

Government Hill Concern Group

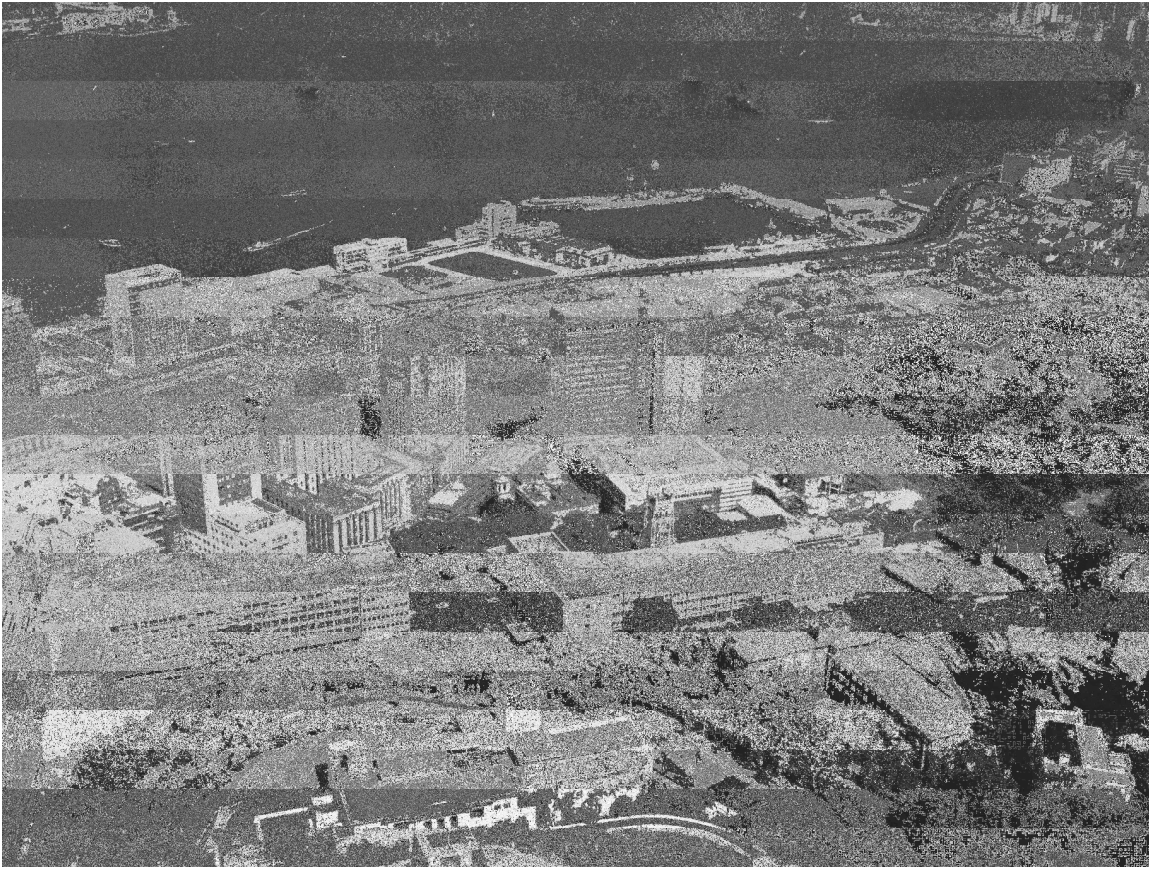
**Proposal for Heritage Alert Action for the
West Wing, Central Government Offices on Government Hill,
Hong Kong SAR
to the
ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on
20th Century Heritage**



June 2012







Executive Summary

Hong Kong's 170-year-old Government Hill is currently under threat by a government plan to redevelop a large part of the area for commercial development. The site slated for demolition and redevelopment is a 20th century heritage - **the Central Government Offices West Wing** – which was built in the 1950s with the East and Central Wings to provide centralized accommodation for all government departments. It is a fine example of 1950s Modernist architecture in Hong Kong.

Government Hill has a history as long as Hong Kong's colonial history. In 1841, not long after the British landed in Hong Kong, the colonial government designated an area in Central District as its political, administrative and religious centre with the Governor's residence, government offices and the cathedral in close proximity. Local historians have remarked that this is probably the last remaining heritage precinct in Hong Kong. A conservation consultant report commissioned by the Hong Kong Government recommends establishing a Special Protected Zone to conserve this entire unique low-rise, wooded historic area.

With the completion of a new government headquarters in 2011, the government plans to take forward a redevelopment scheme and demolish the West Wing. The site will be excavated to make way for a huge underground facility and a 32-storey office tower which will overwhelm the surviving East and Central Wings and other 19th century historic buildings in the area, thus significantly compromise the landscape setting of the Government Hill as a whole. The redevelopment will commercialize a site which has historically been the seat of Government in Hong Kong. The excavation will destroy historic World War II air-raid tunnels underneath Government Hill which are also 20th century heritage.

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, to the Government House and to 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.

We are calling for immediate international action to stop this destruction and save this important 20th century heritage of Hong Kong.

1.0 Identity of Building/Place

1.1 Current name: Central Government Offices (CGO)

Original name: same as above

1.2 Location: Central District, Hong Kong Island, Hong Kong

1.3 Classification/Type of place: government offices/headquarters (until end 2011)

1.4 Current heritage protection status: no protection

2.0 Statement of Significance/History

2.1 Statement of Significance

The CGO lies at the heart of Government Hill which has been the seat of Hong Kong's government for 170 years. As the chief government offices (up until end 2011 when government moved its headquarters to Tamar on the Victoria Harbour foreshore), the CGO was where important governmental functions were performed and important political decisions about Hong Kong were made. It is significant politically as the home to many important government departments and political figures, and having been home to both the British colonial government and the HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) government after the return of sovereignty to The People's Republic of China in 1997.

The CGO is socially significant as the site for public protest – it is an important civic space in Hong Kong where citizens expressed their opinions against government policies.

