

**Heritage Appraisal of Hong Kong City Hall,  
5 Edinburgh Place, Central, Hong Kong**

The Hong Kong City Hall (“City Hall”), located at the Edinburgh Place, is the second city hall in Hong Kong. It occupies an area of around 11,000 square meters and comprises three main parts, namely the Low Block, the Memorial Garden and the High Block. The opening of the City Hall in 1962 signified the economic revival and rapid development of Hong Kong in the post-war period.

***Historical  
Interest***

The first city hall, located on Queen’s Road Central<sup>1</sup> and opened on 2 November 1869, was demolished between the 1930s and 1940s. The poor economy in the 1930s, the Japanese Occupation between 1941 and 1945, and the post-war difficult condition<sup>2</sup> hindered the plan to construct a new city hall. It was not until 1952 that the Legislative Council resolved that the planning work should carry on.

The design and construction work was undertaken by Professor Gordon Brown of The University of Hong Kong and the then Public Works Department (“PWD”) . The design of the new city hall was on display at the British Council to collect public opinions. Taking the public views into consideration, the layout of the building was revised a few times, including the addition of a theatre, a ballroom and a banquet hall.

In 1959, piling work started, and the foundation stone was laid on 25 February 1960 by Sir Robert Black, the then Governor of Hong Kong. The term ‘city hall’ refers to a building accommodating the municipal government in many cities. The City Hall in Hong Kong, however, is a social and cultural centre for the whole city. This intention was reflected in the speech of Sir Robert Black at the

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<sup>1</sup> The first city hall was a two-storey Classical building designed by Achille-Antoine Hermitte, a French architect, and was built on a piece of land granted by the Government. It housed a theatre, a library, a museum and assembly rooms.

<sup>2</sup> Hong Kong suffered from economic depression in the 1930s amid the Great Depression as well as unstable political and economic situation in Mainland China. The massive influx of immigrants from Mainland China added burden to the financial difficulties of the Government.

foundation stone laying ceremony.<sup>3</sup>

After two years of construction, the City Hall was officially opened on 2 March 1962 by Governor Sir Robert Black. The opening ceremony was held at the Concert Hall in the Low Block where Sir Robert Black presented a scroll to Mr K.S. Kinghorn (景韓) JP, the then Chairman of the Urban Council, and endowed the Urban Council with the power to manage the City Hall in accordance with the relevant ordinance enacted on 29 March 1961.<sup>4</sup> The opening of the City Hall was a significant event and the entire opening ceremony was broadcast live. The inauguration concert conducted by London Philharmonic Orchestra (倫敦愛樂樂團) at the Concert Hall was also broadcast live.<sup>5</sup>

The Memorial Shrine at the Memorial Garden was unveiled on 30 August 1962, reminding the public of the Second World War (1941 - 1945) and the glorious deaths in the war, both soldiers and civilians. During the memorial ceremony, Mr Alberto Rodrigues, the Chairman of the Commemorative Committee of the Royal Hong Kong Regiment Fund, passed a Roll of Honour and the plaques listing the units that took part in the war to Sir Robert Black. The Roll of Honour and the plaques are now placed inside the shrine.

The opening of the City Hall denoted the development of Hong Kong since the 1960s, in particular, in the areas of arts and culture. Being funded and operated by the Government, the City Hall embodied the changing attitude of the Government. The Government undertook the responsibility of improving the living

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Robert Black said in his opening speech, “*Hong Kong is uniquely placed to bring together the cultures of China and the West. In the City Hall we hope to see performances of music and drama, and exhibitions of the arts connected with literature and painting both Chinese and Western, for the benefit of all who live in Hong Kong, of whatever race.*”

<sup>4</sup> Since the dissolution of Urban Council 1999, the management of the City Hall has been taken over by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

<sup>5</sup> London Philharmonic Orchestra, one of the world’s top orchestras, staged the first concert at the Concert Hall on 4 March 1962. A total of five concerts were held in the six days from 4 March 1962. Ms Chiu Yee Ha (趙綺霞), a young local pianist who had performed with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, was invited to perform in the last concert.

standards of the citizens by creating a hub of cultural activities and municipal services.

In addition, the City Hall testified the change in social equality in the second half of the twentieth century in Hong Kong. Unlike the first city hall, which was mainly a social venue for the upper class, the City Hall has been a venue for all, regardless of ethnicity and social status. Anyone can go to the library, the museum exhibitions, and enjoy performances in the City Hall free of charge or at affordable prices.

