

# Activating Underutilised Urban Open Spaces for Sustainability in Hong Kong



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# About ULI

**THE URBAN LAND INSTITUTE** is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 45,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the 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 the Asia Pacific regions, with members in 80 countries.

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# About ULI TAPs

**A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL (TAP)** brings the expertise of the ULI membership and the real estate community together to collaborate to find solutions for complex land use, development, and redevelopment projects. TAPs are part of the ULI Advisory Services programme and are run by local chapters of the organization. Over intensive working sessions, experts address key questions about a specific development issue or

policy barrier within a defined geographic area. Panelists often tour the study area, meet with stakeholders, and collaborate to produce an initial report of findings. The process may vary depending on the nature of the project and the issues to address. The objective is to provide a solution and a roadmap for success.

# Technical Assistance Panel

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# Introduction

**IN MARCH 2021**, Bank of America (BoA) Charitable Foundation awarded ULI Hong Kong sponsorship to identify and map underutilised spaces in the city which would benefit from being upgraded in a sustainable manner. The project also called for BoA employees, ULI members and local community groups to raise public awareness on greening Hong Kong while sharing best practices and tracking progress on a continuing basis.

The Project Team (see below) decided that the northwest of Hong Kong Island (basically from Kennedy Town to Taikoo Place) would be a good focus area and agreed that 10 underutilised spaces should be recommended as helpful case studies.

The team also noted that while there were two main land owners likely to be identified (the government and the private sector), it might also be possible to highlight a “demonstration” site in private ownership which could include key greening/urban farming and resilience/sustainability measures. This could be publicized to Hong Kong residents (by promotional activities, workshops, etc.), thereby ensuring wider public understanding of the importance of such measures and, hopefully, increased demand for the better use of such sites.

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The following activities also have been, or are being, carried out to fulfil the study:

- Underutilised urban open spaces in the north west of Hong Kong Island were mapped and 10 required sites were identified, along with ideas regarding their potential greening and activation; for this stage two, teams of students were recruited from Hong Kong’s leading universities along with members of Hong Kong ULI’s Young Leaders Group.
- Workshops involving community groups, experts, and ULI members were held to analyse and discuss the underutilised spaces discovered and to draft the background and potential value of the spaces to the local community.
- A technical assistance panel was held to identify policy and solutions to accelerate greening, mitigate urban heat island impact, and reduce the carbon footprint.
- Experts were convened to address the study topics and to produce proposals for policy, funding, and management/operation strategies to improve the 10 spaces identified.
- A toolkit was created to help communities and private-sector owners to identify and implement strategies for underutilised green spaces.
- An engagement campaign is being created and implemented to raise public awareness and adoption of the TAP and Toolkit reports.
- Analysis of the 10 originally identified underutilised spaces will result in selection of three spaces to showcase potential strategies, raise funds, and deliver impacts.
- Work is being done to elevate the business and health benefits delivered by this type of study.

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## Project Team

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# Alley of Yik Yam Street, Happy Valley

## Zoning: Residential (Group A)

**THIS ALLEY SITE IN HAPPY VALLEY** is an appealing project in a number of ways. First, it has historical significance. The lane was used for many years as a pathway for racehorses to parade from former nearby stables to Happy Valley Racecourse, generating a high profile that would create traction with the media and the community. Second, its connection to the Jockey Club suggests a potential sponsor to finance enhancements.

Comprising a sloping alley about 30 metres long by five metres wide, the passageway currently has limited shop frontage and serves mainly as a path for local pedestrians to access public

transport facilities on the nearby main road. It has both “fast” and “slow” lanes (i.e., it consists of a ramp flanked by flights of steps on either side).

The surrounding area consists mostly of mid-market residential properties and is not especially vibrant, though it does see significant numbers of visitors, especially on race days. It is located close to the Hong Kong Sanatorium (a hospital) and, of course, the racetrack. A park is situated across the main road at the south end of the racecourse.







## Suggested Activation

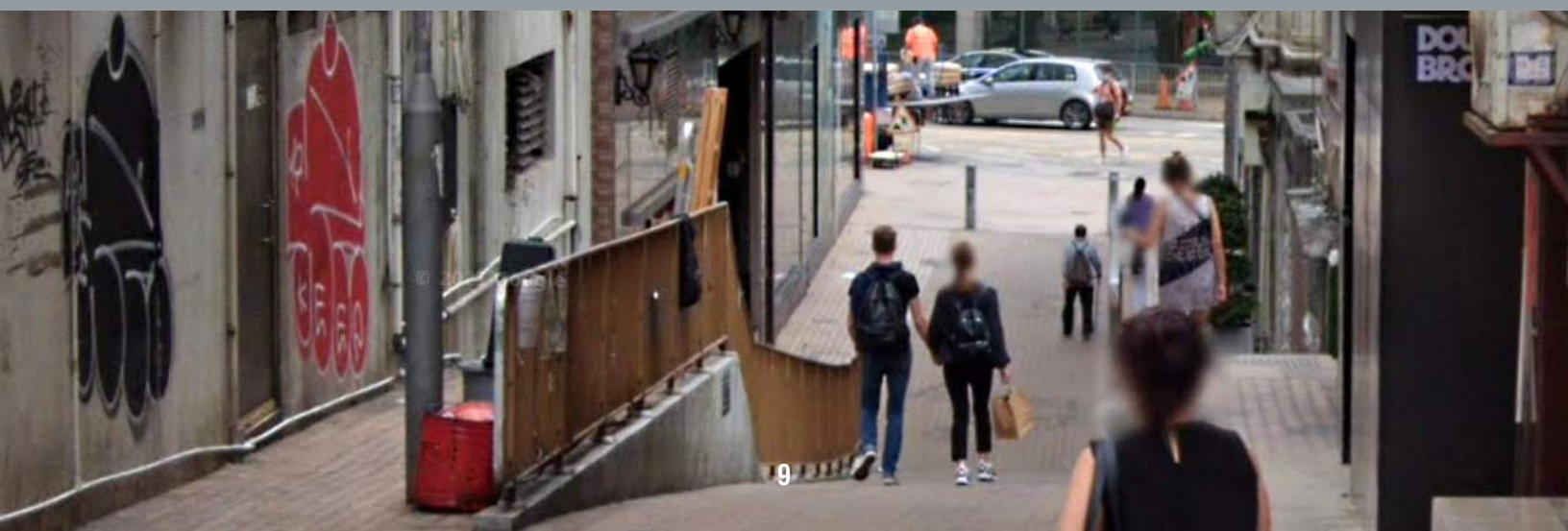
The most obvious activation strategy would be to leverage the alley's historical connection to the racecourse, creating a kind of gateway to Happy Valley. With this in mind:

- While a few shops and cafés front onto the lane, the alley sidewalks are mostly either left blank or used for posting flyers. The environment could therefore be improved easily by using them to host a series of equine-themed murals.
- The sloping “fast lane” ramp (formerly used by the horses) seems adequate to cater to the current pedestrian flow. The “slow” lanes to either side might therefore be used to place plants, furniture, and other features, again adopting an equine theme.
- Pop-up shops or stalls could be opened along both sides of the alley to sell art products, including ceramics and toys. Flower stalls might also be an option, leveraging the proximity of the hospital to boost sales.

- Given that the horses used to walk from the alleyway all the way to the south end of the racetrack, the horse parade theme could be continued by reconstituting the entire parade route, crossing the main road into the adjacent park and extending all the way to the racetrack boundary. Educational/historical storyboards could possibly be posted along the way.

## Noteworthy Issues

Activating the alley might be difficult because it depends on the goodwill of the existing private landlords and businesses along the lane, which may not all agree.







# Corner outside Times Square, Causeway Bay

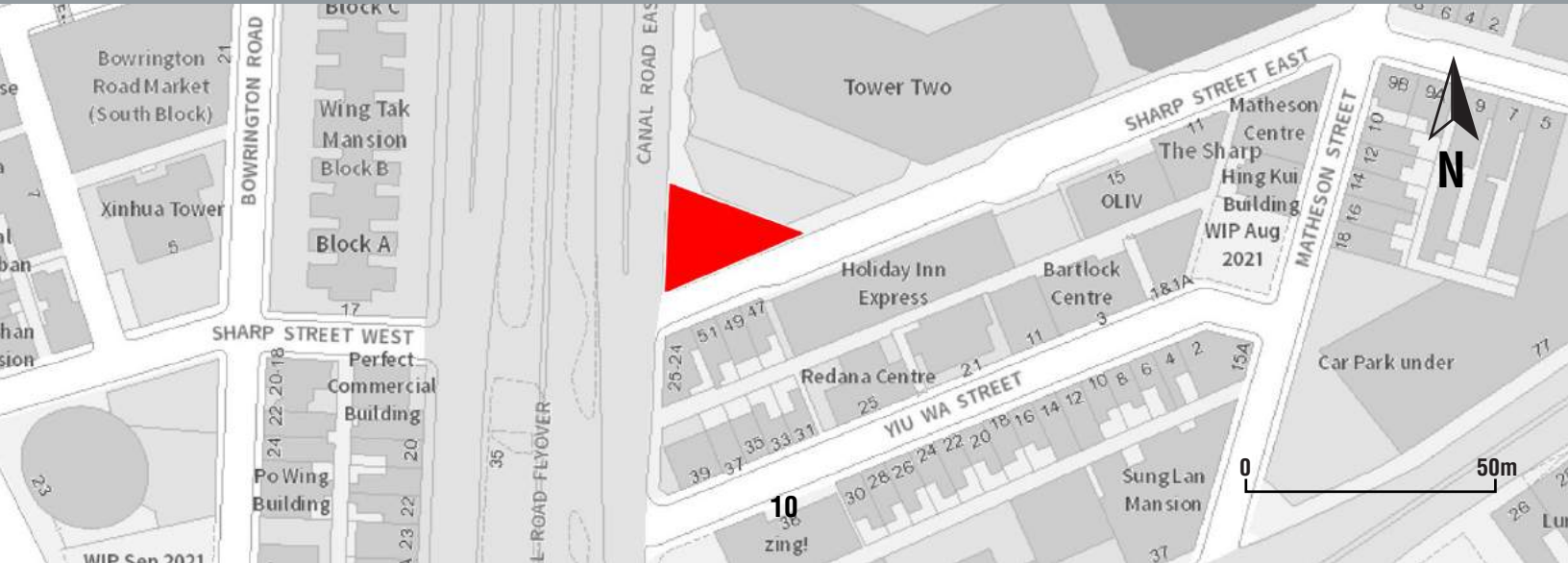
## Zoning: Commercial (2)

