

**Business Facilitation Advisory Committee
Town Planning Task Force**

***Guidelines for Submission of Visual Impact Assessment
to the Town Planning Board***

(Important Note : The guidelines are intended for general reference only. Any enquiry on this pamphlet should be directed to the Planning Information and Technical Administration Unit of the Planning Department, 17th Floor, North Point Government Offices, 333 Java Road, North Point, Hong Kong – Tel. No. 2231 5000. The guidelines are subject to revision without prior notice.)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 From time to time, the processing of section 16 planning applications and section 12A applications for amendments of plans under the Town Planning Ordinance may involve submission of visual impact assessment (VIA). The main aim is to assess the potential visual impact of the proposed development to the surrounding areas, and present sufficient information to facilitate the Town Planning Board (TPB) to visualise the 3-dimensional impact of the proposed development in making a decision on the application. The purpose of these Guidelines is to provide guidance on the general requirements for preparing VIA submissions in support of section 16 or section 12A applications to the TPB.
- 1.2 VIA inevitably involves subjective value judgment and these Guidelines are hence not quantitative, just as the VIA guidelines for designated projects promulgated in the Technical Memorandum on Environmental Impact Assessment Process. The Guidelines would provide a systematic process for VIA to assist the applicants and TPB in their recommendations and decisions.
- 1.3 The requirements specified in these Guidelines may not be exhaustive and are for general reference only. The level of details may be varied depending on individual cases. They are subject to revisions without prior notice.

2. Scope and Application of VIA

- 2.1 The general location, siting, nature, scale and distance to visually sensitive receivers (VSRs) of a proposed development are primary factors for consideration of the need and scope for VIA. VIA is normally not required for applications not involving increase in existing building bulk or development scale intensification or which conform to development restrictions and will unlikely cause public concern. Developments which are subject to comprehensive planning and design control as required by planning briefs or master layout plans under leases or statutory plans, e.g. in “Comprehensive Development Area” or within or near landscape sensitive areas or visually sensitive areas, should normally require VIA.
- 2.2 Landscape sensitive area is area of high landscape value and sensitive to irreversible changes which cannot be easily restored to its current landscape character and conditions. These areas warrant special landscape treatment and may include areas zoned “Agriculture”, “Coastal Protection Area”, “Conservation Area”, “Country Park”, “Green Belt”, “Open Space”, “Recreation”, “Site of Special Scientific Interest” and special zones in rural or suburban areas with intention of protection of rural character and ecological value (e.g. “Other Specified Uses” (“OU”) annotated “Tourist Corridor”, “OU(Rural Use)”, “OU(Comprehensive Development and Wetland Enhancement Area)” and “OU(Tourism and Recreation Related Uses)”) as well as the Wetland Conservation Areas and Wetland Buffer Areas within Deep Bay Area as defined in TPB Guidelines No. 12B.
- 2.3 Visually sensitive area is area where, by nature of its location, topography, character, visual appearance, available views and wider setting or other special attributes, a development to be located within or near it may be out of context and alter the visual quality and views to or from the area currently being enjoyed by the public. These areas may include prime entry points to city, waterfront, hillside, green spaces, ridgeline, spur, fish ponds, country parks, streams and rivers, popular vantage points and major view corridors, scenic land/water routes, hiking trails, rural land, urban fringe, parkland, recreational ground, resort, landmark spaces, historical and heritage sites, conservation areas etc.

2.4 For other applications not mentioned above, or in case of doubt, the applicants may approach the relevant District Planning Offices on the need for VIAs for individual applications, in consultation with the Urban Design Unit of the Planning Department.

3. Primary Consideration of VIA

A development will bring about visual impact, be it positive or negative, as long as it is visible. Visual impact is a matter of degree of the visual perception of the outlook of development to the VSR. It can be psychological and subjective to different visual receivers. The primary town planning consideration of visual impact is not so much on the architectural design, façade treatment, colour, texture, materials and finishes of a building per se, which are within the purview of Architectural Services Department, but the impact of the overall site layout, development scale, form, massing and style on the visual environment and townscape. The foremost underlying principle would be to avoid adverse impact on the visual backdrop. When avoidance is not possible, the impact should be minimized with mitigation and enhancement measures. Alternative design options to achieve the best design with the least adverse visual impact should be thoroughly explored and reported.

