

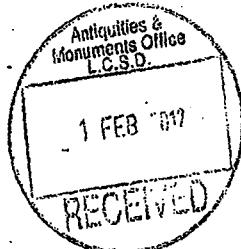
January 30, 2012

To: Members of the Antiquities Advisory Board and its 'Expert Panel'
c/o The Secretariat of the Antiquities Advisory Board
136 Nathan Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon

To: Members of the Town Planning Board
15/F, North Point Government Offices
333 Java Road, North Point, Hong Kong

Dear All,

**Inappropriate redevelopment of the
government headquarters complex
set within the historic Government Hill, Central, Hong Kong**



SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

1. Purpose of this submission

- 1.1 I am writing to provide supplementary information to support my requests which were stated in my letter on the same subject to Members of the Antiquities Advisory Board and Members of the Town Planning Board on November 18, 2011, which are reiterated in paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3 set below.
- 1.2 To appeal to members of the Antiquities Advisory Board, requesting them to consider giving a historic grading to the government headquarters complex comprising three wings which were designed and built in the 1950s.
- 1.3 To appeal to members of the Town Planning Board, requesting them to consider rezoning the Government Hill into a heritage precinct, keeping it as a site for Government, Institution and Community ("GIC") uses.
- 1.4 In this submission, I wish to point out that the West Wing is an integral part of the set of Central Government Offices that should be preserved. It is also the most interesting one of the set, architecturally; the most important one of the set, socially; and the most utilitarian one of the set, functionally.

2. The WEST WING is an integral part of the Central Government Offices

- 2.1 Designed by the Architectural Office of the Public Works Department, the Central Government Offices consist of three blocks of offices. The East Wing (1954) and Central Wing (1956) are connected to each other, while the West Wing (1959) is adjacent. In *Hong Kong Annual Departmental Report by the Director of Public Works for the Financial Years 1953-54 and 1954-55*, the Government Offices project was described in the following way:

- 2.1.1 The *first* phase comprised 80 percent of the East Wing;
 - 2.1.2 The *second* phase of the project included the extension of the East Wing and foundation work and basement for the Central Block;
 - 2.1.3 The *third* phase included the remainder of the Central Wing (i.e. the Colonial Secretariat and Legislative Council Chamber);
 - 2.1.4 The *fourth* and last phase included the West Wing
- 2.2 Michael Wright, who was Chief Architect for the Central Government Offices and Director of Public Works between 1963 and 1969, made the following remarks in a taped interview which was shown at an exhibition “Soul of the City – East Meets West” held in Convocation Room, Room 218, 2/F, Main Building, The University of Hong Kong, January 9-10, 2012. He said:

“The West Wing is a very important part of the central government complex. There were the three buildings that were linked up.” “They were all designed as a whole.” “And I think it would be a great pity to knock one of them down, for historical reasons they should be retained as a government office complex designed in the 1950s to meet a particular purpose” (YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONTaeQMZPUg>)
- 2.3 The fact that the three wings of the Government Offices complex constitute one project completed in phases, is recognized by the government’s heritage consultant (Purcell Miller Tritton LLP). In the consultant’s report *Central Government Offices Historic and Architectural Appraisal* (2009) (hereinafter referred to as “the Appraisal”), there is a remark that goes:

“Although constructed in different phases, the design of the buildings appears to have been conceived more or less simultaneously, as evidenced by the original drawings.” “In terms of form and massing the buildings are consciously low-rise, horizontal in emphasis and with flat roofs that keep the height of the buildings to a minimum” “Consequently, the buildings share many characteristics” (The Appraisal, page 19)
- 2.4 Dr. Lee Hoyin, who is director of the Hong Kong University Department of Architecture’s Architectural Conservation Programme (ACP) and a member of the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB), is correct in making the following statement: “The three government blocks [of the Central Government Offices] should be seen as one totality as they were planned together by one architect. They were just built in different phases.”¹ Accordingly, the three wings are of equal historic importance; they should be preserved in their entirety.

¹ Quoted from *South China Morning Post* article, “Board’s rating move could save west wing,” November 24, 2011.

2.5 The *China Principles* promulgated in 2003 by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, The People's Republic of China, have sent us a clear message: "In all cases the principles of maintaining the social benefits of a [historic] site must be upheld. As far as possible, the use of a site must be consistent with its values." "Social benefits are maximized through effective conservation measures that reveal a site's authenticity and its intrinsic historical character" (Articles 4.1.1 & 4.1.3).

