

BACK TO BUSINESS

THE VIEW

RICHARD HARRIS

Cool quotient

Competition barely exists in Hong Kong and the city has lost its edge by pandering to modernism and depending too much on mainland customers

The main game is blame in Hong Kong these days. It is always someone else's fault. Our problems are much more basic than that and it has nothing to do with fault. It is because Hong Kong is just not cool anymore.

We are like a great new theme restaurant that is full for months, making pots of money, and selecting lucky diners from the lines at the door. Then one day the bookings dry up, the punters walk past, the crowds no longer gather, because a new eatery has just opened up down the road. It is more cool than we are; we've lost the mojo; and we're just not new and hip anymore.

Like heat, cool is relative. Ever since China opened up, Hong Kong was seen as cool from the mainland. It was the place to have property, to shop, to keep your money. Nowadays, mainlanders can scour the world for cool. London is a cool place for property, for the kids to go to university and to see a show in the original Soho.

Great Britain has the Queen—she's cool. Europe has culture and extraordinary cathedrals and the coolest of cool chic. How cool is the Casino Square in Monaco? Hanging out in the bistros of SoHo in New York is too cool. Hong Kong's SoHo is okay but Beijing has its own SOHO in pretty cool Sanlitun. Hong Kong's Disney is okay—but it's now much cooler to go to Shanghai's sparkling new one. Mainlanders are just as likely to holiday in Asia and Australia and keep their money in Panama as they are in Hong Kong.

Cool is not made, it just happens. K-Pop and Psy are cool, with J-pop being left behind (I'm told). Animes are still cool; Yao Ming and David Beckham are cool. John Terry (perhaps a better football player) is not cool. Hello Kitty was cool but is now less cool. Ordinary and old is not cool; quaint is



Being uncool has hit Hong Kong economically. Photo: May Tse

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cool. We have helped ourselves become uncool because in trying to pander to modernism and the mainland customer, we have lost our authenticity, our quaintness, our uniqueness, and our Hongkongness. We have trams, which are cool, but everyone has an MTR.

Being uncool has hit us economically, especially in our retail industry. It is on the cusp of a crisis, not because a few Little Hongkongers were angry with messy mainland parallel traders, but because the shoppers that we banked from the mainland for so many years are going elsewhere.

Why buy French brands in Hong Kong when you can buy them in Paris? Who's stupid now? So we see shops increasingly

boarded up as greedy landlords, long past their sell-by date in hoping for more, drive out long-term tenants.

Our uncool retail malls have become mausoleums to conspicuous consumption moving up the high-end, dead end to oblivion, and highly fragile to a downturn. They used to be the place of choice for families to mingle on a weekend (sad as that sounds) but the 'useful' shops are just about gone. We didn't lose our cool because we wanted to. It happened because we thought that the tourists would bail us out forever—but we live in a world of change. We need to find a way to recover our mojo without blaming each other because cool is high-profile and sucks in demand, revenue, jobs, and profits.

Cool is driven by creativity and creativity is driven by competition. Competition barely exists in Hong Kong whether in property, retail, supermarkets, TV, or transport. Only by breaking up the uncool cartels can we improve competition. That will mean losers at the top—so no hope then. But perhaps the cartels might give a little back to Hong Kong in scholarships, higher salaries, sponsorship or 'Moonshot research' like Google.

Creativity is not about being the best. Can a small city of seven million ever be the best? But we can be the best adapters. In 1997, the new Octopus Card was really cool; today it's old tech—because lack of competition meant lack of innovation. We could, however, take up electric buses, driverless cars, funded pension, health or education schemes, all seeded by government investment of our huge reserves.

Or, we could be creative and rename the meaningless Innovation and Technology Commission as the Ministry of Cool. After all, Bhutan manages its success by Gross Domestic Happiness. Now that's cool.

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Illustration: Henry Wong