

Liveability Indexes; What they mean and how Hong Kong measures up

By Peter Hasdell

B.Sc.Arch.(hons), AA Dipl.(MArch.), RIBA

Associate Dean, Associate Professor, School of Design, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University



At first glance the concept of Liveable Cities appears to be a self-referential truism containing an inherent paradox, namely that cities by definition must be liveable. The word and for that matter the idea or concept of 'city' is linked in Ancient Latin etymology to the concept of civilization. Its Latin root *civitas*, and the *civis* who are its citizens are therefore inextricably connected to the city. Similarly in ancient Greek *polis* refers to the city as evident in *metropolis* for instance, in which *polity* are its inhabitants and form the political organizational and societal structure of those citizens. Therefore implying that all cities are liveable. Yet we well know that there are varying degrees of liveability; places, suburbs, neighborhoods within cities where we would choose to live given a choice; or cities themselves which are more attractive, or provide better amenities, prospects, standards of living or a higher quality of life. In fact, as city inhabitants - as citizens - we often make subjective assessments on whether we would like to live in a particular city or place in a city, this might be due to better schools or leisure, park or recreation facilities, or possibly the area is desirable due to being a higher socio-economic level. Such factors influence not only individuals and citizens but also organisations and businesses, on development and investment opportunities as well as districts and cities on their policies.

Liveability Indexes are one increasingly popular mechanism for evaluating such factors. Liveability Indexes have several origins, one of this stems from socio-economic indexes such as the Gini Coefficient, derived over 100 years

ago which indexed income inequality, other origins have been traced to property speculation in the US in the late 1800s. The number of liveability indexes has grown significantly in scale and scope since the 1970s, in recent years becoming an increasingly commercialized sector where the use of such indexes are often, through licensing and pricy subscriptions, affordable for cities and businesses who use these as either competitive mechanisms or as indicators of business opportunity. As such they often are used as proto-evaluation tools for either individual lifestyle consumers as seen in business, economy and lifestyle magazines such as *The Economist* or *Monocle*, by businesses who might be evaluating markets in different cities as potentials for investment and city policymakers who want to understand the competitiveness of their city or how their city compares with other cities.



(source: Monocle, July/August, 2018)

So what constitutes a liveability index? The methods used to construct liveability indexes vary widely but draw at their base from theories of liveability and on how well inhabitants are adapting to the aspects of that environment. One way this can be understood is: "A liveability index is a table that ranks a set of cities, regions, or nations according to a defined combination of quantitative and qualitative properties. The properties are usually based on data from subjective surveys of, for example, "life satisfaction," "well-being," or "happiness," as well as on data yielding more objective determinants of "quality of life," such as assessments based on public statistics, "economic climate," "political stability," or "public services." A liveability score or ranking given by such an index is an aggregate account of the situation in a city, region, or nation that is purported to obtain there over a given period, usually 1 year." (Scerri 2014).

Indexes gather and arrange data based on chosen criteria and the weighting these have been given in a particular index. Indexes cover a wide range of varying criteria from inequality to sustainability to lifestyle, ease of doing business and city competitiveness, each aimed at a different sector and target audience. Or for example, using criteria including political climate, social, economic, environmental, stability, inhabitant safety and the level of provision of available education, transport, and other public services. As Scerri points out the normative reference point for many indexes is often assumed to be above-average income earners in the global North with an assumption of human mobility, protec-

tion of basic human norms and rights, property rights, rule of law and an open public sphere. A further variable is the range of cities selected, which are normally aimed towards the anticipated users of that index. These factors allude to the inherent bias in all liveability indexes.

In fact, liveability indices have become a part of the inexorable rise of globalization and attendant notions of world city, mobility and the global economy, the 2019 pandemic notwithstanding. In parallel, competitive city paradigms have risen to the forefront as a sector of many city's governance models, that assess their performance in relation to similar cities; or use liveability indexes as development paradigms to attract high-worth sectors as inward investment. Hong Kong and Singapore are cases in point as both constitute similar types of city-states which aim to attract global finance and highly skilled workforces from the international marketplace. If we extend this to a wider view of city planning and policy we can find that the concepts of creative city and creative economy development paradigms utilize similar liveability indexing concepts to rationalize, for instance, the coincidence of the creative districts with high levels of particular types of lifestyle amenities in key areas which attract the creative class. Such cities and regions have for instance attempted to duplicate the successes of San Francisco's Bay Area, London's Shoreditch or New York's Soho areas.

