

ROOFTOP REVOLUTION

An organic vegetable rooftop farm in the heart of Hong Kong's financial district is challenging perceptions about sustainable city living





Photos by Karma Cheng

"Surreal" best describes the feeling of standing outdoors 38-stories high in the middle of Hong Kong's Central business district, surrounded by lush green beds of amaranth, ceylon spinach and sweet potatoes. I am touring an organic vegetable farm of Rooftop Republic, an award-winning social enterprise aiming to challenge perceptions about sustainable city living.

The feeling doesn't last long before the pregnant grey clouds overhead decide they can hold their liquid contents no longer.

The unsheltered vegetables, which have been meticulously planted and tended to over the past few months, are taking a beating. But the farm's co-founder Michelle Hong is unconcerned.

"I'm used to the rain. It [the farm] has survived a couple of typhoon 10s before," she says, as we sit huddled together in the stairwell of the Bank of America Tower waiting for the weather to improve so we can resume the tour.

"Tall crops like sweet corn break in half during the typhoons, the strongest remain," says Hong, whose teams of volunteers harvest as much as they able in preparation for the city's annual typhoon season. Those plants that do remain occasionally fall casualty to the strong winds. "They might not fly off but some will be uprooted," she adds.



Michelle Hong

‘Space is a commodity in Hong Kong. The obvious solution is rooftops. They are already there’

Next to us is Chung Chi-hung, regional director of property management at JLL, and his colleague Felix Chan, senior property manager and district head. JLL, which manages the Bank of America Tower, partnered with Rooftop Republic in 2015 to provide Hong's team with management services and access to the building's 3,000-square-foot sized rooftop.

The farm, watered by an auto irrigation system, operates and is managed all year round by Rooftop Republic. During the off-season typhoon months (typically around August) when the climate doesn't allow for seed planting, Hong's team is still busy with soil maintenance and other preparations for the next planting season.

Proof of concept

By selecting the Bank of America Tower from its portfolio of properties for this project, JLL wanted to send a clear message to the business community that lack of space is no excuse, not even in one of the world's most densely populated cities.

JLL is the first property management company in the city to involve its buildings in such an initiative, but Chung believes "most rooftops in Hong Kong should be able to do this," it's just a matter of will.

But most of the time it isn't corporate clients who need convincing of the benefits of a rooftop farm, says Hong. Building management companies with concerns about the safety and practical aspects of such an operation (e.g. typhoon protection measures and potential soil leakage), are reluctant to implement it on top of their own buildings.

Hong says Rooftop Republic's successful partnership with JLL is "proof of concept" that the communal benefits of rooftop farming far outweigh the risks.

What are those benefits?

As is often the case in life, you gain a better understanding of something by experiencing it yourself. Urban farming is no different. Teaching people about key organic farming concepts (crop rotation, soil resting, seasonal farming) and letting them experience the same challenges organic farmers face (weeding, working under the heat of the sun), helps them appreciate their food that much more.

When the farm first opened on the Bank of America Tower in 2015, Rooftop Republic held urban farming workshops exclusively for JLL staff volunteers for the purposes of team building.

While the majority of JLL's staff were excited, Chung admits there were a few individuals who initially struggled to understand the benefits of this "totally new concept" and how they could get involved.

But the workshops were a hit, and have since been extended to JLL's friends and loved ones, who are invited to take part in regular "family farming days."

JLL volunteer Wendy Chan says that for a long time, she and her husband were considering renting a plot of land near Sai Kung to grow their own vegetables but eventually decided against it after weighing up the significant travel and time commitment required.



Fellow co-founder Pol Fàbrega

After frequent participation in JLL's program, Chan now tells me she firmly believes that "urban farming requires a lesser commitment but offers the same outcome." She has brought her own children (ages five and nine) along to JLL's family farming event three times.

"They always ask me: When will be the next workshop? What will happen to the seeds? Can we eat the vegetables?" she says.

