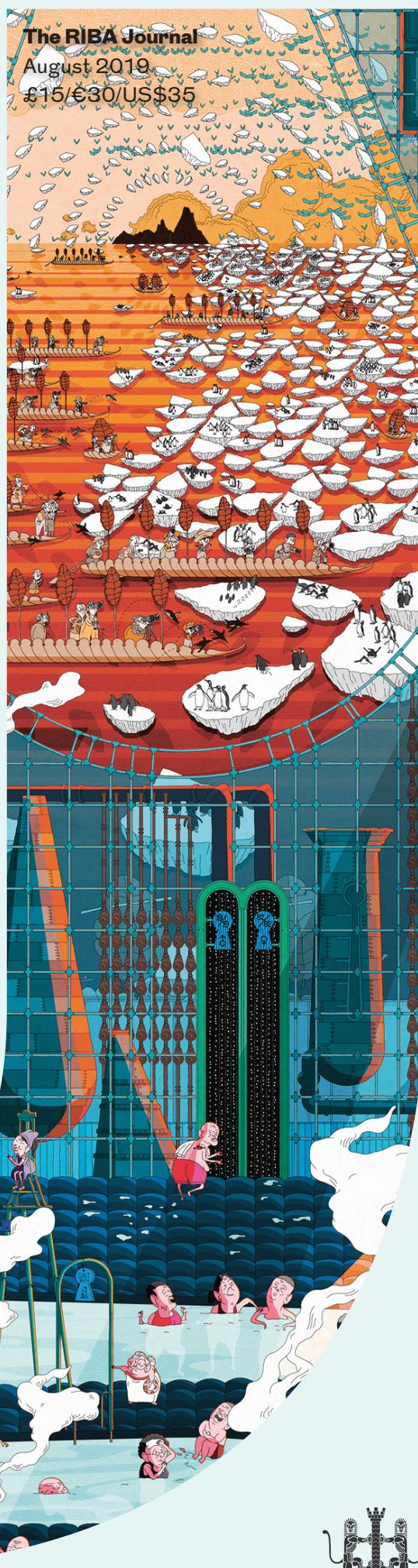


Eye Line lets the pictures tell the story

Six left in the race for the Stirling

Overcoat for Mackintosh

Peak practice: Hong Kong bustles on



The RIBA Journal
August 2019
£15/€30/US\$35



Intelligence Profile

Right The composite “Sun Room” in Peitian uses traditional bamboo-weaving techniques in an entirely new way.

Superposition offers a way through this. There are some parallels with the work of Rural Urban Framework, the non-profit collaborative teaching practice at HKU run by Joshua Bolchover and John Lin. That is a larger-scale affair dealing with the judicious urbanisation of rural communities in China and Mongolia. In contrast, Superposition the practice is outside the university – though as Holohan says, ‘there are unavoidable overlaps and interests – indeed the goal of Superposition is to blur the lines between practice/building, teaching and research’. The series of HKU built projects in Peitian – one per academic year – learn from and develop the traditional techniques found there.

Peitian in Fujian province is a village where traditional craft skills were on the wane, and historic buildings falling into disrepair, but where the traditional agricultural way of life survives. Working through an NGO, Gengxin Village Co-Creation, Superposition has so far realised three projects there: the Wind and Rain Bridge in timber that acts as a covered walkway, shelter and meeting place; the Sun Room shelter and resting place comprising an in-situ composite woven bamboo shell; and the Living Museum archive and workshop, inserted into a disused grain store. So far 180 students have participated.

The Wind and Rain Bridge of 2015-16 is an interlocking timber structure made of 265 digitally-designed components with no mechanical fastenings. This mountainous fertile area had been devastated by flooding in 2014 and reconnections had to be made. The bridge, spanning a rocky torrent in the fields, is also a flight of shallow steps making a seating area: a place to pause, not just traverse.

