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Finalist

Hunghom Peninsula in Hong Kong (A), (B) & (C): A Realistic Call for Corporate Social Responsibilities

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Hunghom Peninsula in Hong Kong (A): A Realistic Call for Corporate Social Responsibilities

The Hunghom Peninsula was firstly built up under Hong Kong government's PSPS (Private Sector Participation Scheme) to help meet the Government's housing supply target. The real estate market shrank significantly during the construction of Hunghom, and in order to ensure the stability of market, the Government decided to suspend the scheme altogether and put it up for sale. Two developers, New World Development Company Limited (NWD) and Sun Hung Kai Properties Limited (SHKP), which had been engaged in the construction of Hunghom, came forward to take ownership and proposed three options for further development of the project – status quo, renovation to fit middle-range private housing standards or redevelopment as a luxury property after demolition. The decision to demolish was not a good one as balance needed to be achieved for satisfying the concerns of many different stakeholder groups, such as the Government, NGOs, neighboring residents and the general public. Ever mindful of the ever-changing real estate market of Hong Kong and with an obligation to maximize shareholders' return, NWD and SHKP were perplexed in searching for an optimal solution.

Hunghom Peninsula Background

Built on the Hunghom waterfront area which was regarded as one of the best urban areas in Hong Kong, Hunghom Peninsula was a government-subsidized housing development project under the Private Sector Participation Scheme (PSPS). This project was once a controversial topic: some perceived it as a good deed by the government towards lower-income residences while others pointed out that the project was unpractical and the idea ill-conceived in land-strapped Hong Kong. The construction of the Hunghom Peninsula was completed in August 2002, comprising seven blocks with 2,470 residential flats, 494 car parking spaces and shopping facilities.

Hong Kong Property Market

Property-related industries, especially the property development industry, is one of the most essential engines of Hong Kong economy. With high economic growth in the 1980s and the 1990s, together with the limited supply of flats, land values and property prices in Hong Kong rose to a sky-high level.

Needless to say, contribution of land sales to Hong Kong government's revenue was significant. Unlike most of the governments' other revenue sources, land sales to the Hong Kong government consistently contributed over 20% of the total government revenue throughout the 1990s. For example, in 1995-1996 before the Asian financial crisis, the Hong Kong government raised over HK\$62 billion from land transactions. This represented 32% of total government revenue.

At the same time, the affordability ratio based on mortgage repayment amounts over average household income remained high. From 1990 to 1996, the ratio was 67% on average. By the end of 1995, a small-sized flat (40m²) in an urban area cost 70% of the monthly income of an

average household in terms of monthly mortgage repayment. This compared unfavorably to the 40-50% of monthly mortgage repayment of household income which was considered by banks to be affordable at the maximum. Compared to Europe and North America, the mortgage ratio was 35% of the average household income¹.

HOS & PSPS

In view of the highly-priced private properties, the Hong Kong government introduced the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) in 1978. The plan was to assist eligible households (mainly lower income households and public housing tenants) to purchase housing properties with a reasonable and discounted price relative to the market. Private Sector Participation Scheme (PSPS) was subsequently introduced in 1979 to supplement HOS by permitting the participation of private developers. Unlike HOS flats which were owned by the Housing Authority (HA), PSPS developments were owned by private developers.

Under the PSPS, private developers were invited to tender for housing sites on which they were required to build flats conforming to certain specifications stipulated by the government. Like other government land sales, the land title of a PSPS site was vested in the developer. The developer held the legal title to the land lot, owned residential units and car parking spaces, and commercial facilities were built under the same lease. Under the Conditions of Sale for PSPS projects, HA was called to nominate eligible parties to purchase flats from the developers within a specified period. In the event that flats were unsold at the end of the period, HA was obliged to purchase the flats at a guaranteed price.

Property market values reached a peak in mid-1997. But the boom ended quickly and Hong Kong was hit by a series of market downturns as a result of unfavorable global economic conditions in the late 1990s. Demands for private residential flats fell drastically and property prices in general experienced a sharp fall. The government policy makers became anxious because they assumed that the major downward price adjustments in the private residential property sector were the direct impact of HOS. In order to correct the mistake and to restore confidence of the public and the investors in the property market, in November 2002, the Hong Kong Government decided to indefinitely cease the HOS/PSPS project, and the sales of such flats from 2003 onwards, to address the imbalance between supply and demand of the private residential property sector.

