

# 4

## **ISSUES AND VULNERABILITIES**

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### **4.1 Historic Landscape Features**

Surrounding the CGO site are several historic landscape features that form an integral part of the historic setting of the CGO on Government Hill. Some of these features, however, are not presented in their best light. Battery Path, which has been in existence since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is surfaced with patchy sections of concrete that are untidy and unappealing. The wall along the south side of the path has some sections of re-pointing that are unattractive and messy. This otherwise pleasant tree lined path could be improved with some general maintenance and minor design changes.

The tunnel portals located on Lower Albert Road are an interesting historic reminder of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. However, they are of a utilitarian nature with plain concrete lintels and sealed with metal doors that have layers of peeling paint on them. The western portal was constructed in a rather dirty historic wall terminated by 19<sup>th</sup> century gate posts. This has marred the setting of these stone pillars. Additionally, one of the gate posts has been lost entirely and one has been almost completely covered over in cement which has been used to shore up the steep bank behind.

Another of the nearby tunnel portals, underneath the Duddell Street Steps, is of a more attractive construction but is not easily found as it is tucked around the side of the steps. No mention of it is made in the interpretation board adjacent to the steps. The area around the portal is also dirty and unappealing as it is used for storage by nearby shops.

Around the back of the Central Wing is a replica of a 17<sup>th</sup> century cannon. This is an interesting feature but it is not obviously noticeable in its current location and only accessible to staff working at the CGO as it is within the fenced compound. This would benefit from a more prominent or accessible location where the general public can also appreciate it.

### **4.2 The Site as a Whole**

Currently the CGO buildings are surrounded by a tall fence erected in 1997 after the HKSAR Government moved into the CGO. This prevents the public from using a convenient thoroughfare from Battery Path up to Lower Albert Road and restricts access to such historic features as the Burmese Rosewood tree outside the Central Wing and the cannon replica.

The restricted area also breaks up the coherence of the Government House/ Cathedral/ French Mission Building relationship. This would be enhanced if the fences were removed. The landscaped area to the north of the CGO, around the Cathedral, could also be improved. Currently there are some large cracks in some of the stone retaining walls to the tree planters which have been re-pointed in dark grey cement but which have reopened.

The main access to the site for vehicles is through the two gates off the Lower Albert Road. However, there is also a vehicle access on the north side of the site leading from the Cathedral driveway and also from Battery Path. It would not appear that this drive and gateway are much used, nor are the parking spaces in this area. There would seem to be an opportunity, if the fences are to be removed, to integrate the landscaping of the area north of the site with the garden and planting on the CGO site. There can be a removal of a good deal of the hard surface and a general integration of the landscape.

### 4.3 The French Mission Building

In 2011 the government's new offices on the Tamar site are due for completion. After this the Legislative Council will be moving into the new building and the Court of Final Appeal, currently housed in the former French Mission Building, will most probably move back to the Supreme Court Building where the Legislative Council are currently based. This will leave the French Mission Building vacant and without a use.

This is an interesting building with a significant history. The French Mission did a substantial refacing and remodelling job on the old 1842-43 Heard & Co building. However, it seems likely that much of the original building fabric remains intact internally. Any new use will hopefully complement the new uses for the Government Offices and will sit comfortably alongside the Cathedral. Finding an appropriate use that will not compromise the fabric of the building will be a challenge.

#### The Buildings

As previously identified, the buildings on the site have been altered many times since their completion, with much original fabric lost. As a result of this, the significance of the surviving buildings is compromised.

Externally, the demolition of the fan-shaped Council Chamber to the north end of the Central Wing has had probably the greatest impact on the original composition. Although replaced with a sympathetic addition in the form of the Central Wing Annexe, its loss deprives the complex of one of its key defining features. Elsewhere, issues such as the top floor additions and external decoration also serve to alter the original appearance of the buildings.

