



The predominantly government-owned MTR has become a target in the recent anti-government protests, thereby affecting connected shopping malls. AFP/ED JONES

THE ART OF DESIGNING MTR ENTRANCES

I occasionally hear criticisms on ineffective planning of mass transit railway station locations, exits and routes, and I have to say these complaints are unfair.

The characteristics of a public transport system is that everyone who uses it expects it to be more convenient, whatever the route.

But in the case of a mass transit system, it is designed to cater to the masses, not the individuals.

Transport infrastructure usually takes more than 10 years to plan and build. In a fast-growing city, that is a long time and economic development could easily change the original land use.

What was originally a residential area could become a commercial area. One does not need to look too far beyond Tsim Sha Tsui and Causeway Bay to see how those parts of the SAR had developed in the past 10 years, requiring new entrances to be built to connect to new nodes of shoppers and commuters. The building of station exits had become a continuous activity over the past 40 years.

Station and exit locations are extremely politically and commercially sensitive for obvious reasons, heavily influenced by local government and commercial developers. It affects city planning and the value of properties nearby.

Most commercial buildings gain in value when they can attract patronage from mass transit railway users, and station locations and their exit points could affect the behavior of commuters, requiring connections to minibus and car pick-up points. The conflicting requirements of easy access and proximity to commercial establishments can never be satisfactorily met.

As mass transit railway stations are usually built after a city has already developed, the exits will have to be sited at places that may not seem ideal. They may not look logical at first glance but are results of some compromise.

Developers often compete to have access directly to railway stations. They will purposely



Nuts and bolts Edmund Leung

design their shopping malls with basements linking directly to stations, to attract commuters to visit their shops.

Ironically, I have seen developers who flatly refused to let MTR station exits join their buildings and malls, fearing that they may attract the wrong type of patrons – those who are not shoppers of premium goods.

For many years in my professional career, I failed to see why they would prefer to lose these commercial opportunities, but the recent social unrest reminded me how wise these people had been.

Many mall owners now wish they do not have direct connections to railway stations, as they have induced undue stresses to their property management team, to say the least.

For station exits, the MTR must have some of the world's most complicated and varied exits.

Witness the long connections between Tsim Sha Tsui and TST East, and between Central and Hong Kong stations. These stations are connected by long pedestrian walkways that, even when travellers are used, could easily be a 10-minute walk. The prevailing weather conditions in Hong Kong also require these walkways to be fully air-conditioned.

For those who complain about expensive construction costs of the MTR, there lies the main reason. But the advantage and convenience of a well-connected underground pedestrian system is probably the main factor why the MTR had been a major success and has become an indispensable facility to most commuters.

So, as you travel on the MTR, may I suggest you take time to pause and appreciate the complicated exit arrangements and enjoy the walk.

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