

1 February 2012

Dear Members of the Expert Panel and the Antiquities Advisory Board,

To assist in your determination of a grading recommendation of the Central Government Offices site which includes the 3 buildings known as the West, East and Main Wings and the contiguous government-owned land, the Government Hill Concern Group offers the following summary where we make reference to a number of reports and appraisals:

Abbreviations used

- PMT** **Central Government Offices Historic and Architectural Appraisal**
by Purcell Miller Tritton (PMT)
- GHC** **Government Hill Compendium**
by Government Hill Concern Group
- BGW** **The Greatest Form Has No Shape: Three Exemplary Works of Hong Kong Modern Architecture**
by Vito Bertin, Gu Daqing and Woo Pui-Leng (BGW)
- Video 1** **Interview with Michael Wright, chief architect of CGO**
by Government Hill Concern Group
- Video 2** **The construction of CGO West Wing, 1957-59, filmed by John Aitken – West Wing project architect**

Both videos and the Government Hill Compendium can be viewed at www.governmenthill.org

Statements by Ron Phillips (co-architect of City Hall) and Gillian Aitken (John Aitken's daughter) can be found in Appendix 1 & 2.

While your evaluation will not take into account any possible reuse or redevelopment options, we do point out two false statements in the PMT report.

False statement 1: Section 4.5 p 130

“that Government has an obligation to maximize the potential value of any site and the best way to do this is by permitting redevelopment”

False statement 2: Section 5.5.2 – page 146.

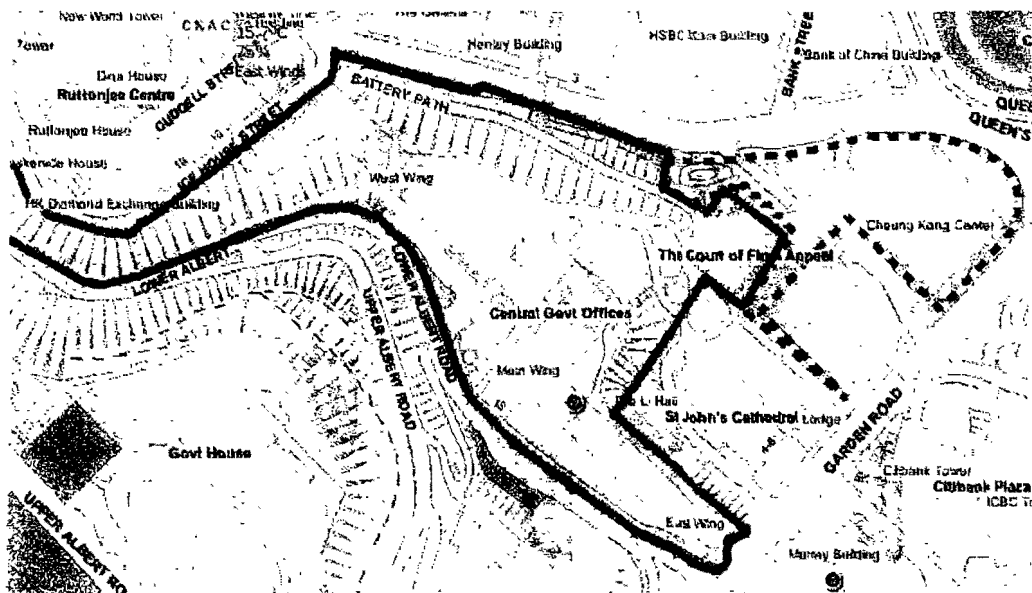
“Financial pressures mean that part of the west end of the site will need to be redeveloped.”

We would like to remind the Expert Panel that you have the power under **Chapter: 53 ANTIQUITIES AND MONUMENTS ORDINANCE** to advise on any matters relating to antiquities.

