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**SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE CENTRAL
GOVERNMENT OFFICE**

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3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT OFFICE (CGO)

3.1 Landscape and Setting

Physical Setting

One of the main reasons why the CGO are significant is their setting within an open green space adjacent to several important historic buildings. The area known as Government Hill, consisting of Government House, the Government Offices and the Cathedral, was formed in the early days of the Colony. Since the end of the Second World War, when Hong Kong was fast becoming a commercial centre, the rest of the city rapidly expanded upwards while Government Hill remained an area of low rise building and green, open space. Tall buildings are now predominant in the Central District of Hong Kong and several of the most iconic buildings surround the CGO on the north and east sides; Norman Foster's HSBC building, the Cheung Kong Centre and the Bank of China tower. The last of these is one of the tallest in Hong Kong at 1,209ft and seventy storeys¹, which dwarfs the CGO's seven storeys. The CGO are therefore an unusual low rise survival in Central.



Norman Foster's HSBC building as seen from the CGO compound

The buildings are set within one of the few 'green lungs' in Hong Kong; an area which extends from Ice House Street, up to the Zoological and Botanical Gardens and over to the east to Hong Kong Park. The Gardens and Park comprise over 13 hectares of green space in addition to the green areas around Government House and the CGO. This constitutes a significant part

of the centre of this urban area. There are five parks on Hong Kong Island and Hong Kong Park is the third largest. (Victoria Park in Causeway Bay is 19ha and Quarry Bay Park is 9.79ha, while Hong Kong Park is 8ha). Other smaller green spaces within the Central District itself are Statue Square and Charter Garden by the Legislative Council Building and the City Hall Courtyard. None of these, however, have the same amount of mature trees and large plants that the CGO Complex and surrounding parks have.

The CGO are located in a prominent part of the Central District of Hong Kong. The public are free to use parts of the area around the CGO. Battery Path is a popular public thoroughfare up through the Cathedral compound to Garden Road and many also use it to access the overhead walkway across Queen's Road Central. The Cathedral compound can be used as a quiet place to sit and rest. The CGO itself must be a pleasant area in which to work as it provides a quiet oasis in the middle of the city with gardens shaded by trees to the north of the Central Wing. Five of these trees are protected on the Register of Old and Valuable Trees because of their large size or outstanding form. The Burmese Rosewood in the central courtyard is also on the Register because of its historical significance.



The Burmese Rosewood in the CGO courtyard

¹ Bank of China Tower, accessed 09/03/09

The CGO's physical setting is significant as it is located near to several of Hong Kong's most important historic buildings and also some of its most iconic modern buildings. Also very significant is the location of the CGO within one of the largest 'green lungs' in the city. The complex and surrounding area is partly open to the public and is an oasis in the busy urban environment.

Views

The CGO's low height is significant as it does not adversely affect the setting of the surrounding area. During the development of the proposals for the CGO in the 1950s there was much discussion about the height of the buildings and their appearance from Government House (see section 2.4.7, p.80). Photographs were created showing the extent of the view of the harbour behind the new buildings, which at that time was still substantial. During the 1930s concerns had also raised about the intensity of the proposed developments and how they would affect the site. The issue of how the CGO buildings would affect the views was obviously a prime concern when they were first proposed.

The view of the harbour, of course, has long since disappeared. Very soon after the CGO were constructed other taller modern buildings were springing up along the shoreline. The low height of the CGO does, however, mean that views to Government House from the north are more easily possible, though the slope of the land down to the shore here and the tree cover make the view more limited from ground level. Government House will be visible from the tall buildings to the north of the CGO.

The CGO are partly screened from the historic buildings below (ie Cathedral and French Mission Buildings) by the planting and trees on and around the CGO site. This protects the historic buildings and softens the potential impact that the CGO buildings could have on them. It was not possible to gain access to the north lawn of Government House to assess the view of the CGO from there. The CGO will certainly make up a substantial part of the view towards the harbour but, of course, the skyscrapers behind the CGO block this view now. The focus of the view is changed from the original view when the CGO were first constructed.



The CGO are partly screened by the trees.
Old Hall is on the left.

The low height of the CGO here would mean that Government House and its gardens are not in the shadow of tall buildings and therefore have plenty of light. From behind Government House, on Upper Albert Road, the CGO are not visible as the house blocks the view. From the Zoological gardens behind Government House the views of the CGO are also mainly obscured by trees.

