

Submission to the Legco Subcommittee
on Antiquities and Monuments Notice

William Meacham
March 12, 2008

In my letter of Feb. 21 to the Legco Subcommittee on Heritage Conservation, regarding the Central School site on Hollywood Road, I wrote:

It is strange that the AMO [Antiquities and Monuments Office of the LCSD] did not engage an independent archaeologist to conduct these investigations, and even worse that it did not formally consult any independent expert on the findings ... [This is] part of a regrettable pattern of AMO behaviour over the years, failing to consult with independent experts, often resulting in financial or heritage disaster.

This consideration also applies to the issue of Jessville Mansion, in particular the way it was handled by the AMO and AAB [Antiquities Advisory Board]. It is one of the major failings of both bodies. It was rather over-confident (to put it mildly) of the LCSD's Dr. Louis Ng to claim, as quoted in newspaper accounts, that "there is already expertise in the AMO to perform the job" and thus there was no need to engage an independent consultant. I will focus on this aspect of the case, with details from two of the examples cited in my Feb. 21 letter. There are many other such examples.

It must be stated, quite emphatically, that the AMO does **not** always have the necessary expertise for the many tasks it undertakes. Furthermore, experts can always be mistaken, and in-house staff can be influenced by extraneous factors such as the prevailing trends or whims of government policy. In cases that are not clear-cut it is always advisable to consult more widely. A "second opinion" is a standard feature of academic, legal and medical circles, and it should be adopted by both the AMO and the AAB as a means of obtaining an independent assessment of issues. Failure to do so can have disastrous affects, as the examples below amply illustrate.

1. In the world of publishing, it is a standard operating procedure to obtain at least one referee's review of a manuscript prior to acceptance, and at least one copy editor's scrutiny prior to publication. In 1995 the AMO published a monograph on the excavation of an archaeological site on Ma Wan. It was a disaster from the cover, with the publisher listed as the "Antiquities [sic!] and Monuments Office", to the bibliography, which contained an amazing 58 mistakes. A comment that I obtained from a prominent archaeologist who had extensive experience in Southeast Asia is reproduced on page 3.
2. In 1976 I wrote a book on Hong Kong's Bronze Age rock carvings, and informed the AMO that these important monuments were under threat due to graffiti-writers. For the next three decades, however, these rock carvings were treated in the most horrendous manner – a veritable conglomerate of blunders of every sort. Some of these are technical, others quite evident even to the layman. All could have been avoided if the AMO had conducted minimal consultation with independent experts. Instead, it relied on various government departments, with the absolutely disgraceful result that we have today. The state of the Po Toi rock carving today vis-à-vis its original undisturbed situation in 1976 is illustrated on pages 4 and 5.

Example 1 – Comment by an eminent archaeologist on a publication of the Antiquities and Monuments Office

[...]

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William Meacham, Chairman
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Fax 2314 1706

July 17, 1995
2 pages

Your Fax of July 16 arrived this morning. I am replying immediately. As my reply is not as polished as I would hope, you may type my comments before presenting them to the Legco Panel in any form most useful to you.

I had the pleasure of attending the Conference on Archaeology in Southeast Asia organized by the University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong, and the Antiquities and Monuments Office, Hong Kong in March 1995. It was a very successful Conference.

Distributed at the Conference by the AMO was a published report on the Tung Wan Tsai. A Bronze Age and Han Period Coastal Site, by Pamela Rumball Rogers, et al. Reading through it, I was astounded to see what appeared to be a report with a total lack of proofing before publication. The typographical errors, along with the factual and methodological problems pointed out by Meacham in his review of the report, add up to the worst publication disaster I have ever seen.

Pamela Rogers admitted it was rushed into print so it could be distributed at the Conference. This should never have happened. It is not professional and only leads to the kind of criticism seen in Meacham's critique and a lack of confidence in the writers, the report, and the sponsoring agency. Using the excuse of rushing the report into press for the major number of deficiencies, really doesn't hold up. Because the Conference papers, which were also rushed into press, were ready to distribute at the Conference, and were properly proofed, and the bound volume is a credit to the organizers.

During November and December of 1990, I had the pleasure of being an "Overseas Advisor", and taking part in the Chek Lap Kok (new airport)

[...]

archaeological knowledge. My comments are based on 43 years of archaeological field work and publications in the Pacific and Asia.

