

# No room for culture?

## A brief review of cultural and urban planning in Hong Kong since the late 20th century

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### Abstract

A cultural city is represented by its iconic cultural architecture, often attributed to the capacity for urban transformation vis-à-vis the legacy of Bilbao. However, cultural landmarks were conceived in urban development plans long before emerging on the architect's drawing board. Meanwhile, advocacy in cultural support argues for the intrinsic value of culture, which has a greater social impact that cannot be measured by economic utility alone. This paper will discuss the planning of cultural facilities within the context of Hong Kong's pronounced urban planning for economic growth, to unpack the sometimes-conflicting objectives between urban and cultural development. It will be done by mapping out key cultural projects since the post-war period and its intricate relationship with the major urban development plan. Although Hong Kong has never had a well-defined cultural policy, the piecemeal development of both landmark and district cultural facilities over the past decades has nonetheless constructed a rich depository of cultural resources. The establishment of the Culture, Sports, and Tourism Bureau (CSTB) in 2022 provides a timely occasion to review the trajectory of Hong Kong's cultural development, from which this paper proposes to reconsider future cultural planning other than the mega-project developmental approach.

### Keywords

Development Plans, Cultural Planning, Cultural Architecture, Mega-projects, Cultural Infrastructure, Hong Kong

### How to cite

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## INTRODUCTION

### POSITIONING CULTURE IN URBAN PLANNING PRACTICE

Hong Kong was infamously known as a “cultural dessert” in the late 20th century when the city was preoccupied with rapid economic growth, as the laissez-faire government played a minimal role in cultural affairs. Even during the 1970s/80s, known as the “golden age” of social welfare, the objective of cultural planning was pragmatic – to create a stable social environment favourable to business development<sup>1</sup>. Housing, education, and healthcare were the main concerns in urban centre and new town master plans, in which culture was marginally included in the rubric of “leisure and recreation” and an afterthought. Although there was never a clearly defined cultural policy and planning in Hong Kong<sup>2</sup>, the piecemeal cultural development over the decades has nonetheless built a rich network of venues and facilities that have become the foundation of the city’s cultural infrastructure. How cultural facilities are planned reflects the place of arts and culture in society<sup>3</sup>, and this paper offers a brief review of cultural planning and development in Hong Kong to illustrate how culture is positioned within major urban development plans. The research revolves around two questions: *How does cultural planning work in collusion or against the greater urban development goal? What are the components in urban planning that can support and nurture the development of arts and culture?*

Cultural planning is considered within the scope of amenity planning in the discipline of modern town planning to facilitate efficient resource distribution<sup>4</sup>. It has an egalitarian origin that builds upon culture’s utility as an instrument of public instruction with a civilising effect, which place it alongside other social provisions such as education or sanitation<sup>5</sup>. In the Western post-war welfare state, cultural development was part of the reconstruction effort and a means to build national solidarity<sup>6</sup>. The colonial territory of Hong Kong has a different and more complex geo-political situation than its British sovereign, which results in a vague cultural policy that avoid the ideological aspect towards colonial or Chinese nationalist sentiments<sup>7</sup>. As the territory grew into a global metropolis, the instrumental purpose of culture gradually establishes as a driver for economic development, which is still the primary direction of Hong Kong’s cultural and urban planning nowadays. In the past several decades, there is increasing focus on the intrinsic value of culture and how cultural experience has a more significant social impact in the global context<sup>8</sup>. However, this paradigm change relies on a strong social vision that looks beyond the immediate return to support long-term cultural development, which policymakers in Hong Kong has yet to adopt and it is still a difficult battle to justify public investment in culture if not in economic terms.

This paper will map the planning of key cultural projects and corresponding urban planning initiatives, to illustrate how cultural development in Hong Kong respond to the economic-driven urban development objectives (Fig.1). The study includes both cultural landmarks – the Hong Kong Cultural Centre (HKCC) and the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD); as well as smaller scale cultural facilities – the municipal Town Halls and heritage revitalisation projects in Central. These projects reflected two periods of active cultural development in Hong Kong during the late colonial governance in the 1970s/80s and as later the Special Administrative Region (SAR) after 1997. Although the socio-political context was very different before and after the change of sovereignty

from the British to the People's Republic of China (PRC), striking similarity is found regarding the planning approach and the attitude towards cultural development, which this paper questions the development mindset of planning practice in Hong Kong and suggests an alternative approach.

