

**Heritage Appraisal of  
Former Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong Central Building  
No. 51 Bridges Street, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong**

Built in 1918, the former Chinese Young Men's Christian Association ("YMCA") of Hong Kong Central Building ("Central Building"), currently known as "the Bridges Street Centre", was the first headquarters building of the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong until 1966, when the headquarters moved to Waterloo Road, Kowloon.

*Historical  
Interest*

The establishment of the Central Building was funded by donations from two Chicago YMCA members, Mrs W. E. Blackstone (碧士東夫人) and Mr C. H. McCormick (麥金覓先生), and prominent local Chinese leaders and businessmen such as Mr Huang Mou-lin (黃茂林), the president of the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong at the time, Mr Lam Woo (林護), a property tycoon, Mr Ma Ying Piu (馬應彪), the founder of Sincere Department Store, Mr Kwok Lok (郭樂), the co-founder of Wing On Department Store, as well as Mr Wu Ting Fang (伍廷芳) the first Chinese Legislative Council member of Hong Kong and others.<sup>1</sup> Through the generous support of prominent members and local Chinese businessmen, the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong succeeded in raising the required funds of around USD 25,000 for the establishment of this dedicated building in Hong Kong. The contribution of the Chinese to the construction of the Central Building was indispensable and showed the growing influence of the Chinese leaders and businessmen to the society in early 20th century Hong Kong.

In 1914, the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong purchased the piece of land known as No. 51 Bridges Street in the Tai Ping Shan area from the Government for the purpose of developing the new building. The construction works commenced in December 1915. Bishop of Victoria, the Right Rev. C.H. Lander D.D. (倫治華博士) laid the foundation stone on 10 February 1917. The building was officially opened by the Hon. Claud Severn, C.M.G. (施勳護督) on 10 October 1918. Upon its inauguration, the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong held

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<sup>1</sup> Names of the donors were inscribed on the memorial plaque installed at the entrance of the auditorium.

a five-day celebration, attracting more than 23,000 people to visit the building.<sup>2</sup>

The Central Building was the first multi-functional building equipped with modern facilities at the time that was dedicated to the Chinese community. The original provision of the building included the Hong Kong's first indoor swimming pool with the provision of warm water, the first elevated wok-shaped running track supported by a cantilever structure, a double-volume auditorium with a screening room that could accommodate some 520 seats, a social room, a billiard room, a dormitory, a kitchen and a dining hall, a library, changing rooms, day and night school rooms and a roof garden.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 20th century, there were few assembly halls to hold large-scale seminars, gatherings or exhibitions in Hong Kong. After its opening, the Central Building soon became a popular venue for such activities. For example, the first annual general meeting of the “Anti-Mui Tsai Society” was held in 1922 and the first mass wedding was held in 1936.<sup>4</sup> Other important events held in the Central Building were the two lectures delivered by the famous Chinese writer Lu Xun on 18 and 19 February 1927, attracting over 600 people.<sup>5</sup> The Central Building had been a place to disseminate new ideas which in some ways enhanced social change.

Sports facilities were crucial elements of the Central Building in achieving the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong's missions of promoting physical well-being of youth and adult. To promote physical education, the architects equipped the Central Building with various sports facilities modelled from the YMCA buildings in

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<sup>2</sup> Website of Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong, “Bridges Street Centre 100th Anniversary”, <https://www.ymca.org.hk/bsc/index-en.php>, accessed on 1 April 2023.

<sup>3</sup> “New Chinese Y.M.C.A. Description of New Building Official Opening Today”, South China Morning Post, 10 October 1918.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Shouson Chow (周壽臣) was the witness for the weddings of eleven couples. Mass weddings were held with the aim to steer society away from the custom of extravagant and wasteful weddings and instead promote a ‘frugal wedding’. Celebrities were invited to share information on maintaining a healthy marriage and a good relationship with their in-laws, as well as information on birth control.

<sup>5</sup> The two lectures delivered by Lu Xun were titled “Voiceless China” (〈無聲的中國〉) and “The Old Way of Writing and Speaking Is Coming to an End” (〈老調子已經唱完〉), which promoted the written Chinese language and literary reform.

America and China. The Central Building was very well-received by the public. According to the archival records of the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong, a total of 1,557 fitness room users, 730 swimming pool users and 1,557 shower room users were recorded between 23 October 1918 and 3 January 1919.<sup>6</sup>

During the Battle of Hong Kong in 1941, the headquarters of Hong Kong's Air Raid Precaution (Section A of the Mid-Levels) was set up in the Central Building and protected thousands of refugees. During the Japanese Occupation (1941–1945), the Central Building was requisitioned by the Japanese Education Department to offer Japanese and German courses. After the war, the Central Building resumed its usual services.

In 1966, the Central Building turned into a youth centre and was renamed as the Bridges Street Centre. The Home of Love Hostel and Home of Love Sheltered Workshop, which officially opened in 1995, are still in operation in the Central Building. The remaining parts of the building are still used as the youth centre.

The Central Building is an iconic rectangular six-storey building with a symmetrical front façade. Standing on a sloping site, the top three stories are above the street level of Bridges Street, while the other three floors are below. The building is connected to Bridges Street with bridges. Such a design is rare in historic buildings in Hong Kong.

*Architectural  
Merit*

The architectural plans of the Central Building were initially prepared by architects Mr Shattuck and Mr Hussey of Chicago, who specialised in the design and construction of YMCA buildings in America and China. The architect, Mr A. R. F. Raven, adapted the architectural plans with minor amendments for local use.

