

FACE LIFT

*How urban renewal
can change people's lives*

By Robin Lynam



THERE WERE PROBABLY more than a few eyebrows raised in Hong Kong at the news that Harbour Plaza Hotels and Resorts was to open a new five-star luxury property in North Point. Facilities and services of that quality are more typically to be found in Central or Tsim Sha Tsui. Those who know the history of the hotel group's parent companies will have been less surprised, however.

For Hong Kong, as in most developed cities around the world, urban renewal is an increasingly important issue. The process is complex, bringing together economic, physical, social and environmental agendas to help meet the public's ever-higher aspirations. The list of examples is long and varied, from Lan Kwai Fong, the pulsating nightlife area that emerged from a couple of crumbling streets in downtown Hong Kong, to the huge face lift that parts of London are receiving as part of preparations for the 2012 Olympic Games. The aim is the same though, to improve the urban landscape and make a difference to people's lives.

North Point is a good example. Thanks to good transport links, recent years have seen the area begin to smarten up, with a growing number of commercial tenants served by a better standard of retail outlets and restaurants. The soft opening of the Harbour Grand Hong Kong on 1 June 2009, marked one

of the biggest milestones in North Point's history. It also reflects a commitment to the area on the part of Cheung Kong and Hutchison Whampoa. Hongkong Electric, a Hutchison Whampoa associated company, has a long history with North Point dating back to the early 20th century, when the present slightly run down urban area was mostly open countryside. Harbour Plaza Hotels and Resorts, which manages hotels in Hong Kong, Mainland China and the Bahamas, opened the popular four-star Harbour Plaza North Point in 2000.

"When you open a five-star hotel it upgrades the entire area, and I think North Point will gradually change to something more upscale. Higher-end restaurants and shops will be attracted because the hotel is here," said General Manager Benedict Chow.

The Harbour Grand Hong Kong is not the first landmark building that helps prompt significant improvement in the neighbourhood. Hutchison Whampoa has well documented expertise in helping erstwhile industrial areas make the transition to mixed residential and commercial use.

Hutchison developed the hugely successful "Garden City" concept for Whampoa Gardens on the site of the former Whampoa Dockyards, completed in 1991. The





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project converted an area formerly dedicated to heavy industry into a whole new community, and the estate now has an estimated population of 50,000. Amenities include schools, sporting facilities, quality retail in supermarkets and shopping malls, numerous restaurants, a cinema and a public transport terminus. The initiative radically revitalised Hung Hom.

Hutchison’s second Garden City project, South Horizons, beginning in the same year Whampoa Gardens was completed, occupies the site of the former Hongkong Electric Power Station on Ap Lei Chau, decommissioned in 1989.

Again, the creative contrast in use of the space is dramatic. A high-rise low-density development with first class recreational facilities, offering its residents a stress-free lifestyle just a short distance from the business districts, South Horizons utterly transformed the formerly industrial island of Ap Lei Chau.

Today the development, completed in 1995, has over 40,000 residents who enjoy facilities including a residents’ club with one indoor and two outdoor swimming pools, flood-lit tennis courts, golf practice driving ranges and well-equipped children’s playgrounds, as well as a jacuzzi, a gymnasium and fitness centre, squash, badminton and basketball courts, an aerobic dance room, two golf practice rooms, each equipped with an electronic golf simulator, and function rooms for entertaining.

Bo Bo Luk has lived in Ap Lei Chau for more than 15 years and has watched the area develop into a thriving community. “My first impression of Ap Lei Chau was that it was a bit isolated. In the early days, the transport network was insufficient but this changed when South Horizons was completed in 1995. Now it’s easy to get anywhere in Hong Kong,” she said.

“The fact that there are so many middle-class families living



THE HARBOUR GRAND FACTS

HARBOUR GRAND HONG KONG is the latest addition to Hutchison Whampoa's hotel group which manages seven properties in Hong Kong as well as Harbour Plaza Chongqing in Mainland China and the Our Lucaya resorts in the Bahamas.

