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The Role of Heritage Architecture in Central: Cultural Conservation or Conversion?

Case Study of The “30 Houses” Neighbourhood under Hong Kong’s Conservation Policies, and The Influence of Public Participation on Local Conservation Projects

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ABSTRACT

In the context of Hong Kong's intricate historical narrative, the city's heritage, encompassing cultural traditions and architectural remnants, serves as a repository of collective memory and history to be transmitted to future generations. Despite initial neglect post-1997 in favour of economic advancement, a growing emphasis on preserving built heritage has emerged, underscored by pivotal events like the Queen's Pier demolition and Lee Tung Street redevelopment. Presently, although a grading system established by the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB) exists for historical buildings, only Declared Monuments hold legal protection (Cap. 53 Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance). Challenges persist, notably in balancing preservation with modern needs through initiatives like the Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme. Noteworthy is Central's juxtaposition of modern skyscrapers with heritage sites, exemplifying the delicate interplay between progress and conservation. As public awareness grows, this paper explores Hong Kong's conservation policies, spotlighting Central as a microcosm, advocating for public engagement and knowledge dissemination to safeguard the city's remaining heritage.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a rise in area-specific advocacy groups dedicated to safeguarding built heritage against rapid urban development that poses risks to structures and sites of historical and cultural importance dating back to both pre-colonial and colonial periods. Public awareness has heightened regarding the Antiquities Advisory Board's (AAB) historic buildings grading system, overseen by the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO), which now necessitates permission from the Secretary for Home Affairs for any alterations or demolitions under the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance of Hong Kong Law (Cap. 53). Despite encompassing both public and private properties,

the grading system encounters challenges due to ungraded structures of significant historical, cultural, and architectural value, prompting disputes among government officials, stakeholders, and industry experts over grading decisions, attributed to committee expertise limitations and perceived system obsolescence.

The Hong Kong SAR Government introduced the Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme in 2004 and operationalized it in 2008 to engage the public in repurposing government-owned historic buildings effectively. This scheme, open to eligible non-profit organizations, involves selection by The Advisory Committee on Built Heritage Conservation (ACBHC), based on proposal assessments. Presently, the forthcoming sixth batch of the initiative is under planning. Despite Central's reputation as a bustling financial district dominated by skyscrapers, traces of old buildings and traditional businesses persist.

Notably, the "30 Houses" enclave stands out for its exceptionally high heritage density in Hong Kong, surpassing the city's average with eight historical structures per hectare, some preserved intact, while others undergo adaptive reuse for conservation and revitalization purposes. However, questions arise regarding whether conservation efforts truly preserve historical and cultural significance and whether activities within revitalized buildings introduce transformative elements that influence Hong Kong's identity.

This study intends to scrutinize the existing conservation policies and strategies, focusing on the "Heritage Triangle" and the 30 Houses neighbourhood in Central as a case study. It will delve into the evolution of historical buildings through adaptive reuse, evaluating their impact on various scales, including the local community, Central as a precinct, and Hong Kong's overall identity. Emphasizing the pivotal role of public interest in shaping urban development trajectories, the research underscores the significance of public engagement. Drawing comparisons with both successful endeavours like the State Theatre and less favoured projects such as Queen's Pier and the Lee Tung Street/McGregor Street Project (The Avenue), this paper seeks to offer insights into the contemporary conservation landscape in Hong Kong, using Central as a focal point to advocate for enhanced public participation and knowledge dissemination concerning the city's enduring heritage assets.

2. Part 1: Heritage Conservation and An Overview of Hong Kong

2.1 Heritage Architecture and Conservation

The terms "heritage" and "conservation" will be recurrently used throughout this study. It is crucial to establish a clear understanding of these concepts before delving into their implications within the community and their influence on the cultural identity of Hong Kong.

Heritage, fundamentally, refers to elements rooted in the past, typically appearing as the cultural traditions of a community or nation, historical structures—referred to as "built heritage" or "heritage architecture"—which bear connections to bygone eras and encapsulate collective memories intended for transmission to future generations. Such heritage may encompass traditional edifices like tenement houses, places of worship, piers, as well as alterations to the landscape such as land reclamation and cultivation, and even communities residing within these landscapes, some of which have been designated as monuments in Hong Kong.

These cultural assets serve a pivotal role in nurturing a sense of belonging and pride among communities, fostering creativity, and facilitating social and economic growth when under appropriate frameworks. In the 2007 Legislative Council Paper on "Views and Suggestions Received from the Public on the Review of Built Heritage Conservation Policy," presented by Heritage Hong Kong, it was highlighted that there exists a prevalent perception of heritage as either a "public" or "government" concern. However, it was emphasized that the public should invariably participate in the identification

and oversight processes to prevent their exclusion or detachment from their own cultural heritage, as such disengagement could impede their involvement in conservation efforts.

Drawing from The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance (1999), conservation is defined as the comprehensive array of actions undertaken to safeguard a site's cultural significance¹. The conservation process involves five primary strategies: maintenance, preservation, restoration, reconstruction, and adaptation, sometimes necessitating the concurrent application of multiple strategies².

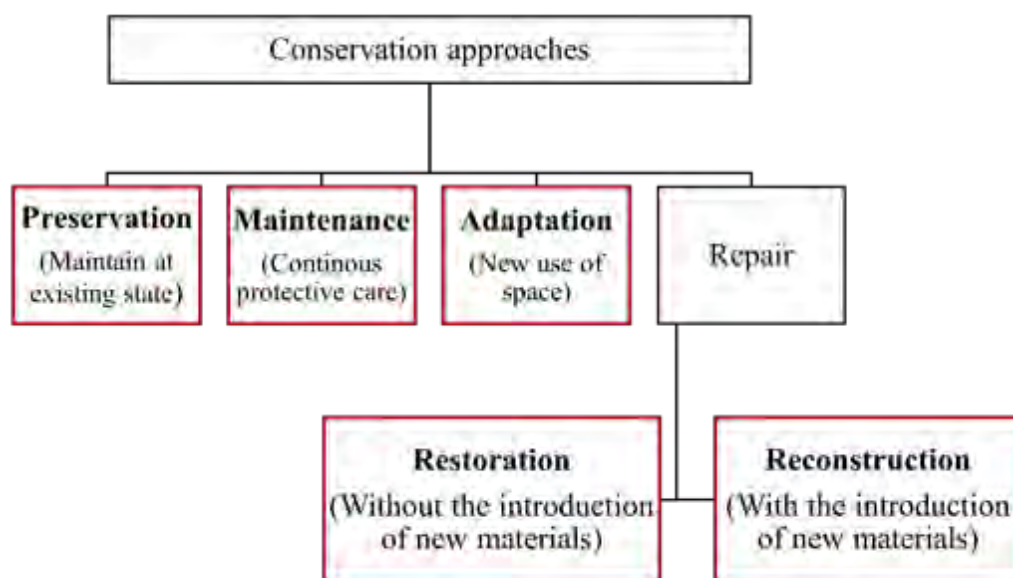


Fig. 1. An interpretation of The Burra Charter's conservation strategies

Preservation typically involves maintenance, including regular inspections and cleaning to uphold the place's original condition and prevent deterioration. In contrast, repair endeavours such as restoration and reconstruction aim to restore the place to a previously documented state. The primary difference between restoration and reconstruction lies in the former's restoration of the original material to its initial position, while the latter involves the introduction of new materials to replace decayed building fabrics (Figure 1).

In the report "Saving Hong Kong's Cultural Heritage" authored by Cecilia Chu and Kylie Uebegang and published in 2002 by Civic Exchange, a local think tank, the challenges and opportunities associated with conserving Hong Kong's cultural heritage amidst rapid urban development and modernization are thoroughly examined. Despite Hong Kong's rich history and diverse cultural heritage, numerous historic buildings and cultural landmarks face the looming threat of disappearance due to neglect, demolition, and redevelopment.

The authors advocate for a more holistic and strategic approach to heritage conservation, promoting enhanced community engagement, public education initiatives, improved inter-departmental communication within governmental bodies, and increased collaboration between public and private stakeholders. The article emphasizes the critical importance of safeguarding Hong Kong's cultural heritage as a means of preserving the city's distinct identity and fostering sustainable and inclusive development practices.

