Dear All,

Reading about DUPAD’s praiseworthy Western Harbor Front master plan triggered thoughts that will take formal expression in two forthcoming Faculty symposia. First, on October 26th, the Eric Lye Memorial afternoon-forum will reflect on the role of the master plan in planning, designing, building and managing Chinese cities (‘Miracles and Mirages’, after the title of Professor Lye’s last lecture in the Mainland). Second, in a symposium being planned by Cecelia Chu and Natalia Echeverri, discussants will explore multiple realities of ‘The Speculative City’. When Cecelia, Natalia and I first started talking about their conference idea with this title, I naïvely assumed they were talking about financial speculation. They weren’t – at least not directly. They were talking about imaginative speculation; the production of speculative designs, spaces, futures. At first, this seems an example of miscommunication across different cultures, paradigms and languages. But the ideas are profoundly linked in ways that we shall hopefully explore in both symposia. Referring to the professional task of guiding the development of a constantly evolving, self-organising historic city like Paris or London, somebody once said ‘the future can’t be predicted it can only be invented’. An ancient proverb reflects: ‘man makes his plans but God directs his steps’. The idea of designing a city is paradoxical; almost to the extreme of being oxymoronic. How can you design something that is characterized by spontaneity, surprise, informality, complexity? Here is the hint of an argument for applying design only to the lowest tier of spatial resource allocation problems: the building. But, of course, there are strong, long-standing (but not unassailable) arguments for applying design, as a method of coordination, at the block, neighbourhood, city and regional scale. And thus we have speculation of imagined futures at each of these various scales. Guoyan Zhou, Professor of Urban Planning at Hefei University once suggested to me that 40% of Chinese master plans are out of date or otherwise irrelevant before they are completed. Master plans allow for grand speculation; and when they are not prematurely out of date and do in fact successfully shape new additions to cities, the speculative cities they create provide new canvases upon which society arranges itself. Master plans are, indeed, speculations in the eye of the designer and the spontaneous way in which land is subsequently used, re-used and re-ordered in the years to come may or may not have a close correspondence to the vision of the speculator.

Compared to the ‘place speculator’ (architect or ‘material culture speculator’), the financial speculator’s role in city building is typically shorter-term. It is the coming together of the short-termism of capital and the long-term legacy of the built investment that gives rise to many of the problems that urban planners try to tackle (retrospectively or in advance). From a planner’s point of view, this is a rationale for master plans. From an investor’s perspective, a master plan can add private value to a site. From a public planner’s or urban designer’s point of view, a master plan can add social value to a collection of sites. From an architect’s point of view, working on a particular site, a master plan can both constrain and liberate. The master plan for the redeveloped Liede urban village (chengzhongcun) in Guangzhou, for example, gave the architect freedom to design buildings way above the legal density (because this was the only way the
municipal government could generate funds sufficient to compensate the villagers who had to be relocated). And so design speculators and financial speculators come together.

Nothing makes this point more powerfully than the so-called tallest-building index. It has long been observed by economists that the commencement of work on the world’s (latest) tallest building regularly precedes a major economic crash (first popularized by investment analyst Andrew Lawrence in 1999 following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis). Think for example, Singer Building, Empire State Building, Sears Tower, Petronas Towers, Burj Khalifa and the Shard, respectively started just before and completed just after the financial crises of 1907, 1929, 1973, 1997 and 2007. The theory is simple: low interest rates and cheap credit means lots of footloose investment funds; land is always a good investment in boom times and centrally located land is even better; return on central land is increased by building ever higher; the confident mood of investors at the peak of a boom tends to push technological solutions to the edge, often leading to new construction technologies and new design possibilities; just as all this self-reinforcing optimism pushes the logic of real-estate investment to its extreme, the bubble bursts. The doors to the latest tallest building in the city, country, region or world, are nearly always opened on the way down.

I am watching the progress of Changsha’s 838m 202 floor prefabricated Sky City, to be constructed in 9 months, with some trepidation. Not only with an eye to the heightening risk of another European banking collapse but also to the similarities with Titanic – biggest ships being another bubble phenomenon associated with boom times…

On a more upbeat note, many congratulations to all those listed below (especially to Anthony and colleagues for their master planning scheme!).

