Historic Building Appraisal

Central Ordnance Munitions Depot

No. 18 Deep Water Bay Drive, Shouson Hill, H.K.

Historical Interest

The Central Ordnance Munitions Depot (中央彈藥庫), or Little Hong Kong as it was known during the Second World War, was constructed by the British Royal Engineers in the late 1930s. This was a time when the political situation in Asia was decaying, and the Depot was a military facility designed to store arms and ammunition for the defence of Hong Kong should it become necessary.

When the Battle of Hong Kong broke out in December 1941, the Depot was manned by soldiers of four nationalities: British Royal Army Ordnance Corps, Royal Army Service Corps, and Royal Engineers; Canadian Winnipeg Grenadiers; Punjabi infantrymen (from pre-partition India); and local Chinese soldiers of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps. Little Hong Kong was referred to in numerous communications throughout the Battle, as missions fought their way through Japanese lines to retrieve munitions with which to re-supply the front line. From Little Hong Kong itself, the defenders fired tens of thousands of rounds in an attempt to prevent the Japanese capturing the area. Notably, it became the last position to fall to the Japanese occupying forces in the Battle on the 27th, two days after the surrender of Hong Kong.

After the fall of Hong Kong in December 1941, the Japanese occupied the site until Hong Kong was liberated in August 1945. Thereafter it returned to British military use until the 1970s when the Hong Kong police used it as a police driving school. The facilities were then used to store rock core samples. Recently, they have been converted into wine cellars dedicated to the handling, cellaring, long-term maturation and enjoyment of wine.

Architectural Merit

The overall site measures 600 metres in length and approximately 250 metres in width. The original facility comprised 12 pairs of underground bunkers, a Depot HQ building and a single sentry box at the farthermost Western corner of the site. The architecture of the ordnance bunkers is unique in that only the bunker facades, guardhouse façade, and sentry box are visible. Many structures are found underground. Experts believe that the location of the Depot was deliberately sited at the bottom of a steep valley, far from dense habitation, so that in the event of an accidental detonation the resulting explosion would do the minimum damage to people and property. The protection afforded by the surrounding hills act as natural camouflage to both air and ground attack, while an inland position with no view of the sea (Lama Channel) meant that bombardment by ship was not possible.

Each bunker has been constructed in a similar design including an entrance corridor measuring 9.40 metres, an internal width of 7.34 metres and a length of 12.19 metres, the only variation being that some bunkers had been designed for high explosives and therefore have an additional (false) brick wall inner-lining against the 1 meter thick bunker walls. This false wall has been constructed 10 cm away from the inner reinforced concrete structure so as to reduce the possible impact of an internal explosion.

The corridors are angled in an S-shape so as to deflect the blast waves of a possible munitions explosion. Moreover, there are channels constructed into the corridor walls sloping from ceiling to floor at 45 degree angles. These channels are designed to capture the blast waves of an explosion and force them downwards onto the corridor floor at an angle of 90 degrees to the sidewalls thus stopping the blast waves from exiting the corridors.

A second smaller corridor can be found at the entrance to the bunker cavity. This smaller corridor which measures 1.25 metres in height and 50 cm in width travels the full length around the outer wall of the bunkers thus creating a moisture trap. This is necessary as the bunkers are under the water table for the majority of the year. This design in turn permits the inner concrete wall to remain free of moisture thus keeping the arms and ammunition dry.

A pair of half-inch thick steel doors can be found at the entrance to the bunker. This entrance opens up into the bunker area. The height of the bunkers is approximately 3.3 metres from the floor to the lowest point of the ceiling. The ceiling features a ribbed, wave-like design that rises and falls approximately 40 cm and is covered in half-inch thick steel. This design again benefits blast wave deflection.

Two interesting features exist inside the bunkers, the first being an escape hatch measuring one metre in diameter. This runs horizontally for five metres and then vertically until you reach the soil slope surface on top of the bunkers. A protective brick and metal structure has been constructed on the slope to facilitate escape under fire. Should the troops be trapped inside the bunkers, a second “breather pipe” has been constructed which opens up into a hidden structure above the slope.

The Depot HQ was demolished before the project proponent of the wine cellars first viewed the site. The only visual record is a photo dating back to the Japanese occupation.

Rarity, Built Heritage Value & Authenticity

The Central Ordnance Munitions Depot is of immense significance in Hong Kong’s military history. It was a centre of resistance in Hong Kong’s battle to attempt to repel the invading Japanese force; and was ultimately the last position to fall to the Japanese on 27 December 1941.

Social Value, & Local Interest

The existing site boasts six underground cellars and a private members' clubhouse comprised of two underground bunkers as well as a newly constructed conservatory. The Central Ordnance Munitions Depot, after being converted into wine cellars, won the Award of Merit in the 2007 Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards offered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in recognition of the success of the efforts taken for the restoration and continued preservation of the former military site.