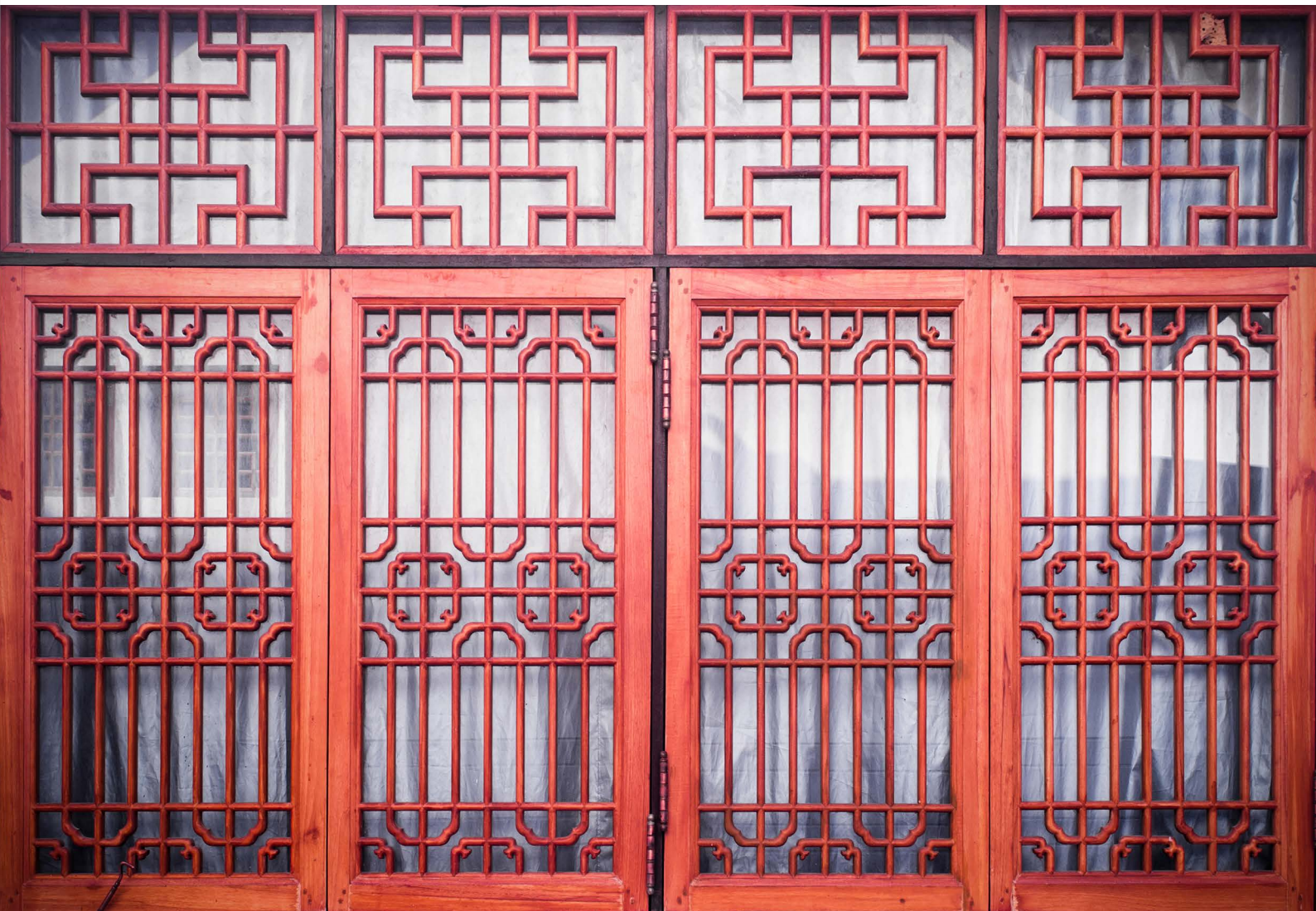




February 2016

Adaptive Reuse of Built Heritage in Hong Kong

Integrated Conservation Approach for Development



The background of the entire page is a photograph of a traditional Chinese wooden lattice door. The door is composed of several panels, each featuring a complex geometric lattice pattern. The top panels have a square grid with smaller squares inside, while the lower panels have a more intricate design with rounded, arch-like shapes. The door is set against a light-colored wall, and the entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The text is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the image.