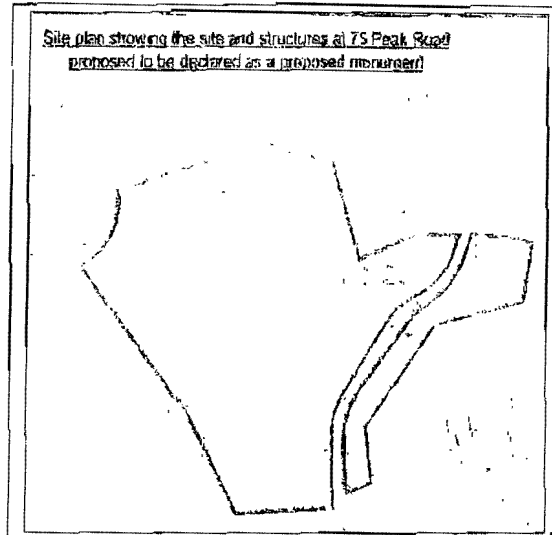
Chapter: 53 ANTIQUITIES AND MONUMENTS ORDINANCE

The [Antiquities Advisory] Board may advise the Authority on any matters relating to antiquities, proposed monuments or monuments or referred to it for consultation under section 2A(1), section 3(1) or section 6(4).

We are assuming that the buildings and site you are evaluating – generally outlined in green in the graphic below - is all the contiguous Government land bordered by Ice House Street, Lower Albert Road, Garden Road and Queen's Road Central - excluding Inland Lot 8887 Sec A, and RP, outlined in dashed red lines, and the St. John's Cathedral site.



We compare this to the **Ho Tung Gardens** site evaluation map where you reviewed all structures and gardens on the entire lot. This site was given a Grade 1, pending monument status.



Another grading precedent is the **City Hall Complex** (Grade 1)

The AAB evaluated the entire complex when it graded the Hong Kong City Hall Complex which include buildings, open space and garden areas.

1. Historic use of open space was considered:

"The open space in between the City Hall and the Queen's Pier was also a special area for most of the historical events. Royal visitors including HM Queen Elizabeth II, HRM Prince Charles, Princess Diana passed through it before entering the City Hall."

For Government Hill, this would be comparable to the protest path of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Hong Kong people who exercised their legal rights by walking through this site, starting at the West Wing entrance on Ice House Street, passing through Battery Path and then up to the Burmese Rosewood at the entrance to the Main Wing.

2. Garden space was considered, and the nature of the space.

"The Memorial Garden is of modern design incorporating paved areas at different levels, steps, planters, benches, water features and a Memorial Shrine. Modern sculptures, grassed area and mature trees soften the harshness of the stark paving"

For Government Hill this would be comparable to the numerous mature trees, even the ones not declared "old and valuable" and the seating areas around the site that take advantage of the mature trees to soften the harshness of the stark paving.

3. "The City Hall complex has built heritage value"

The CGO complex on Government Hill has built heritage value

4. "City Hall has been a cultural centre for over 40 years"

Government Hill has been the centre of Government for over 170 years

The Central Government Offices on Government Hill

For the present assessment, we refer to the following documents in evaluating the project site:

Historical Interest

- a. GHC – Section 17 - History of Government Hill
- b. PMT report – "The governance of Hong Kong has only ever been the function of Government Hill." "The CGO has a significant association to the Hong Kong Government ... having been home to both the British government in Hong Kong and the HKSAR government after the handover of power." "The CGO is located on a historically significant site which has maintained its governmental function for over 150 years."
- c. Video 1 – CGO chief architect's comments on the historical significance of the site
- d. Video 2 – documentary showing how the West Wing was built in the 1950s

Architectural Merit

- a. PMT – "The CGO are architecturally important as a good example of 1950s 'Functional' architecture in Hong Kong." "The buildings were at the 'cutting edge' of office design and therefore technologically advanced."
- b. GHC – Sections 7 and 8 - Architecture of the West Wing; Sec 11 HKIA submission: "West Wing is a fine example of a 'climbing building' on a slope – a characteristic type of buildings in the early days of Hong Kong, with the building actually climbing up a natural sloping terrain with varying plan size/shape"
- c. BGW – "The three buildings of the Central Government Offices were planned as a whole ... West Wing reflects the high level of design in terms of site, programme, structure, and composition."
- d. Video 1 – Original architect's description of the CGO design
- e. Video 2 – Site formation for West Wing – the challenging slope work
- g. Ron Phillips' statement (Appendix 1)
- h. Gillian Aitken's statement (Appendix 2)

Rarity, Built Heritage Value and Authenticity

- a. PMT – "The CGO are the only surviving government offices constructed in that era." "The CGO are the best preserved examples of 1950s Functional architecture in Hong Kong and may have influenced the design of other buildings." "The CGO buildings are some of the best preserved examples of 1950s architecture in the region." "The CGO

