

# Heritage Hong Kong

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## THE LOSS OF STAR FERRY

Needless to say, our members are extremely disappointed and, indeed, dismayed at what they perceive to be the unsympathetic and uncaring attitude displayed by the Administration throughout the recent debate about the future of the Star Ferry and its ultimate demolition. The refusal to engage with those in the community who wished to conserve the collective memory attached to the ferry piers, symbolized by the clock tower, demonstrates a disconnect with the changing aspirations of Hong Kong society and an unwillingness to listen to views which do not accord with Government plans and proposals.

As in many other cases, Government either fails to understand or, worse, is not willing to accept that decisions reached following the previous public consultation model are no longer sustainable when exposed to the scrutiny of a community which is now much more aware and much more concerned about heritage and conservation issues.

As Government is, we are sure, aware there has been a fundamental change in the attitudes of the community in recent years in that there is a growing sense of belonging and ownership, with many returnees having been exposed to, and participated in, civic society activities overseas. They feel Hong Kong is their home and want to shape its future for both their benefit and that of future generations.

Hong Kong Heritage does not see any real value in debating what could and should have happened in respect of the Star Ferry main terminal building and the clock tower, except to say that we remain of the view that an acceptable and economically viable alternative engineering solution could have been found if there had been the will on the part of the Administration.

Our main concern, therefore, is the situation going forward and to ensure that where other heritage buildings and locations are threatened or could be compromised by development or infrastructure proposals, such plans are subject to the utmost exposure and scrutiny in the public arena. There should be a “**presumption for conservation**” in the case of all heritage assets including historic buildings, areas of valuable natural habitat and locations with special collective memory. Furthermore, this should become the policy driver and, just as in the case of any proposal to reclaim land in the harbour, any project proponent, including Government, which will impact on a heritage asset, should be required to comply with a rigorous overriding public need test prior to any project being allowed to proceed.

The current system of identifying and conserving heritage assets is clearly flawed and there is an urgent need to introduce a far greater degree of transparency and audit to the process. The starting point should be a comprehensive survey and listing of all such assets in order to draw up a register of protected buildings, locations, habitats, etc. to which the **presumption of conservation** will be applicable. This would include both public and private property and because of its importance and significance would clearly take time to compile.

In the meantime, Heritage Hong Kong proposes that a **Watch List** should be identified of those heritage assets are known to be under, or may be under, threat in the short and medium term. This would be a project in which all sections of the community would be invited to participate so as to ensure a

collective involvement in what and where should be protected. Heritage Hong Kong would be willing to contribute actively to this initiative and, indeed, play a leading role if this is felt appropriate.

**The underlying message is that the loss of Star Ferry should serve as the catalyst for a more pro-active and inclusive approach to heritage conservation in Hong Kong.**

**Nicholas Brooke, Chairman**

**Margaret Brooke, Convenor**

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