

# Hong Kong as “Laboratory of the Future”

Ezio Manzini

*“We have the economy of compactness and density  
so we can do a lot of things in Hong Kong very quickly.”<sup>1</sup>*

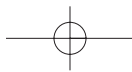
Ideas may move around the world, arrive everywhere and, eventually, have an influence on very distant places. This phenomenon, it has been said, is the essence of the ongoing processes of globalization.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, ideas (and with this term includes any kind of immaterial entities: from specific images to general visions, from fashionable looks to criteria of quality, and from new ways of life to innovative forms of organization) have to be produced somewhere. There has to have been some place in which, for a complex and peculiar mixture of factors, something sufficiently strong happened creating the “energy” for them to appear and, more important, to spread and become potentially influential on other groups of people elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> If and when this phenomenon happens, we can say that these places are playing the role of “laboratories of the future:” places in which the future is, at least to some extent, anticipated.

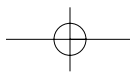
My hypothesis is that Hong Kong has all of the prerogatives to be one of these places: the highest density, the most service-oriented economy and service-intensive society, and the longest and deepest integration of Western technologies into Chinese culture. The social, economic, and cultural environment of Hong Kong appears to be an “extreme environment:” a very favorable habitat for new “forms of life,” i.e., for new forms of social, cultural, and economic organization.<sup>4</sup>

Anyone who has lived in Hong Kong for awhile has had the opportunity to observe many particular aspects of the city (from city planning to domestic life, and from ways of working to ways of eating). Many such people may object to my hypothesis, saying that it is because the physical, social, and cultural environment in Hong Kong is so “extreme” that anything it may produce should be considered as place-specific, i.e., “something that can only work in Hong Kong.”

In the past, this observation perhaps was correct and the assumption that it would never be possible to reproduce the Hong Kong experience elsewhere was true. As a matter of fact, it would not be easy to find other places in the world where the frantic life and work style of Hong Kong would be acceptable. But now things

- 1 Anthony Wong Sik-kei, “ITC Telecom Asia 2000,” *South China Morning Post*, Special report, December 12, 2000.
- 2 I refer here, in particular, to the ideas of Arjun Appadurai. See Arjun Appadurai, “Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, (Minneapolis: Bruce Robbins, 1993).
- 3 I also have developed these ideas in another paper: Ezio Manzini and Silvia Vugliano, “Il locale del globale” (*The local of the global*), *Pluriverso*, N 1, (January, 2000).
- 4 In this context, the expression “extreme environment” refers to an environment in which some general characteristics and/or tendencies are pushed to the extreme (i.e., they are more evident than is the norm in other places). In the case of Hong Kong, as has been stated elsewhere, these characteristics are: density, service-orientation, cultural interaction, but also speed and acceleration in urban changes and in ways of living. For more on the Hong Kong environment and its “extreme” character see the special issue on Hong Kong in *Domus*, 839 (July/August 2001), and Laurent Gutierrez, Ezio Manzini, and Valerie Portefaix, eds., *HK Lab* (Hong Kong: Map Book Publishers, 2002).





have changed and at least two main reasons make this assumption far less true than in the past.<sup>5</sup>

The first reason is that density, service intensity, and even the Chinese and Western cultural mixture are no longer unique to Hong Kong. High-density living is, and will be in the future, one of the most diffuse ways of organizing urban space in a hyperpopulated world. Service-intensity is, and will continue to be, the common denominator of every big city. Finally, the Chinese-Western mix will surely be one of the most characterizing aspects of the ongoing, turbulent development of China (and, in my view, not only of China). The second reason to think that Hong Kong will be a real “laboratory of the future” is that, unlike in the past, today it has stronger connections with the Chinese continent on the one hand, and with the entire world on the other. Hong Kong is now simultaneously a global city and a Chinese city.<sup>6</sup> Among the many implications of this new condition of existence, one is particularly interesting to us here: its economic and social experiments are no longer doomed to confinement within the place that generated them, but can easily migrate and influence other parts of the planet.

For these reasons, the great energy that the “extreme” environment that Hong Kong generates may produce specific, powerful ideas, and these ideas may have the power to migrate and play a role in the development path of other places, wherever the conditions may be favorable. Thus, the way Hong Kong manages to be at once global and Chinese will set a precedent, the effects of which will be felt not only in the future of the place itself but also in other cities in China, and elsewhere.