Architecturally, the CGO is important as one of the best preserved examples of 1950s Modernist Functional architecture in Hong Kong and in the region. The design level of Hong Kong Modernist buildings was comparable to that of the best works of architecture in the world at that time. Its Modernist design could have influenced the design of other buildings in the territory in that period.

2.2 History of place

Hong Kong was a small fishing village on the southern coast of China when it was taken over by the British after China lost the First Opium War in the early 1840s. Not long after the British took control of Hong Kong Island, the ridge between Albany Nullah and Glenealy Nullah on the northern slope of the island was reserved for Crown use and subsequently named Government Hill. The history of the CGO must be understood in the context of the Government Hill historic urban landscape.

A series of buildings and structures were constructed on Government Hill over the years, including the Governor's residence, a battery (Murray Battery), government offices, a church and a footpath leading up to Government Hill. All are set within wooded and landscaped grounds.

There were plans for the total redevelopment of Government Hill in the 1930s but they were aborted due to strong opposition by the new Governor. Government Hill survived World War II and the Japanese occupation. A network of air-raid tunnels and shelters was constructed underneath

Government Hill in 1940-41, some of which still exist today.

After the war, the government drew up a redevelopment plan in order to provide centralized accommodation for all government departments. The old government offices and some temporary buildings located on the site of the Murray Battery were demolished to make way for the new CGO, which was completed in 1959.

The CGO continued its function through the end of the British rule and after Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of The People's Republic of China in 1997. It bears witness to the transfer of power and the change of sovereignty over Hong Kong.

From the mid 1990s, the CGO had been the site of many public protests and calls for democracy and rights. For example, the annual July 1 march had for years made CGO its destination. The CGO is an important site where Hong Kong people engage with the government directly.

At the end of 2011, the HKSAR government moved its headquarters to Tamar and put forward plans to sell and redevelop the West Wing site.

2.3 Date of project/Date of Construction/Finishing of work

The need for new Government Offices in Hong Kong was recognised as early as 1946 to house expanding government departments in a central location. Initial plans for the site date from 1946. By 1950-51 preliminary designs for the CGOs were completed. The complex was designed as a totality but the detailed design and construction was completed in stages. The dates of construction for the individual buildings are as follows:

- Construction on the East Wing commenced in 1952 and was completed in 1954.
- Construction on the Central Wing commenced in 1954 and was completed in 1956.
- Construction commenced on the West Wing in 1957 and was completed in 1959.

2.4 Architect/designers

The CGO was designed by the Architectural Office of the Hong Kong Government Public Works Department. The Chief Architect was Michael Wright. The East and Central Wings were designed by a staff architect John Charter. The West Wing was designed by another staff architect, John Aitken.

2.5 Architect Designers still living? Residence, country of birth contact

Michael Wright is alive, now 99 years old. His contact details can be provided on request. A video interview with Mr Wright can be viewed at the following location: www.governmenthill.org
Some background information:

Michael Wright (1912-)

Joined the Hong Kong Government in 1938

Chief architect for the Central Government Offices

Designed the Star Ferry clock tower

Director of Public Works (1963-69)

Involved in numerous Hong Kong's public housing and infrastructural projects including the Mass

Transit Railway, Cross-Harbour Tunnel, reservoirs and new towns
Founding member of the Hong Kong Institute of Architects
Lai Tak Estate was named after him

John Aitken, the architect of the West Wing, passed away two years ago. A statement about Mr Aitken, prepared by his daughter is attached in Appendix 3. Cinefilm footage taken by John Aitken in 1957-59, showing the site formation and construction of the West Wing, can be found in our website www.governmenthill.org

John Charter, deceased.

2.6 Original and current use of building/place

The CGO was designed to be used as government offices. It continued in this function until late 2011 when the government offices moved to a new government complex, Tamar, located on the foreshore of Victoria Harbour. To date, there are still a few offices remaining in the West Wing and since late March 2012 the interim office of the Chief Executive-Elect Leung Chun Ying has been occupying the 12th floor of the West Wing before it will move to Tamar on 1 July, 2012.

2.7 Changes, additions

There have been changes and additions to the CGOs since the complex was completed. In general terms, these comprise additions to the buildings to increase floorspace or to alter the existing configuration / design of the buildings. The major changes to the CGO are as follows.

- An additional floor was added to the West, Central and East Wings to increase floorspace.
- The creation of a landscaped courtyard in 1975 adjacent to the Legislative Council Chamber in the Central Wing.
- An extension to the Central Wing was completed in 1991. Called the 'New Annexe', it was built to provide more space for the Executive Council and resulted in the demolition of the fan-shaped Legislative Council Chamber on the site. The 'New Annexe' was designed to virtually match the façade of the Central Wing.
- Various internal office refurbishments.
- The construction of a security fence around the perimeter of the site in 2001 which prevents members of the public from walking through the site from Battery Path to Lower Albert Road.
- The entrance hall of the West Wing at the Lower Albert Road level was extended to provide more space.

2.8 Current condition

The buildings are currently in good condition having been used as government offices until late 2011. Most of the offices are now vacant, except a few government offices and the interim office of the Chief Executive-Elect occupying some of the floors.

2.9 Original design intent

The CGO, although built in three separate phases, were conceived and planned as a single complex. It was intended to be large enough to centralize and house the majority of government

departments for many years. One of its aims was to improve staff welfare and working conditions, eg. the CGO was the first government building in Hong Kong to be fully air-conditioned, and its design incorporated facilities such as a canteen, common room spaces and a dental clinic.

The east-west orientated CGO complex was designed in relation to the central axis of Government House and the low height of the buildings was intended to preserve the view to the north from Government House. This enabled a view with the CGO (in the foreground), the commercial buildings of Central, Victoria Harbour, Kowloon and the mountains in the New Territories to be preserved.

Another important design intent is the way in which the buildings respond to the topography of Government Hill. This is particularly evident with the West Wing which was built on the sloping part of the site. A part of the West Wing sits on the top of the slope on the level of Lower Albert Road and another part comes down to the Queen's Road Central level. Elevators in the West Wing allowed users of the CGO and members of the public to go from Queen's Road Central to the Central and East Wings on Lower Albert Road and the upper reaches of Government Hill.