## CULTURAL PLANNING AS WELFARE PROVISION IN THE LATE COLONIAL PERIOD: THE METROPOLITAN AND MUNICIPAL CULTURAL CENTRES

The opening of the City Hall in 1962 marked the beginning of Hong Kong's cultural policy development, as the first public facility with comprehensive cultural functions, including a concert hall, a theatre, a library, a museum, and other civic services. Its planning, design, and operation have since become the models for public cultural facilities in the decades that followed. A report in 1965 by the Urban Council Museum & Art Gallery Committee documented the surging public interest in arts and culture with over one million visitors in the City Hall Museum's first three years of operation, which suggests the need for a new museum<sup>9</sup>. Concurrently, a new civic centre for the Kowloon with similar functions as the City Hall was conceived to accommodate the growing population, especially in the urban core of the Kowloon peninsula, since the 1950s<sup>10</sup>.

Following the 1949 Abercrombie study and recommendations for Hong Kong's future urban planning, a development plan was drafted in 1965 to position the Tsim Sha Tsui area as a business and tourism centre<sup>11</sup>. The proposal includes the relocation of the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) terminal and redevelopment of the former military outpost (Whitefield Barrack) and the Goodwin and logistic area along the waterfront. In this development plan, a small parcel surrounded by public open space at the waterfront was indicated for "Government/ Institution/ Community" (GIC) land use, as a potential site for the new Museum (Fig.2).

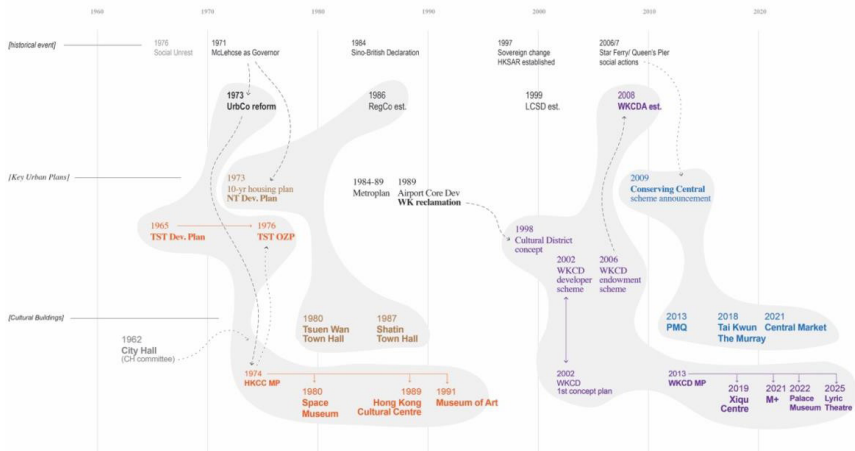


Fig. 1. Timeline and relationships of major cultural projects & urban plans from 1960s to current

Cultural provision in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 60s primarily catered to a small circle of expats and local elites, and public investment in culture had a lower priority than other immediate needs such as sanitation and housing. Only after the 1967 riot incidents did the government begin to pay attention to cultural development as a means to maintain social stability, which was recommended by the post-riot report to the British Colonial Department<sup>12</sup>. It is followed the organisation of various outdoor festive activities for public enjoyment and the building of new facilities addressing the local youth's recreation needs. Furthermore, the organisational reform of the Urban Council (UrbCo) in 1973 has granted it budgetary autonomy and greater number of elected members, allowing further public participation in urban affairs, and it has provided an opportunity for cultural development and to discuss the role of culture in society.

Under the leadership of its first chairman, A.de O. Sales, the Urban Council embarked on an ambitious building scheme of leisure and cultural facilities such as parks, sports grounds, and cultural centres. The earlier proposals for the new Museum, the Kowloon Civic Centre, and the earlier-approved Planetarium were consolidated into a comprehensive plan for the Hong Kong Cultural Centre (HKCC) complex. With advice from the City Hall senior management and involvement of the growing local cultural sector, the project aimed to create a cultural landmark for the burgeoning metropolis in the region. As noted by Mr Darwin Chan, the former City Hall General Manager who was involved in the planning of the HKCC, the project was a result of "multiple favourable circumstances"<sup>13</sup>. While the newly reformed Urban Council had the resources to pursue large-scale development, the positive economic outlook at that time gained them public support to build a new cultural icon for the city. The strong and persuasive character of the Urban Council leadership was also instrumental in negotiating a prime site for the cultural landmark<sup>14</sup>.

