

In the Shadow of Skyscrapers— Hong Kong's Colonial Buildings Await New Custodians

A favorite expression these days in Hong Kong is “the run-up to 1997,” when China regains control from Britain of the approximately 700 square miles comprising this dense metropolis (and often less-dense 236 islands) located at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta. Hong Kong's gleaming architectural trademarks—its chock-a-block skyscrapers—might mistakenly convey the impression that all construction is new here, and it is true that the pace of high-rise building continues to be startling. However, those relatively few historic buildings that have survived blistering, free-market land speculation are testimonies to the fact that some of Hong Kong's colonial legacy is surviving (sometimes by a thread) the fierce pressure to demolish. How?

Two strategies have prevailed: either “landmark” the building in question, or find a new use that will sustain it in the territory's heady marketplace. Landmarking, or “declaring it a monument” as it is generally known in Hong Kong, at first seems to provide a thicker blanket of protection by virtue of the two major provisions that come with the declaration: no demolition and no major exterior modification without government permission. Those making the case for declaration struggle with the question of significance, and the procedures are time-consuming and therefore costly. (Given the hot market for land, however, the question of how to retain a proper context for low-scale historic structures in the midst of gargantuan neighbors is more difficult to answer.)¹ Only 58 buildings in Hong Kong have been “declared,” the most recent three, the University of Hong Kong's oldest buildings, in mid-September 1995.² The Antiquities & Monuments Office, or AMO, which advises the Hong Kong Government about maintenance of its historic heritage, plays a key role in the declaration process. However, as in many jurisdictions, one arm of “the government” might wrestle with another over the issue of what should be saved in the full context of urban change. The AMO struggles to do so in the context of other powerful government offices such as Housing,

Transportation, the Architectural Services Department (which has its own Antiquities Section), the Land Development Corporation and, most recently, the Hong Kong Police, which is considering selling one of its “declared” historic properties (c. 1884) to raise revenue for new facilities.³ To minimize charges of being arbitrary, and to provide a solid base for managing and protecting cultural resources that come under its domain, the AMO in August 1995 began a comprehensive survey of historic buildings throughout the territory funded with a grant of US\$500,000 from the Hong Kong Jockey Club to be completed in two years. This will be part of the “run-up” to July 1997 as it relates to landmarking monuments. What China will do with such a survey, with the “declaration” law (based upon British conservation experience), and the administrative procedures and offices now set in place remains to be seen.

A much more common tactic to preserve colonial buildings in Hong Kong is to pinpoint a more marketable use for them. One of the best examples of this strategy is Western Market (near the Sheung Wan area west of Central), a former meat market constructed in 1906 that was slated for demolition because of a road-widening plan until the AMO, in 1989, convinced city planners to consider renovating the exterior, gutting the interior, and remodeling it as a more upscale retail space (similar to several American and British precedents). In the four years since project completion, Western Market has become a commercial success and a preservation precedent. In 1993, for example, when the foundations of a small (c. 1913) post office substation in the downtown Wanchai area were damaged during the construction of a highrise neighbor, the government decided to change the function of the building and create Hong Kong's first environmental resource center there, in part because of the positive example of Western Market and in part perhaps to atone for the demolition a few years earlier of the Wanchai Methodist Church, which had not been declared a monument.

Another example of what might be termed the “history making money” strategy lies atop the old Bank of China (1949), across the street from the Hong Kong government's Legislative Council (Legco), itself housed in a “declared” colonial-style monument (1912). When I.M. Pei designed the new Bank of China building in the 1980s, one question was what would occur to the old headquarters, sandwiched in between Pei's tower and another new Hong Kong icon,

Norman Foster's Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank Building. On the top three floors of the 15-story, old Bank of China is the recently renovated "China Club," where bank officers from China used to dine lavishly when they transacted business in capitalistic Hong Kong, and where private entrepreneurs have re-created the historic interior (a distinctive "Chinese-Western Art Deco") and are marketing it very successfully as a swank restaurant.

