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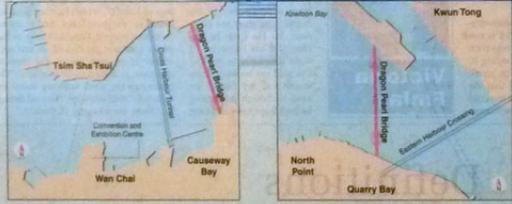
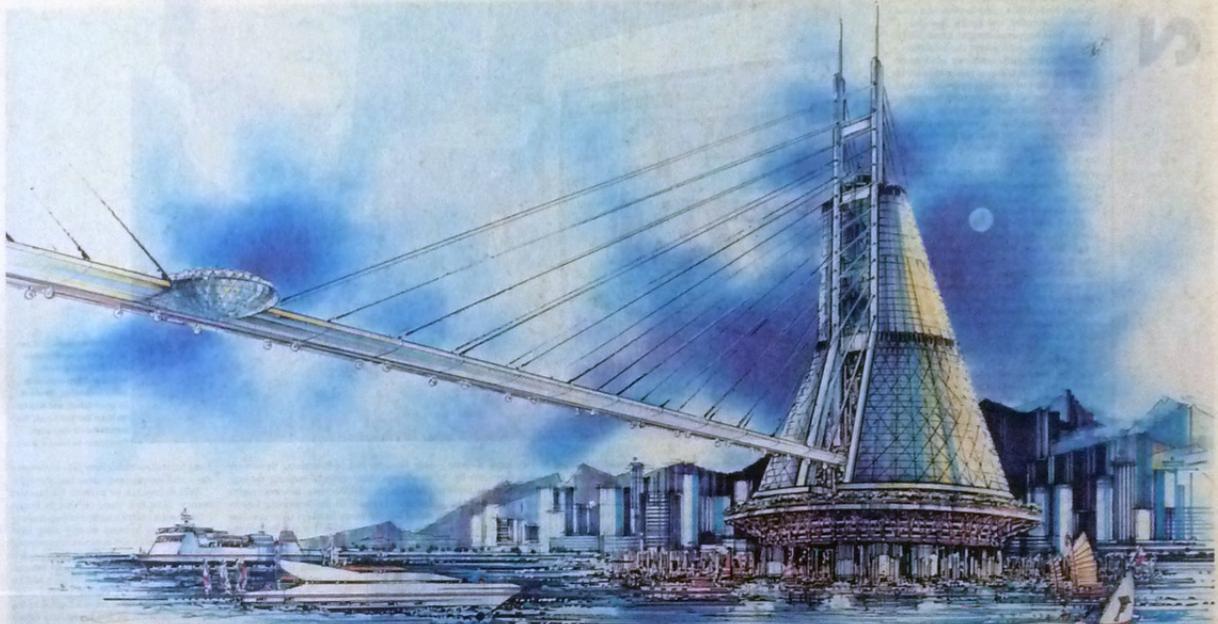
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The sky's the limit

Kevin Sinclair reports on an ambitious project to join Hong Kong Island to Kowloon with a harbour bridge

A futuristic proposal being considered by the Government will allow pedestrians to walk 20 stories above Victoria Harbour from Hong Kong Island to Kowloon in just 20 minutes. Studio Quorum, a US-based consortium of architects, designers and engineers, wants to build a \$12 billion pedestrian bridge linking either Tin Hau to Hung Hom, or Quarry Bay to the tip of the old Kai Tak airport runway.

The design concept includes identical half-pyramid shaped 37-storey buildings upon enormous steel podiums. The buildings would anchor a cable-stayed span almost a kilometre in length 20 stories above the water.

The concept is ambitious. It would be the longest cable-stayed bridge in the world. As envisaged in specifications submitted to the Government, the main span of the Dragon Pearl Bridge would be 960 metres, with the total length of the bridge 1,377 kilometres.

The bridge deck, made of steel box girders, would be 27 metres wide and designed with similar technology to an aircraft's wing to withstand typhoons. At the centre of the bridge would be the Pearl, a climate-controlled public concourse.

The submission was made by David Nixon, a British-born architect based in Los Angeles who is a director of Studio Quorum. He said he had received a "cautiously friendly" reception from government planning and tourism officials and overwhelming support from representatives of the tourist industry.