Sun Room, the second project of 2016/2017, is the most lyrical in form: students and villagers worked with the last remaining



‘The goal of Superposition is to blur the lines between practice/building, teaching and research’



Conservation & heritage



Design, construction & technology

Architecture's yin and yang

Ancient skills and modern technology, practice and academia, theory and making, Ireland and China: Superposition in Hong Kong purposefully mixes it all up

Photographs: Superposition

Above Elspeth Lee and Donn Holohan of Superposition - from Ireland to Hong Kong, combining practice with academic research.

Hugh Pearman

The University of Hong Kong (HKU) is an agreeable place, perched half-way up the hill towards the western end of the island. Its very colonial original Edwardian building, now somewhat shabby and scheduled for an upgrade courtesy of Wilkinson Eyre, is not really at the heart of the action: that takes place on the higher ground where a sequence of modern buildings arranged along lofty covered walkways, terraces and squares gives a processional feel and wonderful views. Here, in the square in front of the rather impressive Knowles Building where the architecture school is based, I meet Donn Holohan.

He and his fellow Irish colleague and partner Elspeth Lee (away on the day I called in) run a practice, Superposition, that is among other things designing a community theatre performance space in Hong Kong and some rural co-housing in Ireland. Holohan's principal research project at HKU is a thoroughly practical, hands-on affair. It marries traditional materials and techniques with modern design technology to produce useful and lyrical buildings in the southern Chinese village of Peitian.

The pair previously had experience with leading Irish firms such as O'Donnell + Tuomey, Grafton, Paul Keogh, Bucholz McEvoy, plus in Lee's case spells with firms in Germany. She's an assistant lecturer at HKU, reviewing and teaching while building up the practice, he a full time assistant professor. Both alumni of University College Dublin, they share with the likes of long-term UCD teachers Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey a love of and fascination with the craft and communal aspects of building.

Moving to Hong Kong in 2014, with the possibilities that opened up in China, allowed them to do things that were increasingly difficult in Ireland or the UK, says Holohan. 'We couldn't practise in the way we wanted to – making things rather than specifying products,' he says. Having a degree in furniture design as well as a masters in architecture, making is what he's used to – at HKU he also helps run an enviable workshop where traditional materials like handmade brick meet the world of the computer-controlled robot.

Hong Kong has its fill of large practices, both native and outposts of overseas organisations (see page 38): smaller experimental firms are less well represented.



(and very old) bamboo weaver in the village, scaling the material up to make a sun and rainscreen for the eventual structure which also functions as a chimney to move air through (it can get very hot there).

The third, Living Museum of 2018/19, moves beyond the scope of the earlier buildings to become something of an economic generator for the village. By finding a new use for the old granary the Living Museum provides a knowledge exchange for crafts and skills and makes a museum of the place itself and its hinterland, so encouraging tourists. Given the continuing commitment of Holo-

Above The Wind and Rain Bridge was the first of the hands-on projects in Peitian.

Above right New meeting old in the Living Museum, made in an old disused granary building.



han/Superposition to the village and their description of the project as a place where 'knowledge is shared between students, teachers, villagers and the academic community', one might also see it as an occasional rural atelier for the architecture school and the practice.

'Merging vernacular means and methods with digital tools' is how Holoohan describes this process, and it could even be a motto for this practice with a strongly community-centred view of evolving tradition and place. Superposition is designing, making and building to excellent purpose. ●

Places, planning
& communityDesign, construction
& technology

Hong Kong practice

Hong Kong is a very different proposition to almost anywhere, but global practices value a foothold in this fast-paced region

Helen Castle

Hong Kong is a magnet for architectural practices worldwide. There is hardly a global firm that does not have an office here. With a population of just 7.3 million, it has nearly 1,000 RIBA members – the greatest number outside the UK – while the Hong Kong Institute of Architects has a further 4,000. A centre for architectural education, two of its architecture schools are in the top 20 of the QS world university rankings. The RIBA has also developed a Part III course here.

Despite the territory's prominence, its professional and commercial landscape is often misunderstood. With East Asia changing fast, will Hong Kong remain an important stepping stone for mainland China? What

does it take to make a practice work in this local context? What challenges do practices face working in China from Hong Kong?

