

From: Louise Low
To:
Date: 14/03/2012 16:11
Subject: Status of Central Government Offices

To the Antiquities Advisory Board,

I understand that the Antiquities Advisory Board will make a crucial decision on the grading of the 3 CGO Buildings on the 22nd of March which will affect their status. As an architecture professional and a resident of Hong Kong for over 16 years, I would like to highlight some other dimensions to the current debate for your consideration.

The West Wing, together with the Central and East Wing, is plotted at a fengshui-blessed axis to the Government House and the Court of Final Appeal. It housed the body of the Civil Service workhorse tasked with the straight forward mandate of safeguarding the interests of Hong Kong and its people. The psyche geography of the triumvirate as Guardian of the City is etched in the undulating topography of Government Hill.

Built in the 1950s, the CGO's abandonment of the florid, conservative neo-classical colonial tradition and embrace of post-war Modernism paved the way for Hong Kong's first steps towards an image of the City as reflected by the "International Style" movement, a harbinger of new social and political ideals. The symbols of state power and class structure gave way to a more global and egalitarian aesthetic.

Spartan minimalism and structural exposure spoke of an honesty, integrity and openness, of a more idealistic era when "government" seemed closer to the ordinary lives of people as mirrored in its modest, streamlined architecture.

The meticulous documentation in defense of its essence can be found in a sensitive publication by CUHK, "The Greatest Form has No Shape" and on the website "<http://www.governmenthill.org/>", with embedded videos of significant emotional impact - an interview with the former Director of public Works, Michael Wright, describing the assiduous search for iron-free granite from Diamond Hill, as well as a silent film of the construction crew, both men and women, hewing stoically, shaping the land's destiny with the same tenacity and fierce determination of those used to "eating bitter" - scornful of obstacles, unfazed under the blistering heat of mid-summer.

It was truly a Hong Kong endeavor from its very foundation.

These records will likely be all that is left of the history and collective societal memory embodied in these structures should current government plans to sell and redevelop the much coveted site forge ahead.

While the announcement of intent tiptoes nervously around talk of more profit accruing to government coffers, the debate hinges on the relative "lack of architectural merits" of the buildings. Some find them "ugly."

Indeed, they are “ugly” among the diamond-cut designer towers in Central the way a well-worn white cotton shirt is “ugly” next to highly embellished, lavish designer fashion.


Grim, austere, dour, astringent, stern, stark...it resembles a monastery the architecture of which conveyed the clarity of purpose - that of chaste, dedicated service.

The aesthetic of simplicity and humility is understandably anathema to the current vogue for flashier architecture. It evokes a nostalgia of a different Hong Kong society. It offers a provocative contrast, and a rebuke to excesses.

As night follows day, the pendulum inevitably swings.

The economy of the past decade, inebriated on free-flowing liquidity and bubbly real estate, sprouted fantastical, mega-budget, iconoclastic architecture of an irrational exuberance in important cities all over the world. The precipitous fall of the ill-fated \$1.2billion Millennium Dome of London and the Experience Music Project of Seattle from feted trophies to mocked

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effigies come to mind.  pastedGraphic.pdf Experience Music Project, Seattle, by architect Frank Gehry

As bubbles burst and the hangover sets in, have our eyes made the necessary, timely adjustment in the cold light of day to judge with dry lucidity an architecture from a more sober age while under the lingering influence of the taste for intoxicating monumental follies? From the perspective of preservation, does aesthetics even matter? Styles emerge from the history of a society, and the imperative of history is to record and narrate past truths, to capture their meaning for the unfolding present and future.




Buildings are not preserved based on market worth, maintenance costs or beauty but on the merits of their social meaning, singularity, urban memory and historic relevance.

Examples of preserved modernity include Tel Aviv's “White City” which was awarded Unesco World Heritage status in 2003.

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 pastedGraphic_1.pdf  pastedGraphic_2.pdf  pastedGraphic_3.pdf Buildings of Tel Aviv's “White City”, awarded Unesco World Heritage status in 2003

In recognition of the need, the World Monument Fund launched “Modernism at Risk”, an advocacy and conservation program for Modern buildings in 2006. (see <http://www.wmf.org/advocacy/modernism> for examples of buildings) It also offers a WMF/Knoll Modernism Prize for well-designed architecture solutions that restore and preserve historic Modern buildings.

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http://209.68.16.34/slideshow_modern_2008/slides.html

Unfortunately in Hong Kong, there has been little recognition of the merits in many outstanding examples of Modern architecture which bear the hallmark of their era. The CGO buildings are a good example of this neglect. In other big cities, New York, London, Boston, Tokyo, etc., buildings of this caliber are usually marked for preservation as part of its architecture history.

This blog recounts Boston's recent efforts to spearhead preservation of their Modernist structures:

http://www.boston.com/community/blogs/this_land/2010/07/making_the_case_for_preservin

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In particular, there was a symposium "Boston Modern: The Spirit of Reinvention" held to debate the architecture merits of modern buildings that many deem "ugly". I have attached the (unfortunately long but only working link found) URL to the reduced pdf of the publication herewith:

https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:4WBxlie8scgJ:www.preservationnation.org/issues/modernism-recent-past/additional-resources/BostonModernBooklet_final_reduced.pdf+Boston+Modern:+The+Spirit+of+Reinvention&hl=en&gl=hk&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESjn6e69XAaetXu2tkVHvLmm_wA07cXKozvCygUkhXudhxUQWgt_Y4Fj59biBMjHIK29qSWsr8pZdkqYZMq9G8p3sulCFPHcRmmAms9tuXM6PVNsSGyFeWk0vsCk0aj59utS48UB&sig=AHIEtbSnLqyp1pEGM9Z4nfbKCtgZzeVyzQ

There may come a day when Hong Kong, with its proud architecture tradition, may follow suit and take stock of its Modern architecture history/era and recognize the potential of these assets found in the heart of the city.

For at the end of the day, the CGO was the beating heart of Hong Kong's life, civically, politically, psychologically. Its very site and its structure formed the proverbial Mountain (as in Sun Tze's "不動如山" the metaphor for psychological bulwark) for Hong Kong people as the fortunes of the City waxed and waned.

Hong Kong is the proverbial shopper's paradise, but will this symbolic "sale" be the last straw in the breaking down of the final frontier between the public interests and profits? What price the erasure of its history and a lobotomized memory?

Finally, I would like to thank the Board for its dedication in preserving important historic assets that provide an emotional anchor for Hong Kong. The modest architecture of the CGO is Hong Kong's history and memory writ large, they have been picketed, visited, treasured, appreciated and loved by generations. Many among us hope that their fate will not be subject to a cursory decision in favor of immediate profit, but have little recourse. Your openness to our appeal is therefore very much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

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