The thirst for innovative marketing in Hong Kong is even bringing a historic building back from the dead. Murray House, a three-story military barracks (1843), stood on the site of Pei's Bank of China building until 1982 when it was dismantled and stored in a warehouse. Now there is a plan by the Hong Kong Housing Department to resurrect and re-assemble the Murray House carcass by 1998 as a mixed-use retailing structure (along the lines of Western Market) in Stanley, on the south side of Hong Kong Island.⁴

Can other historic, Western-style buildings avoid dismembering or demolition? Struggles continue on several fronts. In the Hong Kong Mid-Levels, Board members of the Ohel Leah Synagogue (1902) are unsure whether to renovate or demolish their place of worship, a structure that was nearly razed six years ago.⁵ Trustees of St. John's Cathedral (1849) have been more fortunate with their site, which has also experienced intense development pressure. Hutchison Whampoa Company, owned by one of Hong Kong's richest tycoons, Li Ka-shing, recently received permission to build an 80-story skyscraper adjacent to St. John's. To mitigate some of the damage to the historic context of the site, however, Hutchison agreed to pay for the ongoing maintenance of the cathedral.⁶ Another gnawing question centers around the issue of how to preserve "temporary housing units" constructed by the thousands throughout Hong Kong after a tragic 1953 fire decimated a squatter settlement in Shekkipmei (Kowloon). The Housing Authority wants to demolish all such "temporary housing," most of which is now substandard. However, the AMO is in favor of preserving some of the units as tangible reminders of how thousands of Hong Kong residents lived in the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, Hong Kong is facing the question of how to preserve its more recent past, just as so many other societies are grappling with the same question (see CRM, Vol. 18, No. 8, 1995).⁷

In the "run-up" to 1997, "run-down" cultural resources of all styles and functions in Hong Kong await the attention they deserve. Those resources that relate directly to Chinese heritage now seem better situated for that attention, although the cases cited above suggest that Western-style resources are not being shunned. Two years ago, Hong Kong's first "Heritage Trail" was initiated, thanks to the efforts of the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust (established in 1992 to increase public awareness about Hong Kong's cultural legacy), the Hong Kong Jockey Club, and the Tang Family clan, whose nine historic buildings spread over one kilometer at Ping Shan in the New Territories form the basis for the trail. Other clan buildings, such as temples and ancestral halls in the New Territories, are currently being rehabilitated under the guidance of the Antiquities and Monuments Office. The "Chi Lin" Buddhist Nunnery at Diamond Hill on Kowloon is even creating its own historic monument from scratch, building a Tang Dynasty temple where none ever existed, according to architectural principles found in extant Chinese examples.

Tang-Revival temples and Gothic-Revival cathedrals, both in the shadow of skyscrapers—such is the reality of Hong Kong. When new political custodians take the helm after the run-up to July 1, 1997, they will inherit a host of cultural resources requiring attention. How they manage those resources will be one of the many as-yet-unanswerable questions associated with the switch from British colony to Chinese Special Administrative Region (SAR).

Notes

- ¹ Two recent cases in the territory relating to the issue of how to permit the erection of tall buildings amid those of lower scale concern the Old High Street Hospital on Hong Kong Island and the 30-story extension of the Peninsula Hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon.
- ² "Historic label for places of learning," *South China Morning Post*, 15 September 1995.
- ³ "Police review real estate stock," *South China Morning Post*, 11 October 1995.
- ⁴ "Building for historic comeback," *South China Morning Post*, 11 September 1995.
- ⁵ "Fury over fate of synagogue," *South China Morning Post*, 13 September 1995.
- ⁶ "Hilton plan wins final approval," *South China Morning Post*, 16 September 1995.
- ⁷ "Slum Homes Preserved for Posterity," *South China Morning Post*, 1 January 1996.

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