

Sustainability of Conservation and Preservation of the Built Heritage in Urban Design – A Hong Kong Perspective

Lo Ann Chien, Ann¹

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Building & Real Estate, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HKSAR, China, bsaclo@polyu.edu.hk

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Abstract

Conservation and preservation of built heritage with historic, architectural and cultural significance is one of the major urban design attributes to enhance cultural and historical continuity of a city. Such conservation enhancement generally improves the image and environment of the city at both micro and macro levels. But Hong Kong is predominantly market driven in its economy in particular in the land use and property development. Yet, most heritage buildings in Hong Kong are usually located at prime urban sites or old districts that are in demand of redevelopment and urban renewal. The situation is accentuated with government's shortage of finance to invest in the conservation of built heritage and the pendulum situation of government's conservation policy. It is against this background of complexity that this paper attempts to discuss the feasible sustainable practices of conservation and preservation of the built heritage in urban design in a changing market economic development context with Hong Kong in perspective.

1. Introduction

The State Sustainability Strategy for Western Australia has recognized sustainable development through her commitment to "sustainable urban design" of cities – "to create community-oriented city spaces and networks ... and ecologically sensitive design" (Council for Sustainable Development of HKSAR, 2004).

Hong Kong, likewise, has recognized that sustainable urban design is one of the ways forward to improve the quality of life. A high quality and sustainable total built environment of Hong Kong commensurate with her natural and historical setting is to be provided through urban design attributes. However, how our heritage can be conserved in urban design in a place where it is predominantly governed by market economy is in question. Hence, how our history of continuity, identity and character of the city can be ensured.

2. Objectives of Heritage Conservation

Conservation and preservation of built heritage with historic, architectural and cultural significance is one of the major urban design attributes to enhance cultural and historical continuity of a city. Through the conservation of built heritage, the image and environment of the city is thus generally enhanced and improved. At the micro level: the district characters together with its socio-cultural development or even political significance are preserved. At macro level, the traditional local culture, "enhancement of national cohesion" and "national image" (Department of Planning, HKSAR, 2004) are then able to be fostered. It is towards these directions that the built heritage conservation of Hong Kong is hoped to achieve. And it is with these in mind that the heritage conservation of Hong Kong aims at building Hong Kong's "national image", maintaining the residents' "team spirit" and "enhancing [their] sense of belonging" (Department of Planning, HKSAR, 2004).

3. Issues and Opportunities

The ever changing metropolitan landscape of Hong Kong “reflects the perpetual, rapid evolution of the economic force” and the characteristic swift tempo of the city’s dynamism and changes. Both of which fuel the motivation of flexibility and adaptability. Therefore, “any obstacles inhibiting changes are to be removed”. (Kiang, 1991). Many other socio-cultural needs are therefore being sacrificed. Many buildings/districts of heritage significance and values have to give way to the on-slaughter of market economy in the guise of redevelopment and urbanization.

In fact, most heritage buildings in Hong Kong are usually located at some prime urban sites of the metro or old districts that are in demand of urban renewal and redevelopment for revitalization. So, it is understandable that “conservation occupying land and inhabiting in-situ changes and economic expansion, [which] does not dovetail with the interest of the forcible economic development process” (ibid), are to be torn down to make way for redevelopment. This phenomenon is increased in particular with the shortage of usable land. Moreover, any insistence of built heritage conservation is often seen in the light of prohibiting the redevelopment of metro Hong Kong and hence distorting the mechanism of market economy and its functions, which is detrimental to both economic development and society benefit (ibid).

Besides, this crucial issue of land use and development pressure mentioned, the problems of heritage conservation are multi-facet and the situation is accentuated with government’s shortage of finance to invest in the conservation of built heritage and the pendulum situation of government’s attitude towards conservation particularly in the absence of a comprehensive and integrated conservation policy/strategy.

This is well manifested in the recent cases of the conservation projects of the Marine Headquarter and Central Police Station respectively. The former has literally been turned into a real estate project by the developer whilst the latter is in debates as to why it should be put for public tender (for fear that history repeats itself) instead of government’s consent for the proposal to turn this into a cultural conservation project designed and operated by the University of Hong Kong.

In spite of the legitimization of destroying cultural and historic heritage because of economic progress and redevelopment, the declared heritage buildings in Hong Kong can be conserved and operated in a self-supported manner under the market economy. With the successful overseas examples, there are feasible sustainable practices of conservation and preservation of built heritage in urban design to sustain the ever changing and progressing market economic development. The feasible sustainable conservation practices and preservation for sustainable enhancement of the built heritage in urban design for Hong Kong are thus presented.

