Driving Hong Kong from a sleepy fishing village to Asia’s World City, reclamation has shaped the very essence of our city. But as debate heats up over Chek Lap Kok’s third runway, Judd Boaz and Mark Tjhung dissect the land-sea debate and ponder how long we can continue developing our coastlines. Illustrations by Phoebe Cheng.
If you took a stroll along Hong Kong’s northern shoreline 170 years ago, your path would be very different to what it is today. Queen’s Road, without the tram rolling past, would be at the water’s edge, leading toward a Wan Chai, then known as the Piyaa East district, where Honolulu Head would be at the land’s boundary. Across Victoria Harbour, twice as wide as today, you might be able to make out the Kowloon Peninsula, a diminutive relation to its concrete modern manifestation, and beyond further, if a diminutive relation to its concrete modern might be able to make out the Kowloon Peninsula, water’s edge, leading toward a Wan Chai, then before reclamation.

For a history of reclamation, To really appreciate the role reclamation has played in the development on Hong Kong, and how it has helped the city develop from a population of just 1,460 in 1841 to the 7.2 million it is today, it’s necessary to look back through its history. Although early attempts can be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty, land reclamation began in Hong Kong in earnest during British rule with the first reclamation of Kowloon Bay. The massive influx of immigrants fleeing mainland China during the 1950s and 1960s, and how it has helped the city develop from a population of just 1,460 in 1841 to the 7.2 million it is today, it’s necessary to look back through its history. Although early attempts can be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty, land reclamation began in Hong Kong in earnest during British rule with the first reclamation of Kowloon Bay. The massive influx of immigrants fleeing mainland China during the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the government used a low-cost dredging technique, pulling mud from the sea bed, allowing for land settlement, which would change the face of reclamation in Hong Kong.

The battle for the harbour

The ordinance states: “The habour is to be protected and preserved as a special public asset and a national heritage of Hong Kong people, and for that purpose there shall be a presumption against reclamation in the harbour.”

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Reclamation

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Kong-based NGO advocating protection of Hong Kong foresters. “It was the end of the colonial era, it was Chia Fietten enabling people to start thinking about what they wanted from a civil society and that really felt like they wanted,” Winston Chu, one of the main proponents behind the legislation, aimed to protect the harbour, which he considers “the soul of Hong Kong”. Thus in many ways, harbour protection became the rallying cry for a new Hong Kong. This manifested itself in various protests, none more unwavering than in 2004, when the historic Edinburgh/Place Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier in Central were slated for demolition to make way for the Central harbour front reclamation. Winston Chu says these biases can be attributed to Hong Kong people turning to a more optimistic reclamation. “The funny thing about human psychology is they cannot visualise something before it happens. They say, ‘oh, the government will not do that,’ which he considers ‘the soul of Hong Kong’. Chu says these losses can be attributed to Hong Kong, it’s quite ridiculous to reclaim the land.

Winston Chu sums up how he sees the test. “The reclamation will cause some irreversible impacts to the marine environments,” says Samantha Lee, senior conservation officer, marine at WWF Hong Kong. “It will cause serious habitat loss, which is permanent.” In particular, Lee points to the risk to Chinese white dolphins — often known as the pink dolphin — as well as the fishing industry, with the government’s low-cost dredging technique of pulling up mud from the bottom of the sea to lay foundations increasing sediment in the water, making it turgid and drastically affecting fish populations. “This approach the government has been using is one of destroying first and conserving later,” says Lee. Many environmental activists share Lee’s views. “For a cosmopolitan society like Hong Kong, it’s quite ridiculous to reclaim the land where the Chinese white dolphins live. You can see the mindset of Hong Kong people and the government,” says Roy Tam, CEO of environmental group Green Sense. For Tam, the government has not been able to justify the need for housing problems. Reclamation, therefore, is necessary to some extent. But there are two things to consider when discussing this situation. First, reclamation should be put into practice. First, balance the opinions of different stakeholders, like government should consider other solutions because reclamation is detrimental to our environment. If there are no other options, the government should make sure they carry out assessments and listen to complaints from the public before starting reclamation, so as to lower its impact to the environment.

