



Public buildings in Hong Kong: A short account of evolution since the 1960s

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A B S T R A C T

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In a capitalist society, public buildings are essential social assets that balance private and civic interests while providing convenience and comfort for the entire community. The performance of public buildings is remarkable as they are related to most people instead of a handful of users/owners in the private sector. Hence, architecture of public institutions occupies a central, subtle, and decisive role in the quality and the state of civility in the city. Living in compact environments, Hong Kong people always need and aspire for more acute use of public spaces. In this local context, common space and public buildings naturally form an extension to city living. As a consequence, public buildings are becoming multi-use, multi-value and multi-level.

This article is a short account of the evolution and development of the public building in Hong Kong, from the early 1960s to the new millennium. It considers the historic background of the modernist movement and the socio-economic setting of the city. In chronological order, the paper delineates six examples: the City Hall (1962), Town Hall in Shatin New Town (1985), Cultural Centre (1989), Heritage Museum (2000), Central Library (2001) and Wetland Park (2006). The authors present the statistical analysis of public buildings during this period and examine the cases with established criteria of public/civic buildings. Furthermore, social background and the strategies that those designs adopted are discovered and discussed. While generally following the modernist principles, the government architects in Hong Kong adopted alternative methods to respond to the increasing societal expectations along the timeline, for example, pragmatism, neo-classicism and sustainability. It concludes by suggesting the future of the city's public buildings in the West Kowloon Cultural District in the coming decade.

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Public buildings in Hong Kong

Our homes embody our individual tastes, while the public buildings in city express people's collective values. In a capitalist society, public buildings are essential social assets that balance private and civic interests while providing convenience and comfort to the entire community. Good or bad, the performance of public buildings are remarkable as they are related to most people instead of a handful of users/owners in the private sector.

Dattner (1995) suggests that a civil architecture shall first present a modest monumentality, not being excessive or insufficient in scale. Second, the nobility of aspiration, that is to preserve and enhance public life. Third, sustainability. It concerns the economy of means, doing more with less, conserving material, human and natural resources. Public architecture must set a special example by being efficiently built, long-lasting, and energy-conserving. Fourth, contextuality. It is usually about the

respecting of the natural landscape with imposing a man-made geometry expressive over nature's topography. Fifth, inclusiveness and accessibility. A public building should include necessary functional parts to serve the people well and be conveniently accessed, where all are included, valued and welcomes. Sixth, an acceptance of contradiction that shows a multi-cultural society can withstand multiple interpretations of appropriateness for civic structures. Seventh, an architecture which educates as Winston Churchill recognized the didactic dimension of architecture in his statement that 'we shape our buildings, and then they shape us.' Although postulated from American context, these criteria basically cover the tasks of public building – its functions of social service, collective symbol and reflection of citizens' desire, expectation and dignities.

Baniassad (2006) stated that Hong Kong architecture is inherently public and its 'publicness' is an integral part of local culture. Architecture of public institutions has always occupied a central, subtle, and decisive role in the quality and the state of civility in the city. Ng (2006) also attempted to explain the social reason behind unique features of Hong Kong public architecture. He explains that people living within the compact city need and aspire for more

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acute use of public spaces. In this local context, common space and buildings naturally form an extension to city living. This also significantly improves spatial efficiency in city planning and building design. As a consequence, public buildings are becoming multi-use, multi-value and multi-level. Mixed-use environments are designed for enhanced spatial efficiency and flexibility, which optimizes their usability at different times of the day and year.

The early development of Hong Kong, until the pre-war time, was mainly to satisfy the interests of British merchants and ruling class. In a hundred years' time from 1841 to 1941, the colony was busy in coping with the problems of early settlement, influx of refugees, hygiene in the dense city areas, export and productivity, internal and external pressures. Government could spare little attention, energy and budget on the public facilities (Xue, Ma, & Hui, 2012; Xue, Zou, Li, & Hui, 2012).

It was also very difficult for early colonial officials to finance from and report to London about large scale public investment on the barren Hong Kong Island, as the initial colonial policies of Hong Kong were principally biased for the trade in China for short-term profit (Bristow, 1984). Construction of public architecture was thus scarce. Some notable typologies of public architecture were Catholic and Christian churches, Buddhist and Taoist temples, and tycoons' clubhouses – they only served a small group of people. None of these were invested by the government. Other government buildings, for example the government house and magistrate buildings were predominantly colonial standard with slight Victorian or Edwardian decoration. Not until the 1970s when the economy boomed and the society was stabilised from social unrest and international warfare, the government of Hong Kong eventually had the financial ability to start building the colony into a citizen-friendly city with enormous investment put into community building.

