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From: Katty Law

To: Catherine SW CHIU

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From: Forum UNESCO - University and Heritage (FUUH)


Date: Fri, Sep 9, 2011 at 7:35 PM

Subject: FLASH INFO: Call for academic support 'Hong Kong Government Hill at threat'

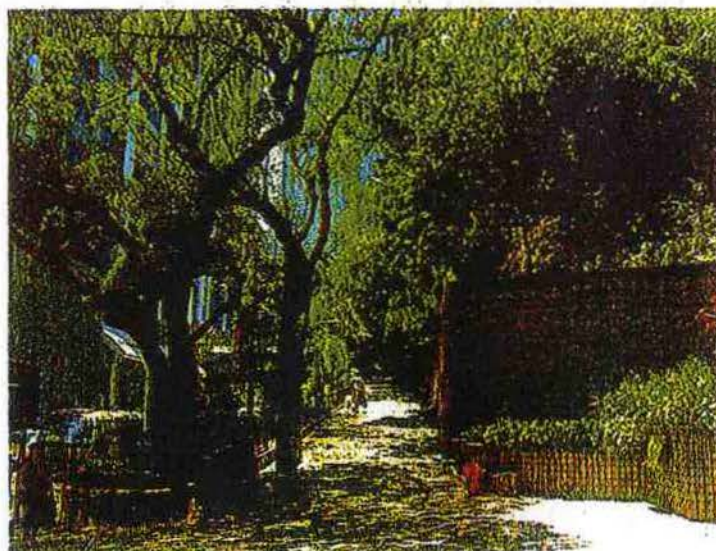
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Call for academic support  
Hong Kong Government Hill at threat



Government Hill - West Wing

Recently, Hong Kong is facing a serious threat to one of the city's most important Historic Urban Landscapes (HULs) - the 170-year-old Government Hill is threatened by a sale plan for high-rise commercial development. The Government Hill has a history as long as Hong Kong's colonial history - In 1841, not long after the British landed in Hong Kong, the colonial government designated an area in Central District as the Government Hill. This has remained the seat of government until today. This area includes the Government House, St John's Cathedral, the Court of Final Appeal, the Central Government Offices and the Bishop House - the general historic ambience of the area has seen little change over the years. A local historian, Jason Wordie, has remarked that this is probably the last remaining heritage precinct in Hong Kong. In fact, a consultant report commissioned by the government has recommended setting up a Special Protected Area to conserve this unique low-rise, wooded historic area in Central.

About five years ago, the HK government decided to move its Central Government Offices (CGO) to the harbor front. There were then wide discussions about the future of the Government Hill. At that time, in order to secure public support for the move, the government made a pledge to HK people that Government Hill would be conserved. However, last year the government made an announcement that it planned to sell the West Wing of CGO to a commercial developer for high-rise commercial development. Note that the West Wing occupies a significant part of the Government Hill. The sale plan involves excavation of the Government Hill for underground shopping facilities together with a tower which is completely out of scale with the existing HUL.


Twenty NGO groups formed the Government Hill Concern Group which has been working very hard during the last few months to campaign for the protection and conservation of Government Hill. We urged the government to follow international guidelines and charters in conserving our historic urban landscape and objected to the sale plan which will definitely destroy the integrity of the HUL. Our Group counts professional architects, planners, historians, legal advisors, environmental conservationists, ex-civil servants and many passionate citizens. Our campaigns have gained much public support. You may like to read more information about Government Hill and our efforts from our website:

<http://www.governmenthill.org>

However, the government seems to be very determined about selling the site despite public objection and despite its consultant recommendation to set up a Special Protected Area.

Members of the Concern Group feel that while it is essential to gain local support, it is also important to raise international attention especially that of the academic community through Forum UNESCO - University and Heritage network. Your expressing support and disseminating this information can make a difference.

Government Hill is an important part of Hong Kong's history. We just cannot afford to lose this place.

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Support our application to protect  
Our Government Hill



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Submission to AAB - pls print

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2011/11/23 上午 11:56

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From: Katty Law

To: Catherine SW CHIU

Document 5

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From: Forum UNESCO - University and Heritage (FUUH)

Date: Mon, Oct 3, 2011 at 6:10 PM

Subject: FLASH INFO: Reply of the Development Bureau - Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government to the Call for academic support 'Hong Kong Government Hill at threat'

To:



Dear Member,

Please find below the reply of the Development Bureau - Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government to the Flash Info "Call for academic support 'Hong Kong Government Hill at threat'" sent on 9 September 2011.



"I refer to the article Call for Academic Support 'Hong Kong Government Hill at Threat' which was sent out by e-mail by Forum UNESCO-University and Heritage (FUUH) on 9 September 2011, and wish to clarify some misconceptions in the article.