**Adaptive Reuse of Built
Heritage in Hong Kong**
Integrated Conservation Approach
for Development

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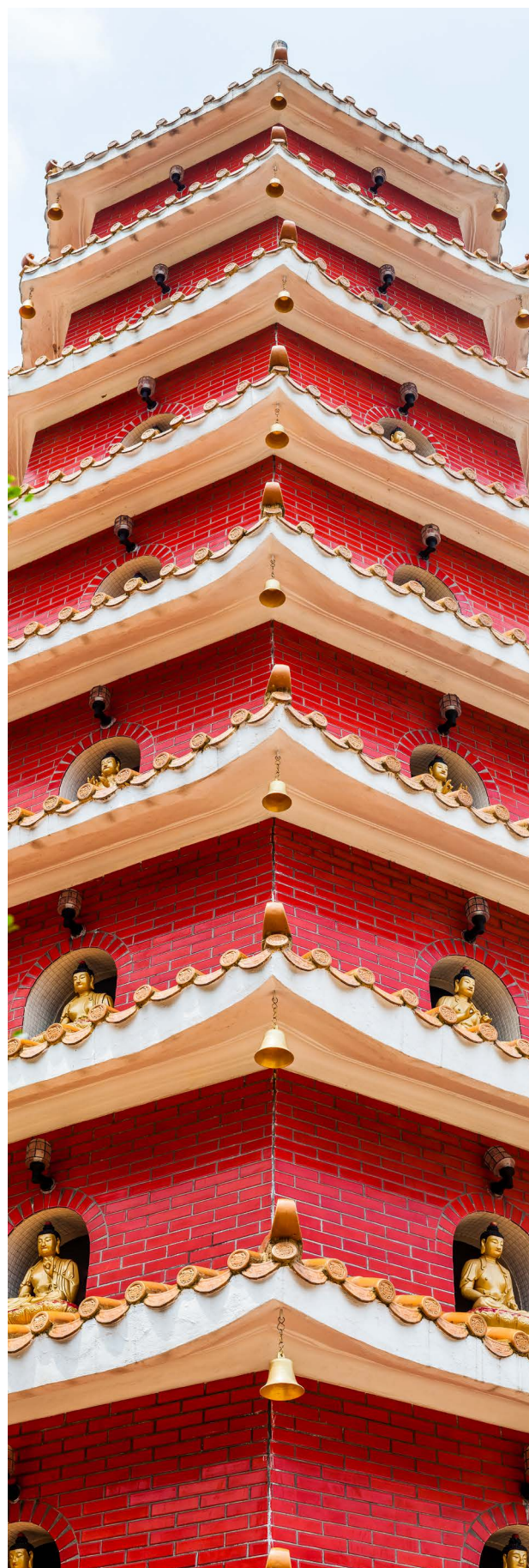
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Executive Summary

While adaptive reuse of built heritage is widely agreed to be the way forward for Hong Kong, the challenge is to build community consensus and support, especially in relation to commercial uses of revitalized buildings. A “quadripartite relationship” involving professional institutions with professionals, and government with NGOs, underpinned by broad-based stakeholder engagement, is considered a possible model for coming up with best practices and standards for heritage conservation that enjoy public trust. For longer term consideration, stakeholders and the government should continue to explore a sustainable funding model for conservation of built heritage, referencing overseas experiences.

The private sector can contribute significantly to heritage conservation. In order to make heritage conservation more viable, a tailored set of building regulations should be developed for heritage buildings. Longer leases for running heritage projects can help achieve commercial sustainability, even when projects are operated by non-profit organisations.

To encourage private sector initiatives in conserving streetscapes in old urban quarters, the relevant rules and regulatory approach should be relaxed to facilitate projects such as those undertaken by micro-developers to refurbish “tong lau” clusters, so that an important part of Hong Kong’s urban character can be preserved, while continuing to satisfy residential needs without adding to the city’s already high density.