The Negotiation

The construction of the Hunghom Peninsula was completed in August 2002. However, PSPS sales, given the aforementioned scenario, were then suspended by the government. Under the PSPS agreement with the private developers, HA was obliged to purchase all the flats at a guaranteed price. After the suspension of the Hunghom Project, HA was reluctant to re-acquire the PSPS flats, and this agitated private developers. As a result, in July 2003, the developers of Hunghom Peninsula initiated litigation against the Hong Kong Government

¹ The Government's High-Land-Price Policy: *Can Hong Kong People Afford It?* - Christine Loh and Citizen's Party, 8 May 1997

and the Hong Kong Housing Authority. In December 2003, the Government finally agreed to negotiate with the developers.

Not long after the beginning of the negotiation, in February 2004, an agreement was signed between the developers and the Government: in the modified Conditions of Sales, the 2,470 flats of Homhung Peninsula were allowed to be sold in the open market. The developers consented to surrender their rights to receive the payment of guaranteed sales at HK\$1,914 million from HA and instead paid a premium of HK\$864 million to the government for the lease modification. The Conditions of Sale restricted the development on the lot to a gross residential floor area of 1.55 million square feet and any redevelopment would have to be in accordance with the Master Layout Plans approved for development. By then, Hunghom Peninsula had been officially transformed into a private residential property of the developers².

Hong Kong Political Environment

After the Asia financial crisis in 1997, the economy of Hong Kong struck a downward spiral. The attack of SARS in 2003 worsened the situation. Being the backbone of the local economy, the property market suffered heavily. With the economic recession followed by a drastic fall in property prices, there was a vigorous rise in bad debts of mortgage loans and an ever-increasing unemployment rate. On top of these, incidences reflecting an inept Civil Service, such as the chaotic opening of Chek Lap Kok Airport and the complete U-turn of the housing policies within just five years, further diminished the local communities' confidence in the Government. Hong Kong people grew skeptical of their Government's new policies.

Moreover, many were critical that selected local real estate tycoons had such strong bargaining power in negotiating with the Government, so the deal was felt to be unfair. Some thought that the decisions made by the Government were biased towards the tycoons and there was thought to exist a collusion between the Government and the tycoons.

The situation deteriorated further after the Election of the Legislation Council (LegCo) in 2004. The newly elected councilors, in siding with the best interests of the general public urged the Government to disclose the truth. Hunghom Peninsula was yet again cast in the spotlight when Hon Ronny Tong, Legislative Councilor, repeatedly raised sharp and critical questions of the LegCo and demanded "honest" replies from Mr. Michael Suen, the Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands³, with regard to the case of the Hunghom Peninsula.

The Two Developers

Hunghom Peninsula was jointly held by Sun Hung Kai Properties Limited (SHKP) and New World Development Company Limited (NWD) on an equal basis.

² LC Paper No. CB(1) 350/04-05(04), Legislative Council, HKSAR, 2 Dec 2004.

³ Website of the Housing, Planning and Lands Bureau of the Government of the HKSAR, 2005 Press Releases, 23 May 2005

Sun Hung Kai Properties Limited (SHKP)

SHKP became publicly listed in 1972 and was one of the largest property companies in Hong Kong. It specialized in premium-quality residential and commercial projects. SHKP was committed to upholding conservative financial policies and maintaining high liquidity and low leverage. Its net assets value on 31 December 2004 was HK\$138,000 million (as at 30 June 2004: HK\$135,239 million). The fixed assets value at 31 December 2004 was HK\$98,843 million (as at 30 June 2004: HK\$98,839 million)⁴. The group was also one of Hong Kong's largest landowners, with a land bank of around 42.9 million square feet⁵.

