

Renovation Termites

Hong Kong, A Renovators' Paradise

Hong Kong has a reputation for being a vibrant city. Though some use this term to mean a lively and exciting social life for energetic English speaking ex-patriots and adventurous tourists, I have come to know it in its less flattering, literal connotation -- endless noise pollution.

It started in Ma On Shan with the building of the KCR East Rail. Suddenly, I was besieged by the thunderous crashing, high whining, and relentless moaning of mammoth construction machinery, designed to cut through and remove hardened earth and solid rock several meters thick. What followed were many additional months of noise produced by vibrating equipment used to distribute freshly poured cement uniformly throughout newly hammered wooden molds. Still vivid in my memory is also the pounding from hand-held and vehicle-based, compressed-air driven, percussion devices used to break up and remove freshly hardened concrete spill-over and terrorize concerned residents who dared to register a formal complaint. The results were devastating, as they placed me squarely at odds with the Hong Kong Environmental Protection Department, whose sponsored noise legislation is more permissive than protective, and the Hong Kong Police Department, Shatin, that never once issued more than a cordial warning for blatant infractions of legislated work times. I will not go into the details here as you can obtain a more thorough explanation elsewhere.¹ No, the purpose of this essay is to treat another problem that is related, but of a different genre -- apartment renovation noise.

Imagine a city in which over 90% of its residents live in high-rise, concrete bunkers surrounded by roads, highways, sidewalks, overpasses, underpasses, footbridges, vehicle bridges, concrete hillsides, and other high-rise buildings only sparsely populated with trees and shrubs -- a city in which the average length of residency in any given dwelling is between two and three years and taxi drivers and bared-skin truck drivers and delivery boys rule the highways and eateries with their horns, smoke, and boisterous chatter.² Even the footpaths that bind the many crests of Hong Kong's hilly countryside are often made from several inches of poured concrete! Only the fine taste and seemingly unending variety of *dim sam* sufficiently compensate for the signature clatter and chatter of glass, porcelain, and sometimes obnoxious guests found in the many smoke-filled tea houses tucked away in large commercial shopping centres located at the base of each and every residential stone quarry.³

Visitors to Hong Kong hardly stay long enough and travel wide enough to know how the vast majority of Hong Kongers live, and most Hong Kongers have never resided long enough outside of Hong Kong to notice anything unusual or strange about their own lifestyle. No, it is simply not the same everywhere one goes in the world, even though it may seem that way to many who have never wandered very far from the world's international hotel circuit.

¹ [June 4, 2002 letter](#) (pdf format) to the Hong Kong Environmental Protection Department. This letter outlines the misery suffered by those closely resident to the construction site. After the railroad was completed all users of the rail line were charged the same relatively high price. Absolutely no compensation was offered -- neither by the Kowloon-Canton Railroad (KCR), the construction companies, nor the Hong Kong government -- to those who suffered the more than two years of daily discomfort brought about by the construction project. Moreover, the only public areas available for recreational stress relief and proximate to those living near the Ma On Shan Station construction site were mismanaged. See [November 14, 2001](#) (pdf format) and [November 25, 2001](#) letters to the Senior Amenities Assistant of the Ma On Shan Park.

² The average length of residency has been told me by numerous agents from three independently owned and operated, city-wide, real estate agencies. Even if it is a myth, it is certainly a believable one, as this is the kind of statistic that real estate agents could easily generate from their own databases.

³ Hong Kong residential estates commonly bear the name *fa yuen* (flower garden). It is an unusual naming practice, as the number of residents usually exceeds the number of flowers in a Hong Kong residential estate. Perhaps this practice was begun to create the illusion of a green and fragrant living environment, endow residents with a fanciful address for overseas communication, and promote the misguided notion that individual residents (the *true* flowers) were someone very special in the eyes of building owners and managers.

In what I have come to know as the average Hong Kong high-rise, the blows of a hammer against the wall or floor of an apartment can be heard as far away as 15 floors. The intensity with which these sounds are heard depends on one's vertical and horizontal location relative to the wall or floor being struck. In effect, renovation work on the 15th floor of a 30-story building can be heard on every floor by residents living vertically above or below the apartment undergoing renovation. Residents living laterally distant and many floors away are largely spared -- well, at least until someone living on a different side of the building, but still very close to the original source of disturbance flees, new renovation work begins, and the composite vertical disturbance is laterally increased. Of course, the pounding of hammers is not the only source of disturbance; far more frequent is the rapid fire of electric chisels used to scale the worn surfaces of soiled tile floors and walls. Electric drills that bore into crusted cement are no less disturbing, but are not used as often.

Neither is noise the only problem. Renovation workers often smoke, and prefer to work with doors and windows wide open for maximum ventilation. Thus, everyone living in apartments on the same floor and several floors above are subjected to double-barrel pollution -- noise and second-hand smoke. Moreover, renovators tend to treat the building in which they are working as their own, and the building's public areas, such as corridors and elevators, become a simple extension of their privately contracted work space. As a result, dirt and loud talking invade neighboring residents' private dwellings to excess.

Tenants receive no compensation. Nothing is offered and nothing is received from either the renovation companies or the owners of the apartments who engage them. Furthermore, the profits from the work and more attractive interiors that result go into the pockets of the owners, workers, and unscrupulous building managers who likely receive side payments to supervise -- with one eye closed -- the voracious appetite of these termites. Even the Hong Kong government profits from this work, as government revenue increases with each dollar spent and received while the work is in progress and long after it is completed

More importantly, these workers, in the absence of sound building management, have every incentive to be both open and obtrusive. Being the latter drives both proximate and distant residents from their homes and creates new contract potential in the newly vacated apartments. Being the former attracts new business, as the owners of other apartments can easily observe the quality of the work performed while it is still in progress. These are only the more important direct sources of renovation-induced stress. There are also the important indirect effects, or aftershocks.

