

The challenge of ensuring a future for the past

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In May this year the Development Bureau (DevB) announced that it has received an overwhelming number of proposals - 113 to be precise – for revitalising seven historic buildings grouped under the "Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme".

This is the first time a systematic attempt has been made to look after heritage structures whilst providing homes for social enterprises.

Hong Kongers' awareness of the need to preserve the city's historical heritage used to be relatively low, but a maturing sense of identity has given rise to concern over the fate of these structures as well as alarm at unfettered development that could see this heritage destroyed forever. As the last-minute attempt to save Kin Yin Lei demonstrates, this concern is very real. The good news is that, with a long list of heritage projects in the pipeline, whether it's the Central Police Station (CPS) complex or the Blue House in Wanchai, the stage is set for the opening of new opportunities for the building industry.

There are many challenges to the preservation of Hong Kong's historical heritage, some obvious, others less so. For example, does Hong Kong need a legal framework covering heritage conservation, particularly given the pressure to strike a balance between conservation and development? Does the city need a statutory body similar to the UK's English Heritage, whose powers and responsibilities are greater than Hong Kong's Antiquities & Monuments Office and which is responsible for listing heritage buildings, advising on their conservation and educating the public about the value of these historical structures, among other things? Or something like the UK's National Trust, which looks after the country's heritage properties independent of the government? The arrangement under which the Hong Kong Jockey Club has been entrusted with the revitalisation and care of the CPS complex certainly points in that direction.

"Having something like a heritage trust takes time to consider," said Jack Chan, who occupies the newly created position of Commissioner for Heritage under DevB. "It's certainly something we're looking at for the long term."

In need of guidelines

As demonstrated by some controversies, such as whether the monument status of Jessville in Pokfulam should be withdrawn, Hong Kong also needs a consistent application of criteria for defining heritage buildings. A guide to best practice is also worth exploring for the same reason, as partial preservation may be acceptable to some but highly objectionable to others. The issues are so complex, debates also tend to arise as to whether a building deserves to be graded as a whole – rather than having, say, a particularly old staircase declared a monument while the enclosing structure is not – and whether certain architectural features should be removed just because they were later additions.

"The alterations need to be judged as to the importance of their construction (type and detail). Some will have acquired historic significance in their own right, others may be assessed as being of little significance. The difficulty is that the assessment is being made at this particular point in time – which is a snapshot within the overall history of the building," said Deborah Lazarus, an associate director of Ove Arup & Partners.

In fact, in the British Government's document "Guidance: Planning and the Historic Environment", there is an appendix covering alterations to listed buildings that states: "Subsequent additions to historic buildings, including minor accretions such as conservatories, porches, balconies, verandas, door dressings, bargeboards or chimneys, do not necessarily detract from the quality of a building. They are often of interest in their own right as part of the building's organic history. Generally, later features of interest should not be removed merely to restore a building to an earlier form."

A civil and structural engineer who specialises in work on existing structures and exploring

economically-viable uses for redundant buildings on the UK's Buildings at Risk register, Ms Lazarus' work reflects the complexity that heritage conservation involves, covering as it does forensic work, inspections and surveys as well as alterations and refurbishment.

Importance of context

Another important consideration which is also the subject of much debate is that of context. Can conservation be said to have been achieved if a preserved structure ends up being in the middle of surroundings that offer little reference to its past, for instance?

“Sense of place is a vital ingredient,” said Andrew Haley, a partner of the Paul Hogarth Company. “The sense of place comes not just from the things themselves, but also views to/from them and social/cultural associations. It is important ...to establish a good understanding of the things that make Hong Kong a distinctive place, their value and sensitivity to change... informed decisions can then be taken in relation to the dynamic processes associated with a thriving city and whether certain elements should be protected, because without them, short-term gains will be at the expense of long-term damage to the integrity of the city, its distinctiveness and ultimately, as cities across the world start to look and feel the same it will compromise its competitiveness.”