4. Sustainable Practices

“The term ‘conservation’ refers to [built] heritage protection in a general sense whereas ‘preservation’ applies where a place is kept in its existing state with a minimum of interference except to prevent or forestall deterioration”. (Consultation Document Review of Built Heritage Conservation Policy, 2004). It is inevitable that conservation will involve certain adaptive changes of the built heritage which will be kept in the minimum and within acceptable limit. In another words, ‘conservation’ has the meaning to conserve for sustainability. Therefore, in order that a built heritage is to sustain, both processes of conservation and preservation are simultaneously in progress.

4.1 Institutional Policy

An integrated and comprehensive conservation policy and proposal and strategy of built heritage together with the selection criteria/model should be implemented for holistic approach to heritage conservation instead of the present inconsistent and seemingly ad-hoc action. The Built Heritage Conservation Policy in Hong Kong is under review since 2004. The integrated and comprehensive conservation policy/strategy is important in the sustainability of economic growth, land use and urban planning & urban design of Hong Kong. This will avoid the long debates as to-what-to-do-with over heritage conservation on some urban sites. Only through the integrated and comprehensive conservation policy/strategy, the unique built heritage can be both rehabilitated, preserved and conserved for sustainable development and facilitating the retention of the inherent characteristics of the buildings or different districts. This strategic policy is consummate with the

Policy Address of the Chief Executive in 1999 “the concept of preserving our heritage should be incorporated into all projects for developing old areas”. A comprehensive urban design with conservation planning of the built heritage, hence, may be envisaged to improve the urban quality of Hong Kong Metro.

A sustainable selection criteria/model is to systematically select and implement built heritage for conservation in Hong Kong respectively. Such selection model should take into account of (i) the heritage value and significance of the buildings, (ii) the potential land use and planning development, (iii) economic values and significance (ability to generate revenue for self-support operation of conservation) and (iv) conservation and preservation opportunities and choices of adaptation, etc. Built heritage will then be selected with a balanced view. The criteria of selection and declaration should be consistent and transparent and made known to the general public. This will avoid the present debates as to which and why certain built heritage should be conserved and the authority of such proposals.

At present, our heritage buildings are protected only under the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance (Cap. 53). The executive arm of the Ordinance is the Antiquities and Monuments Office which serves under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. Only heritages of indisputable significance will be recommended by the Antiquities Advisory Board to the Government for approval for declaration of protection and preservation. Focus of the policy is more on preservation rather than conservation. Since the enactment of the Ordinance in 1971, only 79 monuments (i.e. including archaeological sites, rock carvings, monuments and heritage buildings [Appendix 1]) were declared and amongst them most of the heritage buildings are found in the urban metro of Hong Kong Island [Appendix 2].

With the implementation of an integrated and comprehensive conservation policy together with the sustainable built heritage selection model for conservation, more valuable heritage buildings on urban sites may be preserved and conserved without any prohibition of economic growth on land use.

4.2 Administrative Initiative

A single central cultural and heritage authority should be set up and empowered with authority to co-ordinate, liaise and implement the proposed integrated comprehensive conservation policy and the actual technical process of conservation in practice including planning, development control, preservation, restoration, financial management, land management and property management. This authority should be able to co-ordinate across the concerned and related government departments e.g. the Antiquities and Monuments Office under the Leisure and Cultural Service Department, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA), Tourism Strategy Group with its Sub-group of Heritage and Culture, and Heritage Tourism Task Force, both of which under the Tourism Association, Planning Department, etc. for implementation. This is to ensure co-ordination and integration for effective implementation of conservation and preservation of built heritage instead of scattering through these different government departments with their own domains and agendas over conservation. With this central authority of conservation of built heritage, the proposed integrated and comprehensive conservation policy can be enforced at both macro and micro level over Hong Kong.

The set up of this single central body is to curtail the insufficient support for the enforcement of the Ordinance and hence the Antiquities and Monuments Office which can only propose a list of heritage for protection. It has no control over any subsequent changes of nature or identity of the declared heritage, e.g. Gut Hing Wai, the walled village in Kam Tin. Although the site was declared, yet only the wall of the village was preserved. “The buildings inside have already undergone a large scale conversion and rebuilding which renders a complete change of identity and characters of this historical site” (Kiang, 1991). This then loses the meanings of heritage conservation and preservation.