One of the features of the Hong Kong Park is a thirty metre Vantage Point tower which offers panoramic views of the city, including the area over towards the CGO. From the tower the south side of the East Wing and the east side of the Central Wing are visible behind the Murray Building. This is not the best view of the CGO as all the plant on the roof of the East Wing can be seen. What is perhaps more significant is the amount of open space in this area. Government House is blocked from view by a tall building (St John's Building) on Garden Road but the trees along Lower Albert Road, the Zoological Gardens to the south and the



The view from the vantage point tower in the park.



The view from the Peak with the CGO towards the right of the image

Park surrounding the tower all constitute the 'green lung' discussed above. It is significant that it is possible to get a view like this of the CGO and surrounding area at all in this densely built up city.

Victoria Peak rises above Hong Kong to a height of 1,810ft² and public viewing platforms on the mountain afford a spectacular view of the harbour and across to Kowloon. The CGO are visible from the Peak but are certainly not a significant feature of the view. The main features of the view are the tallest and most spectacular skyscrapers while the CGO are small and relatively insignificant next to them. The point can, however, be made that it is significant that the CGO can be seen at all because of the open area around them. Government House and the tower of St. John's Cathedral can also be seen from the Peak.

The CGO's low height is significant because it was consciously designed to protect the view from Government House. It is also significant that the open space around the CGO allows the buildings to be viewed from vantage points at the Hong Kong Park and the Peak. The low height of the buildings and the surrounding vegetation links to CGO with the adjacent sites to form one large low-rise and green area.

Historical Setting

The CGO Complex is located on one of Hong Kong's most historically significant sites. Government Hill is the historic core of the Hong Kong government and located around

it are several historically significant buildings, including Government House and the former French Mission Building. St. John's Cathedral adds to this history leading some to describe Government Hill as "*perhaps Hong Kong's last remaining real heritage precinct*"³. Since the beginning of the British colony the area that is now Central District has been the heart of the settlement. Other historic buildings from the colonial era survive but the desire for more commercial and business premises in the centre of the city has led to the demolition of many important buildings, such as the old City Hall which was replaced by the first HSBC building in 1933. The survival of these buildings is therefore important to Hong Kong's heritage and this has been recognised by their designation as Declared Monuments.

Near to the CGO and Government Hill are some of the other remaining historic sites in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Park to the east of Government House was opened in 1991 after it was converted from a garrison called Victoria Barracks. The park still contains several colonial era buildings which have been converted for use as park administration (Rawlinson House), a museum (the Flagstaff House Museum of Teaware), an education centre (Wavell House) and the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre (Cassels Block). This is another example of a collection of historic buildings in Central. The surrounding area has, however, been altered and adapted for use as the park and there is little sense of historical context.



The Flagstaff Museum of Teaware

2 Victoria Peak, accessed 10/03/09

3 Wordie, unknown date, p.21



The Magistracy building on the Central Police Station Compound

To the west of the CGO are two of the other main historical sites in Central; the Sheng Kung Hui Compound and the Central Police Station Compound. The Sheng Kung Hui site has two graded buildings; Bishop's House (grade I) and the Old S.K.H. Kei Yan Primary School (grade II). The site was formerly the location for St. Paul's College, which moved off the site in 1951. Most of the rest of the buildings on the site are a jumble of 20th century buildings in varying states of repair. Across the road from this site is also the Old Dairy Farm Depot, a Grade II building with a distinctive brick and stone striped façade.

This collection of buildings is linked closely to Government Hill; physically through the stretch of land and trees which runs from Government House to the Sheng Kung Hui Compound and also through the theme of religion, i.e. the Cathedral, St. Paul's Church and the archbishop's residence in Bishop's House.

Further west is the Central Police Station Compound, the centre of law and order

for Hong Kong for many years until it was decommissioned in 2006. The site includes the Victoria Prison, Central Magistracy and Police Headquarters, which occupy a considerable portion of land in Central. This too remains a 'low-rise' city block.

The CGO is therefore part of the area that demonstrates many of the main historical functions of Hong Kong society in colonial times; Governmental and political on Government Hill, religious at the Cathedral and Sheng Kung Hui Compound, Military at the old Victoria Barracks in the park and in references to the old Murray Barracks at Government Hill, and law and order at the Central Police Station.