The 41-storey hotel boasts 828 guest rooms and suites as well as meeting and banquet facilities, and five restaurants and bars. The rooms all feature LCD televisions, wired and wireless broadband Internet access, DVD players and bathrooms with rainforest showerheads and circular bath tubs in selected rooms. Executive floor privileges include a personalised butler service and access to the Harbour Club Lounge for daily complimentary breakfast, afternoon tea and evening cocktails.

A central feature of the hotel is the elegant high-ceil-



pool and Jacuzzi, a state-of-the-art fitness centre and spa and massage facilities.

ing 6,200 square foot pillarless Grand Ballroom, while the seven function rooms are equipped with the latest audio-visual technology and Internet connectivity.

A variety of authentic cuisines ranging from international and continental to Japanese and Chinese are provided in the hotel's restaurants, while Le 188° Restaurant & Lounge on the top floor offers guests sweeping views across Hong Kong. Other amenities include an outdoor heated swimming

POSITIVE CHANGE



South Horizons occupies the site of the former Hongkong Electric Power Station on Ap Lei Chau.



Albion Riverside in London turns a former bus depot into an up-market residential development.



Whampoa Gardens is built on the site of the former Whampoa Dockyards in Hung Hom.



In London, with the Albion Riverside project, designed by Lord Norman Foster, Hutchison turned a former bus depot into a high profile up-market residential development that has significantly improved the image of the generally run down Battersea area and substantially raised the value of nearby property.

Lawrence Pigeon is the Director of elite kitchen and bathroom outfitters Alternative Plans, which has a retail outlet in the Albion Riverside complex. “We have been in this location for about 30 years and Albion Riverside has improved the area enormously,” he said. “Since its completion, Albion Riverside has helped the area go up-market.

“The improved river access has been an attractive addition and the whole place now has a more presentable environment and is more sales friendly. Albion Riverside has lifted the profile and is now much more of a destination. This area has now become a prestigious location.”

Back in Hong Kong, Harbour Plaza Hotels and Resorts already manages more than a half dozen hotels across the territory, but the Harbour Grand Hong Kong is the Group's first five-star luxury hotel on Hong Kong Island, and is now its flagship.

This is a major vote of confidence in North Point, and the new hotel – built on a spectacular waterfront site formerly occupied by a warehouse – will have a positive

effect on the district as a whole. One obvious reason for this is that guests of luxury hotels automatically have a certain spending power and the quality of local retailing and food and beverage (F&B) services tends to align itself with the elevated expectations of the new visitors.

Nor has Hutchison confined its urban renewal initiatives to Hong Kong. On the Chinese mainland the Chongqing Metropolitan Plaza & Tower, which includes the Harbour Plaza Chongqing Hotel, is one of the largest comprehensive development projects in southwest China. Formerly occupied by a meat and vegetable market, it has been acknowledged by the authorities as one of the most influential projects in the city's revitalisation and a key element in Chongqing's branding.

North Point may also become more attractive as an office location with the development of new commercial buildings conveniently close to the complementary new facilities the hotel offers. International companies which want easy access to accommodation of a high standard for visiting clients and senior executives are likely to be particularly attracted.

‘We can offer a fantastic experience. It is a beautiful and unique property’

“Right behind the hotel we have several A-grade buildings. North Point is very convenient,” explained Mr Chow. “People who work in Central or Taikoo Shing can get a taxi here very easily. Hong Kong is a very small area.”

