



DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

Should public money be used to preserve Hong Kong's heritage buildings? **Discuss.**



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CONSIDERING THE PRESSURE TO PROVIDE THE BASIC NEEDS of homes for Hong Kong residents, one would think this subject would require little discussion. The immediate answer would be housing. The bottom line says that new construction is more cost efficient than preserving, and vertical growth creates more usable space in a sustainable manner. The act of preserving heritage architecture consumes precious public money and rarely does an old building find a suitable new use.

The need for housing and the response of government to provide this service has a record of improvements that stretch back more than 60 years and today, most residents receive housing assistance of some sort. Supporting the primacy of housing in this debate is the political pressure placed on districts and planners to meet the needs of constituents and developers, and with the growing increase in the number of elderly residents, the need is compounded. Immigration further adds to the story. How else could a city maintain its international ranking if it cannot provide the basic service of shelter for the many members of the community needed to support its corporate and service industries?

Public safety also plays into the debate, as many of the ageing shophouses that are so prevalent in urban south-east Asia and early public housing units are now past their lifespan and may be hazardous environments for both residents and pedestrians.

Heritage buildings might provide diversity in style, richness of environment and cultural enjoyment, but who will receive the greatest benefit of these efforts – working residents or tourists?

The RICS International Heritage Conservation Conference takes place in Hong Kong on 9 January 2015. For more information, and to book your place, go to ricsasia-conference.org

STEPPING INTO DIFFERENT SHOES

In an exercise to better understand the subject, heritage preservation specialist Bob Dickensheets argues for a side he does not fully support



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HERITAGE HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN CREATING and maintaining a vibrant and viable urban future. City planners and developers are slowly realising that historic buildings and neighbourhoods have indisputable intrinsic value as places where people want to spend time and will spend money. Historic buildings have unique architectural features, while historic neighbourhoods have a human dimension where residents, businesses and shops co-exist. There's a vibrancy that is difficult to replicate and so often lost in skyscraper cities.

Preserving heritage and injecting it with new life also has an important socio-economic function: to ensure the character of a city and its collective memory stays alive. This was the reason the Singaporean government abandoned its urban renewal policy in the 1990s – it recognised that residents felt a loss of cultural identity living in high-rise flats and business travellers complained that the city looked just like any other. The government invested in regenerating some of the older districts and the city centre again became an attractive place to live, work and play. People started spending money, and soon after the tourism dollars returned.

Preserving heritage buildings is often perceived as financially unfeasible. This may be true if one looks at the short-term viability of renovating an old building versus demolition and new construction, especially in Hong Kong's competitive real estate market. However, if one looks at the variety of long-term benefits of revitalising historic neighbourhoods, rather than individual real estate assets, the economics of heritage start to make sense.