The CGO's location on Government Hill and amongst several important historic buildings is significant. The link between the historic government functions of this site and other historic religious, military and law and order sites nearby is also interesting and significant.

Historic Landscape Features

There are several important historic landscape features on or near the CGO Complex. These include Battery Path and steps to Queen's Road, the air raid tunnels, the replica cannon, the gate posts on Lower Albert Road and the Duddell Street Steps (a Declared Monument). These compliment the remaining historic buildings and enhance their setting.

Battery Path is one of the oldest features of the site, having been in existence from around the time that the Murray Battery was established in the 1850s. It is marked on the map of 1887 in the Map Progression. The late 19th century steps near the top of the path are also an interesting feature. There are significant historic features which are of a slightly later date than the Duddell Street steps. There is good quality stonework, though some repairs need to be carried out and some previous repairs, such as the cement rendered panels between each pier, are poor quality. It is interesting to note the similarities between these steps and the stonework of the Duddell Street Steps on Ice House Street and the gate posts of Lower Albert Road.

The air raid tunnels and the remaining portals that are visible tell a storey of another era in Hong Kong's history, that of the Second World War. The portal in the Duddell Street Steps is well made and complements the design of the steps but is not immediately obvious to an unknowing member of the public as it is in a discreet location to the side of the steps.

The neighbouring shops also use the space outside the portal as a storage area for rubbish which makes it unappealing. The tunnel portals on Lower Albert Road are of a very basic construction and the construction of the western one damaged the existing gate post and wall. These openings are some of the last reminders to the public that the tunnels exist.

The replica cannon is an interesting feature that demonstrates an earlier period of Hong Kong's history, the original having been made in the 17th century when the Ching Dynasty overcame the Ming Dynasty as the imperial ruling power of China. The inscription describes that the "*cannon was cast...when the Emperor was in retreat before the Manchus who had in 1644AD already inaugurated the Ching Dynasty in north China*". The cannon also makes a reference to the nearby former location of the Murray Battery.

These historic features increase the understanding of how the site has developed and show how it has always been at the centre of the development of Hong Kong. All these features have significance and can be used for the interpretation of the history of the site.



Battery Path steps stonework



Stonework of the Duddell Street steps



Gate post on Lower Albert Road

3.2 Architectural

First and foremost the CGO are functional buildings designed to house a number of government departments, requiring a good degree of flexibility and adaptability. This is a task that the buildings have performed admirably in the 50 years since their completion. This 'fitness for purpose' confers a degree of architectural quality to the buildings, which when combined with the fact that they are carefully designed, if a little utilitarian, means that the buildings undoubtedly occupy a place within the architectural heritage of Hong Kong.

This is further reinforced by the buildings being the location of some of the most important decision-making in the history of Hong Kong, being the location of the Council Chamber. In particular the Central Wing has played a prominent role, being the location of the Press Room and with the front elevation serving as a

backdrop for important announcements on the future of the city, becoming the 'public face' of the complex.

The buildings are an excellent example of the work of the architectural and engineering departments of the Hong Kong PWD. The buildings are attributed to one of the senior architects in the PWD, John Charter. Charter had been interned in the Stanley Prisoner of War camp with his wife during the Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong. After the war he worked for the PWD before moving on to private practice. Little is known of his other works.

Through the common language of form, massing and detail such as exposed concrete framing, steel framed glazing and granite elements the buildings undoubtedly have group value. However, the group is not as coherent as it may at first seem, with some fundamental differences apparent between the buildings.



Examples of the common language of form on the CGO

The Central Wing is probably the most interesting building of the set. The East Wing could have appeared slightly anachronistic at the time of completion, quite far removed from the 'cutting edge' of architectural design at the time and more reminiscent of the 1930s than the 1950s, with details such as fluted columns and coffered ceilings in the ground floor car park. That being said the detailing of the East Wing is handled with assurance. The rhythm of the bays is carefully modulated by the varying thicknesses of the ribs and the careful setting back of the horizontal units. The West Wing is so pared down in design that it is really too utilitarian to be considered an important piece of architecture, despite some dramatic gestures such as the cantilevered cafeteria and balcony, and the raking section to the western end. It does, however, fulfil the Functionalist doctrine by being a rational and practical solution to the problem of building on an awkwardly sloping site, rising to the challenge with an assured and robust architecture that is uncompromising in its execution.