3.0 Description (history and technology)

3.1 Physical description

The CGO comprises three buildings. The West Wing is located at the western end of the site and is an 'L' shaped building with frontages to Ice House Street, Queen's Road Central and Lower Albert Road. The main entrance to the building is from the west in Queen's Road Central / Ice House Street, at this point the building rises thirteen floors. At the eastern end there is an entrance facing the Central Wing, this is on the seventh storey with six storeys above. The Central and East Wings of the CGO are connected and form a 'T' shaped building. They have frontages to Lower Albert Road and Garden Road and are located adjacent to St. John's Cathedral (a Declared Monument). The entrance to the Central Wing is accessed off Lower Albert Road, the entrance to the East Wing is located on the corner of Lower Albert Road and Garden Road. Completed in 1959, the CGO complex also has Hong Kong's first underground carpark which can park up to 100 vehicles. See Appendix 6.

3.2 Construction system used

The construction system of the CGOs is by means of concrete frame construction with exposed concrete frame facades and flat roofs. The load bearing structure of the three buildings consists of reinforced concrete frames with shear walls in core areas and end walls on raft foundations. The vertical load bearing elements in the main office areas are formed by a regular column grid defining a central corridor and denser spaced fins on a subdivision by 2 or 4 in the facades. In the open areas on the ground floor of the east and west wings and in the canteen, the structural elements in the facade plane are reduced to the main grid.

The planning grid for all three wings is based on a 9 feet square for a flexible subdivision into offices of various sizes. If half of this – 4.5' – is taken as a module, the resulting spacing of the main structural elements is 2x4 for corridors and 4x4 for offices, with 4x5 for one side of west wing. The spacing of the vertical fins in the facade is 1 for the east and central wings and 2 for the west wing. In the east and west wings, the main office area consists of four structural sections, each with a length of 16 modules.

The structural elements in the office facades are combined with horizontal elements to form various types of grids providing a certain degree of shading, one variation in the east, one in the central and two in the west wing. The original finishes of these grids were shanghai plaster. The infill consisted, depending on the location, of shanghai plaster or mosaic tiles. The consistent contrast between this type of facade and the granite clad end walls and blocks results in a unified expression defining a common character, whereas the variations create richness and allow differentiation.

The ground floor of the central wing is clad with slate, forming a base. The fins on the parapet level of the upper floors are shifted to the centres of the windows and the infill finished with green mosaic tiles. These differences from the east and west wing give it a distinct expression and support the special importance of the central wing as the Secretariat. The main central wing facade could almost daily be seen in the news on television and therefore became the face of the government.

3.3 Context/setting

The CGO are located in Central district, Hong Kong. Central is the historic heart of Hong Kong and is the site of many significant civic and commercial buildings. Most of Central is densely developed with commercial properties. The CGO is located on the historic Government Hill and it shares Government Hill with St John's Cathedral (the Anglican Cathedral for Hong Kong), the Former French Mission Building (now Court of Final Appeal) and the Government House. All of these buildings are 19th century historic buildings and declared monuments. Battery Path runs between the corner of Queen's Road Central/Ice House Street, the Former French Mission Building and the CGO.

Government Hill is a distinctive area in Central district in that it is not densely occupied by buildings and contains significant areas of landscaping, particularly in the area around Battery Path. The topography of Government Hill varies significantly, from very steep gradients around Battery Path to quite level areas around St John's Cathedral.

To the south of the CGO, between Lower Albert Road and Upper Albert Road, is Government House (1855) which is set in a large garden with many mature trees. Government House was the official residence of the Governors of Hong Kong until the colony was handed back to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Today it is the official residence of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. To the south of Government House, and above Upper Albert Road, is the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens which dates from the 1860s and is over 5 hectares in area. Government Hill, Government House and the Zoological and Botanical Gardens are notable in Central for being extensively landscaped, in contrast to the heavily built up commercial properties which typify the area.

To the west of Government Hill are commercial properties of Central, typically retail and office accommodation.

To the north of the site is Statue Square which contains the Former Supreme Court Building by Aston Webb (1912), the Hong Kong Club by Harry Seidler (1984), the Cenotaph and Hong Kong City Hall by Ron Phillips and Alan Fitch (1962). The Hongkong and Shanghai Bank building by Norman Foster (1985) is located between Government Hill and Statue Square. Chater Garden is located to

the east of Statue Square.

To the east of Government Hill is Murray Building by Ron Phillips (1969) which was used by the government for office accommodation. The Murray Building is flanked by the St John's Building and the Citibank Building. To the east of the Murray Building is Hong Kong Park, formerly Victoria Barracks which contains Flagstaff House.

3.4 Social and cultural context

The CGO form buildings designed for the governing and administration of Hong Kong. They occupy the site on Government Hill which has been the place of government administration in Hong Kong since the earliest days of the Colony, and which continued after the handover to the People's Republic of China in 1997 and ended only in late 2011 with the completion of the new government complex at Tamar.

Specifically, Executive Council (ExCo) meetings were held in the CGO on a weekly basis. Until 1985 when it moved to the Old Supreme Court Building, the CGO was also the site of the Legislative Council (LegCo) where lawmakers deliberated, the Governor gave his annual address and where the annual government budget speech was made. The CGO therefore have significant place in the social history of Hong Kong as many of the government decisions which have impacted upon the lives of Hong Kong citizens have been made in the CGO. The Development Bureau's proposal to demolish the West Wing and permit a private developer to construct a commercial office building will partly commercialise the site which has historically been the seat of government in Hong Kong (during both the colonial and post-colonial periods).

The social importance of the CGO, of which the West Wing forms a part, also derives from it being a place where individuals or groups within Hong Kong society interacted with the government. For many years the entrance to the Central Wing was the location where television news crews would set up their cameras to do daily television news reports about government announcements or activities.