- are an unusual low rise survival in Central." "...one of the few buildings in Hong Kong where the horizontal elements of the design are emphasized more than the vertical."
- b. BGW – "The design level of Hong Kong modernist buildings are comparable to that of the best works of architecture in the world at the time." ".....the Central Government Offices are without doubt the exemplary works of modern architecture in Hong Kong."
 - c. GHC – Sections 7 and 8 – Architecture of the West Wing; Sec 17 – Air-raid tunnels underneath Government Hill (military/war heritage)
 - d. Video 1 – Original architect's appraisal of the built heritage value; his description of the great thought and care put into finding non-staining granite from local sources (Diamond Hill) and the involvement of professionals from HKU
 - e. Video 2 – Site formation for West Wing
 - f. Ron Phillips' statement (Appendix 1)
 - g. Gillian Aitken's statement (Appendix 2)

Social Value & Local Interest

- a. GHC – Sec 17 – CGO and Hong Kong people (West Wing Public Enquiry Service in the 1960s, air-raid tunnels as military/war heritage, CGO as an important place for civic engagement)
- b. PMT – "The CGO are socially significant as a place associated with public protest and the public's right to voice their opinion."

Group Value

- a. BGW – "Together with the Central Wing, the West Wing defines a space – the main entrance area of the CGO....a symbolic front of the government headquarters. Centred and aligned with the axis of the Government House, this space implies a clear intention in its site planning. The West Wing forms the protective layer between the commercial area and the Government House, and also between the city and its greenery."
- b. PMT – "The CGO are closely associated with some of the most significant historic buildings in Hong Kong." "Through the common language of form, massing and detail such as exposed concrete framing, steel framed glazing and granite elements the (CGO) buildings undoubtedly have group value."
- c. Video 1 – Michael Wright: "The three buildings were all designed as a whole. 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."
- d. Ron Phillips' statement (Appendix 1)

Immediate Environs

- a. GHC – Sec 14 Tree & Landscape report: "The vegetation around the CGO is an extension of the urban forest from the Botanical Gardens and Government House to the heart of Central." "A sustainable urban forest ...not designed and constructed artificially, but has been taken care of by nature."
- b. PMT – "The CGO's physical setting is significant as it is located near to several of Hong Kong's most important historic buildings and also some of its most iconic modern buildings. Also very significant is the location of the CGO within one of the largest 'green lungs' in the city an oasis in the busy urban environment."

In summary, the Central Government Offices on Government Hill is a symbolic site strongly associated with governance in Hong Kong- it is a cultural landmark of Hong Kong as a city with an outstanding history. The entire CGO complex which includes the surrounding historic urban landscape has immense historical, cultural, architectural and social significance, and should be carefully conserved within a Special Protected Area. The Government Hill Concern Group therefore recommends the AAB to accord it a Grade 1 status pending a declaration of monument.

Please note that in addition to this written submission, we will prepare for a further formal oral presentation to both the expert panel and the AAB in the coming future.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Regards,