Nine Plus Two and the Greater Bay Area

Hong Kong and China are each other's main trading partners. Political influence, however, remains the subject of internal negotiation and tension. As a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong's citizens value the high level of autonomy that its separate legal, administrative and judicial systems provide. As is being demonstrated by recent protests.

Earlier this year the Chinese government announced its Greater Bay Area Plan that earmarks nine mainland cities in Guangdong – most notably Shenzhen – and the two special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macao, as engines for Chinese growth. The 'Nine Plus Two Plan', as it is known, is embodied in the world's longest sea bridge, the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, which links the two regions to the mainland.

The intention is to create an innovation and financial powerhouse in southern China to rival Silicon Valley and the Tokyo Bay Area, as China aims to become an 'artificial intelligence super power'. Hong Kong is to strengthen its status as a trade, financial and professional services hub, while Shenzhen, home to telecoms giant Huawei and Tencent's multi-purpose, social media and payment platform WeChat, bolsters itself as a tech hub. Zhuhai's development as a financial, tech and tourism city has already been vastly accelerated by the new bridge.

Architectural expertise is fundamental to the Greater Bay Area Plan, which includes urban development and housing provision, consolidation of infrastructure, environmental



Top Aedas and RSHP delivered the Passenger Clearance Building at Hong Kong Port to process users of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge.

Above Inside, the roof supplies undulating interest in an imposing airy space.

protection, sustainable energy sources and liveability. Government funding already recognises the need for future architects with subsidies reducing tuition fees at the University of Hong Kong to £4,000 a year.

The Hong Kong Design Centre advocates the significant role of design in economic growth and productivity – and to the city's progress and citizens' wellbeing. As Dr Edmund Lee, the centre's executive director, says: 'Hong Kong is a service economy and does not have natural resources, so requires the human-centred perspective that design brings.' The centre's annual Business of Design Week is a focus for international exchange, drawing speakers and delegates from around the world. This December, the UK will be the partner country. The RIBA



is collaborating with the Department for International Trade on the architecture programme, giving 40 RIBA members the chance to form a major design delegation.

A strategic approach to mainland China

Foreign practices often regard Hong Kong as a safe launch pad for mainland China. The 'One Country, Two Systems' approach guarantees the rights of property and ownership in the territory, while currency and language are different. Hong Kong-based practices must collaborate with Local Design Institutes (LDIs) in China, who undertake work at the detailed design stage, limiting services to the conceptual. Getting money out of clients and the country is also an issue.

How a practice works in mainland China therefore requires a clear strategy. Matthew Potter, director of WilkinsonEyre in Hong Kong, says his focus for the moment is on the Greater Bay Area with projects in Hong Kong, Macao, Shenzhen and Zhuhai. He is expanding the 15-strong team in Hong Kong incrementally. Projects under way include high-profile schemes for institutions in the Greater Bay Area: rejuvenating the main building for Hong Kong University, the Skybridge at Hong Kong International Airport and Shenzhen Bay Avenue East Extension.



Top WilkinsonEyre's Skybridge at Hong Kong International Airport.

Above Hengqin International Financial Center and Hengqin MCC Headquarters Complex (phase II) in Zhuhai, designed by Aedas.

The Shenzhen office leapt from 20 to 80 staff in its first year. Old areas of Shenzhen are 15-20 years old

Dedicated resources are needed to access the market in China effectively. This means employing mainland Chinese staff with language skills and connections with government and planners – and, increasingly, the tech industry. Keith Griffiths, chair and founder of Aedas, who came to Hong Kong in 1983 to work with Fosters on the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, has set up his 1200-strong global company to meet Chinese demand. Though its Hong Kong headquarters has 700 staff, the growth is now in China where there are four offices with 300 staff in Chengdu, Shenzhen, Beijing and Shanghai. Work in the Hong Kong office is 60% from China and more than half the staff are from the mainland. The Shenzhen office leapt from 20 to 80 staff in its first year. Griffiths explains: 'Where there was nothing in 1985, it is all built out. Shenzhen is three times the size of Hong Kong. Old areas of Shenzhen are 15-20 years old.'