An important feature of the West Wing was the entrance on the corner of Queen's Road Central and Ice House Street which was intended to be the public entrance to the building. In the foyer was a reception area for the Hong Kong Government Public Inquiry Service (in the 1960s) which had a wide-ranging remit to assist members of the public in a wide range of matters relating to daily life in Hong Kong. There was also a payment office and a public washroom entered from the Ice House Street side of the West Wing, which were also windows of the government towards the public for many years. Michael Wright, chief architect of the CGO, mentioned a special feature of the West Wing was the lift access that allowed members of the public to go from Queen's Road Central to Lower Albert Road – a great convenience in those days before the barriers were set up.

The CGO is also socially significant as it has been the focus of public discontent at the activities and policies of the Hong Kong government. These have ranged from individuals protesting about a particular personal grievance concerning the government to mass demonstrations and marches. Very often, protesters walked up to Government Hill via Battery Path and most protests ended in the courtyard between the Central Wing and the West Wing, under the century-old Burmese Rosewood.

3.5 Materials/fabric/form/function

The East, Central and West Wings all share the same materials, namely, exposed reinforced concrete frames and steel framed Crittall Universal windows. Granite was used to differentiate parts of some of the buildings such as entrances or other elements of the buildings (for example the granite 'base' to the ground floor of the West Wing on the Ice House Street Frontage). The Purcell Miller Tritton LLP study '*Historical and Architectural Appraisal of the Central Government Offices*' indicates that the original surface rendering to the exterior of the West Wing (and presumably the other buildings in the complex) was 'Shanghai Plaster' which comprises cement, sand and granite chips in a 1:3:4 mix (p. 119). Slate panels were initially installed on parts of the façade of the West Wing, but were replaced with mosaic panels after problems with staining.

Michael Wright, chief architect of the CGO, specifically noted the trouble and care that officials went into to source high quality non-staining granite from quarries in Hong Kong. Eventually, after an expert from Hong Kong University tested several samples, stone was selected from a quarry in Diamond Hill. This stone was used to clad the façade of the West Wing building which faces Ice House Street and possibly other parts of the complex as well. The use of local granite in building the CGO is further discussed in Appendix 5.

The form of the buildings is recognisably Modernist and is typical of low-rise Modernist office buildings of the time. They are sensitively designed in relation to the sloping nature of the Government Hill site and do not seek to dominate their surroundings, in contrast to the adjacent commercial high-rise development. The West Wing is particularly notable for the way in which the design enables the contour of the hillside to be read when seen from Queens Road Central, as the site slopes steeply downwards to the west. This feature of the building is important as it is a particularly fine example of building on sloping sites in Hong Kong which resulted in the completed building blending harmoniously with the natural landscaping and vegetation on slopes. The 'climbing' design of the building to suit the topography of the site results in plan area changes at each level uphill in response to the topography. This is in complete contrast with typical Hong Kong contemporary design practice where the site is flattened, the remaining slope behind stabilised with concrete, and a podium constructed with a tower above. The Development Bureau's development proposal for the West Wing site is typical of this practice which would result in large-scale formation works, defacing the existing sloping terrain of the site.

The idea of a street in the sky which originates from Le Corbusier and was realised also by Alison and Peter Smithson in England, has several implementations in Hong Kong. From the six Police Married Quarters designed by the Public Works Department in the 1960s with streets in the air, only the one in Aberdeen remains. Hing Wah and Kwai Shing West estates from the mid 1970s by the Housing Authority use a variation in which a lift tower brings people to a street in the air which will lead horizontally back to ground level again on a steep slope. The West Wing can be considered a precursor of these with an internal lift. The Public Works Department used this idea shared with architects internationally at the time, applied it to local conditions, developed the idea further in impressive projects and influenced the design of public housing by another institution.

The appraisal report by Purcell Miller Tritton describes many aspects and parts of the buildings of the Central Government Offices. But if we understand architectural design as relating to the basic aspects like site, programme, construction and form and giving order in forming a whole out of the parts, the report doesn't mention the high level of design knowhow which the Government Offices represent. The West Wing is in this respect the most complex of the three wings. An example is the way it sits on the land, has different scales as part of the city on Queens Road and Ice House Street

and part of a park along Lower Albert Road and forms spaces which establish relationships to neighbouring buildings. Another is the differentiation of the load bearing structure to allow for offices of different sizes, to provide shading for the windows and to give expression to the facades. Many specific facets which the building still today reveals to a careful observer can't be explained only as the fulfillment of a functional requirement, but are the result of deliberate design in which each built piece links several ideas.

The height of the CGO buildings was carefully considered to preserve the views from Government House (located on the hill to the immediate south of Government Hill). Both the East/Central Wings and the West Wing were sited to be on either side of the central axis of Government House. Should the West Wing be demolished, this relationship would be lost forever.

The CGO are particularly notable as they incorporated progressive technology and office facilities for the time in Hong Kong with the intention of providing a better working environment. The CGO was the first government building in Hong Kong to be fully air-conditioned and to incorporate staff facilities such as canteens, common spaces, and even a dental clinic.

In this respect their design has been successful as they have fulfilled the function of office / administrative buildings, adapting to the changing needs of the government departments which have occupied the buildings. Each building has narrow floorplates to allow natural light to penetrate the buildings and have separate load bearing and non-load bearing elements to enable the office accommodation to be reorganized at will by means of demountable partitions.

3.6 Aesthetic value

The CGO are of aesthetic value as they are one of the very few remaining Modernist civic buildings from the 1950s / 1960s remaining in Hong Kong. Although the complex was planned as a whole, there are subtle differences in style between the East, Central and West Wings.

The East Wing (the earliest of the group to be built) uses granite cladding and some subtle Art Deco-inspired decoration to the entrance on the corner of Lower Albert Road and Garden Road. The Central Wing dispenses with these decorative elements and the West Wing (the last Wing to be constructed) has the most functional-appearing design of the group. In this sense, the CGO complex appears to demonstrate a subtle shift in design thinking within the Government Architectural Office and within the upper echelons of the Colonial administration.

A letter dated 9th February 1951 stated that the design of the buildings was long and low both for aesthetic reasons and because there would not be interference with the view from Government House. This shows how the CGO complex was designed with the surrounding buildings and environment in mind.

