

ICOMOS

International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage

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modern movement

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12 June 2012

Mr Donald Tsang Yam-kuen

The Chief Executive

Hong Kong SAR Government

Office of the Chief Executive

Central Government Offices

Tamar, Hong Kong

By Email: ceo@ceo.gov.hk

Ref: Urgent Request to reconsider redevelopment Central Government Offices West Wing

Dear Mr Tsang

The International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage (ISC20C) of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Docomomo International and the International Union of Architects (UIA) are all concerned to learn about the proposal to demolish the West Wing of the Central Government Offices (CGO) in Hong Kong, an important architectural component of the Government Hill historic precinct.

The threat of demolition and redevelopment of this important building in a sensitive historic precinct has been drawn to ICOMOS's attention by citizens of Hong Kong in recent months. A Heritage Alert request has now been investigated by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage. The site was inspected from the public domain by the committee president last week, to better understand the cultural and social context of the complex.

We are pleased to note that the West Wing building is in active use and well maintained, but understand that many of its original government functions have recently been transferred to new facilities, and media reports suggest that a decision to demolish and redevelop the site for a commercial use may be imminent.

We are writing to respectfully ask that the demolition and redevelopment proposal for the West Wing be urgently re-considered by the government.

Recent research has established that CGO was an holistically designed architectural concept of three integrated wings, representing and allocated to the different functions of government:

- the East Wing housing the internal government office and also the ExCo (until 1991);
- the Main Wing acting as the Headquarters of the government and LegCo (until 1989) and
- the West Wing housing the government departments that served the public and the offices of LegCo members, so that members of the public could enter the West Wing building for government services or to consult LegCo members.

We note that the findings of the *Heritage Impact Assessment For The Former Central Government Office Relocation of the Department of Justice to the Former Central Government Offices (Main and East Wings)* 7 June 2012 (Final report) prepared by Architectural Services Department LWK Conservation Ltd state that:

The CGO Complex, being the place as a symbol of the highest administrative power since 1847, bears a very high significance towards the social, political and administrative development of Hong Kong from colonial period to SAR period until it ceased operation by the close of 2011. The site was also a work place of many prominent figures that have contributed their efforts to the development of Hong Kong and became part of Hong Kong's history.

As the last of the three buildings that make up the CGO complex, the West Wing is arguably the most sophisticated component, reflecting the final evolution of the design concept and architectural detailing for the complex in the building that was to be the community's interface with government. Its design was influential upon a range of buildings subsequently developed by the Hong Kong Public Works Department in the 1960s and 1970s, led by its chief architect, Michael Wright who with John Aitkin and John Charter, designed the CGO.

We have reviewed the *Historic and Architectural Appraisal* undertaken in 2009 and note its careful research, also its limitations. Today additional information about the origins of the CGO design concept and its role in Hong Kong's modern architectural development is available that was not then known or assessed. Archival research has since identified the specific architects responsible and obtained documentation about the building directly from Michael Wright, whose oral testimony regarding the design concept for the complex is apposite.

The LWK Heritage Impact Assessment of the work proposed on the East and Main buildings also recognises the significance of the CGO complex, without distinguishing between its three components:

To conclude, the CGO site is historically significant as the landmark in signifying the highest governing power of Hong Kong from colonial period to the establishment of HKSAR. Though this CGO is the 2nd generation Government building with 60 years of history, the structure is an early example of a modern reinforced concrete building construction being appeared in Hong Kong in post-war period. Most buildings constructed at that time have been demolished in past decades to make way for the post-modernism high-rise development.

However, the HIA fails to mention or assess the impact on the remaining buildings and on the historic precinct, of the potential loss of the West Wing.

The Hong Kong Institute of Architects has noted that:

"The disposition of the three existing wings in the CGO complex is the result of excellent site planning with the three building blocks well positioned in relationship to each other

and the natural landscape around them. Removal of the West Wing and building a new office tower on the site is like amputating an arm from an otherwise healthy and integral body and attaching an oversized prosthetic arm to the disintegrated body.”

These professional commentaries and the recent research all support the case for needing to review and update the 2009 Appraisal and extend the HIA process to include the West Wing.

It is our view that the significance assessment conclusions stated in the HIA prepared by ILK could equally apply to the West Wing and the case can be well made for the CGO as a whole meeting the criteria for heritage listing, within a Special Protected Zone. Given this level of heritage significance, the preparation of a Conservation Management Plan for the precinct, including a thorough examination of the adaptive re-use options of the CGO is needed to inform any decision on redevelopment or rehabilitation.

The world looks to China for inspiration in modern architecture and excellence in heritage conservation practice, and especially for adherence to *The Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China 2002*, the professional guidelines prepared within China's framework of laws and regulations relating to the conservation of heritage sites, which is endorsed by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage.

Beside the potential architectural and heritage loss, the demolition of the West Wing would be seen as a sign of departure from the widely acknowledged commitment of China to the protection and long-term conservation of its cultural heritage and historic sites of all periods, be they ancient or modern.

The Heritage Alert process uses the ICOMOS ISC20C's international professional and public networks to investigate local requests for international action when modern heritage sites are threatened, using external experts to assess research and analyse comparative values, in order to achieve a rigorous independent assessment of the situation.

The Heritage Alert review was undertaken by ISC20C members from Sweden, South Africa, the USA and Australia, who engaged with local citizens and reviewed the documentary evidence. It has concluded that there would be serious adverse impacts on the historic Government Hill precinct and the modern heritage of Hong Kong should partial or whole demolition of the West Wing be approved. Further, the dwarfing and marginalisation of the heritage precinct by the proposed new construction of a 32 storey commercial tower is not a compatible outcome in a generally low scale heritage precinct, which has always historically been the site of government administration and its public interface for the people of Hong Kong.

In cases such as the CGO, where the heritage values are well-proven, a Heritage Alert can be used to draw international attention to the threat and to promote good conservation solutions. The Heritage Alert which is attached to this letter will be uploaded to the ISC20C website and distributed through the networks of ICOMOS; Docomomo and the International Union of Architects. It will be updated as further information comes to hand.

The undersigned international presidents of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage, Sheridan Burke (Australia); the President of Docomomo, Ana Tostões (Portugal) and the President of the International Union of Architects, Albert Dubler, (France) are unified in their concern about this proposal and urge the government of the SAR of Hong Kong to reconsider the current proposal, to eliminate its adverse impacts by retaining and re-using the West Wing and thus demonstrate its leadership in resolving appropriate conservation solutions.

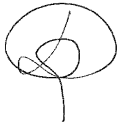
We urge the SAR government to suspend the current proposal and to engage in a Conservation Management Plan process to ensure that the heritage significance of the Central Government Offices complex as a whole is retained as one of Hong Kong's landmarks of 20th Century architecture in its historic precinct setting.

All three organisations would be pleased to have an opportunity to discuss this further with you.

Yours faithfully,



Sheridan Burke
President, International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage



Albert Dubler
President, International Union of Architects, UIA



Ana Tostões
President, Docomomo International

Attachment

Heritage Alert, prepared by Government Hill Concern Group

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