

How 'via north point' seeks to bridge community divides

ART

The ambitious initiative seeks to improve the lives of local residents while reconnecting the area

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Most public art projects in Hong Kong are commissioned with a basic goal in mind: to decorate and beautify. "Via North Point" is more ambitious than most – it offers a glimpse of how to revamp old neighbourhoods without wholesale gentrification.

What makes this project particularly meaningful is its contrast with the redevelopment that the area saw in 2003 when the North Point Estate – a public housing estate built near the North Point Ferry Pier in 1957 – was demolished. Many of the thousands displaced from one of Hong Kong's oldest estates felt unheard and unseen, and the tension between old and new continues to this day in North Point.

The "Via North Point" project, coordinated by the Hong Kong Arts Centre, aims to improve the daily lives of all North Point residents and to reconnect the different areas in the neighbourhood with participatory art installations and designs.

Today, a glossy compound made up of the Hyatt Centric Victoria Harbour Hong Kong hotel, the Harbour North shopping centre and Victoria Harbour Residence, a luxury housing complex, stands where the old North Point Estate once stood. Although it has been several years since these buildings were completed, they still stick out.

This divide between old and new is more than visual, but manifests in the daily lives of North Point residents, according to "Via North Point" presenters.

An analysis found residents from North Point's old neighbourhoods often stayed within the perimeters of these areas while conducting their affairs.

"They would only frequent places such as Chun Yeung Street and go back home," says Hung Fei-ming, one of the organisers from the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Chun Yeung Street is home to the area's wet market, which dates back to at least the 1950s.

The luxury flats selling for jaw-dropping prices – one 286 sq ft studio is currently listed for HK\$10 million – and the shopping centre have brought little value to many long-time North Point residents.

With that in mind, "Via North Point" features an artwork category that involves artists reimagining community spaces in creative ways. Most of the artworks in this group can be used or enjoyed physically by members of the public.

What's noteworthy is that the ideas were curated from the bottom up, based on feedback collected from North Point residents regarding living conditions in the area. All six works of art attempt to solve the issues raised.

For instance, "A Cycle of Life in Chun Yeung" by architecture firm MLKK Studio is not only a sitting area and a community garden, but also a food waste upcycling spot, where food waste from the wet market can be put to better use.

Although the intention behind them is thoughtful, it is ironic that the artworks – which aim to better the lives of North Point residents – occupy the very site of the estate redevelopment.

The unique historical context of the area poses a meaningful question to "Via North Point" viewers: is the best way of modernising an old district truly to demolish and redevelop it?

This question is especially pertinent as the public art project is paid for by the Urban Renewal Fund, itself funded by the Urban Renewal Authority, a public body responsible for many redevelopment projects in Hong Kong.

Professor Ng Mee-kam, director of the urban studies programme at Chinese University, said there does not always have to be a losing party when it comes to redevelopment.

"For a redevelopment project to be a win-win situation, authorities really need to go into the project area and understand the needs of the residents. That definitely should be done before any development projects," she said.

"A fact that's always overlooked is that we should pay attention to the people on the ground, rather than just financial or commercial interests."

Another group of "Via North Point" artworks might be doing just that. The "Community art-hacking projects" involve three small local businesses and a primary school in North Point, which were paired with artists who designed special furniture that accommodates their needs.

One of the beneficiaries is Fei Tat news stand at Fort Street, which a 44-year-old woman who gave her surname as Ng has run for more than 20 years. Artists at Cou Tou Woodworking Studio designed a mobile and retractable display cabinet, which significantly upgraded the business and has helped Ng save nearly two hours of labour a day.

Other local business beneficiaries of the projects shared similar senses of contentment over how the specially designed furniture "artworks" have improved efficiencies of their decades-old businesses.

"The 'Via North Point' project will be a success if we can see local people from all walks of life enjoying the various artworks in different ways," said Connie Lam, the executive director of the Hong Kong Arts Centre.

The early signs are promising. On one recent summer afternoon, people – from toddlers to men in their 70s – could already be seen exploring and enjoying the different installations by the pier.

Throughout this month, the "Via North Point" festival will offer a series of community engagement programmes alongside the artworks on show. Details can be found on the project's website.

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An aerial view of North Point Estate, demolished in 2003.

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Two of the art installations in the vicinity of North Point Ferry Pier, as part of the "Via North Point" initiative, which is an attempt to revitalize and reconnect the district.