2.6 The proposal for allowing a developer to remove the historic hillside of the Government Hill and demolish the West Wing is contrary to conservation effort to reveal the Government Hill's "authenticity and its intrinsic historical character." We've had enough bad examples, e.g. the former Marine Police Headquarters, sold to a developer and now a hotel-cum-mall complex, which have been "emasculated and reduced to caricatures of their former glory."² Haven't we done enough damage already?³

2.7 Preservation of the existing Government Hill can educate young people and give them a greater sense of belonging to Hong Kong. Some people argue that the 1950s Government Offices complex is not that old, but heritage is not just about age. The West Wing of the Government Offices complex is part of what was a significant period in the city's history, and therefore deserves to be preserved, especially in Hong Kong where the city sheds its skin every 20 years, let alone every half century.

3. **The WEST WING is the most interesting among the three wings of the Central Government Offices, architecturally**

3.1 The government's heritage consultant (Purcell Miller Tritton LLP) expressed that the three wings of the Central Government Offices complex "are of high architectural quality and are exemplars of the beginning of modern office design in Hong Kong and of 1950s architecture generally" (*The Appraisal*, page 135). Interestingly, the government's consultant also pointed out that the three wings' slightly variant architecture reflect the periods they were built:

Compared to the East Wing, "the Central Wing, and in particular the West Wing, display a more 'stripped-down', functionalist version of modernism that developed as the build progressed" (*The Appraisal*, page 20).

3.2 Assessing the three wings on a comparable basis, the government's heritage consultant stated that the East Wing is built on a ground which "is generally flat, although outside of the building line to the north it slopes down sharply

² Mary Melville's letter to *South China Morning Post*, "Residents must stop heritage sites being ruined by officials and developers," January 26, 2012.

³ Peter Thompson's letter to *South China Morning Post*, "Prevent repeat of ruined HQ [former marine police headquarters]," March 14, 2011.

towards St John's Cathedral." The Central Wing is "constructed on a flat site at a right angle to the west of the East Wing." (The *Appraisal*, pages 21 & 25). The West Wing is built on a sloping landscape of the Government Hill:

"The West Wing is the largest building of the group. Its site is the most complex of the three, flat at the east but sloping away sharply towards the west, with the result that the building ranges from 7 storeys at the east end (7th to 13th floors) to 14 at the west (ground to 13th floors)." "The highest point of 13 storeys to the western end of the West Wing is more the result of the natural topography than a desire to building high" (The *Appraisal*, pages 19 & 30).

3.3 The architectural uniqueness of the West Wing, which is skillfully built on a very steeply sloping site of the historic Government Hill, was perceived by the government experts during the design stage of the Central Government Offices. The following message is taken from *Hong Kong Annual Report 1958*, when the construction of the West Wing was nearly completed:

"The West Wing, which is the final stage of the Central Government Offices on Hong Kong Island, was nearing completion by the end of the year. This building, which will accommodate the offices of several Government departments, is built on a very steeply sloping site and has six floors at one end and thirteen floors at the other; this added considerably to the complexity of the structure." (pages 227-228)

3.4 The Hong Kong Institute of Architects (HKIA) point out that the West Wing is a fine example of a "climbing building" on a natural sloping terrain with varying floor plans on each level.⁴ In their submission to the Development Bureau, the HKIA support the preservation of the Government Hill site, quoting the government's consultant's report: "Consideration should be given to creating a 'Special Protected Area' to acknowledge the well wooded spaces and low-rise buildings and... presumption would be against any significant redevelopment work."