In saying that Hong Kong will be a laboratory of the future, I am not thinking of an exportable model, or of services and knowledge that would be available for sale everywhere in a standardized way. What, in my hypothesis, may migrate is a set of ideas and images which may influence, but not determine, the life style and forms of organization in other places. The “*Made as-in HK*” concept therefore could be exported and should be imagined as packages of ideas and system organization and knowledge: Hong Kong-specific experiences that, to be useful or useable in other places, should be adapted to the specific circumstances, i.e., specifically localized.

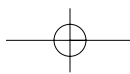
#### **A Service-based Economy (With a Product-oriented Culture)**

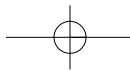
Most accounts... put the stress on the fluidity, flexibility, and decentralized nature of the new form of capital. The Hong Kong economy has benefited very much from these developments that have allowed it to change from a trading post in the nineteenth century to its present position as a premier financial centre of Southeast Asia, from a colonial city to a global city...<sup>7</sup>

5 The general background of these considerations is drawn from many sources. Those that have been most influential on this paper are: Suskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousands Oaks, CA: Pine Forge/Sage Press, 2000); Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access* (New York: Putnam, 2000); IPTS, Futures Project, Information and Communication Technology and the Information Society Panel Report, Seville, N° Series 03, IPTS, (1999).

6 I have developed this concept in “An island no more,” *Domus*, 839, (July/August 2001).

7 Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong. Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 3.





Historically, Hong Kong's economic success was predicated on a combination of the influence of British colonial government, Chinese enterprises, and low cost labor: a mixture which, especially after World War II, led to the "Made in HK" model. The West became familiar with products that were turned out in large quantities at low prices, in a city where living and working conditions were unique. The local environment, with its dense population and heavily concentrated centers of manufacturing, reflected a type of production and living inconceivable anywhere else.

This state continued until 1978 and the institution of the Special Economic Zone just across the border in Shenzhen. From that year on, Hong Kong witnessed a different turn of events. The city, which always had been, in effect, an island, suddenly found itself able to expand, first towards Shenzhen, and later into the whole Pearl River delta. As a result, manufacturing operations were dismantled and reorganized beyond its borders, creating the world's largest "dispersed" factory, employing at least five million workers for concerns based in Hong Kong. This is the new Hong Kong economic and manufacturing model. It is a model in which more than the eighty percent of the GNP is created by services, which was expressed in a study done by a group of MIT researchers:<sup>8</sup> Made by Hong Kong (as opposed to the "Made in Hong Kong" epithet of earlier days).

Today, this economic and organizational model is still evolving, and it is even affecting the service industries themselves.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with those closest to production (from logistics to the more technical areas of product development), the more labor-intensive activities have moved out to Shenzhen, or even deeper into the mainland region. In the city only those services with the highest added value have remained: some have become involved in managing different services and others have stayed due to the closer connectivity (physical as well as virtual), which only a place as densely populated as Hong Kong can guarantee.<sup>10</sup>

### The Art of Managing Complex Systems

At that time, the break in the chain of value was an entirely new concept. We call it "dispersed manufacturing."

This way of doing things immediately spread to the other industries, transforming Hong Kong's economy...<sup>11</sup>

HK has emerged as a control, support and co-ordinating centre for production operation in the region. (Chief Executive Commission on Innovation and Technology. First Report)

"Japanese quality at the expense of the Chinese People's Republic." This slogan by a particular enterprise in Hong Kong<sup>12</sup> might be effectively adopted as the slogan for all things "Made by Hong

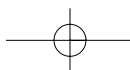
8 Suzanne Berger and Richard K. Lester, *Made by Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997).

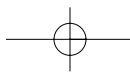
9 At the end of the '90s, Hong Kong was the tenth largest world exporter of goods and the ninth in services. It was the eighth largest banking center, with 400 banks from forty different countries. See Jim Rohwer, *Remade in America. How Asia Will Change Because America Boomed* (New York: Crown Business, 2001), 184

10 Ibid.

11 Li & Fung operates in the field of supply-chain management, and works on behalf of American and European customers with a network of thousands of businesses scattered over the world. See Dinna Louise C. Dayo, *Asian Business Wisdom. From Deals to Dot.coms* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 119.