"Look at every world-class city on a harbour or river, and you will see a bridge," says Mr Nixon. "Hong Kong seems to be the exception." The

highly distinctive concept includes two immense steel platforms, each sitting on 82 caissons. Tides and currents would flow through the support caissons, causing minimum disruption to water flow. There would be ample room under each caisson for a marina.

"The design would create the absolute minimum amount of interference with tidal flows or waterfront land use," says Mr Nixon. Each building would have three levels of car parking with spaces for 700 vehicles.

The twin skyscraper towers would each have substantial retail areas on lower floors - with restaurants and shops - topped by 28 floors of offices and another 20 floors reserved either for apartments or hotels.

The buildings would have 395,000 square metres of floor space for offices and accommodation. There would be 2.5 hectares of landscaped public gardens at the base of each tower.

The entire structure - bridge, caissons, towers, and the 395-metre tall masts - would be built as one cohesive steel structure, Mr Nixon said.

"It would be a major tourist attraction," he added. "It would also provide a new cross-harbour link."

He estimates it would take 20 minutes to walk across the footpath-in-the-sky - roughly the same as taking the bus. But, he adds, it would be an invigorating journey. The plan also includes a gondola underneath the walkway, and modifications for an automated people mover.

The vision of an aerial link between the island and the mainland originated with an American building tycoon named Jack Caldwell, who died last December. Caldwell was a self-made million-

aire described by acquaintances as "a maverick developer" who made his fortune from building large housing subdivisions in Los Angeles. He was a World War II US Naval pilot who later became a roving adventurer before turning to construction. He had visited Hong Kong many times, and had numerous friends here. One of them is Joachim Berger, president of Mega Hotels, which is owned by Gordon Wu Yung-sheng.

During a visit in 1997, Caldwell was on a Star Ferry when he asked himself why Hong Kong did not have a bridge. He looked at the situation through the eyes of a developer: a vehicular bridge needs enormous land area for the approach roads, and was obviously out of the question.

So, he thought, why not a pedestrian bridge? His original concept was a huge tube soaring over the harbour which would include walkways and light traffic shuttles.

Between 1998, when Caldwell was diagnosed with cancer, and July last year, he had commissioned teams of architects, engineers and designers to complete a plan. It differed significantly from his original concept and is close to the proposal now before the Government.

His final plan was presented last month. Caldwell paid for an initial feasibility study, and the four member companies of the consortium which took it on after his death have continued to fund it since a sign of their faith in the project, says Mr Nixon.

Getting approval is likely to be a lengthy process. The Assistant Director of Territorial Planning, Augustine Ng, says the Government needs to study the idea. It has been sent to government

Choice - The two sites for the proposed Dragon Pearl Bridge, and an artist's impression.

consultants engaged on the Harbour Study Plan. The bridge suggestion will be included in the round of public consultations about the harbour, which is due to start in July. There have been discussions since the 1860s about building a harbour bridge, but engineers say vehicle bridge plans have been scuppered by the large amount of land that would be needed for approaches - about three times the area needed for the Causeway Bay approaches to the Cross Harbour Tunnel. But a government strategic transport study has recommended an additional harbour crossing by 2016.

In the 1970s, the idea of building a bridge across the Lei Yue Mun Gap was raised, but then abandoned.

"The proposal is innovative, but touches on two very sensitive issues," Mr Ng said. These are harbour reclamation (which would not be needed for the bridge, say the designers) and the height of waterfront buildings - which is the subject of a study by the Planning Department and will be discussed publicly this month.

The Government needs to study possible benefits and see if the bridge would be welcomed by the public.

"Should it be a pedestrian-only link or combined with vehicle connections?"

Mr Ng said the Government had had Mr Nixon study by the Planning Department and will be discussed publicly this month.

Bidding for the right to develop their own concept would be no problem, Mr Nixon said. "Structurally, it is highly feasible." A "very

wild" guess on costs would be between US\$4 and \$5 billion (HK\$31.2 to \$39 billion). Mr Nixon is confident that if government permission is received and public feedback is positive, he and his partners will have no trouble putting together the financial package.

He says it is too early to carry out meaningful discussions with Hong Kong contractors or potential investors, although he has had informal discussions with representatives of Cheung Kong, which has the development rights for much of Hung Hom. Cheung Kong did not return calls seeking comment.

Mr Nixon says the time to seek public participation will come when the Government publishes its next paper on harbour development; then public reaction can be gauged.

If the bridge is funded privately, a toll will be charged, and that would probably be similar to a bus fare for cross-harbour journeys.

