Dubai's imaginative strategy for its shoreline contrasts sharply with Hong Kong's legacy of inept planning, writes **Tony Latter**

Waterfront blues

Many of you may have visited Dubai. If so, you may have come away filled with admiration for some of its stunning modern architecture, and for its vigorous determination to provide the best of 21st-century living. Or you may simply dismiss it as a soulless, glitzy, concrete jungle. But, either way, one cannot fail to be impressed by the bold strategy of Dubai's leaders in pursuit of a "life after oil" – whether by building homes for the mega rich and providing all the trappings which such people are presumed to hanker after; or by pursuing such tourism projects as the Dubailand theme park, which will be twice the size of Disney World in Florida.

And last month Dubai confirmed another mega plan, to build a canal looping for 75km through the desert. Added to the projects already under way to build marinas and offshore archipelagos such as "Palm Islands" and "The World", Dubai will eventually have supplemented its original natural coastline of some 70km to provide a total waterfrontage of, according to one estimate, an astonishing 2,000km. This additional shoreline will be predominantly for residential or recreational use, in recognition that people like to live or relax next to a stretch of water.

> Hong Kong, blessed with an abundant coastline, has never got to grips with exploiting that potential to the full

Contrast that with Hong Kong. We are naturally endowed with huge amounts of shoreline. To be fair, geography renders much of it unusable, other than at considerable cost. However, even those parts which are usable have too often been reserved, not just for port facilities (for which there is plainly no alternative), but for roads, bus stations, lorry parks, prisons industrial estates, offices, sports grounds and even a windowless cultural centre. Natural bays have been land-filled (so reducing the available waterfrontage), or roads have been built in front of them, such as the North Lantau highway.

We even filled in the Tamar dock basin, which had provided a four-sided waterfront. Where a net addition to the waterfront is created, as in the case of Chek Lap Kok, it is seldom for living.

Of course, a comparison with Dubai in terms of developmental opportunity is far from fair. Dubai has shallow water offshore, making it relatively easy to "build" new islands; and the proposed canal only has to be dug through relatively flat desert. In Hong Kong, there have never been many flat areas of land available, other than through reclamation.

Yet there does appear to be a telling comparison between the mindsets of the two administrations. Dubai, endowed with a relatively short coastline, came to realise that waterfront exploitation is one of the keys to providing an attractive living environment in a place which has few other natural selling points. Hong Kong, blessed with an abundant coastline, has never got to grips with exploiting that potential to the full. There is enough coastline to allow at least some extra residential or tourist development along its length (we still do not have even one decent resort hotel). Access and provision of transport links may present costly challenges, especially with regard to the outlying islands. But, if we have the finance and the engineering expertise to build a bridge to Macau, then surely we should be able to set something aside to meet those other challenges, which could enhance the quality of life for future generations. And, by the same token, surely we could now find somewhere other than along the shoreline to build our roads, even if it means burying some of them.

The sad plight of much of our shoreline is largely the inheritance from some 50 years of inept planning, and a consequence of the understandable tendency to go for the cheapest option. It would not be fair to blame the present administration. Indeed, the official mindset is at last showing signs of changing. Mistakes of the past cannot be rectified overnight, but at least we should now make sure that no more mistakes are made. We have to compete with places like Dubai in fields such as finance, tourism, and business and trade conventions, and in the quest to attract or retain a certain class of resident.

It may be many years before we know whether Dubai's overall plans for a life after oil have succeeded. But, sitting in Hong Kong today, one cannot but be a little envious of a place which has so imaginative a strategy for its shoreline and where the leadership exudes such confidence in taking that forward.

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Equality denied

At 9pm on September 21 in Beijing, Chaoyang district police cordoned off the popular Sanlitun bar district near the diplomatic compounds. They then proceeded to round up any black people in the area, handcuffed them and herded them into detention. Anyone who questioned why they were being treated like animals, without rights, was beaten up. Diplomats' children and international students were caught up in the race-based round-up, and people were hurt in the process.

The foreign diplomatic community was alarmed. It occurred just minutes away from the doors of their embassies, and less than a year before the start of the 2008 Olympics – when China is supposed to show the world how civilised it is. People were being rounded up like cattle, regardless of what nation they were from, and indiscriminately beaten as part of a sloppily executed investigation into Nigerian drug dealers.

China's leaders should realise that such indiscriminate sweeps are not in the nation's best interests so close to the Beijing Olympics. Such action does not show the nation's best side to the foreign media. If police in the Chaoyang district want to do something about drug dealing, they should shut down its plethora of brothels, where crack cocaine is big business.

When a number of diplomats raised concerns about unwarranted police abuse affecting the diplomatic zone and their families, the Foreign Ministry just denied that the incident had ever happened. That is despite the fact there were a number of local and international witnesses, including journalists.

