Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

Up until a few years ago, it is unlikely that we would be here, at a conference on heritage conservation organized by the Hong Kong Government. The subject was a low priority for the Hong Kong government. And it was simply not a concern for the overwhelming majority of our city’s population.

Today, heritage is a hot issue. And what I would like to do this morning is discuss why that is. What has changed? And what does that change mean?

My simple answer to the question is that the people of Hong Kong have essentially acquired a new way of thinking about themselves, their city and the government. This is not just about heritage conservation. It applies to a whole range of public policy areas. It is a long-term process, and it is still underway, but it explains a lot about new challenges facing the government in particular, and also the business sector and other groups in the community.

So I am going to talk about Hong Kong’s new thinking on heritage. But I want to put this in its broader social, economic and political context.

I will start with a bit of history about Hong Kong – about the times when in fact many of our heritage buildings and monuments were built.

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Modern Hong Kong started in 1841, when the British moved in. They established the colony for one reason, and one reason only – as a base for trade. The military forces in the region and the government in London were in effect being pushed around by what we would nowadays call the business lobby. It was merchants who decided that they needed the colony. The main commodity they traded in the direction of China at
the time was of course opium, which gives you an idea of how much money was at stake, and perhaps how little morality or sentiment the merchants had.

The idea that Hong Kong was only about business was taken for granted. Colonial officials came out here, stayed a few years, and then moved on elsewhere. British and other merchants and traders and financiers came here for a while to make their fortunes before retiring back home. And Chinese and other Asians came in to do business or seek work – to make money. Many Chinese workers moved on later to Southeast Asia, Australia or America. In many cases, during much of the last century, people came to Hong Kong to seek refuge from war, hunger and chaos. One writer called Hong Kong ‘a borrowed place on borrowed time’, and it was true. Few people saw Hong Kong as their own home. Most people were just passing through – although, as we shall see, they did leave behind some interesting architecture.

This lack of permanence was true up to just a few decades ago. Before 1997, and the handover to China, people were looking at an uncertain future. People did not know if they would carry on living here. A lot of people even moved to places like Canada. People worried about making money in the short term, and few people worried about preservation of the city’s history.

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Something very big happened in the heritage area just five years ago, in late 2006. For years, the planners had been working on a project to expand the road network along the northern shore of Hong Kong Island. In particular, they were planning a by-pass around the Central business district. This was the traditional approach. To cope with growing traffic levels, build more roads. To build more roads, reclaim more land from the harbor. In fact, this was to be the last big reclamation in the harbor. Activists and politicians had already got a law passed banning any further big reclamation.

Several buildings on the waterfront needed to go as part of the project. One was the Star Ferry Pier. Obviously, the ferry would have to be relocated if the water around the pier was going to be reclaimed. It was a plain and very basic building with a little clock tower in the middle. It wasn’t air conditioned, and the piers were on wooden stilts. It was built in the 1950s, and it was going to be knocked down like dozens, in fact hundreds, of buildings over the decades.

However, lots of people went for a last look, and to take photos. I took my own kids. The Star Ferry was part of our childhood. And then, when the building was sealed off, the situation became emotional. All sorts of people – but especially younger people –
refused to accept that the building had to go. They occupied the site. They hung banners demanding that the building be preserved. Then they moved a few hundred yards along to another pier, a very basic public facility made of bare concrete in the 1950s. That was Queen’s Pier, and they demanded that it should also be kept. There were hundreds of young activists, camping out, lying in the road to stop the demolition vehicles.

Those activists lost those battles, but I think they scored a much bigger victory. The government had gone through the usual planning process, which included public consultation but did not have a high profile in the media or anything.

The government is like one of those huge oil tankers. It takes a long time to slow down and change direction. So several other projects already in the pipeline were going to run into trouble with public opinion. And existing planning methods were also bound to create problems.

When the Urban Renewal Authority wanted to tear down some dilapidated buildings around Graham Street near the central business district and put up a hotel complex, it was forced to scale down the redevelopment plans. The economic viability of the project suffered as a result, but the local residents had no sympathy: they denounced the Urban Renewal Authority for being uncaring about local communities. The residents in particular wanted to keep a street market – the oldest in Hong Kong – and some old shop houses. The URA agreed to at least preserve the facades. But like the government, the authority was taken by surprise at this opposition.

