

# City Talk



Shenzhen has developed from a fishing village into an international hub. XINHUA

## CITY PLANNING SHOULD BE FORWARD LOOKING

The perennial issue of finding land to meet commercial and residential demands reminds me of how each city plans its land use.

In my previous articles, I have explained how Hong Kong continuously found land to meet economic growth – the Taikoo Dockyards became Taikoo Shing and Whampoa Dockyards became the Hungghom development.

I could go on to point out how the Lok On Pai Desalination Plant became the Gold Coast development, Mobil Tank Farm moved to Tsing Yi to make way for Mei Foo's development, and how the Kai Tak Airport became part of the larger land bank for the Cruise Terminal, hospitals, a stadium and a cluster of commercial and residential properties.

I predict that the sites at Tsing Yi – the former Tsing Yi Power Station and the under-utilized site at the Hongkong United Dockyard – will soon become residential developments.

This evolution of land use from industrial to commercial and residential developments is the established planning theme for Hong Kong.

It seems to be a natural trend that fits in with our commercial focus for the development of land with ever-rising value.

But I am concerned that such a transformation is passive and lacks vision.

Looking across our border up north, it is amazing how Shenzhen has developed from farms and a fishing village into a huge growth engine for technology development over the last few decades.

Some may say this is the mainland copying Hong Kong's success by opening up policy restrictions, while others will say that this is due to the abundant immigration of talents to this new city.

These theories may be partly true, but I have my own views, based on my own personal experience.

To develop a city, the first activity



### Nuts and bolts

Edmund Leung

is to plan its infrastructure in the order of transport, power, energy and telecommunication.

Let me share a story with you.

In my days as a consulting engineer, I helped cities plan transport systems, and I was once invited to present a urban transport proposal to the Shenzhen government in the 1990s.

I suggested a ground-level medium-capacity railway network, as there was still a lot of unused land offering ample opportunities to lay out the city.

The rule of thumb for railway capital costs for surface, viaducts and tunnels was about 1:3:10, and a lot of that could be saved.

The city official who received my presentation agreed that though it may be a prudent commercial approach, it did not fit with the grand plan of their city planning as directed by the central government.

They insisted on a full underground railway network, as they anticipated huge growth of population.

This proud consulting engineer went back to Hong Kong with a lost opportunity, shaking his head at what he thought was an overly-ambitious scheme.

Thirty years on, I now know who is right. City planning should be top-down and based on its intended purpose, not purely by evolution. The old fable of the rabbit and the tortoise lives again.

It is still not too late for us to plan our land resources for the next 30 to 50 years by noting the potential of our city's position in the Greater Bay Area instead of just reacting to short-term market trends.

**Veteran engineer Edmund Leung Kwong-ho casts an expert eye over Hong Kong's iconic infrastructure**