The Hong Kong Institute of Architects stated the following in its submission to the government dated 31 December 2010: "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."

4.0 Source of Alert

4.1 References, contacts

This alert has been prepared by the Government Hill Concern Group.

Website: www.governmenthill.org

Contact: Mrs Katty Law, convener, Government Hill Concern Group

Telephone: (+852) 9026 6187

Email address: ktylaw@gmail.com

4.2 Groups supporting Alert and/or nomination, contacts

The Government Hill Concern Group is an alliance of 21 environmental and heritage conservation groups and concerned professionals and members of the public:

Central and Western Concern Group, The Professional Commons, Designing Hong Kong, Green Sense, Greeners Action, The Conservancy Association, Heritage Watch, Community Alliance for Urban Planning, Community Development Initiative, Save Our Shorelines, Lung Fu Shan Environment Concern Group, HK Redevelopment Concern Group, Heritage Hong Kong, Clear the Air, Green Environmental Health Group, South Tokwawan Concern Group, Society for Protection of the Harbour, Soho Residents Committee, Mini Spotters, World City Committee, Dragon Garden Charitable Trust

The Government Hill Concern Group also made a town planning application in early 2011 to zone the CGOs as a heritage precinct and the application was supported by over 6000 members of the public and groups through letters or signatures of petition.

4.3 Groups potentially against Alert action

The Development Bureau of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region which put forward the sale and redevelopment plan of Government Hill/CGO West Wing.

Postal address: 18/F, West Wing, Central Government Offices, 2 Tim Mei Avenue, Tamar, Hong Kong

Telephone: (+852) 3509 8800

Fax: (+852) 2845 3489

Email address: devbenq@devb.gov.hk

4.4 Local, Regional, International significance citations

a) *The Greatest Form Has No Shape – three exemplary works of Hong Kong modern architecture* – an exhibition and publication by Professor Vito Bertin, Gu Daqing and Woo Pui-leng of the School of Architecture, Chinese University of Hong Kong (2011).

The significance of the CGO West Wing was studied and presented in this research project. Copies of this publication has been sent to the committee by post.

b) The Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) of the HKSAR Government has commissioned Purcell Miller Tritton LLP, a British firm of conservation architects, to conduct a consultancy study 'Historical and Architectural Appraisal of the Central Government Offices'. The study was completed in September 2009 and can be accessed at

http://www.amo.gov.hk/en/research_cgo_20091015.php

This is a detailed historical and architectural appraisal of the CGO - it acknowledged the significance of the CGO and recommended setting up a "Special Protected Area" to preserve the cultural landscape of Government Hill. However, the government has deliberately taken ideas out of context to say that the CGO West Wing is "unimportant" thereby justifying the sale and redevelopment of that part of the site.

c) Forum UNESCO – Univeristy and Heritage issued a "*Call for Academic Support – HK Government Hill at threat*" on 9 September 2011

4.5 Letters of support, newspaper articles etc.

There are numerous letters/articles of support for keeping West Wing on local newspapers' letters to the editor page, opinion articles and editorials, such as the South China Morning Post (local english-language newspaper) and other local magazines. There were over 6000 submissions/signed petitions to the Town Planning Board in support of protection of the CGO as a heritage precinct. Many professional groups made submissions with a range of support for the CGO's preservation. Copies of these letters and news articles can be provided if required. Extracts from some of the submissions made by professional and community groups are provided in Appendix 1.

A set of submissions in support of saving the West Wing by the Hong Kong Institute of Architects will be sent via email attachment with this submission. Also a scan copy of U Magazine (03.02.2012) with a feature story titled "Our Government Hill" and Ming Pao Weekly (10.03.2012) with a feature story titled "Who steals Government Hill?" are attached.

Mr John Hurd, President of the ICOMOS Advisory Committee, was interviewed by a Radio Television Hong Kong news reporter recently in an international heritage conservation conference in Hong Kong (12 December 2011). He said that it's important to preserve Government Hill in its entirety:

International call to preserve Government Hill (12-12-2011)

http://rthk.hk/rthk/news/englishnews/20111212/news_20111212_56_804505.htm

Mr Michael Wright, chief architect of the CGO, has spoken via a video interview (conducted in December 2011) in support of the conservation of the entire CGO complex as a whole. A selection of his quotes can be found in Appendix 2. The video can be viewed in www.governmenthill.org

Mr Ronald Phillips, co-architect of the Hong Kong City Hall and a contemporary of Michael Wright and John Aitken, has written a statement in support of the conservation of the CGO West Wing. His statement can be found in Appendix 4.

4.6 Publications that describe the work/place, bibliography, etc.

Please refer to section 4.4 above. There are many books that describe the history of Government Hill:

City of Victoria, first published by the Urban Council of Hong Kong, September 1994

The Government Hill Concern Group has compiled a *Government Hill Compendium* in June 2011 with a detailed coverage on various aspects of history, architecture and landscape of the site. See

The Concern Group has also published an information booklet titled “Our Government Hill” in early June 2012. This can be accessed at www.governmenthill.org

4.7 Time constraints for Advocacy (immediate action/delayed action)

It is recommended that immediate advocacy action be taken by the ICOMOS ISC20C because:

- The Hong Kong Government Antiquities Advisory Board is currently assessing the cultural significance of the CGO complex. Being listed under the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance does not however prevent a building from being demolished. Even a Grade 1 historic building (highest grade) can be pulled down, only a monument status can save a building from demolition. The ordinance is narrowly defined to look at historic buildings only and does not pay much attention to the historic urban landscape. Advocacy action would add significant international weight against the proposed demolition of the West Wing of the CGO. While the Government Hill Concern Group has recommended the Antiquities Advisory Board to accord the CGO a Grade 1 listing pending monument status, the Government has stated that it will continue to demolish the West Wing as the grading exercise is not in its original plan. The Antiquities Advisory Board will meet on 14 June 2012 to discuss the grading - a heritage alert issued before the meeting could help focus attention on the heritage significance of the site against political pressure exerted by the Government.
- The Hong Kong Government Development Bureau proposes to put the West Wing of the CGO up for sale in 2013 for demolition and redevelopment. Immediate advocacy is necessary before the preparations by the Development Bureau of the sale progresses beyond a ‘point of no return’.