SHKP devoted a considerable amount of effort to fulfilling its corporate social responsibility goals. It showed a strong commitment to the community and actively supported social activities and education. It was a Platinum Contributor to the Corporate & Employee Contribution Programme of the Community Chest and the winner of the Community Chest's highest fundraising honour in Corporate Challenge for nine consecutive years in Hong Kong. Furthermore, it participated in the One Company - One Job Programme and the Youth Pre-Employment Training Programme pioneered by the Hong Kong Government. It also offered free office space to not-for-profit organizations like ORBIS.

*"The Group is committed to maintaining high standards of ethics, corporate governance and effective accountability mechanisms in every aspects of its business. Conducting business in a socially responsible and honest manner serves both the Group's and shareholders' long-term interests."*⁶

In addition to being committed to the community, it was keen on protecting the natural environment.

"Protecting the environment is a high priority for the Group, and environmental considerations play a part in all aspects of its operations. "

SHKP was committed to developing green space in urban areas, to make optimized use of natural light and to apply energy and water saving fixtures and facilities in its buildings. SHKP also enacted environmental policies with respect to design, construction, material sourcing and property management and used green construction principles in the early stages of its property developments. These measure included reduction of construction waste and the use of eco-friendly construction materials and green techniques.

Aside from the provision of eco-friendly facilities, the company also actively took part in a number of environmental conservation activities in Hong Kong such as being a Business Environment Council Member, joining the Social Recycling Scheme of the Social Welfare Department and participating in the project to rebuild and upgrade the Tsing Yi Nature Trails.

New World Development Company Limited (NWD)

NWD was a Hong Kong-based leading conglomerate and had been listed in Hong Kong since 1972. The company was active in property, infrastructure, services and telecommunications with its major business in developing private real estate properties. Its net assets value as of

⁴ Unaudited interim report December 2004 of SHKP

⁵ Corporate website of SHKP, 20 Apr 2005

⁶ Extracted from the corporate website of SHKP, 20 Apr 2005

31 December 2004 was HK\$55,798 million (as at 30 June 2004: HK\$54,405 million). The fixed assets value as of 31 December 2004 was HK\$33,771 million (as at 30 June 2004: HK\$33,898 million)⁷.

Identical to SHKP, NWD was keen to give the impression that it was a socially responsible company.

It had shown strong support to the community:

*"We recognize we are an integral part of the communities in which we operate and are committed to doing our shares as a responsible corporate citizen."*⁸

NWD sponsored HK\$40 million⁹ in the design and construction of the Avenue of Stars at Tsimshatsui East in 2003. It also keenly participated in events and functions organized by non-profit organizations. For instance, it has jointly launched the "Create a New World for Children" Corporate Alliance Campaign with UNICEF in 2003.

The Options

The management team of the consortium formed by NWD and SHKP was to determine the fate of Hunghom Peninsula after they had paid an additional premium of HK\$864 million to the Government to turn the original Government subsidized housing estate into a private property. The developers proposed three options for their next step.

(1) Status quo

It was the least destructive to the environment and the simplest option to implement as it was without any modifications. Also this plan met the two developers' environmental standards, but the commercial result was not expected to be fully realized because the existing layout and facilities were originally designed to suit PSPS housing estate standards, not standards for luxurious private property. Thus it could not meet the expectation of the market and the financial return was thought to be very limited.

(2) Renovation and Reconfiguration

The second option was to renovate and enhance the buildings without tearing them down. Partial interiors, external walls together with the unit layouts were to be changed, and enlarged windows and more living spaces were to be added in the renovation specifications. Developers believed that the renovation could bring in a modest profit in a shorter time frame relative to Option (3).

(3) Demolition and Redevelopment

The last option was to knock down the never-occupied project and then redevelop Hunghom Peninsula into a brand-new luxurious real estate property using premium design and materials. Based on a comprehensive market survey, this option was expected to bring a far above average profit for the developers.

⁷Extracted from the corporate website of SHKP, 20 Apr 2005 ⁸ Unaudited interim report December 2004 of NWD

⁸ Extracted from the corporate website of NWD, 20 Apr 2005

⁹ Corporate website of NWD, 20 Apr 2005

The developers wished to act entirely within their legal and contractual rights at every stage, and they understood fully that the demolition would require approval to change the Master Layout Plan. With the additional land premium to be received as well as the increase in income from the stamp duties and rates with the change of Hunghom Peninsula into higher grade flats, the Government would not resist this proposal. The developers expected Option (3) to maximize their investment return. However, they would need to devote a substantial amount of investment and they had to bear the risk of waiting for at least three years before the new construction could be finished.