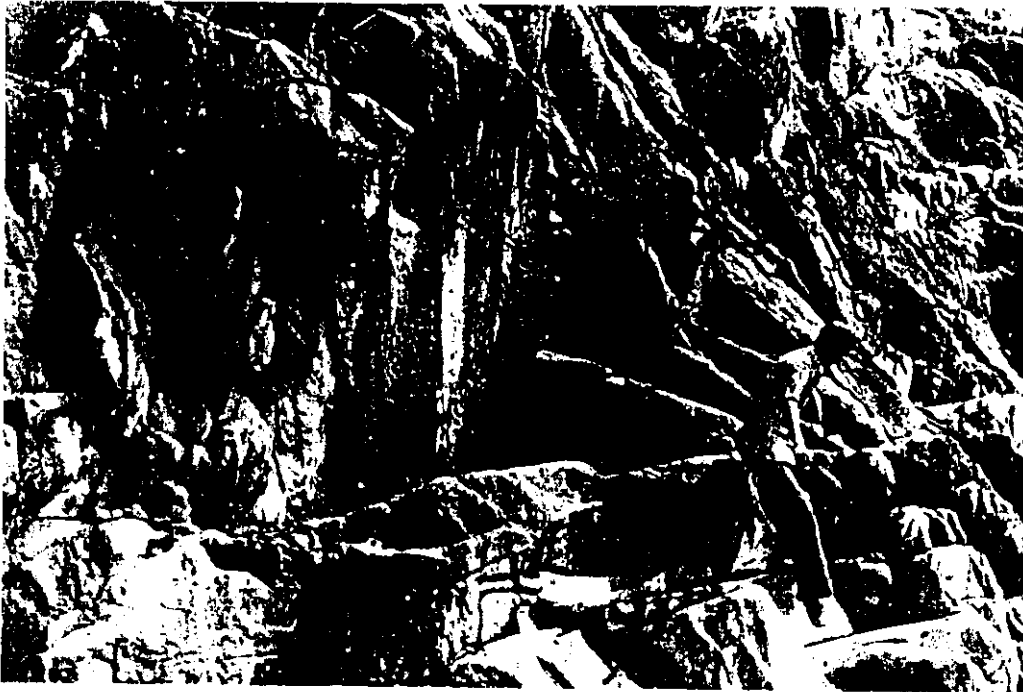
Sincerely,

Richard Shuttler, Jr.
Professor Emeritus
Simon Fraser University

NB: Certain portions of this letter indicated with [...] have been deleted.

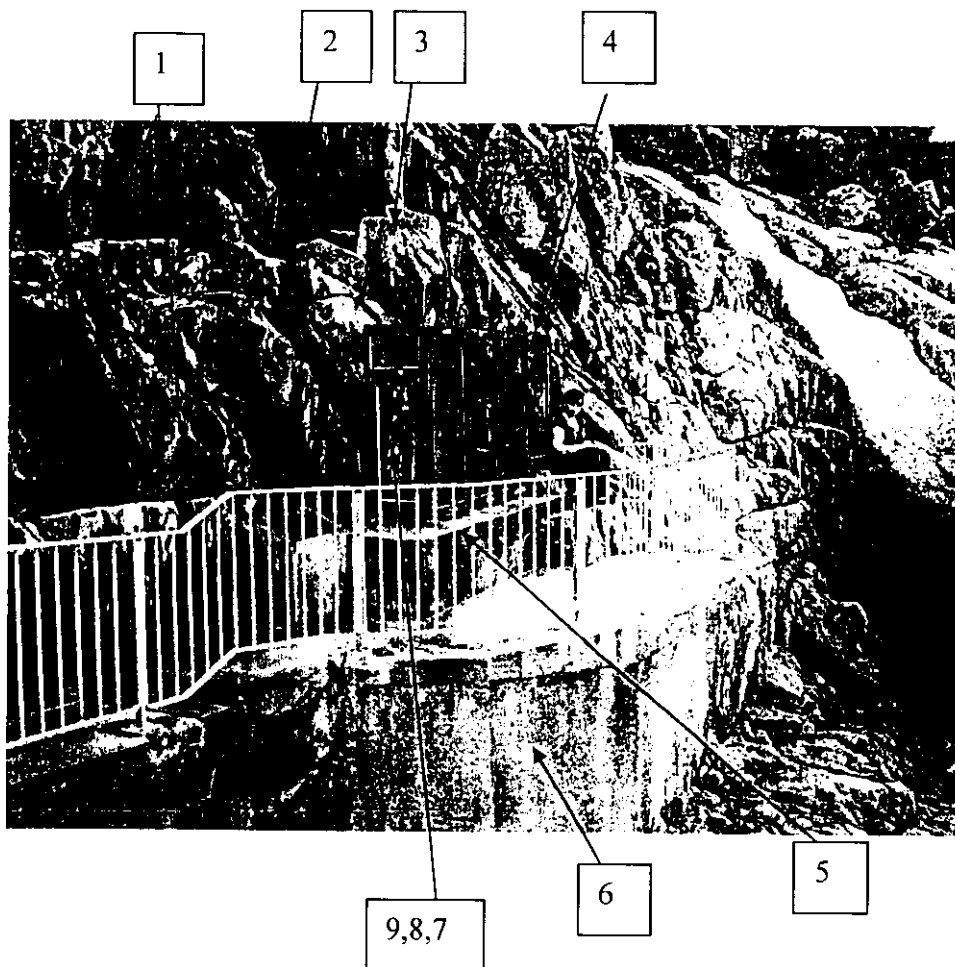
Example 2 – Series of blunders at Po Toi Rock Carving

