

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO COMMUNITY-LED PLACEMAKING IN HK



Crystal Chan (CollaborateHK) & Tiffany Tang

‘Placemaking’ initiatives are often temporary and small scale, which aims to test place interventions in response to changing needs. A successful place-making initiative requires a mix of ingredients – an open-minded decision maker, a passionate community to champion place-based ideas and technical professionals to turn ideas into actions. This ensemble does not happen organically, but demands a concerted effort of a team of people to bring them together.

Three years ago, a not-for-profit organisation, CollaborateHK, was established to find ways to help community groups launch their placemaking projects. With years of experience in organising district-wide placemaking events in Hong Kong, the founders of CollaborateHK came across many passionate community groups that were looking for physical locations to realise place-based ideas; as well as some private investors they met who were interested in funding community projects. Coincidentally, in 2018 the government released a list of unused public sites that are available for short-term leases (up to seven years). That year, the CollaborateHK founders came up with an idea to set up a platform to connect community groups with funders and most importantly, provide them with a pathway to apply for the unused government land.



Figure 1. A site visit to an unused government site with interested community groups

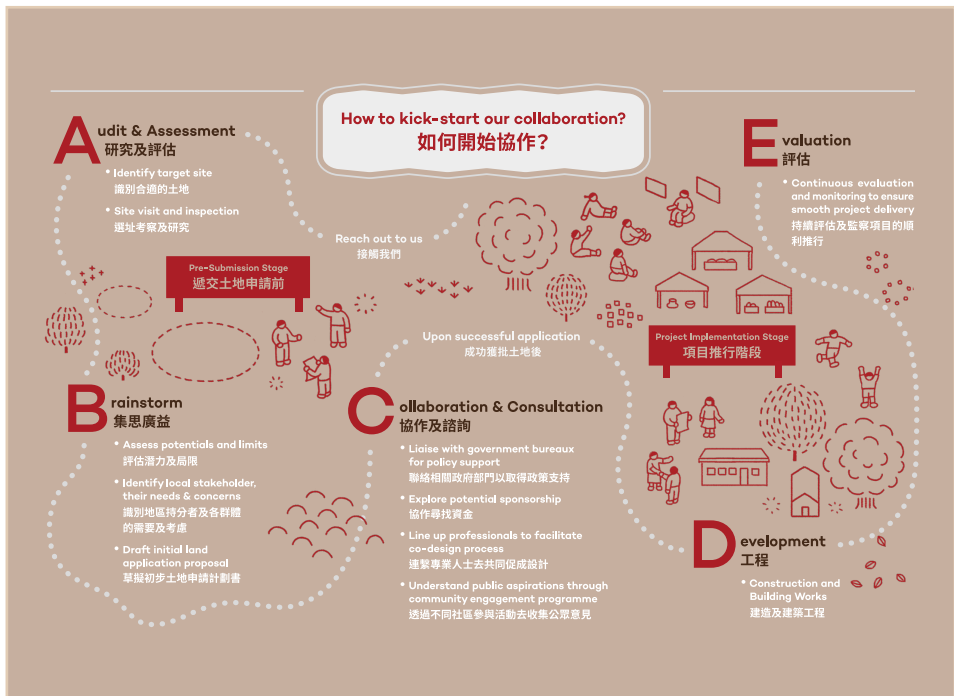


Figure 2. A workflow map illustrating how CollaborateHK helps community organisations apply for government sites

THE CHALLENGE

Contrary to popular belief, Hong Kong does not lack vacant land. In 2018, the Government released a list of 800 unused government land that were available for up to seven years of lease. However, the application procedure was too technical and bureaucratic for any community groups to come close to a successful application. Apart from the long list of sites, the government did not provide any assistance or plain language information to help community groups to get through these application hurdles. The real challenge is, how can we empower community members to put their ideas into technical plans and proposals that can secure government approvals for short-term land leases?

A COLLABORATIVE PLATFORM

Seeing the gap between available public resources and the passion from community members, CollaborateHK was the first not-for-profit organisation to propose a way to connect the two. They proposed a framework that streamlines the application process and channelled professional knowledge and investment to help community groups apply for these government short-term leases to realise their placemaking ideas.