Also, the demolition and redevelopment process would generate intensive pollution to the environment of an already very crowded Hong Kong City: imagine 200,000 tons of construction waste that could fill some 4,000 double-decker buses in all. Given another reason why Hong Kong people should hate this option is the lack of a landfill charge legislation in Hong Kong. It would be the taxpayers who would pay the HK\$25 million landfill cost. In addition, residents who lived near the construction area, especially pupils and teachers of Ma Tau Chung Government Primary School, would have to withstand the noise and air pollution from the demolition and redevelopment.

The future development of Hunghom Peninsula had become a hot topic of public discussion. All concerned parties were eagerly awaiting the developers' final decision.

Hunghom Peninsula in Hong Kong (B): A Realistic Call for Corporate Social Responsibilities

Following NWD and SHKP's year-long intensive study and careful market analysis, the consortium decided to demolish and redevelop Hunghom Peninsula. They believed this approach could bring profit maximization to their shareholders. To address public concerns of possible environmental issues which might arise from the project, the developers planned to implement a comprehensive construction materials recycling programme to supplement the redevelopment plan. Everything appeared to be well under control when suddenly the unexpected happened: after the announcement of the demolition plan, protests from neighbouring residents, schools, communities, and environmental organizations in Hong Kong flocked to Hunghom Peninsula shouting in loud and strong voices against the decision and bringing mounting pressure on the developers.

The spokesperson for the Hunghom Peninsula project commented that the development, which began as a Private Sector Participation Scheme (PSPS) project, was a mismatch of land resources and it would be a huge waste without fully utilizing the prime site to its potential.

"The Hunghom development began as a PSPS project to help meet the government's housing supply target, and the original plan for this prime site is now clearly at odds with Hong Kong's future development needs. To make optimal use of Hong Kong's scarce land resources is the right decision," the spokesperson said.

"Redeveloping Hunghom Peninsula not only helps in creating over a thousand new jobs, meeting market demand for premium land, raising government revenue from increased stamp duty and rates, and stabilising Hunghom's housing prices. In addition, the project will improve the landscape of the waterfront with a new green design coupling with more open space and better environment," he added.

"In correcting the mismatch in land resources, we demonstrate to our next generation that if a mistake was made, one should have the courage to put it right. Moreover, our comprehensive green construction program also helps raise the next generation's awareness of protecting the environment."

The developers believed that a full redevelopment was the best option as it would offer the benefits of a much improved comprehensive planning using premium design and materials, as well as incorporating facilities that would meet or even exceed the environmental standards of a private estate.

"We appreciate the controversy surrounding the project and the redevelopment plan was a difficult decision for us. We understand public concerns about the environmental issues, and we also attach great importance to the development needs. As a result, we have carefully studied various options for almost a year, hoping to find a solution that can meet Hong Kong's development needs, addresses community concerns and balance all interests," the spokesperson said.

To address public concerns of possible environmental issues that might arise from the project, a construction material recycling program was built into the redevelopment plan: *"Up to 95% of the construction materials will be recycled to minimize wastage. Hydraulic crusher, instead of conventional breakers, will be used with a view to*

significantly reducing noise and dust created by the demolition works. Of the 190,000 tons of construction debris, only a few thousand tons will be transported to the landfill. This is about one-thousandth of the waste handled by Hong Kong landfills last year. Although the legislation on landfill charge has yet to come into effect, we have committed to donating an amount matching the landfill charge to support the promotion of greenery projects in Hong Kong. In addition, the proceeds from the sale of recyclable and reusable materials will be donated to support environmental projects."

The developers would invite representatives from the Kowloon City District Council, Ma Tau Chung Government Primary School (Hung Hom Bay), the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and its residence halls, Whampoa Garden owners' committees as well as green groups to form a Concern Group, which would provide a platform for all concerned parties to be briefed regularly concerning the project's status and the implementation of environmental measures. A hotline and a dedicated e-mail address would also be set up for public enquiry.