Furthermore, the City Hall provides the community with a world-class performance venue in Hong Kong. Many significant local and international events and world-class performances have been held at the City Hall. It serves as an important window for Hong Kong people to glimpse the international music scene and the stepping stone of numerous famous Western orchestras and musicians to set foot in Hong Kong and Asia. The provision of first-rate venues for public activities eased the urgent needs of the society for performance venues at the time. The choice of performance venues in the 1950s is limited.<sup>6</sup> After the opening of the City Hall, the Urban Council implemented the policy of keeping a low hiring charge that was affordable for local groups from 1962 to 1973. This policy helped nurture local arts and cultural groups.

The opening of the City Hall marks the development of public museums and art galleries in Hong Kong. Admission to the exhibitions held at the City Hall was basically free. Free exhibitions attracted the general public, in particular the younger generations to deepen their understanding in the arts and history and widen their horizons. It was particularly important at that time as Hong Kong's economy was just taking off. Visiting these cultural venues was amongst the most popular leisure activities in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s.

Before the establishment of the City Hall, there was no government-run public library which was accessible to members of

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<sup>6</sup> The available options like private cinemas usually charged expensive rent.

the Hong Kong society. Although there was a library in the old city hall, the public who wished to apply for library cards needed a guarantor to support their applications. As a result, most of the library users were foreigners. The public were longing for a public library. According to records, the library in the City Hall issued over 1,000 library cards on its first day.

The City Hall has been the venue of many historical events in Hong Kong.<sup>7</sup> Ever since the opening of the City Hall, the inauguration ceremonies of Governors of Hong Kong were held at the Concert Hall.<sup>8</sup> The ceremonial opening of the new Legal Year was also held at the City Hall regularly.

The City Hall is located at a piece of reclaimed land in Central overlooking the Victoria Harbour. The three main parts, namely the Low Block, the High Block and the Memorial Garden, are connected with a covered walkway made of reinforced concrete and an elongated rectangular single-storey subsidiary block where building services are placed. A spiral staircase leading to the elevated walkway is located near the main entrance of the Low Block.

*Architectural  
Merit*

The master outline plan of the City Hall was prepared by Professor Gordon Brown, the then Dean of the Department of Architecture of The University of Hong Kong. The architects were

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<sup>7</sup> A number of British royal family members visited the City Hall between 1975 and 1989. For instance, Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh first visited Hong Kong in May 1975 and again in October 1986; Princess Alexandra officiated at the opening of the 1977 Hong Kong Arts Festival outside the City Hall; Prince Charles and Princess Diana visited the City Hall in 1979 and 1989.

<sup>8</sup> The 24th to 28th Governors of Hong Kong, i.e. Sir David Clive Crosbie Trench (戴麟趾爵士), Sir Murray Macle hose (麥理浩爵士), Sir Edward Youde (尤德爵士), Sir David Wilson (衛奕信爵士) and The Rt. Hon Christopher Francis Patten (彭定康) swore their oaths at the Concert Hall of the City Hall. The Governor would review the Guards of Honor before entering the Concert Hall for the official oath.

Ronald Philips<sup>9</sup> (羅納德 · 菲利浦) and Alan Fitch<sup>10</sup> (艾倫 · 費奇) who worked in PWD at that time. They were tasked “to design a social and cultural centre of its time, both architecturally and in function”.

The City Hall is an outstanding example of Modernist architecture showing features of International Style. The building complex adopts a modest design that focuses on fulfilling the functions of the building. The architects emphasised the idea of “freedom of movement and a sense of unlimited space”. It is well-embodied in the colonnade outside the Low Block, which was designed to be a natural extension of the interior on ground level. To create a sense of space, the interior of the Low Block adopts a consistent and simple design, keeping the supporting structure to a minimum. The architects’ design intent of utilising the harbour view of the site has been realised. Except for the fully enclosed auditoria, all facilities are ensured to have a sea view.

The High Block adopts a modular architectural expression. The staircase located at the North façade facing the Victoria Harbour is an ideal place to enjoy the magnificent view of the harbour. As a vertical tower showing a very different architectural character from the Low Block which carries a horizontal plan, the architects emphasised on connecting the two blocks to avoid the isolation of the High Block. This is reflected in the introduction of a very deep band that is formed by the balustrade of the high-level walkway and the parapet of the elongated subsidiary block.