**HONG KONG HAS MANY SPACES** in or near its busiest retail and business districts that feature arbitrary triangular spaces like this one. The spaces have little to offer in terms of public utility, but they have high potential because of their prime locations. This privately owned space, located on a street corner at the back end of Times Square in Causeway Bay, therefore offers scope as a template for activation.

The site offers both pros and cons. On the one hand, the site boasts a prime location one block from Russell Street, which enjoys massive footfall (especially on weekends) and until recently charged the highest retail rents in the world.

It also has a diverse range of users, many of whom are a younger demographic.

On the other hand, the space is problematic in many ways. Offering neither retail frontage nor options to cross Canal Street to reach public transport and retail facilities on the other side, the immediate area is essentially a dead zone. Large numbers of vehicles also pass by the site, generating significant pollution and noise. One panel member called it “a dark, horrible, noisy corner of the urban environment”.







## Suggested Activation

That said, one advantage of the site's long list of negatives is that they effectively set a low bar, creating significant scope for improvement if the area can be isolated from the road traffic to create an oasis sheltered from the surrounding turmoil. With this in mind:

- The large blank wall at the rear could be used to create a focal point, probably in the shape of a water feature. This would cool the air, reduce noise, remove particulate pollution, and create a backdrop for activities.
- The site could be reinvented as an event space for performances, buskers, and artists. It might also feature pop-up food stalls. A removable stage and/or gantry could be installed, perhaps on weekends when crowds are at their peak.
- Creating an effective way to screen the site from road traffic would be essential. A few trees already planted on the Canal Road side go some way toward achieving this goal, but more

screening is needed. Removable planters containing more bushes or trees could be installed. In addition, a series of canvas sail screens could be set up around the perimeter to further wall off the road traffic.

- Seating and shaded areas placed around the stage area would invite people to linger.
- On-site storage in the form of cabinets or lockers could be installed along the back wall to keep the various enabling equipment.

## Noteworthy Issues

Obtaining permission from the developer, the local authorities, or both to use the site may be difficult owing to problems encountered historically when nearby open spaces have been used for similar types of public activities.







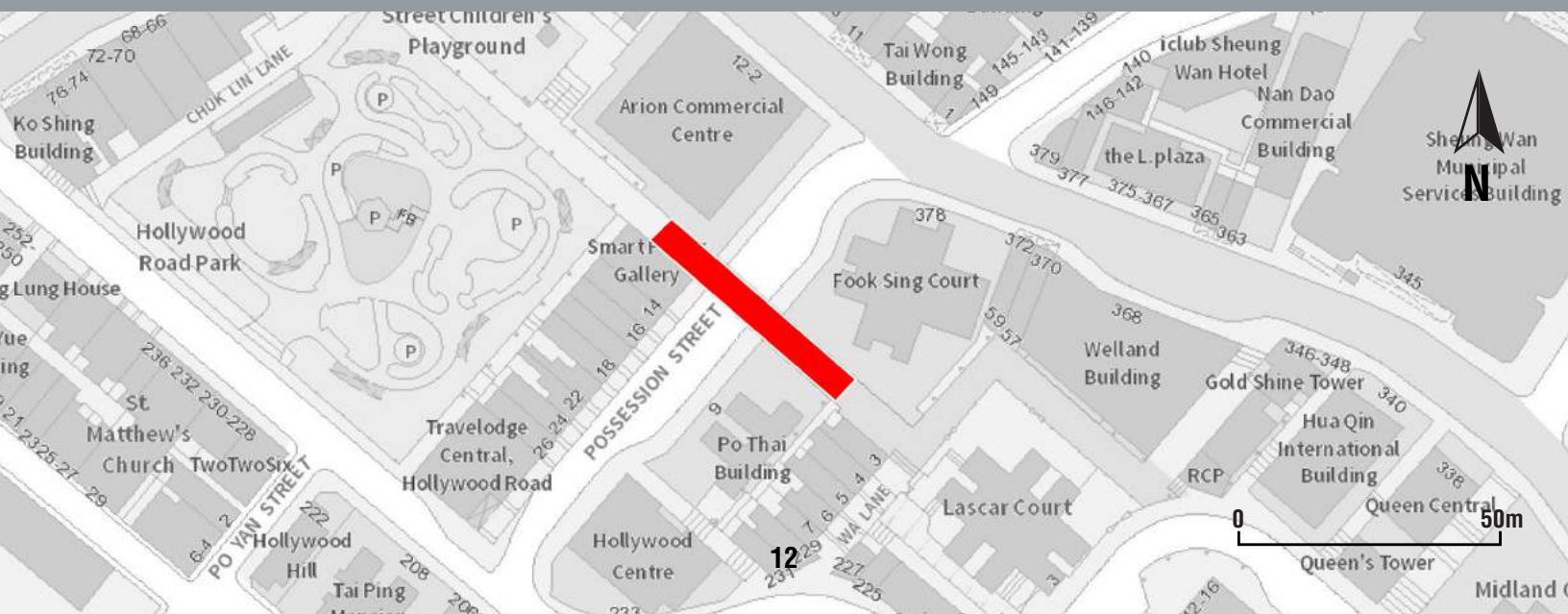
# Footbridge with Dark Underspace, Possession Street, Sheung Wan

Zoning: Residential (Group A) (8)

**THIS GOVERNMENT-OWNED SITE** consists of two parts: a long footbridge connecting a residential neighbourhood to a local park and a space under the same footbridge at a point where it crosses a busy road. Both are fairly common typologies in Hong Kong.

While the area has some commercial property, it is mainly an established residential district. The footbridge spans a distance of about 100 metres and provides access from an area of mainly public housing directly to Hollywood Road Park without requiring pedestrians to descend to street level.

The bridge's existence is not widely known, partly because access from the housing estate side is difficult to locate. But the passageway has good ventilation and plenty of light and is also very fluid, with little indication for users that they are crossing a bridge. Currently, the space is devoid of any enhancements, but there is considerable potential to create a mini-Highline-type facility (in the manner of the famous elevated New York City park).





### Suggested Footbridge Activation

- Develop it as a community living room and space where locals could participate and build a sense of ownership.
- Create urban farming facilities.
- Install a lighting system.
- Install street art and benches along the length of the bridge. These could possibly adopt a light/dark theme, reflecting the contrast between the upper and lower sites.

The underspace, meanwhile, is currently a dark and uninviting area of about 13 metres by five metres located directly below the footbridge as it passes over Possession Street. Despite its claustrophobic nature, however, the site has interesting, somewhat sculptural, proportions. It features a high ceiling, graffitied walls, and a single access point from the street. Given its current underworld feel, there is potential for a dramatic transformation.

Dubbed by panel members the “mushroom space”, it is currently occupied mainly by a fenced-off area used to store equipment for municipal workers. A public-use lift provides direct connectivity from street level to the footbridge above.

### Suggested Underspace Activation

- Create additional garden-oriented facilities that could be rented cheaply by local residents, while also embracing the underworld theme. The nature of the space dictates a need to be fitted with artificial lights, racks for holding cultivated vegetation, and a hydroponic watering system. Given the available height, facilities could possibly be installed on a multilevel basis.
- Secure sponsorship from nearby businesses that could be used to buy equipment to fit out the space and also hire a caretaker who could open it and lock up every day.
- Alternatively, transform the space into one or more “quiet rooms” programmed to help people escape the stress and energy of downtown Hong Kong.
- A further idea: install a rock-climbing wall for recreational purposes.

### Noteworthy Issues

There may be practical difficulties in implementation because the spaces may fall under the jurisdiction of several different government departments.





