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## Hong Kong deserves the gift of green

**EDITH TERRY**

Most of us are satisfied with gazing from a distance at the vast empty lots that scar the city. Not Peter Lee, who decided to take a walk around one of them - the rocky knob of reclaimed land built to serve as a platform for the Western Harbour Crossing. The tunnel's air shaft is currently the only structure on this 40-hectare plot, the rump end of an \$8 billion, 340-hectare reclamation project designed to link the city centre with Chek Lap Kok, an even grander engineering feat. There are larger empty plots in Hong Kong, notably the 280 hectares of the abandoned Kai Tak airport, and more convenient ones, such as the petite Tamar site, once a British naval station and now used as a parking lot in its prime waterfront location.

But Mr Lee decided to visit West Kowloon, together with some friends. Surprisingly, he found it beautiful. Now, he has joined the throngs of people who think they have a better idea than the Hong Kong government's plan to create a peninsula of culture, luxury flats and Lord Foster's giant canopy. Instead of these, Mr Lee would like to see a park.

It would not be the largest urban park - less than one-eighth the size of New York's Central Park and one-sixth that of London's Hyde Park - but it would be more than Hong Kong's existing Victoria Park, Kowloon Park and the Happy Valley recreation area put together. It would have spectacular views of sunsets and the skyline, and give Hongkongers a little more breathing space - Mr Lee estimates that the city has 0.05 sq km of parkland for every 1,000 people, compared to 0.72 sq km per 1,000 people in Manhattan and 0.7 sq km in London. If Kai Tak became an urban park as well, Hong Kong would suddenly jump up the league table and begin to rival London in this vital ratio.

Mr Lee, regional chief of a multinational packaging materials company, is not the only one with good ideas. Last Friday, Swire Properties launched an exhibit in its Pacific Place complex amplifying its disqualified bid for the West Kowloon cultural district. Judging by the wide-eyed crowds viewing the models over the past few days, including a design by world-renowned architect Frank Gehry for a museum on the Tamar site, the developer has struck a chord. Its proposal links multiple sites across

Victoria Harbour in a self-proclaimed "holistic" design that also makes ample use of green space.

It only takes a stroll through Victoria Park or Kowloon Park at the weekend to see how famished people are for open space with flowers, trees and rest areas. The correlation between parks and urban branding is so complete that the dimensions, beauty and safety of urban parks could serve as an index for cities where people want to live.

Nor would there be any hint of cultural bias in such an index. Asia's most ambitious cities have some of the world's best and largest parks, where people can unwind from the office and eat their noodles on park benches - Tokyo's Shinjuku Gyoen, Beihai Yuan in Beijing, and Singapore's Botanical Gardens. If anything, the poorer the country, the more impoverished, dilapidated and dangerous the parks are likely to be. Manila's shabby Luneta Park would not be my first choice for a stroll.

The problem with ideas is often timing. The proposals by Mr Lee and Swire both conflict with decades of official spadework in the public interest, and cynics will ask why they have waited so long to make them. Yet for once, acting Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen may wish to assess current projects against broader values, such as the need to counterbalance decades of development with a substantial gift of green. It would, for one thing, prove that this government has no hearing problems.

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