

**HKIUD Response to “Restoring Green Central – The New Landscape of Central Government Offices”** – Endorsed by Council 21 December 2010

*A. Background and Context*

The site should be appreciated in a wider context as highlighted by the Government's commissioned Consultant - the historic precinct is part of a bigger cultural landscape embedding governance, religious, and law and order elements. The site has been the seat of government for over 150 years.

From an urban design point of view, the site and its wider context need to be considered as a whole. Urban design principles should be adopted to integrate these various sites under the “Conserving Central” theme for the enjoyment of our citizens. HKIUD aligns with the Consultant's recommendation to create a “Special Protected Area” encompassing several significant historic buildings and the green space. We also recognize the Consultant's observation that “the Site itself is arguably of higher significance than the buildings”.

The buildings are considered “exemplars of the beginning of modern office design in Hong Kong and of 1950s architecture generally” – being “functionalist”, relatively low-rise and visually integrated with surroundings and vegetation. The conservation value would lie more in their urban group effect, symbolism, and lush green setting which extends into the existing CBD. Internally there is little of high architectural significance and the interiors have been altered over the years. The exteriors have retained the basic functionalist simple grid façade – coherence maintained despite additional storeys and altered finishes.

*B. Positive Aspects of the Proposal*

The most attractive aspects would be the enhanced public open space on Lower Albert Road level to form a parkland with related pedestrian connectivity and accessibility opportunities from numerous directions, including the Queen's Road Central/ CBD heart to the west and Murray Building/ Hong Kong Park to the east. Opening up of the area, the new pedestrian linkages, overall greenery network restored and green spaces created as a result will be a plus in enhancing accessibility to the site, pedestrian connectivity and improving the micro-climate of the area.

In this Proposal it will be of vital importance to preserve the existing vegetated slopes, mature trees and mellow historical character from the Battery Path to the immediate original vicinity of the site.

*C. Concerns related to the Proposal*

Government Hill is not a commercial site, and selling it to a developer for long as a normal land sale lot to redevelop into a commercial development may not be most appropriate considering the particular historic and civic context and may not be well received by the community at large in the end.

The need for the commercial office tower is questionable as it does not add significantly to the perceived shortage of Grade A offices in Central. In particular, there seems to be no need for yet another high-end retail mall in an area already saturated with them; the proposed podium mall would only give rise to more pedestrian and vehicular congestion,

increase pollution, and require deep excavation which is sure to disrupt the area for many years and cause irreparable damage to the sensitive natural surroundings.

Significantly, any proposal needs to take account of the overall environmental impact. Indeed, in an era where governments and private entities around the world adopt “green” development policies, any proposed major redevelopment of the CGO appears to be inherently unsustainable: replacing a structurally sound and reasonably well-maintained building with massive new construction needs to meet sustainability challenges and address concerns related to all contemporary practices.

#### D. Recommendations for Suggested Improvements and Important Urban Design Principles

HKIUD generally supports and accepts the basic rationale of “*Restoring Green Central – The New Landscape of Central Government Offices*” proposal, but believes the approach needs to be revised to ensure the heritage and character of the site are maintained and the environmental impacts will be minimized.

##### 1. Preserving the Heritage

It is useful to draw on principles from the HKPSG Section 11 Urban Design Guidelines related to Heritage : ” *Identify suitable new and compatible uses for heritage buildings; Minimize negative impact of a new development on neighbouring heritage features to ensure compatibility in scale, proportions, colour materials or architectural design with descending heights towards heritage features” and that “individual & clusters of features should be recognized as important contextual elements...” and “...Suitable settings for heritage features should be preserved.....”.*

Any proposed tower/ additions should relate well to the existing preserved buildings (i.e. the Main and East Wings in the vicinity – to adopt a stepping design, to avoid a curtain wall type standard tower, and to “respect the footprint and height of the existing buildings” as in the Consultant’s recommendation. HKIUD recommends adopting an innovative conservation approach in retaining part or all of the original façade and building orientation of the West Wing in a refined Proposal.

Battery Path, including the retaining stone wall along Ice House Street and the existing vegetated slope and landscaped areas need to be carefully preserved, in lieu of “green façade podium”. Conserved structures and surrounding spaces/ preserved trees should be incorporated into the AAB graded heritage.

##### 2. Ownership and Uses

To preserve the integrity of the Government Hill as one entity of historical significance, the Government should explore the option of not selling the site for private development like any ordinary site but going into a “Private-Public-Collaboration( PPC) type” arrangement (say, for 25 years) and retains the ownership and management. A tender process with design proposals to be publicly evaluated should be adopted.

The proposed uses for any proposed tower/ additions and alterations should be compatible with adaptive reuses for the Main and East Wings, and to incorporate over 50% of civic related uses, restored for public use, with access to the site allowed at all times, such as offices for international civic and NGO/government-related organizations e.g. Asian Development Bank, World Bank, UNESCO, Foreign Trade Commissioners' Offices, Consulates' Offices, Red Cross, Cultural Councils from other countries and the Mainland, Mainland related public organizations etc whose presence at the CBD-former CGO site will enhance Hong Kong's international relationship, national networking, overall image and civic values. Perhaps the retail mall should be replaced by exhibition spaces to promote international trades and culture, a museum of the legacy of the CGO, other museum(s) of some sort with related community facilities, or of Hong Kong's return to China and the entry to resemble/ maintain the existing West Wing entrance as a link to the past.

For reference, after the German Reunification several buildings of the former GDR were made accessible and became major attractions for local and international visitors highly interested in seeing these important historical sites. The buildings themselves were also simple functionalist buildings from the postwar period.

### 3. Urban Design Framework

The CGO site and its surrounding historic sites and proposed enhanced greenery/ pedestrian network should be rezoned as "Special Protected Area" with significant urban design guidelines incorporated into the OZP. A comprehensive pedestrian network Urban Design Study for the area should be carried out, and not be left to the traditional Highways structures/systems. Care needs to be exercised to ensure that the public spaces are accessible by the public without having to enter the building.

HKIUD commends the Government in providing three-dimensional and urban design related information for this CGO project for better understanding by the stakeholders and community. HKIUD appreciates the Government's effort in engaging a design consultant to explore the relevant urban design and planning issues before putting forward the proposal, and urges that all similar exercises be carried out likewise with the appropriate professional contribution.