12 See Berger and Lester, *Made by Hong Kong*, 37





Kong.” It highlights the fact that the success of this production pattern is based not only on the low cost of available labor, but also on a particular organizational capacity. But the slogan is not quite correct in that the best factories analyzed in the study have widely applied the Japanese principles of total quality and “just-in-time” manufacturing. Also, no Japanese model illustrates how to manage a network of manufacturing facilities involving five to six million workers, spread across a broad territory and involving negotiating with local authorities outside all predefined rules. In other words, to refer to Japanese efficiency may have been commercially useful (at a time when that efficiency was acclaimed), but it is no longer the case. For behind the attainment of a “Japanese” efficiency lies an organizational capacity which, in my opinion, is absolutely Chinese, or rather “Hong Kongese.”

Chung Po-Yang, Co-founder and Chairman Emeritus of DHL Ltd., whose activities and biography are emblematic of what we have been saying here, describes himself as “A Taoist manager, following the Chinese philosophy of Taoism, which advocates minimal government,” which, applied to DHL, means: decentralization and strategic thinking at all levels of management with an “Asian family attitude.”<sup>13</sup>

Recognizing this specific quality, the “art of managing complex systems” is a fundamental step to be taken by anyone wishing to find the “originality” of the “Made by HK” model. As a matter of fact, this city has produced knowledge and technologies capable of the advanced organization and management of particularly complex processes and logistics. This knowledge, for me, is original and, in many ways, profoundly Chinese. It may be a model of how Chinese culture and Western technology may merge.<sup>14</sup>

### HK Original Products-Services

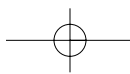
With the advent of the knowledge-based global economy, innovation, technology, productivity and quality of services have become the key drivers of sustainable economic growth.<sup>15</sup>

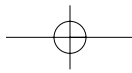
Even if the “Made by Hong Kong” model is still in operation, in Hong Kong today everybody implicated agrees that, in its present form, it needs to be superseded. If the success of the model has been based on the capacity to produce at lower costs in China as they say, then this should now be changed because its competitive edge—the low cost of Chinese labor—won’t last forever. So in order to prepare itself for this lost advantage, Hong Kong’s economy must find a different direction in which to develop. This new direction has been identified, using current technocratic jargon, as ODM (Original Design Manufacturing) and OBM (Original Brand Manufacturing); as opposed to the earlier and still extant model of OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturing) in which Hong Kong manufacturers

13 See Louise Dinna and C. Dayo, *Asian Business Wisdom: From Deals to Dot.coms*, 42-43.

14 I have developed these ideas also in another paper written with Tak Lee, “Made in Hong Kong?” *Domus* 839, (July/August 2001).

15 Tung Chee-Hwa, “Hong Kong Awards for Services,” *South China Morning Post* (November 28, 2000).





worked for export from designs provided by clients. In other words, what has emerged in recent years of public debate is a new concept for Hong Kong manufacturers: the concept of design originality.<sup>16</sup>

Since the realization of the need to change the model arose, the subject of originality has echoed in the words of Hong Kong's politicians and businessmen.<sup>17</sup> In practice, though, what it means and how to implement it remains unresolved. This is, perhaps, because efforts are being made in the least productive direction, that of product originality, when other much more promising paths could be followed. These more promising paths focus on services more than products, and at their most positive are based on experiences emerging from the internal market, rather than on ideas imported from other places. Some examples will make these assumptions more clear.

The first example is an automatic cash deposit machine, produced by Siemens, but entirely developed by its local subsidiary in collaboration with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. This product (in reality, a product-service) was created to meet the specific needs of small shopkeepers in the city who traditionally stay open late at night, long after the banks close. While it was created for the particular needs of Hong Kong it is certainly not limited to it. The so-called "24 hour society" (i.e., the society in which the traditional division between day life and night life tends to disappear) will increasingly be the norm for all urban contemporary societies.

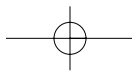
A second example of the same phenomenon is the development of sophisticated information systems for passenger transport companies, which allow them to optimize their operations and improve the standard of services they offer. Delivering goods and mass transit are both activities that have some special characteristics in Hong Kong, but—obviously—every part of the world wants to be able to handle them better. This kind of organizational knowledge, and the software packages in which it is "materialized," are innovative product-services that have been specifically conceived and developed in Hong Kong and that, in the emerging service and knowledge economy, have to be considered as an expression of the new definition of "Made in Hong Kong."