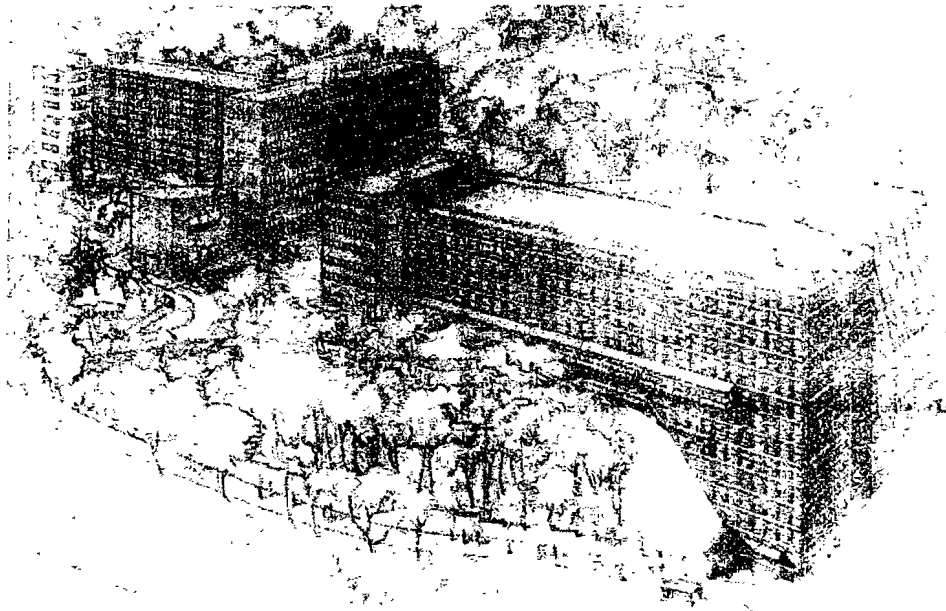
Katty Law

For and on behalf of Government Hill Concern Group

The Government Hill Concern Group is an alliance of 21 environmental and heritage conservation groups and concerned professionals/members of the public:

Central and Western Concern Group, The Professional Commons, Designing Hong Kong, Green Sense, Greeners Action, The Conservancy Association, Heritage Watch, Community Alliance for Urban Planning, Community Development Initiative, Save Our Shorelines, Lung Fu Shan Environment Concern Group, HK Redevelopment Concern Group, Heritage Hong Kong, Clear the Air, Green Environmental Health Group, South Tokwawan Concern Group, Society for Protection of the Harbour, Soho Residents Committee, Mini Spotters, World City Committee, Dragon Garden Charitable Trust

Contact address:



An impression of the Central Government Offices, *Hong Kong and Far East Builder*, 1956, Vol. 12, No.4

Appendix 1

Concern for Hong Kong's Built Environment

by Ron Phillips

I was a practicing architect in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s, the period which saw the beginning of the incredible development of one of the most dynamic places in the world.

This was at a time when The Peak back drop viewed from the harbour was largely green, but even in those early days and in anticipation of what was to come, it was recognised that environmentally there was a need to safeguard the amenity of free movement of pedestrians and the principle of high-level walkways was established.

As the co-architect for the City Hall I returned to Hong Kong for both its 30th and 40th anniversaries in 1992 and 2002 and during the former visit I was delighted to feel that whilst amazing changes had taken place there was still some element of the human scale, and urban spaces were being respected if not expanded.

My latter visit was less reassuring. As an example, the then Star Ferry concourse and car park, which was designed as part of an overall City Hall urban space embracing the Memorial Garden, the Sea Front, Cenotaph, and Statue Square had descended into a down-at-heel image. For one thing to see the clean lines of the car park building defaced with such poor commercial advertising, which bordered on graffiti, it was a great disappointment to me. I knew that it was inevitable that the Star Ferry Piers would eventually be relocated, but to see that environment which had been thought about so carefully to be so abused I found distressing and lacking in respect for its users. I am shortly to return to Hong Kong for the City Hall's 50th anniversary and from what I hear I may experience other disappointments, but being an optimist I hope for the best.

It is a known fact that the only constant in life is change and one cannot stand still, however, there is a danger of it being used as an excuse to sweep aside things of environmental value purely for economic reasons. For reasons of continuity one cannot ignore history and there must be serious regard for what is likely to be sacrificed and by so doing to ask what does it contribute to the community and the environment.

I understand that for infrastructure and reclamation reasons the public open space in front of the City Hall has regrettably been sacrificed together with the Queen's Pier. Such loss of public access and amenity in Central, where it has always been in short supply, can be ill-afforded and the means of escaping the hurly burly of the city centre has now been lost for all time.