4. General Requirements for VIA

4.1 The following information should be included in the assessment.

Assessment Area

4.2 The extent of the area for assessment should be identified at the outset. In general, the assessment area is the area where views and viewers may be affected. It should identify the visual envelope containing the proposed development wholly or partly visible to the visual receivers. Unobstructed fields of view without the proposed development from the visual receivers should be included in the visual envelope. Likewise, areas where views to the proposed development are substantially blocked by buildings, structures, vegetation or topography in between can be excluded.

VSRs

- 4.3 Within the assessment area, VSRs who would likely be affected by the proposed development should be identified. VSRs could be from static or mobile sources. They could include residents, tourists, workers, students, open space users, drivers, travellers and walkers. In general, only those VSRs who are currently, or planned to be, located on prominent sightlines to the proposed development would need to be included in the assessment. Based on the identified VSRs, key viewpoints for assessing the visual impact of the proposed development should be selected. Selection of critical viewpoints which would represent the possible worst case scenario would be important. Public viewpoints should be given precedence over private viewpoints. The selected viewpoints should be agreed with the concerned District Planning Office in consultation with the Urban Design Unit prior to submission of the application for assessing the visual impact in case of doubt.

Visual Elements

- 4.4 Any visual attractors (e.g. natural coastline, mountain backdrop, woodland etc.) or detractors (e.g. pylons, sewage treatment, plant, refuse collection points, ventilation shaft buildings, quarry etc.) that currently exist or are being planned within the visual envelope should be identified. Visual elements may enhance, degrade, or neutralize the overall visual impact of the development being assessed.

Types of Visual Impact

- 4.5 The type of visual impact generated by a development may vary with different VSR groups. Visual impact may be due to visual incompatibility, intrusion or obstruction resultant from a development, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
- 4.6 Visual impact could be analysed according to the following types:
- (a) visual compatibility with surroundings – e.g. massing, height, scale, form, style, character and distinctiveness of buildings. A building of good design can also create visual incompatibility and disharmony with the surroundings;

- (b) visual intrusion – direct intrusion due to intrusive design of the proposed development itself or due to direct permanent loss of valued visual amenities and resources e.g. a development sited on a pleasant ridgeline or on a filled fish pond;
- (c) visual obstruction – e.g. complete or partial blocking of views and vistas, particularly towards prominent ridgelines, harbour, natural coastlines, open sea horizon or skyline, scenic backdrop, landscape features, landmarks, heritage sites and notable features to be preserved etc. A building of good design can also create visual obstruction; and
- (d) improvement of visual quality – e.g. clearance or screening of visual detractors or eyesore, special designs and enhancement measures that could mitigate or make positive contribution to the design of the development and its surrounding setting.

Visual Sensitivity

- 4.7 Different VSR groups would exhibit different visual sensitivity to a visual impact. For example, residents from home would normally be highly sensitive to developments within visible distance limiting their free views and having a substantial effect on the quality and character of views they are currently enjoying; while workers would be moderately sensitive to a visual impact when viewed from workplaces. For VSRs from mobile sources, e.g. travellers, the degree of sensitivity depends on their concentration to the activity they are undertaking and the duration of the view. Those who are taking leisure walk or leisure driving would be more sensitive to a visual impact than those travelling on express highways.
- 4.8 Factors that need to be taken into account for considering visual sensitivity would include availability and quality of existing views and alternative views, the distance of viewers to the proposed development and the number of locations of people affected, whether many, moderate or few. Visual sensitivity may be categorized as low, medium and high.

Magnitude of Change

- 4.9 The magnitude of change that the VSRs will experience should be assessed in a VIA. The magnitude of visual impact would normally relate to the scale/size of the development, the relativity of changes of appearance as a continuum before and after development, the visibleness of the development in the presence of existing and planned developments and any visual contrast created by the development within the field of views of the VSRs. The cumulative impact of all existing and planned developments in the surrounding areas of the application site known at the time of application should be taken into account. The impact of change may be positive or negative and of varying magnitude: small, intermediate or large.

