

## SCOTT JENNINGS MELBOURNE

# RESORT URBANISM

Scott Jennings Melbourne is an Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Hong Kong. His research advances design implementation methodologies and explores the impact of landscape spaces on urban networks. He holds a BLA from the University of Washington and an MLA with Distinction from Harvard University.

+ URBAN PLANNING

Hong Kong's Discovery Bay presents an emergent typology for integrating urban growth at significant densities within a rich topographic condition. A mixed-use development primarily devoted to residences, Discovery Bay manifests commercial success even as the collective project highlights risks in combining urban convenience with landscapes of leisure before more comprehensively establishing the social structures of community. Within the context of an increasingly dynamic Southeast Asia, it is critical that successful, if imperfect, developments like Discovery Bay are investigated as living experiments that may inform future growth patterns throughout the region. As a built work with more than three decades of expansion and inhabitation, DB (as Discovery Bay is colloquially known) is also relevant to designers and planners beyond this territory, who may recognize within the development relationships and ideas worthy of adapting to different climatic and economic contexts.

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is a dense coastal territory with unrealized potential in advancing urban growth that maximizes the opportunities of a richly diverse landscape setting. Constituting a collection of islands paired with an undulating peninsula reaching out toward Southeast Asia, this is a metropolis of coastlines. The city is also a financial center of international stature, offering varying forms of economic opportunity matched with relatively high political stability to historically attract waves of individuals from across the border in the People's Republic of China and beyond. With settlement of these groups constrained by colonial borders, the city today contains some of the highest population densities in the world within a condition aptly described as "a subtropical mountainscape that's equal parts Manhattan and Hawaii."<sup>1</sup> Dramatic topography, where the majority of hillsides are sloped at 20 degrees or higher,<sup>2</sup> places severe limits on buildable areas and gives armature to the city's urban form by guiding the forces of compression and demanding that urban expansion be absorbed within preciously sparse flat collars of shoreline. All the while, building heights have continued to be raised to the point that structures today are commonly built at heights of 40 stories or more. With protected green slopes providing a backdrop, and urban growth abutting waterways with expansive vistas, Hong Kong offers a dramatic example of prospect and refuge<sup>3</sup> at the city scale.

Since the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, at which point it gained its Special Administrative Region (SAR)



Discovery Bay is 25 minutes by high-speed ferry from the Central District of Hong Kong.

status, the territory has successfully maintained much of the openness, safety, rule of law, and business-friendly tax conditions that make it a valued center of operations for many foreign organizations and their employees. These foreign professionals, while constituting a relatively minor single-digit percentage of the city's population,<sup>4</sup> maintain higher-than-average salaries and consequently hold an outsized influence on property offerings. Beyond their buying power, these expatriates also carry with them cultural biases and tastes, sometimes differing from what is valued or prioritized in Hong Kong's uniquely hybridized Cantonese culture. While these spatial uses and expectations have traditionally represented a significant example of contrasting values between local and outsider, studies on historic trends in Hong Kong's real estate advertising point to a more recent and pervasive shift in emphasis toward the exterior environments where "[o]pen spaces are mobilized to articulate a prestigious social status."<sup>5</sup>

DB presents the territory's most successful example of a large-scale development that makes use of these pressures and desires, offering what can be described as a secluded kind of "resort urbanism" that is highly prized by its largely expatriate clientele. The community's significant building densities house a population of more than 7,000 residents per square mile,<sup>6</sup> where building blocks are interspersed with a series of open (but, notably, privately managed) spaces taking the form of plazas, pedestrian shopping streets, and even an expansive sandy beach. These more intimate interior environments are complemented by protected upslope greens made accessible by an extensive trail network.

