

Filling in the Holes

According to Hong Kong urban legend, skyscrapers designed with “holes” in them are built with feng shui in mind, allowing for “spirit dragons” to pass through. We debunk the long-standing myth

By Andrea Lo. Photography by Derry Ainsworth



Above: The Repulse Bay is a famous example of a building with a "hole" in Hong Kong. **Below:** The gap at The Arch in West Kowloon is an illusion created by a block atop two slimmer towers. **Opposite page:** A peek through one of the "holes" at Residence Bel-Air in Cyberport



Every so often in Hong Kong, you spot a high-rise with a gap in the middle of an otherwise dense structure. The reason for this unusual design is usually ascribed to feng shui philosophies, a belief that has persisted for years.

The Repulse Bay in the city's Southside is the most famous example. The luxury residential complex was built in 1986 by Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels. The company had demolished the iconic, colonial-style Repulse Bay Hotel—constructed back in 1920—to make way for a residential high-rise.

When the new property was completed, revealing the now-famous “holey” façade, it set tongues wagging.

“Legend has it that The Repulse Bay's exceptional location is enjoyed by a family of dragons that lives in the surrounding hills,” says Martyn Sawyer, Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels' group director, properties. It was believed that the development was built in such a way in order not to block the path of “the mother dragon and her children” to the ocean, he adds—obstructing their daily ritual of bathing in seawater would bring bad luck to the site.

Sadly for fans of the supernatural, this wasn't what inspired the distinctive design—even though the architects behind The Repulse Bay did, in fact, take the principles of feng shui into consideration, explains Sawyer.

Dubbed a “sky garden”, the gap takes inspiration from the development's beautiful natural surroundings. “The building was designed to reflect a lifestyle that is free, modern, casual and relaxed, where residents may enjoy plenty of greenery, sunlight, fresh air and

a gentle sea breeze,” says Sawyer. The curvilinear wall, meanwhile, corresponds to the contours of the Repulse Bay area.

But what about other buildings with similar design features elsewhere in the city? Notable “holey” developments include Larvotto in Ap Lei Chau, Residence

Bel-Air in Cyberport and The Harbourside in West Kowloon.

To understand their emergence, we have to look into the phenomenon of “wall-effect buildings”.

In the 1980s, “clusters of skyscrapers [that] stand close together, resembling a ‘wall’”—



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as they were described in an academic paper on wall-effect buildings published by scientific journal platform MDPI—began to emerge in Hong Kong.

The motivation behind this design? Developers looking to build—and sell—as many units as possible on the gross floor area they have to work with.

“One of the earliest wall-effect buildings and perhaps the most infamous is probably Provident Centre along the waterfront of North Point,” says Hoyin Lee, director of the Architectural Conservation Programmes at the University of Hong Kong. Completed in the 1980s, Provident Centre is considered “the landmark development that started the concern for massive wall-effect buildings”.

Wall-effect buildings are believed to reduce ventilation—not to mention blocking off neighbouring buildings from sunlight and views.

These developments created enough of an impact that the government released a series of guidelines in the 2000s to encourage developers to find ways to allow for ventilation in their projects. “Making a hole” in a building became a compromise, says Lee.