The developers hailed their decision with a spirit of transparency, sincerity and responsibility.

"From the time we bid for the project to making today's decision to redevelop the site, every step we took is within the law. The decision is also reasonable and fully reflects that we have acted responsibly to our shareholders," the spokesperson remarked.

"Redeveloping Hung Hom Peninsula is a major investment for the consortium, and the fact that we are implementing a comprehensive recycling programme only adds to the investment risk. Nonetheless, we are willing to spend more time and money on the project. The investment decision is our vote of confidence in Hong Kong's future."

"The redevelopment plan has been conceived with the principles of balancing the interests of society and our shareholders, as well as our commitment to be good corporate citizens. We believe our decision will create a win-win situation," the spokesperson concluded.

Stakeholders Reactions

Intense public concern was aroused soon after the developers officially announced their decision. Green groups were major objectors. The first response of five local major environmental groups, namely The Conservancy Association, Friends of the Earth (HK), Greenpeace, Green Power and WWF Hong Kong, was to sign a joint petition to voice their strong objections to the demolition plan. They accused the developers of showing absolutely no environmental concerns. According to the environmentalists, the demolition would generate a volume that equaled the total amount of 15 days of settlement waste for all of Switzerland. The green groups also pointed out that the plan was not in line with sustainable development that the Government had been promoting. In fact, it was also revealed there was no landfill charge legislation to demand that polluters bear the pollution handling charges to the city. As a result, all taxpayers would have to pay for this landfill charge, which was estimated to be HK\$25 million. Environmentalists asserted that it was a blow to the principle of environmental justice that the polluters would not adequately pay their share.

Hong Kong's educators also stepped forward to show strong objections to the plan. They were worried that this influential event in which the rich maximized their profit at the cost of endangering environment could set a bad example and bring negative influence on the younger generations and twist the moral and educational values. Principal of Ma Tau Chung Government Primary School, Ms. Agnes Choi Sook-chun said: *"Destruction of the towers would set a negative example to children. Should we think of money only?"*

The Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union then joined force with Friends of the Earth (HK) and a local radio station to organize a drawing competition for children to express their feeling towards the demolition plan.(see **Exhibit 9**) Another joint effort was writing competitions among primary and secondary students. As well, primary school teachers joined the environmentalists in a protest against the demolition bid..

Staff and students at Ma Tau Chung Government Primary School (Hung Hom Bay), which was located just 15 meters away from the buildings, were particularly concerned by the developers' decision. In fact, the 1,000 pupils were among the most directly affected as they had eye witnessed the "rise and possible fall" of Hunghom Peninsula. Principal Agnes Choi Sook-chun said: *"We are concerned about the many effects of demolition such as air and noise pollution, and a great amount of rubbish."* Ms Choi was also worried that dust from demolition works could impact students' health and result in illnesses, such as asthma and bronchitis. The school gathered 7,000 signatures from pupils, parents and friends opposing demolition of the towers.

However, not everyone in the community objected to the demolition plan. For example, some of the 10,000 private premise owners living near Hunghom Peninsula supported the plan. Even though pollutants from the large-scale demolition project might discourage people from buying the nearby premises, this was only regarded as a short-term effect. In the long run, with the 2,470 flats redesigned into more luxury configurations, surveyors anticipated a strong recovery in the market.

As one of the major stakeholders in this controversial incident, the Hong Kong Government reached an agreement with the two developers on the modification premium after months of negotiation. However, environmentalists and the public vigorously accused the Government of making a serious mistake to allow the demolition of the Hunghom Peninsula estate. In the midst of the public outcry, the Government issued a letter to the developers reminding them that any redevelopment must be in accordance with the estate's master layout plans. Several government officials also publicly commented on the issue. The Director of Environmental Protection Department wrote to the developers urging them to abandon the demolition plan. The Director of Lands took a reserved position about approving any modification that might be required for the proposed development. Another government minister also was critical of the waste and that the project was in violation of environmental protection principles. An executive councilor described the plan as a big joke that would only benefit the property developers. In its defense, the Government announced that it would shortly release all exchanges of correspondences of Hunghom Peninsula and hand over them to the Legislative Council.