The 'Creative City' being a key tool for policy driven tertiary sector city development, developed by Florida, Landry and others, the creative

city ideas have more recently generated global city benchmarking concepts using the 'creative index' and 'creative milieu' ideas (Florida 2005), (Landry and Bianchini 1995). These concepts have been adopted by policy makers and planners and cities to address a variety of urban issues ranging from revitalizing dilapidated urban areas, increasing local employment, providing retraining opportunities, whilst fostering new service, creative industry and technology sectors and enhancing the branding, competitiveness of the city in the global economy, as promoted by UNESCO's (2004) Creative Cities Network. Critics note that the creative cities concept often masquerades as gentrification of run-down urban areas with no benefit to local residents (Markusen and Shrock 2006), creating a mono-cultural development (Mercer 2004).

Extending this line of thought further we can observe Hong Kong's transition from a production-based city to a tertiary knowledge sector city impacts the city's economic, spatial, social and cultural development. As well as the values it establishes, the ways it plans for its future, and ultimately its regional and international competitiveness. The recent creative cluster developments such as the West Kowloon Cultural District, Tai Kwun and to some extent the East Kowloon Business District developments serve as attractions in this sector. In Hong Kong, the idea of the creative city, creative clusters and knowledge or tertiary sector-based economy, society and city was established following the 1997 handover. The Planning Department, (2002) "Working Paper No. 20 Arts and Cultural Development" first outlines the realignment

of government agencies to reflect increasing importance of culture, linked to the subsequent establishment of the Culture and Heritage Commission in 2000 to oversee and promote cultural development.

The "Hong Kong 2030: Planning Vision and Strategy" positions a longer-term vision for HK in context of the changing economy and the need for promotion of the cultural and creative industries sector. This policy change fostered a range of studies, research, strategic positioning reports and case studies, aimed at developing HK's competitiveness in these fields. Hui (2003) provides a sector analysis of HK's creative industries. Subsequent studies are primarily policy based for different government agencies, for example the Hong Kong Ideas Centre (2009) study. A related series of studies on HK's creative index as found in the Hong Kong Policy Research Institute report (2005) which culminated in the establishment of the 'HK Creativity index' in 2012.

Mok in a 2012 article proposed a Hong Kong design index based on the growth of the design sector and design-related industry. Newer government agencies such as Create HK have elevated the creative city concept as a direct branding and marketing strategy. Indeed policy applications of liveability can be found throughout the government agencies as for instance in the Liveable City report by the Commission on Strategic Development (2016) cites several liveability indexes including EIU Liveability Survey, GLCI Survey and CASS Liveability Survey and maps Hong Kong criteria to these as a planning

and development paradigm.

It is not hard to critique the indexical approaches which attempt to value or assess financial or opportunity values to city development policies in Hong Kong. As Mar (2002) outlines, planning in Hong Kong has been 'haphazard.' He cites Cuthbert (1996) who articulates Hong Kong's urban condition borrowing from Reyner Banham's (1971) seminal work on Los Angeles as the beach, the freeways, the flatlands, and the foothills; four post-urban situations disaggregated and connected mainly by mobility. For Cuthbert these four eroding ecologies in Hong Kong are the Merchant City, the Industrial City, the Financial City, and the Capital city; disunified entities that have led to crises such as the current monopolization by large property developers, rampant speculation and property price capitalization; in part a consequence of government-regulated mechanisms of land control. As many authors have commented, these and consequent planning approaches have led to increasing inequality, as seen by large rises in the Gini coefficient and are recognized by some as contributing factors to social unrest in recent years.

