

**Provision of Consultancy Service on the New Mode of Design and Management
Adopted at the Belcher Bay Harbourfront Open Space**

**Executive Summary
May 2021**

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1. Introduction of the research

Research background

The site and scope of this research project is Belcher Bay Harbourfront Open Space (“BBHOP”), located at Shing Sai Road, Kennedy Town. The site was transformed from a disused public cargo working area and first fully opened under an “incremental approach”. Specifically, the site was first opened with a 5-metre-wide boardwalk at the waterfront section in March 2019, and was fully opened on 19 October 2020. BBHOP has a total area of about 5,900 square metres and a 172 metres water frontage.

The Harbour Office of Planning and Lands Branch of the Development Bureau (“DEVB(PLB)”) and the Harbourfront Commission have been exploring and introducing different models of harbourfront development for adding diversity and broadening visitors’ experience. With the support of the local community, an innovative, experimental approach has been adopted at BBHOP in the design and management of this harbourfront site. It includes four major principles:

- Making good use of vacant harbourfront site;
- Implementation of “incremental approach” (先駁通, 再優化);
- Introduction of multiple harbourfront experiences with flexible and periodic pop-up designs (期間限定) and through engagement (公眾參與) and empowerment (發揮潛能); and
- Open site management

With such innovative design and management that is rarely seen in Hong Kong, this research aims to understand users’ opinions in-depth with the following objectives:

- To review and analyse the evolving uses of the BBHOP by different users and respective patronage at various times of a day, days of a week as well as during the festive periods, and elements introduced since its full opening in October 2020;
- To collect and analyse general public satisfaction level and opinion on BBHOP, particularly on its design and management mode; and
- To analyze on the complaints and compliments received by the government

Research methodology

This research relies on a combination of on-site research methods to capture data of users’ behaviours across different user groups, different times of the day, and different types of days (i.e. weekdays, weekends, public holidays). Specifically, the on-site research is divided into five parts, namely i) site observation, ii) surveys and interviews, iii) site engagement, iv) time-lapse video, and v) control study. All on-site research activities were carried out by Research Assistants and took place between 4-15 February 2021. The only desktop research piece is a study on the online perception

and branding of the site. Reference has also been drawn to comments, complaints and compliments alike, received by the government. A total of 633 surveys and 96 interviews were conducted.

2. Lessons learnt from BBHOP

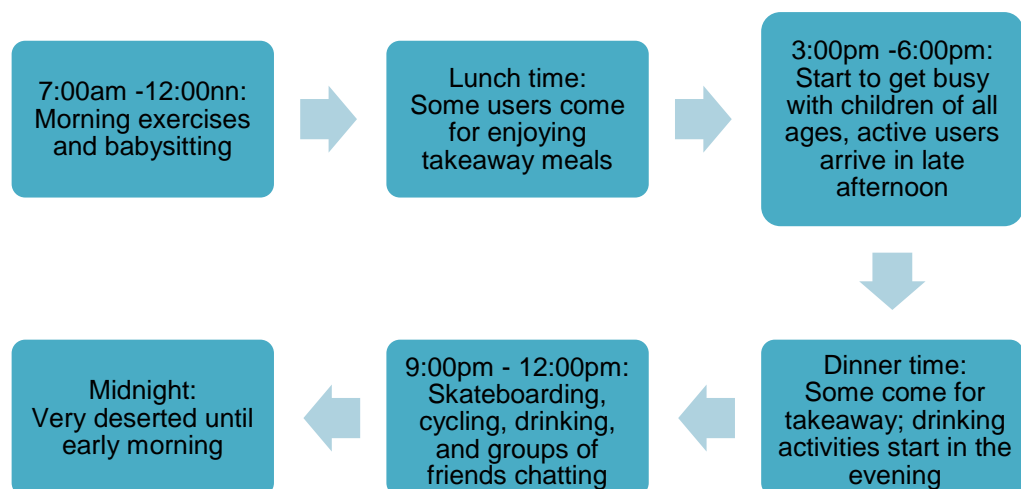
Characteristics of BBHOP

1) *BBHOP attracts diverse users from near and afar*

Compared to nearby LCSD-managed Belcher Bay Park and in general, BBHOP is able to attract users of very diverse backgrounds. The age spans from babies and young children to elderly over 80 years old; like most parks, users are predominantly Chinese, but a greater mix of nationalities are found at BBHOP. It is a space where a spectrum of user types and groups (users come alone, in pairs, in groups) can be found; an uncommon scene in Hong Kong's open spaces. One-third of the respondents stay at BBHOP for 1-2 hours for each visit, while another one-third of them stay for 30 minutes to 1 hour. It should be noted that nearly half of the users (47%) were newly attracted to BBHOP by various factors after its opening; they never visited the site when it was a cargo area.

