

For discussion on
12 December 2008

Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs

Conversion of Yau Ma Tei Theatre and Red Brick Building into A Xiqu Activity Centre

Purpose

This paper seeks Members' support for the proposed conversion of Yau Ma Tei Theatre (YMTT) and Red Brick Building (RBB) into a Xiqu Activity Centre (the Project).

Background

2. The Project includes two graded historic buildings in Yau Ma Tei namely, YMTT (Grade II) and RBB (Grade I), which have site area of about 801 m² and 119m² respectively. Constructed in late 1920s, the YMTT is the only surviving pre-war cinema building in the urban areas of Hong Kong while RBB is the oldest water pumping station structure in the territory built in 1895. The YMTT ceased operation in July 1998 and has remained vacant since then. Because of its cinema layout, the YMTT was considered suitable for conversion into a small-scale performance venue for Xiqu activities with the RBB for supporting uses. In 2006, we sought support of the Yau Tsim Mong District Council and the Cantonese Opera sector for the proposal of converting the YMTT into a permanent base for Xiqu activities. A site plan of the Project is at Annex.

3. The Project is in line with the commitment made by the Government in the 2006/07 Policy Address to identify new venues to support development of traditional Chinese and other performing arts. This is also one of the initiatives of the 2007/08 Policy Address in which the Government has undertaken to actively preserve and promote Cantonese Opera, as part of Hong Kong's valuable intangible cultural heritage and a refined yet popular art form.

Project Scope

4. The proposed scope of the Project includes conversion works of the two historic buildings to provide the following facilities –

YMTT

- (a) A stage with an orchestral pit suitable for small scale Cantonese Opera performances;
- (b) An auditorium of about 300 seats;
- (c) A lobby with a box office;
- (d) A backstage with dressing room and make-up area;
- (e) An audio visual and lighting control room;
- (f) Other facilities, including toilets, barrier free access, safe room, cleaner room, plant room, etc.

RBB

- (g) Two multi-function rooms which may be used for small scale rehearsal, practice, workshops, lectures and meetings;
- (h) Management and booking offices; and
- (i) A souvenir shop and other supporting facilities.

Justifications

Adaptive Re-use of Historic Buildings

5. The YMTT, being a Graded II historic building, and RBB, being a Graded I historic building, have been vacated for a long time pending restoration and adaptive re-use. The YMTT is a good example of an entertainment building with a neo-classical façade, Chinese pitched roof, Art Deco pediment and motifs. The RBB is the oldest surviving pumping station structure of the Water Supplies Department in Hong Kong. Yet, the condition of these two buildings has been deteriorating and requires maintenance from time to time. We see a strong need to expedite actions in preserving valuable historic buildings and putting them into adaptive re-use. We also consider that the proposed use as a performing and practising venue mainly for Cantonese Opera as well as other Xiqu is considered suitable, as it would cause minimal impact on the structural elements and architectural features of the two buildings. Further, the promotion and preservation of Cantonese Opera as a traditional performing art form and cultural heritage would be compatible with the heritage setting of the historic buildings.

Development Needs of Cantonese Opera

6. Cantonese Opera is an emblem of our local culture and a major performing art form of high artistic, cultural and heritage values in Hong Kong as well as in Southern China. With joint efforts of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, the Chinese Ministry of Culture put up Cantonese Opera as one of the candidates to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) for inscription onto the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in September 2008.

7. On the preservation, promotion and development of Cantonese Opera, the Government's policy objectives are –

- (a) To develop performing venues for Cantonese Opera;

- (b) To promote Cantonese Opera education, audience building and community participation;
- (c) To provide training to Cantonese Opera professionals, preserve the tradition and promote creative works;
- (d) To foster cooperation among Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, and promote cultural exchange;
- (e) To preserve the essence of Cantonese Opera and showcase treasures of our cultural heritage; and
- (f) To promote Cantonese Opera as a major tourist attraction.

8. The Project will help to achieve the aforementioned policy objectives and relieve the shortage of performing and practising venues faced by the Cantonese Opera sector. There is a pressing need to provide well-equipped performing and practising facilities for budding artists and upcoming troupes who encounter difficulty in hiring suitable venues at easily accessible locations to build up their audience base, especially in attracting young audience and to elevate their artistic skills. The YMTT and RBB would provide suitable facilities for rehearsal, experimental and traditional performances by these young artists. The Xiqu Activity Centre will play a key role as a cradle for new artists, paving the way for them to perform in larger venues (e.g. the Xiqu Centre of the West Kowloon Cultural District) as they mature in skills and gain wider audience support.

Geographical Significance

9. Yau Ma Tei is well known as a district with local traditional culture, especially around Temple Street and “Banyan Tree”. Coupled with the attraction of these two restored historic buildings and the regular Cantonese Opera performances to be presented, we expect that the converted YMTT and RBB will become a landmark and a cultural tourist spot in the Yau Tsim Mong District that appeals to both local, Mainland and overseas visitors.

Project Estimates and Implementation Plan

10. The Project is now in Category B. The estimated cost of the Project is about \$171 million in September 2008 prices.

11. Subject to funding approval from the Finance Committee (FC), the construction is expected to commence in July 2009 for completion in September 2011.