Regarding the choice of colour, finishes and furnishing, the architects adopted a low-profile design to reduce the visual impact the occupants would create upon the whole scene. This was particularly crucial for the Foyer of the Low Block, where many people gathered

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<sup>9</sup> Mr Ronald Philips was trained at the Essex School of Art and Architecture with post-graduate works at the Architectural Association in London. Before joining the then Public Works Department in January 1955, he was engaged in various architectural offices in England.

<sup>10</sup> Mr Alan Fitch was trained at the King’s College School of Architecture of the University of Durham. He joined the then Public Works Department in October 1954.

before entering the Concert Hall. For the auditoria, the architects considered that the design should follow the function. The use of the space predetermined the type of finishes that could be adopted. Thus, natural warm colours were selected for the Concert Hall while the interior of the Theatre adopts a relatively brighter design.

The Low Block is a three-storey building with a lower ground floor taking an L-shaped plan. The main entrance faces the Edinburgh Place. It is a reinforced concrete building with façade finished with granite, except the north façade which is finished with a band of windows at the exterior of the then Ballroom and Banqueting Hall, and the exterior of the ground floor which is clad with tiles. Lozenge shape windows are on the west façade facing the Memorial Garden. The Low Block was built to house a concert hall, a theatre and a central block containing a foyer on the ground floor, a ballroom on the first floor which could accommodate 250 dancing couples, and a banqueting hall on the second floor with 500 seats. The ballroom was later converted to an exhibition hall while the banqueting hall to a restaurant.<sup>11</sup>

The High Block is a 12-storey reinforced concrete building taking a rectangular plan. There is an entrance facing Connaught Road Central and another one facing the Memorial Garden. The north and south façades of the building show “an uncomplicated repetitive fenestration in a concrete frame” whereas the east and west façades of the building are plastered white to create a “strong statement” which shows contrast to the north and south façades. The exterior of the ground floor of the High Block is clad with tiles. The High Block was built to house the Marriage Registry, library, lecture rooms, exhibition hall, administrative offices, committee rooms and the Museum and Art Gallery.<sup>12</sup> Nowadays, the Marriage

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<sup>11</sup> The first contract of running a restaurant was awarded to Chantecler (雄雞餐廳) under an open tender. The restaurant offered high-end Western cuisine.

<sup>12</sup> The High Block was built to have the foyer on the G/F; the Marriage Registry on the 1/F; the Children’s Library and Periodicals Library on the 2/F; the Lending Library on the 3/F; the Reference Library on the 4/F; the Stack Room on the 5/F; Chinese Library on the 6/F; the Exhibition Room, and the Cataloguing and Binding Room on the 7/F; Lecture Rooms on the 8/F; curator room, museum store and workshop, and committee room on the 9/F; Museum on the 10/F; and Art Gallery and an office on the 11/F.

Registry still occupies the first floor while the library is located on the second to the sixth floors and the eighth to the eleventh floors. The Exhibition Gallery and two committee rooms are on the seventh floor; and the Recital Hall on the eighth floor.

Located at the centre of the Memorial Garden is a 12-sided Memorial Shrine built to remember the soldiers and citizens who sacrificed their lives in defending Hong Kong in the Second World War. The shrine is 20 feet in diameter and is a concrete and steel structure finished with four-inch thick granite as its outer wall. The highest point of its ceiling is 13 feet. The design was plain without much decoration so as to display a sense of solemnity. Its polygonal design symbolises the diversity of racial backgrounds of those who sacrificed for Hong Kong. Two pairs of copper gates set in a glazed screen carrying the emblem of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps are installed at the two entrances of the Memorial Garden. For the interior of the Memorial Shrine, in addition to the short phrases written in English, eight Chinese characters denoting the remembrance of the everlasting spirits of the bravery and the dead are inscribed on the walls and a plaque bearing “The Hong Kong Independent Battalion of the *Dongjian* Column” (東江縱隊港九獨立大隊) is also hung on the wall.

