

SUPPORTING BUSINESS, CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN CENTRAL, HONG KONG

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Abstract

The Central District of Hong Kong is home to three key historic structures: Tai Kwun, PMQ and Central Market. Each is currently being adaptively reused with limited commercial success. The Business Improvement District (BID) is a model that has proven successful in organizing and funding projects that create localized improvements. The project goal was to assess the feasibility of a BID for the promotion of business, culture and community in Central as part of the Smart Cultural Precinct (SCP). By gathering the opinions of stakeholders and urban design experts, as well as reviewing literature on similar initiatives, the team concluded that to create a successful BID in Central, further efforts are necessary to gain support from local businesses, government and the SCP anchor points.



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This report represents the work of four WPI undergraduate students submitted to the faculty as evidence of completion of a degree requirement. WPI routinely publishes these reports on its website without editorial or peer review.



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Cochrane Street, Central Hong Kong¹²

THE SMART CULTURAL PRECINCT (SCP)

The Smart Cultural Precinct (SCP) is an initiative led by the project sponsor, the Institute for Sustainable Urbanisation (ISU). The SCP is a place-making initiative that aims to promote the Hong Kong cultural heritage and re-brand Hong Kong's city image and identity.

The SCP region is defined by three anchor points: PMQ, Tai Kwun, and Central Market. These are three large colonial-era buildings, which have each been converted into culture and arts centers with varying amounts of commercial space. In crowded Central, each location also has a sizable footprint, providing valuable room for community and event space. Since each of their reopenings, they have seen limited success both commercially and in their goals of promoting the arts, culture, and heritage of Central.⁹

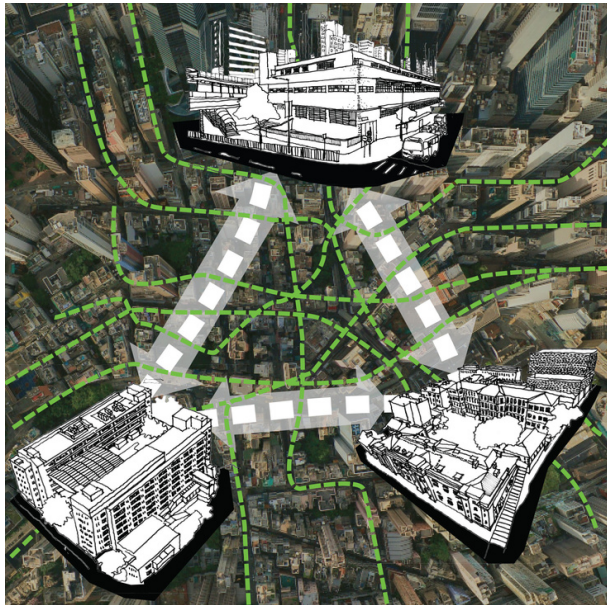


Figure 1: A Map of SCP with the three anchor points highlighted ¹⁷

The SCP aims to bring together the three anchor points along with other stakeholders in the region to create a more cohesive and vibrant community by encouraging collaboration in the area. These stakeholders include pedestrians, residents, businesses, and the government. In order to achieve this cohesion, the ISU aims to create a Community and Business Improvement District (CBID), based upon the Business Improvement District (BID) model.



Figure 2: The SCP Initiative Logo ¹⁷

GLOSSARY

BID	Business Improvement District
SCP	Smart Cultural Precinct
ISU	Institute for Sustainable Urbanisation
SCP Anchor Points	Tai Kwun, PMQ, Central Market
CBID	Community and Business Improvement District
PMQ	Police Married Quarters

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS (BID)

A Business Improvement District (BID) is a geographical area where a governing organization oversees and funds the maintenance, improvement, and promotion of the district. The BID organization is a non-profit governed by representatives from businesses in the area.

The organization is responsible for making decisions regarding improvements to the area and other related projects. Some of these improvements influence the public realm, which is any space that is publicly accessible.⁷ For these changes, the BID organization will work with the appropriate governmental organization to implement the change. The BID organization is funded through an additional property tax on businesses in the area based upon their property value as evaluated by the relevant governmental body.