Introduction: Key Conservation Challenges Facing Public and Private Sectors

Since the government started implementing the “Revitalizing Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme” in 2008, the prevailing approach to conservation of built heritage in Hong Kong has been about finding new adaptive reuses for the historic buildings, so as to give them “a new lease of life for the enjoyment of the public”. Hong Kong’s approach largely echoes the notion of “Constructive Conservation” promoted by English Heritage of the UK, which seeks to “recognise and reinforce the historic significance of places, while accommodating the changes necessary to make sure that people can continue to use and enjoy them”.

Several cases have since been established in Hong Kong to illustrate how heritage buildings or sites can be adapted for new uses (“adaptive reuse”) that bring social and economic benefits. Such cases have helped secure public support for such approach¹.

The broadening public support for adaptive reuse of heritage buildings in Hong Kong reflects worries that sprawling high density development will destroy community identities and broader concerns about a sustainable urban living environment. As articulated in UNESCO’s Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape published on 10 November 2011, the active protection of urban heritage and its sustainable management is a “condition sine qua non of sustainable urban development.” While the purpose of adaptive reuse of built heritage is to maximise both social and economic benefits, the public discourse in Hong Kong on related topics often features a stronger emphasis on preserving the identities or characters of local communities than on their economic benefit. This, to some extent, is probably because the conservation projects conducted under the “Revitalizing Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme” are all government-owned buildings,² or properties acquired using public funds.³

While it is not helpful to put social and economic benefits of heritage conservation in a zero sum equation, it is important to address issues about economic benefit, or financial sustainability from a project management perspective. Unless there are unlimited supplies of public funds available, a more sustainable financial model must be found for adaptive reuse of government-owned heritage buildings. How public acceptance of commercial uses of heritage buildings can be promoted is a key question in the quest for a sustainable model of adaptive reuse when government-owned heritage buildings are conserved. In addition, many stakeholders are of the view that government building regulations governing revitalisation of heritage buildings should also be reviewed to make adaptive reuse more economically viable. These will be among the key questions discussed in this paper when conservation of government-owned heritage buildings is discussed.

On the other hand, conservation of built heritage should not be limited to government-owned historic buildings that can be turned into urban icons or landmarks with new uses. There is growing interest, and indeed actual need, to conserve and revitalise the large number of old privately-owned buildings. The conservation need does not just arise from the fact that these old buildings are fast becoming part of a rapidly disappearing heritage fabric, but perhaps more importantly, they provide accommodation in the heart of urban areas. These old buildings represent an opportunity to rejuvenate older areas without destroying local character. How government policies should be devised to facilitate this type of revitalisation will be another key topic discussed in this paper.

In this paper, references will be drawn from discussions at the one-day international conference organised by RICS on 9 January 2015. Several important case studies in Hong Kong and overseas were shared and discussed at the conference, from which good practices could be distilled for Hong Kong’s unique challenges. References will also be made to good practice where useful.

¹ Examples of completed projects include the Savannah College of Art and Design, the Comix Home Base, and the Tai O Heritage Hotel. Projects being planned for adaptive reuse include the Central Police Station, managed by The Hong Kong Jockey Club, and the Central Market project managed by the Urban Renewal Authority. ² SCAD Hong Kong is a case in point. ³ Comix Home Base

1.0 Heritage Conservation in the Public Sector

1.1 Community Support as Crucial Success Factor

Given the involvement of public resources in terms of properties and funding, members of the public will have high expectations of these projects as they are seen as public assets. It is clear that one key common factor underpinning different successful conservation cases – so far as government buildings are concerned – is support and involvement from local communities. One notable example is the Tai O Heritage Hotel.

Case Study: Tai O Heritage Hotel

The success of the Tai O Heritage Hotel project is built on the basis of strong community involvement. The project encompasses conserving both the physical dimension of the heritage as well as its less tangible aspects, celebrating the historical identity of Tai O through oral history projects involving retired police officers and revival of local customs such as the “water weddings”. The hotel sources materials for daily use locally where possible, employs locals and ploughs back surpluses into local conservation and community causes. The project does not only help conserve the former marine police station, but to some extent Tai O as a whole as well – both physically and culturally – because of the community’s multi-dimensional involvement. Since its launch, the hotel has been popular among Hong Kong residents and tourists alike. The commercial benefits are an integral part of the success of this conservation project: in terms of generating jobs for locals, and also resources for ploughing back into community causes.⁴

The Tai O Heritage Hotel project illustrates that commercial sustainability and community aspirations are not necessarily in conflict with each other. One may argue that while the desirability of having commercial elements in adaptive reuse was often called into question, the deeper question is probably about protecting the “community identity” in the course of integrating commercial use into revitalised built heritage. Indeed, experiences such as the Tai O Heritage Hotel show that local communities will embrace adaptive reuse if they are convinced that it will bring benefits in terms of social and economic development, community building, and enhancement of local identities.