Like Aedas, Farrells focuses on China. It has 90 staff in Hong Kong and a further 10 in Shanghai. It set up in Hong Kong at the height of the recession in the early 90s when it won three key commissions – for Kowloon Station, The Peak and The British Consulate. It has gone on to excel in transit-oriented developments – a model that has become an essential component of high-density urban design. Towers are also important, often built at great speed and with complex phasing, where various parts of a building can effectively be at different work stages at the same time. As the international design architect on a project, Farrells will typically be paired with an LDI to deliver the plot masterplan and the building/facade design.

The practice context

The role of the architect in Hong Kong is quite unique. The Authorised Person (AP) system provides the framework for supervising construction: The Building Department requires APs to co-ordinate and monitor all building

works. Registered architects, structural engineers and quantity surveyors can apply to be APs. The client usually appoints the project AP as project leader. As a result, 1,500 of the 2,200 APs in Hong Kong are architects.

Plot ratio is the main instrument of planning in Hong Kong. In one of the highest density regions in the world, it is used to control population density. The plot ratio of a building is obtained by dividing the gross floor area of the building by the area of the site on which it is to be erected. Ratios in redevelopment zones, for instance Kowloon, can be 10–20 per cent lower than on Hong Kong Island North, where ratios are to 8 to 10.

Density and the lack of affordable housing are a matter of urgency. For Aedas' Griffiths, Hong Kong can only retain its way of life 'if the government is wise about housing provision. There is a big gap too between rich and poor.' It has even affected his practice: 'The shortage of affordable housing already makes it difficult to get architects to work in Hong Kong from mainland China.' Griffiths argues that, having built hardly any housing between 1997 and 2016, the government must unlock rail lines and land: 'There is an urgent need for infrastructure and land supply.'

A new model for international practice

Bean Buro epitomises a new generation of practice, which is redefining what it means to be international. Partners Lorène Faure and Kenny Kinugasa-Tsui set up their studio in Hong Kong in 2013. Faure was born and studied in Paris, and then worked in London with her one-time teacher, Peter Cook, where she met Kinugasa-Tsui, who is Hong-Kong born of Chinese and Japanese heritage. After studying at the Bartlett, he worked at Richard Rogers Partnership and Urban Salon Architects in London. Bean Buro is in the process of becoming a chartered practice; chartered mem-



FARRELLS

bers Faure and Kinugasa-Tsui oversee the log books of their 14-strong, cosmopolitan staff.

The practice focuses on the large-scale opportunities provided by interiors in workplace, residential and hospitality design, which have plenty of crossover. The shortage of available land limits the scope for new builds, but interiors have plenty of potential for interventions, as demonstrated by Bean Buro's sculptural canopies for The Work Project, a 30,000ft² co-working space at Causeway Bay in central Hong Kong. The canopies, inspired by those of the fishing community that once occupied the location, also make a feature of the lettable meeting rooms.

Workplace design here, like Hong Kong style practice, is pragmatic and innovative, moving quickly and at scale. Frequently on short leases, offices can be refitted as often as every four years. It typifies the ethos of practice in the territory that is highly regulated but business-like, responding quickly to the demands of one of the most highly populated regions in the world. International in composition, it always keeps a close eye on rapid developments in mainland China. ●

A longer version of this article is on ribaj.com
The RIBA is participating in Business of Design Week 2019 in Hong Kong, 2-7 December 2019:
<https://bodw.com/en/>

Above The tallest building in Shenzhen until 2016, Farrells' KK100 forms the centre for an eight-tower urban regeneration projects.

Bottom left Lorène Faure and Kenny Kinugasa-Tsui of Bean Buro.

Having built hardly any housing between 1997 and 2016, the government must unlock rail lines and land



BEANBURO

Design, construction
& technology

Room for one more?

Hong Kong's reputation for densely packed building and land reclamation continues its forward march

Words and photographs: Hugh Pearman

The protests had just started, before this, my first visit to Hong Kong. In the weeks and months that followed they steadily increased, and sparked protest in support from members of the Hong Kong diaspora around the world. The HK government under chief executive Carrie Lam moved towards the protestors' central demand – the withdrawal of a bill which would have allowed extradition to mainland China. The demonstrations just continued and intensified, in an echo of what President Macron experienced with the 'gilets jaunes' in France. The dissatisfaction culminated (at the time of writing) in the violent storming of the Legislative Council building on 1 July. More protests are planned.

