

SHA's speech at Construction Industry Institute - HK 2006 Conference (English only)

Following is a speech by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Dr Patrick Ho, at the Construction Industry Institute - Hong Kong 2006 Conference on "Ageing Building - Threat or Opportunity" today (November 21):

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The problem of ageing buildings is one that, sooner or later, confronts every society. In an orderly historical progression, it is constantly manifesting itself in an ever-present cycle of decay and renewal, of obsolescence and replacement.

In our case the problem is greatly magnified by the fact that we are now reaping the effects of the huge upsurge of population that Hong Kong confronted in the post-war years. To accommodate a veritable tidal wave of immigration, especially marked in the fifties, both the Government and private developers erected residential blocks and tenements as fast as resources would allow.

Inevitably, because of the scale of the demand and the compelling time constraints, sheer expediency became the paramount driving force. We had to build against the clock. Luxury was not an option. Functional, utilitarian considerations took priority.

Today, half a century later, that building boom has effectively come home to roost, providing us with the bulk of our ageing buildings and compelling us to examine what we can do about them. But bear in mind that what may seem a typical eyesore today was home, in its time, to many who grew up in its confines.

We must remember - and I suggest that we remember it with pride - that the majority of our population, as I and my parents did, once lived in crowded tenement buildings and resettlement blocks. Within that matrix was laid the seeds of the community we know today; a community that grew in strength and vigour precisely because of the enforced proximity imposed upon it by those constraints of urgency and sheer lack of space.

Something of the spirit of those times was captured in the Shaw Brothers movie *The House of the 72 Tenants*, widely acknowledged to be a classic of Cantonese-language cinema. It knitted together the many tales of a group of families herded together by chance

in just such an environment, and forced to find a *modus vivendi* that would allow them to live in harmony and mutual cooperation.

Because of the nostalgia this film evoked among cinemagoers who had been through precisely that experience, it proved so popular, when released in 1973, that it even broke box office records set by legendary screen icon Bruce Lee. It changed public perception of Cantonese language films and became a landmark film of Hong Kong cinematic history.

In much the same way, the ageing buildings that our present generation has inherited are landmarks of the way we were; the milestones along the road we travelled to where we are now. Well might we ask ourselves, "If these stones could speak, what would they tell us?"

I suggest they would tell us tales of hardship endured, of obstacles overcome, of the perseverance that prompted our endeavours and paved the way to our success.

So when we look at ageing buildings, we are looking at more than the outward material evidence of deterioration and decay. We should also be conscious of the fact that - to a very large extent - these buildings shaped our lives.

It is not my intention to sound an emotional appeal for widespread preservation. I am not persuaded by those environmentalists prone to insist that we must preserve every building simply because they are old.

Apart from being prohibitively expensive, such a course would be totally impractical. Hong Kong has become something of a byword for its forward momentum, for its willingness to embrace change and to move on.

However compelling the siren call of nostalgia, of what Marcel Proust called "In search of lost times", we cannot afford to stand still. We may figure large in global consciousness, but we occupy a very small place on the world Atlas. Ours is a crowded, compact community, where every square metre of space is valued far beyond whatever scale may apply elsewhere.

Hence we have to look at our legacy of ageing buildings with calculating and discerning eyes. We have to analyse very carefully what may be worth preserving and whether it is indeed practicable to preserve it. We cannot afford to turn our city into a museum of past glories. The greater necessity is to keep it always at the forefront, as a

showcase of future potential.

In their way, and in their time, today's ageing buildings were at the forefront of a similar momentum, to transform Hong Kong from a sleepy entrepot of the China trade into one of the manufacturing marvels of Asia. They served their purpose and have now surrendered to the fresh imperatives of a new millennium.

Their obsolescence is intrinsic to the pattern of our evolution. We could not be where we are had we stayed where we were.

So to those of us who meet here today, to discuss what should be done about the threats and opportunities presented by our ageing buildings, I would say this: "Spare the time to look beyond the fabric, at what it represents. Remember that within this matrix developed our very culture and identity. Consider how to preserve the spirit and the essence, if not the vessel itself".

We have to think hard about how far we can go to preserve our heritage within the context of what we seek to be. We have to determine how best to ensure that what we preserve remains of value to our present needs, and does not become a mere sterile monument to our past.

Our past and present are our yin and yang. The yin is our past, the darker element; sad, passive, dark, feminine, downward-looking and corresponding to night. The yang is the brighter element; vigorous, active, masculine, upward-seeking and corresponding to day.

We need both, yes, but with a sense of proportion. We have to get the balance right.

Ladies and Gentlemen, if by now, you are still wondering why the Secretary for Home Affairs is speaking on housing problem, and why building management falls within the remit of policy portfolio of the Home Affairs Bureau, let me take this opportunity to emphasise that building management in Hong Kong has every thing to do with public governance and community building. In working towards a harmonious society, we have to understand that the basic unit in building our community is the family. Hong Kong is made up of over 2 million families, the great majority of which resides in buildings. Tens and hundreds of these families made up a building; a number of these buildings constitute an "area", and a number of these "areas" become a district; and 18 districts become Hong Kong.

It is imperative that families living together in a building each contributes to the welfare of the common good and participates in the management of cogent issues of common concern. It is in keeping with this spirit of community building and the exercise of good public governance that this Secretary for Home Affairs wishes to promote the concept of contemporary building management beyond the boundaries of the buildings, and indeed into our community.

To conclude, let me reiterate the theme of this conference, "Ageing Building - Threat or Opportunity" underlines the importance of the cultural dimensions of ageing buildings and how modern building should embody the very essence and legacy of our heritage and values as beheld and manifested by these buildings: good citizenship, effective public governance, and the spirit of building a harmonious community for Hong Kong.

Thank you very much.

Ends/Tuesday, November 21, 2006

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