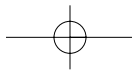
Another successful "original" Hong Kong product is the "Octopus," a rechargeable cash card that can be used quickly and easily, and you don't even have to take it out of your wallet to use it. It was developed for use on crowded buses and the subways to make the service faster and more efficient. Since its introduction, the technology has been expanded for the purchase of all kinds of other services and goods, and it easily can be adapted to other places in the world.

Finally, there is the typical Hong Kong model of residential development, that is high-rise apartment towers with a podium at the base which provides a compact platform, offering every kind of

16 Chief Executive's Commission on Innovation and Technology, September 1998.

17 Mention should be made, in particular, of the address given by Tung Chee Hwa, Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR: "From Adversity to Opportunity" (Address by the Chief Executive The Honorable Tung Chee Hwa at the Legislative Council meeting on October 7, 1998).





service for residents. The spread of this type of accommodation which depends on a system of services has created a conjunction of expertise and organizing capacity that is exportable and adaptable to other contexts. Even if this model of living, in small apartments provided with many common services, is not entirely new and references particularly Le Corbusier's "Unite d'Habitation," it has the potential to be applied more successfully than ever it was in the West, in this new and rapidly changing context. It is a context that draws upon Western and Eastern life style culture. Here, density becomes a diffuse option in the development of new urban space in which society and the economy are shifting towards a servicebase. In my view, Hong Kong expertise is developing a new and dynamic framework in conceiving, constructing and managing complex packages of building and services that provide an interesting, exportable "Hong Kong made product."

The previously mentioned MIT research<sup>18</sup> presented these original (and successful) Hong Kong "products," and noted that each of them—at the beginning—had been thought up for the internal market and had been tested there. So it was the specific environment that stimulated these new products-services that have since been successfully adapted to many other contexts of use.<sup>19</sup>

To avoid misunderstanding, I would like to underline that, in putting forward these examples of success stories, I am not saying that they work on every possible points level as "good practice." If we consider the social and environmental perspectives, each one of them comes in for some criticism.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, they are good examples of "original HK products" and "products" that, in reality, refer to the field of services and systems, rather than that of the material world. However, they should be seen as the results of local inventions rather than external forces.

### A Service-intensive Chinese Society

Globalisation promoted "anytime, anywhere" as a value. But attention is shifting back from space to place.<sup>21</sup>

I began this paper by presenting some aspects of the Hong Kong economy which are contextually relevant, given that we are dealing with, probably the most business-oriented city in the world. Now I will move on to a discussion of some characteristics of daily life, and suggest how they may provide "exportable" exemplars of how to live in a dense urban space.

Hong Kong daily life is largely predicated on a complex network of services. This phenomenon, which increasingly characterizes life in all the big cities of the world,<sup>22</sup> is not new, but it has been pushed to its extreme. Hong Kong society has been operating according to highly service-intensive ways of living for years (that is the quantity of commercial services on which people rely on a

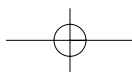
18 Lester Berger, *Made by Hong Kong*, 1997.

19 Ibid., 79.

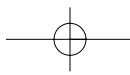
20 Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix, "Life at Hyper-Density," *Domus*, 839 (July/August 2001).

21 Cf. John Thackara, *In the Bubble: Designing for Lightness in a Complex World* (Publication scheduled for Fall 2002).

22 Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Suskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge/Sage Press, 2000).







day-to-day basis). For instance, it is a commonly accepted in Hong Kong that using public transport is more convenient than driving a car, and patronizing restaurants and take out services is more convenient than preparing meals at home.

To give another, less evident example, let's see how a Hong Kong developer presented a recent urban development:

Laguna Verde makes effective use of modern technology to make your life completely hassle-free. With our e-living service, residents have ready access to a wealth of knowledge, news and entertainment fed directly to their home thorough fibre optic. Our smart card system allows easy access to the entrance lobby car park and can also be used to pay your management fee. Clubhouse facilities and Lifestyle Plus services are also available through the online reservation system. (Laguna Verde, Cheung Propriety Development Limited)

Only in Hong Kong (or, at least, here more than in any other place) the sales blurb for a flat focused on the quantity and quality of the services delivered in the podium. Ironically, little or nothing is written about the flat itself, which will be small and utilitarian, a kind of necessary but banal box-to-sleep-in.<sup>23</sup>

The most obvious link between service-intensity and the Hong Kong life style is the lack of space and its consequences for the average flat square-footage. The compact dimensions of flats drives families and individuals to outsource household activities, such as eating and social interaction that elsewhere could and would take place at home.