2) *Fully utilized site over 24 hours*

Users visit BBHOP and make great use of the site at all hours, the site observations and time-lapse videos reveal that the peak hours are 3-6pm and 9-12pm, with the general activity patterns summarized in the figure below. The activity patterns remain more or less similar during the research period across weekdays and holidays; users' traffic was amplified during the holidays but the patterns were similar. Uniquely, the same site is appropriated by different users for very different activities during different times of the day.



Site activities flow chart

3) *BBHOP as neighbourhood park and a destination*

Close to 70% of the survey respondents reside in the Central and Western District with frequent visits, reflecting the positioning of BBHOP as a neighbourhood park. These users naturally mostly walk to the site. However, the comparatively higher percentage of visitors (34%) coming from all over Hong Kong and first-timers (17%) (as opposed the Belcher Bay Park which has a local clientele) also imply that the site is becoming a destination in the city. These visitors spend slightly more time at the site than local residents, especially holiday visitors – 11% of them can spend over 3 hours at the site. The social media research shows over 100 posts that have earned over 100 likes, many of them were posted by influencers and opinion leaders who have a huge number of followers on Instagram, confirming the position of BBHOP as a destination in Hong Kong.

4) *Beloved shared space*

BBHOP receives very positive comments and ratings in the surveys, interviews, and site engagement exercises. Users are in general very satisfied with the site, with an overwhelming 93% of them being satisfied (rating 4 or 5) and none being very dissatisfied (rating 1). Users like the space, scenery it offers, the facilities (particularly the moveable furniture and pop-ups), and the unique management mode adopted at the site. The highest-rated items are opening hours at 4.69, and the lowest-rated items are greenery at 3.14. The ratings range from 3.14 to 4.69 at a scale of 1-5. These in general are comparatively very high scores when referencing other studies about Hong Kong's open spaces.

While there are concerns related to i) sharing the site with skateboarders and corresponding issues (e.g. noise at night); ii) sharing the site with pets and corresponding issues (e.g. hygiene), and iii) the safety and misuse of moveable furniture, especially the pallets, the number of enquiries is significantly low compared to the high volume of usage, with compliments prominently weighing over the concerns. The survey and interview also found out that the majority of the users do not share this sentiment and worries.

Management and design approach

1) *Incremental approach is well received*

The site first opened with a 5-metre-wide boardwalk at the waterfront in March 2020, and was fully opened in October 2020. In fact, BBHOP is the first harbourfront site in Hong Kong completed by adopting the “incremental approach”, allowing part of the site to be opened to the public while construction works carry on in parallel. Although some of the interviewees were not aware

of such an approach and the intended planning behind the scene, almost all interviewees reacted positively to the early opening of the boardwalk, and are happy to have a part of the site opened for public use earlier. An incremental approach implies that architects and management adopt a different approach from the outset of the project.

2) *Unpredictable and innovative usages facilitated by moveable furniture and flexible management mode*

One of the most distinct features of BBHOP is how users interact with the space. A wide range of unpredictable and innovative uses was observed and documented. These are uses that even the designers and management of the space could not have predicted when they designed and opened the site and are out of their expectations. Furthermore, these uses keep evolving as different users come and adapt the site and the furniture to their changing needs, even within a single day; the site is never the same and there is no fixed form.

The vast amount of creativity unleashed in the use of the site is facilitated by the unique features of BBHOP: moveable furniture and open site management. BBHOP places different types of moveable furniture, e.g. various types of lounge chairs, coffee tables, moveable pony cart, stationary pallets and pallets on wheels; and later during Chinese New Year and Valentine's Day, a Chinese candy box (全盒) and heart-shaped chairs with wheels were added. As observed on-site, users, especially children of different age groups and ethnicities, interact with these furniture and pallets in creative ways and are very happy with the possibility to build freely with the pallets. The moveable furniture and pallets are often occupied and can get very crowded during peak hours at weekends and holidays. It was not uncommon to observe people queuing up to use these facilities from time to time. Moveable furniture was well received because of its flexibility to be combined and moved around the site to suit different users' needs. For children and parents, the moveable parts add playfulness to the site; they can easily stay for hours and not get bored, there is always something new to play with and the forms of the site are always changing. For other users, these unique loose parts add attractiveness to the site, making it chill and comfortable, and allows for more interesting interactions between visitors where many made new friends. This constitutes the reason for visiting from other districts.

