

## **Saving Our Historic Government Hill**

This paper summarizes the efforts made by the Government Hill Concern Group to date to raise public awareness about the heritage significance of the historic Government Hill and Central Government Offices, and our work which contributes to the consolidation of research on this subject matter.

The Government Hill Concern Group (the Concern Group) was formed in late 2010 in response to the government announcement of a sale and redevelopment plan for a large area of Government Hill including the Central Government Offices (CGO) West Wing. The Concern Group is made up of 21 heritage and environmental conservation NGOs and independent professionals, academics and concerned individuals, with the clear aim of establishing and defending the integrity of historic Government Hill and averting unfavourable development schemes planned for the area. Members of the group had made individual submissions/objections to the government during the official public consultation period (September to December 2010) but we saw the need to consolidate our efforts through a newly-formed alliance.

A public workshop was organized by the Concern Group before the end of 2010 to gather more opinions and it was decided that a town planning application should be made to propose a heritage precinct status for the CGO. An application was submitted to the Town Planning Board in January 2011. The Concern Group canvassed public support through signature campaigns during the public consultation period and thousands of signatures were received.

Tours for the public of the Government Hill complex were also organized by the Concern Group and led by academics including Dr Joseph Ting, Dr Chin Wan (cultural critic and ex-government official), Mr Simon Chu (former director of the Government Records Service), Mr Lee Yuet (retired senior architect) and our professional members. These tours were well attended by some hundreds of members of the public and media reports covered these tours, some of which appeared in the education and cultural sections of the newspapers.

Around February 2011, the Concern Group approached the Antiquities Advisory Board to express our serious concern about the proposed redevelopment of the CGO and called on the Board to discuss the heritage significance of the site. The Board, however, stated that there was no urgency for such discussion but agreed to take a tour of the site led by Dr Joseph Ting.

Members of the Concern Group spent considerable time researching into the history of the area. Ms Annelise Connell did extensive research into the history of Government Hill and the information was consolidated into the "Government Hill Compendium", published by the Concern Group in June 2011 and copies were circulated to the Town Planning Board, the Antiquities Advisory Board, various government departments and the media. The content was also posted on the Group's website at [www.governmenthill.org](http://www.governmenthill.org)

The Compendium is a collection of information, documents, references and articles covering the historical, architectural, cultural and social significance of historic Government Hill and Central Government Offices, with contributions from architecture professors, conservation architects, historians, researchers and writers. Our member green groups also provided studies of the Government Hill landscape and environmental assessment of the proposed redevelopment scheme. An analysis and critique of the government-commissioned historic and architectural appraisal was written by conservation architect Mr Ken Borthwick.

The 2011 July 1 rally was the time to raise further public awareness of the threat to Government Hill. Our Concern Group members and volunteers spent the day calling for public attention and collecting signatures to support our town planning application. As a result of this and many hours of street-side signature campaigns, a total of over 6000 individuals and groups submitted letters in support of our proposed “heritage precinct” zoning for the CGO.

In July 2011, the Concern Group contacted **Forum UNESCO – University and Heritage**, an academic network of UNESCO, to raise its attention of the threat to Hong Kong's Government Hill. Eventually Forum UNESCO issued a flash information on 9 September 2011 titled “*Call for academic support: Hong Kong Government Hill at threat*” to its international members. As the Concern Group believed that the conservation of Government Hill was of importance for Hong Kong, China and the international community, it was our intention to raise international awareness of this matter.

The Development Bureau of the HKSAR Government wrote to Forum UNESCO in response to our call, and on 3 October 2011 Forum UNESCO published Development Bureau's letter. The Bureau defended the redevelopment scheme by citing the Burra Charter, saying that the scheme was in line with conservation principles outlined by the Burra Charter. In particular, it quoted Articles 5.2 and 22 of the Charter in defense of the redevelopment scheme.

This letter caught the attention of Australia ICOMOS, the organization which drafted the Burra Charter. Australia ICOMOS then asked Dr Hilary du Cros, a member and a heritage specialist residing in Hong Kong, to investigate into this matter. Dr du Cros subsequently advised the Concern Group and newspaper reporters that the Hong Kong government had clearly abused the Burra Charter and the redevelopment scheme was not in compliance with the Charter.

Members of the Concern Group also attended international heritage conferences to raise further awareness. Ms Katty Law attended the *2011 International Conference on World Heritage at Risk* in Ravello, Italy (14-16 September 2011) and made a presentation on Hong Kong Government Hill and met with international heritage experts from ICOMOS, ICCROM, the World Bank and overseas universities to discuss the threat faced by our heritage site. Some of the high-level officials expressed concern and agreed to look into the matter.