Like with other eye-catching topics, the media, especially the print press, played a very significant role throughout. The local newspapers were full of coverage when the developers

announced their plan to pull down the residential blocks. The newspapers provided continuously coverage of the intense public opposition aroused among environmentalists, government officials, legislators, teachers, pupils, etc, and focused their strongest criticism upon the two developers in terms of social responsibility and the huge profit the developers might earn without a full consideration of environmental protection.

The developers were facing a tough situation. They believed that they were making a sound legal business decision while being confronted with fierce opposition from the general public and environmental protection groups. *Should they proceed with their original demolition plan or retreat?*

Inspection Copy

Hunghom Peninsula in Hong Kong (C): A Realistic Call for Corporate Social Responsibilities

On 10 December 2004, in an unprecedented move, the developers, NWD and SHKP, issued a joint statement acknowledging that the decision to tear down the never-occupied project to make way for luxury flats had generated significant controversy and caused discord in the community, thus the plan would be withdrawn. The developers explained that they placed greater concern for community harmony and had therefore decided to change their plans for demolition in favor of exploring the option of renovation and reconfiguration, as well as enhancement of estate facilities in general.

The developers defended their responsibilities to their shareholders: *"As public companies, the developers are accountable to their shareholders. The latest decision also works in their favor, since renovation and reconfiguration, along with facility enhancement, could produce a profit in a shorter period of time and avoid taking an investment risk for three to four years."*

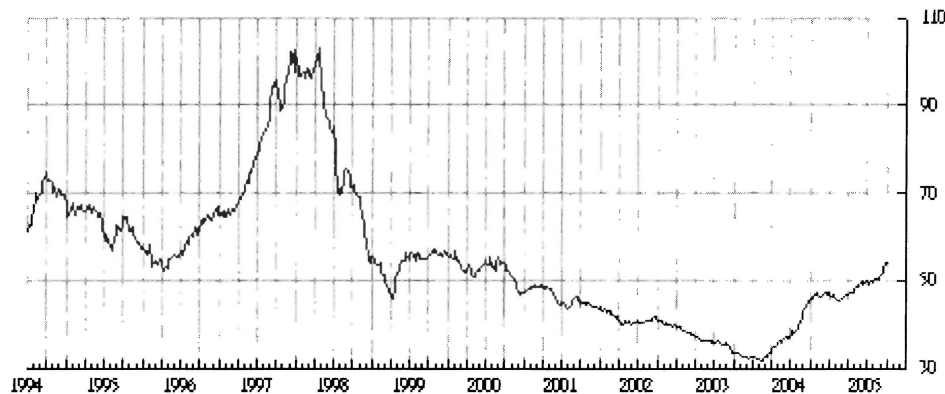
Moreover, the developers stressed that they did not want to precipitate an assault on private property rights and freedom of contract, as this would impair the business environment in a free economy.

"The two developers have acted entirely within their legal and contractual rights at every stage of their dealings with Hunghom Peninsula. The decision to change the demolition plan was made after taking into account prevailing circumstances and listening to public opinion. We have tried to understand and balance all interests with this decision." the spokesman said.

The developers restated their proposed green construction programme and community involvement plans to minimize the impact of any future work on the neighborhood. On 12 December 2004, the protest originally organized by the environmentalists and the teachers against the demolition bid was dramatically reorganized into a mass celebration.

Exhibit 1

Exhibit 1: Hong Kong Property Price Index



Source: Hong Kong Centa-City Index

Exhibit 2: Estimated Cost of "Old" Hunghom Peninsula

| | HK\$Million |
|--|--------------|
| Tender price in Sep 1999 with gross floor area* of 1.33 million sq ft. | 583 |
| Premium paid on Feb 2004 for lease modification to sell as private housing with gross floor area* of 1.55 million sq ft. | 864 |
| Construction cost and interest expenses | 2,000 |
| Total | 3,447 |

(Source: Mingpao Daily, Dec 2004)

* Gross floor area is the area that was allowed for flat development under the contract