Why would it do this? One problem is that when mainland authorities investigate any matter, the organisation concerned investigates itself. The probe begins at the top, and continues layer by layer – each protecting the others. So, in the case of the alleged police abuse in Sanlitun, the officers assigned to the case will believe their own people's accounts, and report as much to higher authorities like the Foreign Ministry.

> Diplomats of developing nations feel let down when Beijing fails to protect their citizens' rights

Clearly, the central government needs an independent body to investigate abuses at all levels of all departments. Local abuses are protected through local protectionism. This has become the new meaning of "Chinese characteristics". There are signs that the problem has spread like a cancer through the nation. Still, no one expected it to explode in the heart of Beijing's diplomatic community.

It is very easy for a perceived race-based round-up to be interpreted as "racist", and the story to be spun as an extension of Chinese chauvinism and nationalism, clearly not the image China wishes to portray to the rest of the world. The police abuses in Sanlitun cannot be ignored by the international community, mainly because the government clearly chose to ignore the reality. Someone at the Foreign Ministry should read the Vienna Convention of 1961, which enshrines the principle of "diplomatic immunity". Clearly, though, diplomats and their children should realise, after this incident, that Beijing's police force either does not understand this principle – or doesn't care about it.

Many wonder whether the Foreign Ministry would have responded differently if it had been citizens from a member of the Group of Eight nations who were rounded up. Does China see all people as equal? China's officials, from President Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) down, like to repeat the slogan: "All countries are equal". Indeed, given its tragic history of foreign "spheres of influence" and the Japanese invasion, China has a right to demand equality. But it also has a responsibility to stand by such a principle.

That begs the question of whether China wishes to use its economic clout to serve as a voice for developing countries. Or is it only saying what these leaders want to hear in order to secure energy resources, as some have accused it of doing in Africa? Many people feel disappointed that China has not stood up for developing countries' interests more in international forums. Moreover, diplomats in Beijing of those same developing nations feel let down when the Chinese government fails to protect the rights of their citizens, especially when they are victims of officially sanctioned racial abuse.

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Other Voices

Myanmar progress won't come easily

Ian Holliday

At the end of his recent mission to Myanmar, UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari finally registered some success by setting up fresh talks between the junta and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Now it is even rumoured that Ms Suu Kyi will be released from the house arrest that has trapped her for 12 of the past 18 years. Amid such positive signals, however, the world needs to recall how easily hope can be dashed in Myanmar and act accordingly.

When individuals around the globe recoiled in horror at the bloody military repression on the streets of Yangon in late September, they naturally looked to the UN for solutions. In an unprecedented move, the Security Council last month adopted a resolution deploring the use of violence against peaceful protesters and endorsing Mr Gambari's mediating mission.

Back in Myanmar, however, the junta defiantly asserted its determination not to bow to "big-power bullies". The message seemed clear: Leave us alone – we will handle this. Ongoing repression through nighttime raids on homes and monasteries confirmed that the generals were determined to follow a path of entrenched military rule.

This reality cannot be overlooked. British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner speak of using aid and investment as incentives for the generals to talk. Others turn to regional powers like China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to pull strings. But it still seems unlikely that the junta will genuinely embrace other agents of change. In its world view, the army is the sole and essential saviour of a fractious nation. Those who play politics in the wider society must be crushed. Myanmar's generals remain a long way from reaching out and truly working with such people. In this context, the outside world will have to work hard to secure lasting change.

First, pressure on the junta to talk must be sustained. When Asean leaders gather in Singapore next week, they must make this a top priority. Intensified pressure in bilateral, trilateral and multilateral forums is also urgently needed.

Second, key states should continue to develop targeted economic measures. One success, led by the US, is smart sanctions aimed at the generals, their family members and cronies. Loud squeals from tycoon Tay Za suggest they are starting to hurt.

Third, in their ongoing struggle against dictatorship, ordinary citizens must be given resources. Humanitarian aid is easy to put at the top of the list. Equally important, however, is inward investment by major companies. For years, blanket economic sanctions have done little to damage the regime and much to harm the people. This failed policy, long promoted by the US, must not be extended by the European Union. Rather, it should be reversed.

The people of Myanmar are crying out for jobs, opportunities and outside contact. In their political struggle, they know prosperity will create the best context for a stable transition to democracy. At a moment when Ms Suu Kyi is speaking in these terms, they must be given an economic lifeline.

Only time will tell whether Myanmar's generals are prepared to engage in real political dialogue. As well as pressing for this, the outside world must also do all it can to help ordinary people sustain their struggle for democracy.