Winston Chau, chairman of the Society for Protection of the Harbour, says his group has a touch-point test it applies to all new work: it is essential, will it involve minimum reclamation, is there no reasonable alternative and does the majority of the public support such a plan?

Mr Nixon trained as an architect in London and worked for large construction companies before the 1979-80 recession in Britain prompted him to move to the US. He taught an architecture at the University of California in Los Angeles and then worked for NASA where one of his assignments was designing astronaut quarters on the space station. "What we've put to the Hong Kong Government is a serious proposal," he says. "If they're interested, we're ready."

saturdayreview

The sky's the limit

March 4, 2000

Kevin Sinclair reports on an ambitious project to join Hong Kong Island to Kowloon with a harbor bridge

A futuristic proposal being considered by the Government will allow pedestrians to walk 20 storeys above Victoria Harbour from Hong Kong island to Kowloon in just 20 minutes, Studio Quorum, a US-based consortium of architects, designers and engineers, wants to build a \$32 billion pedestrian bridge linking either Tin Hau to Hung Hom, or Quarry Bay to the lip of the old Kai Tak airport runway.

The design concept includes identical half-pyramid shaped 57-storey buildings built on enormous steel podiums. The buildings would anchor a cable-stayed span almost a kilometer in length 20 storeys above the water.

The concept is ambitious. It would be the longest cable-stayed bridge in the world. As envisaged in specifications submitted to the Government, the main span of the Dragon Pearl Bridge would be 960 metres, with the total length of the bridge 1.37 kilometres.

The bridge deck, made of steel box girders, would be 27 metres wide and designed with similar technology to an aircraft's wing to withstand typhoons. At the centre of the bridge would be the Pearl, a climate-controlled public concourse.

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"Look at every world-class city on a harbour or river, and you will see a bridge," says Mr. Nixon. "Hong Kong seems to be the exception." The highly distinctive concept includes two immense steel platforms, each sitting on 82 caissons. Tides and currents would flow through the support caissons, causing minimum disruption to water flow. There would be ample room under each caisson for a marina.

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The twin skyscraper towers would each have substantial retail areas on lower floors – with restaurants and shops – topped by 28 floors of offices and another 20 floors reserved either for apartments or hotels.

The buildings would have 355,000 square metres of floor space for offices and accommodation. There would be 2.5 hectares of landscaped public gardens at the base of each tower.

The entire structure – bridge, caissons, towers, and the 393-metre tall masts – would be built as one cohesive steel structure, Mr. Nixon said.

“It would be a major tourist attraction,” he added. “It would also provide a new cross-harbour link.”

He estimates it would take 20 minutes to walk across the footpath-in-the-sky ~ roughly the same as taking the bus. But, he adds, it would be an invigorating journey. The plan also includes a gondola underneath the walkway, and modifications for an automated people mover. The vision of an aerial link between the island and the mainland originated with an American building tycoon named Jack Caldwell, who died last December. Caldwell was a self-made millionaire described by acquaintances as “a maverick developer” who made his fortune from building large housing sub-divisions in Los Angeles. He was a World War II US Naval pilot who later became a roving adventurer before turning to construction. He has visited Hong Kong many times, and had numerous friends here. One of them is Joachim Berger, president of Mega Hotels, which is owned by Gordon Wu Ying-sheung.

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Getting approval is likely to be a lengthy process. The Assistant Director of Territorial Planning, Augustine Ng, says the Government needs to study the idea. It has been sent to government consultants engaged on the Harbour Study Plan. The bridge suggestion will be included in the round of public consultations about the harbor, which is due to start in July. There have been discussions since the 1860s about building a harbor bridge, but engineers says vehicle bridge plans have been scuppered by the large amount of land that would be needed for approaches – about three times the area needed for the Causeway Bay approaches to the Cross Harbour Tunnel. But a government strategic transport study has recommended an additional harbor crossing by 2016.

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The Government needs to study possible benefits and see if the bridge would be welcomed by the public.

Should it be a pedestrian-only link or combined with vehicle connections?

Mr. Ng said the Government had told Mr. Nixon that even if it gave a green light to the project, “the current government systems would require an open tender for the project.”

Bidding for the right to develop their own concept would be no problem, Mr. Nixon said.

“Structurally, it is highly feasible.” A “very wild” guess on costs would be between US\$4 and \$5 billion (HK\$31.2 to \$39 billion). Mr. Nixon is confident that if government permission is received and public feedback is positive, he and his partners will have no trouble putting together the financial package.

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