¹ ICOMOS (2013), Definitions, p1-3

² ICOMOS (2013), Conservation Processes, p6-7

2.2 The Establishment of Heritage Protection Measures in Hong Kong

2.2.1 The Antiquities Advisory Board, The Antiquities and Monuments Office and the grading system

The Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance (Cap.53) was brought into effect in 1976 concurrently with the establishment of the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB) and the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO). The corresponding governmental ministry overseeing these matters is the Development Bureau. Subsequently, the Commissioner for Heritage's Office (CHO) was inaugurated under the Development Bureau on 25 April 2008.

In March 2009, the AMO announced the completion of the evaluation of 1,444 historic buildings, with the AAB thereafter focusing on the confirmation of the grading of these buildings. This process involves utilizing references, historical data, and feedback from the public provided by the AMO. Furthermore, the AAB conducts on-site inspections and assessments to determine the heritage value, and the suitability of items suggested by the public for grading³.

The grading process is defined as follows⁴:

Table 1

Definition of the Gradings

Grade	Definition
Grade I	Buildings of outstanding merit, which every effort should be made to preserve if possible.
Grade II	Buildings of special merit; efforts should be made to selectively preserve.
Grade III	Buildings of some merit; preservation in some form would be desirable and alternative means should be considered if preservation is not practicable.

(Source: Antiquities and Monuments Board)

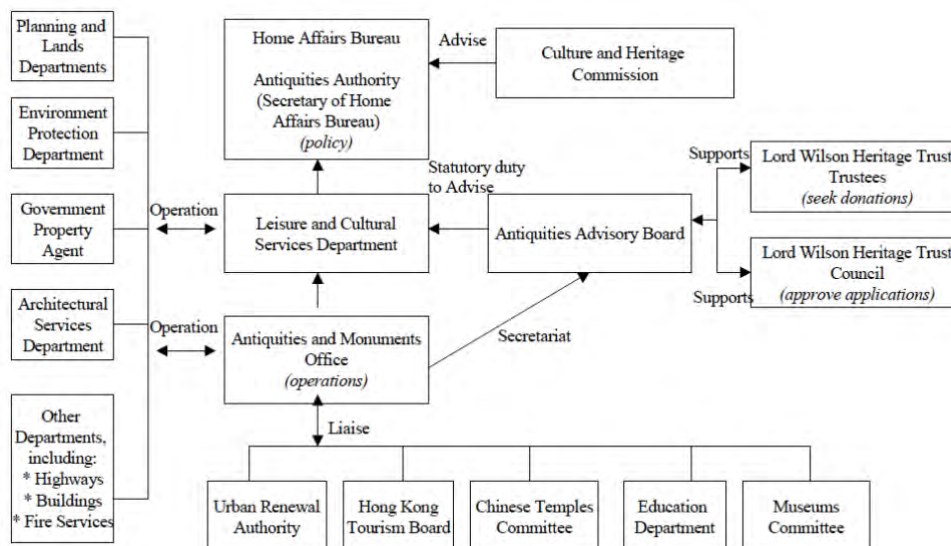


Fig. 2. Formal and Working Relationships of Antiquities and Monuments Office within the Government
(Source: Hong Kong University, Department of Architecture, Architectural Conservation Programme)

³ Conserve and Revitalise Hong Kong Heritage - About us: Commissioner for Heritage's Office

⁴ Antiquities Advisory Board - Definition of the Gradings

2.2.1 The Antiquities Advisory Board's role in heritage conservation⁵

The Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB) plays a significant role in heritage conservation through its multifaceted functions and responsibilities (Figure 2).

As a statutory body, the AAB serves as a key advisor to the Secretary for Development (SDEV) on matters concerning antiquities, proposed monuments, and monuments. It provides recommendations for the declaration of proposed monuments as outlined in the Ordinance. Once a building or site achieves monument status, it is mandated to be permanently preserved, with any alterations or demolitions requiring authorization from the Antiquities Authority.

Moreover, the AAB oversees the grading system for historic buildings, employing an objective framework as an administrative tool to evaluate heritage value. This system does not impact the ownership, management, usage, or development rights of the buildings. The Board conducts quarterly public meetings to deliberate on the grading of historic buildings, often preceded by comprehensive site visits to ensure thorough assessments.

Additionally, the AAB plays a crucial role in reviewing excavation applications submitted by archaeologists seeking licenses under the Ordinance to excavate and search for antiquities. This advisory function underscores the AAB's commitment to safeguarding the region's archaeological heritage.

Furthermore, the AAB mandates Heritage Impact Assessments (HIAs) for Government-led capital works projects that may affect sites or buildings of historical or archaeological significance. Following the completion of the assessment, the AAB reviews the report and, upon approval, submits a funding application to the Legislative Council for consideration, highlighting the Board's role in ensuring appropriate measures to mitigate the impact on heritage sites.

The AAB actively engages in raising public awareness and enhancing public participation in heritage conservation efforts by disseminating information through various platforms, such as The Commissioner for Heritage's Office's Instagram account and online publications. By presenting cultural heritage in a vibrant and engaging manner, the AAB aims to foster broader community involvement in conservation initiatives.

Lastly, serving as an advisory body and collaborative partner with the SAR Government in heritage conservation policy, the AAB conducts policy reviews to provide recommendations on areas necessitating government attention or enhanced resource allocation in the realm of built heritage conservation. Through its proactive engagements and comprehensive functions, the AAB plays a vital role in safeguarding and promoting Hong Kong's rich cultural heritage for present and future generations.

2.3 The Problems for Heritage Buildings in Hong Kong

Heritage conservation in Hong Kong faces a myriad of challenges that hinder the preservation of its rich historical and cultural legacy. One of the primary issues plaguing conservation efforts is the lack of legal protection for numerous buildings not covered under the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance. These structures remain vulnerable to demolition or substantial alteration, with an estimated 10,000 buildings of historical significance yet to be assessed or graded by the Antiquities Authority or the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB). Despite the protection of 1,444 historic buildings as of 2021, the vast majority remain at risk due to insufficient legal safeguards.

Another critical challenge arises from the intersection of time, costs, and the relentless pressure from redevelopment activities. The rapid pace of urban development in Hong Kong poses a significant threat to heritage conservation efforts. Developers, driven by the lucrative prospects of accommodating

⁵ So (2022), p24-33

the burgeoning population and expanding economy, often prioritize profit over preservation. Even with Grade I, II, or III statuses, historic buildings are not immune to demolition. Districts such as Central and Wan Chai, characterized by high property values, face increased risks due to the relentless pressure for redevelopment.

Moreover, a lack of public awareness further compounds the challenges faced in heritage conservation endeavours. The prevailing profit-driven mindset among the residents of Hong Kong, coupled with a predominant focus on infrastructure development, has resulted in limited awareness of the cultural, historical, and architectural values embodied by historic buildings. Many view these structures as outdated impediments to progress, lacking appreciation for their intrinsic significance. This dearth of awareness makes it challenging to garner public support for conservation initiatives, further jeopardizing the preservation of Hong Kong's heritage.

Additionally, the difficulty in repurposing historic buildings and striking a delicate balance between conservation and contemporary needs presents a formidable obstacle. Stringent zoning regulations often restrict the potential uses of historic structures, limiting the scope for viable proposals in adaptive re-use projects. The absence of successful business models demonstrating the financial sustainability of operators revitalizing these buildings exacerbates the challenge. Projects focusing on adaptive re-use in Hong Kong struggle to find balance between commercial interests and the preservation of domestic or communal spaces, highlighting the intricate balance required in repurposing historic buildings for modern needs while safeguarding their heritage value.

2.3 Adaptive re-use

In the introduction to the discussion on Adaptive Reuse within the context of "Asian Revitalization: Adaptive Reuse in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore," Lynne D. DiStefano articulates the acceptance of adaptive reuse as a prominent conservation practice in 21st-century Hong Kong⁶. This approach is duly acknowledged through the government's implementation of the Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme (Revitalisation Scheme) in 2008. Notably, adaptive reuse emerges as a strategic methodology applicable to both government-owned and privately held heritage buildings.