But the keyword to understanding the very special role of services in Hong Kong is density. Density, especially when it gets to very high levels, is much more than the visible expression of the lack of space. It becomes the habitat for particular forms of social organization. For obvious economic and organizational reasons, services are entities that are especially adapted to dense environments. It is easier and more economical to deliver services in the middle of a very dense town than in a very dispersed settlement.<sup>24</sup> As a result, it does not appear so strange that such a hyper-dense city has produced such a highly service-intensive way of living.

### Hong Kong Local Specificity

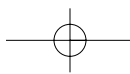
More means that just housing are required to produce a truly compact city with a density comparable to that of New York or Hong Kong... the concept of mix is essential.<sup>25</sup>

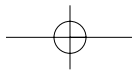
Hong Kong services present a very original mixture of Western and Chinese characteristics, especially relevant to the ongoing process of cultural globalization. But in the former British colony, this cultural hybridization has a long history and, as

23 Gutierrez and Portefaix, "Life at Hyper-Density," 2001.

24 Walter Stahel, "From Products to Services, or Selling Performance Instead of Goods," *Proceedings of the Conference Ecodesign '99*, (Tokyo, 1999).

25 Harm Tilman, "When Dense When Lite?" in Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs and Richard Koek, *Farmax: Excursion on Density* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1998), 126.





mentioned before, it has now reached a kind of maturity, spreading to every level of society and, from our perspective, shaping the system of services on which citizens base a large part of their existence. In other words, Hong Kong has produced, over time, some highly localized kinds of services, where the degree of influence is on the way in which services are conceived, delivered, and used. Obviously, to discuss specific Chinese and Western influences on a given service is very difficult and risky. Nevertheless, seen through Western cultural glasses, many Hong Kong services appear to be shaped differently from what we are accustomed to in other, more Western or Westernized, cities. The services systems reveal “non-Western” influence both on the side of the client (the service interface) and on the side of the provider (the service organization).

For the client, the non-Western character of the services appears not only in the all too obvious case of food-related services, but also in the highly efficient transportation system, whose effectiveness lies in an intelligent combination of centrally organized systems (such as the underground and the major bus and tramway lines) and locally adaptable ones (such as the incredible number of taxis and minibuses). But this is not all. If we look more carefully at the variety of the service networks, we can discover what may appear as a “non-Western imprinting” in other, more subtle, but no less meaningful, ways. For example, in the way that shopkeepers organize their premises and display their merchandise, or in the words and images that developers use to present the podium services of the buildings they are promoting.<sup>26</sup>

On the side of the providers, the non-Western character of the services emerges clearly in the social/familial networks that underpin the majority of services. This is true not only in the small, family-based restaurant or grocery shops on the corner, but also in the most organized and complex systems. Given that services, per se, are always forms of social networks, it is easy to recognize a relationship between the diffusion of services and the strong social networks that characterize Chinese society.

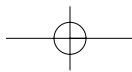
#### **Future Challenges: Connectivity and Environmental Pressure in a Dense Environment**

Probably the hardest thing to foresee ... in Asia over the next few years—and not only in Asia, is just how the global will interact with the local to produce hybrids that never existed before.<sup>27</sup>

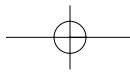
What has been described so far is the system of services that characterizes, and that has characterized, the Hong Kong way of life. In some ways, for the territory this original system of services represents the “traditional” and the “local.”

26 Gutierrez and Portefaix, *Life at Hyper-Density*, 2001.

27 Rohwer, *Remade in America. How Asia Will Change Because America Boomed*.







In recent times, the ongoing processes of cultural and economic globalization have affected traditional Hong Kong features and “the new” has appeared through connectivity. This resulted from the diffusion of the new information and communication technologies<sup>28</sup> and sustainability, that is the result of increased environmental concern, which have impacted on the characteristic Hong Kong service-intensity and service-specificity. But the outcome still is completely open. How will the double impact of connectivity and sustainability change the way of life and the way of doing business? And, vice versa, if Hong Kong experiences should migrate elsewhere, what will be their global impact, especially in the desirable scenario of a worldwide transition towards sustainable forms of society?