This authority is to work complementary to the Culture and Heritage Commission set up by the government in 2000 to advise policies and funding priorities of culture and arts. Since cultural and heritage conservation is just one of the Commission’s responsibilities only, this central cultural and heritage authority will help focus particularly on the conservation issues, its achievement and sustainability in the overall urban design of the city.

4.3 Planning Incentives

The pattern of ownership makes conservation difficult to achieve since the government does not adopt a compulsory purchase along side with the declaration of listed buildings and hence rendered its effort void. For those which are not declared for protection, those built heritages are left empty and deteriorating/dilapidated and have to be demolished for redevelopment.

Incentive to heritage conservation should be provided to encourage potential developers to propose/implement conservation initiatives through “planning instrument such as concessions, transfer of plot ratio and waiver of use or bulk requirements” (Planning Department, 2003). Transfer of plot ratio allows the developer to transfer the development right/potential from the conserved heritage site to another. Such incentive practice is common in Sydney and New York City. Planning concessions such as concession to plot ratio, parking provision or waiving of parking deficiency charge can encourage best use of land together with the conserved buildings. In fact, both New South Wales and Singapore are practicing such. Moreover, the waiver of use and bulk requirements are proposed to apply to heritage buildings and landmarks for their adaptive uses for sustainable development e.g. to waive the land use zoning restriction, land use regulations, etc.

4.4 Financial Incentives

“The cultural trait of an area lies in the identity of the place. Design, history and surroundings distinguish one from another areas. Historical attributes provide a distinguishable identity for the [residents of Hong Kong] to satisfy their need for cultural and psychological attachment and aggrandizement” (Kiang, 1991). To achieve this end, financial initiatives should be rewarded to the heritage owners or developers in the form of tax rebate or reduction or heritage valuation for land tax so as to support the conserved buildings particularly in the maintenance/preservation expenses with their own generated income revenues.

4.5 Urban Design Guidelines

Besides design guidelines for the built heritage preservation, conservation in the form of heritage precinct or cluster proves to be effective in providing comprehensive protection and historic and character enhancement to the built heritage buildings, the environs and the neighbourhood (Planning Department, 2003). It can assure the nearby developments to be compatible to the heritage precinct. The heritage precinct functions as an integral part of the neighbouring community and the heritage buildings within it entail such uses as outlets, cafes, galleries, museums and offices of charity, cultural or community organizations. Such may be the solution that can be implemented to the aforesaid Central Police Station. Revenue may be thus generated for the sustainable support of the heritage buildings.

Heritage precincts can be valuable assets to cultural tourism (ibid). This may help promote the tourist industry in Hong Kong. A rich source of generating revenue can be tapped for both conservation and preservation works. Conservation for sustainability in the urban design of the city is thus enhanced.

5. Conclusion

Many of the sustainable practices for the enhancement of built heritage conservation are insights gained from the valuable international experiences. These practices have proven their values and feasibilities in fostering conservation works. Incentives are a powerful means to motivate the desired heritage preservation on one hand and to render economic progress for redevelopment on the other hand. Hong Kong should borrow these good practices to cultivate her own unique conservation and preservation strategy for sustainable conservation implementation in urban planning and urban design. Along side with this, a holistic approach of heritage conservation with well co-ordinated implementation of planning, land use, development and urban design control and cultural tourism promotion (both local and overseas) is the key to success (ibid). Only through the balance of conflicts and competing forces of conservation and market economy amongst the different stakeholders and by means of co-ordination and consistency of implementation in planning and urban design can conservation be promoted sustainably in this predominantly economic and financial world without impeding the development process of a city like Hong Kong.