This is a lesson in what 'Hong Kongness' means. We are not yet half way through the agreed 50-year transfer period following the handover of the former UK colony. Hence the extreme sensitivity to any government move that is seen to erode the prized freedoms of the Hong Kongers, which have over time led to the physical expression of the place itself.

Why am I writing about this? One reason is that Hong Kong contains the largest number of RIBA members outside the UK, both indigenous and ex-pat. Partly that is a legacy of colonialism but mostly it is to do with those facts outlined above: its location and political status, combined with its vigorous trading



Above Hyper-dense living in the Mong Kok district, inspiration for the film *Blade Runner*.

The shape of the shoreline seems to change constantly as the relatively shallow waters of the archipelago allow for the making of new land

history. As Helen Castle reports in the previous feature, this is where international architecture firms like to have their regional bases. You don't need a visa to go there and when you do, it's almost nostalgic to arrive at Foster's Chek Lap Kok airport on its man made island. When it opened in 1998 this was the ne plus ultra of terminal design, a rapidly-built farewell gift to the colony by the UK government. Now, though still vast to British eyes, it is almost a period piece. It is exactly what we should have built years ago for London in the Thames Estuary, but let's not get into that.

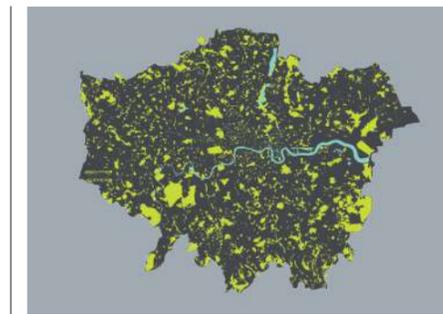
It is, of course, all about the topography, the feel of Hong Kong. You get development clinging to the subtropical high ground. This explains two things about the place: its famed hyper-density and the fact that they just can't stop reclaiming more and more land to build things on, roads included. The shape of the shoreline seems to change constantly as the



Left and right Farrells' HK office produced these diagrams of built and open space in Hong Kong (left) and London (right). Both are 50km across, to the same scale.

● Urban environment
● Green space
● Water

0 10 km



relatively shallow waters of the archipelago allow for the making of new land in a way that is reminiscent of Dubai.

But they are pretty good at building on steep slopes too. One of the attractions of Hong Kong island is the vertical layering of the place, skyscrapers sprouting one behind the other. Often you are so close to another building you can almost touch it, and it is common for windows on lower levels to be opaque to avoid overlooking, but somehow, overall, the vertical separation makes this tolerable. Vegetation creeps in. At the edges vertiginous staircases set into the slopes, alongside carefully-maintained stormwater

Below Cramming in the buildings: towers as vertical plot extrusions.

channels, arrive in mountainous parkland, loud with birdsong, dotted with shrines.

Verticality expresses itself in another way: retail takes place on many more levels than we are used to in Europe. Here, four levels is about the most we'll attempt – how do you get the people circulating round more floors of shops? No problem in Hong Kong: in one vast 2004 shopping centre we visited – Langham Place in the teeming commercial district of Mong Kok in Kowloon – I counted 15 floors of retail, two below ground, 13 above. Retailing happens everywhere: it's not unusual to find yourself being directed through a supermarket to get to a metro station.





Mong Kok is an eye-opener – many thanks to Thomas Chung of the architecture school at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for being our guide. It is an example not only of the traditional HK super-density from the interwar period onwards – it inspired the atmosphere of Ridley Scott’s original Blade Runner movie, after all – but also of how such enormous new developments (and plenty of smaller ones) are inserted into the urban fabric. There is a perpetual churn of new, ever-taller buildings, many effectively just vertical extrusions of their plot boundaries. And the area’s history is also horizontal: the steady advance of land claimed from the sea.