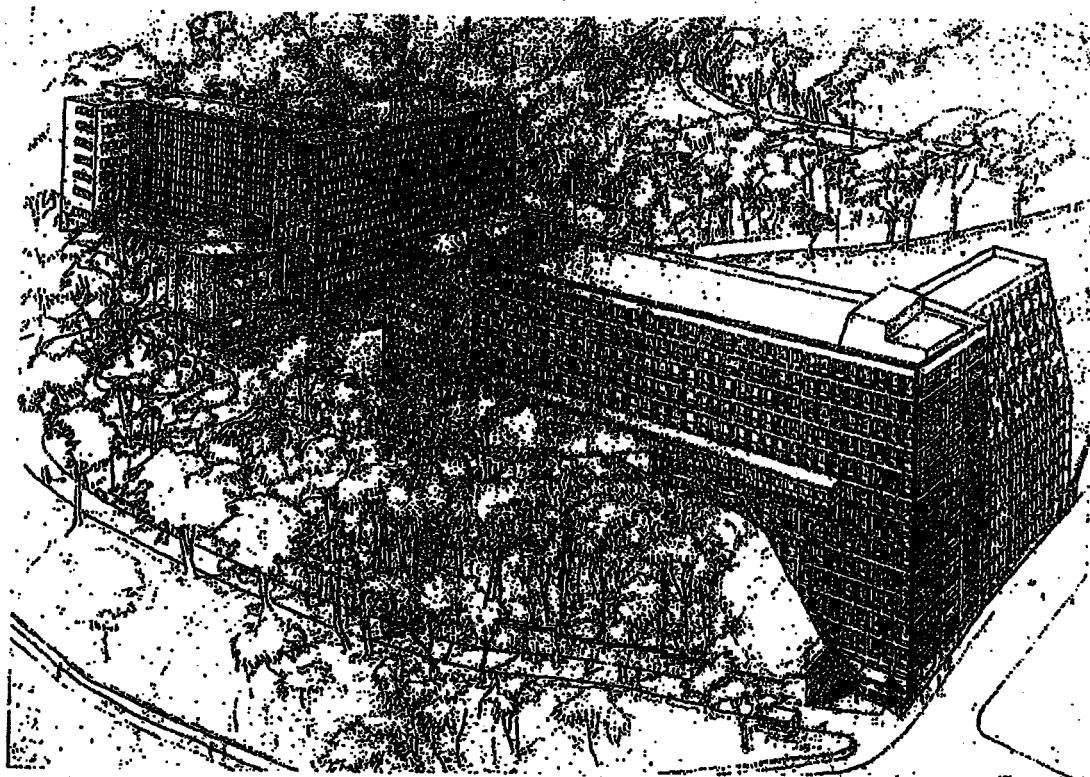
3.5 Retired government architects are unanimous in their view that the West Wing of the Government Offices complex is a fine piece of Functionalist architecture of the 1950s. It "fulfills the Functionalist doctrine by being a rational and practical solution to the problem of building on an awkwardly sloping site, rising to the challenge with an assured and robust architecture that is uncompromising in its execution." "Not that it's a marvelous architecture but I think it's a good solid design," said another architect.⁵

⁴ *South China Morning Post* article, "Call for west wing to be preserved...," December 29, 2010.

⁵ The words of Gillian Aitken and Michael Wright, "Soul of the City – East Meets West" Exhibition held in Convocation Room, Room 218, 2/F, Main Building, The University of Hong Kong, January 9-10, 2012.

3.6 Michael Wright also pointed out that “the Ice House Street end” of the West Wing was built of locally quarried granite. “A lot of thought a lot of care went into making sure that we would get a granite that wouldn’t stain,” he said. The working team looked at different quarries, including Morrison Hill, and finally settled on the Diamond Hill quarry which provided rocks of the best quality (YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONTaeQMZPUG>).

3.7 The following illustration gives a glimpse of how the West Wing has been skillfully designed to respect the urban space around Battery Path. In effect, a Functionalist building of the 1950s is intimately integrated into a valued historic precinct, to produce a pleasant public space harmonious to the natural environment and surrounding greenery.



Source of illustration: *The Hong Kong and Far East Builder*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1956 (reproduced in *South China Morning Post*, November 3, 2011)

3.8 I agree wholeheartedly with Michael Wright that it is unjustifiable to knock down the West Wing and replace it with a 30 storey commercial building together with a small artificial park. He is objective in his description and critical (yet fair and perceptive) in his evaluation:

“I think Hong Kong is very well off in parks (in the area)... [There are] Hong Kong Park, Chater Garden by the Supreme Court, by the Legislative Council Building... They have got the botanical garden a bit further up the hill.” “I don’t think they really need another park in that area. It’s quite unnecessary and will be detrimental to the appearance of Hong Kong.” (YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONTaeQMZPUG>).

4. **The WEST WING is the most important among the three wings of the Central Government Offices, socially**

4.1 The 'social value' of a heritage site, or 'communal value' as the English Heritage put it in their recently promulgated *Conservation Principles Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (2008) refers to "the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory."

4.2 Dr Hilary du Cros, a member of ICOMOS, has pointed out that "what the [government's] consultant [which is a British firm of conservation architects] was asked to do is the basic minimum" and "we can't have architects talk about the socio-political significance."⁶ Indeed, the consultant's dismissal of the social value is shown in the following sentence of the *Appraisal*:

"The fact that so many of these uses [of government offices] have ceased or moved elsewhere and the spaces and finishes have changed means that a great deal of the potential historic architectural and social interest of the buildings has been lost" (page 30)

4.3 The government's consultant's report is rich in historical and architectural information about the Central Government Offices complex, however, the consultant's report cannot, as in the instances noted below, tell the whole story of what it is in the mind of Hong Kong people. We need to resort to Hong Kong people to get an understanding of the social meaning of the Government Offices, especially the West Wing.

4.4 Many, like me, will vividly remember periodic visits to the Ice Street end of the West Wing to pay income tax at the Inland Revenue Department cashier's office. The West Wing is also where the Government Information Services (GIS) photos were available for public inspection. Administratively and politically important the Central and East Wings might be, it is the West Wing that evokes the masses' emotions.