Image source: Cyrus_2000 / Shutterstock.com

“For the Revitalising Historic Building Through Partnership Scheme, I would like to see firstly that leases are longer, at ten years or more; secondly government financial subsidies for renovation are fixed sums, so that NGO partners have the flexibility to use the fund as necessary; and thirdly government financial support for the operation of the premises be fixed irrespective of any extra funds raised by NGO partners.”

Christopher Law

Founding Director, Oval Partnership

⁴ A case study on the Tai O Heritage Hotel was presented at the RICS conference on 9 January 2015 by Mr Randy Yu, General Manager, Hong Kong Heritage Conservation Foundation Ltd.

Another example in neighbouring countries that shares similar success factors is the Blue Mansion in Penang, Malaysia:

Case Study: Blue Mansion, Penang, Malaysia

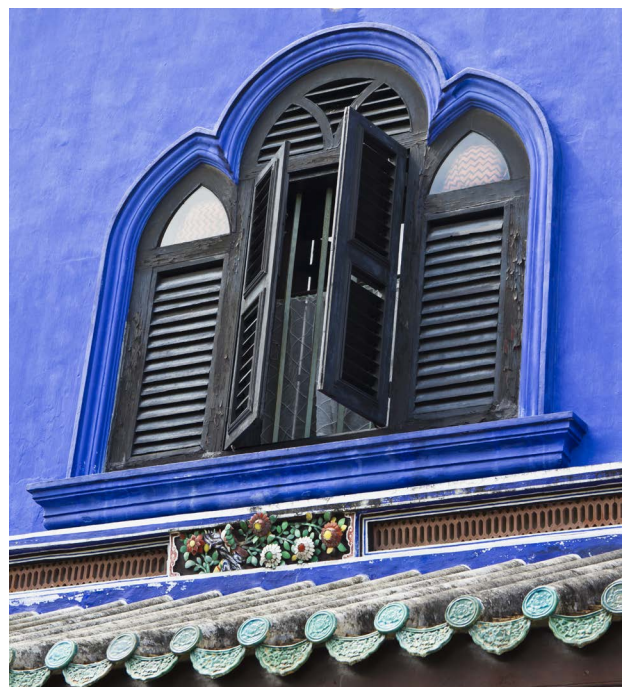
The Cheung Fatt Tse Mansion, more commonly known as Blue Mansion, in Penang, Malaysia has helped put the city on the map as a heritage destination. The local community in Penang fully embraced the project, though privately owned. Local families donated furniture and artefacts, which endowed the revitalised Blue Mansion with a strong sense of community, in spite of the role of the project in promoting cultural tourism which features a strong commercial element.⁵

Both Tai O Heritage Hotel in Hong Kong and the Blue Mansion in Penang illustrate the importance of community or civic engagement in heritage conservation, an increasingly recognized trend globally. As UNESCO puts it:

“Civic engagement tools should involve a diverse cross-section of stakeholders, and empower them to identify key values in their urban areas, develop visions that reflect their diversity, set goals, and agree on actions to safeguard their heritage and promote sustainable development. These tools, which constitute an integral part of urban governance dynamics, should facilitate intercultural dialogue by learning from communities about their histories, traditions, values, needs and aspirations, and by facilitating mediation and negotiation between groups with conflicting interests.”

In Hong Kong, while the importance of gaining community support through civic engagement is usually not disputed, it is often hard to secure consensus and public support on matters of conservation, partly because of a wide range of different public views typically expressed in relation to the matter, and partly due to the prevailing social and political climate. The government often struggles to get public support for its policies because of its perceived lack of popular representation – largely a result of the political structure. Government-driven consultations frequently take a prolonged period of time and even so there is often little consensus achieved in the end, making it arduous to move conservation projects forward.