Cuthbert (1997, 1998) postulates a critique that market-driven imperatives run counter to a citizen-centered approach. This corporate model, not dissimilar to the models of city governance that Hong Kong has utilized in both pre-1997 and after, places emphasis on a mercantile model of 'capital' and value, one that has clearly impacted planning paradigms. Cuthbert describes how planning remains 'derivative rather

than creative,' supporting an argument that the 'social' finds its alignment in Hong Kong, not in social norms or socio-spatial models, but through incorporation into economic frameworks of value and speculative development, leading to an under-investment in civic engagement and in public amenity provision. This planning paradigm has often been contrasted to Singapore's more unified and comprehensive planning approach.

Returning to the primary focus of this article, the liveability index, it is instructive to outline some of these indexes in respect to Hong Kong. There are a wide range of liveability indexes available such as the Monocle magazine's Most Liveable Cities ranking and the Mercer Quality of Life Index have become popular sources for citing Hong Kong's ranking and attractiveness. It should be noted that much of the baseline surveys, research and data for these are completed well in advance of the actual publication and therefore lag behind rapid changes.

One important index is The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Global Liveability Ranking aimed at defining quality of life for 140 cities according to 5 primary weighted factors: Stability (25%), healthcare (20%), culture and the environment (25%), education (10%) and infrastructure (20%) and is clearly targeted at The Economist readers and the business community. In 2015 the EUI Global Liveability Ranking index ranked Hong Kong as 46th out of 140 cities, representing a drop of 15 places on its previous annual ranking. According to a South China Morning Post article (2015), survey editor

Jon Copestake was quoted as saying: “Hong Kong’s liveability has been hit by the disruptive protests that took place last year.” Further commenting that “Hong Kong is still to some extent a gateway to mainland China, but Chinese cities are rising quite rapidly. So its traditional function as a gateway is reducing. The city is not as strong as it used to be,” he said.

In 2016 Hong Kong rose three places, moving ahead of its traditional rival Singapore, which according to the EIU report, was largely due to declines in liveability scores in other cities. China Daily (2016) reported that “Hong Kong used to rank much higher on the same annually updated liveability chart but suffered the steepest drop ever last year,” noting that “Socio-political stability is one of the most important criteria in rankings of this nature, for obvious reasons.” During 2017 and 2018 Hong Kong and Singapore continued to swap places with Hong Kong returning to the leading the ranking between the two in 2018, with a global ranking of 38 out of 140 cities. An analyst at the time was quoted as saying “increased political censorship in Hong Kong, adding to Beijing’s hardline stance against independence advocacy, could lead to less freedom of speech, which would cause companies to leave for greener pastures. He said Hong Kong’s future was entwined with China’s, and its function would be increasingly aimed at the provision of services to the mainland.... The [regional role] of Hong Kong will become smaller, and Singapore is [becoming the choice of Asia-Pacific headquarters for multinational companies] because of its quality of life.” (South China Morning Post, 2018.)

In 2019 Hong Kong continued to rank 38th in the EIU ranking, scoring 95 in stability, 83.1 in culture and environment, 100 in education, 87.5 in health care, and 96.4 infrastructure, falling behind Melbourne, Sydney, Osaka, Tokyo, Adelaide, Auckland, Perth, Brisbane, and Wellington. Reporters from The Standard newspaper noted that “the 2019 ranking for Hong Kong does not encompass the recent unrest. ... This situation has obviously changed dramatically for the worse, and it is highly likely that the next iteration of the index will see Hong Kong’s position slide as a result of the rolling civil unrest that has hit the city since June.” The 2020 EUI Global Liveability Ranking index has been postponed due to the corona virus pandemic as of the publication date of this article.