The Central Wing achieves everything that is asked of it, embodying the spirit of the age in which it was built, experimental in the use of technology and materials and employing a 'stripped-down' Functionalist aesthetic whilst retaining a refinement and attention to detail, avoiding becoming overly utilitarian and basic in execution. The syncopated rhythm of the external frame gives a lift and lightness to the façade.

The importance attached to the building is also apparent in the treatment of the various extensions that have been added. The top storey extension was executed as an exact replica of the lower floors to the extent that it is indistinguishable from the original. Similarly, the main part of the New Annexe (c. 1989; the two may have been carried out simultaneously) is an exact replica of the original. Choosing to match this so closely seems to be more than just architectural good manners and indicates the degree of respect and high regard with which the building was held.

The question of the overall significance of the CGO buildings is compromised by the extent of alteration that has taken place. The complex was designed and intended to be used as flexible buildings, which is exactly what has happened. Working buildings of this nature means that the more successful the buildings are in this regard, the more compromised

the architectural significance of the building becomes because original layouts and features are removed and upgraded.

With the exception of some conference rooms in the East Wing, practically none of the original spatial configurations and their uses remain. No important internal areas, such as entrance lobbies, remain intact, original features having been removed. Most of the offices have now been renovated (or are in the process of renovation) to provide smarter offices with better facilities. In many cases this has happened more than once. Those interiors that have not been renovated are tired and no longer provide adequate working conditions; many of the offices are cramped and a small number do not even have windows. One interesting discovery was a handful of pieces of furniture, such as wooden filing trays, umbrella stands and chairs, which are most probably original.



Conference Room with surviving original table



Possible original wooden filing trays

There have also been more dramatic alterations that have had an impact on the external appearance of the buildings, such as the demolition of the interesting fan-shaped Council Chamber, and the unsympathetic addition of the entrance to the eastern end of the West Wing. It is also likely that the buildings appear quite different now than on completion, the original exposed concrete having been painted, with black window frames instead of the original white. Indeed, a photograph of the main entrance of the West Wing of 1964 shows that the panels to the western elevation appear to have some form of patterning to them, indicative of mosaic tiles, rather than the render present today.

The exterior of the entrance area has also changed considerably from the original. The concrete canopy has been retained but the light fittings have been changed. The steps have also been completely remodelled to add a ramp to the left of the door for wheelchair access. This is likely to have been carried out with the refurbishment of the interior of the reception area in the late 1980s as the purple/green marble cladding inside the building is also used either side and above the entrance door on the exterior. The steps therefore have little significance but the canopy is an interesting original feature. Time has not been particularly kind to the buildings, particularly the interiors, and that the amount of alteration throughout inevitably compromises the overall significance of the complex.

The CGO are architecturally important as a good example of 1950s 'Functional' architecture in Hong Kong. They have, however, been significantly altered internally and to a lesser extent externally so that their appearance now is not as coherent as when they were originally constructed. The architectural quality of the three blocks is not of equal value. The Central Wing and East Wing being of a higher quality than the more utilitarian West Wing. There is some significance attached to the group value of these buildings showing the design development over a short period of time – however, the relationship of the West Wing to the Central Block lies only with the east end of the building which has been compromised by the later extension.



A photograph showing the West Wing entrance in 1964 (GIS, 3121-1)

3.3 Comparative Buildings

The context of the buildings in Hong Kong is integral to the question of the significance of the buildings. The CGO buildings are some of the best preserved examples of 1950s architecture in the region, most others being residential blocks less well designed and finished and in generally poor condition. Other office blocks from the period have largely been demolished and replaced by newer taller examples.

The other surviving major piece of modern architecture constructed at the time was City Hall, constructed from the late 1950s and opened on 2nd March 1962. The building was constructed on a section of reclaimed land on the waterfront as a facility for a theatre, library, art gallery and cultural services⁴. It was designed by British architects Ron Philips and Alan Fitch in a modern design described as being influenced by the Bauhaus⁵. A twelve storey tower housed the library and gallery while a lower building to the east housed the concert hall with a large curtain window looking out to the water.