The design of the Concert Hall and the Theatre inside the Low Block is worth mentioning. For the Concert Hall, the architects made reference to The Royal Festival Hall built in 1951 in London. The ceiling was purpose-designed by acoustic professionals to ensure a first-class acoustic effect. To avoid sound reflection, the superstructure of the Concert Hall was specially designed that underneath it was a concrete false ceiling and a layer of plastering with aluminium louvres laid between them.<sup>13</sup> The acoustics of the Concert Hall was well recognised by the world-renowned musician

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<sup>13</sup> Mr Huge Creighton, a well-known British acoustic expert was hired as the acoustic advisor. His advice included the different acoustic effects that would be required for a wide range of functions of the Concert Hall and the Theatre, the materials to be used on the floors, walls and ceilings. A series of audio tests were also arranged by R.A. Wynard, a Cable & Wireless engineer working at Radio Hong Kong. Professors W.D. Chesterman and J. Prescott of The University of Hong Kong were asked to test the echo effect by firing blanks with a rifle in the Concert Hall.

Sir Malcolm Sargent.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the Concert Hall can be converted into a proscenium, which is a fully equipped stage for Cantonese Opera, Western operas, ballet, etc. The Theatre is smaller in scale and apart from staging theatrical performances, it can be used as a cinema showing either 16 mm or 35 mm films in early years and now screenings in digital format. The ceiling and back walls of the Theatre are composed of horizontal elements, and the sidewalls are furnished with black, grey and white plastic moulded tiles, giving an illusion of being able to see through the walls and the width of the Theatre seems to be increased.

The City Hall has retained much of its original architectural form despite subsequent necessary repairs and maintenances, renovations and refurbishments to rectify the wear and tear brought by its high usage rate, to cater operational needs and to upgrade the facilities to provide excellent and world class performance venues for users since its opening in 1962.<sup>15</sup> Although there have been changes in the usage of some parts of the Low Block and the High Block, the building forms remain largely intact. Two major renovations were

*Authenticity*

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<sup>14</sup> Sir Malcolm Sargent was the conductor of London Philharmonic Orchestra. He complimented that the acoustics of the Concert Hall were “second to none” and supplemented that the government should give “a jolly good subsidy” to help establish an orchestra worthy of the City Hall.

<sup>15</sup> According to *Where Modern Hong Kong Began: The City Hall and Its 50-Year Story* published by the Hong Kong City Hall, in the mid-1970s, the stage floor in the Concert Hall was completely relaid; the floor of the aisles in the audience seating area was also relaid due to seriously worn out; the noise absorbing materials used as audience seat covers were removed due to worn out. In December 1976, the upgrading of the monophonic amplifying system to stereo was carried out. In 1982, more lighting and sound equipment was added, a colour CCTV system was installed, the Chinese restaurant was refurbished, the covered walkway to the west and north of the Memorial Garden was rebuilt and the carpets in the Low Block were replaced. In 1989, the Concert Hall was installed with a new stage lighting system which was the most advanced system in South East Asia at that time.



carried out in 1993<sup>16</sup> and 2002<sup>17</sup> by the Architectural Services Department. The project architects upheld the principles of minimising visual impact on the City Hall and preserving the original style of the buildings on the one hand, and to utilise new elements and high-tech materials to upgrade the premises on the other. A more salient alteration to the building exterior is the removal of two out of the five balconies outside the Concert Hall and the brise soleil façade of the Low Block for the subsequent construction of the Urban Council Chamber. Despite the improvement works of the Memorial Garden in the past like the removal of the Y-shaped staircase in the middle of the garden, the rebuilding of the surrounding area of the Memorial Shrine into a sunken square and the addition of a water channel at the back of the Memorial Shrine, the Memorial Shrine remains unaltered, and the architects' original intention to create a peaceful and quiet retreat in the busy city has been firmly upheld. A wide staircase leading from the Marriage Registry to the Memorial Garden was added to facilitate newlyweds and their guests to go to the garden directly after the wedding ceremony for photos. The staircase has been thoughtfully designed, harmoniously matching the adjoining façade of the High Block and the covered walkway. In addition, the City Hall has been performing its original function as a cultural and arts venue since its opening in 1962, which further enhances its authenticity.

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<sup>16</sup> According to *Where Modern Hong Kong Began: The City Hall and Its 50-Year Story* published by the Hong Kong City Hall, Mr Raymond FUNG of the Architectural Services Department was the project architect of the renovation in 1993 which costed HK\$50 million. The major scope of works included the renovation of the top three floors of the High Block to make them become part of the extended library; refurbishment of other floors of library, the Recital Hall, the exhibition gallery as well as the committee rooms. The Marriage Registry in the High Block was closed from 28 March to 31 July 1994 for renovation, the two wedding halls and the bridal room were refurbished, all the furniture, lighting and carpet were replaced, the waiting area was enlarged, the layout of the two wedding halls was changed so that they are now facing the Memorial Garden and the Victoria Harbour. The Concert Hall and the Theatre at the Low Block was closed for renovation from July 1993 to February 1994 and from July 1993 to April 1994 respectively.