CollaborateHK was not part of a government initiative, but rather a bottom-up approach to bring available resources together. Sitting behind the team of four is a network of like-minded professionals, funders, community groups and government agencies that came together and endorsed a collaborative framework proposed by CollaborateHK (an illustrative workflow is shown in Figure 2). The CollaborateHK team held strong relationships with the government, private funders and community members, which

enabled them to act as a broker between all parties. CollaborateHK fills the gaps in the bureaucratic system – from providing plain language information, to writing application proposals; from public engagement to solicit funding; they hold the hands of community members all the way to successfully obtaining government approvals and permits for short-term leases.

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The CollaborateHK platform bridged the gap between community groups, professionals and the government. With their help, community groups are able to translate the neighbourhood’s aspiration into a doable, implementable proposal that fits in the government’s statutory framework.

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IMPACTS

After three years of hard work, CollaborateHK gained overwhelming support from community partners, professional institutes, academia, businesses and the government. The platform has incubated over 100 neighbourhood improvement ideas in Hong Kong. Two community groups have successfully secured short term leases to establish the city’s first photography education centre and a community permaculture farm.

Case Study 1: Chuen Lung Photography Education Centre

Project Champion: Hong Kong International Photo Festival, a group of photography enthusiasts and arts festival organisers.

- This community organisation wanted to establish Hong Kong's first community photography centre to host public exhibitions, talks, education programmes to promote creativity and imagination
- Through the photograph centre, the Festival organisers also hope to engage with the rural community through photography arts
- The Hong Kong International Photo Festival was granted a 5-year land lease of a vacant village school and a HKD\$ 10 million funding to support site renovation and infrastructure costs

Case Study 2: Tin Shui Wai 'Neighbour-Wood'

Project Champion: Tin Shui Wai Community Development Network, a not-for-profit organisation.

- This project aims to rejuvenate a 20,000m² fishpond into a farming and fishery culture education centre and a community permaculture farm
- One key social outcome of this project is to cultivate a sense of belonging and identity towards Tin Shui Wai, a new town in Hong Kong, through a series of locally curated environmental programmes for the locals.
- To prove the case of their application, the group organised a series of public engagement activities, which attracted over 300 Tin Shui Wai residents, local farmers, green groups representatives and professionals to share their views on the proposed education centre and permaculture farm.
- Tin Shui Wai Community Development Network was granted a 3-year land lease of the former fishpond and a HKD\$ 5.8 million funding to support the renovation of the fishpond into an education centre

DO'S

- Placemakers and civil servants should work together to facilitate bottom-up placemaking initiatives. This includes translating regulations and rules into the language of common people.
- Placemaking will result in the best outcome if it is supported by bottom-up community ideas and top-down policy will.

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The CollaborateHK team had made the impossible possible. They helped us connect with the community, and ensure that public resources is well-utilised by matching land resources with the right community groups. We are eager to witness more of such meaningful projects going ahead with the help of CollaborateHK. - from a government official working closely with CollaborateHK

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Figure 3. A photo taken from a public engagement event for the Tin Shui Wai permaculture farm.

- Communication and trust building is the key to successful project implementation.

DON'TS

- Placemakers should not assume community needs will stay the same over time. Placemaking is an ongoing process that requires regular reassessment.
- A place activation idea may work in one place but goes wrong in another. Placemakers should keep an open mind and listen to what the place and people tell them when looking for activation ideas.

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“CollaborateHK is an empowering platform. They have all the help you need for any local non-profit organisations to take their aspirations to the next level. Their team is dedicated and accommodating. They also have all the knowledge and networks required to engage sincerely with all sides of the political landscape – from grassroots all the way to the decisionmakers. - from a not-for-profit organisation and also a CollaborateHK ‘member’

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Crystal Chan, having lived in Sydney, London and New York, joined Collaborate Hong Kong as a Senior Manager in 2017 to bring alive placemaking projects for her beloved home city. Driven by a professional background in urban planning and versatile experience in community engagement, Crystal puts “people” at the centre of every project through empowering communities with a voice that impacts real action plan.

Tiffany Tang, born and raised in Hong Kong, is an experienced placemaker and community engagement specialist. She has honed her skills in placemaking through working across South East Asia: empowering local communities to capture, retain, and value their cultural heritage, and develop their identity and sense of place. Tiffany has recently moved to Australia, working as an engagement consultant at Capire Consulting Group. She has written this article through the lens of both a Hong Konger and a Melburnian. Her insight is that bottom-up placemaking is often easier said than done; it takes a group of people with true dedication and their love for the community to break the urban planning silos. Not many have succeeded, CollaborateHK is one of the very few.

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