BBHOP adopts an open site management approach whereby different users can share the space and that different types of activities are allowed, instead of prohibiting a lot of activities. This approach is rarely seen in other public and privately-owned and managed public spaces in Hong Kong. Open site management is almost unheard of, but has worked very well at BBHOP with positive comments from users, who are happy to share the site with other users of different age groups, ethnicities and have different interests, with pets, and express liking over the fact that there are fewer rules at BBHOP. Such

management approach is the key to the unpredictability as uses that are prohibited can take place at BBHOP freely without intervention from management.

3) *Unpredictability as a selling point of the site*

The unpredictability of the site is further enhanced by pop-up installations arranged by the management. BBHOP engages a wide range of local creatives and community stakeholders to make greater use of the sites, create pop-up installations and festive decorations that commensurate with the site characteristics and users' preferences. For example, the Chinese candy box (全盒) and heart-shaped moveable chairs as a part of the Chinese New Year and Valentine's Day decorations. Interviewees coming from all walks of life appreciate the pop-ups and community-driven and community-engaged events a lot as the site is ever-changing and refreshing, and they also add to the attractiveness and playfulness of the site, creating a welcoming atmosphere. They would like to see more of the pop-ups in the future.

4) *Collaborative installations empower community and creators*

BBHOP made use of different opportunities to engage the community and local creatives on different scales. Freelance artists helped design harbourfront-themed stamps and stickers available for public for free, individual full-time artists created the very popular knitted figures, architecture and design students were involved, larger-scale creative companies designed and produced the festive installations, community organizations set up recycling bins for carton box and recycling stations for red packets during Chinese New Year, teachers conducted cleaning robot demo in front of kids at the site and turned it into a STEM education ground; the site is the epitome of cross-sectoral collaboration. Collaborators, as well as the users, appreciate the opportunities of engagement, proven by the high traffic at the booth and the presence online.

5) *Evolving site requires flexible design and responsive management mode*

With a site like BBHOP, there are so many unexpected uses taking place daily and performed by a large number of users, a flexible design with moveable parts and pop-ups and responsive management mode are essential to keep up with the pace of changes in the needs of users and respond in a timely manner.

Currently, the management of the space improves facilities and the site quickly after evaluating feedback from the general public, with aims of turning positive feedback into immediate improvement action items and incrementally making positive changes to the site with users' feedback and involvement. Since the opening in October 2020, many adaptations have been implemented to respond to the comments from users within a few days, or even within 24 hours, such as adjustments in lightings at the pets zone to enhance visual comfort levels, new and improved design of moveable pallet furniture, utilization of the metal scaffoldings to provide more comfortable seatings, new signages on-site

to reduce conflicts and accidents, new wayfinding signs to help guide users from MTR stations.

In addition to the above adaptations, various “upcycling” of decorations and pop-up installations have also been introduced to renew user interest while leveraging on some existing successful components. For example, the popular pop-up Christmas sleigh (鹿車) was later transformed to fit the Chinese New Year theme. Other “upcycling” initiatives will also be carried out in the future.

The use of flexible design and loose parts at BBHOP also imply that the site is not affected easily by the malfunctioning and wear-and-tear of any single piece of equipment or pallet; the site does not have to close off a huge area for maintenance and still functions smoothly. In fact, the site’s design would always evolve with users’ constant creations, making use of what is available on-site at a certain moment.

Users acknowledge and welcome the speed of iteration and responsiveness of the management at BBHOP, and feel glad that their opinions are heard. Indeed, they are very keen to provide further constructive comments in the long-run to contribute to the betterment of the site. The management mode of BBHOP and the speedy feedback cycle is pivotal in nurturing a new approach to the use of public space in Hong Kong.

6) *Parks in the same district can serve different users and purposes*

The control survey conducted at both BBHOP and the Belcher Bay Park reveal that the positionings of these two neighbouring open spaces vary greatly. Belcher Bay Park serves more senior users of the Chinese ethnicity (even mostly elderly) who live in the neighbourhood, while BBHOP serves a more ethnically diverse and younger crowd coming from different places in Hong Kong. Fewer movements were observed at the Belcher Bay Park, most users were sitting or stretching, they also liked the quaint and quiet place with a set of fixed furniture and rules. BBHOP’s respondents reacted differently and preferred the opposite. Different open spaces in the same neighbourhood and district can possibly serve users of different demographic backgrounds, who might prefer and require different types of design and management modes of open spaces. The provision of choices, instead of having one type crowding out another, is commendable and supported.