Nonetheless the character of Mong Kok as a place of innumerable small shops and stalls, roughly zoned street by street into enclaves of fruit, fish, meat, electronics and so on – survives happily outside the megamall. A 2017 boutique hotel, the Beacon, designed in the stacked-pod manner by Aedas, fits the ultra-dense surroundings considerably better than the Jerde megamall (which entailed the destruction of a complete old market) – and tells you something about the changing character of the place. But there is another factor: Mong Kok is a centre for cosmetic surgery and such hotels serve the demand for ‘medical tourism’ from China and beyond.

As you’d expect, everywhere in Hong Kong displays the crunch of new against old, from the old trams and new British-built double-decker buses to the built environ-

Above This is how the more affluent live – these apartments in Happy Valley are sizeable by Hong Kong standards.

Below Another approach: timber pavilion in West Kowloon by New Office Works.



ment. Colonial-era buildings, the relatively few that survive, demonstrate various eras of response to the hot humid climate – deep open balconies and planted courtyards at such places as the 1911 Hong Kong University giving way to taller postwar buildings with sophisticated concrete brise-soleils. While Foster’s 1986 HSBC HQ famously uses the waters of Victoria Harbour for cooling and deploys an external sunscoop to direct daylight into its interior, most of the new corporate architecture is just the standard sealed, air conditioned energy-hungry type.

An exception is to be found in the new West Kowloon cultural district – made on new land, of course, lushly landscaped, intended to become something of the HK equivalent of Singapore’s Gardens by the Bay. There’s a curious new performing arts venue there, the Xiqu Centre for Chinese opera, by Canada’s Revery Architecture with local practice Ronald Lu and Partners (the concept is of aluminium curtains being pulled aside, so literally a curtain wall). An OMA-designed lyric theatre is in the pipeline, and a sizeable art museum by Herzog and de Meuron. All big look-at-me lumps, but a small look-at-me lump there now is a beautifully made timber pavilion by New Office Works (Paul Tse Yi-pong and Evelyn Ting Hwei-chung), the result of the first Hong Kong Young Architects & Designers Competition. It’s a reminder of the architectural elements of an older Hong Kong, focusing your view out to sea.

Intelligence Place

Further to the east in Kowloon, directly opposite the harbour centre on the island, the mega-development of Victoria Dockside is under way, masterplanned by KPF and Ronald Lu with James Corner Field Operations on landscape. All in strict accordance with the HK government’s sustainable design guidelines, we are told.

New public space is a key aspect of such developments, which reminds you how little of this there is in urban Hong Kong – though there is plenty up in the hills. The city centre cultural quarter of Tai Kwun, made out of the old colonial police station/courts/prison complex and designed by Purcell with new insertions by Herzog & de Meuron, represents a victory over the usual demolish-and-cram-more-in mentality. Here the old police parade ground and other courtyards, surrounded by relatively low Victorian and Edwardian buildings, provide a real sense of urbanity, and it’s very popular.

Every Sunday, people make their own public space as the (largely Filipina) house-servant class flocks into town on its half-day off, camping out on public concourses and beneath the HSBC building. This reminds you of another Hong Kong, that of the poorest workers living in exceptionally cramped accommodation – essentially, cages or coops, subdivided from other rooms. In this city all property is expensive and (usually) small. The less you earn, the smaller the space.

In a city where publicly-financed housing is commonplace (hence the famously dense



Above The Tai Kwun former Central Police Station complex, now a cultural centre, by Purcell with new buildings by Herzog & de Meuron.

Below Down in the streets, the traditional shops and street markets flourish.



forests of towers in the New Territories especially) there are plans for much more social housing; perhaps inevitably this involves making another artificial island, near existing Lantau Island to the west which itself spawned Foster’s airport. 1,000ha, 260,000 homes, cost of £60 billion. There are real environmental concerns about taking such a drastic course of action when (protestors aver) suitable land exists in the New Territories. But this is part of Hong Kongness: it’s what they have always done, and somehow I can’t see that attitude changing for a while yet. ●

