

Beat: Local

Kai Tak: White Elephant or Planning Mismanagement?

Nobody can get in or out of there.

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USPA NEWS - Though the building itself is of first-rate design standards, the area is plagued with a lack of connectivity; the surrounding area is but the city's largest construction site. So why is this behemoth that costs nearly US\$1b stuck on an "island" on dry land?

Open in mid-2013, the Kai Tak cruise terminal in Hong Kong will have been open to the public come summer 2016. The sleek silver structure surfs on an artificial peninsula above the sea; Foster and Partners, who also designed the new Hong Kong International Airport (which replaced the airport that was on the site of the cruise terminal), designed this modernist avant-garde piece of architecture. It's been hailed as one of the most advanced cruise terminals in the world and even the MS Voyager of the Seas, the largest cruise ship in the world when it was built, has called Kai Tak its home. Just this weekend, the three "Queens", Elizabeth, Victoria, and Mary 2, of Cunard called at Hong Kong on the same day.

Though the building itself is of first-rate design standards, the area is plagued with a lack of connectivity; the surrounding area is but the city's largest construction site. The terminal is designed to comfortably dock two large cruise ships simultaneously and is projected to accommodate 330,000 passengers this year, almost a tenfold increase from its passenger throughput from 2013. However, the cruise terminal in a desert when it comes to transport links, according to the Hong Kong Tourism Board, the only regular transit line is a lonely minibus line that carries 16 passengers to the nearest metro station every seven minutes. You can do the math.

If you're carrying bulky luggage from your cruise, you'll need to wait up to an hour for a taxi in a queue full of disembarked cruise passengers to reach the nearest metro station or ferry pier where ferries run only twice an hour. The weekends are a little better with a special bus route that takes you to the city in just over half an hour. So why is this behemoth that costs nearly US\$1b stuck on an "island" on dry land?

Being in the first stage of the redevelopment of the now defunct Kai Tak Airport, the cruise terminal, along with roads were completed in 2013. However, the second stage of development, which includes building a metro station near the cruise terminal, doesn't finish until at least the third quarter of 2016. What's more is that the surrounding developments, including a monorail, a highway, and a swanky new stadium is supposed to be in the third stage of development and only begins construction this year and slated for completion by as late as 2032.

There's no mistake that separating the development into three different stages can help prevent a labor shortage and stabilize the cost of construction materials. But when the government is building a new high-speed rail line, burrowing a highway under the sea, constructing three metro line extensions, and reclaiming hectares upon hectares of land, their considerations hardly seem sincere. Even so, perhaps they could've completed the transport links before building the cruise terminal?

Don't forget that the cruise passengers are much-needed high-value passengers after a decline in the number of tourists visiting Hong Kong from the Mainland of China. Though the government has made the right decision to build the Kai Tak Terminal to ease congestion and capacity constraints on the ageing Ocean Terminal, they haven't been able to fully capitalize on the revenue its bringing in to the city. I still haven't been there, because getting there takes longer than crossing the border to the Motherland.

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