Management principles for Harbourfront Shared Spaces

BBHOP presents a first in Hong Kong: the first public open space that employs this new incremental approach and open flexible site management model with the use of pop-up and moveable furniture. The results of this study proves that this experimental approach turns BBHOP into a great vibrant place that is loved by its users and residents.

BBHOP is a unique space in Hong Kong where one can observe a high degree of diversity in uses, activities users (gender, age groups, ethnicities) throughout the day, the entire space is activated with different types of social groups. The site is largely perceived as an attractive, comfortable, safe, and accessible place enjoyed vastly by its neighbours and attracts users from far.

BBHOP serves as a placemaking pioneer or even an exemplar for harbourfront spaces, and in general, open spaces in Hong Kong. Its success can be translated into eight key transferable principles that can be implemented in a cross-site and cross-departmental manner for the management of future vibrant and attractive harbourfront open spaces in Hong Kong, while working seamlessly with the existing nine aspects of the Harbour Planning Guidelines issued by the Harbour-front Enhancement Committee. In particular, the following principles serve as an elaboration and validation of existing Harbourfront planning principles related to software, namely public engagement, land use planning, harbour-front management, and sustainable development.

1) Actual users are the experts: virtuous feedback cycle as a key to success

High volume of use provides the most accurate and scientific user feedback as they actively utilize all the facilities and services available on-site at different days and different times of the day. Some frequent the space multiple times a day. Actual users are the experts, as they are able to test everything thoroughly in a short period of time, in the capacity of frequent users and observers. The diverse demographics of users allow comprehensive feedback that reflect the needs of diverse groups of users. With continuous observations, evolving needs and concerns can be captured. It is useful to capture these feedback that spread across the spectrum, and reflect that in the iteration responsively and quickly. Users appreciate that their feedback gets listened to and would induce a sense of ownership when they are incorporated and reflected in the improvements. The creation of this virtuous feedback cycle is a key to success.

2) Pilot is key: allow room for iteration and evolvement

The management parties' acceptance and positive attitude over the incremental improvement of the site proves that there is no need to get everything right on Day One, i.e. at the grand opening of the site. Users are happy to see justified improvements and allow room for iteration and evolvement of the site that responds to their comments. This provision of room for iteration also allows the management and designers to first "test the water", collect feedback, and be more responsive to real needs and concerns. Indeed, public expectation and preference on the use of the site might also evolve gradually upon the opening of the site, making it even more crucial to leave room for iteration. The gradual rise in popularity of BBHOP as a destination for cycling, skateboarding, rollerblading for members of the general public from all walks of life, is one of the prime examples. It takes time for the majority of users to accept such an innovative and experimental approach that is uncommon in Hong Kong. Pilots are a great way to experiment what works and what does not. They create opportunities for users to get involved and be informed, and to

gradually overcome worries which may not always be substantiated and to get used to the new approach that works well in other countries and cities.

3) *Sandbox approach: moveable parts enable new uses and clienteles*

Pallets are an important piece of moveable furniture at BBHOP, successfully serving as a tool of empowerment via a “sandbox approach”. While fixed equipment limits the locations and timing of usage, and how users interact with the piece of equipment, the sandbox approach advocates light, quick and adaptive nature that facilitates users to create a public space they want to see at their own pace and wish easily. “Less is more”: one loose piece can serve multiple purposes and create more possibilities. The barrier of participation is very low and users of different age groups and physical abilities can easily engage him/herself with the moveable parts. Throughout this process of involvement, users gain a sense of control and agency; they are enabled and empowered. In addition, this participatory approach allows them to become attached to what they have created and the site, and finally have a sense of ownership. This behaviour is not limited to children, but is observed across age groups and ethnicities.

4) *Capacity building: Loose parts enhance collaboration and inclusivity*

Moveable parts allow very different users to meet, socialize, make new friends and collaborate. Children of different age groups and races work together to move and push the pallets to build their castle, maze, house or fortress, and to enjoy the creations they build, same applies to parents and adults of different ethnicities who have to work together to push the sleighs where their children are sitting at, or push the big candy box that requires at least several adults to rotate. This kind of collaboration accelerates the dynamics of the site as it expands the possibilities and capabilities and exchanges of the users.

