

HONG KONG STYLE URBAN CONSERVATION

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Abstract. This paper examines the evolution of the field of conservation in the city of Hong Kong. In particular, highlighting the ways in which conservation and urban development can be complementary forces instead of in opposition. The city of Hong Kong will be briefly introduced, along with the characteristics that define and influence its conservation, before moving on to the catalyst for Hong Kong's conservation paradigm shift. The paper will proceed to highlight the various conservation initiatives embarked upon by the Hong Kong SAR's Development Bureau, concluding with a discussion of the bureau's accomplishments and challenges for the future.

Introduction: Hong Kong

Usually, when people think of Hong Kong, the first image that comes to mind is the "harbourscape" of the north shore of Hong Kong Island (*Figure 1*). This is a landscape of high-rise buildings pressed together and protected at the back by lush hills, terminating in what is called "The Peak."

Yet, Hong Kong is more than its harbour and more than a sea of high rises. Hong Kong's main island, what is properly called Hong Kong Island, is one of some 200 islands and one of three distinct parts of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Hong Kong Island was leased to the British as a treaty port in 1841. From the beginning, the City of Victoria (the settlement area along the north shore



Figure 1. Hong Kong's "harbourscape." (Source: Howard Cummer)

of the island) was seen as the commercial heart of the colony. To today, this has not changed. In 1860, the British leased more land from China – the area known as Kowloon. This was a finger of land reaching out to Hong Kong Island that provided an expanse of buildable land for an expanding entrepôt. Yet, by the end of the 19th century, more land was needed; so in 1898, the appropriately named “New Territories” were leased from China for 99 years.

Land/Development Dilemma

Today, enough land remains for new development, but it is not where developers necessarily want it. Understandably, with a limited supply of desirable land, the inevitable outcome is increased land values in sought-after areas. A further complication is that sales of new land (actually leases) are controlled by the government and are a prime generator of government revenue, while many developed sites are in private hands. Given this scenario, especially through the 1970s, 1980s and continuing through most of the 1990s, conservation was of less priority and many of Hong Kong’s historic landmarks were demolished. Through the early and mid-2000s, the traditional practice of eradicating entire blocks of existing neighbourhoods was still common.

Conservation: Pre-2006

Starting in the latter part of the 1990s, and especially after the Handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, local people not only began to see themselves as part of China, but began to articulate their differences as well – their uniqueness as “Hong Kongers.” This quest for a distinct identity included a growing appreciation of local heritage resources and especially places with social value, in particular places of personal attachment.

Yet, understandably, the government, during the early post-Handover period, had other priorities. In the 1999 policy address by the first Chief Executive, Mr. Tung Chee Hwa, conservation of heritage resources was only briefly mentioned. And when it was mentioned, it was in terms of monuments (the unique, the historic) and archaeological sites:

“133. It is important to rehabilitate and preserve *unique buildings* as this not only accords with our objective of sustainable development but also facilitates the retention of the inherent characteristics of different districts, and helps promote tourism. The concept of preserving our heritage should be incorporated into all projects for redeveloping old areas. The government will review the existing heritage policy and related legislation for better protection of

historic buildings and archaeological sites.” (Authors’ Italics)

(Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa, 1999)

More significantly, during this period of the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was little horizontal integration of conservation initiatives within the government. An organizational chart of the period shows that at least 15 departments across five bureaux were charged with specific tasks related to the conservation of heritage resources. Coordination and especially “ownership” of a project were frequently problematic.

2006: The Star Ferry Pier Incident

Prior to 2006, there was no centralized avenue for addressing the public’s rising concern over Hong Kong’s development at the expense of conservation. However, when the government decided to tear down two iconic, yet ordinary, ferry piers from the 1950s (the Central Star Ferry Pier and the adjacent Queen’s Pier), the public began to vehemently voice their disapproval and staged one of the largest heritage protests in Hong Kong’s history (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2. The Central Star Ferry Pier (top) and the public protest (bottom) (Source: Howard Cumber and www.conservancy.org.hk)



These two piers were slated for demolition in order to allow the government to reclaim a portion of the harbour to put in a trunk road to ease traffic congestion. It was for numerous reasons that the public responded so strongly to this proposed demolition, however, it largely came down to their attachment to the place and their view of it as a cultural landmark with linkages to Hong Kong's colonial past. Unfortunately, despite the public outcry, the Star Ferry pier was still demolished in 2006 and the Queen's Pier dismantled in 2007. Yet, despite these losses, the stage was set for conservation to become a more front and central issue, with greater emphasis on finding a balance between conservation and development.