In the 1976 Outline Zoning Plan for Tsim Sha Tsui, almost the whole extent of the waterfront public land was allocated to the HKCC complex and designated as "Other Specific Uses" (Fig.3). This land use indication gave flexibility and liberty to the project planning, design and later management over both the architecture and surrounding public space. The process of the HKCC development demonstrated a mutual influence of cultural and urban planning, where the iconic cultural architecture answered the greater vision of urban planning to build the business and tourism centre.

Besides the flagship project for city-wide residents and international tourists, cultural planning at a municipal level was also compliment the social welfare objectives in urban planning. The 1970s was considered the "golden age of social welfare" through multiple programs initiated by Sir Murray MacLehose during his tenure as Governor from 1971-82. Most notable was the ten-year housing plan to house a million residents who were in subordinate living conditions, with a focus in building suburban new towns to disperse the urban centre population. These new towns were planned to be "self-contained" with a balanced function not only for living but also for work and leisure, completed with a town centre to fulfil shops and services, as well as recreation and cultural facilities. The Shatin new town, planned on reclaimed land across the Shatin River, presents the example modern image of a high-density new town with complete function, and the Shatin Town Hall connecting the riverfront park and the shopping centre to the commuter-rail station. (Fig.4,5)

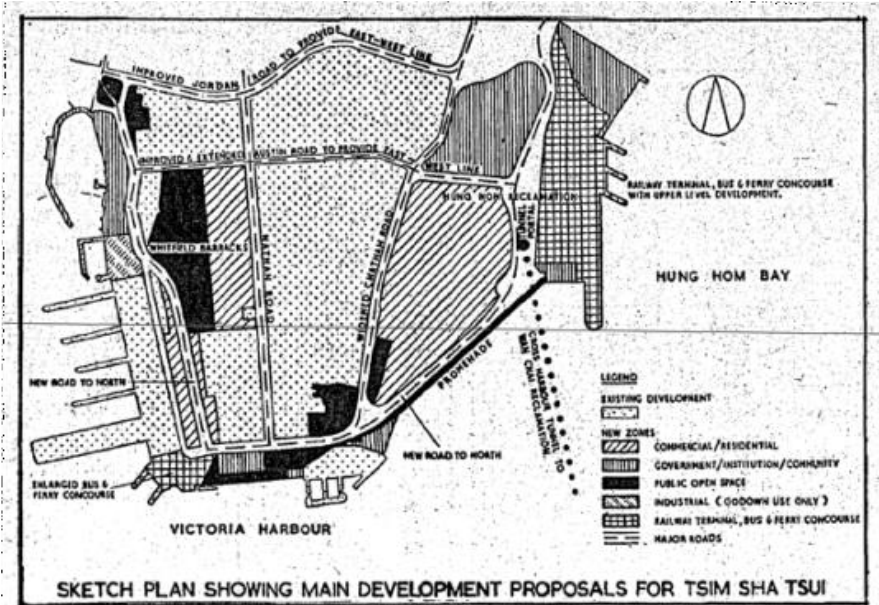


Fig. 2. Development Plan for Tsim Sha Tsui (1965)

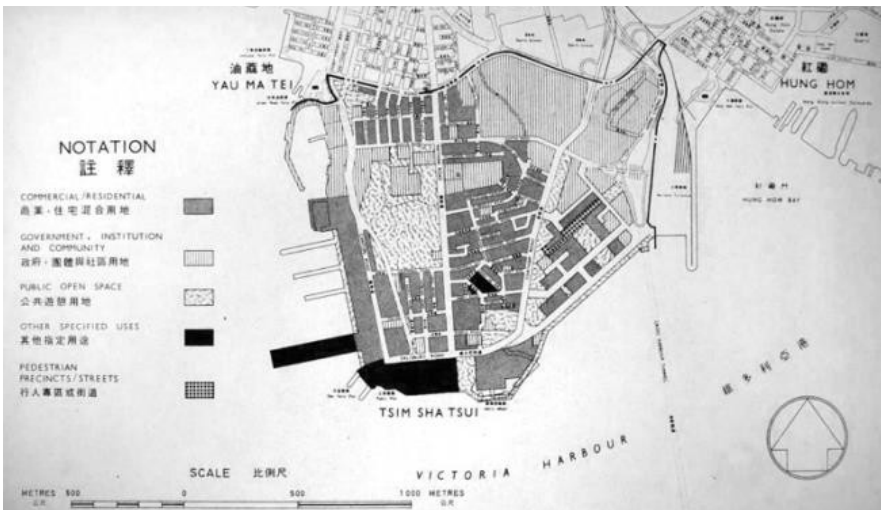


Fig. 3. Tsim Sha Tsui Outline Zoning Plan (1976)