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Appendix 1

Declared Monuments as at 26 March 2004

1. Rock Carving at Big Wave Bay, Hong Kong Island
2. Rock Carving on Kau Sai Chau, Sai Kung
3. Rock Carving on Tung Lung Island, Sai Kung
4. Rock Inscription at Joss House Bay, Sai Kung
5. Rock Carving at Shek Pik, Lantau Island
6. Rock Carving on Po Toi Island
7. Tung Chung Fort, Lantau Island
8. Duddell Street Steps and Gas Lamps, Central
9. Tung Lung Fort, Tung Lung Island, Sai Kung
10. Sam Tung Uk Village, Tsuen Wan
11. Fan Lau Fort, Lantau Island
12. Old District Office North, Tai Po
13. Sheung Yiu Village, Sai Kung
14. Rock Carving on Cheung Chau
15. Tin Hau Temple, Causeway Bay
16. Rock Carving at Lung Ha Wan, Sai Kung
17. Island House, Yuen Chau Tsai, Tai Po
18. Site of Chinese Customs Station, Junk Island, Sai Kung
19. Man Lun Fung Ancestral Hall, San Tin, Yuen Long
20. Remains of Ancient Kiln, Wun Yiu Village, Tai Po
21. Stone Circle, Fan Lau, Lantau Island
22. Tung Chung Battery, Lantau Island
23. Man Mo Temple, Tai Po
24. Hong Kong Observatory, Tsim Sha Tsui
25. Old Stanley Police Station
26. The Exterior of the Old Supreme Court, Central
27. The Exterior of the Main Building, the University of Hong Kong
28. Rock Carving at Wong Chuk Hang
29. Old Tai Po Market Railway Station
30. Liu Man Shek Tong Ancestral Hall, Sheung Shui
31. Old House, Hoi Pa Village, Tsuen Wan
32. Tai Fu Tai Mansion, San Tin, Yuen Long
33. Kun Lung Gate Tower, Lung Yeuk Tau, Fanling
34. Yeung Hau Temple, Ha Tsuen, Yuen Long
35. Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb, Sham Shui Po
36. Flagstaff House, Cotton Tree Drive, Central
37. Former French Mission Building, Battery Path, Central
38. Law Uk Hakka House, Chai Wan
39. Old House, Wong Uk Village, Sha Tin
40. Old Wan Chai Post Office
41. Old Pathological Institute, Caine Lane, Sheung Wan
42. Western Market, Sheung Wan
43. Former Kowloon-Canton Railway Clock Tower, Tsim Sha Tsui
44. Kang Yung Study Hall, Sha Tau Kok
45. Former Kowloon British School, Tsim Sha Tsui
46. Main Building of St. Stephen's Girls' College, Lyttelton Road, Mid-Levels
47. Yi Tai Study Hall, Kam Tin, Yuen Long
48. Enclosing Walls and Corner Watch Towers of Kun Lung Wai, Lung Yeuk Tau, Fanling
49. The Exterior of the Main Building, the Helena May, Garden Road, Central
50. Entrance Tower of Ma Wat Wai, Lung Yeuk Tau, Fanling
51. Former Marine Police Headquarters Compound, Tsim Sha Tsui
52. Gate Lodge of the Former Mountain Lodge, the Peak
53. Central Police Station Compound, Hollywood Road, Central
54. Former Central Magistracy, Arbuthnot Road, Central
55. Victoria Prison Compound, Old Bailey Street, Central
56. The Exterior of University Hall, the University of Hong Kong
57. The Exterior of Hung Hing Ying Building, the University of Hong Kong
58. The Exterior of Tang Chi Ngong Building, the University of Hong Kong
59. Government House, Upper Albert Road, Central
60. St. John's Cathedral, Garden Road, Central
61. I Shing Temple, Wang Chau, Yuen Long
62. Remnants of the South Gate of Kowloon Walled City, Kowloon Walled City Park
63. Former Yamen Building of Kowloon Walled City, Kowloon Walled City Park
64. Entrance Tower & Enclosing Walls of Lo Wai, Lung Yeuk Tau, Fanling
65. Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall, Lung Yeuk Tau, Fanling
66. Cheung Shan Monastery, Ping Che, Fanling
67. King Law Ka Shuk, Tai Po
68. Cheung Ancestral Hall, Shan Ha Tsuen, Yuen Long
69. Fan Sin Temple, Sheung Wun Yiu, Tai Po
70. North and West Blocks of St. Joseph's College, Kennedy Road, Central
71. Waglan Lighthouse, Waglan Island
72. Tang Lung Chau Lighthouse, Tang Lung Chau, Kap Shui Mun, Tsuen Wan
73. Tang Ancestral Hall, Ping Shan, Yuen Long
74. Yu Kiu Ancestral Hall, Ping Shan, Yuen Long
75. Tsui Sing Lau Pagoda, Ping Shan, Yuen Long
76. Hung Shing Temple, Kau Sai Chau, Sai Kung
77. Tin Hau Temple, Lung Yeuk Tau, Fanling
78. Hau Ku Shek Ancestral Hall, Ho Sheung Heung, Sheung Shui
79. Morrison Building, Hoh Fuk Tong, Tuen Mun

Source: Leisure and Cultural Services Department – Antiquities and Monuments Office, HKSAR Government

截至二〇〇四年三月三十日的法定古蹟
Declared Monuments as at 30 March 2004

