

University breathes new life into North Kowloon Magistracy, Hong Kong Successful public-private co-operation within heritage policy framework

Section 1

In 2009, the Development Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administration (HKSAR) entrusted the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) with conserving and revitalizing the historic North Kowloon Magistracy Building as the home of SCAD Hong Kong, the leading site for the study of digital media in Asia, while honouring the structure's historic and cultural significance.¹

The adaptive re-use of the decommissioned 1960s government building at 292 Tai Po Road as an international university of the arts is a model for successful public-private cooperation under the framework of Hong Kong SAR's policy for retaining and optimizing the value of heritage buildings.²

When the Commissioner for Heritage's Office (CHO) was established in 2008, Mrs Carrie Lam, Secretary for Development, said "In his policy address of 2007, the Chief Executive noted a rising concern for Hong Kong's cultural heritage. Certainly, in recent times, Hong Kong's people have expressed a passion for the city's historic past and its place in our future. Indeed, it is to be expected that a mature and advanced society such as ours should become more aware of its historic legacy, and seek to devote extra resources for its conservation. Many of our buildings have matured alongside us and, like us, may need special attention in later life. This inheritance is something that we should cherish, and in the years ahead we will undertake to devote extra time and effort to heritage conservation and to the revitalisation of our historic buildings."³

As one of the many measures to enhance heritage conservation, the CHO promotes the adaptive re-use of suitable government-owned historic buildings under the Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme (Revitalisation Scheme). The North Kowloon Magistracy building was identified for inclusion in Batch I of the Scheme and proposals were sought to reuse the site as a social enterprise with SCAD Hong Kong's application being successful.

Section 2

The main objectives of the Revitalisation Scheme are to preserve and put the heritage buildings to good and innovative use; to transform them into unique cultural landmarks; to promote active public participation in the conservation of historic buildings and to create job opportunities in particular at the district level.

This project sought to establish a branch campus of SCAD providing 1,500 student places at tertiary level with a view to establishing Hong Kong and the North Kowloon Magistracy as a pre-eminent site for the study of digital media in Asia; offering globally recognised digital media programmes and increasing educational diversity and opportunities to Hong Kong; supplying synergizing power to the development of creative industry in Hong Kong; setting up of a facility to provide important cultural resources to students and new professional opportunities for talents; and benefiting the local community.⁴

Section 3

The CHO invited proposals from non-profit-making organisations (NPOs) to use the site to provide services or run social enterprises. In their applications, NPOs were required to provide detailed plans on how the historic buildings will be preserved and their historical significance brought out effectively, how the social enterprise will be operated in order to

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achieve financial viability and how the local community will benefit. These were assessed by the Advisory Committee on Revitalisation of Historic Buildings (ACRHB), comprising government and non-government experts.⁵

Mr Bernard Chan, Chairman of ACRHB, said that although success in the United States of America would not guarantee success in Hong Kong, SCAD had experience in revitalizing a whole town in the United States of America, recognised by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the American Institute of Architects, the International Downtown Association and others.⁶ SCAD was selected for this capacity, experience and track record in a highly competitive process. It also had a competitive edge in the aspect of financial viability.⁷

The key partners are:

- SCAD Foundation (Hong Kong) Limited, which has spent around \$97 million on completing the project design and renovation work.⁸
- The CHO of the Development Bureau provides a one-stop advisory service to the project leader on heritage conservation, land use and planning, building architecture, and compliance with the Buildings Ordinance.⁹
- Sham Shui Po District Council has provided an important link to the local community and has gained an important international dimension.
- The ACRHB, both government and non-government experts, assessed the applications and advised the government on related matters.
- The Legislative Council (LegCo) monitored progress through regular project updates prepared by the CHO although, as the project's capital and operating costs were shouldered by SCAD Hong Kong, there was no need for seeking funding support from the Finance Committee of LegCo.¹⁰
- Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre cooperating with summer arts programmes and campaigns to students.