As a Hongkonger, I feel helped when I see Victoria Harbour getting narrower and narrower. I believe Hong Kong government should consider other solutions because reclamation is detrimental to our environment. If there are no other options, the government should make sure they carry out assessments and listen to complaints from the public before starting reclamation, so as to lower its impact to the environment.

The environmental alarm Environmental concerns have long been an inevitable companion to Hong Kong reclamation projects. And most recently, the discussion has focused on the impact of the proposed third runway for Hong Kong International Airport, a project that aims to raise the airport’s flight-capacity by an extra 200,000 flights per year and which, with its proposed 65ha of reclaimed land, would make it Hong Kong’s second largest reclamation ever. An Environmental Impact Assessment for the third runway was released on June 30 and closed for public consultation on July 19. “[The reclamation] will cause some irreversible impacts to the marine environments,” says Samantha Lee, senior conservation officer, marine at WWF Hong Kong. “It will cause serious habitat loss, which is permanent.” In particular, Lee points to the risk to Chinese white dolphins — often known as the pink dolphin — as well as the fishing industry, with the government’s low-cost dredging technique of pulling up mud from the bottom of the sea to lay foundations increasing sediment in the water, making it turgid and drastically affecting fish populations. “This approach the government has been using is one of destroying first and conserving later,” says Lee. Many environmental activists share Lee’s views. “For a cosmopolitan society like Hong Kong, it’s quite ridiculous to reclaim the land where the Chinese white dolphins live. You can see the mindset of Hong Kong people and the government,” says Roy Tam, CEO of environmental group Green Sense. For Tam, the government has not been able to justify the need for housing problems. Reclamation, therefore, is necessary to some extent. But there are two things to consider when discussing this situation. First, reclamation should be put into practice. First, balance the opinions of different stakeholders, like government should consider other solutions because reclamation is detrimental to our environment. If there are no other options, the government should make sure they carry out assessments and listen to complaints from the public before starting reclamation, so as to lower its impact to the environment.

The view from the street

As long as you do not develop the New Territories, there will not be enough land and the harbour will not be safe

Although reclamation is not environmentally friendly, it is a must – the living quality of locals should be placed before the well-being of sea animals. Reclamation can provide a large quantity of land for development, notably for housing and leisure. Singapore also undergoes various reclamation projects for more relaxing and picturesque environments than Hong Kong’s.

The press and Cass The view for Centre, North Point, Kowloon. Photo by the Chinese white dolphin.

Reclamation is inevitable in Hong Kong. Hong Kong’s population is seven million. If there’s no reclamation, lots of people don’t have a place to live. You have to destroy the environment for a better life. Decades ago, hundreds of people lived in a floor in Central, the living environment was awful. Reclamation is good for the majority – if there’s no reclamation, where can people live with the increasing population?

Suppose reclamation in Hong Kong, Hong Kong is polluted but everybody agrees and reclamation will just worsen it. I don’t deny that we will have more land to our reclamation but the problem is that it means the habitat of sea creatures, like dolphins, and causes air pollution. In addition to that, I think we haven’t enough land already and there’s no need for reclamation anymore. I think it’s more important to control the number of Hollandland-visitors. It’s better to solve the problem of air pollution.

Hong Kong is small and, by comparison, the sea is big. It is logical for us to think that we have the space to build buildings. Yet, in most cases, the publicsupport from the government has not been able to justify the need is more important than the harbour. I say yes.

If the reclaimed land is being used for the well-being of Hong Kong, we should support it. For example, the reclamation for the third runway is beneficial towards the future development of the airport and tourism. Although the sea may be polluted, as long as we have a good policy, I think the air pollution will be less than before. Furthermore, the Environmental Impact Assessment report for the third runway is satisfactory, thus reclamation shouldn’t go. We can try to strike a balance between urban development and environmental protection.

I think reclamation solves the shortage of land in our hilly bay where there is a limited flat land. Reclamation can contribute to the city’s development. For instance, the population of Hong Kong kept increasing at 170% and 180%. The government reclaimed land to develop new towns, like Sha Tin and Tuen Mun, to overcome population housing problems. Reclamation, therefore, is beneficial to development. But there are two things to consider when discussing this situation. First, reclamation should be put into practice. First, balance the opinions of different stakeholders, like government should consider other solutions because reclamation is detrimental to our environment. If there are no other options, the government should make sure they carry out assessments and listen to complaints from the public before starting reclamation, so as to lower its impact to the environment.