City Hall soon after its construction

These buildings were connected by an enclosed courtyard containing a war memorial. The building was very popular when it first opened to the public and was said to have “*enhanced the stature of the architectural profession in Hong Kong*”⁶. City Hall is a good example of 1950s architecture in Hong Kong with a more interesting design than the CGO. In terms of completeness, both the CGO and City Hall have

been adapted and altered internally, the latter in an extensive renovation in 1993, but City Hall perhaps remains more intact. It retains its original purple coloured tiles and some original woodwork in the concert hall common areas, the original handrails in the full height stairwell in the library block and original window frames which have not been marred by the insertion of air-conditioning units. Together with the CGO City Hall was one of the first ‘modern’ buildings in Hong Kong.



The original staircase in City Hall

Soon after the CGO were constructed, Beaconsfield House was built in 1963 on the site of the old Beaconsfield Arcade below the French Mission Building. The construction of a building on this site for government use had been discussed for as many years as there had been discussion about the CGO. Eventually the six storey concrete building was constructed to house the Government Information Services Department and the Royal Hong Kong Regiment (Volunteers), who had mess rooms in the building, and a post office. However, this building was did not age well and was described as “*ugly and utilitarian*”⁷. It was pulled down in 1995 to make way for the Cheung Kong Centre. The CGO are the only surviving government offices constructed in that era.

Another example of 1950s architecture in central Hong Kong is located at the top of Arbuthnot Road and is adjacent to the Roman Catholic Cathedral. It is now home to the

⁴ The function is not equivalent to the British use of city halls as the local government offices as Hong Kong does not have a specific body equivalent to a City Council.

⁵ *Hong Kong City Hall*, accessed 20/03/09

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Defending the North House*, unknown date, accessed 20/03/09



The Caritas College, constructed in a similar style to the CGO

Caritas Francis Hsu College. It is an example of a building that shares many characteristics with the CGO. Firstly, it is a low rise building of eight to nine storeys. The most similar features are the windows which are set in a comparable grid system with projecting horizontal and vertical elements and rendered spandrel panels, very similar to those on the West Wing. These are broken up with full height rendered sections with horizontal groups of windows like on the east end of elevation 3 of the East Wing, though the tall panels of lattice block work are not represented on the CGO. It is also interesting to note how this building was also constructed adjacent to a major religious building, though here the building is much more intrusive structure as it blocks the Catholic Cathedral from view. The public have to make their way around the back of the building in order to view the Cathedral, whereas the CGO do not really obscure St. John's Cathedral in any significant way. It is possible that the design of the CGO introduced this Functional style of architecture to Hong Kong and therefore could have influenced the design of other buildings, such as this one, though no documentary evidence has been found to prove this.

In England at the same time that the CGO were designed and constructed, buildings using similar design elements were also being designed. However, these were generally

office buildings or shopping centres without a particularly high status and no particularly significant examples of high quality architecture of this style can be found from the same period.

Examples of buildings which do use similar architectural elements include the 1958 Queen's Square development of Crawley, one of six 'New Towns' set established after WWII to rebuild communities. This is a fairly bland shopping centre that uses the same clean lines and repetitive windows as the CGO but on a much smaller scale. Another is the Norwich Union offices in Norwich constructed from 1959-62. These use very similar design elements to the CGO, such as projecting vertical concrete beams which divide the windows and latticework decoration above the main doorway. The brick panels underneath the windows are also similar to the rendered panels below the windows of the CGO. These offices have survived relatively intact and, due to the lack of need for air conditioning units, show the façade of the building as originally intended. These examples of typical projects in England at the same date as the CGO were for lower status buildings and most have not aged well or are considered unfashionable.



Queen's Square, Crawley



Norwich Union Building

By the 1950s other styles of modern architecture were emerging and architecture in Hong Kong and the design of the CGO were lagging behind the rest of the architectural world somewhat. The 'Functionalist' architecture of the CGO had its roots in the pre-war architecture of architects such as Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. After the War architects began to turn to techniques like glass curtain walls, for example at Lever House in New York (1951-52 by Gordon Bunshaft, see p.118), reducing the need for exposed concrete frames. Alternatively architects, such as Le Corbusier, were turning to harsher materials like unpainted concrete.

At the same time that the CGO was being designed and constructed Le Corbusier was constructing a new Secretariat building for Chandigarh, India (1951-58, see p.118), as part of a town planning scheme for a new 'model city'. This building shows the advances in architectural design that had not yet reached the architects in the PWD who were working on the design of the CGO.