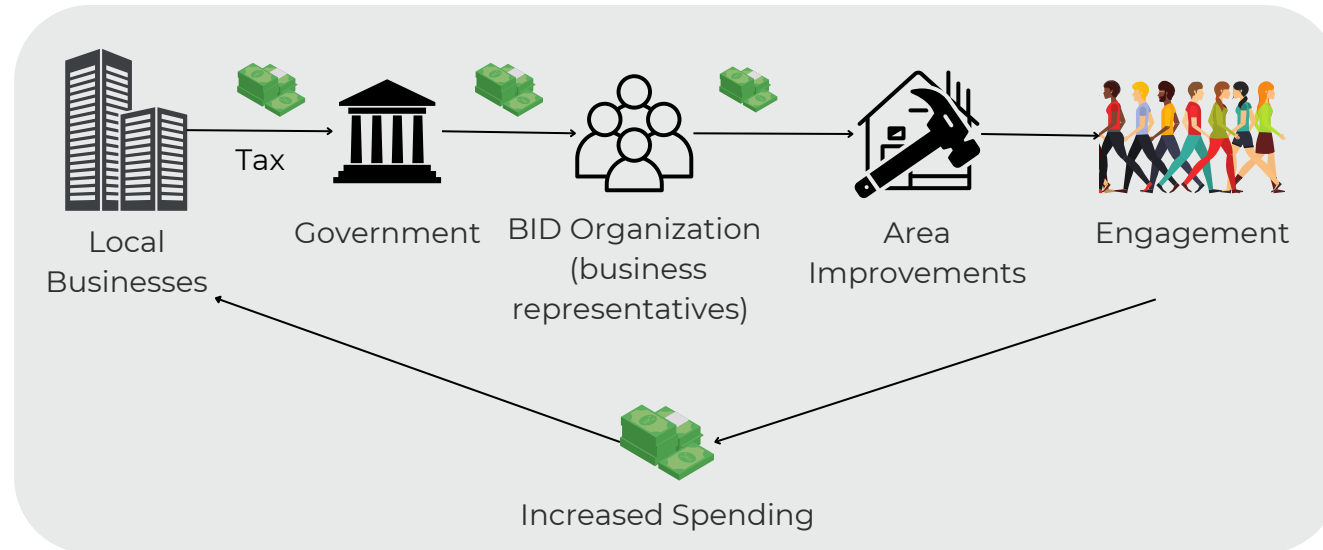


Figure 3: Financial benefits of a BID

The BID structure gives businesses access to reliable funding to provide services that the government does not.⁸ Typical improvements include sanitation services, advertisement and promotion, improvements to the public realm, and collaborative events between businesses.

PROJECT GOAL

This project assessed the feasibility of implementing the BID model in the area defined by the SCP. To achieve this goal, the team conducted a land use survey to categorize different business types within the SCP. Business representatives and pedestrians in the area were interviewed and surveyed respectively to collect their perspectives on the SCP area and the prospect of a BID within it. The team interviewed with urban planning experts and a representative from Central Market. The team took part in a SCP workshop organized by the ISU to gauge interest in the SCP and to get feedback on the team's preliminary findings and recommendations.

HISTORY OF CENTRAL, HONG KONG

As a British colony from 1841 to 1997, Hong Kong's culture is a fusion of Chinese and Western culture. The former capital city of Victoria, which contained the region known as Central today, served as the seat of colonial power and a commercial hub in British Hong Kong. Today, Central serves a similar role as the city's financial center and continues to house locations of administrative importance.⁴



Figure 4: The City of Victoria, 1871 ²¹

During the era of British rule, zoning laws were used to create racial segregation between Westerners and Chinese people within the colony. As various public spaces and markets formed in the city, the two cultures mixed over time to create a unique

Hong Kong cultural identity. Central, as a part of the former city of Victoria, serves as a reminder of this unique identity, having a mix of colonial era structures, street markets, and other historic sites.²⁵

THE SCP ANCHOR POINTS

Central Market, which has been a prominent market for food vendors and artisans since its creation. It was the first market established in Hong Kong by the British in 1842.⁵ The building now stands on its fourth iteration after its remodeling and subsequent reopening in 2021. It is currently operated by the Chinachem conglomerate.



