Conserving Hong Kong

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**Victoria Harbour and the city of Victoria**

Victoria Harbour has always been inseparably linked to Hong Kong’s development. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, if not for the harbour, there would be no Hong Kong as we know it today. The birth of Hong Kong as a city can be traced to the moment, in 1841, when Captain Elliot of the British East India Company raised the Union Jack with little fanfare on a little knoll on a small sub-tropical island off the southeastern coast of China, and declared its possession on behalf of His Majesty’s Government. When the British Government learned of its latest possession, it was not impressed. The British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, went as far as describing Hong Kong contemptuously as ‘a barren island, which will never be a mart of trade’. But thrive Hong Kong did, in part thanks to its natural deep harbour, protected from the worst of the seasonal typhoons by the land masses of the island and Kowloon Peninsula. The harbour, named after one of Britain’s most revered monarchs, has provided Hong Kong the essential means to be developed as a trading port and to flourish as a commercial city.

Thus, the northern coast of Hong Kong Island underwent a number of reclamations, so much so that almost no natural coastline remains today.

At the turn of the century, Hong Kong’s territory became definitive, and it included Hong Kong Island (acquired after the First Opium War), Kowloon Peninsula (after the Second Opium War) and a large expanse of hinterland known as the New Territories, as well as a number of assorted outlying islands (leased from the Imperial Chinese Government at the end of the nineteenth century). By the mid-twentieth century, the urban areas of Hong Kong had expanded to cover most of the northern coast of Hong Kong Island and almost the entire Kowloon Peninsula. The heart of urban Hong Kong, home to all major government and financial institutions, was (and still is) Central district, commonly known as ‘Central’. By this time, Central had developed to become truly worthy of the city’s namesake – it was a district filled with exemplary colonial architecture of the Victorian era, and enriched with those of the Edwardian and Art Deco period.

The first half of the twentieth century saw little noticeable change to the architectural character of Central. The pace of change quickened in the 1950s, when Hong Kong began industrialising and transformed itself from a trading port city into a regional manufacturing industrial hub. Modern mid-rise commercial buildings began to appear along the skyline. By the late 1970s, Hong Kong underwent another transformation, as the labour-intensive manufacturing industry started its exodus to the post-Mao open-door China to take advantage of the abundant cheap labour. The economy shifted to finance and service-based industries for international companies. The demand for higher-quality commercial and
residential property enabled the government to adopt a high land price policy to generate revenue. Hong Kong’s economy was set on the path of dependence on commercial and residential property development. This new economy drastically quickened the pace of change in Central as the familiar Victorian and Edwardian buildings of the pervious eras were rapidly pulled down to make way for high-rise commercial developments that could better exploit the land’s increased plot ratio. Central would never be the same again.

Enter heritage conservation
It has been argued that if the Hong Kong Government had had better conservation foresight in the 1970s, Central could have become a historic centre with architectural showpieces of the Victorian, Edwardian and Art Deco traditions, raising the quality of life and well-being for all of Hong Kong’s inhabitants. Unfortunately for Central, the government took on built-heritage conservation as part of its official portfolio (in 1976) at a time when Hong Kong was starting to shift to the land and property development-driven economy that continues to prevail today. In order not to impede mega-revenue generating development projects, conservation, particularly in urban areas, was given low priority. Conservation was relegated to part of the leisure and cultural services (in the same league as the role of public museums), overseen by an appointed advisory board, whose early membership consisted of a number of people directly or indirectly associated with the property development industry, and executed by an agency low in the governmental hierarchy. The telling sign of the lack of priority given to built-heritage conservation lies in the lack of an open, comprehensive policy (such a policy is still in the process of formulation at the time of writing). The conservation of buildings in the urban areas, where land and property prices are phenomenally high, was (and still is today) carried out in an ad-hoc manner, if it was carried out at all, and dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Since the enactment of legislation for heritage conservation in the mid-1970s, statutory protection of heritage buildings has been officially, and artificially, limited to those built before World War II, which means that the vast majority of such buildings would now be found in Hong Kong’s rural areas – the New Territories – and not on the much more expensive urban land. Further limitation comes in the means to statutorily protect a heritage building, which is to have the building in question be declared a ‘monument’. The problem is that such a restrictive declaration does not distinguish between a truly monumental building (major colonial government buildings, cathedrals, Chinese temple complexes, for example) and a humble shophouse. In the 20-year escalation of urban property prices (until the property bubble burst during the onset of the Asian financial crisis in 1997), many privately-owned older urban buildings were unceremoniously demolished since they were not deemed sufficiently significant to justify getting in the way of financially super-rewarding redevelopment plans. Only those buildings that stood on sites with specific land-use restrictions and therefore limited development potentials (for example, important public and religious buildings) were declared ‘monuments’. Adding to the conservation woes was the lack of public support for conservation. In the early 1980s, the British and the Chinese Governments signed the Joint Declaration that sealed the fate of Hong Kong, which would cease to be a British colony and become an autonomous Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China on 1 July 1997. During this transitional period of sociopolitical uncertainty and, incongruously at the same time, economic prosperity, who in their right mind would want to pay serious attention to heritage conservation? The general attitude of the educated and professionals at the time was to exploit the economic prosperity and plan for emigration.