The present **Central Government Offices (CGO)** in Central comprises three post-war buildings, the Main, East and West Wing. The existing offices in these CGO buildings will be relocated to the new Central Government Complex at Tamar by end-2011. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government has been deliberating on the alternative use of the site and buildings for some time.

Although none of the above buildings are declared monuments or historic buildings accorded an administrative grading, **Government appreciates the special value** of the site and the buildings which have

in their vicinity renowned historic buildings including *St John Cathedral*, the *Court of Final Appeal Building* and a secluded green area. Accordingly, the Antiquities and Monument Office of the HKSAR Government commissioned a heritage consultancy in 2009. It concluded that the Main and East Wings should be retained (though finding alternative use for them is a challenge) while the West Wing could be demolished because of low historical significance and architectural merit. The West Wing was located at the west end of the site with an entrance at Central business area. It was constructed in 1959 and underwent some major renovations in 1998.

Despite the shortage of prime office in Central (which is Hong Kong CBD) and the high value of commercial land, the HKSAR Government has decided to preserve the Main and East Wing and turn these into offices for the Department of Justice, as part of a major blueprint to preserve the vitality and diversity of this business district under what is called *Conserving Central* announced by the Chief Executive of the HKSAR in October 2009. The West Wing building will be redeveloped.

**The proposed redevelopment of the West Wing has the following characteristics:**

*Firstly*, the redevelopment will provide a green public open space of about 6,800 m<sup>2</sup>, forming an integral part of an extensive greenery network in Central. The green space would enable the community to better appreciate the historical context of the site and its relationship with the more significant historic buildings. The proposed scheme is in line with the heritage consultant advice and would not degrade the heritage value of the site.

*Secondly*, the redeveloped office building will be further away from the Main Wing than the existing office/commercial towers in central business district just across the street. Furthermore, the redeveloped office building will have a smaller footprint than the existing West Wing and will allow the open space in front of the Main Wing to be enlarged, thereby enabling the visiting public to have a better experience when viewing the Main Wing, the most historically significant of the three wings. It will also allow the green areas on the hill to flow through a wider opening to the bottom of the hill than possible with the existing West Wing.

Public consultation on the proposed redevelopment scheme of the West Wing was conducted in late 2010. We are refining the scheme taking account of public comments. But we cannot agree with the article accusation that such office development is completely out of scale with the existing Historic Urban Landscape. We believe that, whether in Hong Kong or elsewhere, a good conservation project does not mean that everything on or near a historically significant site should be kept intact and no development should be allowed. Relative degrees of cultural significance may lead to different conservation actions at a place (Article 5.2 of Burra Charter). The established conservation charters do not preclude development within a heritage site, let alone in this case where neither the site nor the three post-war buildings form a formal historical precinct. New work such as additions to a heritage place may be acceptable where it does not distort or obscure the cultural significance of the place, or detract from its interpretation and appreciation (Article 22 of Burra Charter)"

**Development Bureau  
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government**

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**Government Hill Concern Group Reply to Development Bureau Response to Call for Academic Support on UNESCO Website**

CGO Concern Group 10 October 2011

The recent response of the Development Bureau (DB) of the Government of the Hong Kong SAR Government to the Call for Academic Support Hong Kong Government Hill at threat is rather disingenuous and manipulating of the facts to support its development proposal to sell a significant part of the historic Government Hill to a property developer for redevelopment into a shopping centre built into the hill with a 32-storey office tower above, as well as what in effect would be a podium garden over the shopping centre.

The DB response suggests that they appreciate the Special Value of the Site, mentioning that the buildings have in their vicinity renowned historic buildings, including St John's Cathedral, the Court of Final Appeal and 'a secluded green area', while indicating that none of the three wings of Central Government Offices (CGO) are graded historic buildings. Development Bureau for some reason does not mention Government House, the home of the former British Governors of Hong Kong and now the residence of the Chief Executive of the HKSAR which is located on Government Hill just above CGO. They go on to mention that the Government Antiquities and Monuments Office (which comes under the DB) commissioned, in 2009, a heritage consultancy for the site, and asserted that the consultancy *"concluded that the Main and East Wings should be retained . . . . while the West Wing could be demolished because of low historical significance and architectural merit."* Firstly we point out that virtually the whole of Government Hill is a well-wooded green area, which Government's consultant quotes as being *"perhaps Hong Kong's last remaining real heritage precinct"*, and whose buildings *"are set within one of the few 'green lungs' in Hong Kong"*.