Figure 5: Central Market, 2022 ¹⁵

Tai Kwun served as the first police station and prison under British control in the area from 1841 to 2006. It was then converted to a cultural heritage site and now exists as an award-winning UNESCO World Heritage site after reopening in 2018, known for its historical exhibits as well as a central place for modern artists to showcase their work.²⁰ *Tai Kwun*'s use as a modern creative hub is becoming less of a focus, as "its main relevance now is the restaurants and bars inside".¹⁹ The site is operated by the Hong Kong Jockey Club.



Figure 6: Tai Kwun, 2022 ¹⁰

PMQ began as the first Western-style school in Hong Kong in 1862, was occupied then razed during the Japanese occupation during World War II, then was rebuilt for the construction of the Police Married Quarters as living quarters for married police officers. After reopening in 2014, similar to Tai Kwun, it serves as a modern cultural center, with frequent exhibits, showcases, workshops, and shopping.¹⁶ However, it suffers from a similar problem to Tai Kwun: high-end restaurants and services have led to a lack of visitation and tenant businesses have suffered as a result.

While all three locations provide community and event space, much of it is prohibitively expensive for smaller organizations.⁹ Financial viability without significant external support is for these locations a priority, but all three are still experiencing various degrees of financial difficulty. The locations, particularly *PMQ*, have difficulty filling their space with both relevant and profitable enterprises that consistently attract customers.^{6, 9}



Figure 7: *PMQ*, 2014 ¹¹

PLACE AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Each of the anchor points has the goal of preserving the heritage of their respective areas through means such as the maintenance of the original structures and historical exhibits. The SCP project aims to support this goal by connecting these efforts.

To better inform the team on similar cultural preservation efforts in other parts of the world, the team studied the Burra Charter, which is a document of guiding principles surrounding cultural preservation written by the Australian chapter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites. It “provides an example of how international principles can be adapted to the values and needs of a particular nation or particular cultural groups.”¹³ The Burra Charter serves as a widely accepted international standard for cultural preservation projects.

One key principle of the Burra Charter is that the immediate and extended environment of a place contributes to its cultural significance and distinctive character.¹ The SCP project aims to better allow businesses in the region to fill the role of the extended environment of each of the anchor points.

REVITALIZATION THROUGH CULTURAL DISTRICTS

A strategy that can be used for the revitalization of an area is the establishment of a cultural district. These districts seek to bring in a greater number of artists and visitors by showcasing the area to visitors and providing services and other incentives to artists.



Figure 8: Barrio de Las Letras, 2021 ²

A case study for the successful implementation of a cultural district can be found in the Barrio de Las Letras in Madrid, which following its implementation has contributed to record breaking visitation of Madrid. High levels of resident and business networking were found to contribute to the success of the area. In a survey of 187 businesses, these businesses mentioned 364 organizations that they collaborated with. Eighty-eight percent of these organizations were linked with a larger organization or central element, such as a monument. The business network of the area was found to have several highly active entrepreneurs who organized much of the collaboration. High levels of participation in area wide events due to this cohesion resulted in an area attractive to visitors. Rather than relying on a centralized approach, a social network driven by several active local businesses created a more attractive area.²

The West Kowloon Cultural District serves as an example of a cultural district implemented in Hong Kong.



Figure 9: The West Kowloon Cultural District, 2021 ¹⁴

The West Kowloon Cultural District Authority was created by the government as the sole entity responsible for overseeing the district. The district seeks to enrich Hong Kong culture and arts through an ambitious series of developments. The project has become notorious for its delays and cost overruns.²⁶ While private donations served as a major source of funding for the project, much of its budget was sourced governmentally. While the landmark M+ contemporary art museum was finally completed in 2016, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority has hemorrhaged funds, with calculated losses at HKD \$1.1 billion in the 2021-2022 season.²⁴

The West Kowloon Cultural District demonstrates that while there have been attempts at the creation of a cultural district in Hong Kong, management of the efforts has proved rather ineffective. In the case of the district, the large-scale manufacture of cultural attractions resulted in massive delays and costly construction.