Another example can be drawn from Monocle magazine’s Most Liveable Cities ranking, published annually on its chosen top 25 cities. This content is absorbed by the predominantly Millennial and Generation Z readers who are interested in issues of globalized lifestyle, but needs to be understood in terms of the influential circle that extends beyond the immediate readership. The index survey criteria include factors such as international connectivity, business conditions, climate, quality of the built environment, environment and nature, urban condition, public transport availability, safety and crime, tolerance and health care. Education for instance is not a criterion that figures highly in this. In Monocle issue 75 published in July-August 2014 described Hong Kong’s ease of doing business and expansive transport infrastructure as admirable but commented that “the

city could do more to tackle longstanding issues such as housing and quality of education”; noting as well that in order to ease growing tensions between Hong Kongers and the increase of Mainland Chinese tourism that “Hong Kong is considering amending race / anti-discrimination legislation to include the protection of mainland Chinese visitors.”

In contrast issue 85 published in July-August 2015 the report highlighted the development of new cultural events and venues such as the West Kowloon Cultural District and Art Basel, stating that in Hong Kong “pictures of police in riot gear firing tear gas at unarmed protestors holding only umbrellas for protection will be hard to forget; for many this has tarnished the image of the city. But the non-violent and respectful manner in which members of the Umbrella Movement held their ground also gained the respect of many citizens around the world.” Further stating their opinion that the city needed to improve housing to lower living costs, and introduce a congestion charge to reduce pollution, and that the “Government should listen to their young politicized citizens, not chastise them.” Three years later Monocle’s issue 115 published in July-August 2018 noted the traffic congestion once again and advocated car-free zones but notably commented that “The tetchy political scene in Hong Kong has calmed down during chief executive Carrie Lam’s first year in office.”

Mercer, a US-based human resource consulting firm and asset-management company, publishes annually the highly-acclaimed and

comprehensive Mercer’s Cost of Living Survey for over 200 cities worldwide. As their core business is corporate human resourcing, the over 39 criteria chosen are targeted at potential users and include current costs for a typical corporate level relocation in the weighted and comparative cost of services, household goods, global currency fluctuations, education costs, entertainment costs, political-economic stability, business travel costs and comparative accommodation costs, sociopolitical environment (crime, safety, and stability), economics (banking regulations and services), sociocultural environment (media, censorship, personal freedom), health (private and public services, air quality, sanitation, and waste disposal), education (private and public), utilities (transportation, traffic, and services), recreational facilities (restaurants, theaters, sports, and leisure), market (availability of goods), housing, and natural environment (climate, natural calamities, and weather extremes).

Since 2015 the index has listed Hong Kong as the world’s first or second most expensive city from those cities surveyed. In 2015 Hong Kong was ranked second, but by 2016 had moved to first place, ahead of Singapore (4) Tokyo (5) Shanghai (7) and Beijing (10). Connie Leung, Mercer’s Hong Kong Information Solutions Business Leader said, ‘Even though Hong Kong is the world’s most expensive city in which to live, expats are still willing to come here. One of the key reasons is that, due to global market changes and the market potential in Asia, more and more international assignees from the U.S. or Europe recognize there are excellent oppor-

tunities for career development and exposure. Moreover, the pay level in Hong Kong is relatively high compared to most of the cities in the world, off-setting the impact of it being the most expensive city.”

In 2017 it dropped to number 2 but by 2018 and for 2019 it had returned to the most expensive city. The report notes that “Hong Kong (1) remains the most expensive city for expatriates both in Asia and globally as a result of the housing market and currency being pegged to the US dollar, driving up the cost of living locally.” In the 2020 report published June 9th 2020 “Hong Kong retains top spot for the third consecutive year, while Singapore is in fifth, down two places from last year.” The report notes the global impact of Covid and the affects this will have on mobility in general.

Clearly the impacts of recent events such as Covid and the social unrest in Hong Kong will be revealed in subsequent liveability indexes for 2021 and beyond, and will also be impacted by changes wrought through consumption pattern changes for example. Additionally, it is important to note that there is considerable critique of the concept of liveability indexes. For example, Feargus O’Sullivan a journalist with Bloomberg notes in an opinion piece in 2019 that rankings evaluate cities “in terms of a small band of citizens for whom almost all of such metrics are relevant. They assess, broadly, how much potential a city possesses when seen from a privileged point of view: that of a straight, affluent, mobile, and probably white couple who works in something akin to upper management

and has children. Remove even one of those characteristics from the equation and the results often seem way off the mark. ... City rankings are thus a window onto the projected tastes of a highly specific elite.”