The term "Adaptive Reuse" denotes the process of modifying or repurposing a space for a new function. While similar terms such as "Repurposing" exist, they are distinguished by their respective approaches to change. Specifically, "Repurposing" suggests a transformation limited to the building's use, while maintaining the physical characteristics of the space. Conversely, "Revitalisation" carries a more dynamic connotation, emphasizing the revival of a once vibrant space, with the potential for retaining the original use. In contrast, "Rehabilitation" aligns with the material-focused tenets of North American conservation standards and guidelines, involving interventions that may result in either a new use or the preservation of the existing function (2017).

3. Part 2: The Role of Heritage Architecture in Central and The Cultural Implications

3.1 Overview of Central

Hong Kong stands as one of the most densely populated cities globally, ranking fourth in terms of population density⁷. Renowned for its amalgamation of Chinese and Western cultures, this distinctive cultural blend stems from its historical background of Chinese sovereignty intertwined with its past as a British colony. Skyscrapers dominate the skyline around Victoria Harbour, juxtaposed with remnants

⁶ DiStefano (2021), p xiii

⁷ World Population Review 2023

of colonial-era architecture dating back to the period between 1841 and 1997⁸, primarily concentrated in the Central and Sheung Wan districts. Central, functioning as the administrative hub, attracted foreign investors and entrepreneurs, fostering a thriving commercial environment that bolstered Hong Kong's economic and social competitiveness.

These colonial-era buildings, characterized by architectural styles heavily influenced by European neo-classical, art deco, and modernist features, hold significant historical value as essential components of Hong Kong's built heritage. They serve as poignant reminders of the city's colonial legacy and are now safeguarded by Hong Kong's legislative framework.

The rapid urban development within Hong Kong's Central Business District has created a striking juxtaposition between modern glass-and-steel skyscrapers and these heritage structures. Central remains a vibrant and dynamic district, bustling with commercial activities during the mornings and weekdays, while transforming into a hub for cultural and entertainment events during evenings and weekends. Beyond commercial establishments, the region is dotted with restaurants, pubs, and art galleries, showcasing a diverse range of enterprises. Street art installations and murals further accentuate Central's creative ambiance, symbolizing the area's potential for innovation and artistic expression.

Following the handover in 1997, concerns arose regarding Hong Kong's cultural landscape, with some dubbing it a "cultural desert" due to the historical neglect of arts and cultural development in favour of economic and commercial pursuits aimed at solidifying the city's status as an international financial hub. However, in the wake of significant social movements and a wave of emigration from Hong Kong, the remaining residents have begun to exhibit a heightened awareness and protective stance towards the city's threatened built and cultural heritage. This newfound appreciation extends to various facets of Hong Kong's unique culture, including multi-generational businesses, intangible cultural practices like neon sign crafting, bamboo scaffolding techniques, traditional letterpress printing, and more.

This segment of the paper will analyse four prominent graded structures in Central, namely the Police Married Quarters (PMQ), Tai Kwun, Central Market, Hong Kong News Expo, and the culturally rich neighbourhood known as "30 Houses," encompassing the recently completed Staunton/Wing Lee Street Project (H19).

3.2 The "Cultural Triangle" in Central

Proposed by UDP International, the Smart Cultural Precinct (SCP)⁹ embodies an inclusive vision rooted in a grassroots approach, emphasizing public engagement in matters of conservation and revitalization. It aligns with the government's "Conserving Central" initiative through strategic partnerships with the Institute for Sustainable Urbanization (ISP) and the Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The SCP facilitates workshops, street polling, and interviews as interactive platforms for the public to articulate their perspectives and opinions.

The trio of PMQ, Tai Kwun, and Central Market form the core of the "Cultural Triangle" in Central (Figure 3), representing renowned historic landmarks that have undergone adaptive reuse in accordance with government conservation policies.

PMQ (Figure 4), the pioneering structure in this lineup, was previously the Hollywood Road Police Married Quarters, repurposed from the site of Queen's College, which was established in 1889 and subsequently demolished during the Second World War. Extending across Hollywood Road, Aberdeen Street, Staunton Street, and Shing Wong Street, this compound attained Grade III historic building

⁸ The colony only consisted of Hong Kong Island at first, followed by the inclusion of Kowloon Peninsula in 1860, and later the rest of Kowloon and New Territories in 1898. Hong Kong became the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China in 1997 after 99 years, losing the identity of being a British colony.

⁹ Govada (2020), p22-36

status in 2010. After a 15-year period of abandonment, PMQ reopened in 2014 as a vibrant arts and design hub, offering exhibition spaces, studios, shops, and offices catering to the creative industry¹⁰.

Public engagement has been fundamental since 1998, with feedback and participation reflecting evolving governmental policies across various epochs. In Phase IV, a three-month public engagement initiative conducted from February to May 2008 solicited diverse perspectives and visions for the revitalization and repurposing of the PMQ site¹¹. This marked a significant milestone as a large-scale engagement effort aimed at fostering relationships with stakeholders, incorporating public input into decision-making processes, and ensuring the success of adaptive reuse projects.

The subsequent pillar in chronological order is Tai Kwun (Figure 5 & Figure 6), formerly recognized as the Central Police Station Compound. Comprising three Declared Monuments since 1995—the former Central Police Station, the Former Central Magistracy, and the Victoria Prison¹²—it features 16 historic buildings erected between 1841 and 1925. Situated amidst Hollywood Road, Arbuthnot Road, Chancery Lane, and Old Bailey Street¹³, Tai Kwun underwent revitalization in collaboration with the Hong Kong Jockey Club in 2008. Today, it stands as a hub for heritage and arts, offering exhibition spaces for contemporary and performing arts, as well as venues for screenings, heritage talks, and symposiums.

Central Market (Figure 7) represents the most recent addition to the Cultural Triangle, positioned at the crossroads of Des Voeux Road Central, Queen's Road Central, Jubilee Street, and Queen Victoria Street. Tracing its origins back to the 1850s, the market has undergone several reconstructions, culminating in the present-day Bauhaus structure, the fourth iteration of the Central Market erected in 1939¹⁴. Designated as a Grade III historic building by the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB) in 1990, the market underwent revitalization under the auspices of the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) in response to the “Conserving Central” mandate.

The Central Oasis Community Advisory Committee (COCAC) was established in 2009 to conduct a two-year public engagement initiative through polling, gathering public sentiment on the future utilization of the rejuvenated market building¹⁵. Transformed into a “Playground for All,” the revitalized market now hosts a blend of retail spaces, dining establishments, and exhibition venues, overseen jointly by the URA and ChinaChem Group.

Nestled against a backdrop of mountainous terrain, Central is interconnected by a network of staircases, with the Central-Mid-Levels Escalator (highlighted in orange, Figure 3) serving as a prominent feature. These revitalized edifices and compounds serve as anchor points along a cultural heritage trail, inviting pedestrians to traverse and explore the labyrinthine streets and alleys of Central. Given Hong Kong's longstanding dependence on tourism since the 1950s¹⁶, the SCP aspires to cultivate a pedestrian-friendly environment in Central by enhancing walkability. The Cultural Triangle plays a pivotal role in activating underutilized public spaces, serving as catalysts for businesses, cultural endeavours, and performances, fostering collaborative engagements among diverse community stakeholders¹⁷.

¹⁰ History of PMQ <https://www.pmq.org.hk/heritage/history-of-pmq/>

¹¹ Architectural Services Department (2011), p172

¹² Development Bureau (2010), File Ref.: DEVB(CR)(W) 1-150/76

¹³ Tsui (2018)

¹⁴ History Timeline, <https://www.centralmarket.hk/en/history-timeline>

¹⁵ Urban Renewal Authority. Central Oasis Revitalisation Project - Hong Kong wide survey result summary

¹⁶ White (2020), p23

¹⁷ Govada (2020), p22-36



Fig. 3. A diagram showing the “Cultural Triangle” in Central



Fig. 4. detour HK (2022) at PMQ



Fig. 5. Tai Kwun (Day)



Fig. 6. Tai Kwun (Night)



Fig. 7. Central Market

3.3 The "30 Houses" Neighbourhood

Unbeknownst to many, situated opposite the Staunton Street entrance of PMQ at 62 Staunton Street lies a storefront adorned with Chinese characters proclaiming "卅間街坊盂蘭節會" (Central 30 Houses Kaifong Yulan Association), distinguished by frosted glass windows and flanked by two white lanterns—a vestige of the fading community known as "30 Houses".