5.0 Recommended Action

5.1 Heritage Alert: international/national distribution

It is recommended that the Heritage Alert have international distribution.

5.2 Letters to:

It is recommended that the letter be addressed to the Hong Kong SAR Chief Executive (the current term will end on 30 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

Tel: (+852) 2878 3300
Fax: (+852) 25090580
Email: ceo@ceo.gov.hk

Copies of the letter should be sent to the following officials at the same time:

Mr Leung Chun Ying
Chief Executive-Elect
Hong Kong SAR Government
The West Wing, (Former) Central Government Offices
Lower Albert Road
Hong Kong

Email: ceeo@ce-elect-office.hk

Mrs Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor
Secretary for Development
18/F, West Wing
Central Government Offices
2 Tim Mei Avenue
Tamar
Hong Kong

Telephone: (+852) 3509 8800

Fax: (+852) 2845 3489

Email address: devbeng@devb.gov.hk, carrielam@devb.gov.hk

Mr. Bernard Charnwut Chan
Chairman
Antiquities Advisory Board
136 Nathan Road
Tsim Sha Tsui
Kowloon
Hong Kong

Tel.: (+852) 2208 4400

Fax: (+852) 2721 6216

Email address: amo@lcsd.gov.hk, bernie@bernardchan.com

Mr Ming Kay Chuen, Tom
Executive Secretary
Antiques and Monuments Office
136 Nathan Road
Tsim Sha Tsui
Kowloon
Hong Kong

Email: tkcming@lcsd.gov.hk

Note: Mr Ming should be requested to forward the letter to all members of the Antiques Advisory Board at his earliest convenience.

Mr. Thomas Chow
Chairman
Town Planning Board
15/F, North Point Government Offices
333 Java Road
North Point
Hong Kong

Tel: (+852) 2231 4810 or (+852) 2231 4835
Fax: (+852) 2877 0245 or (+852) 2522 8426
Email address: tpbpd@pland.gov.hk

Kindly copy the letter to the Government Hill Concern Group
Contact person: Katty Law
Contact email: ktylaw@gmail.com

5.3 ISC20C Website upload

It is recommended that an Alert is uploaded onto the ISC20C website.

5.4 Affiliated distribution eg. UIA/Docomomo/TICCIH

It is recommended that distribution be made to affiliated organisations such as Docomomo.

Appendix 1

Extracts from Public Submissions and Professionals

What the Professionals Say

“The West Wing appears modest but actually reflects the high level of design in terms of the site, programme, structure, and composition – suggesting it might be the best among the three wings of the Central Government Offices.”

Vito Bertin, Gu Daqing and Woo Pui-leng in *The Greatest Form has No Shape – Three Exemplary Works of Hong Kong Architecture*

Extracts from Public Consultation on Proposals by Development Bureau on the Central Government Offices: (see: www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/misc/cgo/index_eng.htm)

“In submitting our views on Initiatives for Conserving Central to the Development Bureau in November 2009 we recommended the preservation of the entire Central Government (CGO) complex, including the West Wing. We are rather perplexed by the recent approach taken by the government to change one of the original eight “conservation initiatives” into a “redevelopment proposal.....”

- The Hong Kong Institute of Architects

“The Government’s present proposal is fundamentally flawed. The starting point should be public enjoyment of Government Hill and what historical, cultural and environmental benefits it can bring to the people and how it could be used to make Hong Kong into a better city.”

- Society for Protection of the Harbour

“.....Simply put: this is a public site that should remain in the hands of the public for public uses and not be sold for inappropriate commercial and retail use.”

- Central & Western Concern Group

“It is not clear why Ice House Street is to be widened at its junction with Queen’s Road Central, as its northern section cannot be equally widened.....We are also concerned that the existing strong green character and tree shading character would be lost.....”

- The Hong Kong Institute of Planners

“.....HKIUD aligns with the (government commissioned) Consultant’s recommendation to create a “Special Protected Area” encompassing several significant historical buildings and the green

space....”

- Hong Kong Institute of Urban Design

Appendix 2

What Michael Wright, chief architect of the Central Government Offices, said about the West Wing and the proposed redevelopment (extracts from an interview conducted in December 2011)

“I think the West Wing was a very important part of the central government complex. There were the three buildings that were linked up, and especially the lift access to the seventh floor making it easier for the public to get to the Secretariat Building (Central Wing). ”

“They were all designed as a whole. It would be a great pity to knock one of them down, for historical reasons they should be retained as a government office complex designed in the 1950s to meet a particular purpose.”

“Do they really need another small artificial park (as proposed in the redevelopment) ? It’s quite unnecessary and will be detrimental to the appearance of Hong Kong.”

“I think it’s quite illogical to trade off a piddling little park - if you would excuse my language - with a ugly 30 storey building, have no park and have a decent building that fits in with the environment.”

“This would have my full support of what you are trying to do to retain the West Wing, not that it’s a marvellous architecture but I think it’s a good solid design, and it’s part of the historical complex built in the 1950s and it should all be retained as one.”

Appendix 3

Statement about the architect of the West Wing of the Central Government Offices written by his daughter, Gillian Aitken.

John Aitken, a post-war graduate of Edinburgh University, joined the HK Architectural Office in 1955 at a time of unprecedented development in Hong Kong. He spent most of his working career in service to the HK Public Works Department, rising to Director of Building Development several years before retirement in 1982.

His first major architectural project soon after arriving in HK was the Central Government Offices complex, known as the West Wing. While my father did not much discuss his working life, he did talk of the West Wing project; the scope, scale and complexity, was not only a significant one for the time, but a significant undertaking for a new recruit, and he felt the weight of his responsibility. Years later, after a lifetime of executing HK housing and infrastructure development programmes on a scale unknown to many in his field, it was the West Wing project he would often recall. The daunting complexity of the site development, the difficulties in how to best retain the site's intrinsic character, including the central banyan tree, and his own personal gratification of successfully integrating a highly modern and visible building into a valued historic precinct. He would have been fascinated to learn of the keen interest in HK today to retain the West Wing, the ironies would not have escaped him.

