healthy, and green living.</p> <p>Source: https://www.nm.gov.hk/en/innovation-and-technology-zone</p>	<p>The inauguration of a number of redevelopment projects and the historical building revitalisation plans for the former Lai Chi Kok Hospital, North Kowloon Magistracy, and Mei Ho House will bring new impetus to the district, promoting its tourism, cultural, and creative industries.</p> <p>Source: https://www.districtcouncils.gov.hk/ssp/english/scenery/highlight_01.html#:~:text=Situated%20in%20the%20northwestern%20part,an%20area%20of%20about%201</p>



“I found this activity very inspiring, especially collaborating with other professionals to envision future solutions for our projects and Hong Kong. We also had guest speakers share the latest trends and solutions related to sustainability in climate, people, economy, and culture. Overall, it was a meaningful experience.”

Kim Fung Lai, Link Asset Management



“The format was excellent, especially the multidisciplinary approach. Seeing urban designers sketch in real time was mind-blowing. I appreciated the breakout sessions, which fostered sharing and collaboration. Overall, it was a successful workshop.”

Marine Thomas, The Nature Conservancy

San Tin: Team 1 Vision Slide

“A Climate-Resilient Community”

Dragonfruit

Vision Sheet

Desirable neighbourhood

A climate-resilient community where every neighbourhood is easily connected to

- Nature
- Transport*
- Community
- Economy

Blended, not siloed

Participatory social engagement



Requires new ways of working:

- Regulatory
- Co-ownership model
- Financing models

I&T Sponge City, with tree-lined canals from wetlands, support eco-tourism

Phased implementation by blended neighbourhood clusters

Village / wetland economic partnerships with I&T / TOD

Resi pricing deals for I&T tenants

No hard barriers between neighbourhoods

Community allotments and other shared spaces

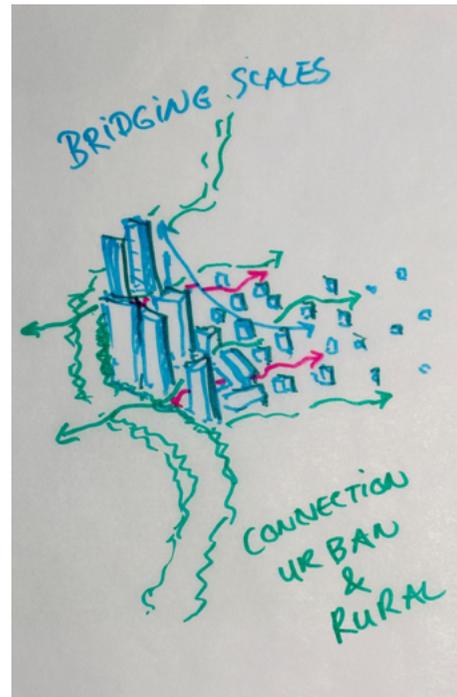
1. **Assess the feasibility of establishing the area as a special economic zone** with tailored regulations, financing arrangements, and tax incentives.
2. **Explore diverse financing and investment models**, including public/private partnerships and long-term investment packages aimed at attracting multinational companies.
3. **Investigate options for preferential residential pricing** and other incentives to encourage local workers to reside in the area.
4. **Integrate wetlands with development** to foster a climate-resilient community.
5. **Create a plan to engage and empower the existing village economy and residents**, ensuring they can both benefit from and contribute to the new community.

San Tin: Team 2 Vision Slide

“Bridging the Past and the Future”

Bridging the Past and the Future

Reimagining San Tin as an **accessible & resilient** tech hub that energises **village** living



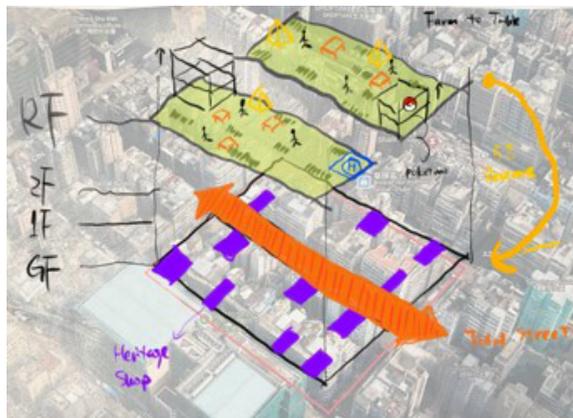
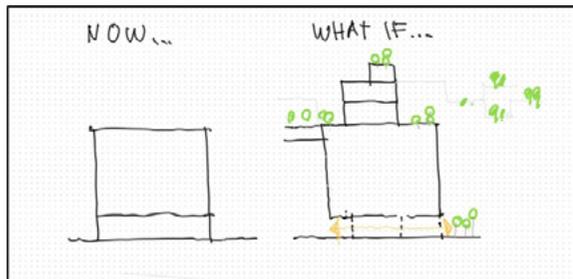
1. **Connect the current identity with a forward-looking vision** for a technology-friendly area, transforming it into an accessible and resilient tech hub that enhances and harmonises with the rural identity, lifestyle, and existing landscape.
2. **Integrate transit-oriented development** with the village's pace of life, creating a cohesive plan that bridges various living and planning models. Focus on accessibility, density, and vibrancy while preserving the beauty and heritage of the rural environment.
3. **Incorporate water management and tourism elements** that complement the area's agricultural functions.
4. **Develop an emotional framework for the neighborhood** that emphasises its beauty and cultural richness.
5. **Prioritize ecosystem health** while fostering a vibrant and accessible living environment.