A BID CASE STUDY

The South Bank BID in London is an example of a BID situated in an area that has similarities with Central and has been successful in its mission. The BID in London was established in 2014 to increase foot traffic in the urban cultural center. Its primary efforts center on cleanliness, security, advertising, as well as the organization and promotion of events. The BID is part of a governmental and local association partnership known as the South Bank partnership that aims to empower members to more effectively improve the area. The activities of the BID have been successful in generating increased visitation and revenue.

Events such as 2018's Lumiere London light show brought 125,000 visitors to the South Bank. Over the span of 2014-2018, the BID estimates it created a gross economic impact of GBP 3.9 billion.¹⁸

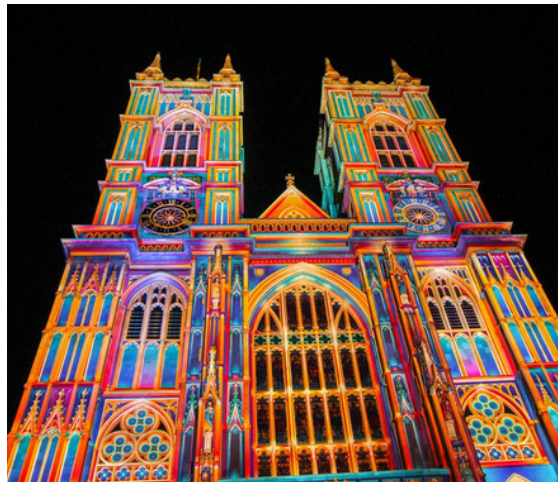


Figure 10: Lumiere London Light Show, 2021²³

Although BIDs are popular in countries such as the U.S., UK, and South Africa, Hong Kong still has not implemented such a system.⁷ Comparable cities in Asia, such as Singapore, have only just begun the trial phases of BID implementation and still have not yielded results.²²

As the adoption of the BID concept has been slow in Asia, the team's research is to investigate if the model can be adapted to Hong Kong's unique culture and Central's business landscape.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The goal of the project is to assess the feasibility of a Business Improvement District (BID) for the promotion of business, culture, and community in the Central District of Hong Kong as part of the proposed Smart Cultural Precinct (SCP) initiative developed by the Institute for Sustainable Urbanisation (ISU). In order to achieve this, the team developed three objectives:

1. Identify which business types are present in the region defined by the SCP.
2. Investigate stakeholders' perspectives on the region defined by the SCP.
3. Identify aspects of a successful BID and whether they may be viable to implement in the area.