2007: The Ground-breaking Policy Address

The loss of these two places, beloved by the greater Hong Kong community, propelled the government to take action. This action introduced a clearly articulated government policy that recognized and aimed to conserve a wide range of heritage resources, especially those directly related to the day-to-day lives of Hong Kong people. The 2007 policy address by the second Chief Executive, Mr. Donald Tsang, set the

framework for action:

"49. Cultural life is a key component of a quality city life. A progressive city treasures its own culture and history along with a living experience unique to the city. In recent years, Hong Kong people have expressed our passion for our culture and lifestyle. This is something we should cherish. In the next five years, I will press ahead with our work on heritage conservation." (Authors' Italics)

(Chief Executive Donald Tsang, 2007)

The Next five Years: Enter the Development Bureau

The responsibility for implementing the Chief Executive's policies for **development-related heritage conservation** was assigned to a new bureau: the Development Bureau, headed by the Secretary for Development (*Figure 3*), who sits directly under the Financial Secretary, who, in turn, sits directly under the Chief Executive. Almost all pre-existing departments with responsibilities related to the conservation of heritage resources were gathered together (development-related or not) under the newly-formed Development Bureau.



Figure 3. Secretary for Development, Mrs. Carrie Lam. (Source: archive.news.gov.hk)

In 2008, within the Development Bureau, the Commissioner for Heritage's Office (CHO) was set up to support bureau programmes related to heritage conservation. The specific tasks of this office are "to provide dedicated support to [the] Secretary for Development in implementing the policy on heritage conservation and keeping it under constant review, taking forward a series of new initiatives as announced in the Chief Executive's Policy Address..., as well as serving as a focal point of contact, both locally and overseas."

CHO: Development-related Conservation Initiatives

A general policy statement further defines the role of CHO:

“To protect, conserve and revitalize as appropriate historical and heritage sites and buildings through relevant and sustainable approaches for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.”
(Authors’ Italics)

(Commissioner for Heritage’s Office, 2008)

Key words in this statement reveal the direction of the Development Bureau: conservation as it relates to important aspects of development rather than conservation as a goal in and of itself. Conservation is seen as a means to revitalize not only individual heritage buildings, but as a means to revitalize older buildings and sites – for the direct benefit of the Hong Kong community.

From this clear articulation of a policy direction, a number of initiatives have unfolded throughout the past four years. The nature of the initiatives, as well as their staging, reveals the increasing recognition of how conservation can not only help development, but how conservation can help drive development.

Setting the Stage, Providing the Stage: Public Education, Secondary Education

The first initiative under the new Development Bureau was launched in 2008 and focused on helping the general public better understand heritage conservation. A public awareness campaign was undertaken that included a broad palette of activities ranging from roving exhibitions to lectures (Figure 4).

Some two years later, the bureau was in the position to work with the Hong Kong Institute of Education in creating an in-depth teaching kit for Hong Kong’s newly reformed curriculum (the “New Curriculum”) for upper level (secondary school) students. Not surprisingly, the multi-unit kit includes in-depth material

on revitalization and its relevance for Hong Kong people.

Heritage Impact Assessments (HIAs)

At the same time that this public education initiative was taking place, the Development Bureau had to address very practical issues. In particular, how to conserve the multiple values of heritage resources, especially buildings, while allowing needed change, in the context of both adaptive reuse and potential redevelopment. Current mechanisms in place, such as the Environmental Impact Assessment, failed to cover and protect most heritage buildings and sites. Hence, beginning in 2008, all capital works involving Declared Monuments, Graded Buildings and Sites, recorded sites of archaeological interest and government historic sites (as identified by the Antiquities and Monuments Office) were required to have an HIA at the “Project Inception Stage.”

Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme

Not content to “simply” require an HIA for all properties of heritage value undergoing capital works, the Development Bureau chose to also target government properties of heritage value that were no longer needed by the government, but could be put to new uses by qualified non-profits. These buildings and sites are intended to provide services or business in the form of social enterprise with an emphasis on community benefit. Now in its third batch, the “Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme” has so far seen nine buildings and sites awarded and undergoing careful adaptive reuse. More importantly, in terms of development objectives, these properties have been (or will be) important trigger points for carefully-paced development at the district level (Figure 5).

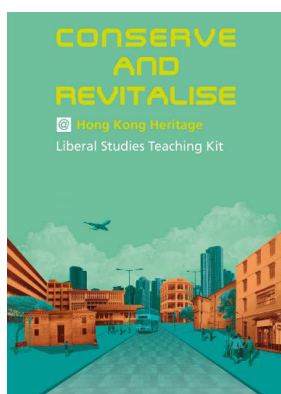


Figure 4. Public Awareness Campaign on Heritage Conservation (top) and Liberal Studies Teaching Kit on Heritage Conservation (bottom). (Source: www.heritage.gov.hk)



Figure 5. The former North Kowloon Magistracy was revitalized as an art college. In 2011, the project received a UNESCO Asia-Pacific Award for Culture Heritage Conservation in recognition of its successful adaptive reuse for the greater Hong Kong community. (Source: www.editoratlarge.com)