Secondly we opine that the suggestion that the DB statement about the consultancy's conclusion is contrary to the facts, as the consultant states with regard to the various CGO wings, under 'Conclusions and Recommendations', that *"The buildings are of a high architectural quality and are exemplars of the beginning of modern office design in Hong Kong and of 1950s architecture generally."* He does, however rank them in the order of Central Wing, of highest value, then East Wing and with East Wing as the lowest. The President of the Hong Kong Institute of Architects (HKIA) (which is Hong Kong's premier body dealing with design of the built environment) sent a letter to Secretary for Development dated December 2010 attaching HKIA's written views on Government's proposals which pointed out that, far from recommending demolition, the consultant *"only suggests that 'the West Wing may be demolished' and further pointing out that 'instead of recommending redevelopment, the report 'has in fact more than once recommended the*

preservation of all the buildings on the site". The HKIA emphasized that based on that and other observations that *"it would not be correct to interpret that the report actually suggests or recommends demolishing the West Wing to make way for redevelopment."*

The HKIA Comments Paper is a well-considered document and goes on to list planning justifications for preserving the west wing, pointing out that *"The disposition of the three buildings in the CGO complex is the result of excellent site planning with the three building blocks well positioned in relationship to each other and the natural landscape around them."* The HKIA Paper went on to compare the *"removal of the West Wing and building a new office tower on the site to the amputating an arm from an otherwise healthy and integral body. . ."* As HKIA pointed out to Secretary for Development, Government's consultant urged (in his very first General Recommendation) that *"Consideration should be given to creating a 'Special Protected Area' to acknowledge the well wooded spaces and low-rise buildings in the Hong Kong Park, Botanic Gardens, Government House Gardens, the CGO site, the garden between the Cathedral and the French Mission Building, the Battery Path area and the Sheung Kung Hui site."* The HKIA Comments Paper went on to point out that *"under the summarised General Conclusions of Chapter 5 that "it is suggested that there might be a case for making all the low rise and well planted area into a Special Protected Area' where the presumption would be against any significant redevelopment work."* It clear from his report that the consultant advocated the creation of the 'Special Protected Area' (as well as logically the Grading of Central Wing and East Wing) before any major development proposals or similar were formulated for the Government Hill Area. Government's consultant rightly pointed out in his General Conclusions that *"the site itself is arguably of higher significance than the buildings, [as it] has been the seat of Government since the foundation of Hong Kong as an independent colony."* With regard to the height of the buildings on Government Hill the consultant pointed out that the low height of the CGO buildings was intended to preserve the view from Government House. He emphasizes again the importance of the height of the CGO buildings under Conclusions and Recommendations when he states that *"Any new development should respect the low rise of the existing buildings and open space around them."* We take the view that the height of the existing CGO buildings as well as the other buildings on Government Hill is of fundamental importance to the heritage area.

In the first paragraph on Conclusions in the Executive Summary of the his report Government's consultant gives great prominence to his opposition to any kind of commercial development on the site, where he stresses that *"It would seem to be very undesirable to have commercial use which*

demeaned the historic and current function of the building and site."

Therefore for DB to suggest that "the proposed scheme is in line with the heritage consultant advice and would not degrade the heritage value of the site" is contradictory to the facts. It can be seen that their proposals, in particular the demeaning of the site by commercial development, are in complete disregard of his recommendations. The community has also seen no sign whatever of Government taking steps to create the '*Special Protected Area*' recommended by their consultant, or to grade Central Wing and East Wing of CGO as recommended by him.

DB's response refers to the shortage of prime office space in Central (Hong Kong's main CBD) as well as the high land values of commercial land as justification for their development proposals. They refer to the development of the 32-storey office building and a green public open space, but neglect to mention the huge partly-sunken shopping centre which was highlighted on their proposals and which would occupy virtually the entire footprint of the West Wing site and the fact that (as HKIA pointed out in their paper) the public open space would be "on top of a podium". Neither do they mention the destruction of historic wall and mature trees on the neighbouring Ice House Street; the likely destruction of the wooded slope area adjacent to the historic Battery Path and the destruction of the scale, natural environment and ambience of the historic and attractive Lower Albert Road, which would form the rear entrance to the office tower. Regarding their argument for office space property experts have pointed out that the West Wing site could only house a very limited amount of office space and the answer to Hong Kong's office needs should be to create a new satellite office districts, say at the old airport site of Kai Tak or another area. They have also criticised Government's building of a huge new headquarters on prime waterfront land at the former Tamar site, rather than making it available for office development.

It is our view that in their response Government is plainly 'cherry picking' from their consultant's report to suit their pro-redevelopment agenda. As stated, their development proposals are clearly contrary to their consultant's recommendations and would fundamentally destroy the history and environment of Government Hill. In addition, there is very widespread community opposition to the sale of a site, which has been in Government / Community hands for over 150 years, to a property developer, in view of precedent cases of destruction of Hong Kong's heritage and environment by developers, as well as what is perceived to be their excessive influence in the community.