

Heritage Appraisal of Facade of the Old Mental Hospital

Completed in 1892, the Old Mental Hospital at No. 2 High Street (referred to “the Building” hereafter) was originally designed and constructed as Medical Staff Quarters of the Government Civil Hospital. It consisted of ten bedrooms, five sitting rooms, an office and a dining room with servants’ quarters, bath and lavatory for the accommodation of the Assistant Superintendent, Government Analyst and Apothecary and European nurses of the hospital. The site was chosen because of its isolation and quietness away from the noisy thoroughfare of Queen’s Road, on which temporary quarters of the Government Civil Hospital abutted, which was considered good for the health of the medical staff. Construction contract of the Building was signed in November 1889. The Building was completed and occupied in June 1892. *Historical Interest*

In 1906, an extension was constructed to the east end of the original building by extending eastwards up High Street to accommodate additional nurses. It comprised a dining room, a sitting room, six bedrooms, three bathrooms, a box room, a pantry and four rooms for servants. The extension was faced with granite dressings carefully designed to match the original adjoining facade. In 1908 another two-storey extension, comprising four bedrooms and two bathrooms, was further added to the east end to accommodate additional staff from the Hong Kong Nursing Institute which was taken over by the Government. The Building remained as the Medical Staff Quarters of the Government Civil Hospital until 1939.

Prior to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, many mentally-ill Chinese patients were transferred from Hong Kong to the John Kerr Refuge for the Insane in Guangzhou for treatment because of the limited capacity of the Chinese Lunatic Asylum at No. 45 Eastern Street (opposite the Building), which was originally expected to give temporary accommodation to the patients waiting for transferring to Guangzhou. However, the transfer ceased when Guangzhou was occupied by the Japanese in October 1938, so the local Chinese patients then had to be kept in very overcrowded

condition in the Mental Hospital¹. To relieve the overcrowding condition, the Government endorsed the Building to be converted into wards for the mentally-ill female patients in 1938. The conversion works commenced in March 1939 and were completed in August in the same year. Being the additional wards of the Mental Hospital in its vicinity, the Building on High Street was then known as “the Mental Hospital” as well.

Later in 1939, the Japanese Military Authorities, according to the Hong Kong Administration Report for that year, permitted the transfer of local Chinese patients to Guangzhou so the overcrowding condition of the Mental Hospital was further relieved. However, there is no accurate record of the use of the Building during the Japanese Occupation (1941-1945).

In view of the termination of transferring the Chinese patients to Guangzhou in 1949 and the increasing demands of local psychiatric service, provision of a new, large purpose-built institution was found necessary. Therefore, the Castle Peak Hospital was constructed. It was officially opened by Sir Robert Black, the then Governor of Hong Kong, in 1961.

In 1961, the Building was converted into an out-patient clinic for the mentally-ill, offering some limited day hospital accommodation. The Building was left vacant from 1971 to 1998. In 1998, redevelopment works of the site into the current Sai Ying Pun Community Complex commenced while the exceptional granite facade of the Building was preserved intact.

The existing preserved facade of the Building is L-shaped in plan and comprises a wide verandah along the long side facing High Street, and its short side elevation facing Eastern Street. The heavy Early-Baroque features, including wide arched verandah and rusticated granite blocks at lower level, create an appearance of strength and impregnability. The fine dressed ashlar mouldings, cornices, quoins and band courses provide an elegant contrast to the

***Architectural
Merit***

¹ According to the Hong Kong Government Gazette, the Chinese Lunatic Asylum on Eastern Street and the European Lunatic Asylum next to it (now demolished) were united in 1906 and renamed as Mental Hospital in 1929.

heavy rusticated granite blocks. Further graceful effects are achieved by the use of pediments, pinnacles, decorative parapets and ornamental wrought-ironwork balustrading to the verandahs.

The granite facade remains authentic, although of course the inside face of the facade has been modified to ‘tie-in’ with the new structure of the Sai Ying Pun Community Complex behind. The later extensions at the east end built in 1906 and 1908 were deliberately designed to blend into the original adjoining facade. ***Authenticity***

Serving as a mental hospital from 1939 to 1961 and subsequently an out-patient clinic for the mentally-ill from 1961 to 1971, the facade of the Building is one of the oldest surviving structures testifying the development of mental care services in Hong Kong. This style of monumental Early-Baroque architecture is also rare in Hong Kong, particularly as it is so accurately constructed, using local materials. ***Rarity***

For the history of a mental hospital from 1939 to 1961, the Building has been locally known as the “Old Mental Hospital”. It has been recognized as a landmark in Western District, and a popular historical feature on the Central and Western Heritage Trail. It is also affectionately known as the “High Street Haunted House” and has been featured in films such as “The Supernormal” (1992) and “Triad Underworld” (2004). Despite the fact that preservation of the facade may invite criticism of being an example of “facadism”, it demonstrates a valuable practical compromise, by retaining the most important character-defining elements of the original construction, and preserving an historic landmark that blends well with the urban streetscape. ***Social Value & Local Interest***

The facade of the Building provides an attractive architectural and historic grouping with the Old Chinese Lunatic Asylum on Eastern Street (Grade 2) (currently the Eastern Street Methadone Clinic). The construction of the facade harmonises very well with the character of the low-medium rise buildings along High Street. It also remains as a key element in the historic Sai Ying Pun hospital ensemble, which extends along Hospital Road, Eastern Street ***Group Value***

and High Street. The facade is within walking distance to the Old Upper Levels Police Station at No. 1F High Street (Grade 3) (currently David Trench Rehabilitation Centre), No. 4 Hospital Road (Grade 2), CCC Hop Yat Church (Hong Kong Church) at No.2 Bonham Road (Grade 1) and the old Pathological Institute at No. 2 Caine Lane (declared monument).