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Dear Mr. YAU,

The Hong Kong Institute of Architects' Response to Ma Tso Lung and New Territories North New Town Planning Study

Introduction

The Northern Metropolis (NM) represents a bold vision for Hong Kong's future, aiming to transform the Northern region into a hub of innovation, connectivity, and sustainable growth within the Greater Bay Area (GBA). Ngau Tam Mei (NTM), Ma Tso Lung (MTL) and New Territories North New Town (NTNNT), as outlined in the NTM, MTL and NTNNT Planning Study are pivotal to this strategy, serving as the final pieces of the NM puzzle. The Hong Kong Institute of Architects (HKIA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on this study. Our recommendations seek to ensure that NTM, MTL and NTNNT contribute effectively to Hong Kong's long-term prosperity and global competitiveness.

1. Ma Tso Lung: A Strategic Gateway

Ma Tso Lung (MTL) is uniquely positioned near the Hong Kong-Shenzhen Innovation & Technology Park, the Lo Wu border crossing, and Kwu Tung North, making it a vital gateway within the Northern Metropolis. Its strategic location offers significant potential to enhance economic and social linkages, strengthening the NM's overall cohesion.

To maximize MTL's value, we propose exploring alternative development options beyond typical residential development projects. For instance, transforming MTL into a another strategic hub, such as university town, hospital and medical center etc., could leverage its proximity to Shenzhen's technology ecosystem and key transport nodes. This approach would attract global talent, foster research, and drive innovation. Reimagining nearby Green Belt areas, such as Tit Hang San, could further create a connected hub linking Kwu Tung North, San Tin, and MTL, blending education, technology, and community life into the NM's vision.



Preserving MTL's distinct character is equally critical. The current plan includes a road cutting through MTL, which could fragment its landscape. We recommend exploring an underpass alternative to ensure a more cohesive development. By balancing progress with local identity, MTL can play a central role in the Northern Metropolis. Further to that, while appreciating the government's development planning, we suggest enhancing it by preserving the area's cultural heritage. The proposed removal of structures like Ma Tso Lung San Tsuen, She Leng villages, and Loong Kai Public School, which may be historically significant, warrants reconsideration. We recommend conducting a detailed cultural heritage study aligned with international standards to assess their value and guide preservation decisions. Furthermore, improving connections to nearby heritage assets, such as the Former Macintosh Fort and Ma Tso Lung Shun Yee Sun Tsuen, through aligned green belts and roads, would create a cohesive development that highlights the area's unique cultural history.

2. New Territories North New Town: Expanding the NM's Reach

New Territories North New Town, spanning 1,420 hectares, offers a vast canvas for the Northern Metropolis's future expansion. Phased development is essential to ensure sustainability and adaptability. The Government's proposal to prioritize Development Areas (PDAs) near border crossings such as Lo Wu, Man Kam To, and Heung Yuen Wai lays a solid foundation. These areas could evolve into thriving commercial and logistics hubs, enhancing the NM's connectivity.

Timing is key to NTNNT's success. Allowing PDAs to mature first while monitoring the evolution of Shenzhen's adjacent districts will keep NTNNT adaptable to emerging needs, ensuring it aligns with the broader NM vision.

Transport infrastructure also demands attention. While the proposed rail link from Fanling to Heung Yuen Wai is a step forward, the overburdened East Rail line highlights the need for a bolder solution. A new North-South Railway connecting the NM directly to Hong Kong Island would significantly improve access and reinforce NTNNT's role within the NM.

The HKIA applauds the government's commitment to preserving the 21 indigenous villages in the New Territories North and studying urban-rural integration. We suggest revitalizing these villages as cultural hubs, possibly with rural business incentives, to maintain their charm and support the North Metropolis's growth. New developments should reflect the villages' unique character, blending heritage with modernity. Connecting the villages via heritage walks and bike paths would promote green tourism and showcase Hong Kong's cultural history. These measures would safeguard rural heritage and enhance the North Metropolis's sustainable and cultural development.



3. Strengthening Cross-Border and Demographic Planning

The Northern Metropolis's success hinges on seamless integration with the Greater Bay Area (GBA). MTL and NTNNT provide unique opportunities to deepen cross-border ties. Joint planning with Shenzhen could align land use, transport, and economic strategies, while shared initiatives such as smart energy grids or green corridors would embed the NM within the regional framework.

Demographically, detailed population forecasts and talent attraction strategies like tax incentives or streamlined work permits are vital to balance housing and employment needs. These measures will enable MTL and NTNNT to support the NM's overarching goals.