<sup>17</sup> According to *Where Modern Hong Kong Began: The City Hall and Its 50-Year Story* published by the Hong Kong City Hall, the renovation in 2002 was also led by Mr Raymond FUNG. The major scope of works included the renovation and improvement of the facilities in washrooms; the elevators in the High Block; and the conversion of the concrete ground around the Memorial Shrine into a pond.

The City Hall is a rare and significant example of *Rarity* Modernist architecture, which sets an architectural trend in Hong Kong and has become a landmark design for Hong Kong architecture. Despite numerous performance venues built in the past few decades, the acoustics of the Concert Hall in the Low Block still plays a leading role of its kind. The City Hall is also the first multi-purpose cultural complex in Hong Kong witnessing and prompting the arts and cultural development of Hong Kong to enrich people's cultural lives. It has been the forerunner of several other major cultural complexes built subsequently, including the Sha Tin and Tsuen Wan Town Halls, and demonstrated the unprecedented commitment of the Government to provide platforms where the Chinese and the Western cultures could meet and be enjoyed by the general public of Hong Kong from all walks of life.

The City Hall is one the most important carriers of Hong Kong people's collective memories. Since its opening in 1962, it has been an ideal platform for artists to showcase their talent and for audiences to enjoy a wide range of world class performances. Countless lovers became couples at the Marriage Registry at the High Block and took wedding photos at the Memorial Garden. Numerous people viewed exhibitions in the Exhibition Gallery, the Exhibition Hall and the Museum and Art Gallery.<sup>18</sup> Since its opening, the air-conditioned library soon became a popular place for people of Hong Kong. Many of them stayed at the staircases to read or enjoy the sea view through the big windows. The social value of the City Hall obviously lies in its role in cultivating the cultural life of the general public as well as being a popular spot for all walks of life to spend leisure time. *Social Value & Local Interest*

The Memorial Garden, the elevated L-shaped walkway and the open space facing the harbour are famous spots for dating. The beautiful setting of the Memorial Garden makes it a popular place for a break from work in Central and a photo spot for newlyweds. The Urban Council staged the very first Flower Show at the Memorial

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<sup>18</sup> In 1975, the Museum and Art Gallery was split into the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Museum of Art. The Hong Kong Museum of History moved to the Star House at Tsim Sha Tsui whereas The Hong Kong Museum of Art remained at the City Hall until it moved to the present site at Tsim Sha Tsui in 1991.

Garden in 1968 and it had been the venue for similar event until the 1980s when the Sha Tin Town Hall opened.

The Memorial Shrine, an impressive reminder for those who died to defend Hong Kong during the Second World War, enhances the social value of the City Hall. The Government holds official ceremony at the Memorial Garden on Chung Yeung Festival to pay tribute to those who sacrificed themselves in defending Hong Kong between 1941 and 1945. Since 2014, the Government has been holding official ceremony on 3 September at the Memorial Garden to commemorate the victory of the Chinese people's war of resistance against Japanese aggression.

The City Hall is situated at the Edinburgh Place and well connected to a cluster of important buildings and premises, like Statue Square, the Old Supreme Court (舊最高法院) (exterior of which is a declared monument), Bank of China Building (中國銀行大廈) (Grade 1), the Former French Mission Building (前法國外方傳道會大樓) (Declared Monument), St. John's Cathedral (聖約翰座堂) (Declared Monument), New Hall of St. John's Cathedral (聖約翰座堂新座) (Grade 2), Main Wing, East Wing and West Wing of the Former Central Government Offices (舊中區政府合署中座、東座及西座) (all Grade 1), Government House (禮賓府) (Declared Monument), Duddell Street Steps and Gas Lamps (都爹利街石階及煤氣路燈) (Declared Monument); and Cenotaph (和平紀念碑) (Declared Monument). The Memorial Shrine of the City Hall is a complement to Cenotaph, both serving as reminders of those who contributed their lives in wars. The clusters of historic buildings and structures collectively witness and reflect the historical, economic and socio-cultural development of the territory.

***Group Value***

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