Internally, there are few surviving areas of any note that retain substantial levels of original fabric, being mostly confined to utilitarian areas such as the staircases. The exceptions to this are the East Wing conference rooms, although even these appear to date from the early 1960s rather than the late 1950s.

With such little surviving original fabric, it is clear that whatever remains becomes of key importance. The potential loss of this as a result of alterations for re-use is high.

Accordingly, if the significance of the buildings is to be preserved the control of future change is essential, and a well developed set of policies need to be developed in this regard.

### 4.4 Historic Use

Government Hill has been described as "perhaps Hong Kong's last remaining heritage precinct"<sup>1</sup>. It is a rare collection of historic buildings in central Hong Kong that has always been in governmental uses. Once the government move to their new site in 2011, there will be a risk that all reminders of the former use of the CGO disappear. Features such as the plaque in the Central Wing lobby should be retained. This particular feature could also be placed in a more prominent position as currently it is set back underneath a set of stairs with a rockery garden in front of it, meaning that it is not easy to read.

Whatever new use is found for the buildings it would be good to see the 167 years of history as the seat of Government adequately recognised. This could take the form of remote interpretation, but if some part of the building is retained it would be good to see public access to the building and some permanent interpretative display that acknowledges the significance of the site.

### 4.5 Future Uses and Potential Development

Perhaps the most important question to be settled is whether any new development should be permitted on the site and if so how much and where should this take place.

There is little doubt that it is feasible to reuse the existing buildings. The buildings are generally in good condition and conversion to another use is a feasible and practical proposition that could be achieved relatively easily were the right use to be found. There would be no need for wholesale repairs, or doubts as to whether conversion would be viable because of the poor state of the buildings and the need for major repairs.

However, the nature of the buildings places some restrictions on what uses could be contained within them. Plans are shallow, with relatively small cellular internal spaces, although some flexibility is available through

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<sup>1</sup> Wordie, unknown date, p.21

the framed nature of the buildings, with columns and demountable partitions. However, the opportunity to create large internal spaces is limited, and floor to ceiling heights are also relatively low.

An appropriate new use for the existing buildings will be a challenge. Any new use should, as far as possible, have some respect for the previous government use. The conversion of the building for housing or for a hotel, for example, would entirely change the feel and character of the site in a way that would seriously compromise its significance.

At present the uses on the site are restricted by the Town Planning Board; under Outline Zoning Plans the site is designated for Government, Institution or Community use (see Appendix C). Uses that are “always permitted” under this designation that are suitable for the site and buildings include:

- ◇ Public Library; this could conceivably be accommodated within the buildings; the original accommodation actually included several libraries for government departments. However, an extensive public library is already available at nearby City Hall.
  - ◇ Educational Institution; it is possible that such a use could be accommodated within the buildings, although the incorporation of larger spaces such as lecture theatres could be problematic.
  - ◇ Exhibition or Convention Hall; the spaces are unsuitable for this use. They are too small and with low storey heights. The extent of intervention required would make this use unviable.
  - ◇ Government Staff Quarters; residential accommodation could be inserted into the buildings relatively easily. However, this would seem to be a very inappropriate use for these buildings.
  - ◇ Religious Institution; St John’s Cathedral is adjacent to the site. There is, perhaps, the possibility that the Cathedral might wish to use some of the space, though it seems to be highly unlikely that they would use more than a small proportion of it.
- Other development of a more commercial nature is permitted with the specific permission of the Town Planning Board. These uses are:
- ◇ Retail shop; it is difficult to imagine this use working within the buildings; they are not ideally located, being outside the main commercial district, with little opportunity for footfall. In addition, internal spaces are generally too small with unsuitable circulation arrangements.
  - ◇ Restaurant; in common with above, the buildings are probably in the wrong location for this use to be viable and such a use would be out of keeping with the significance of the building.
  - ◇ Commercial Office; the buildings could continue in this function. However, it is worth noting that the office spaces within the buildings are somewhat outdated, lacking the necessary servicing and features such as access floors. The building framework is robust and with a major refit the building could be converted for modern office use. The main question here would be the suitability of any tenant given the historic and cultural significance of the buildings. A straight forward commercial use would lose much of the significance of the site. A more appropriate use might be to let the building to an appropriate NGO – however, it seems unlikely that any local NGO would require even a modest proportion of the available space.
  - ◇ Residential accommodation; this use could be inserted into the buildings relatively easily with the creation of some new access cores; the cellular nature of the buildings, shallow plan and storey heights all suiting conversion. However, residential use would completely change the nature of the site and is unlikely to provide any opportunity for enhanced public access or interpretation.