4.5 The Central and East Wings primarily provided office accommodation for the more senior members of the civil service and thus were less accessible to the general public. The West Wing, however, is of higher social value because it was, as said, the site of department offices frequently used by the public. Therefore, the West Wing arouses public sentiment in the same manner as other historic landmarks, such as Queen's Pier or King Yin Lei, do or did.

⁶ *South China Morning Post* article, "Expert insulted as charter 'misused' for hill project," November 17, 2011.

4.6 Hong Kong historians have expressed profoundly their unfettered attachment to the West Wing. They said the plan to redevelop part of Government Hill for commercial use will spoil the more-than-a-century-old landscape, which is an important reminder of Hong Kong's colonial history. The following are extracted from *South China Morning Post* article "West Wing should be kept, say historians," November 19, 2010:

"The West Wing itself is an extremely functional piece of architecture, but it should be handled with caution; if the hill is removed, as in 1881 Heritage, it would be a failure," Dr Joseph Ting Sun-pao said, referring to the former marine police headquarters in Tsim Sha Tsui. "As a historian, I'd prefer to see the landscape kept intact," he said, describing it as the first town planning initiative by the British.

The Central Government Offices should be seen as an integral part of the landscape shaped by the British colonial rulers since the 1840s. "Selling part of the hill [Government Hill] would amount to [eradicating colonial traces]," said Simon Chu Fook-keung (former director of the Government Records Service) who said the West Wing should be used as an archive museum to showcase important historical documents related to the city.

4.7 The West Wing and the Government Hill at large are full of memories for the Hong Kong people who worked to make the city prosperous. We need to conserve the soul of the city and its memories, by conserving buildings and unique urban landscapes. We must say "no" to the ill-conceived proposal for selling this significant portion of the Government Hill to private developer.

5. **The WEST WING is the most utilitarian among the three wings of the Central Government Offices, functionally**

5.1 The government's heritage consultant frankly stated that the West Wing "is the most utilitarian" among the three wings of the Central Government Offices (*The Appraisal*, page 20). This has been pointed out in *Hong Kong Annual Departmental Report by the Director of Public Works for the Financial Year 1953-54*, in which the West Wing is described as being

"built up of 4' 6" wide window bays, and internal partitions can be erected between any two windows. Thus internal flexibility is obtained, since offices may be built up of any multiple of 4' 6". Where desirable, the corridor partitions may also be omitted to provide large registries and drawing offices extending the full 45' 0" width of the building" (page 4)

5.2 The current administration has announced that the 12th floor of the West Wing will be used as temporary office of the chief executive-designate. This office will operate for three months from March 25, 2012, with an aim to help the chief executive-designate form a governing team and arrange a smooth transition. Using the West Wing for this purpose is akin to saying that the West Wing is still usable and that demolition is unnecessary.

- 5.3 The fact that the West Wing is still usable and remains highly utilitarian, also means that it is easily adaptable to a variety of new public uses. If Hong Kong's career bureaucrats take a step backward, they'd realize that it will be in the broader interests of the community to scrap the West Wing demolition and land sale proposal. It will also be better to find out how the site could be used for public benefit instead of selling it to private developer.
- 5.4 Rather than demolish buildings such as the West Wing of the Government Offices, there can be creative alternative proposals. Just to give one example, a French architect who moved to Hong Kong about a year ago, said she could see possibilities to turn the West Wing into a mixed-use centre to bring diversity to Central, based on her experience working on the revitalization of post-war social housing complexes in Le Mirail, outside Toulouse.⁷

6. What's Next?

- 6.1 Set up as a seat of government since the 1840s, the Government Hill is a source of memories to Hong Kong people. "The public deserves to see this historic area developed in a way which makes us proud of."⁸ It will be a great pity and great loss that this historic landmark is destroyed.
- 6.2 The Government Hill is "perhaps Hong Kong's last remaining heritage precinct" (*The Appraisal*, page 128). We do not want the current and future generations to have no attachment to the place, which is a historic urban landscape that defines the uniqueness of old Hong Kong.
- 6.3 Please will the **Antiquities Advisory Board** and the **Town Planning Board** get their acts together to facilitate the conservation of the Government Hill and the Central Government Offices complex as a public asset inherited from the past for the present and future generations.

A Hong Kong-based conservationist

c.c. **Government Hill Concern Group**
c/o Ms. Kitty Law Ngar-ling
Legislative Council Panel on Development
c/o Legislative Council Secretariat
Purcell Miller Tritton (HK) Ltd, government-commissioned consultant
c/o Mr. Michael Morrison
South China Morning Post Publishers Ltd.
c/o Staff Reporter

⁷ *South China Morning Post* article, "Board's rating move could save west wing," November 24, 2011.

⁸ *South China Morning Post* editorial, "Public has stake in Government Hill," November 17, 2011.