After retirement, John Aitken was able to fully indulge his love of architectural history, film and travel, eventually settling in Sydney, Australia until his death in 2009.

Appendix 4

Concern for Hong Kong's Built Environment

by Ron Phillips

I was a practicing architect in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s, the period which saw the beginning of the incredible development of one of the most dynamic places in the world.

This was at a time when The Peak back drop viewed from the harbour was largely green, but even in those early days and in anticipation of what was to come, it was recognised that environmentally there was a need to safeguard the amenity of free movement of pedestrians and the principle of high-level walkways was established.

As the co-architect for the City Hall I returned to Hong Kong for both its 30th and 40th anniversaries in 1992 and 2002 and during the former visit I was delighted to feel that whilst amazing changes had taken place there was still some element of the human scale, and urban spaces were being respected if not expanded.

My latter visit was less reassuring. As an example, the then Star Ferry concourse and car park, which was designed as part of an overall City Hall urban space embracing the Memorial Garden, the Sea Front, Cenotaph, and Statue Square had descended into a down-at-heel image. For one thing to see the clean lines of the car park building defaced with such poor commercial advertising, which bordered on graffiti, it was a great disappointment to me. I knew that it was inevitable that the Star Ferry Piers would eventually be relocated, but to see that environment which had been thought about so carefully to be so abused I found distressing and lacking in respect for its users.

I am shortly to return to Hong Kong for the City Hall's 50th anniversary and from what I hear I may experience other disappointments, but being an optimist I hope for the best.

It is a known fact that the only constant in life is change and one cannot stand still, however, there is a danger of it being used as an excuse to sweep aside things of environmental value purely for economic reasons. For reasons of continuity one cannot ignore history and there must be serious regard for what is likely to be sacrificed and by so doing to ask what does it contribute to the community and the environment.

I understand that for infrastructure and reclamation reasons the public open space in front of the City Hall has regrettably been sacrificed together with the Queen's Pier. Such loss of public access and amenity in Central, where it has always been in short supply, can be ill-afforded and the means of escaping the hurly burly of the city centre has now been lost for all time.

I have heard that the West Wing of the Central Government Offices is to be demolished to make way for another office/shopping development and this gives me some concern.

I well remember this wing of the Central Government Offices being built and how the design by my good friend, John Aitken, had been developed to respect and enhance the urban space connecting Cathedral Close, Battery Path, the French Mission Building and the West Wing of the Central Government Offices. I hate to think what the environmental impact the building of yet another glass tower block in this location will have upon this otherwise combined intimate pleasant space of human scale.

All the projects in Hong Kong in which I was involved endeavoured to create human space around them, however small. I give my full support to the Government Hill Concern Group in its efforts to protect and improve the built environment in Hong Kong.

Ron Phillips is the architect of the Hong Kong City Hall and the Edinburgh Place complex, Murray Building and Beaconsfield House (demolished). The City Hall is a grade 1 historic building.

Appendix 5

Use of Local Granite in the Construction of the Central Government Offices Complex

The Central Government Offices (CGO) complex on Government Hill is one of the few samples of 1950s reinforced concrete and granite-faced public buildings in Hong Kong. Michael Wright, the chief architect of the CGO, in an interview with the Government Hill Concern Group in December 2011, emphasized that the government had put in “a lot of thought, a lot of care” into finding the right granite for building the CGO complex.¹ This paper will provide information regarding the use of local granite in the construction of the CGO complex. The references are based on archival research of public records of that period, supplemented by information from an academic publication.

Finding the right granite

The Public Records Office has a detailed file on the construction of the CGO (HKRS 156-1-1803). There are several correspondences on granite testing.

Professor S.G. Davis of the Department of Geography and Geology, University of Hong Kong, was commissioned by the Public Works Department (PWD) in 1952 and 1954 to conduct testing of granite facing slabs for use in facing the CGO complex.

In a letter written by Davis to the PWD in June 1952², Davis said “*I presume your main concern in the testing of these granites is that they shall be durable and not rust in the same way as the granites which face the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank Building and the Bank of China.*” He added that a minimum of three weeks spot-testing in the lab was required and he had to do his own sampling from the quarry as “*granite textures and structures are often highly variable over a small area.*” This series of testing was supposedly to obtain the granite for building the East Wing, Stage I of the CGO construction.

In September 1954, Davis was again asked by the PWD to conduct testing of granite samples, presumably for surfacing the Stage II and III of the CGO (Central Wing and West Wing). In a letter written by Michael Wright to Davis³, it was said that “*The necessity for additional tests arises from the fact that the Grampian Road quarry area is to be levelled early next year as part of the new airport extension scheme and, in the circumstances, it is not feasible to cut from this quarry the facing slabs required for the second and third blocks of the Government Offices. It is, therefore, necessary to find another quarry producing granite which is practically identical to that of Grampian Road quarry.*”

Michael went on to say that “*the Hakka mason employed on the Government Offices has produced samples from a quarry at Diamond Hill (near Kai Tak) which are almost identical in appearance and texture to the granite at Grampian Road. It is hoped, therefore, that you (Davis) will select and test samples from this quarry.*”

There was “a complication” which “arises from the fact that the Diamond Hill quarry is already being worked by a private firm under Government permit. It would simplify matters, therefore, if a reasonably accessible but unworked area could be located, producing a similar stone to that at Grampian Road.”