# Gap Site on Ventris Road, Happy Valley

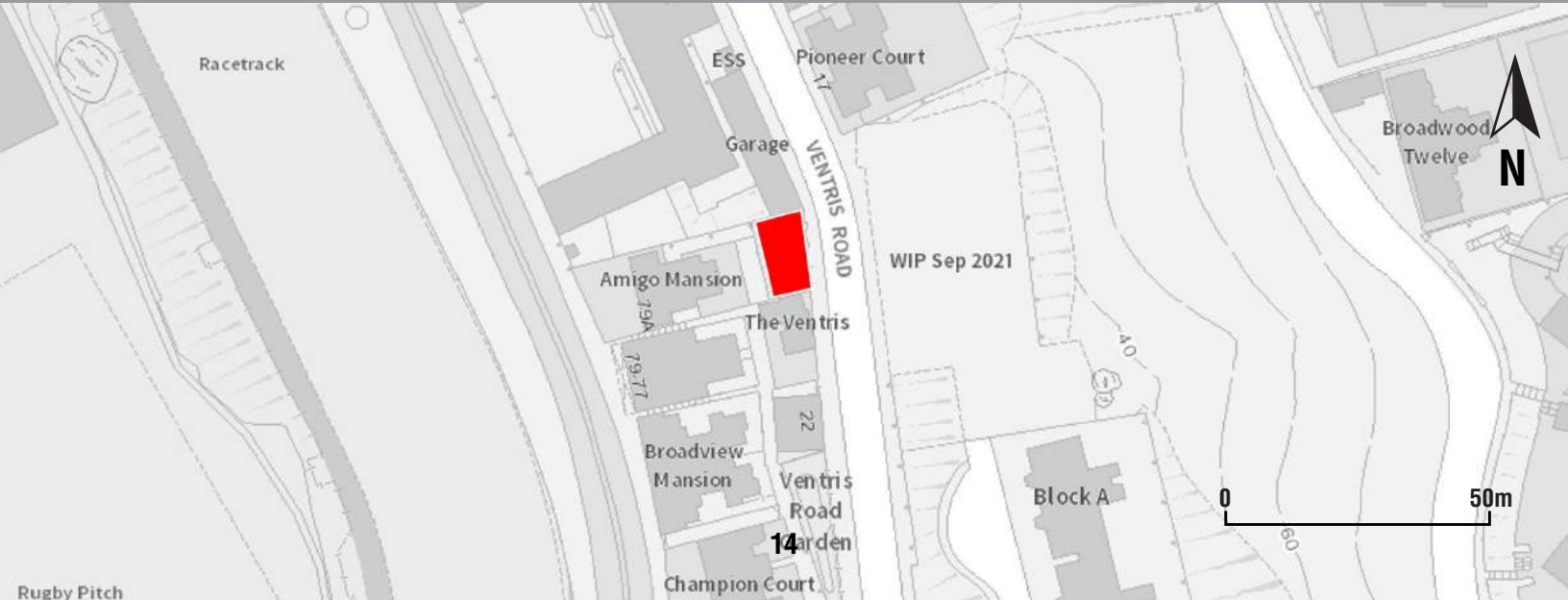
## Zoning: Residential (Group A)

**GAP SITES LIKE THIS PLOT** in upmarket Happy Valley are surprisingly common in Hong Kong's high-end neighbourhoods. Often owned by generations of the same family, they can remain in a state of neglect for many years even as expensive residential projects are built around them. The site therefore represents another typology where a precedent for temporary activation—pending eventual development of the plot—could have wider application.

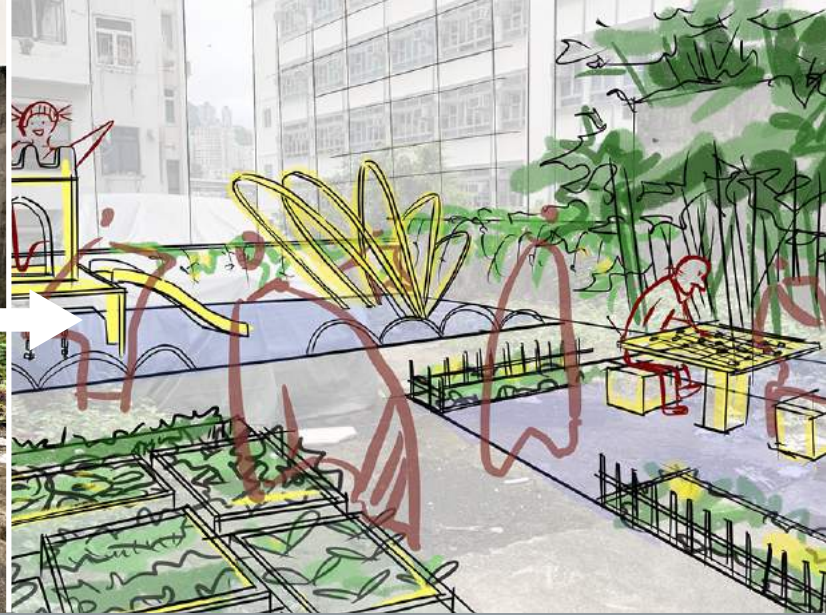
Consisting of a space about 123 square metres, the site is privately owned, although the owner's identity is

unknown given that no transfer of title has been registered since its last conveyance some 90 years ago (again, not uncommon in Hong Kong). Most likely, however, it is still held by the same family.

The local area is a middle/upper-class community that is leafy and lightly trafficked. Opinions about population density vary and require further study. A secondary school is located next door and a senior housing project is under construction nearby.







## Suggested Activation

The advantage of working with a privately owned site (assuming the owner is willing to cooperate) is that the bureaucratic hurdles commonly associated with government properties can be avoided. Greater flexibility, especially in terms of change in use, is another key benefit.

The approach suggested in this case is to leverage the neighbourhood's widely varying demographic to bring different generations together in one location. Instead of a one-off space, the site could be used as an events-focused anchor connecting the nearby school and senior living facility. Over the longer term, it might also serve as a hub for the greater community, potentially in conjunction with other vacant spaces in the area. In particular,

- Using a phased approach, the site could be used initially to hold pop-up events featuring a roster of themes that rotate over time, ranging from health care to food markets to gardening to the arts. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and retail brands could be invited to participate. Any infrastructure involved would be temporary and easily removable.
- A direct physical connection could be created between the site and the senior living complex next door. Potentially, the same connection could be made to the school by building a bridge across the road at the first-floor level (assuming permission could be obtained).
- Assuming the site generates sufficient traffic from the local catchment area and also that the owner remains cooperative, the next step (in a potential 10-year roadmap) might be an

evolution from a public, communal space to a more permanent, multifunctional facility for use by the general community. Maintaining a high level of biodiversity throughout would be an important element of this process.

- The site could be developed in a modular way, with plots for different uses assigned to a rotating gallery of users, be it a food truck, a butterfly hut, an allotment, or something else.
- Potentially, and given its small footprint, this facility could be stacked on a multilevel basis, with public events (such as a play area) on the ground floor and semiprivate (food) and private (health care) areas on the upper levels. The top floor might be reserved for activities requiring sunlight, such as urban farming. There would therefore be multilayer activities creating different pockets of functions.
- Facilities at the site could also be developed in a way that maintains an open outlook, allowing the various activities to be easily visible from the outside. In particular, the podium of the senior living project next door could offer a box seat to the various on-site activities, transforming it into a stage performing a type of outdoor theatre.

## Noteworthy Issues

The panel questioned whether lack of foot traffic in the area might undermine its viability. It may therefore require further research before progressing.





# Hill Road Flyover, Kennedy Town

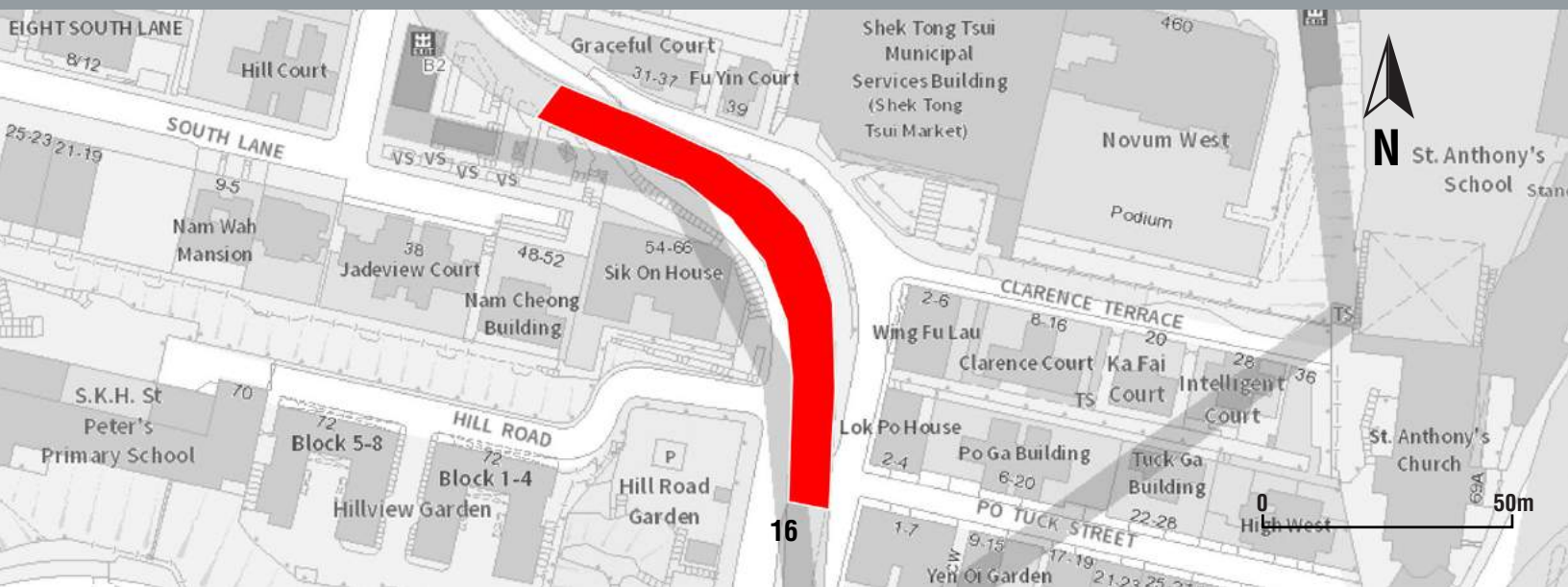
Zoning: N.A. (Road)

**LOCATED AT 51 HILL ROAD** in Kennedy Town, the site constitutes a steep slope about 25 metres wide by eight metres long running beneath a flyover. The only significant amenities currently include a number of planters arranged in a line on either side of the space, together with some rudimentary and uncomfortable seating. The site is framed by two lightly used roads.