Heritage Implications

12. As confirmed by the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Project would affect the heritage site of YMTT, a Grade II historic building and RBB, a Grade I historic building. Hence, a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) was carried out and the HIA report was submitted to the AMO who had no objection to the mitigation measures proposed in the HIA report. On 26 November 2008, the HIA report was also presented to the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB) who expressed support for the Project. The Architectural Services Department will ensure that the construction works and mitigation measures to be carried out for heritage conservation will comply with the requirements stipulated in the HIA report.

Public Consultation

Yau Tsim Mong District Council

13. We consulted the Yau Tsim Mong District Council's Community Building Committee on the project scope and conceptual design of the Project on 7 December 2006 and 5 June 2008 respectively. Members supported the proposal and urged for its early implementation.

Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee

14. We also consulted the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee (COAC) whose terms of reference are to advise the

Government on policies and issues in relation to the promotion, preservation, study and development of Cantonese Opera. A working group comprising COAC members and representatives of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts has been set up under COAC to advise on the development of the Project and to provide users' comments on the detailed design and layout of the Centre. The COAC strongly supports the proposal and urged for the early implementation of the Project.

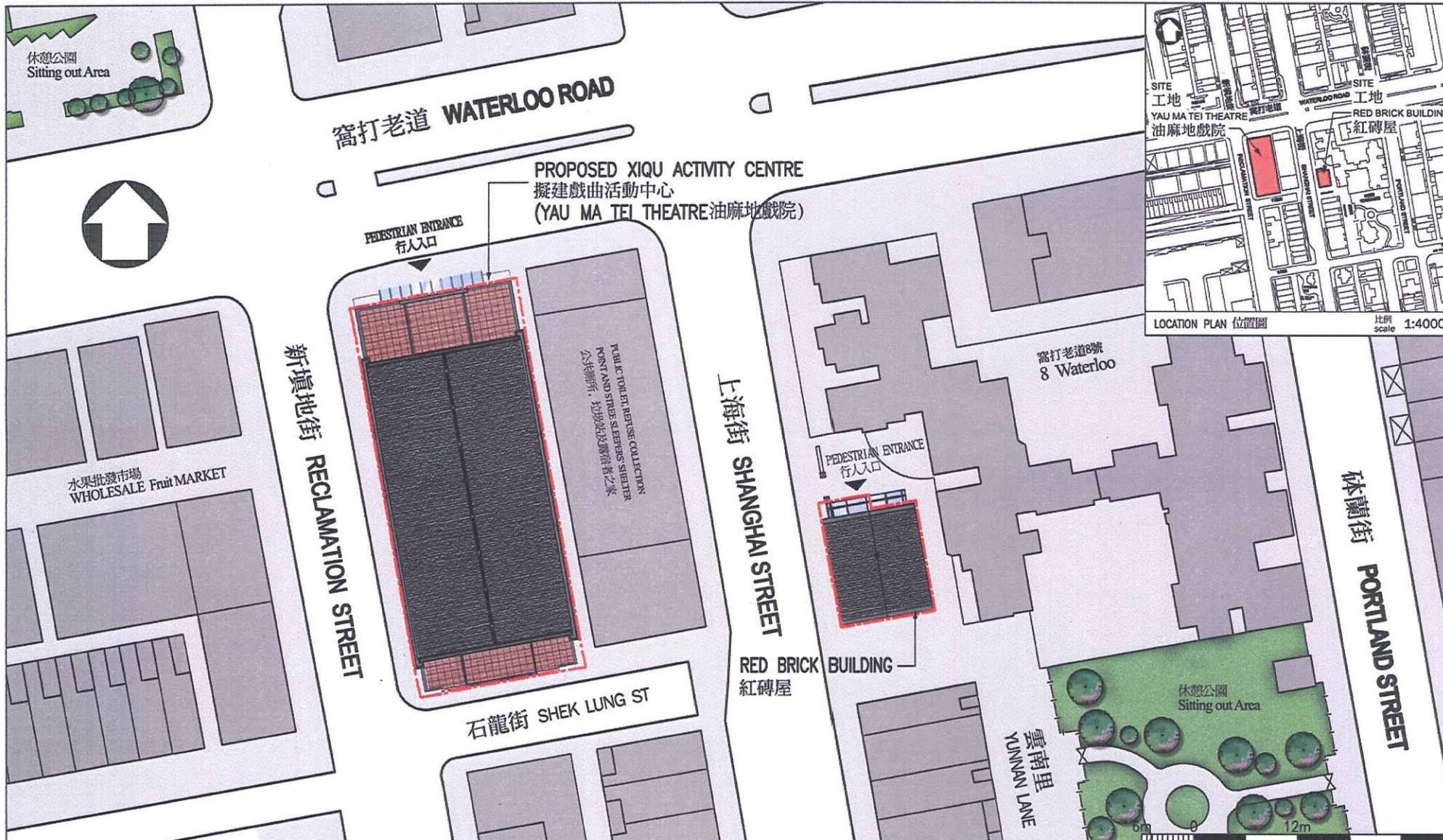
Antiquities Advisory Board

15. As mentioned above, the AAB was consulted at its meeting held on 26 November 2008 and was supportive of the Project.

Way Forward

16. We plan to submit the Project proposal to the Public Works Subcommittee of the FC for consideration for upgrading it as Category A item at its meeting on 21 January 2009.

Home Affairs Bureau
December 2008



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