These town halls were planned as a component of the new town master plan, with a generic program and non-specific identity regarding cultural content. It would be logical for the Urban Council (UrbCo), who was responsible for cultural provisions in the city, to take up the planning and operation of the new town cultural facilities, which also would be an opportunity to develop an overall cultural policy vision for Hong Kong. However, new town

planning and administration was a delicate matter in regard of the opinions of the small but significant indigenous new territories population<sup>15</sup>. There was a sense of protectionism by the village leaders who wanted autonomy in local affairs, and the local residents were indifferent to the preference of predominately established art form and elitist image in urban cultural provision. Eventually a Regional Urban Council (RC) with similar functions and budgetary resources as the UrbCo was established in 1986 and subsequently took up the programming and management of the Town Halls. As a result, the cultural presentations at the municipal town halls have a stronger local appeal, such as Cantonese Opera, which gradually developed into a competitive relationship between the two Councils in cultural development matters.

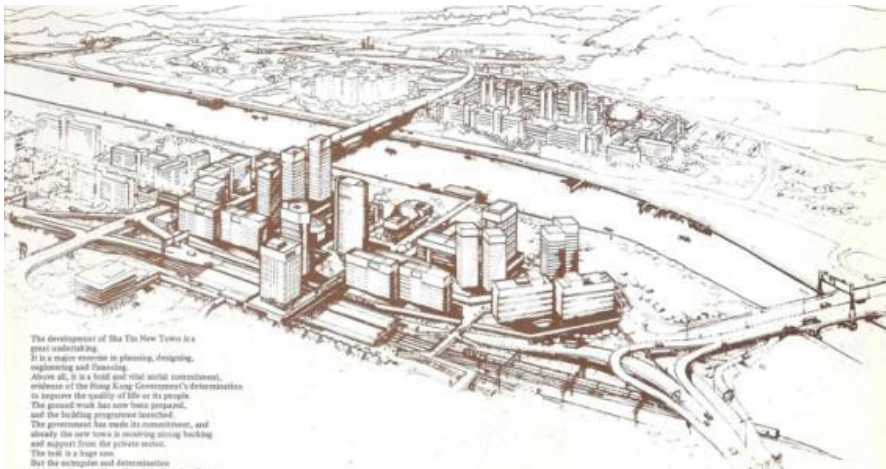


Fig. 4. A sketch of Shatin New Town (1976/78)



Fig. 5. Shatin Town Hall in construction (1986)

The new town cultural facilities are comparable to the municipal arts centre in the UK or “masion du culture” in France in the late 20th-century welfare states. These town halls or district-based cultural facilities were not conceived under a holistic cultural vision but planned according to demographics and growth in different areas. In accord with the colonial government’s intention to de-emphasise the ideological aspect of cultural services, the role of these new town halls was simply venues for hire and managed by technocratic operations. The discussion regarding these projects in the Council focused on function and scale, mainly a pragmatic response to population projection and cost.

The dissolution of the two urban councils in 1999 has further eradicated public participation in urban affairs, and the Leisure and Cultural Service Department (LCSD) replaced the cultural provision function of the Council that has some public representation. Remained at an operation level evaluated by attendance or venue hire income, the LCSD has effectively no involvement in cultural policy and budgetary decision, which were decided in the upper-level Home Affairs Bureau. As a result, the focus of cultural policy became distanced urban development strategies on tourist attraction of economic catalyst.