Chris
1. Ms. Tris Kee

- presented a paper "Adaptive Reuse of Industrial Buildings to Affordable Housing" at the Asia Pacific Network for Housing Research Conference 2013, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

- was invited to teach a summer studio workshop at the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, August 22nd and 23rd, 2013.
Dr Hoyin Lee appeared in a full-page feature on the South China Morning Post, in which he talked about the concept and feasibility of integrating architectural conservation with small-scale, non-demolition-based property development by means of refurbishing early post-war tong lau (Chinese shophouses) as high-quality boutique apartments on August 13th, 2013.
1. Dr. Roger Chan

- jointly presented a paper with the PhD student, Mr. Yi Sun entitled “The Changing Governance Mechanism and Spatiality of Chinese State: Lessons from Guangzhou-Foshan City Region” at the Inter-University Seminar on Asian Megacities: Asian Urbanism and Beyond at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 16th, 2013.

- served as the External Examiner to the PhD dissertation of Li Yun, Department of Geography and Resource Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 20th, 2013.

2. Dr. Raul Lejano

- published a paper with details as below:


3. Ms. Jie Li (PhD student)

- made a presentation entitled "Mega-projects and the Entrepreneurial Local State - Planning the New Towns in Shanghai" (joint paper with Prof. Rebecca Chiu) at the Inter-University Seminar on Asian Megacities: Asian Urbanism and Beyond at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 16th, 2013.

4. Mr. Samson Zhuojun Liu (PhD student)

- made a presentation entitled “Transforming to Urbanity? Shareholding Reforms of Village Collectives in Guangzhou” (joint paper with Prof. Bo-sin Tang) at the Inter-University Seminar on Asian Megacities: Asian Urbanism and Beyond at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 16th, 2013.

5. Professor Bo-sin Tang

- made a presentation entitled “Logic of Open Space Planning and Development in Hong Kong” (joint paper with the PhD student, Darren Man-wai Cheung) at the Inter-University Seminar on Asian Megacities: Asian Urbanism and Beyond at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on August 16th, 2013.

6. Dr. Fiona Yang

- awarded a research grant of RMB 230,000 by the National Science Foundation China for the research project on “A Study of the Multi-scalar Growth Dynamics of Producer Services and Its Urbanization Effects: From the Political Economy Perspective”.

7. Professor Anthony Yeh

- The Western Harbourfront Conceptual Master Plan of the Department of Urban Planning and Design with Prof. Anthony Yeh as PI has been positively received by the District Council as well as the press. The Plan for the Central and Western District Council that covers the stretch of waterfront area in the Western District that includes the Western Wholesale Food Market, the Western District Public Cargo Working Area and the temporary Kennedy Town Bus Terminus at
Shing Sai Street was widely publicized in most newspapers in Hong Kong on Saturday, 17 August 2013. It aims to provide a short, medium and long term plan to regenerate the past glamour of the Western Harbourfront. It will make the Western Harbourfront to be an attractive, vibrant and accessible water front by improving its public open space and converting it into a Western Gateway – a new landmark of Hong Kong.

The future of Western Harbourfront as envisaged by Hong Kong University and the district council. Photo: SCMP Pictures

Now that’s how to make an entrance

Plan unveiled to turn Kennedy Town waterfront into city’s glam and green ‘western gateway’

By Ng Ka Wai

A stunning new waterfront, featuring a bridge and walkway, will be the centrepiece of a project to regenerate the Western Harbourfront.

The bridge, which will link Kennedy Town to Victoria Park, is expected to become a new landmark for the city.

The plan, unveiled last month, was hailed by government officials as a significant step towards enhancing the city’s waterfront.

“The new bridge will not only connect Kennedy Town to Victoria Park, but also provide a new gateway to the city,” said Albert Chan, chairman of the Western Harbourfront Revitalization Task Force.

Chan said the bridge would be a key feature of the project, which is expected to cost around HK$1 billion.

The project will also include the construction of a new water park, a pedestrian bridge and a boardwalk along the waterfront.

“I am confident that this project will not only enhance the city’s waterfront but also attract more visitors,” said Chan.

The project is expected to be completed in 2016.