The area now recognized as SoHo, a name derived from "South of Hollywood Road," encompasses the region stretching from Hollywood Road to Caine Road and extending from the escalators on Shelley Street to the terminus of Bridges Street. This contemporary district closely mirrors the historic enclave of 30 Houses, dating back to the colonial era¹⁸, denoted in Cantonese as "卅間," translating to "30 Houses" in English.

The 30 Houses Neighbourhood holds a poignant connection with the Yu Lan (Ghost) Festival, with the Central 30 Houses Kaifong Yu Lan Association tracing its roots back to the 20th century. However, due to limited archival data, the precise year of its establishment remains uncertain, as revealed in a documented interview from 2002¹⁹. Legend suggests that the moniker "30 Houses" stemmed from the purported construction of 30 stone dwellings by a Guangzhou merchant during the 19th century, with these structures housing the early members of the Kaifong Yu Lan Association. Regrettably, these dwellings vanished before the onset of wartime, leaving only traces in the annual Yu Lan parade route that vaguely delineate the community's boundaries.

During the last century, migrants from eastern Guangdong flocked to Hong Kong, primarily serving as manual labourers during the city's evolution from a trading post to a bustling commercial hub. The locale of the 30 Houses community, once a slum, teemed with "coolie agencies," attracting numerous migrants seeking opportunities. Predominantly lacking formal education and venturing solo from their hometowns, these individuals forged a tight-knit community united by shared struggles in a foreign land. Their solidarity manifested in collective fundraising efforts to support fellow compatriots succumbing to ailments and exhaustion, despite lacking blood ties.

Over time, the neighbourhood underwent profound transformations. The construction of the Central-Mid-Levels Escalators triggered a spike in property values and rents, prompting tenants to relocate and landlords to divest their holdings. Subsequently, SoHo emerged as a vibrant precinct renowned for its diverse culinary offerings and vibrant nightlife within Central. Today, only a handful of original 30 Houses inhabitants endure amidst the rapid gentrification and the Urban Renewal Authority's H19 Project, imperilling the community's legacy and the continuity of the Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival. Aging elder members, custodians of tradition, struggle to sustain customs in the absence of a successor generation willing to assume responsibility.

Following this introduction, the forthcoming segments of this paper will explore the interconnected narrative of the 30 Houses community with the Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost Festival) and its vital role as a cornerstone of the traditional letterpress printing industry. Further examination will focus on specific initiatives within the Revitalizing Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme, alongside case studies that assess the balance between conservation and cultural adaptation for the communities and industries embedded in this dynamic urban milieu.

3.4 Conservation? Conversion? To be determined?

3.4.1 Conservation: Yu Lan Kai Fong Association & Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival [Folk craft, traditional customs & religious rituals]

¹⁸ 鄭宏泰&周文港. (2019). 半山電梯：扶搖直上青雲路

¹⁹ The Hong Kong Oral History Archives: Collective Memories (Accession No.: 131)



Fig. 8. Central 30 Houses Kaifong Yulan Association at 62 Staunton Street

As previously indicated, the Central 30 Houses Kaifong Yulan Association (Figure 8) served as the linchpin of the 30 Houses neighbourhood. Beyond its primary function of facilitating rituals to honour ancestors, guide the departed to the afterlife, and commemorate those lost during the Japanese Occupation, the association also aimed to offer solace to both the deceased and the living. Originating from the historical context where PMQ functioned as a morgue for victims of Japanese brutality, the Association's core mission evolved to encompass psychological support for the community. Embedded within the Yulan Association is the collective memory and narrative of Hong Kong's working class, demonstrating the influence of grassroots civic entities in fostering resilience, unity, and comfort provision following adversities.

Initially initiated by the Hoklo residents of the neighbourhood, the Yulan Festival attracted participation from individuals of Chiu Chow and Cantonese backgrounds, showcasing the diverse ethnic tapestry of the community²⁰. In its earlier iterations, the festival spanned two days and nights, featuring Baizi opera performances in Hoi Luk Fung dialect on one evening and Cantonese opera on the other. Contributions from Chinese Buddhist nuns, dai pai dong proprietors, and printing establishments in Central and Sheung Wan underscored the festival's communal significance.

Despite the evolving landscape marked by the decline of "coolie agencies," kaifongs, and dai pai dong establishments, preserving the Yu Lan tradition has posed significant challenges. The reluctance of bars and restaurants in SoHo to engage in traditional ceremonies, despite outreach efforts by the Association through English informational materials, has hindered the continuity of these practices. Presently, the Association relies heavily on donations from the dwindling printing industry to sustain its activities, culminating in the truncation of the festival to a single-day event conducted along the pedestrian walk adjacent to its premises.

²⁰ 鄭宏泰&周文港. (2019). 半山電梯：扶搖直上青雲路

The annual setup of the Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival at 30 Houses adheres to a consistent structure each year (Figure 9). Featuring three prominent bamboo scaffoldings, the shrine for ancestral veneration occupies the leftmost scaffold, where individuals inscribe the names of departed loved ones on paper tablets to facilitate their spiritual journey. The central scaffolding accommodates master interpreters and Dao scripture reciters conducting ceremonial rites, including honouring spirits from diverse backgrounds affected by terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial calamities. This symbolic gesture reflects the neighbourhood's cosmopolitan nature, intermingling Chinese and Western cultures amidst a backdrop of bars and Western eateries frequented by international visitors.

Offerings for the spirits, comprising beverages, fruits, vegetables, eggs, and a banquet-style arrangement for 60 spirits, are arranged on the ground alongside a 0.5m tall "bun tower" and two baskets of bananas, symbolizing abundance. These offerings, crafted from paper, encompass a spectrum of commodities believed to be useful for the spirits, ranging from personal hygiene items like toothbrushes, combs, and nail clippers to sewing kits and stationery supplies.

In Chinese culture, the concept of "family" stands as a paramount value. Embedded within the proverb "blood is thicker than water" is the belief that familial ties should take precedence over all other relationships, irrespective of circumstances. This devotion to family is exemplified through the meticulous organization of weekend "yum cha" gatherings, engaging mahjong sessions, and elaborate festive meals, all of which serve as enduring commitments to kinship. A prevalent Chinese folk wisdom states, "The distance between this world and the next is but a sheet of paper."²¹ The intriguing and distinctive nature of paper offerings for the afterlife lies not only in their traditional craftsmanship but also in their symbolic reflection of the breadth of human imagination and creativity. Given that the deceased cannot carry material possessions to the afterlife, the practice of burning paper replicas of desired items (as depicted in Figure 10) underscores a symbolic transition of offerings from the earthly realm to the spiritual realm. In the act of selecting and procuring paper offerings for departed loved ones, a parallel can be drawn to the careful consideration given to selecting gifts for living friends and family, emphasizing the importance of honouring individual practices and preferences in both realms.

²¹ Gaul (2023)



Disclaimer: Some terms may not be accurately translated with limited information found in English and are indicated with quotation marks.
Image source: Zolima CityMag

Fig. 9. The set-up of the annual Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival in plan view drawn based on findings



Fig. 10. An example of the paper offerings

The continuity of demand for traditional Chinese paper offerings is intricately tied to the presence of Chinese communities. While the foreseeable future suggests that paper offering shops will persist, the manner of production is poised to undergo a transformation. The conventional handcrafted

colourful paper and meticulously assembled cards by adept artisans or experts may gradually yield to automated processes in an era defined by rapid technological advancements, offering cost efficiency and heightened productivity.

As fewer individuals from younger generations engage in learning the traditional craftsmanship and as the elder cohort retires, the landscape of the paper offering industry experiences a shift. Notably, figures like Au Yeung Ping-Chi, a product designer, have emerged to cater to evolving preferences by crafting bespoke and contemporary offerings inspired by props from science fiction films.

