

**Historic Building Appraisal**  
**Second Street Public Bathhouse**  
**Junction of Second Street and Western Street, Sai Ying Pun, H.K.**

Second Street Public Bathhouse (第二街公共浴室) is situated at the junction of Second Street (第二街) and Western Street (西邊街) in Sai Ying Pun (formerly “Saiyingpun”), which is close to an area formerly known as Taipingshan. It was completed and opened in 1925. The construction of the bathhouse was a result of the government’s efforts to improve the sanitary conditions of the City of Victoria, which had been an ongoing process since the first outbreak of bubonic plague at Taipingshan in 1894. In fact, from 1894 to 1923, Hong Kong was frequently hit by plague epidemics, which occurred almost every year before 1904 and every few years between then and 1923.<sup>1</sup>

*Historical  
Interest*

According to a report on the bubonic plague in Hong Kong during the epidemic of 1903, which Governor Sir Henry Arthur Blake (1898 – 1903) completed in August that year, neighbourhoods such as Second Street and Third Street were inhabited by very poor people, and had “an evil record in every epidemic of plague since 1894”.<sup>2</sup> To eliminate the media of infection, Blake suggested that there should be “constant, unremitting attention to cleanliness of person, furniture and premises”.<sup>3</sup> To this end, he proposed that disinfection work, including the erection of large tanks for boiling water and disinfectant fluid (Jeyes fluid), into which bed boards and simple furniture could be dipped, must be carried out, and wash houses (i.e. bathhouses), in which both sexes could have a supply of hot water for washing purposes, should be provided by the government.

Early in April 1903 before finishing the report, Blake proposed the erection of tanks and setting up of bathhouses to Dr John Mitford Atkinson, who was the Principal Civil Medical Officer and President of the Sanitary Board. On 22 April, four large tanks were erected within the area bounded by Second Street,

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<sup>1</sup> The plague in 1896, for instance, affected places like Second Street and Third Street (第三街) in Saiyingpun, Taipingshan Street (太平山街) and Upper Station Street (差館上街) in Taipingshan, Bridges Street (必列啫士街) and Staunton Street (士丹頓街) in Sheung Wan, and Graham Street (嘉咸街) and Gage Street (結志街) in Central.

At its climax in 1894, 2,679 plague cases were recorded. In 1896, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901 and 1903, the figure was, on average, 1,350 cases per year. From 1904 to 1907, around 480 cases were recorded every year. Unfortunately, the figure rose to 1,073 in 1908, 1,847 in 1912, 2,146 in 1914 and 1,181 in 1922. The mortality rate exceeded 90% on average.

<sup>2</sup> “Memorandum by H.E. The Governor on the Result of the Treatment of Patients in their Own Houses and in Local Hospitals during the Epidemic of 1903,” *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1903.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Third Street, Eastern Street and Western Street.<sup>4</sup> In the same month, some private premises were also vacated, fitted up and later rented by the government to house four temporary public bathhouses, which were situated at No. 92 Second Street and No. 1 Woi On Lane (both for men), and No. 2 On Wai Lane and No. 2 Sheung Fung Lane (both for women).<sup>5</sup>

In 1903, as part of the constant efforts to improve the sanitary conditions of the City of Victoria, the first permanent free public bathhouse (for men only) was opened in Cross Lane in Wan Chai (demolished), and that was followed in 1904 by the first permanent one for both men and women at the junction of Pound Lane and Taipingshan Street (now Tai Ping Shan Street), which was subsequently rebuilt in 1961.<sup>6</sup> The other two public bathhouses were aforementioned temporary ones in Second Street (for men) and Sheung Fung Lane (for women). They were closed on 27 December 1922 to make way for re-construction. In 1925, they were replaced by the third permanent public bathhouse (for men and women) in the City of Victoria, i.e. the existing one at the junction of Second Street and Western Street, which was completed in November 1925 and opened on the 18<sup>th</sup> of the same month.

Second Street Public Bathhouse is situated on government land. Previously it was a private lot known as “Inland Lot No. 624” (I.L. 624). The plot of land was owned by the Berlin Ladies Mission for China, which operated a foundling house there until it was surrendered to the government in 1892. Around 1900, a public latrine of 40 seats was erected on the north side of a portion of the former I.L. 624 at the corner of Second Street and Western Street.<sup>7</sup> A contract was let on 11 September 1923 for the construction of the existing bathhouse and an underground trough closet under the centre of Second Street at its junction with

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<sup>4</sup> The tanks measured nine feet in length, two feet in width and 3 feet deep and could hold about 400 gallons of water. Mats and cloth materials would be dipped for about two minutes first, after which bed boards and simple furniture would be dipped. They were set up in Sheung Fung Lane, Tak Sing Lane, On Wai Lane and Woi On Lane.