People power and urban conservation
Since the return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty from Great Britain to China in 1997 (in the British tradition of grand understatement, the event is known as the ‘Handover’), there has been a perceptible change in the mindset of the people of Hong Kong about heritage conservation. The return of a highly developed Hong Kong to the relatively less well-developed Chinese motherland has prompted a desire among Hongkongers to cultivate their own distinctive identity of being ‘Hong Kong-Chinese’. At the same time, the highly educated younger generations (thanks to vastly increased tertiary education opportunities in place since the late 1980s) no longer buy into the idea that the government’s high-land-price policy and intense property development strategy are crucial for the economy. Unlike their predecessors, who were more singularly focused on archiving prosperity, the
younger generations are more concerned with environmental issues, such as protecting the natural environment, reducing pollution and improving the quality of the living built-environment.

Since the Handover, raising public awareness in heritage conservation has enabled a number of privately owned heritage buildings to be rescued from demolition. Public support for conservation has been further enhanced by elected politicians (legislative and district councillors), who have discovered the potential for political gains by adopting heritage conservation as part of their political platform. Such unprecedented public support for conservation helped to justify the equally unprecedented use of public money to purchase – at a cost of more than US$6.4 million (HK$50 million) – a piece of urban heritage property for adaptive reuse as a public museum. Public outcry was also instrumental in stopping privately owned historical buildings from being torn down or sold for redevelopment. None of these conservation success stories is related to Central, since the district has been almost fully developed into a high-rise, high-density built-environment. Successive reclamations have also ensured that no pre-World War II building exists along the waterfront of Central facing the Victoria Harbour.

However, Victoria Harbour, which factors so significantly in Hong Kong’s development, has become significant in the city’s urban conservation. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, architecture along the Central harbour-front was represented by a cluster of buildings of the early Modernism tradition: the Star Ferry Pier and Clock Tower; Queen’s Pier and the City Hall Complex. Popularly labelled the ‘Bauhaus style’ by the local media, these 1950s–1970s buildings are characterised by their austere functional appearance, which departs from the popular aesthetic notion of ‘historic buildings’ that are worthy of conservation. These relatively undervalued buildings had been slated for redevelopment under the original plan to reclaim the coastal waters of the Victoria Harbour in Central formulated in the 1990s. After the Handover, disagreement with the harbour reclamation plan became increasingly vocal, as NGOs and environmental groups began to point out the unsustainable nature of continuously filling in Hong Kong’s precious Victoria Harbour for the sake of creating more land for property development.

The turning point in urban heritage conservation in Hong Kong came about when the 1950s Star Ferry Pier and Clock Tower, which had become iconic landmarks along the harbour-front in Central, were demolished amid public protest in early 2007. The ferocity of the public outcry took the government by surprise, and it happened at the most awkward time for Hong Kong’s Chief Executive (essentially, the title for the post-colonial governor), who was at the eve of seeking re-election, and could not be seen as not having the mandate of the Hong Kong people for his appointment (a key reason for the early resignation of the previous Chief Executive).

To pacify the confrontation sentiment of the pro-conservation public, the government released a list of nearly 500 ‘graded historical buildings’ – buildings whose heritage values have been evaluated for possible statutory protection (the grading itself is not legally binding). Significantly, about half of the buildings in the list are privately owned and located in urban areas. While such a list was known to exist, it had been kept as a confidential document, partly in order not to affect private property development plans, and partly to protect the buildings from their owners, who might resort to demolishing their graded properties for fear of statutory protection limiting their potential development gain. The official release of this list had the effect of stopping redevelopment plans for the listed properties because developers are weary of the fierce public objection that might incur.

The future
The year 2007 will probably go down in history as the year when the people of Hong Kong collectively woke up to the call for protecting their built-heritage, particularly so in the urban context. Since the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier and Clock Tower, issues of urban conservation have been widely discussed and debated not only within academic and professional circles but also in the mass media. People are now more willing to give priority to conservation than redevelopment because of the increasing understanding that urban conservation is not a means to an end, but a component for sustainable development of a city. For Victoria Harbour, it would appear that the continuous reclamation of its waters has finally come to an end, as environmental and heritage conservationists have rendered such artificial land creation politically unfeasible. However, long-term protection of the harbour-front can only be possible when conservation becomes integrated with urban design and planning. Such integration has been missing in the
urban development of Hong Kong. The recent successful re-election of the second Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has brought hope. It has been announced that a new policy bureau will be set up, which combines the departments responsible for land-use, urban planning and conservation. This has long been advocated by local professionals and academics, but only realised with the changing sociopolitical reality in post-Handover Hong Kong.

For the authors, as faculty members of China’s first and only master degree level academic programme in conservation – the Architectural Conservation Programme at the University of Hong Kong – we are pleased to see that built-heritage conservation is no longer considered an obscure branch of studies lumped together with museums and antiquities. What the programme has been advocating, that urban conservation should be an essential component of the sustainable development of Hong Kong as a city, has finally been given its due recognition. Many of the principles and ideas taught and advocated in the programme have become widely discussed not only in academic circles but also by the public through the mass media. When the programme was first established in 2000, the common reaction was, ‘What’s there to conserve in Hong Kong?’. Now, the common response is, ‘There is so much we need to conserve in Hong Kong, and we’re not doing enough’. For the loss of the Star Ferry Pier and Clock Tower, Hong Kong has gained one small step in the sustainable development of the city, and a significant step in the continual effort for better urban conservation and improved quality of life.
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