## PLANNING FOR CULTURAL ECONOMY SINCE THE MILLENNIUM: THE WKCD AND CONSERVING CENTRAL

The 1980s/90s saw a drastic urban transformation as the earlier planning schemes came into realisation. As the new town development was well underway, Hong Kong’s urban planning re-focused on the city centre first with the Metroplan in early 1980s, followed by the Port and Airport Development Strategy. Publicly presented as the “Rose Garden” project in late 1989, it was the colonial government’s last significant urban development plan that will span across decades into the early 2010s. Some scholars saw it as an attempt to regain the confidence of foreign and local investment after the Tiananmen incident in Beijing in June 1989, which overshadowed Hong Kong’s change of sovereignty to communist China in less than a decade<sup>16</sup>.

The extensive development package included the construction of a new airport, a cargo port, a high-speed rail terminal, with associated large-scale reclamation to the west of Kowloon. Besides accommodating transportation infrastructure, most newly created land was zoned for residential and commercial private development. This ‘neoliberal turn’ signalled a departure from the previous welfare investment with a greater emphasis on market forces in shaping the city’s development. There was no indication of cultural function in the earlier proposals, until the new administration 1998 Policy Address announced the idea of developing a cultural district in Kowloon<sup>17</sup>. It was followed by a survey of existing cultural facilities in Hong Kong<sup>18</sup> and a feasibility study for a new performance venue commissioned by the Hong Kong Tourism Association (HKTA)<sup>19</sup>. These reports suggested the need for new large-scale cultural facilities in Hong Kong, anticipating local residents and tourists demand, which the HKTA study presented the concept of a new performance venue with a 2300-seat theatre and a 6720-seat semi-open venue on a 5.5 hectares site at the tip of west Kowloon reclamation land (Fig.6).

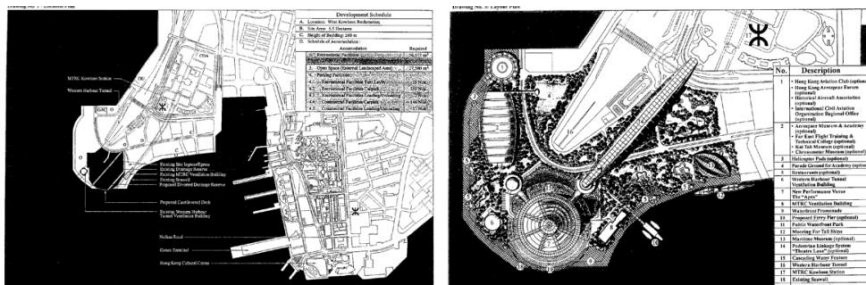


Fig. 6. Feasibility study of a new performance venue (1999)

The West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), eventually occupying the full extent of the 40-hectare West Kowloon waterfront, was the most ambitious cultural project that the city has long waited for. Starting from the Arts Policy Review Report consultation by the Government Secretariat Recreation and Culture Branch in the early 1990s<sup>20</sup>, there was enthusiastic feedback from the local cultural sector who argued the need of local cultural development during the transition period into the semi-autonomous SAR<sup>21</sup>. While the cultural sector saw the new cultural district as an opportunity to address cultural and social development issues, the initial proposal presented in 2003 did not meet their expectation and lacked detail on how it would impact cultural sector development and growth<sup>22</sup> as the development's central argument pivoted around tourism and real estate potentials.

Viewing in conjunction with the adjacent luxury commercial and residential development that was not part of the cultural district plan<sup>23</sup>, it is effectively a grand urban development project with culture as a branding instrument. After initial single-developer consortium development model was called to halt due to strong public opposition, the project turned into a public-funded initiative with a \$20 billion initial endowment, with the statutory body (WKCD Authority) established in 2008 to manage its design, construction, and later operation. A second round of international competition was conducted in 2011, with the development master plan was approved by the Town Planning Board and Executive Council in 2013 (Fig.6,7).

The narrative of the WKCD development reinforced the real estate-driven characteristic of urban planning in Hong Kong, in which the discussion of cultural development was focused on its economic benefit instrumental instead of social and local cultural sector benefit.

Since the 1990s, increasing discussion calls for a visionary cultural policy for Hong Kong, which coincides with the emerging concept of cultural economy that became popular in the planning and development practices. The HKSAR government embraced this concept and conveniently adopted it to frame the cultural policy as one that supports the growth of a “creative industry”<sup>24</sup>. At the same time, a rising awareness of local identity was reflected in public interest towards heritage conservation, exemplified by civil actions against the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier demolition in 2006-07<sup>25</sup>. The hybrid urban and cultural development plan, “Conserving Central”, proposed by the HKSAR Development Bureau in 2009 emerged, which can be seen as the government's response to the public sentiment that intersects with the new policy strategy to promote cultural economy.