Business meets community

Accessible by invitation-only to JLL's staff, tenants and external business organizations and schools, Rooftop Republic's farm atop the Bank of America Tower is not a commercial operation nor is it open to the public.

"The point of it is not to compete with organic farming but to educate the public on what sustainable city living looks like," says Hong, who describes the operation as more of an "awareness project."

One hundred percent of the vegetables harvested by volunteers up on the Bank of America Tower is donated to food distribution charity Feeding Hong Kong year-round. With that in mind, Hong's team tries to plant vegetables that can easily be cooked

for hot lunchbox meals, making sure they are always seasonal.

The farm yields more variety in the winter compared to the summer; kale, red cabbage, colorful carrots and swiss chard are just a few examples of what volunteers have harvested during the cooler months.



But while seasonal crop diversity is always a delight, the focus year-round is on growing good quality produce (and enough of it) for the food banks.

Aside from giving to charity, the other driver behind the urban farming movement is to turn unused and “idling” private assets into places where the community can come together. For Rooftop Republic, that place turned out to be on top of an old helipad in the heart of Central.

“Space is a commodity in Hong Kong. The obvious solution is rooftops. They are already there,” she says.

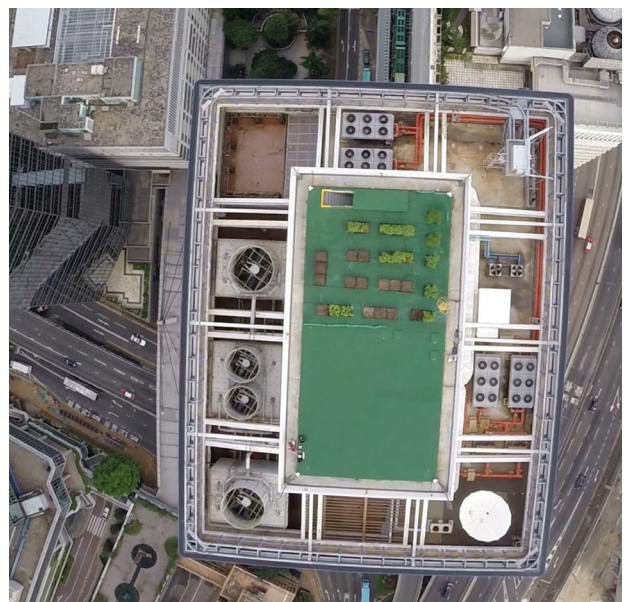
‘We aren’t targeting the percentage [of the population] who are already converted, but those who are sitting on the fence - those who are interested but could do without it’



Staff volunteer Wendy Chan with her family and colleagues at a JLL “family farming day” event



Amaranth leaves





Drone image of the farm's location atop the Bank of America Tower in Central

From Hobby to Lifestyle

Singaporean native Hong co-founded Rooftop Republic in 2015 together with husband Andrew Tsui from Hong Kong and Pol Fàbrega from Barcelona, both of whom had prior experience running the now-closed urban farming enterprise Time to Grow.

"In the eight years I've lived in Hong Kong, I could never be sure of where my food comes from. City dwellers don't get the opportunity to get to know farmers," she says. What started as a weekend hobby (urban farming) in 2012 quickly became a way of life for Hong, who subsequently left her advertising job to run Rooftop Republic full-time.

This shift in Hong's own perception towards urban farming is what she also hopes for the people of Hong Kong - for them to learn that growing your own food while living in a city can be a realistic and practical option, and "not just a novelty anymore."

Rooftop Republic's message targets city dwellers with an interest in joining the sustainable city movement but don't know how to get started.

"We aren't targeting the percentage [of the population] who are already converted, but those who are sitting on the fence - those who are interested but could do without it," she says.

Michelle's Tip: Start small, go seasonal

"All you need is a couple of pots to begin with. Do your research into what grows well in Hong Kong. I've met many avid gardeners from the U.K. who say they cannot seem to make it work here, because the varieties they are used to planting over there just don't flourish over here," she says.



Left to right: Chung Chi-hung, Michelle Hong, Felix Chan