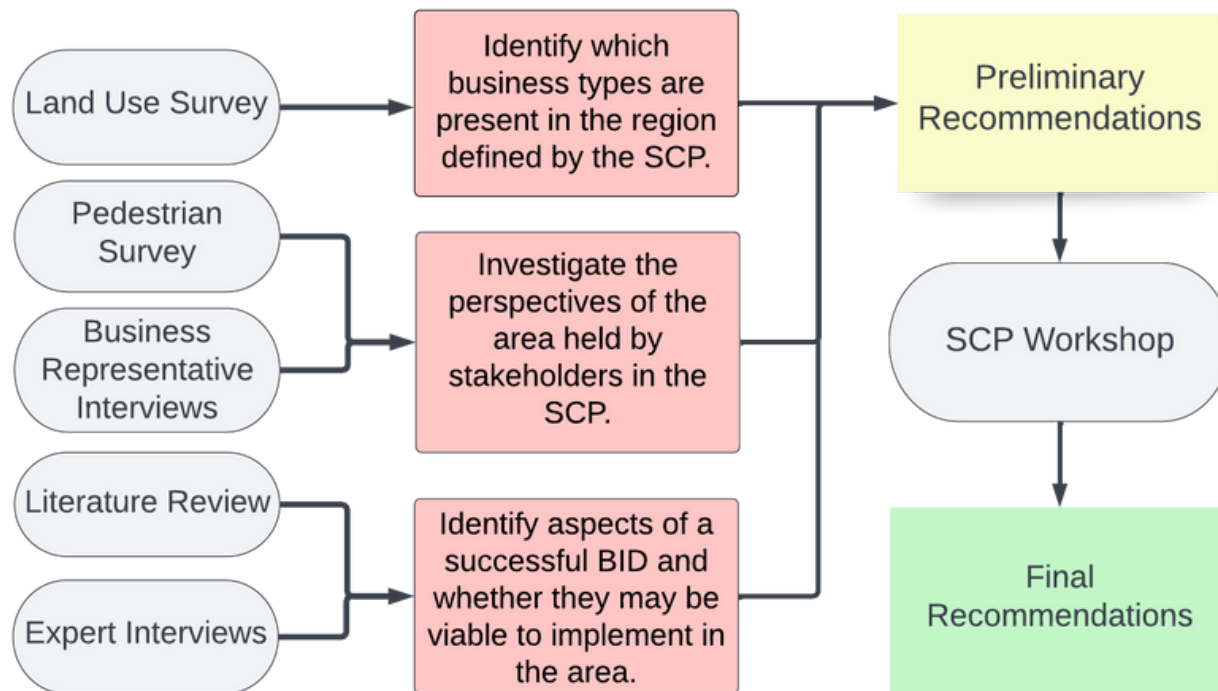


Figure 11: Objectives and Associated Methods

IDENTIFYING ASPECTS OF A SUCCESSFUL BID

The team identified the various aspects, contexts, and mechanisms that have allowed successful BIDs and similar organizations to thrive through literature review and expert interviews. In particular, there were three specific case studies the team focused on, those being the South Bank BID in London, West Kowloon

Cultural District in Hong Kong, and the Downtown Boston BID.

Additionally, the team conducted a semi-structured interview with Andrew Grace, the current Director of Economic and Strategic Planning in the Office of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion for the City of Boston who oversaw the creation of the Downtown Boston BID. The questions for this interview can be found in the supplemental materials.

The information gathered from this research provided the team with the necessary background knowledge about successful BIDs.

IDENTIFYING BUSINESSES IN THE SCP

In order to identify the member businesses of a potential BID in the area as well as trends with the business landscape, the team categorized each business located on the ground floor into one of seven categories: food & beverage, retail, residential, service, office, street vendor, and other. Over the course of two days from January 31st, 2023 to February 1st, 2023 the team walked through the area and marked down the name, location, and business type of each ground floor business using a location intelligence software called AmigoCloud. The primary reason for identifying exclusively ground floor businesses is that the businesses on the ground floor are the most visible. The survey equipped the team with the required context to properly assess patterns with regards to the

types of businesses in the area. Identifying which types of businesses are present in the area allowed the team to determine if it would be appropriate to tailor the BID to these specific business types.

INVESTIGATING STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

To better understand the perspective of each of the stakeholders in the region on potential improvements that a BID could provide, the team conducted both an anonymous survey of pedestrians and several interviews with business representatives.

The pedestrian survey aimed to gather opinions on the area on topics such as walkability, popular points of interest, and community engagement. The survey was distributed in both English and traditional Chinese. Both the flyer and survey questions can be found in the supplemental materials.

Additionally, to capture the interests of businesses and their willingness to contribute financially to a BID, the team conducted semi-structured

interviews with representatives from several businesses in the region. The questions covered business confidence, target customer demographics, interest in cross-business collaboration, and areas of improvement for Central. The full list of questions can be found in the supplemental materials. Over the course of two weeks from February 3rd, 2023 to February 17th, 2023 the team visited businesses during business hours and requested an interview. The team visited businesses when they had few customers and visited stores at various times in each interview day. The team worked with a translator, provided by the ISU, in order to conduct interviews in Cantonese. The team also reached out to representatives from the three anchor points of the SCP: Tai Kwun, Central Market, and PMQ in order to gain their perspectives on the BID.