After World War II, the British colonial government returned to power. The population increased from 800,000 of 1946 to 3 million in 1950. To cope with the increasing demand of society, the government invited Sir Patrick Abercrombie to design the urban development blueprint for Hong Kong and advice for the direction of development in the coming 50 years. Hong Kong Housing Society, an independent voluntary housing organization, was established. Many public housing (for resettlement), schools and hospitals were built during this period. In 1967, a severe riot took place in Hong Kong and home-made bombs were thrown in streets.¹ The newly arrived governor and his cabinet thought that a good supply of public housing and facilities would be the best way to soothe the society. The administration adopted a people-oriented policy and started massive and numerous civil infrastructure projects. Public architecture, including resettlement estates, city halls, libraries, sport complexes, hospitals, and schools, eventually formed the urban landscape of the Hong Kong territory (Welsh, 2010). The youth of the locals found their spirits solaced with healthy life style against extremist anti-social behaviour.

Today, the average Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in Hong Kong reaches US\$40,000, half of households are still living in a flat less than 50 m².² The public facilities and space become an indispensable part of people's life. People go to city halls for viewing performance and participating amateur arts activities.

Children and old people go to library for doing homework and enjoying cool air. The public spaces are always hustle and bustle.

The majority of public buildings in Hong Kong were designed and (construction) supervised by government architects from the former Public Works Department. During early colonial years, architects and planners of Hong Kong all came from the British Commonwealth nations. The staff members at Public Works Department in the 1950s were mainly young professionals and eager to display their talents in the territory. While modernism was widespread in Europe and America, the designers of public buildings in Hong Kong generally adopted the modernist principles. Economically, the modernist attitude and method can well solve the functional problems and requirements (Curtis, 1987; Frampton, 1992). Aesthetically, it conformed to the prevailing world trend in the 1950s to 70s.³ Their works form part of Hong Kong architectural history after the war.

The Public Works Department was dissolved in 1982. A new department, Architectural Services Department (ASD), established in 1986, took the original functions of the former one as the architectural services provider to government institutions and departments. Since the 1980s, local architects eventually dominated the agency and the British influence faded. Local government architects started to shape the public buildings based on their understanding of indigenous culture and western ideas (*Building Review*, 1986, Vol. 11, No. 8).

Some authors have studied the public buildings in Hong Kong on particular aspects such as energy consumption, post 97 public architecture, the heritage of the post-colonial culture and even indoor air quality index. For instance, Yiu-cheung Chan conducts a study on the energy consumption characteristics of office buildings in public sector in Hong Kong. This work addresses the technical part of public building; Hong Kong Architectural Services Department (2006) publishes Post 97 public architecture in Hong Kong. This is mainly a pictorial record of buildings in the 21st century; Chun-shing Chow and Elizabeth K. Teather reviews the heritage, identity and the (re) construction of culture in post-colonial public building in Hong Kong. It raises the questions of identity of public building. These works have generally described the public buildings in Hong Kong, but far from in-depth. Compared to the large amount of construction in the public sector, the existing study is insufficient both in quantity and quality.⁴

To gain an overview of contemporary Hong Kong public architecture, a total of 173 public building projects built from 1955 to 2011 are recorded for the study purpose. The building projects are classified according to their typologies and completion periods. Essential facilities such as hospitals, government offices and municipal services buildings constitute 70% of all typologies. Cultural centres, museums, libraries and sport facilities account for 22%. While for the period of construction, '1950–1960s' forms 10%; '1970s', 8%; '1980s', 30%; '1990s', 28% and '21st century', 24%. After the surge of mass production from early post-war period to the 1980s, the rate of construction of public buildings by quantity became stable afterwards (Figs. 1 and 2).

³ In talking about the modernist architecture, the authors follow the discussion and definition of classical writings like William Curtis and Kenneth Frampton. See William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987; Kenneth Frampton, *Modern architecture: a critical history*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1992.

⁴ Publications mentioned in this paragraph include: Yiu-cheung Chan, *A study on the energy consumption characteristics of office buildings in public sector in Hong Kong*, City University of Hong Kong Press, Hong Kong, 2003; Hong Kong Architectural Services Department, *Post-97 public architecture in Hong Kong* Hong Kong Architectural Services Department, Hong Kong, 2006; Chun-shing Chow and Elizabeth K. Teather, *Heritage, identity and the (re)construction of culture in post-colonial Hong Kong*, Centre for China Urban and Regional Studies and Hong Kong Baptist University Press, Hong Kong, 2002.

¹ The riot in Hong Kong in May 1967 was triggered by the confrontation between the factory owners and workers. It was soon developed to a movement of 'anti-British colonial rule' by the leftists in Hong Kong, influenced by the Cultural Revolution in the Chinese mainland (1966–1976). The riot lasted for seven months, including workers and schools' strikes, paralysis of public transportation and toll of 52 lives. See Zhang Jiawei, *Xianggang Liuqi Baodong Neiqing* (The internal situation of riot in Hong Kong in 1967), Taipingyang Shiji Chubanshe, 2000.

² These figures are from *World Development Report*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011 and *Hong Kong Yearbook*, HKSAR Government, 2012.

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