The taking of often narrow band or subjective criteria and presenting these as definitive city metrics of liveability can be problematic, especially when the expanded utilization extends to legitimizing policy making, competitive city promotion and investment. Often done, in the words of Scerri (2014), “as a means for promoting a particular place with the aim of attracting international capital and capital-intensive “creative” labor, which politicians and business actors popularize and promote the overall rankings provided by major liveability indexes.” This kind of use normalizes, commercializes and monetizes the inherent bias and relativism in most liveability indexes into benchmarks and indexes that simulate an image of veracity, whilst often ignoring many other significant socio-economic or environmental underlying issues.

In fact, many academic critics have argued the need for more comprehensive forms of liveability indexes that include issues of environmental sustainability, social infrastructure and so on. This seeks to focus liveability on not only consumptive lifestyle type issues but other value sets that may have resonance or meaning both for individual users and for organizational and civic applications. The separation for instance of newer indexes aimed at for instance sustainability or people planet and profit type indexes

tend to operate on a more academic level as evaluation tools and there has not been a commercial value or marketability for these.

However as big data, smart cities and technological convergence develop, we can expect to see further alignments of liveability indexes with other data that impacts city planning and citizen use across socio-economic and socio-environmental registers.

References

- Bloomberg News <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-26/the-problem-with-most-livable-city-rankings>
- Create HK (2013) "Creative City" Create HK, HK SAR Government, http://www.brandhk.gov.hk/en/facts/factsheets/pdf/05_creative_city_en.pdf
- Development Bureau, (2013) "Legislative Council Panel on Development 2013 Policy Address Policy Initiatives of Development Bureau", http://www.devb.gov.hk/filemanager/en/content_68/2013_policy_address_devb_s_policy_initiatives.pdf
- Economist Intelligence Unit. (2009). Liveability Ranking Retrieved 23 Feb., 2010, from <http://www.economist.com/markets/rankings/displaystory>.
- How is the cost of living index calculated? Retrieved 2 Jun, 2011, from http://www.worldwidecostofliving.com/asp/wcol_HelpIndexCalc.asp – quality of life.
- Florida, R. (2002). The rise of the creative class. New York: Basic Books. Google Scholar
- Hagerty, M. R. (1999). Unifying livability and comparison theory: Cross-national time-series analysis of life-satisfaction. *Social Indicators Research*, 47(1), 343–356. Google Scholar
- Hong Kong 2030 (2007), "Hong Kong 2030: Planning Vision and Strategy", Department of Planning, Department of Development, HK SAR Government http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/comp_s/hk2030/eng/finalreport/
- Hong Kong Ideas Centre (2009), "Study on Creative Industries in Hong Kong : Key Recommendations", Hong Kong Ideas Centre, http://www.cpu.gov.hk/doc/en/research_reports/baseline%20study%28eng%29.pdf
- Hui, D., Centre for Cultural Policy Research (2003) "Baseline Study on Hong Kong's Creative Industries", Central Policy Unit, HK SAR Government, http://www.cpu.gov.hk/doc/en/research_reports/baseline%20study%28eng%29.pdf
- Hui, D., Ng C., Mok, P., Fong, N., Chin, W., Yuen, C., (2005) "A Study on Creativity Index", Centre for Cultural Policy Research, The University of Hong Kong and Home Affairs Bureau, HK Gov., <http://www.uis.unesco.org/culture/Documents/Hui.pdf>
- International Intelligence on Culture in association with Cultural Capital Ltd and Hong Kong Policy Research Institute (2005) "Hong Kong Arts and Cultural Indicators Research Report", Hong Kong Arts Development Council, http://www.hkadc.org.hk/rs/File/info_centre/reports/200510_hkartnculture_report.pdf