Exhibit 3: Estimated Construction Costs

| | HK\$ / sq ft.** |
|--|-----------------|
| Internal Renovation and Reconfiguration Costs | 900 |
| Redevelopment Costs (Demolition, Re-built & Interest expenses) | 1,500 |
| Additional Premium for modification to Master Layout Plans | 2,000 |

(Source: Hong Kong Economic Times, Dec 2004)

** HK\$ per square feet of gross floor area

Exhibit 4: Estimated Selling Prices

| | HK\$ / sq ft.*** |
|---|------------------|
| After Internal Renovation & Reconfiguration (c.f. Whampoa Garden) | 4,000 |
| After Redevelopment (c.f. Laguna Verde & Harbourfront Landmark) | 8,000 |

(Source: Centanet, Apr 2005)

*** HK\$ per square feet of sellable floor area, the area that can be sold to buyers. It can be assumed that gross floor area = 80% of sellable area.

Exhibit 5: Financial Highlights of 2 Developers

| | SHKP 6 Month Ended 31.12.2004 (HK\$ M) | NWD 6 Month Ended 31.12.2004 (HK\$ M) |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Turnover | 11,278 | 11,520 |
| Profit from operations | 4,096 | 1,140 |
| Profit before taxation | 6,332 | 2,161 |
| Taxation | 642 | 453 |
| Profit after taxation | 5,690 | 1,708 |

Exhibit 6: The Entrance of Hunghom Peninsula



Exhibit 7: Hunghom Peninsula Before Renovation



Exhibit 8: Hunghom Peninsula in Renovation



Exhibit 9: An article from Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union

The following article "Don't let our children cry at night" on the Hunghom Peninsula Incident was written by Legislative Councillor the Hon. Cheung Man-kwong, who is the president of Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union. The article, written in Chinese, was first published in Ming Pao on November 12, 2004. Friends of the Earth (HK) had this article translated into English. (http://www.foe.org.hk/newsletter/newsletter_112004_page3.html; March 22, 2009)

Don't let our children cry at night

The Hunghom Peninsula Incident exposes humankind's arrogance and greed.

While our Government is still trying to pacify public outcry against its selling of Hunghom Peninsula at knock-down price to private developers, the developers declare that they will be demolishing the seven brand-new towers.

What the developers are telling us is: 'everything has its price'. As long as it makes money, Hunghom Peninsula could be bought, and could be levelled as well.

Hunghom Peninsula, unlike our heritage buildings, does not have a history. Unlike Victoria Harbour, Hunghom Peninsula does not register our collective memory.

What the developers are attempting to accomplish are: shutting off the 'noise' of green groups, softening councillors' critical stance at the legislative chamber, keeping government officials' lips sealed, and diverting academics' attention. All these will enable a speedy euthanasia for Hunghom Peninsula.

But will this euthanasia be a speedy and painless one? Ma Tau Chung Government School, which is the next-door neighbour of Hunghom Peninsula, has its students collected 7,000 signatures to petition against this proposed demolition.

It is the children making the developers realise that they may not be able to translate everything into monetary terms.

Their voices are the ones that cannot be ignored.

Twelve years ago, a 12-year-old Canadian girl Severn Suzuki delivered her six-minute speech in front of world leaders at the 1992 Earth Summit. And her speech received a standing ovation.

Suzuki said, "I'm only a child and I don't have all the solutions, but I want you to realise, neither do you! You don't know how to fix the holes in our ozone layer. You don't know how to bring salmon back up a dead stream. You don't know how to bring back an animal now extinct. And you can't bring back forests that once grew where there is now desert. If you don't know how to fix it, please stop breaking it!...Well, what you do makes me cry at night. You grown ups say you love us. I challenge you, please make your actions reflect your words".

A folk tale originating from South America has it that: in the midst of a hill fire, human beings, birds, insects and all animals all flee for their lives. But a hummingbird remains and carries water with his beak. He pours tiny drops of water over the hill fire. People laugh at

him, saying: "What are you trying to do?" The hummingbird says: "I'm doing what in my capacity can be done".

Suzuki was also doing what in her capacity could be done. And so are the children of Ma Tau Chung Government Primary School.

So how can we adults remain reticent about it? How long can we keep our silence?

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