4. Policy and Economic Recommendations

To realize the Northern Metropolis's ambitious vision, we must address policy and economic barriers while seizing opportunities for innovation. The following recommendations outline a path forward:

Addressing Outdated Regulations

Outdated frameworks, such as the Town Planning Ordinance and Building Regulations, risk hindering the NM's progress, particularly for modern industries like advanced manufacturing. We recommend a thorough review of these regulations to align them with the NM's objectives. Introducing "sandbox" zones pilot areas exempt from legacy rules would allow testing of innovative approaches, such as modular construction or mixed-use developments, fostering creativity and flexibility.

International Design Competitions

International design competitions offer a powerful mechanism to elevate the Northern Metropolis's global profile and enhance Hong Kong's branding as an innovative, forward-thinking city. By inviting world-class Architects and Planners to compete for key projects in MTL and NTNNT, Hong Kong can attract investment, inspire local talent, and demonstrate its commitment to cutting-edge urban design. These competitions would produce iconic, sustainable developments while positioning the NM as a benchmark for global urban planning. Beyond physical outcomes, they would boost tourism, draw international attention, and establish the NM as a hub of creativity and sustainability, enriching its identity through diverse global and local collaboration.

Enterprise / Industry-Led Approach

We concur with the Financial Secretary's direction that the Northern Metropolis should adopt an enterprise / industry-led approach. This strategy will ensure the NM's development is driven by market needs and innovation, fostering economic growth and competitiveness. Regular assessments of economic trends, including post-pandemic shifts and evolving Greater Bay Area dynamics, will be essential to maintaining this direction.



Concession Policy to Attract Enterprise and Modern Industries Investments

To enhance the NM's appeal, we recommend implementing a concession policy offering incentives such as tax breaks, land grants, or regulatory relaxations tailored to modern industries. These measures would attract innovative enterprises, boost investment, and position the NM as a global hub for cutting-edge sectors like biotech and fintech, contributing to Hong Kong's economic growth.

Cultural Heritage Study for Branding and Economic Value

We recommend a targeted cultural heritage study to identify and leverage the Northern Metropolis's key historical and cultural assets. This initiative would enhance the region's global branding as a culturally distinctive destination, driving tourism and attracting investment. By strategically integrating heritage sites such as villages and historical landmarks into the NM's development, Hong Kong can craft a unique identity that resonates with international audiences, boosting its economic appeal. Conducted efficiently by qualified consultants and aligned with global standards, this study would position the NM as a hub of cultural richness and innovation, delivering long-term economic value.

5. A Unified Approach to Governance and Collaboration

The Northern Metropolis requires a coordinated approach to governance and collaboration to succeed over its long timeline. Currently, multiple bureaus Development, Housing, Transport and Logistics operate independently, risking fragmentation. We propose establishing a high-level Northern Metropolis Development Authority, with approval authority, to centralize oversight, align efforts, and ensure a unified strategy. This body would not only provide centralized coordination but also have the power to make decisions and approvals, ensuring efficient and unified progress.

This authority could also strengthen ties with Shenzhen and other stakeholders, enhancing cross-border synergy. The Innovation, Technology and Industry Bureau (ITIB) could spearhead efforts to attract global investment and talent, positioning the NM as a leader in fields like biotech and fintech.

A balance between public oversight and private innovation is essential. The Development Authority would set the strategic vision and infrastructure, while initiatives like "sandbox" zones and design competitions would encourage private-sector creativity and adaptability. Furthermore, stakeholders shall be consulted, and their reasonable comments taken into account, ensuring that the planning process is transparent and responsive to community and industry needs.



Conclusion

The Northern Metropolis holds immense potential to redefine Hong Kong's future, with Ngau Tam Mei, Ma Tso Lung and New Territories North New Town as cornerstone contributors. By pursuing innovative strategies reimagining NTM as one of the research hubs, MTL as a university town or strategic gateway, phasing NTNNT's development thoughtfully, and fostering cross-border collaboration we can ensure these areas advance the NM's objectives. The HKIA stands ready to contribute with the Northern Metropolis Coordination Office, Shenzhen counterparts, and global stakeholders to craft a Northern Metropolis that reflects Hong Kong's unique strengths and visionary aspirations.

Yours Sincerely,

Ar. LAU Man Kwan Julia, *CHKIA, JP*
President
The Hong Kong Institute of Architects