Sham Shui Po: Team 3 Vision Slide

“Self-funded, Sustainable Urban Regeneration”

Revitalise the precinct into a vibrant, green, and walkable hub, enhancing lives while redefining urban sustainability and community value.

Now & Implementation



Future

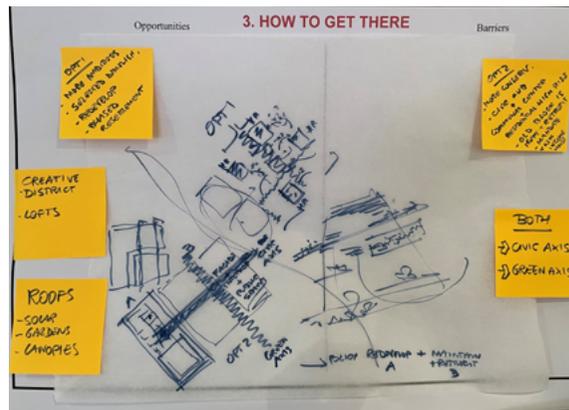
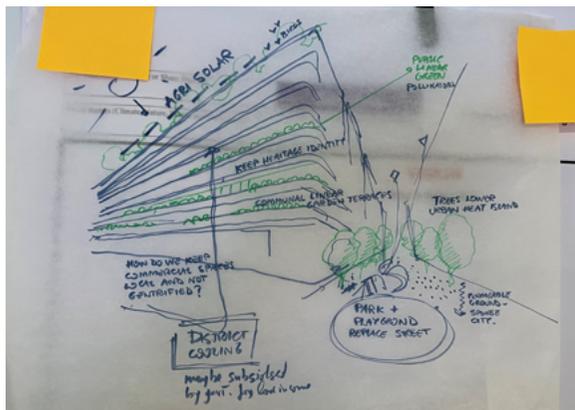
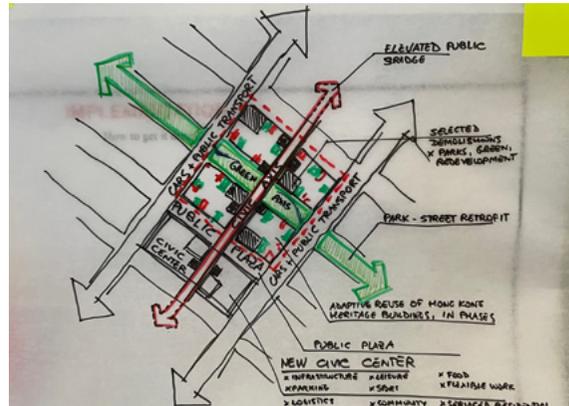


1. **Develop a blueprint for sustainable urban regeneration in Hong Kong** that fosters a genuine sense of place, blending nostalgia with innovation. This approach should balance economic growth with the preservation of the area's unique character and history, allowing locals to reconnect with their memories while attracting new visitors to explore its cultural heritage.
2. **Activate and monetize rooftops** to increase foot traffic and revenue. Encourage vertical expansion through timber-framed structures and install lifts for disabled access. Include features like urban agriculture (e.g., beehives, farm-to-table concepts), health and wellness activities, experiential retail (e.g., live music, vintage collectibles), and drone landing pads.
3. **Leverage the rich history of the area** to monetize ground-floor spaces through specialty shops and diverse food and beverage offerings.
4. **Implement monetization strategies** that enable a 20 percent rent discount for residents, making housing more affordable for locals.
5. **Seek government support** to update outdated regulations regarding zoning, gross floor area, and height restrictions.