There will, of course, be the possibility of having the site rezoned once the Government departments have moved to the new Tamar Building. Re-zoning, however, is really only a technicality and finding a use which is appropriate in terms of significance will be the major challenge. Ideally it wants to be some sort of public facility – in whole or in part. This would allow for free access around the exterior of the building, as well as internal space for appropriate education and interpretative facilities.

If this could be achieved the site could perhaps be made to work in conjunction with the Sheng Kung Hui complex and the Central Police Station as three significant sites that demonstrate the development of all facets of Hong Kong.

The pressure to find an appropriate new use will be increased by the Court of Final Appeal moving out of the French Mission Building. This will be a highly significant building looking for an appropriate public use and this indeed may be a more appropriate site for any public interpretation.

The question must, therefore, be addressed as to whether these buildings are so significant that they must all be retained or whether there is scope for some or all the buildings to be demolished to allow the site to be redeveloped.

Perhaps the most convincing lines of argument for redevelopment are:

- (i) that Government has an obligation to maximise the potential value of any site and the best way to do this is by permitting redevelopment

and

- (ii) that it may inevitably be very difficult to find a use for the buildings which is both commercially viable and respects the historic significance of the site. The demolition of some or all of the buildings and the sensitive redevelopment of the site may be favourable to the buildings being used inappropriately. This should only be considered as a course of action when all other avenues for suitable reuse have been explored. Given the significance and architectural quality of the building such an outcome would be a cause of serious regret.

The arguments against redevelopment are, of course, primarily to do with the architectural quality of the building and its significance in cultural, political and historic terms. A compromise will be to keep some parts of the complex and demolish others. As has been seen from this study the quality of the different parts of the complex is uneven.

The Central Block and the East Wing being of a higher architectural quality (at least as far as the exterior of the building is concerned) than the West Wing. A good case can be made for keeping the Central and East Wings but for the demolition of the West Wing.

The question must then be faced as to what form of redevelopment would be permitted – would a high rise building be appropriate on this site? When the CGO complex was designed the height of the building was determined by the desire to preserve the view of the harbour from Government House. The view has, of course, long since disappeared but the low rise buildings and surrounding open space have taken on a wider significance.

The CGO site forms a part of a much wider open area which runs from Hong Kong Park in the east to the Sheng Kung Hui site in the west and from the Battery Path in the north through the CGO site, the Government House Gardens and the Botanical Gardens to the south. This now forms a very green space with very little high rise building. It would be undesirable to see a high rise building over the majority of the CGO site as it would encroach into this 'low rise green area' and would also be undesirably close to Government House.

The area of the site where some high rise development could most easily be accepted would be at the west end of the site where the thirteen storey block sits on the corner of Ice House Street and Queens Road. Development along the 'foot' of the 'L' shape of the West Wing, which is at the lower end of Ice House Street, could also be considered. There is already high rise development on the opposite sides of the road.

The possibility of creating some new public garden space on the site is interesting. This idea was discussed in the 1980s – demolishing some of the buildings and creating a new garden space and some low density commercial buildings. Any commercial development now seems to be inappropriate but a new public garden in the place of the bulk of the West Wing would be a fine resource for this central area of Hong Kong. Such a garden could reclaim the main forecourt as a route across the site and over the wider area a newly planted garden would cement the green space of Government House Garden with the trees on Battery Path.