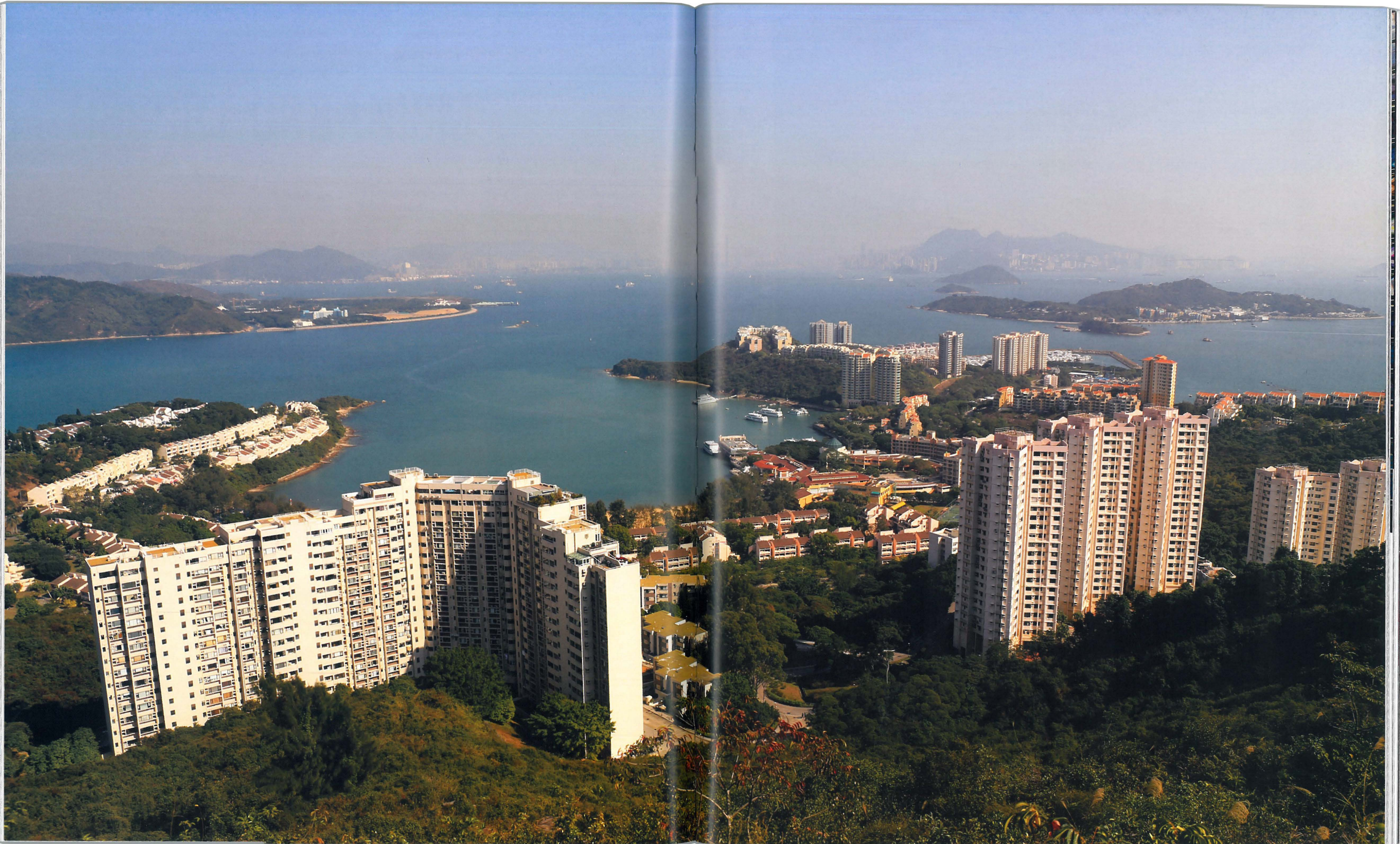
A larger-scale combination of barriers and portals can be used to understand how landscape has been utilized to achieve the resort-like qualities of DB. The development takes advantage of its topographic condition to be situated as an enclave at the eastern edge of Lantau Island, the largest of Hong Kong's islands but one that has traditionally been sparsely populated. For the first two decades of its existence, in fact, there was no vehicular access whatsoever to the DB site, with all construction materials and equipment needing to be transported to the island by ferry. Much as destination resorts make use of choreographed pairings between seen and unseen, served and serving, the resort urbanism of this enclave is supported by calculated juxtapositions of openings and closings, accessible frontages of activity, and rear concealment of supporting infrastructure.

Mass transit plays an essential role, with local bus services augmenting pedestrian connections to help make feasible a ban on private automobile use within the community. This car-free status has a significant impact on the use and character of spaces throughout the development. Meanwhile, regularly scheduled high-speed ferry services play a vital role in facilitating accessibility and making the intensity of Hong Kong's Central District a mere 25-minute boat ride away.