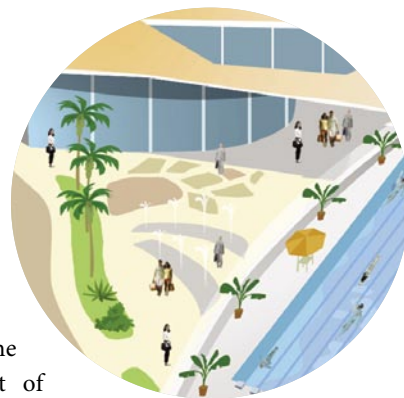
According to Dr John Ap, Associate Professor at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s School of Hotel & Tourism Management, the new hotel in North Point should have a major impact on the area. “Usually, a new major project will provide flow-on benefits for the surrounding neighbourhood and if the area was previously run down, it may provide the catalyst to revitalise the neighbourhood,” he said.

“Besides providing services to tourists and business travelers, local residents also use hotels, especially the F&B or recreational/club house facilities. If the area is developing, a new major hotel can certainly enhance the civic pride of the locals who can take pride in seeing the area developing and modernising. At the same time, it also provides employment oppor-

tunities and a boost to the local economy.”

While it is of course too early to evaluate the full long-term impact of the new Harbour Grand Hong Kong on North Point, it is certain that Hong Kong’s waterfront has an iconic new landmark and that guests and visitors will have good reason to ponder the potential of the surrounding area.

“I believe we are the only hotel in Hong Kong to have all of our guestrooms facing a harbour view, and most of our restaurants as well,” said Mr Chow. “Several of our rooms and suites also have a patio with a sunken Jacuzzi, so guests can relax in an open environment and at the same time appreciate the harbour. We can offer a fantastic experience. It is a beautiful and unique property.”



NORTH POINT’S CHEQUERED PAST

THE FIRST major milestone in the urban development of the northernmost part of Hong Kong island was the opening of the North Point Power Station in 1919. Electric Road today commemorates the station, which spurred growth in the area, and was not de-commissioned until 70 years later in 1989.

By 1941, North Point had become the site of a refugee camp for Kuomintang soldiers, and although it was used as a prisoner of war camp for captured Canadian military personnel after the Japanese invasion, a pattern had been established.

After the war another wave of refugees arrived and made their way to North Point – although this time many of the new arrivals had money. They came from Shanghai, generally regarded at that point as the most sophisticated city in China, and set about stamping their own identity on the area. North Point began to acquire a certain glamour as Hong Kong’s “Little Shanghai”.

As Hong Kong historian Jason Wordie points out in his authoritative book *Streets: Exploring Hong Kong Island* (Hong Kong University Press, 2002): “These days Japan and its fashion trends symbolise the modern and the smart to Hong Kong’s young people...but until the 1950s it was Shanghai styles that were emulated; ageing signboards in North Point today still advertise beauty parlours, restaurants and barbershops first established and popularised 50 years ago”.

Even today there are many reminders in North Point of its 1950s heyday, and for a while the Shanghaiese stuck together in a single community. Eventually, they realised that for the

most part they were not going home, and many moved to other areas of Hong Kong, mingling and intermarrying with the Cantonese majority of the population.

As the Shanghaiese presence waned, the Fujianese took their place. Ethnic Chinese immigrants originating from that area of China came in from unstable Indonesia, and over time “Little Shanghai” morphed into “Little Fujian”.

North Point also became for some time, according to the *Guinness Book of Records* when it was first published in 1955, the most densely populated place on earth.

There are still many reminders of “Little Shanghai” and “Little Fujian” in the streets of North Point today, including Shanghaiese barber shops and Indonesian style grocery stores. Those with an ear for Chinese dialects will notice southern Fujian’s Min Nan dialect being spoken alongside Hong Kong’s native Cantonese.

The political outlook of those immigrants has also left a legacy. The famous Sunbeam Theatre on the corner of King’s Road and Shu Kuk Street was established in 1972 to screen patriotically themed Chinese movies promoting ideology with which many North Point locals were in sympathy. The Sunbeam has since been converted into a venue for theatrical performances, and is the last privately owned theatre in Hong Kong to stage Chinese operas. Although its future has often been in question in recent years, its lease was renewed in early 2009, and the future of Cantonese opera there is assured for at least another three years.