Davis, in his reply letter⁴, said he needed to undertake several procedures: *“(a) Sampling of likely granite areas by my staff and myself. (b) Laboratory micro-testing and sectioning for a minimum period of one month. (c) Weekly visits to the quarry and the stone-masons' workshops with permission to reject faulty dressed stones. The above technique is necessary to ensure masonry that will not rust.”*

It is evident that the government had made much effort in finding the right granite for building the CGO complex. The emphasis is on the quality, rather than the use of expensive materials. In a government memo titled “Building Costs” dated 15 July 1959⁵, from the Director of Public Works to the Colonial Secretary, it was reported that the CGO buildings had a much lower cost than private buildings of the same period (cost per square foot is 62% of Jardine House, 53% of Wing On Life Building, etc), and one of the reasons given was *“the 'expensive' appearance of the government buildings is obtained by careful detailing and insistence on a high standard of finish rather than by the use of expensive materials.”* This reflects the government's taste and philosophy at that time and the attempt to win the hearts of the people through the means of good architecture. *“If the Hong Kong Government is to command respect of the local population, its departments must be worthily housed.”* (from a government correspondence dated 11 July 1949)

Hong Kong Granite

Professor Davis published a book titled ***Building Stones and Rock Materials Used in Hong Kong*** in 1965⁶. There was a section on Hong Kong granite and some references on how it was applied in the construction of the CGO.

“Granite is by far the most popular of all building stones and quarries in it are widely scattered wherever there are suitable and conveniently placed outcrops. In recent years (1960s), because of the tremendous demands of the building industry, it has become obvious that although there is an abundance of granite there is only a limited amount that is suitable as a high quality building stone. Such requirements as strength, texture, durability, mineral stability, colour, accessibility and ease of cutting do not always occur together.” (p.2)

“Hong Kong granite is the best known of all the Hong Kong building stones. When fresh it has a fine appearance, is tough and hard and can take bearing loads of hundreds of tons. Its strength and rough fracture also make it highly regarded for use in concrete aggregates.” (p.2)

“Granite has been used widely in a great number of large buildings in Hong Kong. Prominent among the pre-World War Two buildings are the Supreme Court, the Hong Kong Club and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Head Office. Post-war buildings in granite are best represented by the Bank of China, Chartered Bank, the American Consulate and the large complex of the Administrative Offices of the Hong Kong Government. This last group of buildings is handsomely characterized by plain high walls of white granite that glisten in the early morning or late afternoon sun. The stone for all these post-war buildings was quarried in Grampian Road and Diamond Hill in Kowloon. At the time of writing dressed granite from Diamond Hill to the value of more than two million dollars is being prepared for the new Bank of Canton being built on the Ice House Street. Until June 1964 the Government quarry at Diamond Hill was reserved solely for building stone.” (p.4-5)

Local craftsmanship

Davis' book also discussed the quality of stone masonry in Hong Kong.

"Stone masonry in Hong Kong is a traditional industry that is well established. It is run and controlled almost entirely by the Hakka people who make up the vast majority of the stonemasons. These stonemasons have a reputation for high-class work that compares favourably with the best in the world." (p.37)

"Great care should be exercised to ensure that the cement mortar used in high class granite ashlar should be free from impurities that are likely to cause staining or rusting in the joints. Instead of using sand it is a wise precaution to use granite fines ground from the same rock as the stonework. The excellence of this technique is beautifully shown on the high granite wall at the east end of the Colonial Secretariat on Garden Road opposite the Peak Tramway Station." (p.38)

It is clear from the above review that the CGO complex is a fine example of post-war reinforced concrete and granite-faced buildings in Hong Kong. The use of local granite was carefully planned by the Public Works Department with professional support from the university to obtain high-quality materials, and the result was enhanced by the superior craftsmanship of the Hakka stonemasons.

The sources of these granites which built the CGO complex had long been exhausted. The two quarries in Grampian Road and Diamond Hill ceased operation in the 1950s and 1970s.

The CGO complex is therefore an architectural reminder of the time when grand Hong Kong buildings were built of local granite. Many of the buildings mentioned above had long gone – the old Hong Kong Bank and the old Chartered Bank (two of the big three granite banks), the old Hong Kong Club, etc. The CGO complex - its East, Central and West Wings - which served the public for more than half a century have now become our heritage. It is one of the few surviving examples of 1950s reinforced concrete and granite-faced public buildings in Hong Kong. In its essence, the use of local materials has created a wonderful connection between the buildings and our land. It will be a waste to destroy this architectural heritage.

"I think these Central Government Offices are very fine-looking. They are of what I believe is called functional design and they can certainly be considered a very great credit to our architects and also to the contractors who, in one form or another, erected them and I hope you will agree with me that the Central Government Offices are in every way worthy of the Colony of Hongkong."

- Sir Alexander Grantham, Governor, 1957

Notes

1 The video of the interview of Michael Wright by the Government Hill Concern Group can be viewed on www.governmenthill.org

2 Correspondence re "New Government Offices: Testing of Granite Facing Slabs" from S.G. Davis, Head of Department of Geology and Geography, University of Hong Kong to Chief Architect (J.C. Charter), The Public Works Department, 25 July 1952 (HKRS 156-1-1803)

3 Correspondence re "New Government Offices: Testing of Granite Samples" from A.M.J. Wright, Chief Architect, The Public Works Department to S.G. Davis, 9 September 1954 (HKRS 156-1-1803)

4 Correspondence re "New Government Offices: Testing of Granite Samples" from S.G. Davis to A.M.J. Wright, 1 October 1954 (HKRS 156-1-1803)

5 Government Memo from Director of Public Works to Colonial Secretary, 15 July 1959 (HKRS 156-1-1803)

6 *Building Stones and Rock Materials Used in Hong Kong*, S.G. Davis, First Edition 1965, published by Davis Publications Limited, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's First Underground Carpark

A piece of news from 1959:

An Underground Car Park

An underground car park accommodating about 100 vehicles at Lower Albert Road is now in use.

The first of its kind in Hongkong, the car park is situated underneath the compound between the two wings of the Central Government Offices.

The entrance to the car park is led from Lower Albert Road by a short sloping concrete path and vehicles leave the car park by another opening near Battery Path.

Ventilation of the car park is maintained by a mushroom shaped structure which rises out of the compound near the East Wing.

(South China Morning Post, 11 August 1959 - Public Records Office HKRS 232-1-8)

So the CGO is not only Hong Kong's first air-conditioned public building complex, it also has Hong Kong's first underground car park!