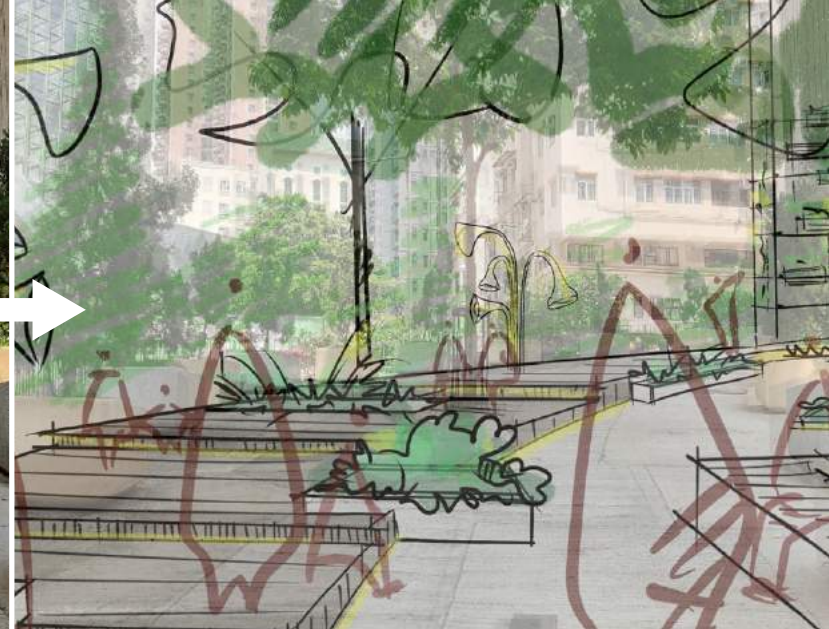
Connectivity is good, with an entrance to The University of Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station directly adjacent. The surrounding area is quiet, with some low-density residential buildings as well as some schools.

Local residents tend to be elderly, and there is a lack of nearby parks or other leisure facilities. Pedestrian traffic is not heavy, though there is steady foot traffic to and from the MTR station.

Currently, the site lacks identity, although it sees occasional use as an events space, including movie viewing and some workshops. Murals have been painted on the bases of some of the columns of the flyover. A nearby mortuary may have lessened the area's appeal for local residents and has possibly deterred previous enhancement plans.







## Suggested Activation

The site provides a combination of shade, a large empty space under the flyover, and good airflow. Given the lack of other neighbourhood recreational facilities, there is strong potential to create a social space where locals can gather, and also an outdoor arts and culture venue. In particular, this could include

- Constructing a wooden staircase structure along parts or all of the site.
  - Adding better seating facilities, including step seating.
  - Integrating the recommended facilities with community activities and programming involving the arts, play activities for both old and young users (including possibly a skate park), and a dog park. Weekend/farmers markets are another possibility.
  - Engaging local residents to help create community gardens. This would also help improve the visual environment.
  - Embracing the verticality of the site. One suggestion involved installation of a 30-metre-long canvass along the underside of the flyover to engage the community using street arts and enhance the vibrancy of the space. Also, play structures could be suspended from the highway infrastructure. If regulatory problems prevent this, they could alternately be installed at grade while still representing the theme of an environment suspended in the air.
  - Extending the existing murals at the bases of the flyover columns to the rest of the site, including the underside of the flyover and vertically up the columns.
- Converting a significant area within the site that currently forms a cul-de-sac used on weekends for (illegal) car parking into a community space, thereby enlarging the site.
  - Potentially embracing a ghostly theme to echo the nearby mortuary. The site already hosts a seasonal ghost theatre.
  - Given the length of the site, dividing it into zones by theme. Nearby schools at the top of the hill dictate installation of playground infrastructure at that level. Other facilities could be positioned sequentially along the lower sections.
  - Installing on-site facilities for storage of removable structures, allowing adaptive and nonpermanent use that rotates seasonally.
  - Potentially holding a design competition for students at the nearby Hong Kong University.

## Noteworthy Issues

- The site offers a good bang for the buck because of its iconic, visually striking setting and the potential for significant on-site improvement without the need for major intervention.
- Highway Department regulations prohibiting the attachment of third-party appendages to highway infrastructure mean that executing some of the intended designs may be problematic.





# Ladder Street Lot with Metal Roof, Sheung Wan

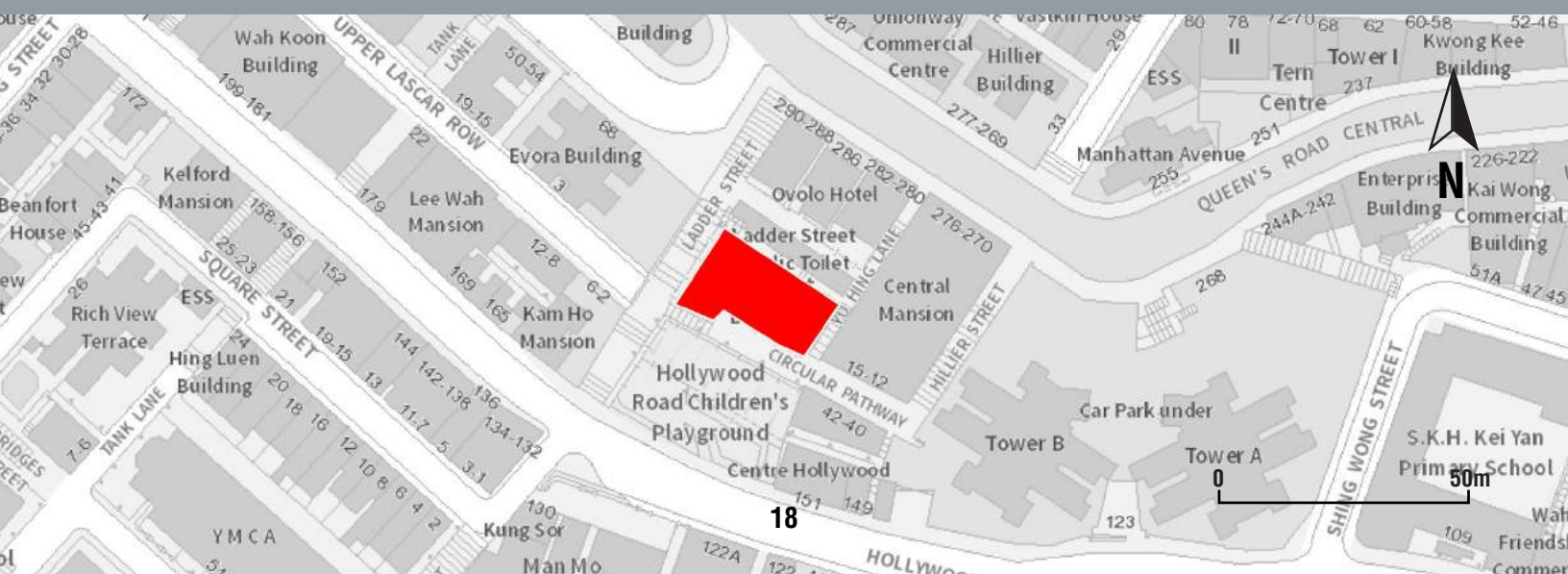
## Zoning: Open Space

**LADDER STREET IS AN HISTORIC** 350-metre-long pedestrian pathway composed almost entirely of stone steps, running uphill from Queen's Road Central to Caine Road in midlevels. A registered monument in Hong Kong, the site has a high profile with its proximity to the famous Man Mo Temple on Hollywood Road, as well as to various antique/curio markets found along the upper parts of the street. Its user base consists of a mix of local residents, visitors, and tourists.

The Sheung Wan area has changed hugely in recent years. It is now “what Soho used to be 15 years ago”, as one panel member put it. As the area becomes increasingly energised,

spaces like this are likely to see increasing traffic with more people drawn to the area.