Despite the emergence of novel trends within the paper offering sector, the 30 Houses Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival remains a bastion of tradition, exclusively featuring the intricate handcrafted offerings by seasoned paper masters. Diverging from the standardized mass-produced replicas prevalent in mainland China, these offerings uphold a unique artisanal quality. Even amidst the backdrop of elderly residents engrossed in mahjong pursuits behind frosted windows at 62 Staunton Street, extensive planning and preparation spanning months are dedicated to the annual rituals. This meticulous process commences with the collaboration with paper masters to conceptualize and fabricate elaborate Paper Mache sculptures replicating various deities.



Fig. 11. Wong Kun-oi, a.k.a. "Uncle Sai"
(Source: Zolima CityMag²²)

Wong Kun-oi, aged 74, affectionately referred to as "Uncle Sai," is the champion of the 30 Houses Yulan Kaifong community and serves as the head of the organizing committee for the 30 Houses Yu Lan Festival²³ (Figure 11). This festival stands as a singular occasion that binds the elderly members of the community together. Consequently, Uncle Sai collaborates annually with Yung Chan-wa, also known as "Brother Wa," a master in the art of papercraft, to deliberate on and craft statues tailored to suit the festival site (Figure 12).

²² Chan (2022)

²³ Uncle Sai and Yu Lan Festival at 30 Houses” by 城市日記 Urban Diary



Fig. 12. Yung Chan-wa, a.k.a. "Brother Wa"

(Source: Screenshot from "Uncle Sai and Yu Lan Festival at 30 Houses" by Urban Diary on YouTube)

The third bamboo scaffold within the Yu Lan Festival infrastructure at 30 Houses accommodates the revered "Red Paper Horse" and the esteemed "Ghost King," masterpieces crafted by Brother Wa. The symbolic red paper horse embodies a divine steed tasked with conveying festival scriptures to celestial realms, while the Ghost King assumes the role of a guardian entity responsible for maintaining order among wandering spirits and untamed spectres throughout the Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival.

In the documentary "Uncle Sai and Yu Lan Festival at 30 Houses" produced by Urban Diary, Uncle Sai articulates his apprehensions regarding the lack of younger generations participating in the annual ceremony or comprehending its cultural significance within the neighbourhood's fabric. He advocates for a revision of the ritual practices to captivate broader interest, encouraging deeper exploration of historical roots and fostering reverence for the festival.

George Wan, founder of Hide and Seek Tour, and Katty Law, a dedicated kaifong member and convenor of the Central and Western Concern Group, stand as influential figures within the 30 Houses community (refer to Figure 13). Their proactive engagement with local residents aims to bolster the region's future planning endeavours, revitalizing the legacy of "30 Houses" through archival research, narrative collection, and community involvement. Their collective efforts seek to invigorate communal cohesion, empowering residents to actively shape the neighbourhood's trajectory while honouring its historical heritage.

Regrettably, the Central 30 Houses Kaifong Yulan Association announced on July 19, 2023, that following the three-year impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst the aging of senior association members who have dutifully served the community for decades, a decision has been reached to uphold the longstanding tradition by hosting the Yu Lan Festival on September 8, 2023, the 24th day of the seventh lunar month. In contrast to previous large-scale street settings, the ceremony will adopt a more intimate format, spanning from noon to evening within the association's premises, facilitating visitor participation in incense offerings to honour the departed²⁴.

The Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival ceremony at 30 Houses epitomizes a poignant illustration of traditional craftsmanship and elements in an era characterized by rapid modernization, where such customs risk being supplanted by contemporary technologies. The preservation of 30 Houses' authentic

²⁴ Facebook page: 中區卅間街坊盂蘭勝會

essence stands as a critical inquiry, with the recent announcement from the Central 30 Houses Kaifong Yulan Association poised to shed light on the community's trajectory.



Fig. 13. Key influential members of the 30 Houses Neighbourhood

3.4.2 Conversion: Letterpress printing, Hong Kong News Expo & Hong Kong Open Press [Local craftsmanship, Sunset industry and Revitalisation]

In the period spanning the 1950s to the 1970s, the Central and Sheung Wan districts, notably intersected by Wing Lee Street, Wa In Fong, and Shing Wong Street, emerged as focal points housing a multitude of foreign enterprises and journalistic establishments. This confluence of international companies and press offices catalysed the proliferation of small-scale printing enterprises in the vicinity, capitalizing on the strategic geographical positioning of the area. The zenith of this industrial boom witnessed an expanse of over 150 printing establishments across Staunton Street, Elgin Street, Aberdeen Street, Wa In Fong West, and Gough Street (refer to Figure 14), fostering a milieu conducive to ancillary industries such as paper manufacturing, envelope production, ink supply, and hot stamping services. Notably, during the 1950s and 1960s, Wing Lee Street alone hosted more than 10 printing workshops, emblematic of the rapid commercial evolution characterizing Central and Sheung Wan and distinguishing these districts with a unique economic vibrancy.

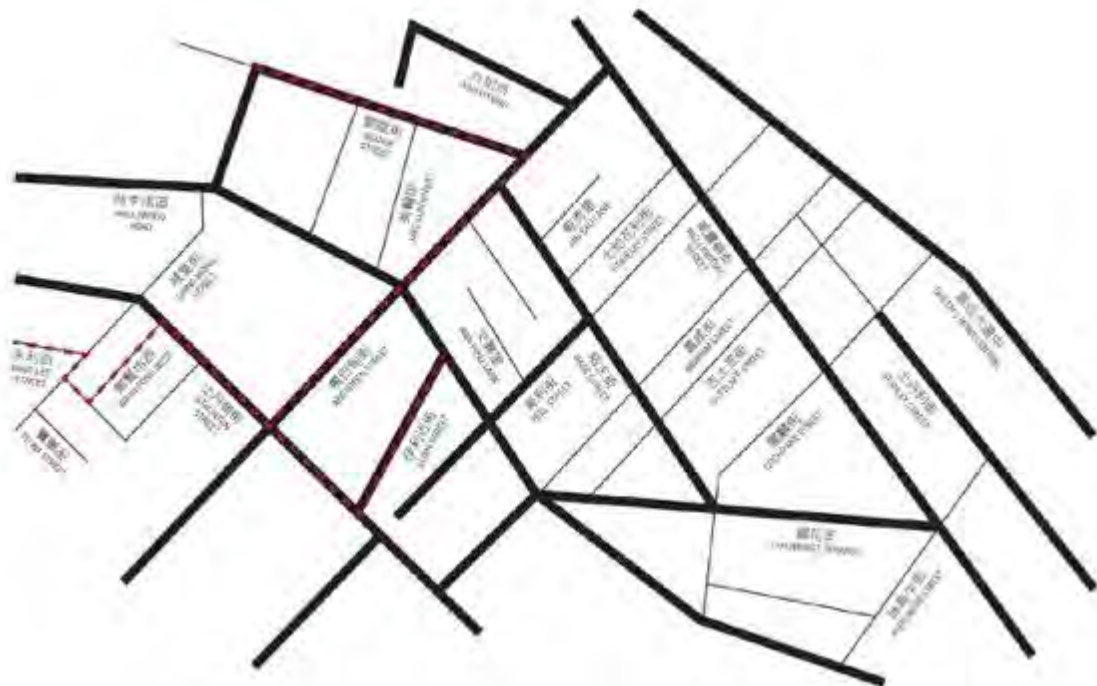


Fig. 14. Base map in "Virtue under the Breaking Roofs - Stories of the Old Shops in Central and Western District". Edited by author to indicate locations of former printing shops in the 1950s to 70s.

Family-owned enterprises like the Kwong Wah Printing Company (Figure 15) exemplify a letterpress printing establishment that thrived during the aforementioned period and stands as the sole survivor in the contemporary landscape of the Central and Sheung Wan districts. Kwong Wah represents a lineage-based business, originating from the vision of Yam Chiu-kwong in 1954, a former apprentice of the "Tak Lee Printing Company" (refer to Figure 16) situated on Pottinger Street (refer to Figure 17). Following his tutelage, Yam Chiu-kwong ventured to establish his own printing enterprise, subsequently passing the reins to the current proprietor, Yam Wai-sang, in 1984. Yam Wai-sang, who imbibed the craft through hands-on involvement during his formative years, inherited the legacy and expertise of the trade from his predecessor²⁵.

