

# City Talk

## LA fires were disaster waiting to happen



**Nuts and bolts**

Edmund Leung

We are getting off to a bad start to the year, what with the catastrophic wildfires in Los Angeles making for a hellish mix when one factors in a slew of earthquakes and other natural disasters.

In a comment made in August on the wildfire in Lahaina, Hawaii, I said it was probably the worst such conflagration in America, at least in the past century.

A whole district was wiped out and more than 100 people died.

The Los Angeles wildfires have caused at least 27 deaths and dozens missing, but their footprint was much worse than the Lahaina disaster – 150 square kilometers.

It is estimated that at least 10,000 buildings burned down and more than 100,000 people have had to evacuate.

Some structures were expensive houses and commercial facilities in a scenic neighborhood, occupied by celebrities and wealthy businessmen.

Losses have been estimated at more than US\$150 billion (HK\$1.17 trillion).

That is a huge number by any measure and may probably set a new world record for the cost of damages due to wildfires.

Wildfires occur every year, especially in the dry winter, and affect many parts of the world. It is usually caused by dry weather and strong winds.

When a wildfire starts, strong winds help spread the inferno to larger areas.

Once it spreads, conventional fire-fighting methods, either with the help of fire hydrants or by dumping water from helicopters, will not do the trick. The high heat load, fueled by wooden buildings and nearby grass and trees, will cause the fire to spread quickly and continuously.



The only way blazes happening on such a grand scale can be extinguished, apart from torrential rain, would be by carving out a fire break.

That means removing trees and grass to leave a stretch of land barren of fuel in the hope that the fire can stop spreading.

However, residents in the affected areas can't deny they had not been warned.

Last year, many had insurance coverage on their houses revoked.

That should have got them thinking about why that happened, ergo whether fire risks had gone off the charts.

Reports say California is supposed to have the most stringent fire regulations in the whole country but we can see that it was unable to prevent the fires from spreading for more than a week.

Residents blamed authorities for inadequate water supply to hydrants, hampering the fire department's ability to respond to emergencies.

They also reported that some large reservoirs were out of commission due to routine maintenance and repairs, leading to hydrants drying up.

However, my viewpoint is that there is a limit to purely feeding the hydrants with water from reservoirs and no engineering design can be brought to bear on bushfires that break out on such an epic scale.

In hindsight, town planning rules could have specified isolation strips for



The Los Angeles wildfires must have seemed like an apocalyptic scenario, what with, clockwise from main, a helicopter water bomb seeming to be a drop in an ocean of fire; the Palisades fire showing what a difference concrete makes; firemen coming too late to save an apartment building in Altadena; the Eaton fire taking an emotional toll on a family; and a hillfire in Yuen Long seemingly tame by comparison.



each small group of houses, segregating to minimize the potential for fires to spread.

However, one can guess that wouldn't go down well at all as it would make neighborhoods unpleasant, breaking with the general desire to have a lot of green vegetation around houses.

More adequately manned fire brigades could have been provided for more timely firefighting, though that is unlikely due to budget cuts.

Either way, it is likely that the entire prevention planning process and fire fighting facilities will be extensively reviewed in the aftermath of such a disaster.

We in Hong Kong live in a concrete jungle and often envy the lifestyles afforded by low-rise houses. However, in terms of convenience for commuting, shopping and doing daily chores, we now see the relative advantages to be had from living in concrete apartments in high-rise blocks.

We enjoy a very efficient public transport system, and our lives are, apart from the occasional serious typhoon, seldom affected by the weather.

Our fire prevention and fire fighting provisions, thanks to the experience and hard work of our Fire Services Department, ensure a very high level of safety for most of us.

We have long forgotten the days when some of our forebears lived in squatter huts on hillsides and suffered from winter fires in the past century.

The Los Angeles wildfires remind us that there is no perfect dwelling.

Flood plains have already proven to be dangerous for human habitation in the long term due to the risks of floods.

Living in the suburbs, apart from the inconvenience of commuting, not only costs a lot more but also requires a lot of valuable land.

Stringent fire regulations are some-

times resisted in old tenement blocks, but the fire in the Jordan Road building last year served as a wake-up call that reminds us that, when it comes to human safety, high standards must be maintained at all costs.

It is also fair to say that, for a densely populated area, instituting effective fire prevention measures is much easier.

Only at times like this do we remember how fortunate we are.

Our fire brigades and ambulances can reach us within minutes due to an excellent network and the efficient planning and operations of our Fire Services Department.

Hopefully, we do not need to see them too often as most of our buildings are adequately equipped to prevent fires from spreading and to fight them.

**Veteran engineer Edmund Leung Kwong-ho casts an expert eye over features of modern life**

## Cezanne and Renoir to leave great impression on HK

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

BERNARD CHARNWUT CHAN



Established in 1962, the Hong Kong Museum of Art is the city's first public art museum and a cornerstone of its cultural landscape.

Dedicated to preserving and showcasing art and cultural heritage, it reflects Hong Kong's journey as a bridge between tradition and modernity and East and West.

Throughout its history, the museum has curated a rich and diverse collection that includes Chinese antiquities such as ceramics, jade and bronzes, traditional and modern Chinese painting and calligraphy and historical local art, including works

documenting the city's cultural evolution.

It also features contemporary art by local and international artists and actively supports and promotes local talent, showcasing Hong Kong artists to a global audience.

Cezanne and Renoir: Looking at the World – Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Orangerie and the Musée d'Orsay opened last week at the museum. It is sponsored by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and runs until May 7.

This is the first large-scale exhibition of the two impressionist masters, Cezanne and Renoir, in Hong Kong.



It showcases 52 masterpieces from the Musée de l'Orangerie, renowned for its impressionist and post-impressionist masterpieces, and Musée d'Orsay, which houses an extensive collection of 19th and early

20th-century masterpieces. Both museums are located in Paris.

Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) were two of the most influential artists of the 19th century and key figures in the Impressionist movement.

Cezanne, often regarded as the "father of modern art," revolutionized painting with his bold use of color, geometric forms and innovative perspectives, laying the foundation for modern movements like Cubism.

Renoir, known for his vibrant and luminous works, captured the beauty of everyday life with a focus on human fig-

ures, intimate scenes and lush landscapes, celebrating joy and sensuality through his signature brushwork.

Both artists profoundly shaped the evolution of modern art and continue to inspire generations of artists.

The museum is concurrently hosting exhibitions featuring local artists Lai Kwan-ting, who reinterprets Impressionist legacies through contemporary Chinese painting, and Trevor Yeung, who explores themes of nature and human interaction with impressionism.

Don't miss this unique opportunity to explore Cezanne and Renoir alongside two talented Hong Kong artists.

**Bernard Charnwut Chan is chairman of Tai Kwun Culture & Arts Co Ltd**