The rock carving in 1976:



In a state of nature, but needed protection from graffiti-writing and possible vandalism. However, government intervention since that time has been a series of blunders due to failure of the Antiquities and Monuments Office to consult properly before taking action.

Summary of grievous errors in the management of the
Po Toi rock carving since 1976



1. holes drilled for water drainage – unsightly and unknown impact on rock’s internal hydrology
2. black bio-film growing on rocks, unnoticed for several years
3. concrete dam placed directly above the rock art face: “a potential disaster”
4. perspex case, “creating a micro-climate inside”, altering natural conditions
5. cement block on rock art face: a travesty, completely ruining the archaeological setting
6. concrete platform, unknown impact, blocking sea spray and water flow; “altering natural conditions” and disfiguring archaeological setting
7. latex mold applied in 1980 pulled off some of rock surface.
8. bio-film on the rock carving itself, peeling off and removing rock surface, summer 2007
9. surface treated with chemicals in Nov 2007 – a treatment “widely condemned in rock art conservation”

Relevance to the “Jessville” case

It is painfully obvious that outside professional advice should have been obtained on this issue. It would probably have prevented the ridiculous, revisionist about-face on the significance of the building and its owner. It is objectionable (but nothing new) that the government tends to distort the truth to fit its immediate goals. This is much more difficult to achieve when an independent assessment has been obtained.

It is regrettable that the AAB does not seem capable of fulfilling the role of an independent body, perhaps because it is spoon-fed by the very department that it is supposed to monitor. It is an absolute disgrace that the AAB endorsed the two conflicting evaluations of Jessville without remark. Did the Board members even read these papers? Or did they, as per the practice over the last three decades, simply rubber stamp what the administration wanted?

One AAB member was quoted as saying that they relied heavily on the government experts. A stunningly honest admission, but one that calls into question the AAB's *raison d'être*. How could the members not react when the supposed expert evaluation of Jessville changed so drastically, from “a cultural landmark” and “an epitome” of the styles of the era to a “not extraordinary” building? This fiasco illustrates clearly that AAB members appear not to exercise even minimal monitoring over the information presented to them. In other words ... a rubber stamp.

It would be interesting to know if the AAB has ever, in its 30 years of existence, requested an outside expert opinion on anything. As an archaeologist working in Hong Kong since 1970 and widely published, I have never been approached by the AAB on any issue, even though it has made literally hundreds of recommendations on archaeological matters. A similar situation applies to my colleague Dr Patrick Hase, a local historian also with decades of experience. Over the years I have made quite a few presentations to Legco subcommittees, but all attempts to make a submission in person to the AAB have been rejected. They appear singularly uninterested in hearing from non-government experts, or in getting a scientific or scholarly consensus.

Perhaps the embarrassing and humiliating experience of being so blatantly manipulated in the Jessville case will finally convince AAB members to shake off their yes-men image and make vigorous efforts to get at the truth. The preservation of Hong Kong heritage requires it.