²⁵ Interview with Yam Wai-sang on 19 October 2022

The evolution of Kwong Wah's physical presence is marked by a series of relocations. Initially situated on Gough Street, the enterprise transitioned to Wa In Fong West in 1964 before eventually settling at its present site on Sai Street in 1983.

Reflecting on the traditional printing practices prevalent in Hong Kong, Mr. Yam articulates, "A majority of historical printing establishments in Hong Kong operated through letterpress technology and were managed as family enterprises. The intricate process involving the selection of letter types, typesetting, printing, and binding demanded meticulous attention and consumed significant time²⁶." The historical print industry heavily relied on conventional instruments like letter blocks and typesetters crafted from lead, alongside antiquated printing apparatus such as the venerable Heidelberg Platen Press (Figure 18), a relic still operational within the precincts of Kwong Wah.

Given the advancements in printing technology, the traditional methodologies of letterpress printing and manual typesetting have seen a decline, prompting the transformation of Kwong Wah Printing Company into a vibrant living museum. Here, a diverse array of tools crucial for the intricate stages of letterpress printing, spanning from type selection and typesetting to forme locking and the ultimate printing process, are meticulously displayed.

Yam Wai-sang has launched educational walking tours across Central to shed light on the historical significance of the printing industry. These tours lead participants to his shop, where they engage in an immersive experience curated by Mr. Yam himself, who imparts his extensive knowledge of letterpress printing. Through workshops, attendees gain hands-on exposure to the meticulous procedures involved. Despite the prevalent modern utilization of such technology by graphic designers to evoke nostalgic or retro aesthetics, Yam's primary objective is to conserve and transmit this traditional craft.

In the ultimate stop of Mr. Yam's walking tours, participants are guided to the Hong Kong News Expo (Figure 19), previously known as the Bridges Street Market, with entrances on Bridges Street, Shing Wong Street, and Wing Lee Street. Originating in 1953, the Bridges Street Market serves as one of the earliest public markets constructed post-World War II and was designated as a Grade III historic structure in September 2011²⁷. As part of Batch III of the Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme, this site is slated for conversion into an educational and exhibition centre focusing on media education. The proposal, endorsed by the Journalism Education Foundation Hong Kong Limited, aims to repurpose this historic venue into a nucleus for learning and the preservation of cultural heritage.

²⁶ Leung, T (2013), p104

²⁷ Bridges Street Market Resource Kit by the Commissioner for Heritage's Office



Fig. 15. Kwong Wah Printing Company on Sai Street



Fig. 16. Notice of Business Closure to Employees at Tak Lee Printing Company



Fig. 17. A historic photo placed at Kwong Wah Printing Company, indicating the location of Tak Lee Printing Company

The Hong Kong News Expo features a series of informative videos that chronicle the evolution of the news media, encapsulating both the illustrious periods and the eventual decline of the printing industry in Hong Kong. While the Expo showcases certain lead types utilized in letterpress printing, it is the Kwong Wah Printing Company, functioning as a living museum replete with type cabinets and an assortment of other essential letterpress tools, that truly encapsulates the essence of the printing industry. This authentic collection provides a comprehensive and immersive depiction of the historical trajectory and intricacies of the printing trade, offering a more vivid and encompassing portrayal compared to the exhibition at the Hong Kong News Expo.



Fig. 19. Hong Kong News Expo, former Bridges Street Market



Fig. 20. Hong Kong Open Press

Hong Kong Open Press, led by Loraine Wong, a graphic designer, is an organization dedicated to preserving and promoting letterpress in Hong Kong. Funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and managed by the Hong Kong Open Printshop, it operates an exhibition space at 404 Shanghai Street in Yau Ma Tei, showcasing key artifacts like Heidelberg Windmill Platen Presses and movable type donated by shuttered printing shops. Through weekend workshops, participants experience the full printing process, from design to print, and take home their creations, fostering a renewed interest in traditional printing techniques.



Fig. 21. Letterpress artefacts

The transformation of Kwong Wah Printing Company and the establishment of Hong Kong Open Press mark a significant stride towards not only conserving historical legacies, knowledge, and artifacts but also revitalizing an industry that struggles to find relevance in contemporary times. These initiatives serve as exemplars for other declining sectors on engaging the interest of younger cohorts and transferring expertise to individuals eager to learn. Moreover, they underscore the potential for rejuvenating traditional skill sets by infusing them with innovative elements, thereby reimagining their integration into modern societal frameworks. These endeavours offer a blueprint for how sunset industries can captivate new audiences and reinvigorate their craft in alternative forms, ensuring their continued relevance and resonance in an evolving landscape.

3.4.3 To be determined: Staunton Street / Wing Lee Street Project (H19) by Urban Renewal

Authority

[Adaptive re-use and revitalisation]

As delineated in the preceding segment, the precincts of Wai In Fong West housed several printing establishments, including the notable Kwong Wah Printing Company. The economic downturn within the printing industry precipitated the closure of printing enterprises in Wai In Fong West and Wing Lee Street. Concurrently, the Urban Renewal Authority's (URA) H19 revitalization initiative necessitated the acquisition of tenement buildings in Wai In Fong West, Staunton Street, and Shing Wing Street, compelling proprietors like Mr. Yam Wai-sang to relocate their printing operations. The specific demarcations of the affected sites are outlined in Appendix A. Initially encompassed within the URA's redevelopment blueprint, properties at No. 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 12 Wing Lee Street were slated for redevelopment²⁸. However, subsequent revisions to the redevelopment strategy led the URA to opt for the preservation and refurbishment of these structures. This decision was met with substantial opposition from the public, culminating in the "Saving Wing Lee Street" campaign spearheaded by the Central and Western Concern Group (Figure 22). Noteworthy is the correlation between this public dissent and the "Saving Wing Lee Street" movement with the release of the acclaimed film "Echoes of the Rainbow"²⁹ (Figure 23).

The revitalisation works of H19 acquired buildings commenced in 2021 and reached completion in February 2023 (Figure 24), based on a community-orientated design approach. Residential units were repurposed into co-living spaces with shared areas and community farms. Procurement of the co-operators that are responsible for managing these spaces was scheduled for 2023.

The revitalised structures repurposed their residential units into collaborative living spaces, incorporating communal zones and communal farming areas. This initiative is designed to infuse fresh vigour into the aging community and its environs. Furthermore, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA)

²⁸ <https://www.ura.org.hk/en/project/heritage-preservation-and-revitalisation/wls>

²⁹ Lai (2020)

has forged partnerships with neighbouring buildings to foster and endorse renovation endeavours that enhance the overall architectural landscape.



Fig. 22. “Saving Wing Lee Street” demonstration



Fig. 23. Echoes of the Rainbow movie poster³⁰



Fig. 24. Staunton Street / Wing Lee Street Project (H19)

³⁰ http://www.mtime.com/movie/102279/posters_and_images/

Simultaneously, the URA has cultivated relationships with structures in the vicinity to promote renovations believed to uplift the built environment and invigorate the aging community. In December 2018, Social Ventures Hong Kong was enlisted by the URA to conduct an exhaustive study on community development in the H19 locality through a series of public engagement activities encompassing qualitative and quantitative methodologies such as interviews, street surveys, focus groups, and community outreach efforts³¹.

The H19 project was awarded the Gold Rating in the BEAM Plus Neighbourhood category in 2022, lauding its dedication to community engagement and place-making. It stands as the inaugural private residential Alterations and Additions (A&A)/revitalization initiative to secure such accolades³².

Given its recent introduction to the neighbourhood, awareness of H19's inauguration might not be widespread. In a bid to familiarize individuals with this new addition, a themed site visit titled "Staunton Street/Shing Wong Street Neighbourhood - Integrated Urban Renewal Approach" was led by Ms. Fanny Ang, Conservation Architect & Authorized Person, and heritage consultant of H19, alongside Mr. Joseph Hui, Architect & Authorized Person, representing the URA. The event took at the G/F Common Room of No. 6-8 Wa In Fong West (Figure 25) on August 12, 2023, with participation limited to 15 individuals, with priority accorded to members of the Hong Kong Institute of Architectural Conservationists (HKICON).



