

How Much Open Space Do Hong Kongers Get?

Civic Exchange Maps It Out

HONG KONG, 24 February 2017 – Civic Exchange, a public policy think-tank, has conducted an in-depth study into whether Hong Kong residents are getting their fair share of open space. Our “Unopened Space: Mapping Equitable Availability of Open Space in Hong Kong” report was crowd-funded with more than HKD \$300,000 in individual donations, allowing Civic Exchange to conduct truly independent and unbiased research.

The level of public support for “Unopened Space” underlines how important the issue is to residents in one of the world’s most crowded metropolises, where population densities can reach up to 400,000 people per square kilometre in some city blocks.

Researcher Carine Lai spent almost a year unearthing statistics on open space in Hong Kong. She then mapped out the data, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. Civic Exchange also determined which demographic groups – by median income, poverty concentration, and age - were given the least or most open space.

This particular study looks at the urban spaces city-dwellers use every day (and does not include protected rural areas like country parks.) “Open space” can mean anything from children’s play areas, to athletic grounds, to landmarks like Hong Kong Park.

Open space is an essential part of daily life, and also the hallmark of a world-class city. Our report, “Unopened Space: Mapping Equitable Availability of Open Space in Hong Kong,” found multiple problems: standards that lag behind other Asian cities, a lack of clear data, socio-economic inequality and, in many cases, a simple lack of space.

Key Findings

- Residents of urban Hong Kong currently get an average of 2.7-2.8 m² of open space per person. **Hong Kong is behind other Asian cities like Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai and Singapore**, whose residents get 5.8 m² to 7.6 m².
- The current Hong Kong government standard of 2 m², which has not been updated for 15 years, is too low. That standard gives each resident, on average, open space about the size of a toilet cubicle.
- The government’s proposed increase to 2.5 m², as cited in the 2030+ Plan, is also too low.
- Hong Kong’s open space is unevenly distributed, meaning that many residents get less than the 2 m² government standard.

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- When Civic Exchange broke the data down into Outline Zoning Plan areas (or, more simply, local neighborhoods), we found that **1.84 million Hong Kongers live in OZPs with less than their promised 2 m² of open space.**
- About 3.9 million people, or more than half the urban population, live in OZPs with less than 2.5 m² of open space.
- **There is a grey area between public and private “open space.”** On top of controversial cases involving malls or residences (like Times Square in Causeway Bay, or Metro Harbour View in Kowloon), there is about four times as much private open space in large residential developments which is inaccessible to the public, but which is still counted towards the 2 m² standard.
- **There is a gap between rich and poor.** In high-income areas like The Peak, Kowloon Tong and Discovery Bay, **some affluent residents have more than 8m²** of open space, as well as access to other green areas. **Residents of Mong Kok have just 0.6m².**
- Families in the Housing Authority’s public housing estates benefit from a decent amount of open space. The worst off are low-income residents outside the HA system, mostly in standalone buildings, in old and densely-built neighborhoods.
- **The elderly are disproportionately affected.** This situation is worst in areas like Cheung Sha Wan, Ma Tau Kok, and Causeway Bay.

Policy Recommendations

The Hong Kong Government should:

- Simplify and consolidate the way open space is counted. **Make information about open space public and accessible.**
- **Use a standard of 3-3.5 m² of open space per person.** That change would benefit those in old urban areas, plus an additional 1.3 million living mainly in New Towns like Ma On Shan, Tsing Yi and Sha Tin.
- **Develop recreational spaces on land that has been zoned for open space, but has been left idle.** This includes land under highway overpasses, fenced-in urban lots, or larger spaces in the New Territories being used for open container storage, junk yards, or simply left empty.
- **Plan for high-quality landmark parks in the Central-Wanchai Reclamation, West Kowloon and Kai Tak,** and ensure that they are easily accessible to pedestrians from neighbourhoods further inland. Practically speaking, these are the last three remaining areas where this could happen downtown.

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Conclusion

Open space has enormous health and societal benefits. International cities like New York and London are defined, in part, by iconic parks and walkable neighborhoods. Asian cities like Singapore have put policy emphasis on building new attractions like Gardens by the Bay. Good parks and decent shared spaces are the hallmarks of a truly world-class city.

Hong Kong has limited land, so we must be intelligent in making the most of the space we have. That starts with having sensible and publicly accessible data on how much open space there really is, and how it is used. This was the main aim of this report.

Once the current situation is assessed, the government needs to work between its various bureaux and departments – The Development Bureau, The Transport and Housing Bureau, The Home Affairs Bureau and perhaps even The Education Bureau – to make plans on how open space can be integrated into future urban planning.

About Civic Exchange

Civic Exchange is an independent, non-partisan, public policy think-tank established in Hong Kong in 2000. With a vision to shape a liveable and sustainable Hong Kong, Civic Exchange's mission is to advance civic education and engage society to influence public policy through research, dialogue and development of practical and sustainable solutions. Civic Exchange undertakes research in three major areas: air quality, nature conservation and the urban environment, with an overarching framework of promoting Wellbeing.

About the Author

Carine Lai, who led this research project, joined Civic Exchange in 2004, and has combined her policy work with ongoing study since then. She has worked widely on projects related to wellbeing in Asian cities, walkability, urban design, urban renewal and governance in Hong Kong. She holds a master's degree in urban planning from University College London and a bachelor's degree in political science and studio art from Tufts University.

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The report can be downloaded at: http://bit.ly/CEX_POSreport

Photos and charts can be downloaded at: <http://bit.ly/CEX-POSReport>

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