Sham Shui Po: Team 4 Vision Slide

“Sham Shui Po + Climate + People + Economy”

Vision: Revitalising Sham Shui Po into an urban oasis for its current residents and businesses while transforming it into a creative destination for Hong Kong residents and tourists. Maintaining its historical character through preservation of heritage building facades while renovating interiors to create more green public spaces and cool desirable creative spaces. Leveraging the latest circular economy methodologies and smart-city technologies.



1. **Revitalise the neighborhood** by blending modern development with the rich history and strong sense of community that defines it. Aim to create an urban oasis that honors its historical character while fostering active community involvement.
2. **Explore ways to reintroduce traditional Hong Kong architectural features**, such as “lodges,” to develop shaded and inviting commercial spaces that enhance comfort and accessibility.
3. **Formulate a strategy** to encourage collaboration between the government and private sector, potentially through a public/private partnership model, to drive the project’s success.
4. **Conduct a comprehensive analysis** of the structural integrity of existing buildings to determine which can be preserved and which may need to be replaced.
5. **Investigate the implementation of district cooling systems** and the integration of solar energy solutions to sustainably power the neighborhood.

Call to Action

It's clear that the need for holistic, integrated approaches has never been more pressing. The insights gathered from diverse stakeholders highlight the importance of breaking down silos that have historically impeded collaboration and innovation in urban design.

1. **Embrace Collaboration:** The collaboration among engineers, designers, developers, and community members is essential. By fostering cross-disciplinary partnerships, we can harness a wealth of expertise to tackle complex urban challenges.
2. **Prioritize Inclusivity:** Urban planning must consider the diverse needs of all community members, particularly vulnerable populations. Inclusive design promotes social cohesion and enhances overall community well-being.
3. **Integrate Nature:** Nature-based solutions are not just beneficial for the environment; they also enhance urban resilience and improve quality of life. Protecting and incorporating natural elements into urban spaces should be a top priority.
4. **Focus on Sustainability:** Sustainability is a critical driver of value in urban development. Implementing best practices in sustainability can lead to economic benefits while mitigating climate risks.
5. **Innovate and Adapt:** The proposals generated during the workshop demonstrate a commitment to innovative thinking. We must continue to adapt our strategies to meet evolving challenges and aspirations.
6. **Implement Group Proposals:** Each team has developed actionable proposals tailored to their assigned sites. We urge stakeholders to collaborate in refining and implementing these ideas, ensuring a holistic approach that encompasses climate, social, nature, and economic impacts.
7. **Engage the Community:** Establish robust community engagement processes to gather continuous feedback and ensure that the voices of all residents are heard and considered in future developments.
8. **Advocate for Policy Changes:** To facilitate meaningful urban regeneration, we must advocate for policy changes that support innovative urban design, including zoning reforms and incentives for sustainable practices.
9. **Monitor Progress:** Establish key performance indicators to assess the impact of implemented strategies. Regular monitoring will help us learn from successes and challenges, allowing for adaptive management.

10. **Foster Ongoing Dialogue:** Create platforms for ongoing dialogue among stakeholders, ensuring that the momentum generated during this workshop is sustained and that collaboration continues to flourish.

Together, we have the opportunity to reshape our urban landscapes into resilient, inclusive, and sustainable environments. Let us commit to this vision and work collectively to realize a future that meets the diverse needs of our communities.



“What a fantastic experience! It was inspiring to see imaginative, yet practical solutions developed in such a short time, showcasing Hong Kong's capabilities when constraints are removed. Kudos to ULI for hosting this amazing event! I hope the outcomes are shared with all industry stakeholders and government officials who can help turn these ideas into reality. Hong Kong has the potential to become a world leader in urban regeneration.”

Andrew Macpherson, JLL

Related ULI Resources



- *ULI Net Zero Imperative: Landlord-Tenant Decarbonization Engagement Guide*
- *Resilient Retrofits: Climate Upgrades for Existing Buildings*
- *Nature Positive and Net Zero : The Ecology of Real Estate*
- *Greening Buildings for Healthier People*
- *Insurance on the Rise: Climate Risk, Property Insurance, and Real Estate Investment Decisions*
- *Surge: Coastal Resilience and Real Estate*
- *Senior Housing: A Business Case for Investment in Hong Kong*



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Acknowledgements

Presenters

Mark Cameron

Nuveen

Vincent Cheng

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Dedicated to sustainable development, Arup is a collective of 18,000 designers, advisors and experts working across 140 countries. Founded to strive for humanity and excellence in everything that we do, we collaborate with our clients and partners, using imagination, technology, and rigour to shape a better world.

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