<sup>5</sup> Chinese dwellings were built with neither toilets nor bathrooms. Back in the early 1880s, Governor Sir John Pope Hennessy (1877 – 1882) considered building public bathhouses, with a supply of hot water, for the Chinese, and hoped that further private ones charging an extremely moderate fee could be built. However, both the local Chinese and government officials at that time were apathetic concerning housing and sanitary reforms. They were anxious about the costs that might be incurred and the potential need for increased taxation and rents. Neither of Hennessy’s successors – Governor Sir George Bowen (1883 – 1885) and Governor Sir William Des Voeux (1887 – 1891) – achieved any significant improvement in the sanitation of the Chinese houses. In 1901, as one of the remedial actions taken to prevent plague epidemics during the governorship of Sir Henry Arthur Blake, temporary makeshift bathhouses were erected in various parts of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon in 1901. The establishment of temporary bathhouses in vacated houses was therefore an improvement in this aspect of public sanitary facilities. The houses were selected with the assistance of Fung Wa-chun (馮華川), who was Chinese community leader and served on the Board of Directors of the Tung Wah Hospital in 1892, 1897 and 1901.

<sup>6</sup> The first permanent free public bathhouse on Hong Kong Island was built in Cross Lane on the east of the Naval Hospital in Wan Chai in 1902 and opened in 1903. It was for men only and mainly served the male coolies in the district.

<sup>7</sup> A map dated 1922 shows that the remaining portion of the old lot was occupied by a West District Public Dispensary and Maternity Hospital (also known as Tsan Yuk Maternity Hospital (贊育醫院), which was formally opened on 17 October 1922) (Grade 1).

Western Street. It was expected that the bucket latrine would be reconstructed with an additional storey and fitted out as a bathhouse, providing accommodation for 34 men and 18 women, upon completion of the trough closet. The trough closet was completed in 1924, while the Second Street bathhouse had not yet been reconstructed that year. The number of users of the bathhouse was first recorded in 1925.<sup>8</sup>

Located on a sloping site, the two-storey bathhouse built of red brickwork was constructed on a levelled granite platform. The building has a rectangular plan, with a narrow front/western facade on Western Street and a long northern facade on Second Street. The external wall has been plastered and painted pink. Some brickworks are exposed and have been painted white, including window sills, recessed wall surfaces under windows on the first floor, and the coping of the screen wall in front of the male bathroom. The recessed wall surfaces under the windows show Flemish bond brickworks. The chimney stacks of brickwork on the roof are exposed and painted pink. *Architectural Merit*

The male bathroom is located on the ground floor and the female one on the first floor. The Chinese characters “男浴室” (male bathroom) and “女浴室” (female bathroom) have been painted on the front facade at the respective access staircase. The entrance to the male bathroom is accessible via a flight of granite steps with metal railings, one of which is old and two of which are a pair of railings of later addition. The entrance to the female bathroom is accessible via an external staircase, made up of concrete steps, in the lane between the southern facade of the bathhouse and the Old Tsan Yuk Hospital (舊贊育醫院). This staircase is supported on columns and fitted with an old concrete railing and a pair of metal railings of later addition. The columns supporting the staircase have chamfered edges with stepped bases.

The bathhouse was designed for practical purposes and built on a simple rectangular plan. The male bathroom is a large space with shower stalls. There are glass louvers for better ventilation. The female bathroom is also a large space with shower stalls. As the top floor, there are more ventilation devices. Apart from glass louvers, there are ventilation vents on the central axis of the flat concrete roof. There are also ventilation grilles made by flattened octagonal blocks at the two ends of the first floor, although the grilles in the former caretakers' quarters at the east end (with No. 88 Second Street at the back) have

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<sup>8</sup> No records could be taken in 1924 as construction was not completed. The record on the number of users of the bathhouse in 1925 is set out below:

18,859 (men); 14,111 (women) and 18,403 (children). These were the figures as from 18 November 1925, on which Second Street Bathhouse was first opened.

been sealed. Besides, there is an obsolete refuse chute inside the bathhouse. It runs from a corner near the entrance to the male bathroom to the upper floor, and is covered by a roof vent.

