

Heritage Appraisal of the Béthanie
139 Pok Fu Lam Road, Hong Kong

The Béthanie (伯大尼修院) was completed in 1875 by the Société des Missions Étrangères (法國外方傳道會) (the Society), which is also known as the Missions Étrangères de Paris (巴黎外方傳教會), as their first sanatorium in the East Asia for sick missionaries. Since its opening in 1875, the Béthanie received some 6 000 missionaries working in the East Asia and served as an important base of the French Catholic missionary work in the East Asia until its closure in 1974.

*Historical
Interest*

The idea of building a sanatorium somewhere in the East Asia had been raised by the French priests since 1856. However, the idea was not turned into reality until the 1870s by Father Pierre-Marie Osouf (奧塞神父) (1829-1906), who was the Procurator¹ (司帳) of Hong Kong (1862-1875) responsible for the administration of the Society in China.

Following with the success of the French missionary work in the East Asia in the early 1870s², the time of building a sanatorium for use by members of the Society became mature. Father Osouf recommended in his letter to the Directors of the Society in Paris in January 1873 that Hong Kong was a proper place for building a sanatorium in the East Asia after having compared Hong Kong with other potential places like Saigon, Malaya or Yokohama in terms of climate, construction and operation costs, as well as medical knowledge and skills for handling common illnesses in tropical countries. The Pokfulam area, which is located in the southern part of the Hong Kong Island, was also regarded as an ideal place for the proposed sanatorium in consideration of its good geographical

¹ “Procurator” literally means “provider”. The main duty of Father Osouf was to provide for the practical needs of front-line missionary workers in China and served as a crucial communication link between the local missions and the directors of the Paris Seminary where all the French missionaries spent some time on training before joining their Eastern missions. At that time, the Procure (司帳處) of Hong Kong was located in Staunton Street, Central.

² In the early 1870s, the Society had no fewer than 7 bishops and 200 priests working in China. In 1873, the year when the construction of the Béthanie commenced, the French priests had already established parishes in Manchuria and the southern provinces of China such as Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet. Similar missionary work was being carried out in most of the East Asia including Japan, Korea, India, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, Burma, and etc.

location³.

The Directors of the Society in Paris were delighted at Father Osouf's Pokfulam sanatorium proposal and gave him *carte blanche* to go ahead with the proposal in April of the same year. Two months later, Father Osouf purchased the Pokfulam site, which was of 1,057,155 square feet (approximately 24 acres) for \$3,000 for the erection of the House of Béthanie⁴.

According to the design drawing of Father Osouf and under the supervision of Father Charles Edmond Patriat (白德禮神父) (1828 - 1887), who was later appointed as the first Superior of Béthanie⁵, the construction commenced in late 1873 and was completed in 1875.

On the opposite side of the Béthanie on Pok Fu Lam Road, there was another building called the House of Nazareth (the Nazareth) (納匝肋修院)⁶, which was originally known as “Douglas Castle” (杜格拉斯堡). The Nazareth was a retreat to restore the spiritual health of missionaries who needed to rekindle the flame of their missionary zeal, while the Béthanie was a sanatorium to restore sick or tired missionaries to physical health. The Béthanie and the Nazareth were regarded as the twin foundation of the Society in the

³ The site was high up in the hills and had excellent exposure to the sea breeze (fresh air). The area was also safe and only an hour by palanquin from the stores and doctors of the Victoria City.

⁴ The sanatorium was called “Béthanie” in French (or “Bethany” in English) in memory of the village in the Gospel which Jesus made a point of revisiting just before his Passion. This was where Jesus's three special friends used to live, i.e. Lazarus whom Jesus miraculously brought back to life after he had been dead for a few days, and his two sisters, Martha and Mary. Over the front door lintel of the sanatorium, a Latin inscription was carved in the granite stone. It is a quotation from St. John's Gospel and reads: “*Domine, ecce, quem amas infirmatur* (English: Lord, the one whom you love is sick)”. The quotation was a message sent by Martha to Jesus, who was away from the Béthanie at the time, about Lazarus. As the motto for the sanatorium, Martha's words were regarded as an encouragement for the ailing missionaries to remain strong in their faith in Christ.

⁵ Father Patriat was Superior of Béthanie from 1875 to 1887. In view of his contribution to the House of Béthanie, the French priests expressed their gratitude to him after his death in 1887 in France by installing a stone memorial in the west wall of the chapel in the Béthanie. The memorial is still visible today.