Extent of Visual Impact

- 4.10 The extent or degree of visual impact is a function of the sensitivity of the affected VSRs and magnitude of change. Taking into account the visual sensitivity, magnitude of change and any design mitigation/enhancement measures, the extent of visual impact to each VSR group may be judged as negligible, slight, moderate or significant. For instance, a moderate impact can result from intermediate magnitude of change and medium sensitivity.

Evaluation of Overall Visual Impact

- 4.11 The applicant should conclude the overall visual impact of a proposed development based on evaluation of the cumulative visual impact to all the identified VSR groups as mentioned in paragraph 4.10, and whether the impact is general or localised. The conclusion should be supported by reasoned judgment and accurate illustrative materials. The overall impact may be classified according to the following thresholds:
- (a) enhanced – if the proposed development in overall term will improve the visual quality and complement the visual character of its setting for most of the VSR groups;
 - (b) partly enhanced/partly adverse – if the proposed development will exhibit enhanced visual effects to some

VSR groups and at the same time exhibit adverse visual effects to some other VSR groups;

- (c) negligible – if the proposed development will in overall term have insignificant visual effects to most of the VSR groups, or the visual effects would be screened or filtered by other distracting visual elements in the visual envelope;
- (d) slightly adverse – if the proposed development will, with or without mitigation measures, result in overall term some negative visual effects to most of the VSR groups;
- (e) moderately adverse – if the proposed development will, with or without mitigation measures, result in overall term negative visual effects to most of the key VSR groups; and
- (f) significantly adverse – if the proposed development will in overall term cause serious and detrimental visual effects to most of the key VSR groups even with mitigation measures.

Design Concept and Mitigation/Enhancement Measures

- 4.12 A description on the recommended design concept and/or mitigation/enhancement measures, if any, adopted/incorporated in the design to address the visual impact should be provided in the submission, supported by illustrative materials and an implementation programme if applicable. Relevant information such as urban design guidelines in the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines, planning studies e.g. Study on Urban Design Guidelines for Hong Kong and Study on Landscape Value Mapping of Hong Kong, and statutory/non-statutory development plans should also be taken into account.

5. Materials to be Submitted

- 5.1 The following materials should normally be included in the submission for the VIA:

- A plan showing the boundary of the assessment area, locations of the identified VSR groups and viewpoints and all the major visual elements within the visual envelope. A sample plan is shown in the **Appendix** (*to be tabled at the meeting*).

- Site photographs showing the existing conditions of the subject site.
- Site photographs showing the existing view(s) from the selected viewpoint(s) for each of the identified VSR groups without the proposed development.
- Photomontages showing the view to the proposed development from the selected viewpoint(s) for each of the identified key VSR groups. Information of the exact locations and angles from where the photos are taken, as well as the focal length used, for the photomontages, should also be provided.

5.2 The following materials may sometimes be required to support the VIA for more complex cases if considered appropriate:

- A physical model in the appropriate scale and size.
- Softcopy of photomontages, animation and/or digital model.
- Other supplementary materials such as drawings to show perspectives, cross-sections and elevations.

5.3 For submission of softcopy, both native digital model and the visualization outputs should be submitted in following formats:

- Native digital models should be in VIZ/MAX/DGN/DWG/VRML with both facades and depended files linked/attached properly; and
- Visualisation outputs should be in JPEG/BMP/TIFF formats with not less than 1024 x 1280 dpi for still images, and AVI/RM/WMV formats with not less than 720x480 dpi for animations.

5.4 For softcopy, the spatial data including viewpoints should be in HK1980 grid coordinate system and height attributes in Hong Kong Principal Datum. Description of the digital data employed including date of acquisition, original resolution and scale of site photos/aerial photos/satellite imagery/base maps, should also be provided where applicable.