Ms Lazarus and Mr Haley were among a group of British experts who visited Hong Kong a few months ago to share the UK experience in heritage conservation and made presentations at a professional seminar that reflects the fact that, although public attention has been drawn to the more emotive issues such as grading decisions and the value of collective memory, the technical challenges are no less daunting. In this respect, it is worth asking whether Hong Kong currently has the expertise and supporting infrastructure to not only convert heritage buildings for adaptive reuse, but also to maintain them over the long term.

Take the fact that historical structures were built at a time when building codes, materials and services were all very different; successful conversions will entail individualised blends of flexibility, sensitivity and skill.

Technical concerns

Ms Lazarus used the issues of fire safety and loading as examples: “The installation of fire safety measures needs to be evaluated in respect of aesthetic impact and the risk of damage to the fabric – for instance, sprinkler systems may themselves cause damage to fabric either in operation or if there is a malfunction. There is the potential for the fire safety measures to do more harm than the fire, and this needs to be looked at in the context of the life safety requirement.

“We know that the code requirements for imposed loading can be unduly onerous. It may mean that there is a need to look at, for example, not just the intended use of the building overall but the use of specific areas and agree imposed loads almost on a room-by-room basis.”

Ms Lazarus pointed out that these issues were investigated and successfully resolved in the successful conversion of Kom Tong Hall into the Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum. However, this project also highlighted the difficulties faced by heritage schemes. One was the shortage of local craftsmen to handle some of the restoration work: Indonesian workers had to be brought in to repair the damaged stained glass windows. The other was the lack of a supporting industry to provide the skill and materials required: finding a kiln capable of producing a small batch of bricks with the same composition and material properties as the original ones in Kom Tong Hall proved extremely difficult.

Building services pose another challenge. Ms Lazarus again: “Upgrading the building services can be much more of a challenge than the structural work needed – there is a need to thread pipes and cables through the building while minimising openings in historic fabric. The simplest guiding principle is to look for alternatives in order to meet this objective.”

Skills shortage

The Architectural Services Department (ArchSD) did exactly that at Kom Tong Hall. Given its years of experience in heritage conservation, the department has built up a pool of expertise in this field, but this is far from the case with private sector projects. Will the seven historical buildings selected for the revitalisation scheme be able to obtain the expert support they need? What about the maintenance and conservation of the other historical buildings in Hong Kong?

As of 31 May 2008, DevB's List of Specialist Contractors for Repair and Restoration of Historic Buildings contains only 18 companies. Of these, five are listed "for works related to 'Western Style Buildings' only" and two are listed "For works related to 'Chinese Style Buildings' only". By contrast, the list of general contractor capable of undertaking large-scale public works ("Group C" contractors) contains 58 companies.

ArchSD's senior property services manager Lam Sair Ling, a conservation architect, is also concerned that there is currently no means of determining whether the professionals involved in heritage conservation work have the necessary skill and experience.

"With doctors we have different kinds of specialists but in this field we don't. We have all these planners, architects, surveyors, etc, involved but there is no recognition for conservation specialists in the professional institutes," he said. "Everyone can say 'I have the experience.' But is being, say, a 'qualified architect' enough? What yardstick do we use to measure that qualification?"

Mr Lam spoke as someone who received conservation training from the University of York and who has been involved in a string of award-winning conservation projects over the years, including the restoration of Tai Fu Tai (HKIA President's Prize 1989), Kun Ting Study Hall (HKIA President's Prize 1991 & ARCASIA Gold Medal 1994) and St. Joseph Chapel at Yim Tin Tsai (UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards 2005).

How much training?

Training is another area that he believed requires examination. There are conservation courses available but those involved in the field are not required to take them. There is also the issue of the extent of training that should be required: are a few contact hours under the continuing professional development scheme enough? Mr Lam believed that only a structured course would be of use, but conceded that the volume of work available might not justify spending a few years on such training.