⁶ The Nazareth was originally accommodated in a house named “Santa Sancha” (聖珊澤宮) in Macau from 1884, moved to Pokfulam, Hong Kong in 1885 and then relocated to Richmond Terrace (列治文台) six years later. In 1894, the Society purchased the Douglas Castle as the permanent home for the Nazareth. Douglas Castle was rebuilt and additions were made in the form of new accommodation, a chapel and the Nazareth Printing Press (納匝肋印書館), which turned out to be an active operation publishing religious items in 28 languages. The Nazareth in Pokfulam, Hong Kong has been used as the University Hall, which is a student residence of the University of Hong Kong, since 1956 and was declared as a monument in 1995.

East Asia to take care of the health of souls and bodies of the French missionaries.

It is also interesting to note that the floral emblem of Hong Kong, the *Bauhinia blakeana*⁷, was firstly discovered near Mount Davis by the French priests who followed the 18th century tradition of collecting unusual plants and trees found in their mission territories and growing them in their gardens. The priests took cuttings of that rare specimen and planted the cuttings in the garden of the Béthanie. Subsequently, further cuttings were given to the Hong Kong Botanic Gardens and to the Canton Catholic Cathedral. Nowadays, the Bauhinia trees grow everywhere in the region and the beautiful purple flower has become the emblem of the city of Hong Kong since 1965.

During the Japanese Occupation (1941-1945), both the Béthanie and the Nazareth were requisitioned by the Japanese. After the war, the Béthanie, similar to many other surviving European buildings in Hong Kong, was left an empty shell without furniture. Even the bathtubs were removed, and the electric system was ripped for its copper. The garden of the Béthanie was also seriously damaged and most of the trees were gone. The sanatorium was reopened in February 1949 after refurbishment. Following the close of China and other countries in Asia to Catholic missions in the 1950s, many missionaries were driven away and lodged in the Béthanie⁸.

With the rapid grow of population in Hong Kong in the 1950s⁹, the Society turned their attention from servicing the missionary work in the neighbouring countries to local pastoral work in Hong Kong. Despite the downsize of the Procure of Hong Kong¹⁰ and the closure of the Nazareth in 1954, many priests still

⁷ In the early 20th century, the Superintendent of the Afforestation Department, Stephen T. Dunn, named the tree after the then Governor, Sir Henry Blake (1898 – 1903), hence *Bauhinia blakeana*.

⁸ In 1951 alone, the Béthanie received the visits of 70 missionaries among which 63 came from China.

⁹ In the ten years from 1945 to 1955, the Hong Kong population grew from 600 000 to 2.5 million. The number of Catholics in Hong Kong also jumped from 20 000 in 1941 to 200 000 in 1961.

¹⁰ In 1954, the French priests moved out of their grand building in Battery Path (i.e. the Former French Mission Building, which currently housed the Hong Kong Final Court of Appeal) to a more modest Procure in May Road.

living in Hong Kong and were reassigned to parish work. The Béthanie continued to serve as the community centre for the Society. However, local pastoral work of the Society now took pride of place whilst the Béthanie and even the Procure seemed no longer performing the core role in the overall missionary effort in the East Asia.

The Béthanie was finally closed in 1974. The premises was sold to Hongkong Land and was later taken over by the Government. It was then leased to the University of Hong Kong from 1978 to 1997. In 2002, the Government decided to restore and lease the Béthanie together with the adjacent Old Dairy Farm Cowshed Building to the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (“HKAPA”) for conversion into their second campus for the School of Film and Television. The HKAPA held the ground breaking ceremony at the Béthanie on 12 December 2003 and completed the conversion works in 2006.

The Béthanie consists of three parts: the chapel, the sanatorium and the service wing. The predominant architectural style is Neo-Gothic featuring pointed lancet windows, pointed arched colonnades to verandahs, flying buttresses, pinnacles, crockets and trefoil ornamentation to parapets.

*Architectural
Merit*

According to the design of Father Osouf in 1873, the Béthanie was originally a two-storey building with a basement, a chapel and an H-shape service wing. The most impressive part of the building is its beautiful Neo-Gothic chapel with a semi-circular apse to house the high altar at the end of the nave. Extending around the apse is an aisle or passageway sometimes called an ambulatory with a doorway leading onto the terrace outside. The nave is flanked on either side by nave arcades and side aisles. Oratories and a gallery are provided at first floor level. Original floor tiles can still be found.

