

# Safe as Houses

**With Hong Kong's seemingly unstoppable property boom, some buyers are looking overseas for cheaper investments. But not every deal is as good as it may look. – By Sarah Graham**

For many people living and working in Hong Kong, owning a property in the city will likely only ever be a pipe dream.

In January this year, Hong Kong was named the world's least affordable city by US planning consultancy Demographia for the eighth successive year, beating other markets that have proved red hot in recent years, including Sydney and Vancouver. The survey found the median property price in Hong Kong is now 19.4 times the median income. That compares to 8.5 in London, which has also been reported to be experiencing an affordability crisis.

It's easy then to see the allure of looking overseas for cheaper real estate. And buying an "off-plan" property – those that have been designed but are yet to be built – can be an even more attractive prospect for an investor looking to shell out less for a desirable property.

If you've never purchased an off-plan property – or a buyer-led scheme as they're also known – here's how it works. Developers draw up authority-approved plans which they then advertise through real-estate agents and exhibitions. The attraction for the investor is simple: they buy the off-plan property for up to 35%

cheaper than the market price on completion. The benefit for the developer is that they raise a significant amount of capital before they even purchase the building materials.

Marcus Sohlberg of AsiaPropertyHQ explains: "Investors normally don't pay for the complete property up front, but an initial deposit of around 10%, and sometimes with continuing payment instalments. These will be put at stake in case the developer defaults or can't finalise a project. In case a developer defaults on a project, a solution can be that another developer takes on the project and finalises it."

Sounds like a win, win situation? In many cases, it is. However, a number of Asian investors have found themselves in hot water after investing in developments that are now standing half-completed, or worse still, not even started. One example is the Angelgate development in Manchester, UK. Billed as "an original and inspiring place to live" on the website of Emerging Developments Property Investment Specialists, the development would comprise 334 one-and two-bed luxury apartments, a concierge, fitness suite, landscaped gardens and car parking. Early investors were promised a 7% yield assured for two years after its scheduled completion in February 2016.

But things didn't go according to plan. A number of investors from Hong Kong contacted Greater Manchester Police in December 2016 complaining they had between them ploughed millions of pounds sterling into the scheme yet construction had stalled. It soon emerged that the construction company, PHD1 Ltd, had gone into liquidation. Developer Far East Consortium (FEC) has since acquired the Angelgate site, which borders its £200 million MeadowSide development of 756 apartments and town houses.

MeadowSide and Angelgate sit on the doorstep of Manchester's Northern Gateway,

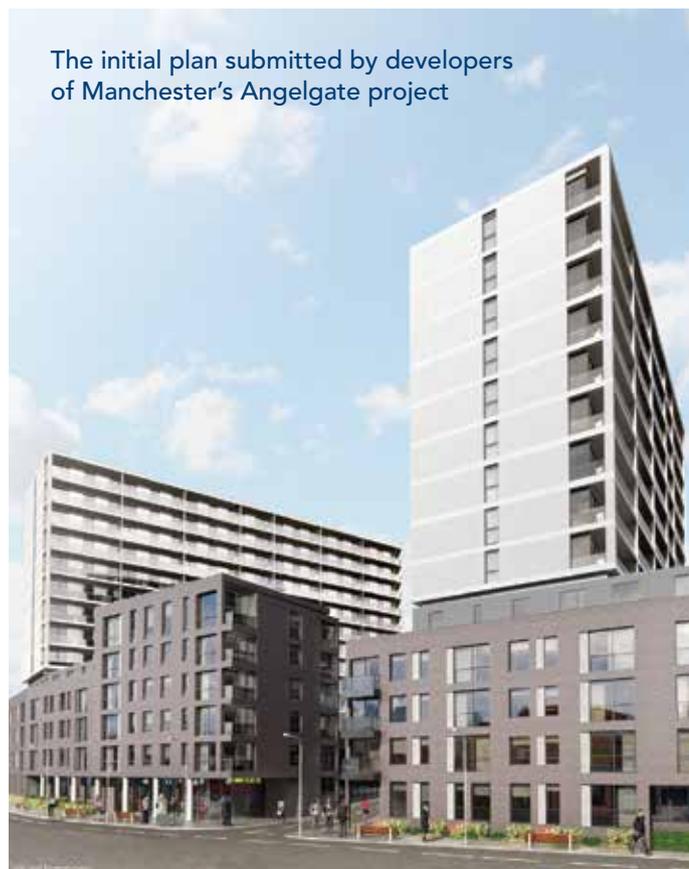
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from different police forces concerning investment fraud.”

an investment partnership between FEC and Manchester City Council to deliver 15,000 new homes across the northern side of central Manchester over the next decade.

Gavin Taylor, Regional General Manager of FEC Manchester, said: "Having acquired the Angelgate site at auction, we will prepare new plans for a residential development and hope to submit a revised planning application to Manchester City Council before the end of 2018."