Fig. 25. Facade of No. 6-8 Wa In Fong West (Source: Urban Renewal Authority)

It may be premature to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the software's advantages and disadvantages, given that tenants yet to occupy the space. To promote the H19 project effectively, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) and the Hong Kong Institute of Architectural Conservationists (HKICON) should collaborate on initiatives such as hosting informational sessions led by the project architect and organizing public site visits. Initially, inviting members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can help generate grassroots awareness through word-of-mouth dissemination.

Public feedback is essential to gauge the efficacy of the community-driven and place-making strategies employed in this revitalization endeavour. This feedback will serve as a crucial evaluation

³¹ Staunton Street / Shing Wong Street Community Making Study 2019 by Social Ventures Hong Kong

³² Development Bureau (2023), p22-23 LC Paper No. CB(1)801/2023(04)

tool for assessing the success of the project, providing invaluable insights that can serve as a template for future revitalization projects.

3.4.4 *The politics of conserving local community culture*

This section examined three cases within the 30 Houses neighbourhood, where the 30 Houses Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival emerges as a pillar of the religious observance in the community. Individuals like Katty Law, Wong Kun-oi, and Yam Wai-sung have ascended as champions within the community due to their profound contributions and intertwined relationships with the locality.

The invaluable efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) warrant acknowledgment for their substantial impact on revitalization projects and the strategic planning of forthcoming developments in the vicinity. Besides the Central and Western Concern Group, other NGOs such as Urban Diary, VeryHK, Hide & Seek Tour, and The Hong Kong Neon Heritage have played integral roles in propagating the narratives of the 30 Houses and the Yu Lan (Hungry Ghost) Festival through diverse channels. Many of these NGOs, established by individuals of varying age groups, predominantly leverage social media platforms due to their cost-effectiveness and expansive outreach capabilities.

In contrast to H19 stands "軾Dongpohk" (Figure 26), a boutique store situated at 17 Shing Wong Street, conceived as a passion project by storefront designer Vincent Ou-yang in 2020. Offering an array of products spanning from postcards to furniture, both vintage and contemporary, all meticulously crafted by local artisans, the shop serves as a hub for authentic Hong Kong designs. Operating exclusively from Friday to Sunday, Vincent extends a warm invitation to passers-by, encouraging them to engage in moments of relaxation over a cup of tea at a table thoughtfully arranged on the landing of Shing Wong Street. Periodic movie screenings and communal sharing sessions further enrich the shop's vibrant ambiance.

Vincent's overarching vision is to bridge the gap between tradition and innovation, leveraging his expertise in Hong Kong's industrial heritage and his network within the design realm. He ardently believes that exceptional designs should not remain confined to the past; rather, there exists a cohort of emerging local designers in Hong Kong awaiting discovery and widespread recognition, necessitating enhanced promotional platforms for their talents to flourish.



Fig. 26. 軾Dongpohk on Shing Wong Street

The establishment "軒Dongpohk" stands out as a remarkably successful place-making endeavour, epitomizing a passion project that facilitates direct connections among individuals and nurtures interpersonal relationships through a simple yet impactful gesture of placing furniture in public spaces. This exemplifies that place-making strategies can be refreshingly uncomplicated and need not always entail substantial financial investments.

Owing to its strategic geographic positioning, the diverse landscape within the 30 Houses enclave presents a striking contrast to the bustling streets adorned with an array of bars and restaurants within close proximity. This coexistence engenders a compelling juxtaposition of the traditional and the contemporary, the Eastern and the Western influences, contributing to the formation of a distinctive cultural identity not just within Hong Kong but potentially resonating on a global scale.

4. Part 3: Public participation in Hong Kong's heritage conservation

4.1 Learning from the past: Queen's Pier and Lee Tung Street

The decision to proceed with the demolition of the Queen's Pier in September 2006 marked a regrettable outcome, driven by the imperative to clear the site for land reclamation projects in Central as well as the construction of the Central-Wan Chai bypass. The Queen's Pier holds a pivotal status as an iconic and ceremonial site where British colonial governors would disembark during their official visits (Figure 27). It served as a poignant emblem of the city's historical and cultural heritage, embodying a significant component of the collective memory intertwined with the legacy of British colonial administration.



Fig. 27. Decoration being put up for Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip's visit from 21st -23rd October 1986 (Source: SCMP archive³³)

Despite the protests and sit-ins led by grassroots organizations, alongside the active participation of political party activists, the government remained resolute in its decision to forge ahead with the planned demolition. Contrary to halting the proceedings, these demonstrations seemed to catalyse the government's actions, culminating in accelerated overnight demolition operations orchestrated by governmental authorities. Protesters were subsequently compelled to vacate the premises promptly,

³³ <https://www.scmp.com/photos/hong-kong/2104975/10-years-ago-today-queens-pier-wasdemolished>

following a notice issued by the Lands Department citing the violation of laws pertaining to the occupation of government-owned land³⁴ (Figure 28).



Fig. 28. Banner with “Preserving Queen’s Pier” held by local activists (Source: Samantha Sin/AFP)

An additional instance of preservation failure involves Lee Tung Street, affectionately labelled the "Wedding Card Street" due to its historical significance as a hub where couples traditionally selected invitation cards for their wedding banquets. Renowned for its role in producing and printing wedding cards dating back to the 1970s (Figure 29), the street encapsulated a vibrant legacy within the printing industry. Furthermore, remnants of Chinese tailor shops further enriched the cultural tapestry of this locale.



Fig. 29. Lee Tung Street before redevelopment
(Source: Jerry Crimson Mann via Wikipedia Commons)



Fig. 30. Protest banners against the Lee Tung Street redevelopment plan (Source: HKFP via Wikipedia³⁵)

The redevelopment scheme for Lee Tung Street initiated by the Hong Kong SAR Government dates back to 1999, with the execution of the Lee Tung Street/McGregor Street redevelopment project (H15) carried out by the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) commencing in 2004. In response to these

³⁴ Pang (2020)

³⁵ Wong, H. (2020)

transformations, the H15 Concern Group, comprising business proprietors, residents, and architects, emerged as a pivotal intermediary entity between the tenants and the URA. The group endeavoured to underscore the community's significance to the government by advocating for the preservation of the low-rise structures within the vicinity. Despite the group's impassioned efforts, including protests and hunger strikes orchestrated in a bid to safeguard the street's heritage³⁶ (Figure 30), the URA remained steadfast in its decision to proceed with the redevelopment plans.

In stark contrast to the situation at Queen's Pier, the plight of Lee Tung Street is amplified by the irrevocable eradication of its rich history in wedding card printing, leaving behind no vestiges of the erstwhile shops. The thorough transformation of the landscape, characterized by the replacement of traditional establishments with modern shops and towering residential complexes, stands as a poignant testament to the obliteration of the street's cultural legacy. Moreover, the absence of provisions for the resettlement of original residents and tenants further compounds the loss. Renamed as "Lee Tung Avenue," the thoroughfare now stands devoid of its former cultural essence, hosting upscale boutiques and residential edifices that, while presenting a novel facade, contribute to a homogenized urban landscape reminiscent of numerous shopping precincts in Hong Kong.

4.2 Ray of Hope



Fig. 31. Banner with "Preserving Queen's Pier" held by local activists (Source: Samantha Sin/AFP)

The comprehensive acquisition of the venerable 71-year-old State Theatre (previously known as the Empire Theatre) situated at 277-291 King's Road, North Point in 2020 marked a pivotal turning point in its preservation journey. New World Development unveiled ambitious plans to conserve and revitalize this Grade I historic structure, renowned for its distinctive parabolic exoskeleton truss atop the roof (Figure 31). The restoration efforts are geared towards safeguarding the architectural integrity of the building, with a meticulous focus on repairing the interior to facilitate future arts and cultural endeavours within its hallowed halls.

Subsequently, in a bid to further fortify its commitment to preserving the theatre's illustrious legacy, New World Development launched the non-governmental organization (NGO) "Culture for Tomorrow." This specialized entity is dedicated to orchestrating a diverse array of events and initiatives designed to pay homage to the theatre's storied past while nurturing a vibrant cultural landscape for future generations to relish and behold³⁷.