Fig. 7. Competition rendering of the WKCD (2011)

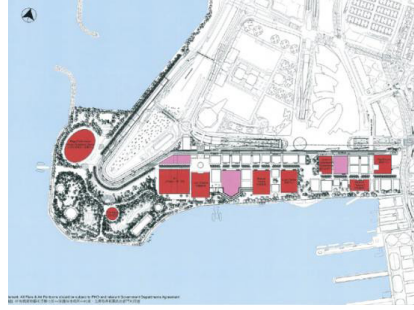


Fig. 8. Development plan indicating cultural facilities (2013)

The plan identified eight projects in Central with heritage value to be revitalised for public use, mostly with cultural functions. These projects in prime urban centre locations are removed from the public land scales list, and therefore saved from the risk of demolition by commercial development. However, it was presented at the outset as an “urban development opportunity”, which would consequently benefit heritage conservation<sup>26</sup>. The essence of the scheme is a development instrument of plot-ratio transfer that allows excessive built area allowance of the heritage building to be transferred (i.e. sold) to another development.

Summarized in Table 1 below, the collection of projects has a range of different regeneration models, including

9. The reclaimed land development in the Central harbourfront; (2) the Central Market as a urban renewal project;
10. The revitalisation plan of the former Police Married Quarter; (4) the philanthropy-funded conservation of the Central Police compound; (5, 6 & 7) former government buildings with functions to be relocated in 2011; and (8) a colonial building complex with private ownership.

Although all revitalisation proposals have some form of leisure and cultural function, these projects were not conceived as a holistic urban or cultural plan and there is minimal programmatic or spatial relationship among them (Fig. 8). It could instead be seen as a publicity scheme to package the projects, including some controversial ones, under a unified image of conservation for better public appeal. While specific project details have been discussed elsewhere<sup>27</sup>, this paper uses the overall scheme as a case to illustrate how urban and cultural planning is entangled, sometimes with conflicting objectives. Cultural planning aims to enhance public accessibility to culture through infrastructure provision and resource distribution, which has found opportunities to repurpose heritage buildings for cultural use. Meanwhile, planning objectives in Hong Kong is often guided by the preparation of developable land resources.

Project	Year built	Ownership / Operation	Proposed Redevelopment	Status
Central new Harbourfront	New (reclamation)	Government / public and private development mix	Plot-ratio transfer of parcel #1, 2 to parcel #5 for commercial dev.	developed in phases
Central Market	1939	Urban Renewal Authority / commercial operation	Cultural and leisure space, with venues for cultural activities, retail and F&B	reopened 2021
Police Married Quarter	1948	Gov. fund for renovation / RFP for operation	Creative Industry centre, with designer studio, space for events	reopened 2014 as PMQ
Central Police Station Compound	1864-1919 <sup>(a)</sup>	Funded by HK Jockey Club / independent operation	Restored heritage building, with new art gallery, theatre, event space, retail, F&B	reopened 2018 as Tai Kwun
Central Gov Office Complex	1961-63 <sup>(b)</sup>	Government / operations pending	Partial demolition for future commercial development + public open space	pending
Murray Building	1969 <sup>(b)</sup>	Gov. own / public tender of land & building	Private hotel development	reopened 2018 as Murray Hotel
Former French Mission Building	1843-1846 <sup>(a), (b)</sup>	Government / operations pending	Pending adoptive reuse	pending
HK Sheng Kung Hui Compound	1848-1919 <sup>(a)</sup>	Private ownership	High-rise development on site while preserving the 4 heritage buildings (incentive thru plot-ratio transfer)	pending

Table 1. The projects of the Conserving Central Scheme

\* notes: (a) certified monument / (b) former government offices to be relocated in 2011

Therefore, a review of how projects in the Conserving Central scheme have developed illustrate the different possibilities in response to the above-stated purposes. For example, the Police Married Quarters on Hollywood Road has been turned into a creative industry cluster directed by the government agency CreateHK, which reopened in 2014 as the “PMQ”. The local philanthropy, Jockey Club, funded the Central Police Compound project and restored the heritage buildings with new constructions of an art gallery and a theatre, which reopened in 2018 as the cultural and commercial complex “Tai Kwun”. These projects have a more pronounced cultural function but operate differently from the LCSD or WKCD model as independent operations with minimal public investment, which means it is necessary to have a comparable commercial programme to ensure financial viability.

