

A challenge for the senses

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How to describe Hong Kong? What attributes do we associate with an administrative region so spatially challenged and yet otherwise so dimensionally unbounded?

The old rules of seeing, hearing, tasting and smelling are not an accurate guide, for Hong Kong evokes so many different and often conflicting images that one is tempted to think of it as a chameleon city, as changeable and inconstant as its seasons.

Nevertheless, since colour and music have influenced both my professional career and my recreational pursuits, I must admit a certain curiosity as to whether either have played a part, not so much in defining as in triggering my own response to this indefinable city that I call home.

Where colour is concerned I began, in my early years, by picturing Hong Kong in tones of blue, compounded by the vistas of sea and sky that surround our archipelago.

In the more vulnerable years of the late 1960s, when Hong Kong almost witnessed a spillover of the Cultural Revolution on its shores, red became the ascendant tone.

This was followed in the boom years of the 1970s by purple, a colour associated with people and events of technological importance.

With the rising affluence of the 1980s, the expansion of country parks, recreational opportunities and a growing consciousness of our environment as a precious asset we must protect and preserve, green has taken over and has remained, the predominant colour I now associate with Hong Kong.

This may seem a surprising choice for a city that ranks among the most crowded in the world – until one considers how extensively green has been grafted among the grey skyscrapers.

We may laud the architects responsible for producing our endlessly varied and vertically inclined skyline, but just as important to my mind are those largely unsung heroes, our landscape gardeners, whose labours of love have given us our jewels of parks and gardens.

Great ingenuity has gone into creating these exquisitely conceived oases amid the otherwise all-pervading concrete, and it is consoling to see how intensely they are used.

And what of music? What sounds do I associate with Hong Kong?

Not surprisingly, they are sounds of impetuosity and boundless activity, combining to form a ceaseless toccata and fugue that would have had the great Johann Sebastian Bach covering his ears.

When Victoria city was first taking shape along the shoreline of Hong Kong Island, early visitors objected to the constant cacophony of hammers striking granite, as stonemasons fashioned the first building blocks of our embryo metropolis.

Those sounds have long surrendered to the greater symphony of pile drivers accompanying Hong Kong's subsequent development.

And even this is not the sound which springs to mind. On the contrary, the sound that first impinges on my ears when I awake in the morning is that of bird calls – and not because I live in some especially privileged precinct, for it is a sound surprisingly widespread throughout our city.

Our dawn chorus testifies to the extraordinary proximity that exists here between our metropolis and its natural surroundings, for unlike most other

cities, we are not distanced from nature by miles of suburban ribbon development.

Having focused on the primary senses, I cannot entirely ignore the sense of taste and the sense of smell, especially when Hong Kong caters most opulently to the former and its very name was inspired by the latter. Where taste is concerned, where to begin? Hong Kong is so extravagant in its love of food that I must concede my inability to select one flavour surpassing all others.

The same is true of smell, for – since the old Kai Tak airport, and the distinctive aroma of its adjoining nullah that gave our Fragrant Harbour its name – I find it very difficult to select one distinct odour that speaks for the city as a whole. Does money have a smell? Or should I settle instead for the perfume that inspired the title of one of my all-time favourite Hollywood movies? If the latter is my only recourse, then let me nominate, as Hong Kong's defining fragrance, the "Sweet Smell of Success".