"Right now there's a conservation boom; the conservation course offered by CITB (Construction Industry Training Board) is fully subscribed," Mr Lam said. "But what if someone goes through four to five years of a degree course to find the boom is over? It's hard to seek a balance between building up the expertise and ensuring the trained professionals will get sufficient work," he said.

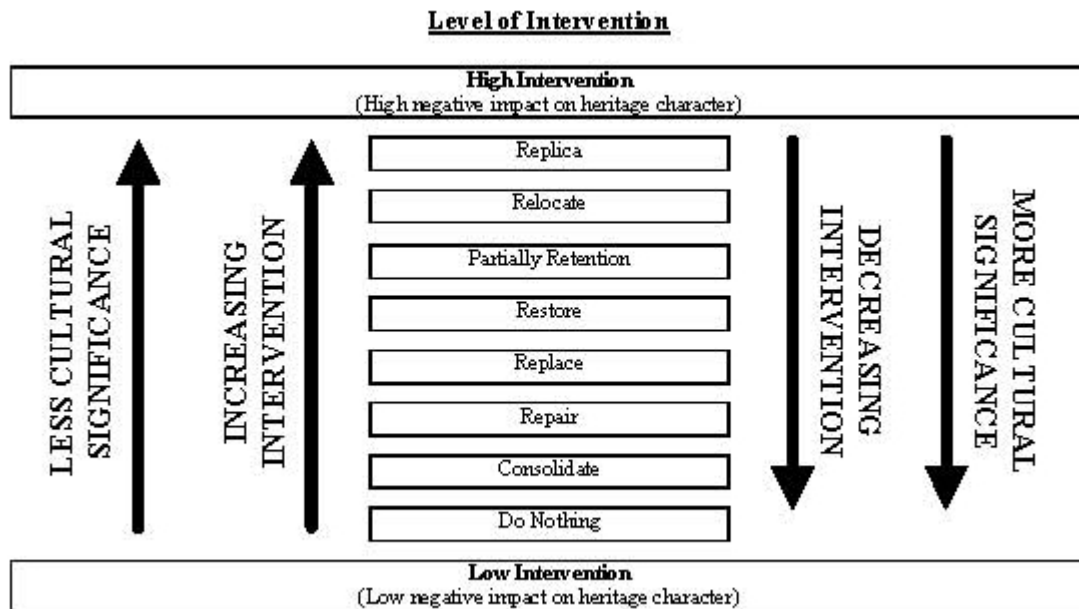
Mr Chan said DevB would welcome proposals from the professional institutions for setting up relevant professional development programmes.

There is certainly a glaring need for education, both because the city requires a pool of expertise capable of caring for its heritage over the long term and because all stakeholders have to learn to appreciate the value of Hong Kong's heritage.

"If conservation of the built form is to be taken seriously, people need to value their urban environment, understanding the things that are good and which should be retained for future generations and why this is the case," Mr Haley said. "It is important that legislation (for example taxes) are set such that they encourage people to 'do the right thing' - developers should benefit from retaining and re-using existing buildings and structures, rather than knocking them down. Achieving this change in perspective will help to transform attitudes so that there is a greater enthusiasm to 'do the right thing' rather than trying to police a system that commercial reality will seek to defy. In a city where there is such competition for land, it is even more pressing that there is a sense of value for the historic assets."

During a briefing to introduce the pilot revitalisation scheme, DevB said that the approach

adopted for the revitalisation of the seven historical buildings represented its thinking “at this point in time”, so for now, all seems subject to how this experiment will turn out. The revitalisation proposals submitted for the pilot projects are being examined by Mr Chan's office. The assessment process is expected to be completed before the end of 2008.



In “revitalising” a historical building, how much intervention is acceptable? Too much intervention, and the resulting structure becomes little more than a replica, as Lam Sair Ling explained through this diagram