As a result of the heightened noise level during the day, residents who, for any number of reasons, are unable to vacate their apartment during the day engage in abnormal behavior. Parents become less tolerant toward their children and loud tears and shouting result. Alternatively, parents provide their children with freer reign, and playground-like screaming and yelling begins. Televisions and stereos are turned up to excessive levels, smoke inhalation becomes more commonplace, and the overall building atmosphere becomes ripe for aggressive confrontation. Neighbors slam their doors, engage in harsh verbal exchanges, and abandon their pets to the chagrin of others who must listen to the endless barking of forsaken canines. In contrast, renovation workers -- the originating source of the stress -- enjoy a quiet evening or weekend at home very distant from their place of work, or are busy generating more stress in a different building even more poorly managed than the one that they have been compelled to leave because of better enforced building work schedules.

Of course, the attribute *renovation termite* did not arise from my having endured the renovation work of the apartment adjacent to my own for an entire month, nor even that from the apartment adjacent to the one adjacent to mine; rather, it arose from similar work in no fewer than 1.4 apartments per month over a sixteen month period -- nearly 10 percent of the building's potential unit occupancy!⁴ What was particularly pernicious was each time there was a lull in this isopteran work activity, and one believed that the workers had finally run out of vacant apartments, new work would begin. When asked to be told in advance about the renovators' projected work plans, residents were told that management did not know. Only after the noise began, would anything be posted, and what was posted was often imprecise and easily altered to accommodate changes in the renovators' work schedules. No specific time frames were ever allotted for the running of electrical and/or impacting machinery. Upon inquiry, the names of the renovation companies were not provided, and reluctance to inform residents about the exact location of work activity within the building

⁴ These values are extrapolated from data obtained over a 10-month period during which management posted the goings-on of renovation work performed in the building. No data was posted for the first six months of my residency, because management felt under no obligation to do so, until a meeting was demanded between myself, building management, and the Environmental Protection Department. Also, present at the meeting were my landlord and a representative from the management company.

was profound. At the beginning there were no building hours set aside for renovation work, and workers had free reign of the building from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM, the same 12-hour time frame accorded workers at out-of-door construction sites. Even after building hours were finally posted, the building's security guards were lax in their enforcement. Residents were largely compelled to seek out the refractory workers on their own. Even numerous calls to the local police department were only temporarily effective, because, like my experience in Ma On Shan, only cordial warnings were ever given. Moreover, those who received the warnings were forever changing. Never once, was anyone fined. Complaints to the management company responsible for my building's managers resulted in four new ones, but no manager any more effective than his predecessor. One still saw renovation management teams in close consultation with each. Moreover, the same pretentious assistant manager and negligent security guards that were present when I moved in, were still present when more than a year and a half later the renovation workers finally departed. Rather than scolding the refractory workers in front of residents, the security guards provided excuses for their presence and disturbance beyond normally scheduled work hours.

In order to understand the misery that tenants were put through, one must understand the absence of incentives and rules to protect them.

Firstly, building management does not answer to tenants, unless the tenants are themselves owners of the apartments in which they dwell. Thus, the tenant's ability to obtain the cooperation of management depends on his ability to persuade his owner to speak on his behalf.

Secondly, the ability of an owner to influence management depends on his own influence in the owners' committee that rarely meets, and is composed of a staunch core of owners with their own business agenda far removed from those of tenants and only coincidental with those of other owners.

Thirdly, there is no requirement that the occupant of an apartment be the owner of the apartment. As apartment owners and their tenants are usually strangers until they sign a tenancy agreement, they continue to maintain a distant relationship until there is trouble with payment, a negative report from management, contract renewal or termination.

Fourthly, there is no residents' committee, either nominal or entitled. Thus, as a group, residents have no say in the goings-on of either management or owners when it comes to the enforcement of building rules, the behavior of certain neighbors, problems of building maintenance, building security, or any other matter of concern to residents.

Fifthly, in the absence of cooperative owners or responsive management, individual residents have only local government to whom they can turn. Local government tends to be slow and procedural. Furthermore, most government officials are fearful of rocking the boat and would sooner pretend that they are busy rather than have to deal with issues whose resolution could threaten their own job security. Moreover, as there are no laws to protect individual residents from irresponsible building management teams, there is little that these officials can do anyway. Effective problem resolution is further exacerbated by the tendency of lower ranking officials seeking to demonstrate to higher ranking officials that everything is under control. Thus, government reports tend to be feckless.

Sixthly, administrative guidance, as it were, is only truly enforceable, when it comes to licensing. As most building management teams in Hong Kong are employed by much larger building management companies, whose heads wield important, local political influence, it is difficult for government to refuse even a license.

Seventhly, Hong Kong society, like East Asian society in general, is largely authoritarian. This means that the relationship between figures of authority and those subject to that authority are often more important than the rules that these figures are suppose to enforce. Accordingly, Hong Kongers have little respect for rules in general. Moreover, Hong Kongers are very quick to point their finger and feel little or no shame in hiding the truth. This makes it difficult for building managers to enforce even the simplest rules in the face of obdurate residents. As a result, building managers grant special favors to make their own life easier; so many in fact, that when other residents complain that a fellow resident is abusing his specially granted privilege, managers find it difficult to retract that privilege. The rules have long ceased to be very meaningful to anyone.

Thus, small problems between residents, or between residents and management, that can easily destroy an individual's happiness, if left unattended, are often resolved by tenant relocation. Relocation means more vacancies. More vacancies mean increased opportunity for renovation. More renovation means more relo-

cation. The cycle is endless and the social ramifications of endless relocation are obvious. Hong Kongers are among the rudest, noisiest people in the world.

R. A. Stegemann