FEASIBILITY OF A BID IN CENTRAL

In order to gain perspective on the applicability of the BID concept in

Central, the team conducted several semi-structured interviews with urban design and planning experts who have worked on projects in Hong Kong. The team created specific questions for each interview, which can be found in the supplemental materials.

To gauge community support and get feedback on the idea of a BID in the area, the team facilitated unstructured focus groups as a part of the ISU's promotional SCP workshop on February 15th, 2023. As a part of this workshop, the team presented some preliminary findings and conclusions of this research, then split the audience into three discussion groups. The SCP workshop brought together several urban design and planning professionals, community organization leaders, and members of academia. Notable figures in the audience included Katty Law, the convenor of the Central and Western District Concern Group, Wilfred Au, the Director of the Planning and Design Division of the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) as well as Angie Chung, the General

Manager for Central Market. Workshop participants provided various perspectives on issues they perceived with the area, as well as suggestions for ways in which they believed the area could be improved. During these discussion groups, the team received feedback regarding the potential improvements a BID could generate in the area as well as how an organization like this might be implemented.

FINDINGS

The Businesses in Central are New and Diverse in Type

The majority of ground floor level businesses in Central were found to be retail or food and beverage locations. Of the 1,293 businesses surveyed, 33% fell into the food and beverage category and 22% into retail. Because the southern portion of the SCP is zoned as mixed use commercial and residential, 9% of ground floor entrances were those of residential buildings. In the northern portion, where land is zoned as exclusively commercial, a mix of

offices and other businesses occupy the buildings. Street vendors were concentrated within a few street markets, with only a few outlying vendors present in other locations. Due to the small footprint of each stall, while they made up 14% of businesses, the physical presence of street vendors was not widespread. Over 60% of businesses interviewed were less than three years old, reflecting high business turnover within the Central area.

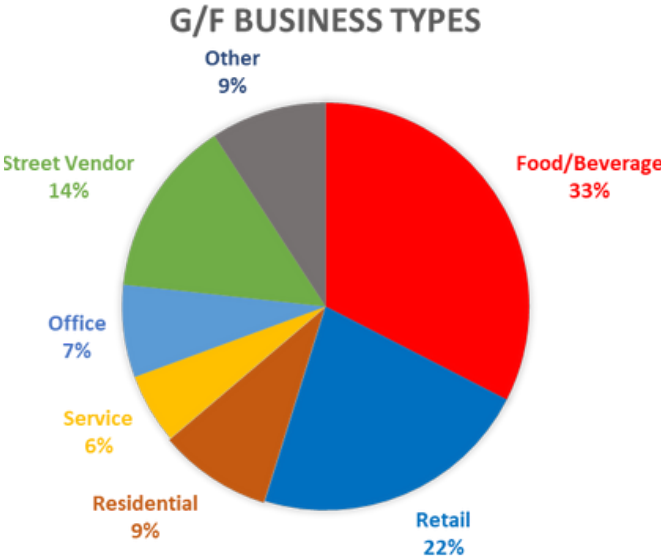


Figure 12: Ground Floor Business Types in the SCP

Central is Frequently Visited by Hong Kongers

The team gathered 93 survey responses from pedestrians. Most of the pedestrians surveyed were familiar with the Central District, with around half of them coming to Central at least once a week. Out of 63 survey respondents who responded to demographic questions, 90% were Hong Kong residents. However, only 18% of them lived in the Central and Western District. Survey respondents were therefore very familiar with Hong Kong, but may not represent the interests of those who live in Central. While they were not residents of Central, 80% of those surveyed worked in the area. As the travel restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are lifted and tourists come back to the area, the team expects the demographics of those using the area to change.

Businesses gave varied responses on who their target customer was, with less than 10% of businesses responding that they targeted only a

single demographic among locals and tourists. A common theme among food and beverage locations that served Western style food was that they tended to attract expatriates living in Hong Kong. When a target age range was stated by businesses during the interview, it was in the age range of 20-30. This aligns with the age demographic information from the pedestrian survey, in which 57% of respondents were within the 18-34 age range.