The building’s architecture is of Neo-Gothic style and the plan is in symmetrical form with verandahs on all four sides. Rubble and ashlar plinth wall at the basement level, ornamental balustrade and arched colonnades to verandahs form the elevations of

the building. There are other special features, for example, an arched portico with an in-situ table and built-in corner shelves on the roof patio, and a stone grotto and a well were set into the semi-circular bull-nose wall at the north end of the building. The materials used in construction were bricks for the upper walls and columns, with dressed masonry for the lower walls.

The Béthanie remains fairly authentic despite the additions and alterations it has undergone in the past 140 years. The first enlargement of the Béthanie was undertaken in 1896 to cope with the growing number of sick missionaries requesting permission to stay in the Béthanie¹¹. The works were completed in the following year. New bedrooms were created in the attic of the sanatorium. A new refectory building was built to the north-east of the sanatorium (parallel to the east of the chapel). Other addition and alteration works were carried out in the sanatorium throughout the 20th century. For example, the impressive Gothic porch with Art Deco features was added in front of the main entrance in the 1920s. An extension on the east side is of Bauhaus style with typical 1930s architectural features. In 1961, an extra floor was added to its structure capped with a flat roof.

Authenticity

From 2003 to 2006, the Béthanie underwent alteration and addition works during the change-of-use process to enable its present use as the second campus of the HKAPA. However, the heritage significance of the Béthanie has not been diminished through the efforts of the devoted project team and the sensitive and sympathetic design of the conversion project. The additional flat roof of 1961 has been removed to reveal the original pitched roof design, which was rebuilt with double-glazed panels of glass and is currently reused as a multi-purpose function room (presently known as Sir Y K Pao Studio 包玉剛禮堂). Some heritage features have been kept and restored (such as fireplaces and logos associated with the Missions Étrangères) and some have been salvaged for reuse and display in the BNP (Banque Nationale de Paris) Paribas Museum of Béthanie (法國巴黎銀行伯大尼博物館) at the basement of the building.

¹¹ In the earlier years of the Béthanie, there were 15 to 20 annual visitors. In the later period between 1887 and 1890, the figure increased to an average of 42, and to well over 50 in the following years. The Béthanie was not large enough to accommodate the increasing need.

In the chapel, all the original nineteen stained glass windows and twelve apostle statues mounted on corbels surround the altar had disappeared after the sale of the Béthanie in 1975. With the efforts of the project team, nine original stained glass windows were successfully traced after the three-year search and finally reinstated back to the chapel. The remaining ones were reproduced in the Philippines with reference to the old photos of the chapel. Besides, four of the twelve apostle statues (i.e. St. Matthew, St. Thomas, St. Paul and St. Peter) were found and replicated by using a silicone moulding technique. The replicated statues were reinstated at the original place in the chapel. Other original features of the chapel were also found by the project team like the altar and the massive chapel doors. The restoration and conversion project of the Béthanie carried out by the HKAPA was awarded an Honourable Mention at the 2008 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Cultural Heritage Awards.

The Béthanie is one of three surviving pre-war buildings of the Society in Hong Kong. The other two pre-war historic buildings in connection with the Society have been declared as monuments, namely the Former French Mission Building in Battery Path, Central and the Nazareth (now housed the University Hall).

Rarity

In nearly one hundred years from 1875 to 1974, the Béthanie received and provided treatment for some 6 000 missionaries from all parts of Asia. Most of those who arrived sick or exhausted returned to their missions with their health restored and their energies refreshed¹². The Béthanie was not only the first sanatorium of the Society in the East Asia taking care of the physical health of their members, but, together with the Procure of Hong Kong and the Nazareth, formed an important base of the Society for their missionary work in China as well as other countries in the East Asia.

***Social Value
& Local
Interest***

¹² Inevitably, some sick missionaries died (a total of 101). Those missionaries who died at the Béthanie had been originally buried in the grounds of the sanatorium, and their bones were eventually transferred to Chai Wan Catholic Cemetery after the sale of the Béthanie in 1975.

The Béthanie has high group value with other historic buildings in the area. On the opposite site of Pok Fu Lam Road, there is a declared monument, i.e. the University Hall (once housed the Nazareth). In addition, a farm heritage, namely the Old Dairy Farm Cowshed Compound, is located to the south of the Béthanie. It comprises a number of old buildings, including a senior staff quarters (Grade 1), a main office building (Grade 2) and a cowshed in dumb-bell shape (Grade 2).

Group Value