

Historic Building Appraisal

Luk Keng Pillboxes and Observation Posts, N.T.

Located at the fringe of Pat Sin Leng Country Park in Luk Keng (鹿頸), this network of defence comprising pillboxes, observation posts and trenches was constructed during the period of Japanese Occupation (1941-1945). They stand on prominent hilltops which overlook Starling Inlet (Sha Tau Kok Hoi 沙頭角海), giving them an excellent field of observation. It is believed that these structures were intended to strengthen border defense and against the offensive operations of Allied forces should any attempt be made to enter Hong Kong from the northeastern side of the New Territories.

*Historical
Interest*

The path leading to the network is not well-defined and access to it is rather difficult. Information on the pillboxes and observation posts is scant, and the Japanese claimed that authentic records of Hong Kong's defence during the war period were all lost. They merit further investigation; however, from the recollections of villages nearby it can be established that the pillboxes and observation posts were built during the period of Japanese Occupation and some local inhabitants were pressed to take part in the construction.

The pillboxes and observation posts on the site are reinforced concrete structures built against slopes and partially covered with earth and vegetation. All remain derelict and unused. The pillboxes feature wing walls at the sides and have narrow cavities all around the perimeter walls for ventilation purpose. Some of the pillboxes have concrete roof vents. The architectural style can be classified as **Utilitarian (Military)**.

*Architectural
Merit*

The pillboxes appear to be connected by communication trenches which allowed movement between positions. This allowed for the relocation of troops to threatened positions, ammunition re-supply, casualty evacuation, and covered withdrawal. Japanese manuals prescribed communication trenches to be 2 ft wide and 4 ft deep for one-way movement and 5 ft deep for two-way traffic. Communication trenches could be less than 2 ft deep and 18 in wide if connecting minor positions.

Parapets might be present, but more often than not the earth was removed for better concealment. The trenches might be roofed with palm fronds, tree branches, camouflage nets, planks, small logs, or sheet metal covered by a layer of earth, more for concealment than protection.

Trenches were often laid out in a zigzag pattern with angular jogs, in curvy lines following terrain contour, or echeloned at right angles allowing one section of trench to cover another from the rear. The angles and curves in the trenches prevented the enemy from firing down a long length of trench and reduced the damage by an artillery, mortar or bomb hit. In loose and unstable

soil revetting was required to shore up the side of the trench. This helped prevent the sides from collapsing.

The use of concrete as a construction material for the pillboxes at Luk Keng is unusual. Field fortifications were usually constructed of local materials such as rocks, coral, tree trunks, etc., or improved using wooden boxes and steel oil drums filled with rocks and sand. Cement and steel bars used for reinforcement were reserved for command posts, communications centers, fuel and ammunition storage bunkers, bomb shelters, and critical support facilities. The cement used in the construction of these pillboxes was probably not shipped in but produced locally, and could well have come from the Green Island Company's cement works at Hung Hom.

No detailed survey has been made of the pillboxes so that the layout plans, the thickness of concrete, the positions of entrances and firing ports, etc. are not known. The quality of the construction seems to vary considerably not surprisingly if forced village labour was used to build the pillboxes. Some of the pillboxes have firing ports or embrasures with fancy decorative surrounds, and on other the joint lines left by the timber formwork or shuttering when the concrete was poured can clearly be seen on the face of the concrete.

After World War II, many other items built by the occupying force such as the War Memorial Tower (忠靈塔, a Japanese memorial on the war dead) were demolished. As military structures built during the wartime, these pillboxes and observation posts are rare pieces of built heritage.

***Rarity,
Built Heritage
Value &
Authenticity***

The pillboxes and observation posts are derelict and abandoned, but they probably could be restored and local interest in them revived. They have group value with Wong Chun Yu Ancestral Hall in Luk Keng Wong Uk (鹿頸黃屋春儒黃公祠) and Chan Ancestral Hall in Luk Keng Chan Uk (鹿頸陳屋祠堂). They are thematically related to the MacIntosh Forts (麥景陶碉堡) which served as observation posts of the police to strengthen border defense.

***Social Value,
Local Interest
& Group Value***

As far as is known there are no plans to redevelop the site so that the question of adaptive re-use does not arise.

Adaptive Re-use