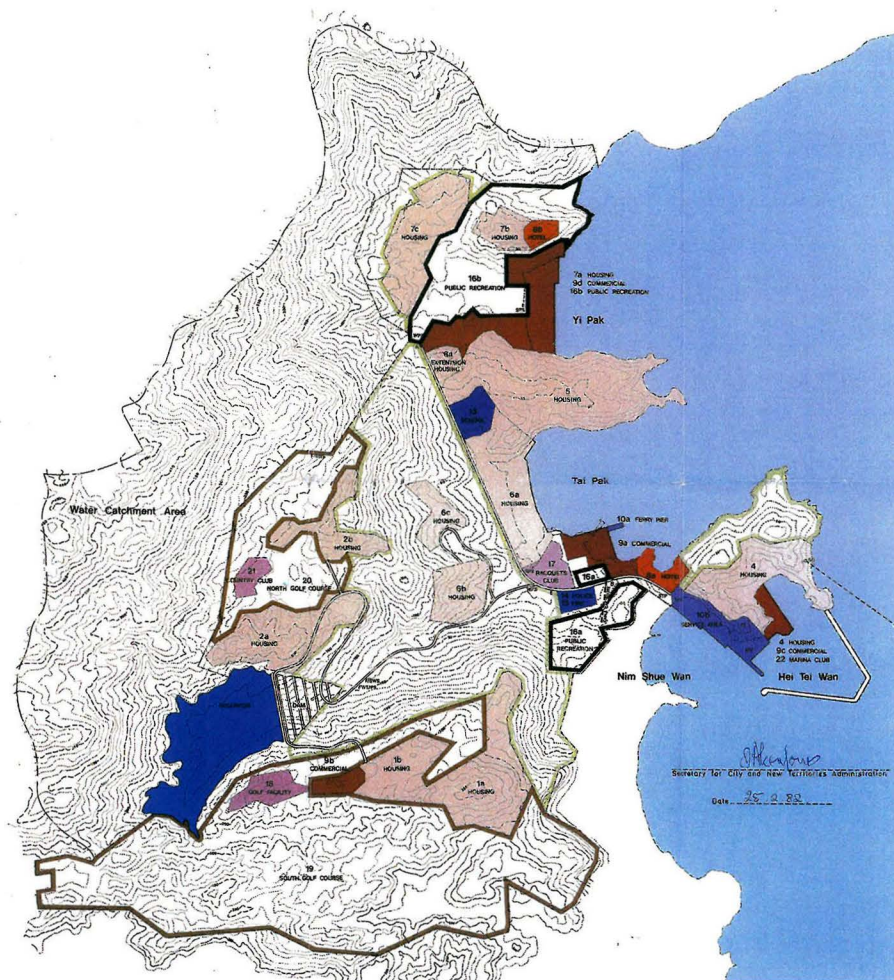
The allure of DB can be understood through an in-person experience of its landscape conditions. An afternoon spent walking the extensive plazas and esplanades of DB makes vividly clear why it has been so financially successful and attractive to its occupants, teeming with families as construction on yet even more housing towers continues apace. There is much on offer for these residents, living in an environment of urban convenience that also takes full advantage of Hong Kong's waterfront orientation and protected green spaces. For a city with already high levels of personal safety (and some of the highest life expectancy levels in the world<sup>7</sup>), DB offers an almost unheard-of minimization of threats. With an absence of personal automobiles, it can feel as though the entire development functions as a playground for children to explore and occupy. This opportunity is especially notable when experienced in the context of greater Hong Kong, where young children are rarely allowed the freedom of unsupervised play. The parents of DB clearly both value such opportunity for their children, and also see this environment as being sufficiently safe for its pursuit. With a baseline of safety having been established, a critical mass of pedestrian activity self-supports the fully domesticated environment. Importantly, this emphasis on safety is internalized, focused on operation and management rather than the kind of reactionary gated communities found in North America or self-contained expatriate compounds constructed in places like Dubai. The place is also distinct from building models found throughout contemporary China where, in cities from Shenzhen to Beijing, a favored typology operates at the superblock scale, locating towers and building podiums at the gated perimeter while maintaining a relatively small private green space at the core. With DB's porous borders and open access, it is not about keeping the unwanted out, but rather the prescription of activities and establishment of ground rules for what is allowed within.

A focus on frontage can be seen in an early masterplan document dating from 1982, where proposed development is concentrated on the waterfront edge and only secondary uses are distributed amongst relatively flat upland plateaus. Access builds from the centrally located ferry pier, with pedestrian paths linking the waterfront program while service roads are relegated to leeward positions. Tellingly, this early masterplan document only labels the Nim Shue Wan village, adjacent to DB's southern edge, without marking existing structures or showing potential paths for accessing and engaging with this fragment of local community.

At the core of DB's physical development is a residential typology that may be identified, contextualized, and potentially applied to other areas exhibiting similar conditions. Within the development itself is an interplay of building mass and open space that offers urban convenience (i.e., a density of public amenities, shopping, and restaurants all within walking distance) together with a variety of designed landscape spaces and access to more



This early Discovery Bay masterplan document describes the development as a resort despite its emphasis on housing accommodations. Courtesy HKRI Ltd.



extensive greens that support a spectrum of outdoor activities. This combination of mass and void requires balancing, for with too little development the area will have limited support for domestic activities and lack the gravity to hold users within the village-like destination. Landscape deficiencies will, conversely, make the whole endeavor not worthwhile to those looking for some benefit beyond the city's urban core. Transportation connections are to be convenient and reliable, but focused and not so extensive as to diminish the development's status as destination. Finally, a hospitable climate must be recognized as playing an essential role in supporting such efforts in outdoor living. It is chiefly for this experience of lifestyle that DB's resort urbanism has been pursued: while environmental benefits brought about by heightened housing density and mass transit use are real, these are not differentiating factors within the context of hyper-dense Hong Kong.