On the other hand, because of the public distrust of developers in conducting conservation projects with commercial elements, and the lack of both an appropriate regulatory framework and sufficient incentives for developers or private landlords to engage in heritage conservation, often times the government looks to NGOs to step in as the drivers. But NGOs typically lack much of the required expertise and they also have to work closely with government which provides the mainstay of the funding required. In short, NGO involvement in itself cannot resolve the consensus and expertise issues.



“Making government driven revitalisation projects successful is only the first step, encouraging privately owned revitalisation projects should be the ultimate goal.”

Candy Chan

Director, Property Conservation Co. Ltd

⁵ The Blue Mansion of Penang was another case study presented at the RICS conference on 9 January 2015 by Mr Laurence Loh, President, Heritage of Malaysia Trust (Badan Warisan Malaysia)

In view of these unique difficulties in Hong Kong, a different model should be considered for building consensus on what constitutes acceptable adaptive reuse and moving conservation projects forward on a sustainable basis. To help fill the gap, professionals and professional bodies perhaps can play a more prominent role in providing the solution.

1.2 New Model Driven by Professional Institutions and Broad-based Stakeholder Engagement

To overcome public scepticism about government and businesses, professionals involved in conservation, and related professional institutions, can and should play a bigger role in formulating best practice and providing guidance for heritage conservation projects. Professional institutions in particular could make use of their expertise to set standards from which the Government and its NGO partners could follow or draw reference, effectively filling the gaps in existing policy direction and regulations.

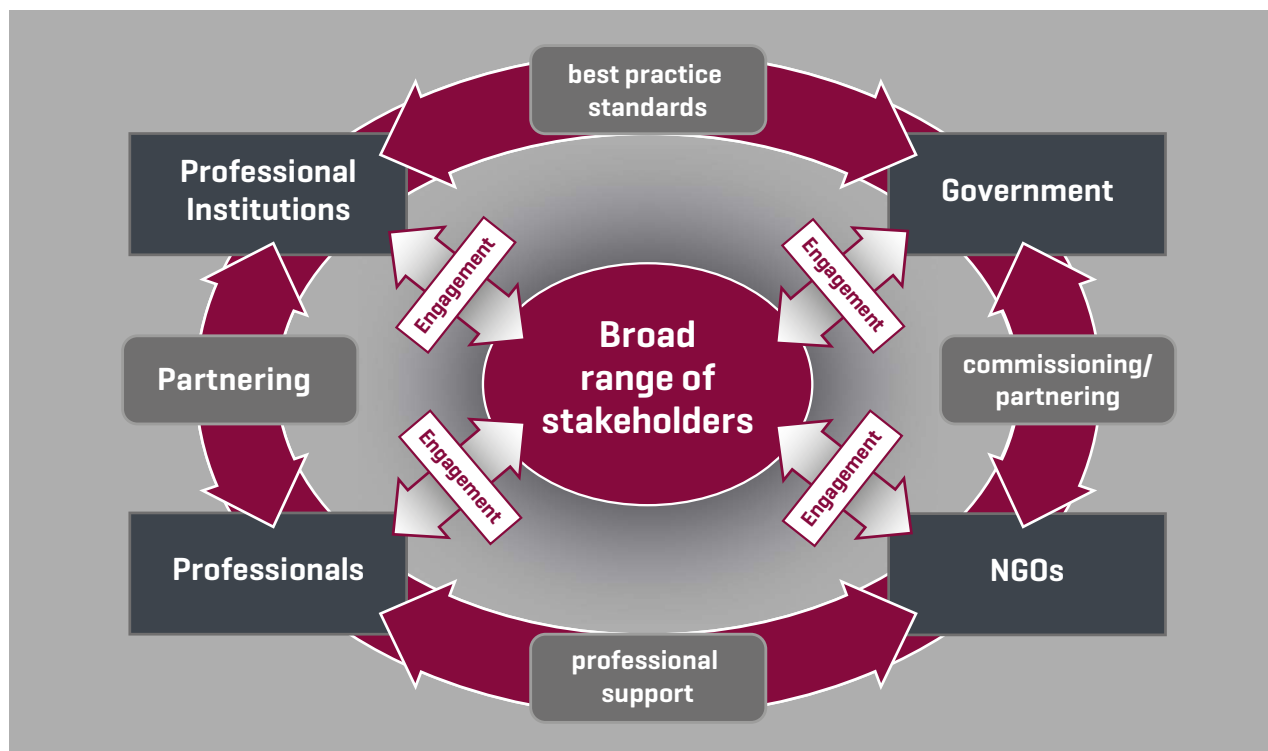
A “quadrupartite relationship” among professional institutions with professionals, and government with NGOs, underpinned by broad-based stakeholder engagement, could be established as illustrated below:

Under this “quadrupartite relationship” the role of professional institutions in the fields of architecture, engineering, conservation, surveying, planning, among others, is to set the *de facto* basic policy and regulatory framework through establishing best practice and standards.⁶ The government may then require the commissioned or partnering NGOs to undertake conservation projects to follow the best practice and standards set by the professional institutions and their respective professional members, effectively turning the ‘soft rules’ of best practice and guidelines into performance processes and procedures, without having to legislate or harden the soft rules into rigid laws.

As professional institutions, by virtue of their professionalism and independence, generally enjoy an element of public trust, they are well positioned to step in to help overcome the “trust deficit” in this area when conservation projects involving adaptive reuse are being considered. That said, in order to maintain and further enhance such trust, professional institutions must be transparent and engage openly with stakeholders and the public in a continuous process of setting and refining best practice and standards.

There is useful overseas experience in applying a professional institutions-driven model. In Australia, a set of principles have been set by professional institutions that government authorities practically follow. In the UK,

Figure 1: Quadrupartite relationship among professional institutions with professionals, and government with NGOs, underpinned by broad-based stakeholder engagement



⁶ Apart from long established professional bodies in the fields of surveying, engineering, planning and architecture, a new professional body, the Hong Kong Institute of Architectural Conservationists, has been established to serve as register of conservational architects.

English Heritage takes the lead in formulating an adaptive reuse approach, known as “constructive conservation,” which the UK government endorses as guiding principles for all projects.

When conservation projects are being implemented, individual professional practitioners play a key role in assisting NGOs and others in applying standards and best practice to individual projects. As few NGOs partnering with the government have all the needed expertise to conduct conservation projects, expert assistance from professionals is essential.

1.3 Longer Leases and Greater Flexibility

Conservationists, and professionals working with them, often find the bureaucracy and rigidity arising from government rules and tight financial and implementation control to be key issues. While the need for accountability when public money is used is well recognised, it is necessary that ways are found to enable conservation projects to gain better results on a sustainable basis.

Some suggest that it would help conservation projects succeed and achieve improved commercial sustainability if authorities could take a long term view, providing longer leases and allowing more flexibility in operations. Some organisations and NGOs indicate that they may have the resources to fund certain heritage projects on their own provided that longer leases are granted to allow cost recovery and financial sustainability.

The need for greater flexibility is not only related to the length of leases and the operations of projects. For successful adaptive reuse, introducing innovations or alterations, and creative solutions to the design of heritage buildings are often necessary. As English Heritage sees it:

The recognition of the public interest in heritage values is not in conflict with innovation, which can help to create the heritage of the future. Innovation is essential to sustaining cultural values in the historic environment for present and future generations, but should not be achieved at the expense of places of established value.

In Hong Kong, the guidelines for alteration and additions to heritage buildings are seen as not being sufficiently updated to respond to changing aspirations for innovation and adaptive reuse. The overall approach of the authorities for proposed new elements or interventions to heritage buildings is seen as overly conservative.

Much has been said about having another set of building regulations for heritage buildings rather than using the same set of regulations for all buildings. Efforts on this front must continue. Regarding the overall direction for a tailored code for heritage buildings, most stakeholders support a principle-based or performance-based approach in meeting the requirements under the Buildings Ordinance.