Other projects in the scheme have more straight-forward objectives as commercial real estate operations. The Central Market was tendered to private operation after the renovation was completed with urban renewal funding, and the Murray Building became a private hotel development. Proposed by the HKSAR Development Bureau, the Conserving Central scheme tested different development models for heritage sites. It reiterates the argument that cultural development in Hong Kong is overshadowed by economy-driven urban planning. However, on a positive note, it has also contributed to the city’s cultural infrastructure with small and medium-scale cultural spaces.



Fig. 9. The Conserving Central scheme publicity brochure (2009)

## CONCLUSION: CULTURAL PLANNING AND CULTURAL VALUE

With a brief overview of significant cultural projects in Hong Kong built since the late 20th century, this paper demonstrates the intricate dynamics between cultural and urban development. It underscores the unique challenges of cultural planning in Hong Kong that are inextricably linked to the instrumental purpose of serving economic growth, whether in the scale of flagship or smaller projects, or during the time of colonial rule or current SAR governance. It was an exception instead of the norm that the early Urban Council had a vision to build the Cultural Centre complex and negotiate through the urban planning process to implement it with a prime location. In most cases, cultural project is an afterthought in the larger urban planning schemes, primarily to serve economic outcome by real estate, tourism or the creative industry.

Although cultural and urban planning might have diverging objectives, the common goal of planning practice should be to build a better society, of which culture can play a positive role. With the cases introduced above, there have been multiple occasions for public discussion on what could be a cultural policy for the city. Yet, it was a lost cause and an inclusive cultural vision for Hong Kong has yet to be formulated. The establishment of the executive-level Cultural, Sports, and Tourism Bureau (CSTB) in 2022 is the latest opportunity for such discourse, although the current pronounced vision remains to focus on economic potential of culture, for which the argument for cultural development has to be translated into quantitative and instrumental terms in order to convince the technocratic policymakers.

However, the value of culture cannot be reduced to the revenue that it brings. In international discourse, after the phases of post-war welfare state cultural provision and the neoliberal turn in cultural development around the millennium, decision-makers in global cities are revisiting the intrinsic value of culture and its impact on propelling social good and democracy<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, culture is now recognised as the fourth pillar of sustainable development alongside the environment, economy, and social dimensions<sup>29</sup>, which renders an urgency to re-examine the role of culture in urban planning. Unfortunately, such value has yet to be incorporated into the cultural policy discussion in Hong Kong and the current preoccupation is still the building of grand projects and hosting mega-events, as it interprets the PRC Central Government's positioning for Hong Kong as a "centre for international cultural exchange"<sup>30</sup>.

While acknowledging the potential benefits of large-scale cultural projects, this paper will conclude by proposing a new perspective in cultural planning that focuses on multi-scalar development. In anticipation of an economic downturn ahead, it is necessary to reconsider a resilient cultural planning model, moving beyond the reliance on welfare provision and reinstating cultural and social value into the current speculative development. A cultural infrastructure vision plan can integrate culture into urban planning practice, and it should consider not only the grand display for cultural consumption but also the supporting infrastructure for cultural production<sup>31</sup>. Cultural development would always require some form of public funding, but the critical question is how to effectively distribute resources to provide an infrastructure that allows the local cultural sector to grow. The study of different cultural development cases has revealed the problem of developmental urban and cultural planning in Hong Kong, and it calls to reimagine cultural development not only as the iconic structures but as a working system that includes the smaller and less visible components, answering to the purpose of urban and cultural planning to facilitate sustainable urban growth.

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#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

**Melody Hoi-lam Yiu** is a designer and scholar on urbanism, public space, and cultural architecture. Her research builds upon the professional experience in architecture and urban design, to investigate public space issues and their relationship to the cultural sector. After completing the PhD research on historical and spatial study of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, her current research focus on the topic of cultural infrastructure and spatial agency for cultural development in Asian cities. An upcoming monography publication, "Cultural Architecture and late-colonial space: constructing cultural centres in Hong Kong" is anticipated to be published by Routledge Research in Architecture series in early 2025.

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## IMAGE SOURCES

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Figure 2 South China Morning Post, "Big Govt Plan to Change Face of Tsim sha tsui", 11 Dec 1965

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