Business Confidence Relies on Tourism

When polled on their expectations for their performance this year, most businesses said that they expected to do better than previously. Forty-five percent of businesses expected to do slightly better, and 21% much better than previously, with most citing the return of tourists after the easing of COVID-19 restrictions as a major contributor. Many businesses that were older than five years had a more negative outlook and expected to do worse. High business turnover as a

result of COVID-19 has resulted in many businesses that do not have experience in a non-restricted Hong Kong. When polled about the greatest challenges they face, businesses cited mixed factors, with the most common answer citing a lack of customers. As tourists are a major source of revenue for businesses in Central, the prospect of their return appears to be a large source of hope for these businesses.

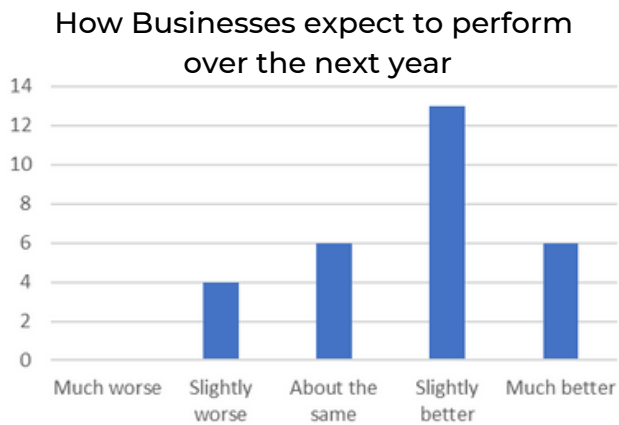


Figure 13: Survey of Business Confidence

Businesses and Pedestrians Support Pedestrian Infrastructure Improvements

Pedestrian survey results and business representative interviews indicate that stakeholders believe

that while the walkability of the area is satisfactory, it can be improved. Approximately two thirds of businesses surveyed believed that it would attract more customers to their business if it were easier to walk in Central. Businesses further away from the Central-Mid-Levels escalators in particular expressed that the pedestrian infrastructure in the area was an obstacle to their businesses' success.

While the majority of businesses believed that it would bring more customers to the area if pedestrian infrastructure were improved, 90% of pedestrians surveyed expressed that it was easy and comfortable to walk in Central. Multiple interviewees mentioned on the topic that they believe pedestrians in Hong Kong are used to the hilly walking conditions and narrow sidewalks of Central. Despite this, 75% of pedestrians surveyed said that they would support the closure of certain streets for the purpose of pedestrianization. Sixty percent of pedestrians said that they would like more crosswalks in Central. This suggests that although

pedestrians may perceive that current walking infrastructure is sufficient, they believe it still has room for improvement.

Public Realm Improvements Will be Difficult to Implement

While a BID can advocate for and implement certain improvements, significant alterations to the public realm must first be approved by the government. For example, sidewalk management and street signage fall under the management of the Hong Kong Highway Department, while any changes affecting traffic must also be approved by the Transport Department. Improvements such as street closures would require approval from both departments.⁶ A consistent concern in discussions with interviewees and in the focus groups of the SCP workshop was how public realm improvements would be implemented. The primary concern raised was if the government would actually be receptive to

implementing the improvements in a timely manner. A URA official participating in the workshop stated that due to the multi-departmental management of streets and sidewalks, making changes to the public realm is exceedingly difficult. He said that non-standard alterations to the environment, such as area wide decorations, require a time-consuming cross-departmental review process, which often stalls out projects. Similarly, multiple workshop participants mentioned that in their personal experience working with the various departments of the Hong Kong government, communication was slow and often unclear. One workshop participant stated that in their experience as a community advocate in Hong Kong, they believe they cannot voice local concerns to any entity other than to what they perceive as an impotent local district council. These accounts from members of the community show how difficult it has been to make changes that affect the public realm in Central.