This site sits on government-owned land that adjoins Ladder Street on the lower section of the staircase. It consists of a covered space about 22 metres by nine metres sandwiched between a well-maintained (and brightly painted) public toilet on one side and a stepped retaining wall on the other. There are two entrances. Although it was once used as a market, the site has long been disused. However, it enjoys a clean footprint that would lend itself well to enhancement, with the retaining wall creating a semisunken perspective that provides an element of privacy.







## Suggested Activation

Clean up the site and reinvent it as a resting spot for those climbing the staircase and also as a mixing area where different types of users can meet. In particular,

- The existing roof structure could be upgraded, creating a shaded area and shelter for rainy or hot days. The upgraded covering could be in the form of a retractable awning that would be deployed or stored according to the weather.
- Cultural elements could be used to tell the history of the area and to inform the space. For example, the nearby Man Mo Temple has a long history of helping the sick during past epidemics that could be told and celebrated here. Other local landmarks, such as Cat Street, have similarly interesting stories.
- Community-oriented elements, such as a pet-related area for use by local residents, could be included. Site use needs to remain flexible, however, because it has to serve both

tourism and community components, so a single specific use would not be sufficiently adaptable.

- Sand or other soft surfaces such as timber decking should be used to provide less of a hardscape feeling.
- The (ugly) retaining wall at the top of the site could be repurposed to create an amphitheatre structure/feel. Ideally this could feature a green wall that would contribute to a more appealing environment as pedestrians walk up the stairs. It would also help blend in with the rest of the street, which has numerous trees and leafy areas.

## Noteworthy Issues

Another proposal for reactivating the site was approved by the government about two years ago. This was never implemented, but it raises questions about how any ULI proposals might be viewed.







## Rest Area with Chairs, Kennedy Road, Wan Chai

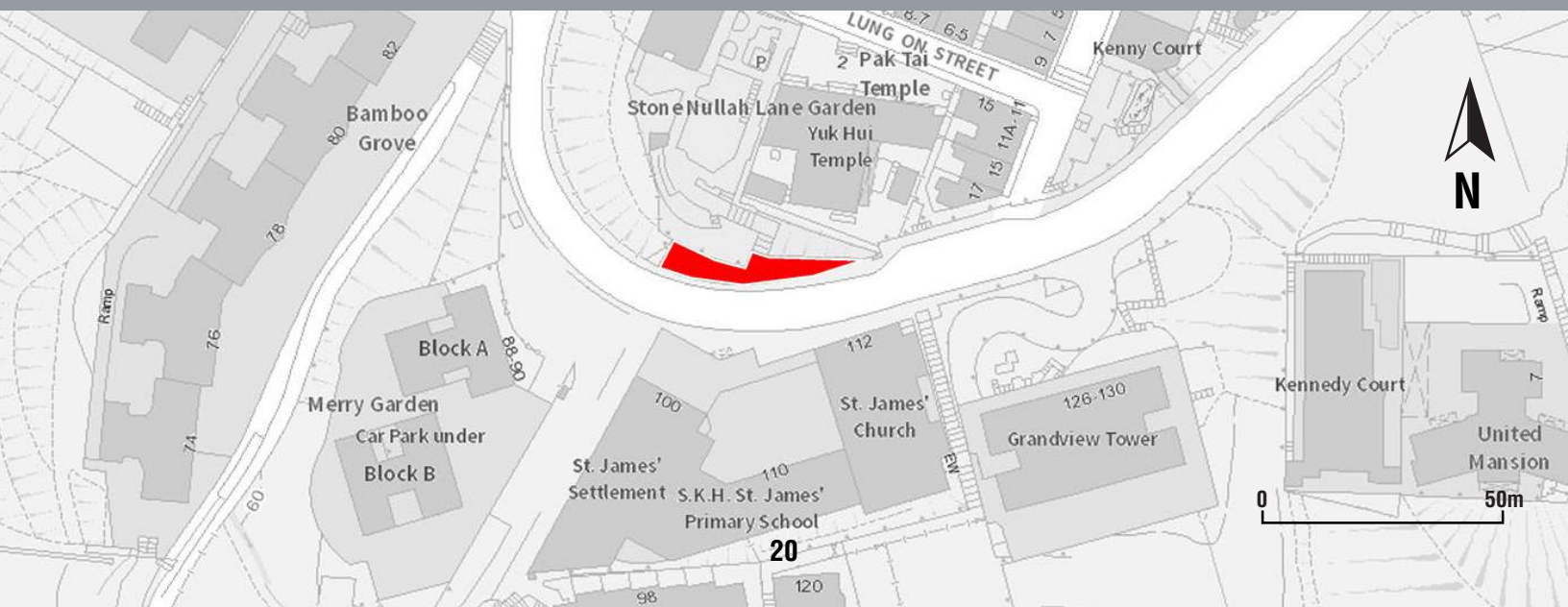
### Zoning: Open Space

**THIS SMALL ROADSIDE SITE** is located across the road from St. James' Church and primary school in Wan Chai. It consists of a stretch of pavement and adjoining concreted space about 30 metres long by 4 to 5 metres wide, separated from the road by an iron guardrail. The site is currently occupied by a handful of striking but quite ugly red benches arranged in an anti-social configuration.

Although the pavement runs continuously in both directions along the south side of Kennedy Road, the site receives little foot traffic, with most pedestrians using the pavement on the

other side. However, the rest area is commonly used by churchgoers, who collect there before and after services, and also by parents and helpers waiting for children to finish school. A nearby pedestrian crossing allows easy cross-road access.

To the south, a stairway descends from the site to the adjacent Stone Nullah Lane Garden and nearby Pak Tai Temple.







## Suggested Activation

Potential changes to the orientation of the road, the position of the pedestrian crossing, or both were discounted because of the improbability of obtaining official approval. Otherwise, the site's small size, its regular use as a gathering point for specific groups, and the lack of foot traffic on that side of the road limit the use of prescriptive programming.

Various ideas were suggested in an effort to create a typology that might be replicable elsewhere in the city:

- Changing the floor to make it more permeable and colourful, using an artistic design that connotes movement and might include graffiti. This would be a cheap way to eliminate the current ugly floor configuration and provide a more upbeat atmosphere. The new floor design could potentially be partly programmed with children's games.
- Changing the seating options by either
  - Removing the existing red benches and replacing them with a more modern and functional design. This might include benches configured like islands or otherwise in a geometry that would soften the current hardness of the site, or
  - Retaining the old benches and repositioning them relative to each other. Potentially in the context of other

suggested changes to the space, their outlandish appearance could add personality to the site and help create a carnival-like atmosphere.

- Installing canopies to provide shelter/shading, probably in conjunction with the newly configured benches/seating. These canopies could be more progressive in design terms. Lighting could also be installed on the framework of the canopy to activate the area in the evenings.
- With the help of ULI, encouraging groups from St James' to bring their activities out into the street and showcase them.
- Programming the site along its length for different uses. In particular, the eastern section overlooking the temple could be designed to accommodate any views that are available, while the rest of the site could be programmed as required. This would create a linear strip, with bench-like infrastructure running along it, that would cater to the needs of different users.
- Removing the dog toilet currently situated in the corner next to the downward stairway and replacing it with a booth for selling drinks and snacks that would open according to use patterns at the site.







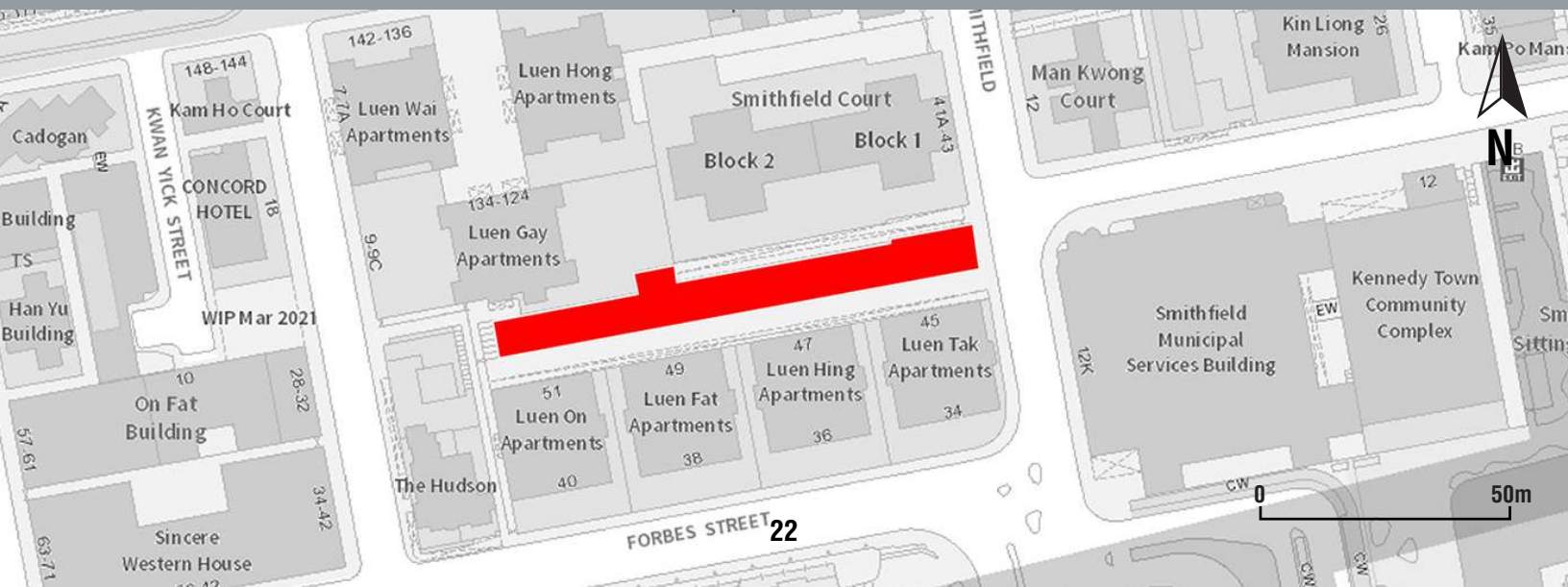
# Smithfield Walk, Kennedy Town

## Zoning: Residential (Group A)

**LOCATED IN KENNEDY TOWN**, Smithfield Walk is a linear, privately owned, pedestrian-only street running for around 100 metres within the confines of a group of buildings defined by a city block. The street is below ground level, with access by way of a downward sloping ramp from the eastern side. The street is porous, connecting to two other sides of the block via an alleyway and staircases at its western end.

