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The decentralized compactness of Hong Kong: how sustainable?

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Abstract

As an initial response to the call of the 1987 Brundtland report for sustainable development and as an outcome of the environmental protection movement originated in the 1970s, the compact city model was advocated by the Western cities as a possible solution to reduce the environmental toll of urban settlements. The compact city model contests that compact urban forms are more sustainable. Possibly due to the compact structure of most Asian cities, the compact city model has not been much discussed as a possible sustainable urban form for these cities. Although spatial development strategies are perennial concerns of governments, especially countries undergoing rapid urban development such as China, the inclusion of sustainability criteria in the development strategy is only emerging. It is high time that the sustainability of dense Asian cities was to be evaluated, and sustainable urban forms and spatial strategies were to be explored for this region of the world.

Thus, this presentation will apply the compact city model to critically assess the sustainability performance of Hong Kong, which adopts a decentralized concentrated spatial strategy. It will argue that Hong Kong meets the sustainability criteria of the model despite its extreme compactness, but that its sustainability performance is heterogeneous. Urban compactness is however generally neither the primary nor the sole factor for such performance. While the high density of Hong Kong provides the necessary economy of scale for bringing about sustainability benefits, other pertinent urban policies (planning, housing and transport policies) must be implemented.