Community Event Space is Limited in Central

In an interview with Phil Kim and Connie Cheng, two prominent urban design professionals in Hong Kong, they mentioned that because public community space is limited in Central, the anchor points play a significant role in providing a space where the community can gather, especially for large events. Many of the SCP workshop participants, particularly those who were the leaders of community organizations, agreed that the space within each of the anchor points was being underutilized and is generally prohibitively expensive for smaller community organizations. Based on these sentiments and the team's observations on the area, the team found that the physical event space is limited and that the anchor points are currently underutilizing their space.

Successful Aspects of a BID

The team identified three key aspects necessary for the successful formation of a BID. The first aspect identified is the presence of local business networks. These networks are necessary to advocate for a BID in the area.

Andrew Grace stated that he had not seen a successful BID form without the involvement of a local business association. The team found that in successful BIDs, high degrees of business networking were common.³ Prior relationships generate trust and familiarity among businesses, laying the groundwork for the further collaboration and negotiation required for BID formation.

The second aspect identified was the support of landowners and large businesses with access to key resources such as physical space and funding. While participation from all businesses in the area is not a requirement for a BID, sufficient

participation is required to provide the organization with the resources to effectively operate. Uneven participation also creates issues of inequity. Many improvements provided by a BID benefit the whole area, but non-participation in the organization allows non-participating businesses to benefit without contributing.

Finally, the government must enable the BID's foundation and operation. To do this, the government must be able to establish an additional tax on businesses and be willing to work with the BID when its activities interact with public services or the public realm. The involvement of the government is also necessary for the funding of the BID through taxation.

The Area Lacks Business Networking

The team has found that there is a lack of networking between businesses in Central. Throughout the process of business representative interviews, expert interviews, and the SCP workshop, the team was unable to identify any long-term business networks. During the business

representative interviews, 75% of interviewees expressed some interest in cross-business promotions and 73% expressed interest in being part of community events as part of a business organization. Some respondents stated that while they are interested in these services, they do not currently have the resources to create and maintain them. While some respondents mentioned that they had participated in some cross-business events, none of these had been part of a long-term business network. This shared sentiment of a lack of resources for desired collaboration indicates that there currently is no functioning business network.

The Anchor Points are Skeptical of Collaboration

Experts the team interviewed believed the anchor points will be reluctant to collaborate with each other. The competitive, capitalistic nature of Hong Kong was often cited as the reason why the organizations

had little faith in future collaborative efforts. Alvin Yip, former Curator-in-Chief for the revitalization of Central Market, expressed that the anchor points, and large businesses more broadly, are mainly concerned about relationships within their own spheres of influence. The lack of pre-existing collaboration efforts among businesses of similar size suggests that it will be difficult to bring the anchor points together.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

What a BID in Central Could Look Like

The team has identified two main focus areas that a potential BID in Central could address. Based on the stakeholder perspectives gathered, the team found that there is support for some public realm improvements and that businesses are interested in collaboration.

1. Advocate for more pedestrian crossings and the pedestrianization of the area through street closures.

2. Host collaborative events and facilitate cross-business promotions and advertisements.

Business Support Requires More Concrete Details

As previously established, businesses are interested in cross-business collaboration for advertising and hosting events, but they currently lack the financial resources and physical space to do so. However, when asked if they would be willing to pay for the services, 71% of business representatives responded with “maybe”. The vast majority of these respondents stated that in order to be willing to pay for the services, either directly or indirectly, they would have to have a detailed description of the services and have an understanding as to how they would directly improve their business.

This suggests that while there is interest from businesses in the region towards potential improvements that a BID could facilitate, businesses have to be educated about the tangible benefits and costs of a BID to receive their support.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

To create a successful BID in Central, it is essential to gain support from the local businesses, government and the anchor points. The team recommends that the ISU continues to host workshops for the purpose of educating the area’s stakeholders on the potential benefits of a BID and furthering the discussion regarding its implementation. Business owners in Central would gain valuable insight on how a BID could meet their interests and therefore would be more willing to support the effort. With regards to the anchor points, the team recommends looking into supporting small scale collaborative events and promotions across all three points. This would be an effective means of showcasing the advantages of collaboration and generate interest for deeper collaborative efforts, which can come in the form of a BID.

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