



香港建築師學會

The Hong Kong Institute of Architects

## **The Hong Kong Institute of Architects Views on Initiatives for Conserving Central**

We refer to your letter to us dated 14 October 2009 seeking the institute's support for the government's recently launched initiatives to conserve several heritage buildings/sites in Central based on an "Area-based Revitalisation" concept.

The Institute welcomes and supports the initiative. The creation of a quality and livable urban environment is a pre-requisite for a higher living standard for residents of Hong Kong. Given Hong Kong's exceptional density, the effects of co-ordinated conservation and improvement will benefit a very substantial numbers of people.

Strategically, the realization of a better quality urban environment that balances conservation with pedestrianisation and development surely also will benefit the territories overall economic competitiveness and attractiveness to both inward migration and investment.

We believe, regrettably, that a good deal of the media response Hong Kong has lately received with respect to its urban environment has a basis in truth : our urban habitat is harsh and unpleasant compared to many cities. This fact is not a reflection upon the competence or motivation of our predecessors but an inevitable legacy of the chaotic circumstances that gave rise to modern Hong Kong. The proposed Area-based conservation is a welcome and positive step towards realizing genuine improvement.

We offer some specific comments on the initiatives as follows :

### **A. General**

- Consideration should be given to the possible linking up of the various heritage sites (now rather scattered) and the making use of the Mid-Levels escalator system to form an easy-to-follow heritage walk and "urban spine" for both the Hong Kong people and the tourists.
- A public place concept should be imbued in each project as far as possible so that most of the revitalized venues will not be imposed with unnecessary management or security control, and thus they will become real free places for the enjoyment of the people at all reasonable times.
- Conservation shall not be limited to buildings only but the sites, squares, spaces, neighbourhood, and the settings associated is also important. The concept can help to avoid destroying a place while conserving a building.
- Design competitions shall be encouraged for the revitalization and development projects in order to obtain the most appropriate design. Achieving a most appropriate design is much more important than an early completion.
- Promotion of the historical significance of Central to the public is a key for the success of Conserving Central. In this regard, listening to the community's views on significant historic events, buildings and locations is important. A survey should be carried out to gather, analyze, and publicize these views through various media. The findings may also facilitate the design of new street furniture and street signage at all relevant locations to benefit those who are interested in the history of Central.



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- Attention should also be given to tailoring the marketing and management of the facilities (software) to the proposed uses and design of the revitalized buildings (hardware) to make Conserving Central a success.

**B. Sites 1 & 2 of New Central Harbour Front**

Being the only non-revitalisation project among the initiatives, the government's plan is in line with the earlier suggestions from HKIA and HEC in lowering the development density and providing more community/recreational uses and greenery. However, the proposition of a Private Proprietor Partnership and Build-Operate-Transfer arrangement for the development of Sites 1 & 2 and putting the ultimate facilities under private management should be fully justified. As privatizing the ownership/management of the developments may create fundamental conflict to the opportunity to open the completed community/recreational facilities to the public at all times; other alternative methods of project procurement must be provided for consideration/selection by the community prior to any commitment.

**C. Central Market**

The concept of creating an "urban oasis" and "breathing space" for this site is fully supported. HKIA firmly believes and has long been suggesting that the single most badly needed feature in all overly dense urban areas of Hong Kong is such "breathing spaces" among tall buildings and narrow streets. In fact this concept should be more widely applied to all urban renewal projects over Hong Kong. The sacrifice of monetary gains from sale of this prime piece of land also delivers a landmark statement to the world that HK is no longer aspiring only to financial returns with its land resources, but also to better the living environment and heritage conservation. As a Grade 3 heritage building with relatively non-appealing structure in the eyes of many people, a more liberal approach should be given to the revitalization plan, including possible alteration and demolition of parts of the building to facilitate a good example of adaptive re-use of existing building.

**D. Central Police Station Compound**

HKIA's comments have been given under a separate paper and further comments will be provided, pending the HKJC's revised design.

**E. Hollywood Road Married Police Quarters**

The public may be confused by the heritage value of the old Central College (which does not exist above ground anymore) and that of the Married Police Quarters buildings (which has comparatively limited heritage value). If the site is to be conserved as a heritage site, more has to be done to the remnants of the Central College and part of the two Married Police Quarters buildings may have to be removed to make way for this. Alternatively, if the target is to revitalize the two ungraded buildings into a creative art centre, the space between the two buildings should be rendered more flexible and be more integrated into the use of the whole complex.

**F. SKH Cluster of Heritage Buildings**

HKIA welcomes the Government's adoption of a flexible approach to heritage preservation in this project, i.e. allowing the transfer of development potential to another lot owned by the same private owner. However, the ultimate development on the subject site, including the new integrated community service building, should be subject to a master plan approval process so as to ensure compatibility of the building design and disposition with the conserved heritage buildings.



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**G. Central Government Office Ensemble**

To conserve the character and setting of the Government Hill, conservation of the entire Central Government Office Ensemble, including the West Wing, should be considered unless there is a convincing scheme that can duly address the key heritage and urban design concerns. The heritage value of the West Wing (completed only 3 years after the Central Block and only 5 years after the East Wing, in 1959) is comparable to the other two blocks. If the heritage value of the two warrants their conservation, so will that of the West Wing. In fact, the CGO Ensemble is a cluster of well-dispositioned building blocks in an exceptionally nice and green setting. To maintain the integrity of such a unique setting calls for the keeping of all the existing buildings intact as a preferred scenario. Removal of the West Wing is like amputating an arm from an otherwise integral body. The area surrounding the champion tree in front of the West Wing and Main Block entrances will never look the same with one of these two backdrops removed too. Furthermore, the West Wing was built on a sloping site among lush and dense vegetation. A redevelopment of this site into new commercial complex will very likely involve substantial demolition/site formation works and will unavoidably require the cutting down of a large number of aged and beautiful trees, like what happened to the Marine Police Headquarters Redevelopment in Tsimshatsui. This is not desirable even when there is no increase to the existing bulk or density upon redevelopment.

**H. Conversion of Murray Building into a Hotel**

The innovative and well thought out idea is supported.

**I. Old French Mission Building**

The declared monument has a very rich history of its own and has witnessed cycles of changes to its legal, political and physical surroundings. With its prominent location, it will be a very promising starting point of a heritage walk and the location of a Tourist Information Centre. The building can also house a museum of the constitutional history and legal archive of Hong Kong, and maybe a photo gallery of the ever-changing faces of Central itself. There are certainly more options and we support the Government's adopting an open process in taking forward the project.

The Institute and our members are obliged and well prepared to offer more assistance and advice on the execution of these initiatives; especially on the organization of design competitions, which is considered of utmost importance to the success of these revitalisation and development projects. Please feel free to contact HKIA for anything we could be of assistance.

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**May 2010**