

Hong Kong's Disappearing Heritage
An Inconvenient Truth

“What should we conserve?”

“How do we conserve?”

“How much and who should pay?”

The Home Affairs Bureau held a three-month public consultation on the above broad policy issues in February 2004. They reported their findings to the Legco Panel on Home Affairs on 9 November 2004. The summary was “In brief, the public is very supportive of built heritage conservation and considers that more efforts should be devoted by the community at large to this area of work.”

Terms such as “intangible heritage”, “collective memory” and “economic and environmental improvement” were used, as well as “single heritage authority” and “heritage trust fund”. In the same report to Legco in 2004, HAB pointed the Way Forward, that they would formulate proposals on implementation measures for further public consultation in 2005.

Nothing happened in 2005, nor in 2006. After the Star Ferry Pier was demolished and Legco passed a motion on establishing a heritage policy (17 January, 2007), HAB accelerated another set of public consultations in early 2007 asking the same broad policy questions from 2004, but no proposals on implementation measures were presented. The Way Forward in 2004, therefore, seemed to be a Way Backward in 2007.

Furthermore, HAB reported to the AAB on 6 March 2007 that “A clear consensus on the above three fundamental questions had yet to emerge” and therefore, spent one hour discussing the contents of a proposed 25-question telephone survey to gather more public opinions. Unfortunately, this only left the HAB five minutes to discuss the summary of the 2007 public forums (Board Paper AAB/6/2007-08).

We submit to you that there are clearly deeper issues than what Home Affairs Bureau can face alone. If HAB continues the present course of reviewing our built heritage policy, our most precious heritage, both tangible and intangible will disappear in our lifetime.

Indeed, the Panel on Planning, Lands and Works (on its duty visit in September 2002 to Singapore, Berlin and London) has acknowledged that heritage preservation is interlinked with urban renewal and the town planning process, and should be explored with an integrated approach.

With the objectives of the Urban Renewal Authority to redevelop land and tender projects to developers, while removing and destroying historic sites and its inhabitants, or at best leaving facades of old buildings as token preservation; with the Hong Kong Government focused on the economic benefits of new infrastructure;

along with an antiquated Town Planning Ordinance reviewed in 1991 but with the most crucial amendments not implemented to date; how can the public trust the Hong Kong Government and expect our heritage to be protected and preserved for now and the future?

If we are facing the value of the dollar against the value of heritage, who decides what is best for the public? This is not an easy question to answer, but without concrete proposals from relevant government departments involved with cultural heritage conservation, and without top leadership and directives, Hong Kong's heritage will disappear before a Heritage Policy or a Heritage Fund is formulated and enacted as law.

Heritage Watch agrees with the summary statement of HAB in November 2004 that more efforts should be devoted by the community at large toward the preservation of Hong Kong's heritage. We welcome the opportunity to work with the government to see that the needs of the community are reflected in Hong Kong's new Heritage Policy and Heritage Fund. In the meantime, we look forward to commenting on any proposed concrete interim measures from HAB to safeguard heritage under threat earmarked for destruction and loss within the next two years.

Heritage Watch also requests HAB to report on the progress of each specific item (a) through (i) listed in the Motion on "Policy on Conservation of Monuments" moved by Hon Audrey Eu Yuet Mee on 17 January 2007, not by cutting and pasting the general summary from what was already presented by HAB in 2004 and repeated in 2007.

Heritage Watch further proposes that:

1. Government adopt an integrated approach to heritage conservation, urban renewal and town planning;
2. Government take interim measures to prevent any further demolition of our heritage, while making consolidated efforts to formulate a comprehensive policy and institute a sustainable funding structure for heritage conservation;
3. Government put in place as soon as possible concrete, new measures for engaging the public in the decision making processes implied under (1) above;
4. LegCo step up its efforts to monitor the development of an integrated approach to heritage policy and the search for long-term to the various policy concerns under (1) above, by setting up a special committee on heritage conservation.

It is time to discuss, collaborate, and implement concrete solutions to the broad policy issues.

Heritage Watch
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