On the research front, further consolidation of information about the architecture of the CGO has enriched our understanding of the site, including the research efforts by three architecture professors from the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Prof Vito Bertin, Gu Daqing and Leng Woo). An exhibition titled “*The Greatest Form has No Shape: Three Exemplary Works of Hong Kong Modern Architecture*” was opened from 5 November to 17 December 2011 at the Conservancy Association Centre for Heritage in Sai Ying Pun. A research booklet was also published which includes detailed information and analysis about the CGO West Wing.

On 23 November 2011, the Antiquities Advisory Board met the representatives of the Government Hill Concern Group and held a short discussion. On the same day, the Board agreed to grade the CGO complex following a study by the Board's expert panel. The grading is yet to be announced.

Later in the year (27 November-2 December 2011), two members of the Concern Group (Ms Cynthia Lee and Ms Katty Law) attended the *17<sup>th</sup> ICOMOS General Assembly* in Paris, a large gathering of the world's heritage conservation community. The two members spoke about Hong Kong Government Hill during the assembly's scientific symposium and held discussions with heritage experts from Australia, Britain, Japan, China and other countries. This attracted concern

from members of the ICOMOS who later advised the Concern Group to make a formal submission to ICOMOS to raise international alert. The Concern Group proceeded to submit all the necessary documentation to the ICOMOS in the early months of 2012.

*The International Conference on Heritage Conservation* organized by the HKSAR government in Hong Kong in December 2011 was well attended by members of the Government Hill Concern Group. Information of our Government Hill campaign was distributed to many of the attendees and our members spoke vigorously about the need to protect Government Hill. The President of ICOMOS Advisory Committee, Mr John Hurd, a guest speaker in the conference, echoed our view that Government Hill should be conserved when interviewed by the local media (RTHK Radio 3).

In January 2012, an exhibition titled “*Soul of the City*”, organized by architect Mr Lee Yuet and members of the Concern Group, was held at the University of Hong Kong (Convocation Room, Main Building). We were happy to have the support of Mr Michael Wright, the 99-year-old chief architect of the CGO who agreed to be interviewed by us in London, and a video of the interview was shown in the exhibition and through media broadcast to the Hong Kong public. Mr Wright is strongly against the sale and demolition of the West Wing - he confirmed that the three wings of the CGO were designed as one and were good-quality modernist architecture. He cited the efforts made by the Public Works Department with the aid of HKU Geology Professor to find the right granite from local sources (Diamond Hill) for building the CGO. He called for the conservation of the entire CGO complex, and this was echoed by his fellow ex-colleague, Mr Ronald Phillips, co-architect of the Hong Kong City Hall, who wrote a message to the Concern Group in support of the campaign. We also got in touch with Ms Gillian Aitken in Sydney, daughter of the architect of the West Wing, John Aitken, who passed us a video filmed by John in the 1950s showing the challenging slope and foundation work for building the West Wing. This provides further evidence of the architectural value of the building. Both videos can be viewed on our website

[www.governmenthill.org](http://www.governmenthill.org)

The exhibition was well attended by members of the public, academics, professionals and ex-government officials including Ms Libby Wong (ex-secretary of health and social welfare) and Sir David Akers-Jones (ex-chief secretary), both of them gave support to our campaign. The exhibition was followed by cover stories on Government Hill by local magazines (U-Magazine and Ming Pao Weekly), and a RTHK programme (Hong Kong Connection) featuring differential treatments of Ho Tung Garden and Government Hill.

On various occasions the Concern Group met legislators, district councillors, AAB members and government officials to discuss issues related to the conservation of Government Hill. Public opinions regarding new uses of the CGO were collected through public workshops and tours. The Concern Group is committed to on-going research of this important heritage site and educational activities including public tours will continue to be conducted. A second exhibition will be organized in June 2012 and a booklet on Government Hill will soon be published. Our town planning application will be heard by the Town Planning Board in due course. It is hoped that this campaign could consolidate public knowledge of the significance of Government Hill and avert the unacceptable redevelopment plan for the area. **We believe that the entire CGO complex should be conserved** – by heritage grading and a monument status, as well as the designation of a Special Protected Area for Government Hill as a whole. Appropriate new public uses of the CGO site should open up this community-owned space for the people of Hong Kong and the rest of the world to enjoy its beautiful landscape and learn about the history of our wonderful city.

**Government Hill Concern Group**

**Hong Kong**

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