Though still in the Functionalist idiom with repetitive horizontals and verticals, Le Corbusier added differing elements to break up the overall form of the Secretariat; one concrete stair tower has small windows rising in diagonal lines to follow the staircases

and a central section has varying sizes and shapes of sunscreens corresponding to larger chambers inside the building. In comparison, while the CGO has the same function as the Chandigarh Secretariat, the design is a lot less sophisticated.

The CGO are significant in that they are some of the best preserved examples of 1950s Functional architecture in Hong Kong and may have influenced the design of other buildings. However, City Hall is perhaps a better example of architecture from this period and in international terms the design of the CGO was neither radical or innovative.



Lever House
(David Shankbone, Wikimedia Commons)



Le Corbusier's Secretariat at Chandigarh, India
(Roth, 2007, p.80)

3.4 Construction and Technology

When the CGO was first envisioned one of the aims for the buildings was to improve staff welfare and working conditions. At the time staff were working in rented offices that were cramped and were not air-conditioned. Government correspondence from the time goes into lengthy debates about the need for air-conditioning in the new buildings weighing up the cost issues for having air-conditioning in the whole building or just in the office areas and the cost of hiring in an overseas expert

for the design of the system. Ultimately it was decided that it would be wise for the long term to install air-conditioning into the whole building. The CGO was therefore the first government building in Hong Kong to be totally air-conditioned.

The building design incorporated facilities, such as a canteen and common room spaces. Shortly after the completion of the West Wing a dental clinic was added to the building for the staff's use. Staff had previously not had access to these kind of facilities.

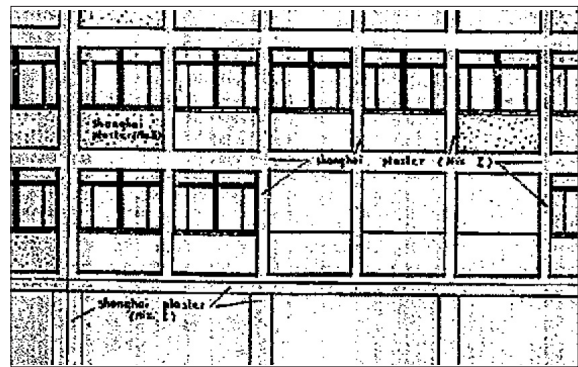
In terms of construction the design of the CGO buildings were a good solution to the problem of accommodating large structures on a site with such varied levels. The site has a flat central area but on the east, north and west ends it slopes away, especially at the west end where the slope is very steep. The West Wing therefore is seven storeys at the centre of the site and gradually lower floors are added to the west end as the ground slopes away so that there are ultimately thirteen storeys. This means that the site can be used fully and that there is a public entrance to the buildings at the Ice House Street level.



A sample of the concrete from the West Wing

Sample analysis of concrete from the West Wing (although the same material appears to be consistent through all of the buildings) has revealed that underneath the modern paint there is a layer 5 – 8 mm thick consisting of a white matrix with granite aggregate 1 to 3 mm in diameter, which would have been the original finish of the buildings (not painted). The substrate beneath this is of a dark grey concrete. Studies of the original drawings indicate that the top layer is "Shanghai Plaster", an external rendering consisting of cement, sand and granite chips, usually in a 1:3:4 mix and applied to minimise maintenance⁸. Some sources cite this as a 'traditional' material. It is not clear whether this was applied to an insitu concrete frame or whether the frame was to some extent pre-cast.

There is an assortment of demountable partitions throughout the buildings. Whilst it is doubtful that these are contemporaneous with the original construction of the buildings (the original plans show internal partitions as 9" hollow block or 9" clay block) these are certainly of an early date; demountable partitions were in use by the early 1960s, a relatively early example of their use. Those to the East Wing in particular are carefully detailed, with



A detail of a plan showing the use of Shanghai Plaster on the buildings (ASD, 24213)

permanent vents above the doors to promote through-ventilation. The vent grilles are of teak, with teak acoustic back-boxes lined with sound-absorbent material to minimise the passage of sound between spaces.

An interesting feature of the CGO are that they were the first government offices in the colony to be fully air conditioned and provide a better working environment for the government staff. The design of buildings is also a good solution to a site with unusual levels. Use of Shanghai Plaster and the use of demountable partitions are also interesting, indicating that the buildings were at the 'cutting edge' of office design and therefore technologically advanced.