5) *Vision-driven approach: software is of paramount importance*

While the moveable parts are empowering in nature, software is as essential in order to create vibrancy. A great space requires a vision-led management style rather than rules-driven approach. With fewer rules and limited intervention from security guards, users are not banned from doing, but are encouraged to innovate and freely use the sites the way they wish to, while maintaining mutual respect; it is not about strict compliance. Without a plate detailing a long list of rules and prohibited activities, the site is not rules- or complaint-driven. Rather, the open site management approach creates an enabling inclusive culture and environment rarely seen and experienced in Hong Kong’s public spaces. It helps nurture a culture of “joint-management” and “shared use” with and among users, for instance, via sharing space with cyclists and rollers, pets, street performers, etc. Rules and regulation should be the means to facilitate and achieve the placemaking vision of shared spaces in mind. We should let the ends direct the means, but not vice versa.

6) *Destination making: evolution and unpredictability within the site itself as an attraction*

Some interviewees express their delight in coming to a very different site every time. Furthermore, users would unintentionally build upon and revise the fixtures set up by previous users, contributing to the dynamic nature of the space. As security guards are not tasked to resume the site overnight; there is never a fixed form or image of the site. The seasonal pop-ups, ever-changing set ups created by users, and the innovative and unexpected uses performed by users have become a scene and an attraction itself, rather than a fear of unpredictability.

7) *Chaotic beauty: inherent order and organization within “chaos”*

BBHOP is very vibrant, dynamic and full of movements, and the beauty of this experience is that despite the seemingly “chaotic” atmosphere, an inherent order would gradually evolve among the users so that people from different walks of life can enjoy the place while respecting how others use the site. For instance, fixed zonings might reduce possibilities in interaction, dynamics, and the unpredictability of the site. Users are able to develop their own rough zonings – there are areas where a certain type of users are more prominent and would cluster, forming kids’ zone, skaters’ zone, pets’ zone, elderly’s zone, etc. “Tacit understanding” is developed among users, who have learnt to respect for different uses mutually, and have developed self-awareness on safety while there are all types of dynamic movements (e.g. cycling, skateboarding, rollerblading, scooters, pushing pallets, sleighs, and strollers). BBHOP’s experience also shows that zoning can happen not just spatially but on the basis of time segments throughout the day.

8) *From place-making to sustainable place-management*

While a good initial design and vision is important, the eventual success equally relies on a continuous curatorial management process. “Place-making” is a catchy term in town, but once the site has been set in place and open for public use, equally immense effort has to be placed in “sustainable place management” to create the appropriate conditioning for the dynamics and the vibrancy to happen. This important concept is often ignored in the discussion of public space issues in Hong Kong: public places projects are often deemed complete as the fixtures are in place, the management mostly involves placing security guards and cleaning janitors on-site to enforce fixed rules and procedures that are applied across all types of parks and sitting-out areas in different districts, the approach is not site-specific and thus does not respond to the needs and desires of the users. The BBHOP experience shows that this meticulous place-management approach is indeed able to resolve various potential conflicts between different users, and the merit (the vibrancy of the site) clearly outweighs the extra experimental effort.

3. Conclusion

Based on the study, it can be observed that BBHOP encompasses a diverse range of activities that co-exists with one another, contributing to the vibrancy of the site. Some examples of prominent activities may include but not be limited to busking, skateboarding, picnicking, pet-walking and fishing. The lessons and management principles learnt from the BBHOP experience can be further extended and applied to other Harbourfront Shared Spaces if users of these sites respect one another's rights, needs and wellbeing. The BBHOP experience can facilitate and empower the general public to build public spaces that are shared and enjoyed equitably for everyone.

The experience of BBHOP highlights the importance of providing diversity and freedom of use amongst various Harbourfront Shared Spaces, where different spatial arrangements can be chosen and utilized proactively by people from all walks of life. This is particularly innovative and experimental when compared with conventional modes of management of public spaces in other parts of Hong Kong.

While BBHOP serves as a successful pioneer of Hong Kong's place-making, it is essential that BBHOP's merits and management arrangements, as detailed in Chapter 4 (i.e. opens 24 hours, incremental approach, moveable furniture and flexible design, responsive management mode), are combined with the aforementioned 8 general management principles, together serving as guiding principles for the future development of Harbourfront Shared Spaces, and adopted with attention to local site context.

It would be valuable to further investigate the usage patterns of any future Harbourfront Shared Spaces, so that a more in-depth study can be conducted, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the future of Hong Kong's public spaces. As such, it is of greatest hope that this success will be amplified at suitable locations along the 38 kilometre promenade of the Victoria Harbour, under the principles of "adaption to local characteristics" (因地制宜) and "locational peculiar design" (段段有特色) advocated by the Harbourfront Commission and the government, creating shared vibrant and diverse spaces that are enjoyed by all, contributing to a more liveable Hong Kong.