³⁶ Yung, E.H.K & Leung H.H. (2019), p275-278

³⁷ Press release by NWD. "Discover the State Theatre in All of Us" - An exceptional immersive event in a Grade I historic site before New World Development begins the restoration of the State Theatre

"Discover the State Theatre in All of Us" (Figure 32, Figure 33 & Figure 34) stands out as the inaugural event orchestrated by Culture for Tomorrow in April 2021, marking a poignant tribute to the State Theatre before the onset of its extensive restoration efforts. This event served as a unique opportunity for participants to engage in an immersive odyssey, replete with artifacts harkening back to the cinematic ambiance of the 1950s, thereby offering an authentic glimpse into the bygone era of the arcade's interiors. The meticulously curated experience not only encapsulated the essence of the State Theatre's legacy but also provided a compelling preview of the meticulous restoration efforts that lie ahead, underscoring the rich historical tapestry woven within its walls.



Fig. 32. "Discover the State Theatre in All of Us" in April 2021



Fig. 33. Adrian Cheng, CEO of New World Development, and founder of Culture for Tomorrow
(Source: Lifestyle Asia)



Fig. 34. Settings of “Discover the State Theatre in All of Us” in State Theatre Shopping Arcade



Fig. 35. Consolidated Q&A package on the State Theatre's historic grading controversy by Walk in Hong Kong

Credit for the successful lobbying that led to the elevation of the State Theatre's historic status from Grade III to Grade I rightfully belong to Paul Chan and Haider Kikabhoy, the co-founders of the NGO "Walk in Hong Kong". Through their dedicated consultancy and advocacy efforts, notably the "Save Our State": State Theatre Conservation Advocacy Campaign, they spearheaded a multifaceted approach involving engagement with key entities such as the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB), the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO), DOCOMOMO International, local and international scholars, architects, conservationists, as well as members of the public, including celebrities like Mr. Ken Tseng with an architectural background.

Their meticulous work included conducting comprehensive research in collaboration with architectural conservationists and submitting a thorough Statement of Significance to the AMO. Additionally, Walk in Hong Kong orchestrated a petition drive, accompanied by a consolidated Q&A package (Figure 35), to advocate for an upgraded historic grading for the State Theatre in 2016³⁸. Leveraging their social media platforms and securing media exposure, they galvanized widespread support for their cause, ultimately leading to the successful preservation of this architectural gem.



Fig. 36. Producer Paul Chi-yuen Chan, directors Dora Choi and Haider Kikabhoy of “To Be Continued” at a post-screening sharing (Source: Walk in Hong Kong)

"To be continued" (Figure 36) is a private documentary co-produced by Walk in Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Community Heritage Foundation, with Haider Kikabhoy overseeing research and Dora Choi handling the script. This documentary chronicles Haider Kikabhoy's five-year passion project, narrating the tale of the State Theatre and its founder, Harry Odell, an impresario whose contributions epitomized a golden era in Hong Kong. The film serves as a compelling piece of evidence that played a pivotal role in persuading the government of the theatre's significance, ultimately leading to its higher grading. "To be continued" premiered at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in April 2023.

The experiences with Queen's Pier and Lee Tung Street served as poignant lessons and calls to action for the people of Hong Kong, emphasizing the need for strategic preparation when engaging with government bodies and developers. Walk in Hong Kong's diligent efforts not only garnered increased societal attention but also set a new standard, inspiring private developers like New World Development to adopt a fresh approach in their redevelopment strategies. This shift highlights the rationale for developers to invest in conservation initiatives, driven by their belief in future prospects and opportunities supported by public backing.

The State Theatre project has commenced on a positive note, with the commitment to preserve the roof truss and restore significant portions of the theatre poised for realization in the near future. A follow-up interview held on 24 July 2023 (refer to Figure 37) explored the perspectives on conservation in Hong Kong with Haider Kikabhoy and Wendy Ng, an architectural conservationist and heritage consultant for the State Theatre project, as well as the daughter of a former tenant, Wendy Co., at the former State Theatre Shopping Arcade.

³⁸ 舊皇都戲院評級爭議懶人包 <https://walkin.hk/zh-hant/saveourstateqna/>



Fig. 37. Wendy Ng and Haider Kikabhoy in the middle; interviewer & author on the right

4. Conclusion

Heritage serves as a bridge connecting the past, present, and future. While the terms "conservation" and "conversion" may initially seem contradictory, conversion can aid in maintaining the vibrancy of festivals and the longevity of structures by updating them with modern community-relevant software and management systems.

In this context, various groups and NGOs in Hong Kong have emerged with a focus on different aspects of the city's heritage and urban planning. For instance, organizations like the Central and Western Concern Group advocate for heritage preservation and improved urban design. Urban Diary collects and documents stories from diverse communities through text, illustrations, photography, and guided tours. Additionally, groups such as @streetsignhk and the Hong Kong Neon Heritage work to rescue and safeguard storefronts and neon signs. These NGOs represent just a fraction of the broader movement; numerous Facebook pages and Instagram accounts also contribute to exploring and documenting Hong Kong's cultural heritage.

Public engagement and participation in conservation projects are essential components of ensuring the sustainable preservation of cultural heritage. However, several limitations can impede the effectiveness of such endeavors. One significant challenge lies in reconciling the diverse interests and priorities of stakeholders involved in conservation initiatives. Varying perspectives and objectives among different groups can complicate the process of reaching consensus on the most suitable approaches for preservation. Moreover, a lack of awareness or understanding of the cultural significance of heritage sites may result in differing levels of engagement among the public, further complicating efforts to mobilize support for conservation projects.

Each conservation project presents a unique set of circumstances and requirements, often leading to limitations in public participation. Resource constraints, both in terms of funding and expertise, can hinder the extent to which the public can actively engage in conservation efforts. The complexity of legal, technical, and financial considerations inherent in conservation projects may also pose challenges for individuals without specialized knowledge or guidance. Consequently, the case-by-case nature of conservation initiatives can restrict the level of public involvement and influence in decision-making processes.

Communication and outreach strategies play a pivotal role in fostering public engagement in conservation projects. However, limited outreach efforts and communication channels may hinder the ability to engage a diverse range of community members effectively. Language barriers, as well as issues related to accessibility and information dissemination, can further impede efforts to involve the public in meaningful ways. Additionally, sustaining long-term public interest and commitment throughout the duration of a conservation project may prove challenging, particularly when initial

enthusiasm diminishes over time and when individuals face constraints in terms of time and resources required for active participation.

Furthermore, the decision-making processes governing conservation projects can present obstacles to meaningful public engagement. Power dynamics within decision-making structures may influence the extent to which diverse voices are considered, potentially marginalizing certain community perspectives. Limited transparency in decision-making processes can erode public trust and impede opportunities for meaningful participation. Moreover, existing legal and regulatory frameworks may place constraints on the level of public involvement in conservation initiatives, limiting the scope of engagement in shaping the future of cultural heritage preservation efforts.

Addressing these limitations necessitates a concerted effort to promote inclusivity, transparency, and accessibility in public engagement initiatives related to conservation projects. By fostering an environment that values diverse perspectives, advocates for equitable decision-making processes, and enhances communication and outreach strategies, stakeholders can work towards overcoming these challenges and fostering greater public involvement in the preservation of cultural heritage for future generations.

Education emerges as a powerful tool to engage the public in heritage conservation. Often, traditional businesses and historic structures go unnoticed until they face the threat of disappearance due to rapid development. However, individuals passionate about heritage conservation often band together, seeking to raise awareness and garner support for preserving these elements that define Hong Kong's identity.

Established NGOs can collaborate with founders of online platforms to enhance research and community outreach efforts. These content creators possess the ability to communicate effectively with local communities, fostering connections that resonate with a wider audience.

Effective heritage conservation should prioritize human needs. While governmental support is crucial, a solely top-down approach may overlook lesser-known heritage sites. A receptive attitude towards suggestions from NGOs and community groups can facilitate a more inclusive, bottom-up conservation strategy.

Over the years, Hong Kong has shifted from being a cultural desert to a place where societal representatives actively engage in conserving and revitalizing heritage sites. This collective effort bodes well for preserving Hong Kong's unique cultural blend of old and new, Eastern and Western influences, ensuring a promising future for the city's cultural identity.

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