The Central Building is mainly constructed from red brick and concrete. Fair-face red brick was one of the most popular types

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<sup>6</sup> Website of Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong, "Bridges Street Centre 100th Anniversary", <https://www.ymca.org.hk/bsc/index-en.php>, accessed on 1 April 2023.

of facades for Western buildings in Hong Kong, especially between 1890 and 1950.<sup>7</sup> The Central Building represented the prevailing architectural style at the time.

The Central Building is an example of eclectic architecture, in which Western neo-classical elements are juxtaposed with Chinese vernacular elements. The front elevation displays neo-classical features such as keystones, Tuscan columns, a classical arched main entrance porch, dentils in arranged brickwork and brick arch openings at the basement. More Western features can be found in the building's interior, such as classical-style scroll brackets of the auditorium, a fireplace and plastered moulding. The Chinese feature is mainly the green glazed tiled eaves of the porches at the auditorium entrances, the old lobby and the balconies on the second floor. The rear elevation of the building presents a utilitarian appearance. The use of identical fenestration, demonstrating functional expression and directness, reveals the character of the Chicago School's architectural style. Adopting Chinese architectural elements in a Western building was a practice in ecclesiastical architecture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The multi-functional arrangement of different spaces of this building is similar to, and modelled after, other YMCA buildings in North America of the same period. All of its special features and facilities contributed to making it a Hong Kong building that was modern and advanced for its time.

The Central Building has generally retained much of its original appearance since it was built in 1918.<sup>8</sup> Although some areas of the building have undergone some conversion works in order to meet different uses in the past 100 years and led to subsequent changes to the internal layout and internal finishes,<sup>9</sup> most of the architectural

***Authenticity***

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<sup>7</sup> The old Pathological Institute, Kom Tong Hall, the Fung Ping Shan Building, the Main Building, the Hung Hing Ying Building, Elliot Hall and May Hall of The University of Hong Kong are examples of red brick buildings in the Central and Western District.

<sup>8</sup> An obvious change is the replacement of the two external metal staircases to fulfil the current building regulations. The new staircases retain the visual character of the original design.

<sup>9</sup> For example, some areas of the gymnasium have been converted into a store and toilets, the finishings of the swimming pool, changing room and dormitory have been replaced with new materials and the green glazed eave tiles have been re-laid according to the original

features and heritage assets of the Central Building, including the foundation stone with the emblem of the YMCA, the inscriptions of “Young Men’s Christian Association” at the auditorium and old lobby entrance porches, the fireplace in the old lobby area, the terrazzo steps leading to the stage of the auditorium, timber staircases to the upper loft of the auditorium, the wok-shaped running track and iron railing, the fitness equipment and timber flooring of the gymnasium and other features are all still preserved in good condition. The swimming pool of the Central Building, the first heated indoor pool during wintertime in Hong Kong, has maintained its original use since 1918. The two historic brass rails and the layout of the swimming pool remain unchanged. In addition, the Central Building has been continuously used as a youth centre, offering various kinds of sports and recreational activities and facilities, as well as hostel services, since its establishment. All these factors further enhance its authenticity.

The building is the oldest surviving building in Hong Kong that the YMCA once used as their headquarters. It is also the first building to be equipped with various advanced sports and recreational facilities and other functional facilities. The wok-shaped running track is probably the only surviving example in Hong Kong. ***Rarity***

Ecclesiastical architecture with a mix of Western building technology and Chinese architectural features is a special type of architecture in Hong Kong.<sup>10</sup> It is also unique for how it was designed by architects from North America, modelled on the master building form of the YMCA buildings in North America.

The social value of the building lies in its role in contributing to social, religious, educational, sports and rehabilitation services development in Hong Kong. For over a century, from serving as the headquarters in 1918 to 1966 and then as the Bridges Street Centre, a youth and recreational centre and a ***Social Value & Local Interest***

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appearance.

<sup>10</sup> Other examples of eclectic-style ecclesiastical buildings in Hong Kong include S.K.H. St. Mary’s Church in Causeway Bay, S.K.H. Holy Trinity Cathedral in Kowloon City, Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre in Sha Tin and the Holy Spirit Seminary in Wong Chuk Hang.

sheltered workshop and hostel today, the Central Building has continuously offered diverse sports opportunities, education, social services and hostel services to the community. Although part of the building has been converted into a sheltered workshop and hostel, the building continues to be a venue for sports programmes and interest classes with the wide participation from the members of the community.

In the early days, the Central Building was an important place for social communication, especially for the Chinese community. Many well-known Chinese businessmen and elites were directors of the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong. The construction of the building reflected the social network of the Chinese elites, as suggested in the memorial plaques engraved with the name of donors installed outside and inside the auditorium of the Central Building.

With a distinctive appearance and a prominent location along Ladder Street, the Central Building is an iconic local landmark. Because of its historical and social background, it is of considerable local interest and attracts visitors for appreciation. It is also one of the historic buildings along the Central and Western Heritage Trail (中西區文物徑).

The Central Building, Man Mo Temple Compound, Sheung Wan (Declared Monument), Kwong Fook I Tsz (Grade 2), Main Block of the Tung Wah Hospital (Grade 1) were all founded or managed by local Chinese people and located in the Tai Ping Shan area. These historical buildings collectively illustrate the development of the Chinese community in early Hong Kong. Together with the Man Mo Temple compound and the old Pathological Institute (Declared Monument) (currently the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences), these three historic buildings are located along Ladder Street (Grade 1), which connects the Central District and Mid-Levels, where European and wealthy Chinese residents lived. Also, the Bridges Street Market (Grade 3) (currently the Hong Kong News-Expo) is within walking distance of the Central Building. These historic

***Group Value***

buildings and structures collectively exemplify the development of Hong Kong – in particular, the historical and socio-cultural development of the Sheung Wan District.

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