3.5 Political

The CGO are closely associated with Hong Kong's government, both before and after the handover of power. The CGO were constructed in the 1950s when the British colonial government was still in office. During the planning and most of the construction of CGO Sir Alexander Grantham was the Governor. His term as Governor lasted ten years. He also oversaw the opening ceremony of the Central Wing of the CGO in 1957 where he remarked in his speech that the new building was "very fine looking".

This ceremony is commemorated in the plaque in the lobby of the Central Wing. Now the HKSAR Government operates from the CGO. The emblem of the government is displayed above each main entrance door and the flag is flown in the main courtyard. The buildings are known by the local people as being the central offices for the government and the area is known for its history as the centre for the government, which is embodied in the area's name Government Hill.

8 Lim, 1988, pp.68-69



The emblems of the HKSAR and the People's Republic of China above the Central Wing main entrance

The CGO saw the handover of government from Britain to the People's Republic of China and the formation of the HKSAR Government. The transfer of power officially took place at midnight on the 1st July 1997. The last governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, departed Hong Kong that night. Government House then became the official residence of the Chief Executive. The first Chief Executive, Mr Tung Chee-hwa, chose not to live in Government House so Mr Donald Tsang, the second Chief Executive, was the first to live there. Changes were made at the CGO, including the replacement of all the Royal crests with the new emblem of the HKSAR and the erection of a fence around the compound. The transfer of power is one of the most important events in Hong Kong's history which marks a new era for the country and it is significant that the CGO were closely associated with these changes.

The CGO are the main government offices in the country which house the offices of the most important political figures. When they were constructed the aim was to centralise the government offices in Hong Kong as they had become more and more dispersed around the city in rented accommodation. The CGO were intended to be large enough to house most of the government departments for many years but this proved to be very optimistic and space soon ran out. Now there are many government office blocks not only in Central but also across the harbour in Kowloon. Examples of government offices are; Queensway Government Offices in the Admiralty District of Hong Kong, on the east side of the Hong Kong Park; The North Point Government Offices housing the Planning Department is located out to the east of the CGO past Causeway Bay; The Cheung Sha Wan Government Offices are over in Kowloon as are the offices of the AMO, among others.

This means that governmental functions have become more dispersed. However, the CGO have remained the main government building. The location of Government House and other historic government buildings, such as the Supreme Court Building (now the Legislative Council Building) on Jackson Road, close to the CGO emphasise the importance of the site and the expansion of the Hong Kong Government into other offices does not reduce the significance of the political setting of the CGO.

Being the main government building of the HKSAR, the CGO is a site where many important government decisions were and still are made. The Executive Council has its offices in the Central Wing. This council is a body which assists the Chief Executive on policy (the equivalent of the Prime Minister's cabinet in the UK). The New Annexe was constructed in 1989 to house the offices of the Executive Council members. The council meets once a week on Tuesdays in the Central Wing of the CGO. These meetings are presided over by the Chief Executive himself. This body has been in existence since the 1840s and has gradually expanded from only a handful of members to around 30 members today who are appointed by the Chief Executive.



The Supreme Court Building

The CGO also used to be home to the Legislative Council, an assembly with the power to make and amend laws. This Council met in the fan-shaped council chamber originally on the north end of the Central Wing. This was demolished in 1989 to make way for the New Annexe after the Legislative Council moved out of the CGO to the Old Supreme Court Building on Jackson Road in 1985.

Many other important decisions and meetings would have been held in the CGO over the years, such as the Financial Secretary's budget and the Governor's policy address.

The CGO is also home to many of the most significant government departments and the principal officers of the Bureaux. The CGO are therefore buildings where many of the most important government decisions are made and where many important figures work.

There have, however, been doubts in the past about whether the CGO are suitable to house the government of one of the world's largest economies. The feasibility study carried out in the late 1980s recommended that the CGO site should be redeveloped *"given that a parcel of ramshackle and unglamorous low rises should not be the centre of government for a high-rise territory with one of the world's largest economies"*⁹.

The CGO has a significant association to the Hong Kong Government. It is significant politically as the home to the many important government departments and political figures. Its political significance also comes from it having been home to both the British government in Hong Kong and the HKSAR government after the handover of power.

3.6 Historic

The CGO is located in one of the prime historic sites in Hong Kong; Government Hill. Government Hill was the government headquarters from the very early days of the colony in the 1840s. The first signs of the governmental use of the site are marked on maps as early as 1845 (see government offices on the two maps in section 2.4.12), just three years after the Treaty of Nanking was signed.

