

HERITAGE HONG KONG

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HONG KONG

Position Paper on Heritage Conservation in Hong Kong

Executive Summary and Next Steps

Heritage Hong Kong (HHK) has prepared a Position Paper (attached) to form a basis for discussion between the various institutions (including Government), groups, associations and individuals that have expressed an interest in the identification and conservation of Hong Kong's diverse and valuable heritage assets. Hopefully, such discussion will result in the clarification of just what Hong Kong people regard as "heritage", what they consider worthwhile to conserve, the effort and expense that they are willing to commit to such conservation and the formulation of ways and means to work with the Government to achieve what ultimately we all want to see – the conservation of the best of Hong Kong's past for the enjoyment and benefit of present and future generations. The time seems right for such a discussion and views from as wide a range of interested parties as possible are invited.

However discussion is not enough – what we really need to see are workable solutions supported by both Government policy and the community to prevent yet further destruction of what little of its diverse heritage Hong Kong still enjoys. The Position Paper puts forward not only longer term solutions but also various interim proposals as well as some that only need a change in attitude and mindset – such as a commitment by Government to adopt the China Principles in respect of heritage conservation and to consider all sites in the light of their heritage value as part of the planning and land use process.

Essentially, HHK is of the view that our heritage – and this includes both the natural and built environments in our view – belongs to the community as a whole – it does not "belong" to Government nor does it "belong" to any particular individual or group. This means that although the actual assets involved may be under the control of specific groups or of the Government, it is the community which should ultimately decide what is heritage, what is important to Hong Kong people, what should be conserved and how and whether they are willing to meet the associated costs.

As the Paper discusses, heritage means different things to different people and it may be that the best we can do is reach a majority view of what in the long run is important enough to

keep and what, if needs be, could be altered, changed or even redeveloped. However, at present there is no real forum for such discussion and debate and to date Government has not involved society at large in any of its internal assessments of what they think we want. This was probably acceptable in the past when economic development was the prime target, not only of the administration of the day but also of most Hong Kong residents. However, times have changed, Hong Kong has become more prosperous and people are now focused on wider issues, such as the environment, conservation and lifestyle. This trend seems to have gone unnoticed by many of the institutions of Government which are now presented with the need to change their mindset quite radically and find out just what it is the people of Hong Kong care about.

The Paper puts forward several ideas as to what can be done in the short, medium and longer term not only to identify what should be preserved but also ways in which this could be achieved. Some suggestions need new legislation and an acceptance by all that heritage conservation has its price. Some could be achieved with a change of policy but under current legislation and without undue drain on Government finances. Some simply require a change in priorities and attitude.

The principal proposal is the establishment of an independent Heritage Foundation or Trust which would take responsibility for the conservation, renovation, operation, maintenance and management of Hong Kong heritage on behalf of, and working with, both Government and the private sector.

The Government has already announced that it is considering the establishment of a trust and HHK hopes that it may be willing to take the HHK proposal on board as we, and many of those we have spoken to while compiling this Paper, believe that to be credible any such foundation or trust needs to be independent with real community participation (a membership organisation is the only real way to ensure this) and not yet another Government dominated institution whose council/board is filled with favoured Government nominees and with a Government department acting as its Secretariat. Unfortunately the various Government bureaux and departments that deal with the heritage matters in Hong Kong (Home Affairs, Housing Planning and Lands, Agriculture Fisheries and Conservation, Environment Transport and Works, the Antiquities Advisory Board, etc.) lack credibility in the eyes of many in the community and there is little trust that a Government body would be truly independent or proactive or constituted in such a way as to offer genuine public participation and involvement in the decision making and ongoing implementation process.

However, whether or not Government is willing to adopt the approach put forward in the Position Paper, HHK has already taken steps to register the Heritage Hong Kong Foundation and to apply for its charitable status. It has also attracted a core group of members – both

individual and companies – and intends to undertake a number of pilot projects to demonstrate what can be done, given determination and the right mindset. It is now in discussions with two groups wishing to conserve very different types of project but which need operations and management support, as well as an element of funding, in order to do so.

The concept is that the HHK Foundation should act as an “umbrella” organisation bringing funding and, where needed, expertise and manpower, to assist the proponents of these projects to achieve their goals. Proponents will be welcome to approach the Foundation but the Foundation will also be pro-active in identifying buildings, natural heritage sites, heritage zones, etc where it feels it can make a contribution to heritage protection and conservation. Each would receive funding and operations and management support from the Foundation but the extent would depend upon the needs and resources of the supporting community in each case.

Whilst heritage assets with important historic, architectural, cultural or social value more or less identify themselves and should always be protected and conserved (the Central Police Station complex is a case in point), there are others which do not have such obvious “collective memory” or public affection but which nevertheless attract support for their preservation and the willingness of at least a core group to become (and stay) involved in the ongoing conservation effort. It is therefore essential that immediate steps are taken to identify in a pro-active and participatory manner what is important to Hong Kong, to evaluate this in heritage terms and then put in place a robust policy for its appropriate protection and conservation.

For further information or a copy of the Position Paper please contact:

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Heritage Hong Kong is a not-for-profit grouping of concerned Hong Kong residents established with the objective of becoming a focal point for action and ideas on heritage and conservation issues in Hong Kong. It is interested in both the built and natural environment.

HHK Mission

To ensure that natural, historic, architectural, cultural and social heritage assets in Hong Kong are protected, conserved, operated and managed in a manner which is in keeping with their intrinsic heritage and community value and to facilitate public enjoyment and participation wherever possible.

HHK Vision

To assist in further developing an appreciation and understanding in Hong Kong of the tangible and intangible value of heritage assets in building a cohesive and balanced community, comfortable with its history, its present and its future.

HHK wishes to see a “**heritage first**” approach adopted in the case of Hong Kong heritage assets and a move away from the present practice whereby commercial considerations dominate the decision making process in relation to the future role and use of such assets. Over time the objective is to achieve a situation where the stewardship of these assets is vested in an appropriately structured, not-for-profit Foundation.

In the opinion of HHK, the community should not expect Government to be solely responsible for protecting Hong Kong's heritage as, at present at least, it is not structured or equipped to do so on a long term basis. Therefore alternative means are required to ensure that our limited stocks of such assets are not lost or damaged.