Great Manchester Police has since passed its investment fraud investigation to Titan, the North West Regional Organised Crime Unit. A spokesperson said: "There have been a number of referrals



**Tips from Knight Frank for purchasing off-plan property:**

- Be cautious on the selection of property consultancy
- Understand the tenure of the property
- Understand the economic and social situation of the country
- Familiarise yourself with the property information, market conditions and the appreciation potential of the property
- Arrange for property and site viewing
- Weigh in on the options for payment
- Stay informed on taxes and property management
- Calculate the purchasing power
- Be aware of currency exchange rate fluctuations
- Look into bank mortgage and monthly payment methods

purchase from reputable agencies that work for established developers.”

Talk to many people in the real estate business about buying off-plan, and the message is clear: do your homework before you invest.

Mei Han Wong, Executive Director - Head of International Project Marketing at Knight Frank says: “As property prices in Hong Kong continue to soar, many investors are keen to diversify their investment portfolio by investing overseas, in particular new-build properties which are increasing in popularity to international investors due to a competitive off-plan price and minimal work prospective buyers need to do. However, as with any forms of investing, there are areas which buyers have to fully understand before putting the money into property overseas.”

Christopher Dillon author of the Landed series of real estate books, agrees investors must do their own due diligence.

While in some countries there are regulations governing the sale of such properties, in others there is no redress or financial life raft.

In Hong Kong, however, changes are afoot in terms of regulating licensed real estate agents selling property overseas following the introduction in April of new guidelines issued by the Estate Agents Authority of Hong Kong. Any licensed agents found in breach of the regulations may be subject to disciplinary action by the authority.

Harrison Chapman, Senior Operations Manager at global real estate firm Colliers International, welcomes the new regulations. “These guidelines will be effective in governing the sale of overseas property. They enforce that the project has received development consent from the local governing body, they ensure that the agency in Hong Kong has implemented due diligence reports and they also enforce that the Hong Kong agency research the validity of buying restrictions for the given project,” he said. “In saying this, I must stress that investors do their own due diligence and only

“Find out who the builder is. Have they completed projects in this city before? Were the projects delivered on time and on budget? Is the developer in financial difficulty or being sued by unhappy customers?” he says.

“I find it astonishing that anyone would buy sight unseen in a city they’ve never visited. If I was spending US\$500,000 on a home, I’d get on a plane



and walk the neighbourhood to see what's nearby – like brownfield sites or social housing – and see if the area is being gentrified or in decline. I'd check prices for comparable homes and visit projects that the developer completed five or 10 years ago, to see how well they've aged."

While that's clearly sound advice, it may not always be possible for a potential buyer to scope out a location, or check whether a developer has the correct permits to begin building. Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL), a leading professional services firm specialising in real estate and investment management, is one such licensed agent that does most of the due diligence footwork for clients.

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*We also ensure we have teams on the ground in those cities who can ensure what we're taking on will be a viable project.*

*– Anne-Marie Sage, Head of International Residential Property Services, Asia Pacific at JLL*

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Anne-Marie Sage, JLL's Head of International Residential Property Services, Asia Pacific, says the agency, which has a global workforce of 83,500 operating in over 80 countries, prides itself on selecting the most reputable developers for its clients.

"At JLL we do our due diligence with regards to the developers before we take on the project. We also ensure we have teams on the ground in those cities who can ensure what we're taking on will be a viable project," she said.

As long as there's no end in sight to Hong Kong's property price boom, some investors will naturally seek cheaper, more spacious real estate overseas. But the message is clear. If you want more bang for your buck, be prepared to do your homework. **B**

## PHUKET PROPERTY FOR SALE

This 5-bedroom, 5-bathroom pool villa is situated in one of the most family-friendly parts of the island and enjoys a quiet green location just a few minutes drive to some of Phuket's best beaches. You'll enjoy great access to fabulous local restaurants and beach clubs, with a wide variety of international shopping options just 10 minutes to the north or south.

Unlike many homes in Phuket, this one is really meant to be enjoyed by everyone and was planned with easy comfort in mind.

It has a spacious living room with plush red living room suite that seats 6 comfortably and is surrounded by green views through the copious windows. Floors are polished hardwood, giving a warmth to the entire environment. The full Western kitchen is fully-fitted and has a cooktop, hood, oven, microwave, and family-sized fridge. The ground floor also holds a dedicated laundry room. The bedrooms are spacious, with lovely hardwood floors and balcony access. Four of the bedrooms are on the middle level, and the "penthouse suite" on the topmost level is a real bonus. It features gorgeous views from the "sunrise" and "sunset" balconies, giving the master of the house something truly special.

Three of the bedrooms have ensuite bathrooms and feature tasteful modern fixtures. There are 5 bathrooms in total.

There is a lovely garden and terrace with 9m swimming pool. The pool has 2 separate step-downs as well as a jacuzzi bench, making it the perfect place to spend a lazy afternoon. The pool terrace features mature plantings along the privacy wall, and a generous sala.

Just beside, you'll find the outdoor games room, which features a pool table, foosball table, and table tennis. The large lawn makes it perfect for families.

Private car port

The land is split into 2 separate titles, 1 Chanote and 1 Nor Sor 3 Gor.

**HK\$6,500,000**



For more details and to arrange a viewing, please contact:  
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