SCAD Hong Kong signed a tenancy agreement with the government on the operations of the social enterprise and preservation of the historic building. Because SCAD Hong Kong was launching bachelor's and master's degree programmes, a longer-than-usual tenancy agreement was signed.¹¹

Section 4

Renovation work, which began on 1 December 2009, was completed on 7 July 2010 with classes beginning on 13 September 2010.¹² "The university worked closely with the Development Bureau on this revitalisation project with significant features of the historic building conserved and restored." John Paul Rowan, Vice President of SCAD Hong Kong said.¹³

Chief Executive of the HKSAR, Donald Tsang, said "We were rather, as a government, hesitant [...] in the beginning because building and land assets are perhaps the most valuable things we have in Hong Kong. Turning these assets into something which are not profit-making always scares us a bit but now, I believe we have done something right". He added that SCAD's community programmes would "make Sham Shui Po a very different place. We are rediscovering our own soul, our own spirit in it."¹⁴ The project created 220 jobs during renovation with 147 (full-time) and 67 (part-time) going forward.¹⁵

The Commissioner for Heritage, Ms. Vivian Ko, said “The accolade from UNESCO [...] is indeed a great encouragement to our incessant and dedicated work in heritage conservation in Hong Kong. We hope this award could motivate our community stakeholders to actively participating in our upcoming Batch III revitalisation scheme projects.”¹⁶

Section 5

The SCAD Hong Kong campus project demonstrates the importance of:

- Performance specifications and competition – the government had a plainly stated set of expectations and undertook a formal and transparent selection process, linked to clear policy objectives.
- Maintaining value of public assets – often assets in public hands are actually declining in value through lack of fiscal resources, expertise or management efficiency. The Public Private Partnership (PPP) was structured to enhance this public asset.
- Tapping into innovation from the private sector via the PPP - “SCAD’s vision for the former North Kowloon Magistracy was to honour the structure’s historic and cultural significance while updating it with leading-edge technology to create inspiring learning and teaching spaces [...] Environmentally friendly features such as power efficient lighting systems, state-of-the-art cooling systems and solar reducing technologies were also utilised.” John Paul Rowan said.¹⁷
- Service/tenancy agreements - Government retained the title of the heritage building.
- Building confidence through successful PPPs could lead to the creation of a national trust style citizen movement.

In conclusion, it is recommended that public partners have very clear systems and objectives and that private partners should not be put off by, what might seem to be, complex and lengthy processes.

Section 6

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¹ Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) website www.scad.edu/hong-kong

² Welcome message from Mrs Carrie Lam, Secretary for Development, on website of Commissioner for Heritage's Office <http://www.heritage.gov.hk/en/about/welcome.htm>

³ News from UNESCO Bangkok, 19 December 2011
<http://www.unescobkk.org/news/article/scad-hong-kong-former-north-kowloon-magistracy-building-in-hong-kong-sar-china-receives-the-honou/>

⁴ Batch I of Revitalisation Scheme, Results of Selection, on website of Commissioner for Heritage's Office
http://www.heritage.gov.hk/en/rhbt/ProgressResult_North_Kowloon_Magistracy.htm

⁵ Commissioner for Heritage's Office website <http://www.heritage.gov.hk/en/rhbt/about.htm>

⁶ <http://www.essortment.com/savannah-college-art-design-40280.html>

⁷ Legislative Council Paper No. CB(1)1633/08-09 (Panel on Development Minutes of meeting held on Tuesday, 24 February 2009) <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/dev/minutes/dev20090224.pdf>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Commissioner for Heritage's Office website

¹⁰ Legislative Council Paper No. CB(1)1633/08-09 <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/dev/minutes/dev20090224.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Batch I of Revitalisation Scheme, Updates, on Commissioner for Heritage's Office website
http://www.heritage.gov.hk/en/doc/Progress_on_Batch_I_of_the_Revitalisation_Scheme_Enq.pdf

¹³ @Heritage, 20 September 2011, Commissioner for Heritage's Office
http://www.heritage.gov.hk/tc/doc/devb_cfh_newsletter20_final.pdf

¹⁴ @Heritage, 15 November 2010, Commissioner for Heritage's Office
http://www.heritage.gov.hk/tc/doc/Heritage_Issue_15.pdf

¹⁵ Batch I of Revitalisation Scheme, Updates

¹⁶ @Heritage, 20 September 2011

¹⁷ Ibid

Author profile

Catherine Leonard joined the UK National Trust in 1999, when she was responsible for the Trust's work with overseas heritage groups and managing the European Network of National Heritage Organisations. Catherine now heads the INTO Secretariat and is the strategic lead for the organisation's international co-ordination, including resource management, programme development, communications and relationships with INTO members, other ngos, policy makers and institutions worldwide. Catherine studied languages and literature at university and has spent time living and working abroad. Prior to joining the National Trust, Catherine worked for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. She visited Hong Kong several times in the late 1990s.