

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Central Government Offices (CGO) were built in three distinct phases in the 1950s. The buildings were purpose designed as offices for government departments and have remained in this use from their completion to the present. The offices will be vacated once the new Tamar building is completed. This study considers the architectural and historic significance of this group of buildings and makes some recommendations as to the future once they cease to be used as Government offices.

The three phases of the building each have a distinct architectural style. The first to be built was the East Wing which was completed in 1954; the second phase was the Central Wing completed in 1956; the third phase was the West Wing completed in 1959. The Central Wing is judged to be the most interesting architecturally and it is probably also the most significant in historic terms. This building originally had the Legislative Council Chamber in a fan shaped building attached to the north side of the wing. This was demolished in the late 1980s to make way for an extension to the wing which was carried out in an almost exact copy of the original section of the building. The East Wing is also an elegant building which marks a transition from a classical Beaux Arts towards a more modern functionalist style. The West Wing, much the largest of the three elements is judged to be the least successful architecturally. This is a strictly functionalist building with a heavy concrete framed grid across its elevations. It is seven stories high across the centre of the site but drops away to give a thirteen storey height at the west end where it fronts Ice House Street.

All three buildings appear to be the work of the government architects in the Public Works Department and it does not appear to be possible to attribute with any certainty the work to particular individuals. All three wings have been altered a good deal since their original design. All the Wings had an upper floor added in the 1960s and the Central Wing had the major extension to the north in 1989. The West Wing has a new entrance suite on its east front added in 1998. Internally, changes have been made on more than one occasion to the plan layouts and to the fixtures, fittings and finishes. There is little that remains inside these buildings which can be seen as highly significant.

The site itself and the history associated with it is seen as being as significant, possibly more significant than the buildings. This area of Hong Kong has been associated with government since the foundation of the Colony. Government offices are marked on the site in the plans dated 1845 and a larger set of offices was built in 1847-48, which remained in use until they were demolished to make way for the present offices. The presence of Government House and the other historic buildings (The Cathedral and The Old French Mission) also add interest and significance to the site.

These buildings were deliberately designed in the 1950s as low rise to preserve the view of the harbour from Government House. This view may have long since disappeared but the low rise buildings and the trees combine with the other well wooded areas (Government House garden, the Botanic Gardens and Hong Kong Park) to give a large green space in an otherwise heavily developed part of the city. This is something to be maintained in any future development of the site and it is suggested that there might be a "Special Protected Area" in planning terms so that the significance of the low rise well wooded nature of this area is considered when any future applications are considered.

The main conclusions from the study are that that Central and East Wings should be retained but that the West Wing is of lower value and could be demolished for redevelopment. The most difficult aspect of the retained buildings will be to find a beneficial use that is appropriate with the serious nature of the current government use. It would seem to be very undesirable to have commercial use which demeaned the historic and current function of the building and site. There should be no significant concerns over major internal alterations to suit a new use but the exterior of the buildings should be respected as far as possible.

If the West Wing is to be demolished and redeveloped the new development should generally respect the footprint and height of the existing building. The exception to this might be at the west end of the site where a higher rise building could perhaps be considered.

The site was much more accessible to the public until 1997 when the current security fencing was erected. It would be very desirable, when considering any new use, to allow public access across and around the site once more. One radical suggestion would be to remove much of the vehicular access and landscape the area as a public garden as a continuation of the Cathedral Gardens. If some or all of the West Wing is demolished it might be possible to extend the garden over a wider area to provide a green link between Battery Path and the Government House Gardens.

The document ends with a series of "Recommendations". These could readily be converted into "Conservation Policies" if it was thought appropriate to provide such guidance to the future development of the site.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT OFFICES

Historic and Architectural Appraisal

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