These questions are so big, and the present context so open and turbulent, that it is clearly impossible to give any real answer to them. Nevertheless, some consideration can be given and some hypotheses developed on Hong Kong’s potential role in any future transition.<sup>29</sup>

Let us begin by considering only one point. What might happen when an increasing connectivity impacts on a very dense social environment, such as Hong Kong, that also is deeply rooted in a strong non-Western background? And how will service-intensive ways of life and Hong Kong-specific services be renewed and reoriented by the increasing levels of connectivity?

To date, research on connectivity, and on its social and economic effects, has been directed mainly towards what happens, in real time, when we connect people that are geographically disconnected, and when all of them are Western or deeply Westernized. What might happen when a high degree of connectivity invests a very dense social system, and when, as in Hong Kong, this system already is, in many ways, well connected, and has been, until now, considered far less. But change is taking place as evidenced by the fact that more and more researchers are considering the potential role of connectivity in dense environments, and its capacity to support new forms of services and social organizations. In his latest book, John Thackara writes that:

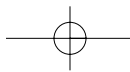
For network and microprocessor designers, confronted already, by a light-speed crisis, “closer” is better than “faster.” A low of locality drives this kind of network design. Where nerads lead, we should follow. Density and proximity are success factors in cities too.<sup>30</sup>

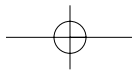
Given these issues, it is easy to observe that Hong Kong is in an exceptional position as a test-field where solutions may be found. It could be, and in many ways it is already, the best experimental field for observing what happens, and what could happen, with the

28 “Connectivity” refers to the number and quality of “manageable interactions” between the elements of a given system. All systems are characterized by a certain degree of connectivity. In recent times, ICT have penetrated socio-technical systems. The implication of this is that the number of interactions that are potentially manageable (i.e., the connectivity characterizing these systems) would tend to increase.

29 The general background of this discussion has been developed in several papers: Ezio Manzini, “Sustainability and Scenario Building: Scenarios of Sustainable Wellbeing and Sustainable Solutions Development,” *Proceedings of the Conference Ecodesign 2001* (Tokyo, 2001) and Ezio Manzini, Carlo Vezzoli, and Garrette Clark, “Product-Service Systems: Using an Existing Concept as a New Approach to Sustainability,” *The Journal of Design Research*, 1 (Delft: Delft University Press, 2001).

30 John Thackara, *In the Bubble: Designing for Lightness in a Complex World*.





highest density and the highest connectivity within a mixed, non-Western and Western, culture. At the same time, given the increasing pressure of the environmental issue, a second point has to be introduced, that is how to reorient the system towards sustainability.

### **Sustainability in a Dense Environment *and* in a Chinese Culture**

Hong Kong could engineer, finance and implement sustainable urban systems for energy, transport, waste, water, food, building materials, and other essential needs. Our extreme urban density is a unique laboratory ideally suited to showcasing sustainable urban systems.<sup>31</sup>

If we put Hong Kong and its ways of life in the perspective of sustainability, what appears is a radically contradictory image of a place on the one hand dramatically unsustainable yet, at the same time, in a more favorable position comparatively than many other big cities. Leaving the negative side of this image to other discussions (given also that everybody perceives these problems in his/her own direct experience of the city<sup>32</sup>) let us concentrate on the positive side, that is the opportunities.

The opportunities in a transition towards sustainability are represented in the merging of high-density, high-connectivity, and service-intensity. Within this framework, there exists the possibility of developing a new family of services based on an environmentally friendly Chinese-Western cultural paradigm.

The starting point is the recognition that density is not necessarily synonymous with unsustainability. Despite existing “ecological pictures,” it is technically, environmentally, and economically easier to imagine sustainable solutions in the case of a dense social system than the case of a diffuse one.<sup>33</sup> Even the local branch of Friends of the Earth assumes that:

Hong Kong’s urban density is the only clearly sustainable part of its Footprint. This is a competitive advantage for Hong Kong’s future because Western-style, car-based development is not sustainable for the planet.”<sup>34</sup>

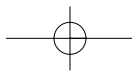
If this assumption is correct, the Hong Kong starting point in the transition towards sustainability presents some interesting opportunities. The big challenge now is to be able to orient the “new” to emerge from the social impact of the new technologies moving in the “right direction,” that is in the direction of a new generation of sustainable service-based solutions. Given that this possible reorientation demands greater environmental and social sensitivity on the part of all of the different social actors, it will depend, in the territory, on how the whole society evolves and, more specifically, on how the deep roots of Chinese culture can be integrated with the most advanced global knowledge. Ideally, this

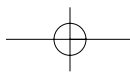
31 Friends of the Earth—Hong Kong, *Sustainability... a Community Dialogue*, Research Report, supported by Environment and Conservation Fund, Project 34/96 (Hong Kong, 2000).