The bathhouse was built with two caretakers' quarters, one of which was located at the east end of the male bathroom. The remaining one was on the top of it on the first floor and connected to the female bathroom. They were used as staff quarters probably until sometime around the early 1990s, and now remain vacant. The ground-floor caretakers' quarters is decorated with black and white cement floor tiles. It was connected to the boiler room (still in use) and the oil store. The oil store was converted from a coal storage room around 1959, and is now a storeroom.<sup>9</sup> The former caretakers' quarters and oil store, and the existing boiler room on the ground floor are accessible via an internal staircase on the northern facade, while the former caretakers' quarters on the first floor is accessible via an external concrete staircase, which was proposed to erect in 1959.<sup>10</sup>

A proposed alteration plan prepared in 1959 shows the known alterations to the building. For instance, four shower stalls were proposed to be added in the male bathroom while the number of shower stalls in the female bathroom was proposed to be doubled by sub-dividing the old ones. The more obvious change to the internal layout was carried out at the caretakers' quarters and the service rooms at the east end of the male bathhouse. Originally, a caretaker could access the quarters on the ground floor through an internal staircase, which led from Western Street to the space opposite the storeroom for coal. Then turning left, the caretaker would reach the boiler room, and finally the quarters and kitchen. After alterations, the coal store became an oil store. The boiler house was relocated to the space opposite the new oil store. The old internal staircase was also replaced by a new one. The location of the former boiler house was used to accommodate a new concrete staircase, and a new storeroom which adjoins the living space of the caretakers' quarters. The partition wall of the storeroom has gone, but the granite slabs which mark the entrance doorways of the storeroom and the living space have been retained. The kitchen was once converted into a quarters during the Japanese Occupation (1941 – 1945). Around April 1962, the

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<sup>9</sup> Bathing water was first heated by coal, later by diesel oil and now by gas. It is believed that coal was replaced by diesel oil around 1959, as an architectural drawing of 1956 shows that the existing facility room was a room for storing coal, with a Boiler House adjoining it. In 1959, a drawing was prepared for the proposed conversion of the room to an oil store. Besides, an Urban Council's record of 1974 shows that diesel oil was used at that time. According to the information from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department in 2020, hot water is provided from every November of a year to May of the next year. The supply will start once a temperature of 20°C or below is recorded in November, and will stop once 25°C or above is recorded on three consecutive days in May.

<sup>10</sup> Before having the external staircase, the caretakers' quarters on the first floor was only accessible through the female bathhouse and the door still exists.

then Public Works Department reverted it to a kitchen. Besides, a new external staircase provided the caretakers' quarters on the first floor with a new access. Those changes to the internal layout and the erection of an external staircase at the east end of the building led to alterations (including relocation and addition) to the window and door openings.

Second Street Public Bathhouse is important for people who live without or with inadequate bathing facilities for over 90 years, although such importance has been declining from the late 1970s due to the modern trend of providing bathrooms in residential units.<sup>11</sup> Its history provides a continuing link to the lives of local people in the district.

***Social Value & Local Interest***

The bathhouse has group value with other historic buildings, including the Main Building (主樓, Grade 1) and Annex Block (附屬建築物, Grade 2) of the Old Tsan Yuk Maternity Hospital (舊贊育醫院), Kau Yan Church (救恩堂, Grade 1), King's College (英皇書院, Declared Monument) and Bonham Road Government Primary School (般咸道官立小學, Grade 1).

***Group Value***

Second Street Public Bathhouse is the only surviving pre-war building of its kind in Hong Kong. It bears witness to the government's efforts to improve the sanitation of the city, and has been providing valuable service to the public and local residents for many years, although it is now a less critical resource in the context of the modern city. The more obvious alterations were the changes to the staircase leading to the ground-floor staff quarters and the addition of an external staircase to the first-floor staff quarters around 1959, and the replacement of timber windows with aluminium ones in 2010. However, such alterations have not diminished the authenticity of the building. The colour of the external wall finish was changed to pink from light yellow in the late 1990s, giving it a more eye-catching appearance.

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

<sup>11</sup> According to two records of the then Urban Council dated 1978 and 1980, the use of public bathhouses was declining because the modern trend of providing bathrooms in residential units had greatly reduced the need for public bathhouses.

Some records on the usage rates of the Second Street Public Bathhouse is extracted below for reference. Figures of the 1960s and the 1980s cannot be identified.

Year	Men	Women	Children
1925	18,859	14,111	18,403
1935	186,998	108,383	128,012
1950	97,753	74,175	76,672
Year	Average Number of Daily Users		
1975 – 1976	114		
1977 – 1978	85		

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