1.4 Alternative Funding Model

The government is cautious about the idea of setting up a heritage trust with public funds to acquire privately-owned heritage properties, a caution which is, perhaps, understandable given the high cost of land and buildings in the city. Indeed, the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB) in its latest policy review of built heritage conservation explored the question of whether public funds should be used to purchase or resume privately-owned historic buildings, but eventually came to the conclusion that the idea should not be pursued because of diverse views in the community.

In place of setting up a public fund to acquire privately held heritage buildings, the AAB recommends the Government to consolidate and increase the existing economic incentives and administrative support to make it more attractive for private owners to preserve and revitalise their historic buildings. The recommendation is to continue with the prevailing “development-cum-preservation” model, making use of incentives such as relaxation of plot ratio and land exchange but offering such incentives through a more systematic and well-publicised mechanism according to the scale, building conditions and heritage value of the privately-owned historic buildings.

While the existing practice may still be used in view of the lack of community consensus on alternative models, it should be recognised that the chronic lack of land resources in Hong Kong will continue to make it difficult to effectively deploy incentives such as land exchange, as there are always higher priorities for available land resources. Relaxing plot ratio as an incentive is also not a panacea because of concerns about the impact of high density development. In view of such constraints, some are of the view that perhaps the best possible device Hong Kong might use that does not entail monetary compensation or the offer of an alternative site is allowing additional development within the site.

As government and stakeholders continue to ponder upon different ways to balance heritage conservation and private property rights, and how best public resources should be used in this respect, it is useful to look at different alternatives and consider whether overseas experience can inform the search for a solution for Hong Kong.

Australia’s revolving fund is one such potentially useful alternative.⁸ The revolving fund provides funds for the purchase of properties with natural and / or cultural values. After acquisition, a conservation covenant is placed on the title, and necessary adaptations are applied to the property before reselling with the conservation covenant attached, so as to ensure the conservation objective. The proceeds from the sale of such properties are used to buy more properties of heritage value, hence the revolving nature of the fund. Apart from supporting public conservation initiatives, the revolving fund is also a vehicle for private owners who want to donate land that has conservation value.

⁷ Practice Guidebook for Adaptive Re-use of and Alteration and Addition Works to Heritage Buildings, Buildings Department, Hong Kong (2012) ⁸ The model of Australia’s revolving fund was presented at the RICS conference on 9 January 2015 by Mr Ian Innes, Assistant Director, Heritage, Sydney Living Museums

2.0 Private Sector Initiatives: Streetscape Conservation



The Blue Mansion in Penang, mentioned above, was started by a group of conservationists who bought the property when it was put on the market. They sought to restore the property and adapt it into a boutique hotel while conserving the heritage building to the highest standards. The case illustrates that private investors can contribute significantly to heritage conservation provided that their projects enjoy community support, and that government policies and regulations provide a positive framework.

In Hong Kong, there is a growing body of successful cases, albeit currently of small scale, that were initiated by private investors who sought to conserve and restore pre-war or post-war buildings, which are fast becoming part of Hong Kong's heritage. Their successful experience sheds light on how private investors can play their role under existing conditions and points to how such initiatives can be broadened to help achieve large scale conservation of Hong Kong's built heritage.

2.1 Streetscape Conservation: The Shanghai Street Shophouses Project

Conservation of built heritage in Hong Kong until recently has largely meant the preservation or revitalisation of individual structures, without their broader integration with surrounding buildings, the context and the setting. But exceptions have begun to appear.

One recent example is the Shanghai Street shophouses project undertaken by the Urban Renewal Authority (URA). The URA's plan is to preserve the façade and front half of a row of 10 pre-war shophouses, and redevelop the back of these houses for commercial uses, with shops selling daily necessities and Hong Kong-style cafes. For the redevelopment portion, the height of the new parts will be restricted such that the original appearance from the street will be preserved. It is reported that upmarket brand names and declining traditional businesses will not be sought for the redevelopment and conservation project as the plan aims to serve the local community and preserve historical street landscape.⁹ The Shanghai Street Shophouses project is not a private sector initiative, but it does point to an approach embraced by many.

“Successful adaptive reuse of heritage buildings requires not only retention of their individual heritage features but also their setting and context so that protecting neighbourhoods and streetscapes is an important element in the balance between conservation and development.”