Something similar happened when the URA wanted to redevelop a row of old-style tenement buildings from the early 1950s. The little street – Wing Lee Street – had just been used to make a touching film about working-class life in the old Hong Kong of the 50s and 60s. Again, it was young people who led the way and forced the URA to back down.

The URA has now changed its approach, and it is actively engaging local communities before drawing up plans. And its work has a new focus on renovation rather than redevelopment – even though this makes far less sense in purely financial terms.

This is a radical change in Hong Kong official culture. The idea that the government might reduce its revenue in exchange for keeping heritage sites – and creating a nicer living environment in general – was an alien concept. Hong Kong, the low-tax, small-
government colony, was founded for business, not to be a nice place for people to live in surrounded by quaint old buildings.

A couple of years ago, the Chief Executive Donald Tsang announced a plan not to redevelop a range of sites in the central business district. They were not architecturally special, or really of great historic interest, but they were parts of people’s childhoods, they were familiar, and in most cases they were low-rise. In the past, they would have become high-rise office or residential towers. Instead, Mr Tsang announced that the buildings would be kept as leisure areas, cultural venues and things like that. Some of his officials supported the idea – in fact one of them had originally proposed it – but others found it hard to understand such a break with traditional thinking.

The private sector is also now under pressure to meet these new public expectations. And, like the public sector, it was taken by surprise by the relatively rapid development of public awareness about heritage sites. One particular project involved a property developer turning the old Marine Police headquarters in Kowloon into a tourist-oriented shopping and hotel complex. By the standards of public opinion a decade before, the plan was fairly sensitive and did a good job of preserving the essential structure and features, which go back as far as the 1880s. But by the time the plan was implemented, it came in for severe criticism, for radical landscaping work and what some critics said was an inappropriate use of an old government building.

As a result of this sort of controversy, officials have now defined several distinct approaches on how to use publicly owned historic buildings.

Commercial use on commercial terms – like a lease to a profit-making company – is not ruled out. But the public is skeptical about letting the private sector, especially real estate companies, use heritage sites to make a profit.

A more acceptable approach to the community is to pass management of a site to a non-profit but self-sufficient organization which is involved in a socially valuable activity. In my role as Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Revitalizing Historic Buildings, I have been involved in some interesting examples. One is the North Kowloon Magistracy, a neo-classical structure built in 1960. We recommended that it be used to accommodate a campus of the Savannah College of Art and Design. That’s an American institution, and certain local cultural groups were unhappy that they didn’t get the building. One thing I have found with heritage preservation is that whatever you do, you can never please everyone.
We have done some interesting things with old colonial police stations, which are typically two-story buildings with verandas and wooden floorboards. One at Tai O, which overlooks the sea in a remote area, will become a small boutique hotel. Again, this was controversial, as the non-profit foundation concerned has links with a development company. But we were satisfied their proposal was genuine. Another police station at Tai Po is being turned into a “green hub” to promote sustainable living. That will be run by the Kadoorie Farm, a local charity.

We have even found a use for an old 1954 public housing estate block – Mei Ho House in Shamshuipo. The early public housing in Hong Kong was very basic. It was designed to rehouse refugee families who were in illegal shantytowns. Life was harsh in those days, but these places are a key part of the city’s collective memory. It was the start of social intervention by the government. And it was the beginning of the transformation of Hong Kong from poverty to prosperity. Mei Ho House is to become a youth hostel.

These examples are all self-funding and non-profit. A third option is simply to allow an NGO or other non-profit group to use a site – assuming that the public funding can be arranged. Typically, this usually applies to small-scale premises.

The government has also taken a fourth approach, and that is to let a qualified non-profit group take over the whole rejuvenation project with its own funding. The main example of this is the old Police Headquarters and Victoria Prison above Central, which the Hong Kong Jockey Club will turn into a part-commercial, part-cultural complex.

I think it is fair to say that the government’s more positive approach to preserving old public buildings has encouraged activists to propose more and more conservation. The latest controversy is over the West Wing of the old government headquarters near the central business district. The 1950s office block does not really have much architectural value. However, opponents of redevelopment are arguing that it is part of a larger “cultural landscape” in the surrounding area known as Government Hill. They are arguing that as a whole it represents a special part of our historical, political and social heritage. They are quoting UNESCO guidelines to support them, and generally keeping our officials on their toes.