- Ling, O. G., & Yun, B. (Eds.). (2010). *World cities: Achieving liveability and vibrancy*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company. Google Scholar
- Marsh Mercer Kroll. (2009). *Quality of living – survey highlights* Retrieved 23 Feb, 2010, from <http://www.mercer.com/qualityofliving>.
- Mercer Financial Services <https://www.mercerfinancialservices.com/better-lives-wealth/cost-of-living-2015.html>
- <https://www.mercer.com.hk/newsroom/mercercost-of-living-survey-finds-african-asian-and-european-cities-dominate-list-of-most-expensive-locations.html>
- <https://www.mercer.com/newsroom/mercercost-of-living-survey-finds-cities-in-asia-most-expensive-locations-for-employees-working-abroad.html>
- Mok, P., Woo, M., Lee, W., Lam A., (2011) “A Review Study on Cultural Audit: The Landscape of Hong Kong’s Cultural Infrastructure”, Hong Kong Development and Strategy Research Centre, City Univ, http://www.cpu.gov.hk/doc/en/research_reports/Review%20Study%20on%20Cultural%20Audit.pdf
- Mok, P., Chow, A., Fu, C., Lau, A., (2012) “A Study on the Framework of Hong Kong Design Index”, HK Design Centre, http://www.hkdesigncentre.org/download/publications/designindex_eng.pdf
- Monocle Magazine <https://monocle.com/magazine/issues/125/quality-of-life-survey/>
- Ng, W., Chan, W., Mok, P., (2007) “Hong Kong: A Creative Metropolis, Policy Submission Paper”, Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre, http://www.bauhinia.org/research_content.php?lang=eng&id=38
- Planning Department, (2002) “Working Paper No. 20 Arts and Cultural Development”, Planning Department, HK SAR Government, http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/comp_s/hk2030/eng/wpapers/pdf/workingPaper_20.pdf
- Scerri, A., (2014). *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, Springer, DOI: 10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_1668
- South China Morning Post <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/1850420/occupy-protests-hit-hong-kongs-liveability-says-economist>
- <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/hong-kong-economy/article/2159518/hong-kong-reclaims-lead-over-singapore-global>
- <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/section-news/section/4/211351/HK-livability-down---and-that's-not-counting-unrest>
- Veenhoven, R., & Ehrhardt, J. (1995). The cross-national pattern of happiness: Test of predictions implied in three theories of happiness. *Social Indicators Research*, 34(1), 33–68. Google Scholar
- Urban Renewal Authority, (2012) “Old Urban Districts : Pilot Study,” Urban Renewal Authority, HK, <http://ura.org.hk/en/pdf/community/ACPP%20Pamphlet%20Eng.pdf>

Biography:

Peter Hasdell B.Sc.Arch.(hons), AA Dipl. (MArch.), RIBA., is the Associate Dean of Academic Programmes in the School of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. An Associate Professor, he was leader of the Environment and Interior Design programme prior to his current position. A long standing academic, registered architect, urbanist, and interactive specialist he graduated in Architecture from the University of Sydney and holds an AA Diploma from the renowned Architectural Association in London.

Peter has taught extensively in architecture and design schools worldwide including the renowned Bartlett School of Architecture UCL London; KTH Arkitektur Stockholm; University of Manitoba; University of East London; Hong Kong University; The Berlage Institute / TU Delft, the Netherlands; Columbia University NY; and others. He has been a primary research member of high profile urban and architecture research institutes including the well-known Chora Institute of Architecture and Urbanism, London; and the Centre for Architecture Structures and Technology (C.A.S.T.), Manitoba Canada; and he also founded and directed Architecture and Urban Research Lab (A+URL), Stockholm; Pneuma in Canada; and currently operates In-situ Project <http://insitu-project.com> a research platform focusing on participatory processes and sustainable community development that has co-designed and constructed several research-based community projects in rural China.

His present research focuses on the metabolic architecture on the scales of the city (city as a life form, urban ecology), and as architecture (interactive and responsive architectures). Recent publications include *Border Ecologies: Hong Kong's Mainland Frontier*, Birkhauser 2016. He has practiced widely in Sydney, London, Tokyo and Hong Kong as a planner, urbanist and architect.