Commonly used as a shortcut by locals, Smithfield Walk offers direct access to surrounding residential tower blocks. Shops and restaurants line one side of the passage at street level and on both sides on terraces above (that is, at surface level).

Until recently, the street served as little more than a service alley, but the opening of the nearby Kennedy Town MTR has energised the area and it is now part of a busy retail and residential neighbourhood. Although the neighbourhood has become more vibrant, a community representative stated that it still lacks sufficient gathering areas, unlike the nearby Kennedy Town waterfront that has been significantly enhanced by the district council. As one participant said: “It’s highly visible, but dead from an urban design standpoint.”







## Suggested Activation

Although the street has significant potential for improvements through removal of hard surfaces, mitigation of the heat island effect, and installation of various types of urban furnishings, the need to maintain a five- to six-metre emergency vehicle access (EVA) passage may inhibit implementation of meaningful solutions at the street level. Attention may therefore need to be split between street, terrace, and upper-level shops.

### At street level:

- The blank wall constituting the right side of the street (which is part of an adjoining car park) could be transformed into a cultural art wall to display creative works done by nearby school students.
- Glass windows that currently form part of that wall could be removed to provide more openness and cross breezes.
- Although there is opportunity for selective greening, limited available space means that the community aspect will probably be the most potent element of the project from a sustainability perspective. Small, pocketed areas along the street could be pressed into service for particular purposes, including
  - Flexible or semipermanent seating and gathering areas, shaded areas, and rain-protected areas. All these fixtures would be removable, as required.
  - A certain amount of fixed furniture, to the extent allowable by EVA rules. Lighting fixtures might be attached to the furniture to activate the space at night.
  - A small, temporary recycling area could be created in one of the niches found along the car park wall. This

option would be especially useful given that the nearest primary recycling centre is a 15-minute walk away.

- The large green wall currently installed at the western end of the street could be adapted as a screen for viewing movies or other media. The need to limit noise and crowding may limit use to once per week or month, but it would transform both the street and terraces into a special-event amphitheatre.

### At terrace level:

- Similar semipermanent seating and gathering areas could be installed, helping to activate the terrace and providing streetscape views.
- Currently, a row of air conditioning equipment installed along the outside edge of the terrace generates noise, creates “aircon rain” for pedestrians, and blows heat into the overall space. The heat island effect is amplified by the street’s canyon-like nature as well as by multiple hard surfaces that absorb and radiate heat. Greening could go some way in mitigating this effect. In addition, air-conditioning equipment could be covered by upcycled boxes using the wood pallets in the neighbourhood as the source material to hide its surfaces and create a more inviting space for local residents to stay and rest.

## Noteworthy Issues

The street is divided into nine independently owned parcels, complicating negotiations over implementation of improvements if not all owners agree to proceed. Although some separate parcels may still be owned by a single party, one solution to this would be to create modular designs, with different interventions on different lots.



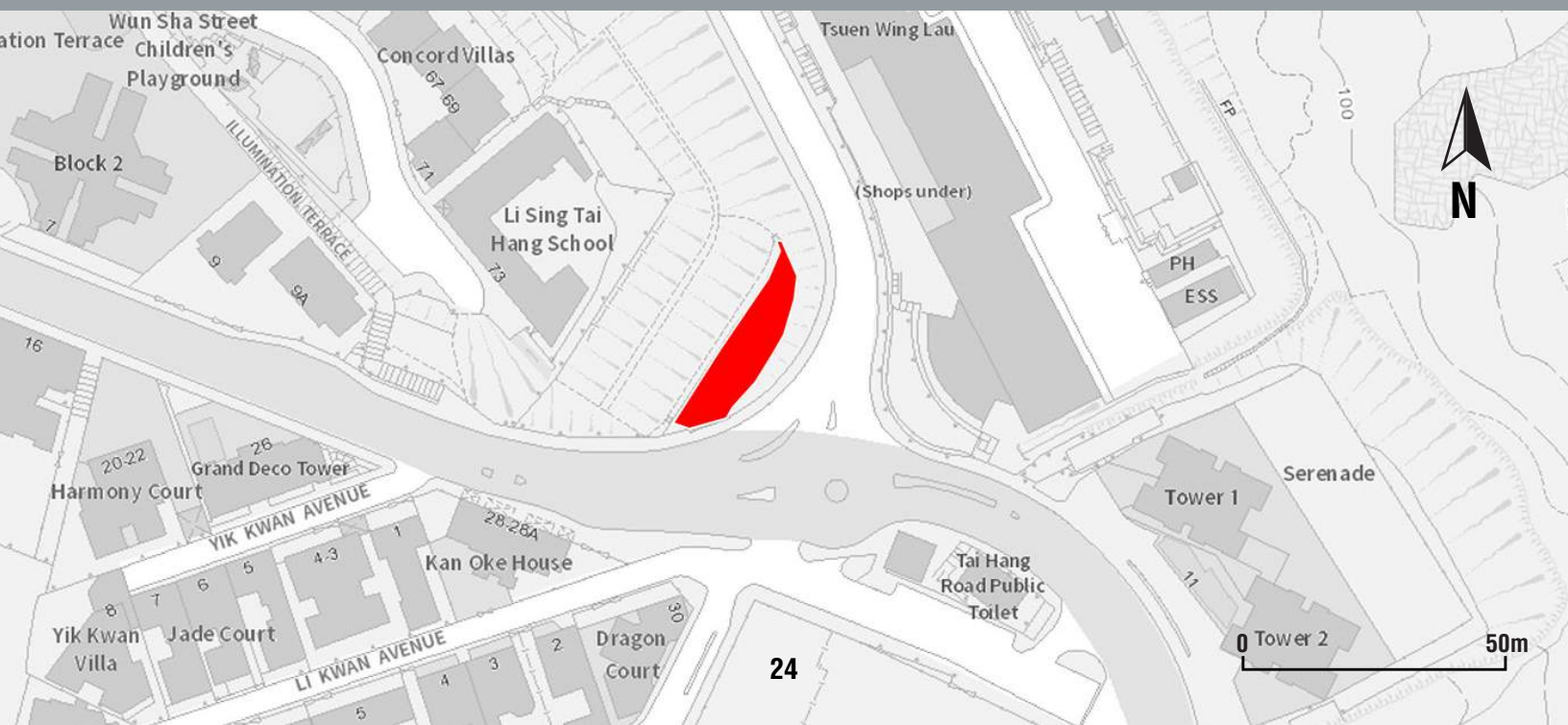


# Vacant Lot Next to Lai Tak Tsuen, Tai Hang

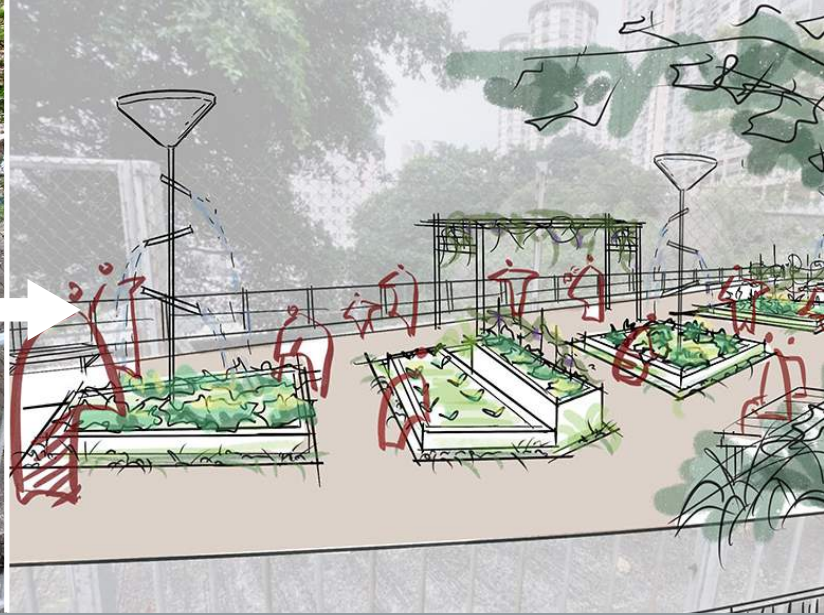
Zoning: Green Belt

**MANY RESIDENTIAL AREAS** in Hong Kong suffer from a chronic lack of local amenities, whether they be retail or (more particularly) leisure facilities. This government-owned site in Tai Hang is surrounded by an established residential area—mainly Home Ownership Scheme housing—suffering from just that problem.