The Government Office constructed in the late 1840s was the principal government office for over 100 years. Despite this building having been demolished to make way for the CGO the site has remained in the same use and therefore the governance of Hong Kong has only ever been the function of Government Hill. This function has continued for 167 years.

The construction of the first Government Offices has been commemorated in the plaque in the lobby of the CGO Central Wing. This

plaque, erected to commemorate the opening of the Central and East Wings of the CGO, incorporates the foundation plaque for the first Government Offices discovered during the demolition. It records that the Governor Sir John Francis Davis laid the foundation stone on the 24th January 1847. The plaque is a reminder of the history of the CGO site.



The commemorative plaque in the Central Wing lobby

As has been previously noted, the CGO are surrounded by some of the most historically significant buildings in Hong Kong. Government House, St. John's Cathedral and the former French Mission Building were some of the first buildings constructed in the colony and are some of the few that have survived the rapid expansion and modernisation of the city. Their historical significance has been recognised in their designation as Declared Monuments, which gives them protection under the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance.

The area is also associated with World War II. This is through the existence of the series of air-raid tunnels and portals located near the CGO site and because Government house still has the distinctly Japanese feel that it acquired during restorations by the Japanese while they were in Hong Kong.

9 Fellman, 1995, unpaginated

The CGO is located on a historically significant site which has maintained its governmental functions for over 150 years. The CGO are also closely associated with some of the most significant historic buildings in Hong Kong.

3.7 Social Events

The CGO are socially significant as a place where members of the public have aired their opinions on government policies and public affairs. As the main government buildings in Hong Kong and being centrally located in the city, Government House and the CGO are traditionally places where citizens of Hong Kong have gathered to protest.

The area has been used in this way for many years. 1967 was a year of particular turmoil in Hong Kong. Young followers of Chairman Mao challenging the British colonial government demonstrated outside Government House started, with crowds chanting quotes from Mao's 'Little Red Book', sticking posters to the wall and presenting petitions to the government. The protests escalated, however, leading to widespread violence and bombing. Eventually warnings came from the Chinese government that leftist groups should stop the violence. Police tried to bring order. One contemporary witness described a Sunday near the Cathedral when a crowd of protesters trying to advance up Garden Road to Government House were stopped by police¹⁰. In more recent times pro-democracy protestors marched from the Legislative Council building at Chater Road to Government House on the 27th January 2009.

The CGO grounds themselves were said to have been a place where protestors would also come, and they would shelter themselves from the sun underneath the large Burmese Rosewood tree in the central courtyard. Since the handover of power this is no longer possible as large fences were erected in 1997 around the perimeter to provide additional security for the buildings.

The CGO are socially significant as a place associated with public protest and the public's right to voice their opinion.

3.8 Archaeological

There is some potential for archaeological remains under the CGO. It is known that air-raid tunnels exist underneath Government Hill, which extend underneath Government House and the Sheng Kung Hui compound. These are an interesting reminder of the 2nd World War and the struggles Hong Kong went through during that time. Above ground evidence still exists in the form of the tunnel portals and ventilation shaft. However, though the CEDD7 hold plans of the location of the tunnels, many of them were backfilled after the War to prevent collapses and it is not known how much of the tunnel system is still accessible.

The CGO were built on a site which previously had several buildings on it. These included colonial buildings (the old Government Offices and their stables, the HKDF Headquarters, and possibly the Ice House) and newer ones (the temporary PWD buildings). Before the PWD temporary buildings were constructed the Murray Battery was on the site of the West Wing of the CGO.

There is some chance that remains of these buildings still survive. However, the CGO buildings both have underground car parks and extensive site works were carried out to level out the site when they were constructed. This means that much of the potential archaeology is likely to have been removed in the process of building the new CGO. The only place where the potential for archaeology is slightly higher is where the stables were formerly located on the south side of Lower Albert Road. The building no longer exists but no structure has replaced them. The space is now a lay-by beside the road and so not part of the CGO site.

The potential for archaeology of former buildings on the CGO site is low and that which might be found is unlikely to be of particular importance.

10 *Hong Kong during the 1960s*, accessed on 23/03/09



The stables on Lower Albert Road still in existence in this aerial image of 1963
(Lands Department, 7468 02Feb1963 2700)