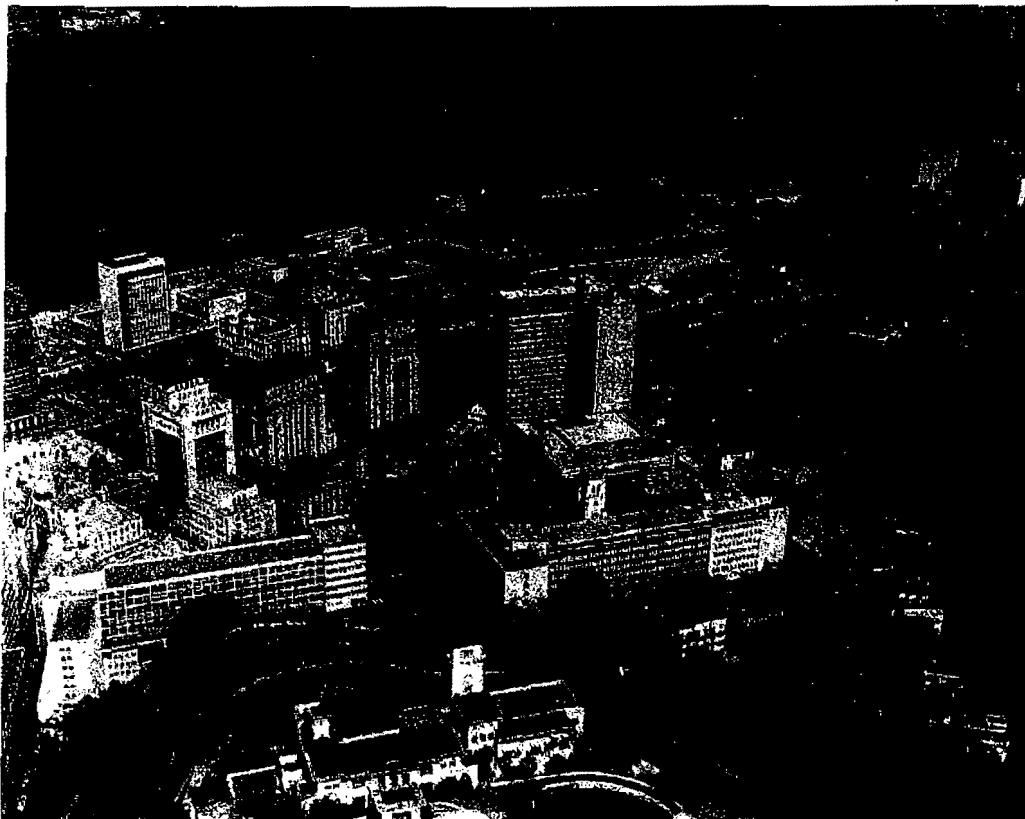
I have heard that the West Wing of the Central Government Offices is to be demolished to make way for another office/shopping development and this gives me some concern.

I well remember this wing of the Central Government Offices being built and how the design by my good friend, John Aitken, had been developed to respect and enhance the urban space connecting Cathedral Close, Battery Path, the French Mission Building and the West Wing of the Central Government Offices. I hate to think what the environmental

impact the building of yet another glass tower block in this location will have upon this otherwise combined intimate pleasant space of human scale.

All the projects in Hong Kong in which I was involved endeavoured to create human space around them, however small. I give my full support to the Government Hill Concern Group in its efforts to protect and improve the built environment in Hong Kong.

Ron Phillips is the co-architect for the Hong Kong City Hall and the Edinburgh Place complex; architect for Murray Building and Beaconsfield House (demolished)



The Central Government Offices in alignment with the axis of the Government House.
The City Hall complex can be seen near the harbour

Appendix 2

John Aitken (1923-2009)

Project architect of CGO West Wing

by Gillian Aitken

John Aitken, a post-war graduate of Edinburgh University, joined the HK Architectural Office in 1955 at a time of unprecedented development in Hong Kong. He spent most of his working career in service to the HK Public Works Department, rising to Director of Building Development several years before retirement in 1982. My father John Aitken was a keen amateur cinematographer, purchasing his first 8mm Bolex cine camera in 1956 thanks to a small inheritance. As well as capturing our cherished family records, he was also keenly interested in the landscape, buildings, people, and small detail of the world around him.

His first major architectural project soon after arriving in HK was the government offices, known as the West Wing. While my father did not much discuss his working life, he did talk of the West Wing project; the scope, scale and complexity, was not only a significant one for the time, but a significant undertaking for a new recruit, and he felt the weight of his responsibility. Years later, after a lifetime of executing HK housing and infrastructure development programs on an scale unknown to many in his field, it was the West Wing project he would most often recall. The daunting complexity of the site development (clearly a preoccupation, as shown in the accompanying cine footage), the difficulties in how best to retain the site's intrinsic character, including the vitally central rosewood tree, and his own personal gratification of successfully integrating a highly modern and visible building into a valued historic precinct. He would have been fascinated to learn of the keen interest in HK today to retain the West Wing, the ironies would not have escaped him.

After retirement, John Aitken was able to fully indulge his love of architectural history, film and travel, eventually settling in Sydney Australia until his death in 2009.

"The West Wing 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."

Central Government Offices, Historic and Architectural Appraisal, a report commissioned by the HKSAR Government and produced by Purcell Miller Tritton LLP (2009)