The space consists of a large concrete platform, zoned as green belt, about 50 metres long by 15 metres wide, sitting next to a main road. The densely populated neighbourhood provides good footfall past the site and includes a high proportion of elderly residents living within walking distance. The area therefore offers a demographic that has plenty of time to pursue outdoor activities but is currently without options.







## Suggested Activation

A community garden on the site would provide a replicable, noninterventionist, easily removable facility catering to the needs of local residents, who would also be able to manage and care for it.

- The flat, open space provides an ideal venue for installation of allotments for growing plants and vegetables. Suitable facilities such as planters would be easy to supply or install on a temporary basis on top of the platform without having to dig into the concrete.
- Local residents could apply for a plot either for free or at low rent.
- Proper drainage would need to be arranged, but this could probably be done at a low cost.
- A fixed structure would need to be created on the site to house tools and equipment. This could also potentially be used as a venue to sell drinks and snacks and as an educational facility for younger people. It would again need

to be easily removable (possibly built in the form of a wheeled structure or from a converted shipping container), but this could probably be achieved cheaply and easily.

- Seating and benches could be installed to encourage people to linger at the site and would create a social gathering point.
- Environmentally friendly utilities could be installed, including a rainwater collection and storage system for irrigation purposes, together with solar panels for electricity (expected electricity use will be minimal, however).
- Potentially, the site could also serve as a connector between neighbourhoods above and below it.
- Depending on local demand for allotments, the site is also large enough to support other types of programming and could therefore also be used for other purposes in addition to the urban farm.





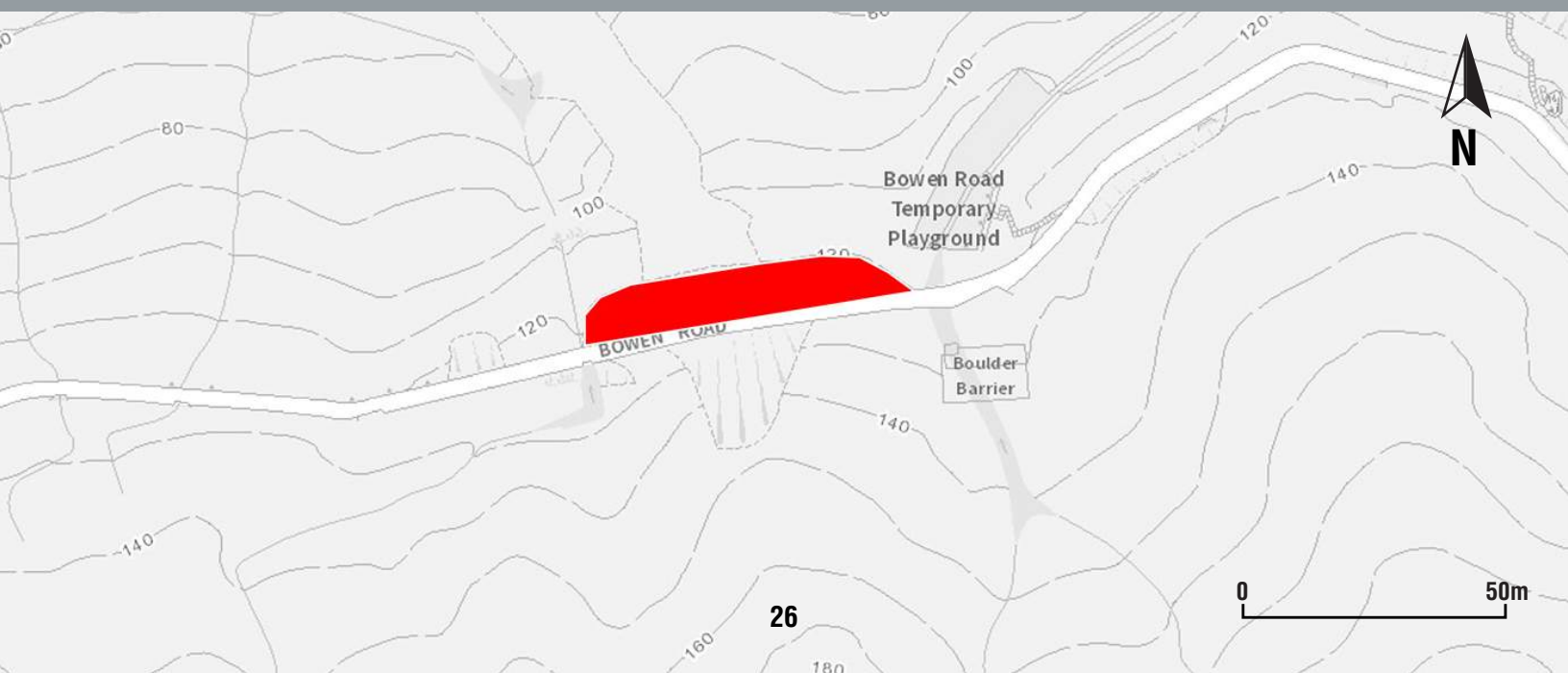


# Viewing Area along Hiking Trail, Bowen Road, Wanchai

## Zoning: Open Space

**THIS SITE IS THE ONLY ONE** of our 10 case studies located outside Hong Kong's densely populated urban core. While they may be out of the way, however, rural plots like this represent a significant typology for the city given that 40 percent of Hong Kong's land mass is designated as country parks and is widely used by local residents for recreation. The importance of rural plots will only increase as work-from-home employees convert time previously spent commuting to and from work into recreational activities.

The space consists of a stretch of concrete about 50 metres by four to five metres. It abuts Bowen Road, which serves as a pedestrian-only hiking trail traversing the hillsides behind the city between midlevels and Happy Valley. It is government owned and was created as a result of remedial work that took place years ago following a landslide. Used mainly by the wealthier demographic living in nearby neighbourhoods, the land commonly serves as a rest point given its unobstructed views over Wan Chai and Kowloon.







## Suggested Activation

Lack of infrastructure for hikers or even dog walkers in Hong Kong provides an opportunity to create a replicable model. In general, suggested activation for the site avoids specific programming, aiming instead to enhance the outdoor experience and provide resources where users can rest and enjoy the view. In particular,

- The site's long, narrow dimensions mean it can be divided into zones for different types of users or activities.
- Trees and undergrowth in front of the site could be cut back to prevent obstructions to the view, and then they should be pruned regularly. A common problem for viewpoints across Hong Kong is that they are commonly hemmed in by fast-growing vegetation. More interesting foliage also could be planted.
- The current guardrail perimeter could be replaced with variably shaped benching, about 1.5 metres deep, for perhaps 40 metres of the 50-metre length to create a furniture-like utility offering places to sit or lean.
- Alternately, the guardrail could be lowered (possibly a couple metres down the slope) so that this bench seating could offer unobstructed forward-facing views.
- Awnings could also be installed along parts of the benching to offer shade or shelter from the rain.
- Given its status as a pitstop for hikers and its distance from any shops, the site could accommodate a pop-up (possibly mobile) drinks/snacks outlet during seasonal or peak hours.
- Appropriate lighting could be installed given how many users appear in the evenings when the weather cools. Lighting would need to be solar powered given the lack of on-site electricity and also would need to be indirect (probably from below) to avoid creating glare for photographers.
- The concrete retaining wall constructed on the slope to the rear of the site could be landscaped with appropriate greenery.
- A social media presence could be created that leverages the striking views. Possibly this could incorporate AR (augmented reality) and QR codes.

## Noteworthy Issues

One negative aspect is that the site does not currently draw large numbers of users, and any improvements are likely to serve the existing user base of hikers, joggers, and dog walkers rather than attract new footfall to the area.



# Social and Community Impact

**ACTIVATING UNDERUTILISED SITES** and transforming them into parks and other public spaces can provide opportunities to incorporate strategies that help create social and community impact. *Making Space for Parks: A Toolkit for Hong Kong* highlights best practices for park activation in highly dense urban settings, and many of the suggestions connect to the learnings from ULI Hong Kong's recently conducted technical assistance panel. These best practices and takeaways include the following:

- Use design and placemaking to celebrate the history of a site and create an appealing brand, a reason to visit the park, and a sense of community identity, ownership, and belonging.
- Ensure that the space is flexible enough to be used for different populations within the community and to change over time to meet evolving needs.
- Cultivate connections to nature and community together (e.g., gardening and urban farming).
- Develop policies that support park use for all, such as affordable rental prices for urban farming plots or allowed uses that accommodate different groups' interests.
- Connect the park to the surrounding community's activities and existing amenities.

