

# City Talk



Dry docks like this one in Whampoa were still thriving in 1965 before they made way for housing estates and commercial properties when air transport boomed in the 1970s.

## DOCKS MAY HAVE GONE BUT THEY LEFT THEIR MARK

If people were asked what the earliest industry in Hong Kong was, I bet not many would know that the dockyard industry was the pioneer.

Taikoo Dockyard and Whampoa Docks were probably the earliest industries.

Post office box No 1, now the PO box number for Swire Pacific, started with Taikoo Dockyard, and business registration No 1 was assigned to Whampoa Docks as the first limited company.

Indeed, our older residents will remember these two organizations as the largest employers in Hong Kong.

Up to the early 1950s, we did not have a lot of university graduates. The dockyards offered opportunities apart from working in import and export firms, or in retail shops or restaurants to those who had little education.

Painting, welding, metal working, etc were considered good jobs in those days as they paid comparatively well, especially if workers were prepared to work overtime, work under undesirable conditions and perform manual labor.

They enjoyed stable employment and some fringe benefits such as free medical services, which were much better than what shopkeepers and hawkers would get.

Hong Kong was the Pearl of the Orient for two centuries, and when sea transport was the main mode for goods of trade, there were a lot of oceangoing vessels visiting the Far East.

Our dockyards, following the examples of those in Britain, enjoyed a lucrative business as we have deep seaports and our relatively large volume of trade facilitated a lot of sea traffic.

Oceangoing vessels require frequent maintenance and our dockyards enjoyed a leading position ahead of Singapore and Shanghai.

In order for sea vessels to be inspected and repaired on dry ground, dry docks were the main facility.

A dry dock allows a ship to enter, with



### Nuts and bolts

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the gates closed off and water drained so that the ship rests on blocks at the bottom of the dock, to allow routine inspection and painting.

Lifting cranes on the top of the dry dock allow equipment replacement or overhaul while the vessel is out of service.

As each inspection and repair process involves weeks of work, it created a lot of job opportunities.

In the 1970s, as air transport gradually took over the bulk of travel, dockyard businesses began their downward trend, and the two owned by British conglomerates, Swire and Hutchison Whampoa, decided to merge.

Thus, Hongkong United Dockyards was formed, and operations were moved to Tsing Yi, freeing up the most valuable land in town for development.

Instead of using dry docks, three floating docks provided the necessary facilities for ship inspections and repairs.

What we now see as Taikoo Shing and the Whampoa development are successful examples of land-use transformation from industrial applications to residential and commercial applications.

As with any city, businesses grow and move on with time and with demands.

The heydays of Hong Kong as a major seaport soon changed from ship repairs to container terminals, and manual labor gradually evolved into much more sophisticated service industries.

But the quest for talent superior to our neighbors remains the key to keeping our leading position in the region.

Let us hope we can once again lead our region with our long-standing but now forgotten tradition of talent and hard work.

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