Economic Incentives for Preservation of Privately-owned Historic Buildings

Perhaps the most challenging of the initiatives is the “Economic Incentives for Preservation of Privately-owned Historic Buildings.” This is the means for controlling, but supporting development through the protection of privately-owned historic buildings, using land exchanges and the transferring of development rights. However, the process and negotiations

for doing so are protracted and difficult; particularly in a place like Hong Kong where land in sought-after areas is costly and discussions between government and private developers are perceived with suspicion. One such success is the preservation of King Yin Lei (Figure 6), achieved through a land swap where the site offered for exchange was made available through rezoning, following a public town planning process. Clearly, such economic incentives can only be used sparingly – and strategically.



Figure 6. King Yin Lei. (Source: Development Bureau, HKSAR Government)

Financial Assistance for Maintenance Scheme

Less challenging and more feasible, is the initiative “Financial Assistance for Maintenance Scheme” (Figure 7). This scheme is intended to help reduce the deterioration of privately-owned graded historic buildings due to lack of maintenance by providing financial assistance in the form of grants to their owners. In exchange for this assistance, a degree of public access is requested, in order to give back to the community. As with the “Economic Incentives for Preservation of Privately-owned Historic Buildings,” this programme is an effective means of controlling and supporting development in what can be called “sensitive” historic areas.



Figure 7. Lo Pan Temple, which has benefitted from the “Financial Assistance for Maintenance Scheme” for its repair work. (Source: www.heritage.gov.hk)

Closing Act: Special Initiatives (from Buildings and Sites to Clusters)

The broad recognition of heritage as a value-added element has prompted the development of a conservation initiative that extends beyond individually conserved government buildings and sites to an area approach. This is a challenging initiative for property owners, given the potential of high returns from redevelopment and the sanctity of private property rights. However, the Secretary for Development has introduced the concept of “Intertwining Conservation Clusters” (Mrs. Carrie Lam, personal interview with the authors, June 14, 2011), which involves the strategy of achieving a de facto conservation area by means of clusters of government-initiated conserved buildings in close proximity to one another and with the goal of influencing private property owners to

conserve heritage buildings of community relevance. The “Conserving Central” initiative, announced in 2009, comprises eight sites, three of which are large government-owned heritage building clusters, being adapted for cultural and/or commercial uses (Figure 8). In this context, conservation is seen as a critical component within a larger planning/development context. The objective, as noted above, is to entice developers and private property owners to use adaptive reuse as a form of development in between conserved clusters. To date, there have been encouraging signs as small private developers have begun adapting buildings, especially from the 1950s and 1960s, for new and more remunerative uses, such as serviced apartments and boutique hotels.

Whether as an expansive site (such as the Central Police Station Compound, *Figure 9*) or as a series of clusters distributed within a district (“Conserving Central”), such heritage resources are touchstones for future development and evocative anchors in a dynamic and changing urban environment.*



Figure 8. The heritage building clusters in “Conserving Central.” (Source: www.heritage.gov.hk)

* Although, the Commissioner for Heritage’s Office (CHO) has been the prime focus of this paper, within the Development Bureau there is also the Urban Renewal Authority (URA). As of February 2011, a new Urban Renewal Strategy was released, which has distinct conservation related objectives in tandem with its urban development emphasis. This helps to further highlight the balance that can be achieved between conservation and development and the specific role conservation can play as one of the “drivers” of development. For more information on the URA and this Urban Renewal Strategy, please refer to the following: <http://www.ursreview.gov.hk/eng/about.html>.



Figure 9. Central Police Station Compound, one of the heritage building clusters in “Conserving Central.”
(Source: Herzog & de Meuron)

Development Bureau: Accomplishments and Continuing Challenges

As explained by the Secretary for Development, there are three key conservation challenges facing Hong Kong. The first is in the context of private property rights and the need for private owners to better understand and appreciate the importance of conservation for adding value to a property. In other words, that conservation adds value and is a benefit, not a hindrance. Secondly, is helping an even broader cross-section of the community appreciate the importance and relevancy of conservation. One possible solution that has been raised so far is to establish a heritage trust, similar to the UK National Trust, although this possibility remains under study. And thirdly, is the ever present need for more trained

professionals. In particular, the need for contractors and other workers with an understanding of conservation principles and the patience to apply them. Although these challenges remain, the results to date suggest that heritage can be and should be a driver for both the development of properties and of local cultural identity. From the newfound perspective of the Development Bureau, conservation can help control the direction of development through strategic initiatives and it can help control the pace of development through effective controls. The Development Bureau, through its actions, has demonstrated its capacity to work within a deep-seated development framework, while championing the conservation of heritage places that resonate deeply within the hearts and minds of Hong Kong people.

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