The following case studies from the technical assistance panel demonstrate how these best practices can be envisioned and exemplified in currently underutilised spaces:

- The **Yik Yam Street alley in Happy Valley** could connect the history of the alley to users' experiences of walking (and potentially shopping) there. Many of the design features would celebrate its history as a pathway for racehorses—including by reconstituting the entire parade route and posting educational storyboards—and help bolster a strong identity for the alley. Similarly, the **Ladder Street lot with metal roof in Sheung Wan** could use cultural elements to tell the stories of the nearby Man Mo Temple and other local landmarks.
- In the **corner outside Times Square in Causeway Bay**, the **gap site in Ladder Street**, and other locations, the sites could serve as event spaces, stages, pop-ups, social and community spaces, art displays, and other creative and flexible uses that serve the community, bring different generations together, and develop a sense of ownership and belonging.
- The **footbridge with dark underspace, Possession Street in Sheung Wan**, and the **vacant lot next to Lai TakTsuen in Tai Hang** have the potential to sustain urban farming and other garden-oriented facilities. Supportive policies include allowing residents to rent plots for an affordable price and providing equipment on site.
- Both design and programming can connect parks to the surrounding community. In the **gap Site on Ventris Road in Happy Valley**, an event space is designed to connect a nearby school and senior living facility. These spaces would be visible from the outside so that people in the senior living facility could view the events. The **rest area on Kennedy Road in Wan Chai** is also close to a primary school and church. The members of the school and church communities could showcase their activities in the rest area. Covered benches could benefit local residents and passers-by. Both design and programming similarly help to activate the park by connecting it with the community.

Incorporating some or all of these strategies can help each of these sites maximize their social impact and serve their communities in the short and long terms.



# Environmental Impact

**PARKS AND OTHER GREEN SPACES**—even small sites like pocket parks—can help cities mitigate environmental issues and create a healthy, sustainable, and attractive urban environment. Environmental considerations are especially important as climate change leads to sea-level rise, more frequent heavy

precipitation, rising temperatures, and extreme heat in Hong Kong. Park design strategies such as incorporating green infrastructure and providing shaded seating areas contribute to making a more liveable environment, enhancing residents' quality of life and community resilience.

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## Best Practices

The best practices for park activation highlighted in *Making Space for Parks: A Toolkit for Hong Kong* include methods for environmental impacts, and many of these relate to the learnings from ULI Hong Kong's recently conducted technical assistance panel. These best practices and takeaways include:

- Mitigate environmental issues. For example, green infrastructure can address the urban heat island effect and manage stormwater runoff and flooding—two common issues in urban environments.
- Use environmental interventions to improve the look of a site. Green walls, water features, planters, drought-tolerant plants, and other amenities create additional visual appeal.
- Seek out opportunities to reduce the environmental impact of a site. These strategies often have benefits for health as well, such as vegetation that helps to preserve the biodiversity of the area while providing benefits for mental health, mitigating extreme heat risks for elderly residents, and improving air quality.

The following case studies from the technical assistance panel demonstrate how these best practices can be envisioned and exemplified in currently underutilised spaces:

- In the **corner outside Times Square in Causeway Bay**, an existing wall could accommodate a water feature that cools the air, reduces noise, and helps remove particulate pollution. Similarly, greening the **Smithfield Walk in Kennedy Town** could help mitigate current environmental issues, such as the nearby air-conditioning equipment that generates noise, heat (contributing to the urban heat island effect that is already intensified by nearby surfaces), and “aircon rain” for pedestrians.

- Environmental features can also create a more visually appealing atmosphere. A series of planters could shield the **corner outside Times Square in Causeway Bay** from traffic, and a green wall at the **Ladder Street lot with metal roof in Sheung Wan** could make the existing retaining wall more attractive while helping the lot to blend in with the rest of the street.
- Opportunities to support and maintain biodiversity exist in the **gap site on Ventris Road in Happy Valley**, such as by installing a butterfly hut. In the **vacant lot next to Lai Tak Tsuen in Tai Hang**, utilities like solar panels or a rainwater collection and storage system for irrigation could help make the site more environmentally friendly.

Designing for climate resilience and sustainability not only reduces the environmental impact of a site but also has health, economic, and other community benefits that can help make the park activation successful.



PHOTO: Getty Images



# Design

**CITIES CAN IMPLEMENT DESIGN STRATEGIES** to maximize the many cobenefits of parks to create healthier, more climate resilient places. *Making Space for Parks: A Toolkit for Hong Kong* highlights best practices for park design, with a focus on pocket parks in dense urban settings. Many of these strategies connect directly to the recommendations from ULI Hong Kong’s recently conducted technical assistance panel. These best practices takeaways include the following:

- By making the park experience convenient and inviting - without overly restrictive rules or unwelcoming features—cities can make parks more attractive and draw in new park users. Greenery and exposure to nature can amplify the mental-health effects of parks.
- Parks should be designed for safety and comfort. Lighting, signage, and emergency call boxes can increase perceptions of safety and make pocket parks safer, as can avoiding the creation of deserted areas within the park by distributing amenities throughout the space. Amenities may include seating, sheltered areas, restrooms, drinking foundations, and wi-fi or charging stations.
- Clear signage and well-marked, safe, and convenient access points can ensure that people are aware of the park and are able to gain access to it.
- Park resilience design strategies include providing shaded areas, adding drought-tolerant plants, and building living shorelines, new wetlands, and greenways designed to be underwater during floods.

The following case studies from the technical assistance panel demonstrate how these best practices can be envisioned and exemplified in currently underutilised spaces:

- Adding lighting, plants, furniture, and equine-themed signage at the **Yik Yam Street alley in Happy Valley** could increase the vibrancy of the site, thereby enhancing safety and comfort. Similarly, adding a lighting system, street art, and benches along the length of the **footbridge with dark underspace, Possession Street, Sheung Wan**—in coordination with local residents—could make the space feel more inviting while creating a sense of community ownership.



- Adding new planters and providing more comfortable benches or repositioning the existing red benches at the **rest area with chairs, Kennedy Road, Wan Chai**; adding seating at the **vacant lot next to Lai Tak Tsuen, Tai Hang**; and replacing the current guardrail perimeter at the **viewing area along hiking trail, Bowen Road, Wanchai**, with variably shared benching would create social gathering points and more inviting and comfortable experiences for users.
- Creating clear signage and a direct physical connection between the **gap site on Ventris Road, Happy Valley**, site and the senior living complex next door could support park awareness and access.
- **The corner outside Times Square, Causeway Bay**, offers an opportunity to use design to enhance health and resilience in a polluted area. Creating shaded areas and a water feature would cool the air, reduce noise, and remove particulate pollution. Similarly, designing a green wall and upgrading the existing roof structure to create a shaded area at the **Ladder Street lot with metal roof, Sheung Wan**, and implementing a greening plan to mitigate the heat island effect at the **Smithfield Walk, Kennedy Town**, site would enhance local resilience.

Incorporating some or all of these strategies could help each of these sites maximize their design potential and serve their communities in the short and long terms.



# Implementability

**CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIP** enhances the feasibility of short-term open space activation projects. *Making Space for Parks: A Toolkit for Hong Kong* highlights four models of opportunities and considerations related to forming cross-sector partnerships in highly dense urban settings. Those models connect to the learnings from ULI Hong Kong's recently conducted technical assistance panel. The four cross-sector partnership models are the following:

- Leveraging spaces owned by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD)
- Having nonprofit organisations lease public land
- Using land owned by nonprofit organisations and semipublic bodies
- Engaging the private sector

The following case studies from the technical assistance panel demonstrate how the four models can be envisioned and exemplified in currently underutilised spaces:

The **Yik Yam Street alley in Happy Valley** and the **vacant lot next to Lai Tak Tsuen in Tai Hang** are government-owned sites with foreseeable long application, liaison, and approval processes. Support from the district council may help connect with the relevant government departments to push the initiatives forward.

The **footbridge with dark underspace**, the **Ladder Street lot with metal roof in Sheung Wan**, **rest area with chairs on Kennedy Road in Wan Chai**, and **viewing area along Bowen Road** are vacant government sites available for government, institution, or community uses and as greening or leisure areas managed by the LCSD. The involvement of nonprofit organisations with interests in running community gardens or open spaces could be beneficial to increase the feasibility of open space activation. NGOs could apply for a funding scheme of up to HK\$60 million by the Development Bureau to pursue restoration works on vacant government sites to complete one-off infrastructure-based projects, including the provision of drainage and erection of temporary structures.

Meanwhile, the **corner outside Times Square in Causeway Bay**, **gap site on Ventris Road in Happy Valley**, and **Smithfield Walk in Kennedy Town** involve partnerships with private owners on existing landholdings that could often speed up the process and shorten the time spent on administration works. Open space activation and greening projects could be readily implemented with permission from the relevant government departments, consultancy from ULI, and sponsorship from BoA.

With the multiple stakeholders involved in open space activation projects, it is crucial to specify the management and operation responsibilities—such as funding, storage, and use of materials after the completion of projects—to avoid conflicts in partnership.

Depending on the statutory land use of the selected open spaces, activation works might be limited to comply with the development restrictions and conditions. This can be supplemented with careful design to provide suitable amenities to cater for public use and sustainability. The location and layout of activation projects should avoid blocking emergency access and should reserve ways for pedestrians without interrupting with the existing traffic. Also, the design should provide opportunities to allow maximum public use that improves the quality of life of users. Involvement with architects and landscape architects interested in open space activation and greening projects could be useful to develop appropriate designs customised to the conditions of selected sites.

Incorporating some or all of these strategies can help each of these sites maximize their implementability and make an impact in their communities.



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