



Model Settlements or Speculative Projects? The Garden Cities in Colonial Hong Kong, 1911-1941

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Since its inception as a response to ameliorate the urban problems of Victorian cities, Ebenezer Howard's garden city concept has reverberated through much of the world, with varied appropriations by planners both of the political right and left. In this paper, I examine how aspects of the garden city concept were adopted in Hong Kong between 1911 and 1941 -- a period in which the British colony experienced multiple waves of speculative land booms amidst simmering social tensions and the rapid rise of Chinese nationalism. Although a novel formulation, the remedies offered by the garden city, such as the provision of greenbelts and open space that insulated residential areas away from the crowded central city, found resonance with Hong Kong's early segregation policies that prohibited the construction of Chinese houses in the European reservation districts. These exclusionary policies unintentionally boosted land values in the urban areas, enabling many European and Chinese investors to amass significant profits through property speculation. Meanwhile, the continual expansion of Chinese houses near the border of the European reservations prompted some of the "less wealthy" Europeans, most notably the Portuguese, to petition the government to grant them the right to establish their own residential reservations along racial lines.

The opening up of Kowloon Peninsula after the completion of the Kowloon-Canton Railway in 1910 provided new hopes for many that Hong Kong's longstanding housing shortage would be relieved. While planners and urban reformers conceived Kowloon as a model city of the future that would stand in contrast to the colony's early haphazard, opportunistic development, business entrepreneurs put forward ambitious development schemes almost exclusively targeting the well-to-do. These included a fast growing number of wealthy Chinese merchants who desired to live in modern environments no less superior than those in the European reservations. Increasingly, the usage of the term "garden city" became a key means for envisioning different urban futures that were nonetheless predicated on a shared set of attributes and projected imageries. While some of the proposals were keen to promote integrated agricultural development based on the operation of cooperatives, others were largely speculative in nature. By tracing the narratives of three projects promoted by entrepreneurs with different backgrounds and visions, this paper aims to understand the complexities entailed in the shaping of a racialized colonial landscape that was increasingly divided by class. It also hopes to connect the development of this period with shifting imperialist ideologies and the ongoing impact of capitalism, and elucidate some of the ways in which contingent forms of social consensus were enabled in an urban context underscored by prosperity and profound inequalities.