32 With regard to the Hong Kong “ecological footprint,” see the very interesting and complete study that has been done and edited by Friends of the Earth: Friends of the Earth Hong Kong, *Sustainability... a Community Dialogue*.

33 Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs, and Richard Koek, *Farma: Excursion on Density* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1998), 34–52; Walter Stahel, “From Products to Services, or Selling Performance Instead of Goods,” *Proceedings of the Conference Ecodesign '99* (Tokyo, 1999).

34 Cf. Friends of the Earth—Hong Kong, *Sustainability... a Community Dialogue*, 20.





will lead to new ideas of well-being and, hopefully, to more sustainable ways of living.<sup>35</sup>

In some sense, Chinese traditional ideas about production have provided a very significant list of ideas for current society. From my point of view, the most important in this list can be summed up as a “method of carefulness,” “knowing common sense,” “doing nothing,” plus another very important idea about environmental protection: “benefit everything in the world.”<sup>36</sup>

(This list of “good ideas,” proposed by Professor Xu Ping of the Nanjing Academy of Art, synthesizes very well what many Chinese students think about the possible Chinese interpretation of the Western concept of sustainability; or better, of what they perceive as the Western cultural background of sustainability.)

Its is a completely open question as to whether traditional Chinese wisdom will really affect the country’s way of facing environmental and social problems that are related to the ongoing rapid economic development. But if there will be a place in which new experiments in this direction can occur, the place will be Hong Kong. Even if its business and consumption-oriented way of living appear in opposition to the list of the “good Chinese ideas,” Hong Kong has the potentiality to be a test-field for the most advanced experiments. When and how these experiments will take place, what their results will be, and what influence they will have on other Chinese and non-Chinese regions are crucial questions that cannot be answered here.

### Conclusions

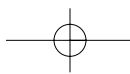
1 The new definition of “Made in Hong” should not be sought within the old economy of products, but in the new economy of services and knowledge. Within this framework, the “art of managing complex systems” has to be seen as an original expression of the hybridization of Western and Chinese culture, and has to be considered as the basis for original “Hong Kong products.”

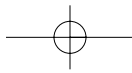
2 In recent decades, Hong Kong has begun to emerge as a proto-“laboratory of the future,” where its specific ways of life have engendered new typologies of services, relationships between public and private spaces, forms of household organization, and hybrid Chinese-Western behavior. Each may be seen as evidence of the “art of managing complex systems” applied to daily life that characterizes Hong Kong’s success in the dispersed manufacturing system of the Pearl River delta.

3 The Hong Kong-specific ways of living and their related services may be considered as possible role models for elsewhere in the world. What today is specific to the territory, tomorrow could be commonplace where high density and high connectivity meet, and where Chinese and Western cultures mix (and other cultures mix, too).

35 Mention should be made of *Hong Kong—Mainland China Network on Design for Sustainability*, an ongoing research project funded by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The research started in 2001 and it is being developed as a joint-program with CIRIS-Politecnico di Milano, Italy, and with the Hunan University in Changsha, China. Some initial results of the research were presented in Ezio Manzini, and Benny Leong, “Strategic Design and design for Sustainability. A General Overview and Some Consideration in the Chinese Context,” *Proceedings of the Tsinghua 2001 China International Design Forum, Beijing, 2001* (China International Design Forum, Beijing 2001).

36 Xu Ping, *Dialogue Through Time and Space* (Paper presented at the Conference of the Hunan University on Sustainability and Design, Changsha, (Feb. 22, 2001).





4 The immediate role of Hong Kong as a laboratory of the future might focus on two major and interconnected issues: the impact of higher levels of connectivity and the search for sustainable solutions in highly dense and culturally hybrid environments.

As yet, the result of these experiments remains open, but the potential is rich.