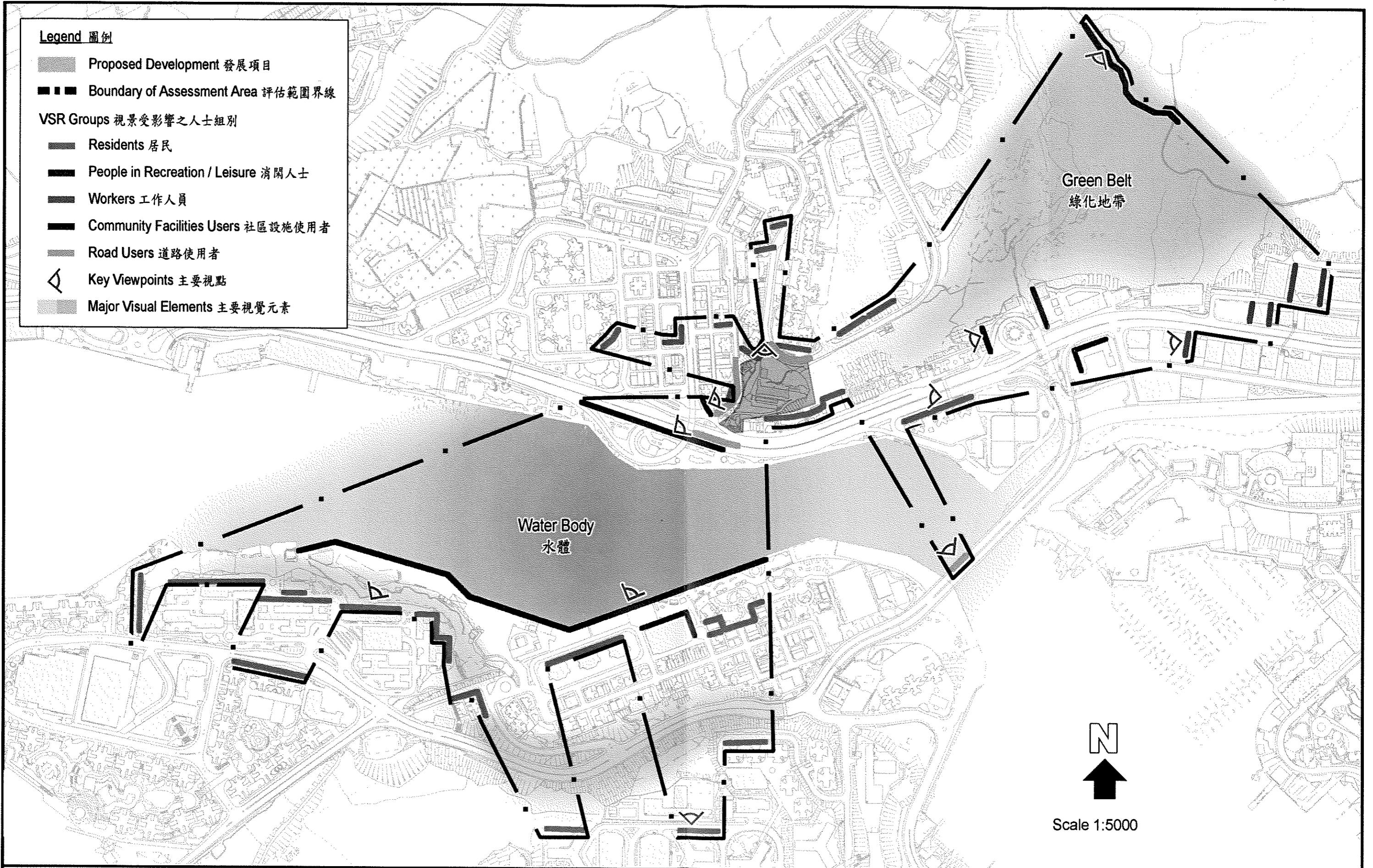
5.5 Applicants should ensure that all the materials submitted are accurately presented.

5.6 Applicants are welcome to contact the concerned District Planning Office, who will be assisted by the Urban Design Unit of the Planning Department, for advice on supportive materials to be submitted in the VIA for any specific application.

6. Enquiries and Advice

Applicants may approach the Urban Design Unit of the Planning Department direct for general and non-site specific enquiries and advice if necessary on these Guidelines.

TOWN PLANNING BOARD
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SAMPLE PLAN TO SHOW VISUAL ENVELOPE
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