

Santa Raymond RIBA
SANTA RAYMOND CONSULTANTS
Room 701, Hoseinee House, 69 Wyndham Place, Central
+ 852 9264 6743
santa@santaraymond.com

The Hon. LAU Wong-fat, GBM, GBS, JP
Chairman
Subcommittee to Review the Planning for the
Central Waterfront (including the Tamar site)
Panel on Planning, Lands and Works
Legislative Council
Jackson Road
Central
Hong Kong

20 April 2006

Dear Mr. Lau,

**Central and Tamar Roads and Planning Review
CGO and Legco Premises**

With regard to the Discussion Paper CB(1)1319/05-06(01), I would make the following comments in my capacity as expert on the workplace as evidenced by my seminal book on the subject: *'Tomorrow's Office – creating effective and humane interiors'*. The headings relate to those in the document, and comments are restricted to aspects relating to the design of the workplace.

PURPOSE

In general terms, the paper does NOT set out details of the proposal for the details of the proposals for a new Central Government Complex (CGC), Legislative Council Complex (LLC), Civic Place and associated facilities at Tamar, as it claims. The paper concentrates on answering criticism rather than describing strategy. Therefore, before any action is taken, it is essential that a serious and considered proposal is put forward based on an impartial and transparent investigation of all possible options.

It is also noted that there is no reference made to environment friendly measures to – for instance – reduce energy consumption, nor the possible use of solar, wind or wave generation, as might be expected from a major leadership.

PROPOSAL

(A) Central Government Complex (CGC)

3. Government complains of shortage of space, but with many organisations when a thorough investigation is carried out into how accommodation is used, it becomes clear that with better space usage relocation may not be necessary.
4. Concerning the installation of information technology, this can now be handled in sophisticated ways so that – with modern and wire-free systems - existing facilities, cable trunking and so on, can serve current and future requirements. These buildings still have many years of life in them, that is if they are properly maintained, and intelligently refurbished.
5. On car parking, increasingly organisations in city locations with good public transport are discouraging car use except for those with special requirements such as physical disabilities, and Government could well be advised to lead by example.

6. It is not clear as to how the amount of space proposed was arrived at, nor indeed whether its allocation would enable increased performance.

7. Out-stationed offices can have great advantages. These include reducing risk in case of terrorist or viral attack, allowing staff to work nearer home thus avoiding outlay of time and money, plus reducing environmental impact, and the enhancement of local communities.

8. Financial savings must be seen in an overall context, and it is proven that in many instances it is cheaper to rent rather than own accommodation.

(B) Legislative Council Complex

9. The existing building is an icon of Government for the people of the Hong Kong, and is excellently located. With intelligent and creative refurbishment, additional members could be adequately accommodated in the Chamber. Additional facilities could be provided in a newly development on the Murray Building car-park site, providing civilised access and increasing the vibrancy of Chater Gardens.

10. A low block could be acceptable on the Tamar site, but buildings of the height suggested would seriously impinge on the community's enjoyment of the harbour and of the mountains.

(C) Civic Place

12. In order for Hong Kong to get the 'Civic Place' it deserves, its design must be a priority. For this amenity to be constructed in 'left-over' land will lead to a second-rate solution.

13. The description of Government requirements for the Civic Place is much too general, and could lead to an extremely sub-standard solution.

14. It is not clear what the purpose is of a deck the size of a soccer field is, nor whether a 10.8-hectare of open space will meet community and visitor requirements.

(D) Associated Facilities

15. The description of the footbridges is too limited for proper consideration, and indeed it is surprising that this 'Associated Facilities' paragraph is restricted to two foot bridges.

16. Again, more information is needed.

(E) Other Design Requirements

17. The document contains some information on requirements, but virtually nothing on 'Design Requirement'. Only with proper monitoring by Government can a level of design acceptable to the community be achieved.

18. Proposed building heights are still unacceptable.

19-20 The proposal to place 20% of the accommodation below ground is suspect. Whilst underground car parking is normal in many places, it is expensive to construct – especially in this sort of location. This proportion of the overall accommodation means that staff will be working underground, and the Government should be aware that in many developed countries it is a legal requirement for staff – of all levels – to have a view to the outside of the building.