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Privately owned historic buildings are much harder to deal with. Public opinion is just as strong – if not stronger – about some of these sites as about the publicly owned
ones. A government planning to knock down an old public building is seen as bureaucratic, or maybe favouring the property developers. But a person or company wanting to redevelop an old private property down is seen as greedy.

There have been several high-profile examples of this problem in recent years.

One was Kom Tong Hall in the Mid-Levels, a large family home built in 1914. In recent decades it was owned by the Mormon Church, and around 10 years ago they wanted to redevelop it. This was one of the earlier cases where public opinion had a major influence. Being a Church, perhaps, the owners found it hard to go against their neighbours and the wider community, so they agreed to do a deal in 2004, and the government bought the building, and it is now a small museum.

That was a nice simple case. Another, much tougher one, was a 1930s family home called King Yin Lei, overlooking Happy Valley. This is a mansion in the style known as Chinese Renaissance, combining Western building techniques with traditional Chinese features like curled roofs. The government initially refused to intervene in 2004 when it looked like the owner wanted to redevelop it. Then in 2007 there was an outcry when workers arrived and began to demolish the structure. The government then ordered the work to stop. Eventually, the government gave the owners an adjacent lot of land which they could develop. The place has now been restored. We are now inviting the public to come forward with proposals on how the structure can be used.

A more recent case involves another Chinese Renaissance structure: Ho Tung Gardens on the Peak. This is actually still owned by a member of the original family who built it back in the 1920s. She planned to redevelop, and several months ago the government anticipated public opinion and declared the building a monument – therefore protected. The owner is essentially refusing a land swap, arguing that her ancestral home’s location is important to her. It is thought that in order to compensate her fully for the possible profits from redevelopment, the government would have to pay out an incredible three billion Hong Kong dollars. Nearly half a billion US dollars. To put it in context it’s nearly 10% of Hong Kong’s entire annual public health care budget.

That case is still being negotiated between the government and the owner. If the negotiations are not successful, the case could end up in court.

The key thing is that officials have made a lot of progress in adapting to new public expectations. Like them, my colleagues and I on the Advisory Committee on
Revitalizing Historic Buildings and the Antiquities Advisory Board are learning as we go along – especially with the revitalization projects. We are experimenting, and maybe some cases could have been handled better, but on the whole I think we are setting some good precedents for the future.

Two challenges lie ahead, especially where privately owned heritage sites are concerned. One is the lack of a consistent official procedure or strategy. As you can see, the government is approaching privately-owned heritage sites on a case-by-case basis. This has prompted calls for a more systematic framework to be adopted. With the current administration ending in the middle of next year, this is something the community needs to address later on.

The second is the way we as a community think about land and space. Land values in Hong Kong are in many ways inflated artificially by traditional government policy. The government ultimately owns all the land and uses it as a revenue source. It therefore keeps tight control of land supply and development opportunities. At the same time, there is an assumption in Hong Kong that redevelopment rights and property rights are the same thing. This system can give the owners of historic structures massive financial incentives to redevelop, and it makes compensation for them far more expensive. This is all also linked with bigger debates about building densities, the cost of housing, planning and overall quality of life.

And that brings us back to my opening remarks.

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Public opinion has been changing fast on the issue of heritage preservation. The government has been struggling to keep pace with this change. Activists are very critical of our officials because of this.

My own view is that our officials deserve a bit of sympathy and understanding. This is part of a social as well as a political shift that is taking place in Hong Kong. The city, as I say, was founded for business. The old colonial governments existed to manage a port and trading center – not a hometown for people to live in and be a part of. Certainly, the old colonial officials weren’t thinking of living and retiring here, and that way of thinking continued, not just in government but among much of the population within the last few decades.

Now the handover in 1997 has come and gone. We have been through the Asian financial crisis, the SARS outbreak, and the recent financial crisis – and we life goes
on. Many of the people who went to Canada in the 1980s and 90s have come back. The future of the world increasingly lies here in Asia. This is a city where people expect to grow up and have their careers and families. And new people are coming to live here – indeed, many of the heritage activists in Hong Kong, along with the young, are people from the West.

So our senior officials, who were all trained in colonial times, are not just struggling to keep up with a change in public mood about heritage conservation. They are having to adapt to a shift in the whole relationship between the Hong Kong people and their city and its government. Their willingness to adopt new ways of thinking about heritage is a sign of a bigger, and I think very positive, step forward in accountability to the community. As the next generation rises in business, politics, civil society and government, I believe this trend will continue.

Thank you all very much.