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The hot issue of a melting Antarctica

Michael Richardson

Ban Ki-moon has ventured where no UN secretary general has gone before – to Antarctica last Friday. After his visit, he warned that the icy continent was "on the verge of catastrophe" that could trigger a sharp rise in sea level and major flooding of coastal lowlands around the world.

Mr Ban is trying to build support for more effective international action to tackle climate change. His trip was part of a political ecotour through Latin America. From there, he will go to Spain and Bali over the next few weeks. In the Spanish city of Valencia on Saturday, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) will release its latest summary report on the causes, impacts, mitigation measures and remedies for climate change.

But the bigger and more important issue is what the international community will do about global warming. In Bali next month, UN member states will try to hammer out terms for a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012.

Antarctica is currently controversial for two reasons. First, as sea ice recedes around the North Pole, countries bordering the Arctic Ocean are making competing claims to adjacent subsea territory that is thought to contain vast reserves of oil and natural gas.

Similar jostling has started in the Antarctic. Britain last month said it was considering lodging a claim to territorial rights over an area of the continental shelf off Antarctica. Argentina and Chile immediately confirmed that they have overlapping claims. Other countries, including Russia, Australia, New Zealand, France and Norway, have already lodged claims or reserved the right to do so. China has said it will build a third research station on the continent and expand its scientific presence there. However, these claims are overshadowed by a second, more urgent controversy – the extent to which the vast ice sheet that entombs nearly all of the continent and extends offshore is melting and contributing to rising sea levels.

The potential for global catastrophe is clear. The world's only two continental ice sheets, Antarctica and Greenland, contain over half the total amount of fresh water and around 99 per cent of freshwater ice on Earth. A report commissioned by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said that the level of oceans and seas would rise by about 64 metres if the present mass of ice in Antarctica and Greenland melted completely. Antarctica alone would account for nearly 57 metres of the rise. Although the scientists added that this could take hundreds or even thousands of years, "recent observations show a marked increase in ice-sheet contributions to sea-level rise".

The latest IPCC assessment report projects a sea-level rise by the end of this century of between 18cm and 59cm. A major uncertainty is the contribution that ice-sheet melting may make. Some scientists, worried by what they see in Greenland and Antarctica, believe that 21st-century sea-level rises might exceed IPCC projections and be as large as 1.4 metres.

Of the major inhabited continents, Asia would be most seriously affected. The UNEP report said that a one-metre rise in sea level would inundate over 800 sq km of low-lying land with a population of more than 100 million, slicing US$450 billion from the region's gross domestic product.

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Below the Border

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Saving memories

When Lam Kiu-chung, Nam Wa Po's village representative since 1979, decided to renovate the village school and church, he got a nasty shock. The 71-year-old former construction worker discovered that the wooden roof beams were being eaten away by termites. There was genuine concern that the building, part of the village's "collective memory" may collapse.

"Thank goodness it wasn't in the foundations," said Mr Lam. "We quickly started fund-raising and getting donations. We spoke to the government but they were no real help. So we did it on our own. It will cost us about HK$150,000. The work started in August and we expect it to finish by Christmas. It has been a long struggle, but it's something we have to preserve. It's part of our history."

Collective memory is a contemporary phenomenon. In Hong Kong, it came to the fore over the government's demolition plans for the Star Ferry and Queen's piers. I felt nothing for Queen's Pier, but I had fond memories of the former Star Ferry pier, which I first stepped foot on in 1968.

This is the crux of collective memory: one person's beloved recollection is another's anathema. Everyone has their own view. How do you judge what is the collective memory of the majority? Seen this way, collective memory is a lot nonsense, because many people will not agree with my choices. I would like to see public marinas, like we have public golf courses. I'd like to replace all the concrete on country paths with wooden and stone trails.

In the case of Nam Wa Po's school, it holds the esteemed position of being Hong Kong's first village-owned school. Constructed in the 1920s, more than three generations of Hakka farming children have studied there.

In the past, education was for the prosperous. The poor Hakka farmers couldn't afford to send their children to a school in Tai Po. So, with a view to future generations, they pooled their money and built their own school. Other communities followed suit.

Today, the Nam Wa Po school is a church, with a parish of 40; it is a landmark in the rolling hills of Tai Po. This is, I believe, a genuine collective memory. There is a sense of pride in each person who studied in the simple structure. And there are similar examples in many villages.

Rarely can this type of collective memory be repeated in an urban setting. But the Tai Hang fire dragon dance is the exception. At every Mid-Autumn Festival, locals pay homage to the dragon spirit which saved them from a killer cholera outbreak in 1880. They perform a dance through the streets with a dragon created from incense sticks, to ward off evil spirits. Amid the nationwide celebration of a successful harvest, this ritual is also considered part of our unique cultural heritage.

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