Margaret Brooke
CEO, Professional Property Services Group

⁹ “HK\$200 million plan to turn back clock in Mong Kok Street,” South China Morning Post, 24 February 2015.

Typically government-funded projects like the Shanghai Street Shophouses are large in scale and best serve as landmarks, and they are effective in raising public awareness about streetscape conservation. But society cannot expect unlimited public money to fund such projects. While it would be useful for the URA to continue undertaking projects like Shanghai Street Shophouses (and also Comix Home Base in Wan Chai), in order to expand streetscape protection, its modus operandi and financial model is insufficient for more than the occasional buildings. A more sustainable approach must be found to encourage private initiatives in refurbishing or revitalising old tong lau clusters in local communities, especially those in historic neighbourhoods.

2.2 Facilitating Micro-Developers in Streetscape Conservation

Both pre- and post-war tong lau are fast becoming heritage buildings. They represent an important period of Hong Kong's history and contain the living memories of many generations who grew up during that time. Their heritage value is much embraced by the public. If a significant portion of the tong lau can be revitalized, it will go a long way to conserve the heritage of everyday life – as opposed to the landmark heritage structures which are usually government or civic premises.

One distinctive aspect of revitalising private buildings like the pre- and post-war tong lau that must be considered is the streetscape in which they are located. In short, it is not an individual block of tong lau that defines the character of a district as individual blocks do not usually have the same aesthetic value as a landmark. It is a continuous row of tong lau blocks that speak to the community and create a distinctive streetscape.

There have been isolated cases of success in the refurbishment of old buildings in some parts of Hong Kong Island. Cases can be found in Tai Ping Shan Street, Sai Street and the Soho areas, which are projects undertaken by micro-developers. So far these successful cases are mostly individual blocks.¹⁰

In order to expand the positive impact of these small scale developments, appropriate incentives must be provided for these micro-developers to acquire more blocks (and for the owners to sell), and therefore help preserve a larger section of the streetscape. For example, planning rules should be relaxed to make it easier to assemble adjoining blocks or sites (without changing the plot ratio), so as to make larger scale streetscape preservation projects more attractive and financially sustainable for micro-developers.

This is a development-led approach for the private sector, as opposed to the revitalisation model adopted in the public sector. Each serves a different purpose. Revitalisation of government-owned projects provides a landmark-type of built heritage for public uses, whereas the development-led approach encourages micro-developers to conserve large sections of the streetscape while keeping the refurbished private properties for residential use without adding to the area's density.

“The time has come for heritage revitalisation in Hong Kong to upscale to street level, moving beyond individual buildings. A carrot and stick approach must be in place to preserve streetscapes: incentives for the private sector to renovate blocks rather than demolishing them AND appropriate guidelines that allow for alteration and addition to heritage buildings.”

Dr. Ester van Steekelenburg
Founder & Director, Urban Discovery

¹⁰ For reference, see <http://www.11upperstation.com/>, and also news media reports: <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1495006/life-raw-updating-tong-lau-apartment>

3.0 Summary and Conclusion

Driven by government policy, adaptive reuse of built heritage is a defensible way forward. The challenge is to build community consensus and support, especially in relation to commercial uses, which form a key factor of the sustainability of heritage conservation. Professional institutions can play a key role in coming up with best practice and standards for heritage conservation, effectively filling the gap of public trust when public heritage assets are adapted for reuse. And in order to make heritage conservation more viable, a tailored set of principle- or performance-based building regulations should be developed for revitalising heritage buildings, so as to allow more flexibility in conservation and adaptive reuse. Longer leases can also help.

For longer term consideration, stakeholders and the government should continue to explore what kind of funding model best suits a sustainable conservation of built heritage, perhaps referencing overseas experiences.

To encourage private sector initiatives in conserving streetscapes in old urban quarters, particularly those in historic neighbourhoods, rules and regulatory approach should be relaxed to facilitate projects such as those that seek to conserve tong lau clusters. These pre- and post-war residential buildings are an important part of Hong Kong's built heritage fabric, and ways must be found to revitalise such buildings, by way of refurbishing clusters and preserving broad streetscape, so that an important part of Hong Kong's urban character can be preserved, while continuing to satisfy residential needs without adding to the city's already high density.

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