Discovery Bay's history sheds light on how this typology emerged as a mix of intentional planning and evolving opportunity. While DB today thrives as a residential outpost, it was not initially intended to function as a bedroom community serving Hong Kong's Central District. The lands were originally zoned for a resort development when long-term lease rights were purchased in the mid-1970s, and have in fact maintained this status until the present day. Shifting from original notions of resort destination to a convenient location for second homes, the development is now firmly established as a desirable residential community. The resulting situation is

something of an inverse to what might be found elsewhere: rather than a residential community attempting to take on the air of a resort, Discovery Bay has for some three decades been a resort in designation even though it is home to thousands of residents and had its first hotel open only recently in 2012. The managing corporate owner, Hong Kong Resort Company Limited, embraces this classification in name, and while tax gains generated from the disconnect between zoned and actual usage has in the past been called out as scandalous,<sup>8</sup> the development continues to grow. A variety of mostly local designers have been commissioned to guide DB's development, completing some 14 building phases since the project's inception.

As the development matures, long-term residents have encountered the limits to their influence on decision-making for this corporate-managed community. The lack of representative governance makes the occasional protest or boycott the most visible form of feedback. These activities are sometimes in response to price sensitivity, such as displeasure over fare increases for the high-speed ferry monopolistically controlled by DB's parent company. At other times these modest demonstrations are triggered by operational changes, such as when a popular pub is closed down or a children's facility is, without notice, given over to new management. It is this simmering instability and opaque decision-making that inhibits deep-rooted connections and defines the development's ultimate weakness in functioning as a community. While many occupants of DB will indeed be transitory, others still will raise families and call this place home for many years. During these times of dispute, individuals may be reminded that they are not residents so much as they are customers.

Even as a finely measured mix of isolation and access established the foundation for DB's success, consequential growth is challenging this equilibrium and puncturing DB's sense of isolation. Construction of a new airport, located off the northern edge of Lantau Island and opened in 1998, brought with it increased external infrastructure, including highways and bridges linking Lantau by road and rail to the rest of Hong Kong. The proximity of these developments to DB has demanded that the development's isolation be more self-conscious, increasingly self-imposed, presenting opportunities for ease of access that must intentionally be denied. These connections sometimes prove all too tempting, however, as evidenced by the Discovery Bay Tunnel that opened in 2000, providing direct vehicular links to the nearby North Lantau Highway. This proximity to external threats and opportunities is made all the more clear when comparing the northwestern portions of the early masterplan document with a more current draft version, where not just the North Lantau Highway but also a wastewater treatment plant and the opposing shoreline of Lantau Island itself are shown to be dramatically close to DB. Whereas the void in the earlier masterplan suggested an extreme isolation, the more current document offers a peek around the proscenium at a reality present just offstage.

While the global design community catches its collective breath after China's dramatic rush to development over the past decade and a half, further south the groundwork is being laid for another wave of effort across cities like Hanoi, Jakarta, and even Yangon. In this context, Discovery Bay represents an imperfect exemplar for synthesizing urban form with landscape. As an assemblage it points to possibilities, offering a dramatic example for how landscape at varying scales may be successfully employed in the creation of not only desirable images but also highly livable neighborhoods. And yet, as is the case in all resorts, the messy realities of governance and vital ecologies of life are carefully concealed, here to the point of limiting the place's potential.

- 1 Evan Osnos, "The Party and the People," *New Yorker* (October 13, 2014).
- 2 "Natural Terrain in Hong Kong," Hong Kong Geotechnical Engineering Office [accessed 2 October 2014], [http://hkgs.cedd.gov.hk/hkss/eng/natural\\_terrain.aspx](http://hkgs.cedd.gov.hk/hkss/eng/natural_terrain.aspx).
- 3 Grant Hildebrand, *Origins of Architectural Pleasure* (California: University of California Press, 1999).
- 4 Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, "2011 Population Census Thematic Report: Ethnic Minorities," 7.
- 5 Sidney C.H. Cheung & Eric K.W. Ma, "Advertising Modernity: Home, Space and Privacy 1," *Visual Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2005): 65-80.
- 6 As a point of comparison, this density is similar to Brooklyn, New York, albeit with a significantly different massing arrangement.
- 7 "Hong Kong SAR, China Data," The World Bank [accessed October 11, 2014], <http://data.worldbank.org/country/hong-kong-sar-china>.
- 8 Jane Moir, "Discovery Mystery," *South China Morning Post* (January 22, 2005).



