

Historic Building Appraisal

Victoria Road Detention Centre, Hong Kong

The Victoria Road Detention Centre, which was known as Mount Davis Concentration Camp (摩星嶺集中營) by some of the inmates detained inside there, was built in the early 1950s as a mess for the British Army Royal Engineers. Drainage manhole covers bearing the initials WD for War Department and an ornamental wrought iron insignia of RE for Royal Engineers are relics of the British Army occupation. The site takes in one of the old disused gun batteries formerly part of the Jubilee Battery built in 1936-1939 as part of the re-organisation of Hong Kong's defences.

The buildings were renovated in the late 1950s, at the height of tensions across the Taiwan Straits, to hold Taiwanese spies caught in the territory. During the 1967 upheavals, the Centre was used by the Special Branch of the Royal Hong Kong Police Force (now Hong Kong Police Force) to hold political prisoners. Among those held include the famous actor Fu Qi (傅奇), the actress She Wei (石慧), Choi Wei-hung (蔡渭衡) who was secretary of the Chinese Reform Association (華人革新協會), and labour unionists such as Leung Kwok-ching (梁國政) of the Kowloon Dockyard Union (九龍船塢工會) and Leung Shu (梁樞) of the Taikoo Dockyard Union (太古船塢工會).

It is rumoured that the last known residents were political refugees fleeing the Chinese mainland after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. Later on, the Centre was used for police training purposes and as a safe haven in witness protection programmes. The Special Branch of the Royal Hong Kong Police Force was disbanded in 1995, prior to the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong from Britain to China. After the 1997 handover, it no longer serves as a detention centre and is occasionally rented out for use as a film set.

The compound is surrounded by chain link and barbed wire security fencing and screened from the road by a high concrete wall. The buildings are situated on platforms cut into the hillside connected by concrete paths and flights of steps. The main buildings, which are mostly two storeys high, consist of a mess, a detention blocks, an interrogation block, an accommodation block or barracks, a kitchen (the converted disused gun battery) and a guardhouse. A separate block on the other side of the road is a two storey building built as senior officers' quarters.

The architectural style of the buildings is International Modern, the main features of which are cubic shapes, flat roofs, white walls, open verandahs, metal windows, continuous horizontal projections (typhoon canopies) and tubular steel railways. Windows are heavily barred or screened with lattice pattern concrete screens.

Internally, the rooms are plain and devoid of architectural detail. Security doors and grills can still be seen in the prisoners' blocks. The former mess is minimalist in style, with a straight flight wooden staircases featuring ornamental balustrading, and simple wooden paneled doors to rooms. On the first floor there is a large room with an ornamental stone fireplace at one end, a wood block floor, and tall windows with low cills to enable occupants to appreciate the sea view. The officers' quarters are very basic and simple, the only features of note being two fireplaces with tiled surrounds.

Frankly, the buildings have little aesthetic appeal or architectural merit being utilitarian and functional according to the dictates of modernism.

This kind of architecture is widespread and the buildings cannot therefore be said to be rare. They have group value, of course, being interrelated in their various functions, and being of the same style. Although there have been several renovations over the years, as far as can be seen alterations have been kept to a minimum and the buildings would appear to be largely "as built".

Although the Centre has a notorious past, heritage conservationists and even former prisoners consider that the place should be preserved as it is part of Hong Kong's history.

The Centre, which is part of the Jubilee Battery, is in opposite to the Pinewood Battery at a distance on the Peak. It has group value with Felix Villas (福利別墅) at No. 61 Mount Davis Road.

The site is currently unoccupied. It must have valuable redevelopment potential. If the building is to be saved an appropriate adaptive re-use needs to be found which will bring benefit to the local community.