21. It would be useful to know what the Urban Design Guidelines and Harbour Planning Principles mean in practical terms, and how the development will be monitored to ensure these are met.

(F) Plot Ratio

22. Discussion of plot ratios in the context of a development of this importance would seem irrelevant. What is built should be that which is appropriate, not that which maximises development potential.

(G) Environmental and Traffic Concerns

23-25. This section relating to the negative impacts of the proposed development is covered by others, however what is noticeably absent is reference to any Government initiatives on reducing energy consumption and waste, increasing the efficiency of the buildings, including solar shading, and solar, wind or wave generation, and recycling. This should surely be on the agenda of any responsible leadership.

(H) Use of Precast Units

26. The inclusion of this minor item related to job creation provides clear indication of the status of this document in answering critics, rather than developing a wise strategy.

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

27-29. It would be interesting to know how these figures were arrived at.

PREQUALIFICATION

30. The criteria for selection of a contractor should be made available for public scrutiny.

FUTURE USE OF THE CGO/MB

31-32. It is an essential part of this initiative that the public be made fully conversant with the available options for the CGO and MB.

OTHER OPTIONS

(A) In-situ development of CGO and MB

33. There is no reason why the Central Government Offices and the Murray Building cannot be refurbished or redeveloped to meet the future needs of Government. If well devised, disruption can be kept to the minimum, and indeed can prove a useful element in enabling staff work more effectively. In addition, little mention has been made of Government House, or how this accommodation can be used as part of the whole.

34. The development of the Tamar site could take less time in total than the redevelopment of the existing buildings however, time getting things right, is time well spent. In addition, with refurbishment, the process of improvement would start with the first works on site, several years ahead of the occupation of the buildings on the Tamar site.

Again, creating construction jobs has no place in a strategic document that considers the long-term future of the City. However, whatever initiative is put in place, jobs will be created – some long term, and some short term.

(B) Kai Tak Site

35-39 No comment

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

40. Before any decision is made, or any contractor appointed, time must be allowed for proper public consultation with the community as a whole. This input must be robustly collected and form part of the brief for the project.

WAY FORWARD

41. The Government is in no position to go forward as indicated, and must not do so on the basis of information much of which is either outdated or inaccurate. There is an excellent option available, which will become clear if time is allowed, and the right processes are put in place, for this to emerge.

BACKGROUND

42-45 No further comment

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ANTIQUATED APPROACH to GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS

When considering future accommodation, have Government people never heard of wireless technology enabling sophisticated technology to be installed in even the most historically sensitive buildings? Have they questioned putting 20% of the space underground, with its expense and its unattractiveness for the user? Do they realise that in many countries it is a legal requirement for all occupants – of whatever status – to be able to see daylight, and that natural ventilation – at least part of the year – is considered normal? Why is no mention made of environmental measures to reduce energy consumption, of solar shading and solar, wind and wave generation? Does Government not appreciate the positive value of disruption in helping people to perform better in the long run? With all this talk of Hong Kong being a World city, aiming to attract maximum business and tourism, why no emphasis on the level of excellence in design that will be expected from the development? Has any consideration been given to using the space in the Legislature better to fit more members in, and redeveloping the Murray Building car park as offices (slightly further than the new Parliamentary offices in London but a nicer to walk across Chater Gardens than a busy main road)? Has anyone thought whether 10.8 is the optimum size for a Civic Place, and what characteristics would give the community pleasure? Has no one pointed out that time spent planning the right action is time, and indeed money, superbly well spent? What proof do we have that the information that is provided was arrived upon in the best possible way, and that it is indeed correct?

As author of the seminal publication on the workplace – ‘Tomorrow’s Office – creating effective and humane interiors’, the above questions and many more make me question the validity of the document at all. It concentrates on answering every possible objection (with ‘Use of Precast Units’ having apparently the same importance as ‘Central Government Complex’), but appears to contain no responsible strategy. For an initiative of this importance, the populace has the right expect a much more substantial document than this, and one based on an impartial and transparent investigation of all possible options. Let us hope and trust that somehow this will be forthcoming before any irreversible action is taken.

378 words

(Ms) Santa Raymond RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects)
Room 701, Hoseinee House, 69 Wyndham Place, Central
+ 852 9264 6743
santa@santaraymond.com