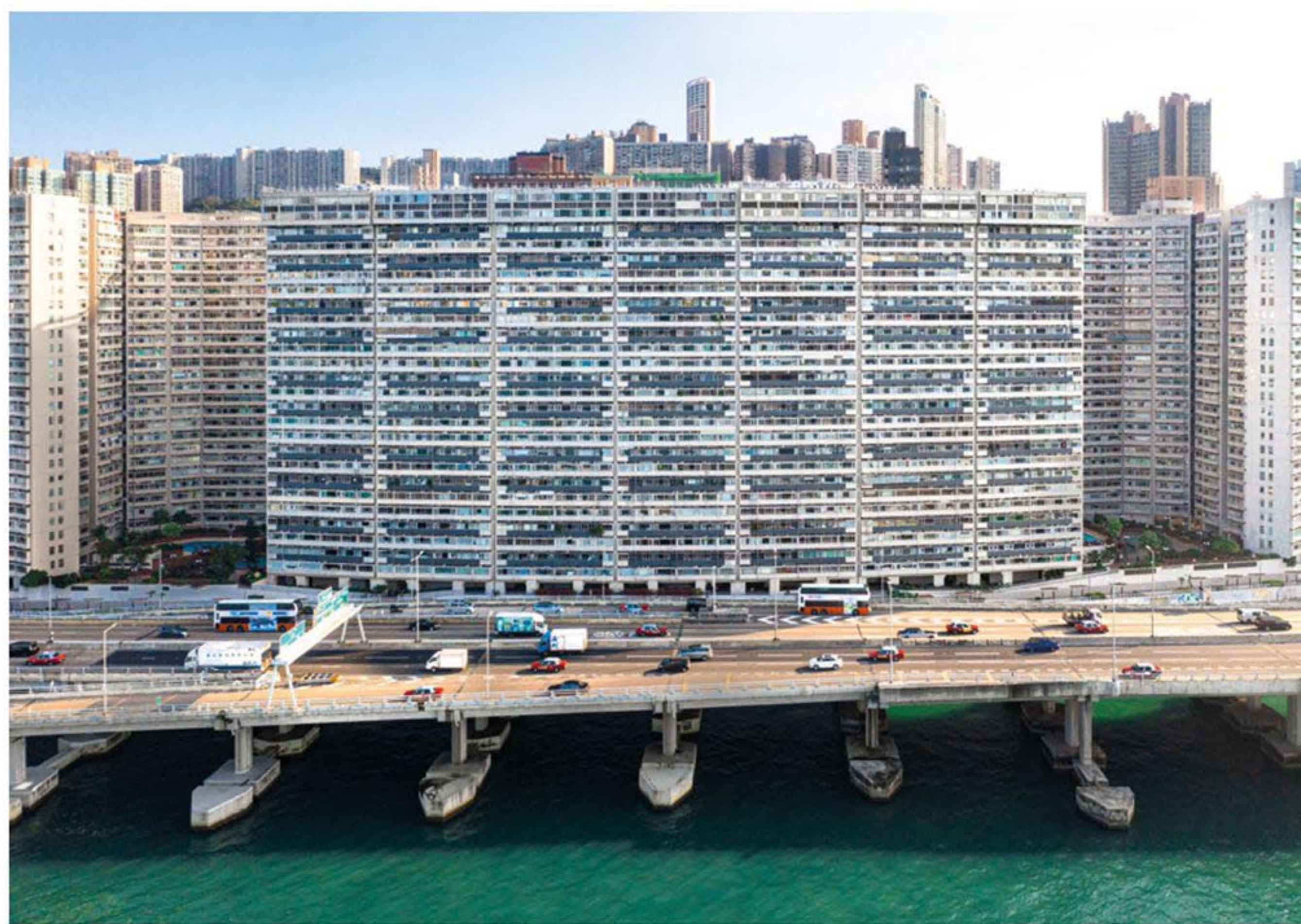
But Hongkongers are a superstitious bunch—and the “holes” only served to perpetuate dragon-related theories.

They are, however, “definitely not because of feng shui”, says Priya Subberwal, a Hong Kong-based feng shui and metaphysics consultant and founder of Disha Consulting, who is also an interior designer. And in fact, a hole design may present quite the opposite to good fortune for feng shui believers.

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important things that everybody looks for, especially when they come to do feng shui,” Subberwal explains. “You want stability in your life or some kind of grounding.” Living with a ‘hole’ in a building, especially directly below the apartment, means your home doesn’t have a ‘firm foundation’—and goes against

feng shui beliefs entirely, she adds. This desire for solidity is also why practitioners of feng shui typically prefer a square or rectangular-shaped home.

So now you know. And maybe next time you hear people talking about buildings and spirit dragons, you can tell them the whole—or hole—story.



Clockwise from left: The Arch; The Harbourside; Larvotto. **Opposite page:** Provident Centre