– Mr Wu, retired construction worker SUPPORTS reclamation

– Mr Wong, fundraiser at Plan International AGAINST reclamation

– Mr Au, retired AGAINST reclamation

– Mr Li Kui-Wai, associate professor at City University of Hong Kong, however, says simply stopping reclamation on an environmental basis isn’t an easy cut and dry. “Obviously we wouldn’t like to have cleaner areas and we want to have a better environment. But on the other hand, we are talking about the welfare of seven million people and the economic capabilities of Hong Kong. We have to strike a balance.”

But where does it stop? Balance is a key word in this debate – and with HK’s population projected to reach 8 million by 2041, there remains a tension between the need for land and the needs to protect the environment. In 2004, in the case of Town Planning Board’s Society for Protection of the Harbour Ltd, the Court of Final Appeal ruled out a four-lane heads public needs test to the continued reclamation of the harbour, which required several criteria to be met:

- that the development must address issues that affect Hong Kong in the present
- that the development must serve an economic, environmental social need of the city
- that there be no reasonable alternative to the reclamation
- that the development must entail the minimum level of reclamation to meet requirements.

Winston Chu sums up how he sees the test. “[The need for the reclamation] must be overriding that the need is more important than the harbour,” he says.
We want to have a better environment, but we are also talking about the welfare of seven million people. We have to strike a balance.

Indeed, there are those who suggest that reclamation purely for housing development may not even address the problem at hand. “Land created from reclamation is extremely expensive. If you make use of it for housing, the prices will always be very expensive and beyond people’s means,” says Chu. “As long as you do not develop the New Territories, there will not be enough land and the harbour will not be safe.”

The Real Estate Developers Association of Hong Kong said in a public submission to the government on proposed reclamation projects across Lantau Island in 2012, “we would always be very expensive and beyond people’s means.”

Mary Hanbury outlines some of Hong Kong’s most significant current and future projects.

In the works

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<tr>
<th>What it entails</th>
<th>Where</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
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<tr>
<td>The construction of a 650-hectare space to extend the capacity of Hong Kong International Airport.</td>
<td>Southwest of Tsing Yi</td>
<td>Completed by 2023.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The expansion of the container terminal.</td>
<td>South of Tsing Yi</td>
<td>Completed in 2014.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A 100 to 300 hectare site for economic development and improving connectivity.</td>
<td>Lantau near Sunny Bay.</td>
<td>In the works.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A 200 to 300 hectare site for economic development and improving connectivity.</td>
<td>Along the northern coast of Lantau between the airport and the Central harbour front, has been completed.</td>
<td>Completed by 2017.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A 250 to 300 hectare site for economic development and improving connectivity.</td>
<td>East Lantau Development Area – In the works.</td>
<td>In the works.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A 100 to 150 hectare site for economic development and improving connectivity.</td>
<td>In the waters between Lung Kwu Tan, New Territories and the harbour will not be safe.</td>
<td>In the works.</td>
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In a blog post on the Development Bureau website last year, Chan also stated: “Reclamation is the best way to build up a land reserve because it does not involve land resumption and relocation, and the reclaimed land can be readily made available in the short, medium and long terms when the need arises... If Hong Kong remains hesitant and fails to expedite the relevant effort, leaving the problem of land shortage to continue to hinder our livelihood and development, who will suffer most in the end?” Time Out contacted the Development Bureau, but it declined to comment.

As further evidence of the government’s drive to reclaim, in 2012, the Civil Engineering and Development Department produced a map (see above) flagging 25 potential sites for further reclamation, with several already in the early stages of planning. Kenneth To says this glut of proposals is a deliberate move to counteract opposition. “In the past few years, this government has been pushing the planners to identify more than enough development opportunities, knowing that many of them will not be able to go ahead,” he says.

Ultimately, the future of reclamation – its continuing drive into the harbour or otherwise – comes down to a precarious balancing act, and one where there are pros and cons to every outcome. While the government, with the pronouncements from the Secretary for Development, appears to have a clear position, the question for Hong Kong as a whole seems to be whether, in this precarious balancing act, does our collective conscience lean?