

- 2.4 The proposed office/commercial building is then presented as 'following the recommendations in the Appraisal'. This includes the provision of an enlarged public open space in the area.
- 2.5 Four design emphasis were discussed :-
- (a) More Greenery : creation of an area of about 6,800sm of public open space which is similar in size to Statue Square;
  - (b) Better Pedestrian Connectivity : new footbridge connections and paths would improve accessibility to the new open space and office building;
  - (c) Preserve Heritage Precinct : The site is surrounded by declared monuments and other heritage buildings and features, and the future POS would enhance the setting for these buildings, and
  - (d) Compatible Building Design : the height and bulk of the building will be set at 150mPD in relation to the existing office buildings in the area.
- 2.6 There was no discussion of alternatives in terms of design options, uses or means of implementation. The Paper proposed that the site would be rezoned from "Government Institution / Community" (GIC) to "Comprehensive Development Area" (CDA) and a formal request to rezone the site would be presented after the public consultation on the proposal had been completed. A copy of the Planning Department's plan indicating the proposed rezoning area is included as **Figure 1**.

*Town Planning Board's Comments*

- 2.7 The Minutes of the 969 Town Planning Board Meeting record the presentation by Government officials and the comments from the Board Members. Comments, in summary, included :-
- (a) Many members supported the provision of a significant amount of public open space on the site and that should be carefully integrated with the other open areas in the vicinity;
  - (b) There was concern from the Members on the traffic generated from the proposed office/commercial building as the area was already very congested;
  - (c) There was concern over whether the project should be a public one or implemented by the private sector. There was concern that the objectives of the project need to be carefully defined if it was to be undertaken by the private sector;
  - (d) Pedestrian connectivity to the surrounding areas was considered very important;
  - (e) A few members considered that the West Wing was of low architectural merit and demolition of it for new uses of greater public benefits was supported;
  - (f) There was an acute shortage of Grade A office space and the proposed office space was supported;
  - (g) The representation in the brochure appeared to be exaggerated in relation to the greening of the façade and the Ice House Street widening.



### **3. Purpose and Reason for this Application**

3.1 This application has been submitted jointly on behalf of several NGO's who are concerned that the process being undertaken by the Government is not in the best long term interests of the public. The main concerns are :-

- (a) That the conservation of the CGO compound is being subverted by the introduction of a new office building which is inappropriate for the site;
- (b) The consultation undertaken by the Government is inadequate as many issues were not mentioned and there were wide public concerns which have not been considered in the presentation to the TPB;
- (c) The approach taken by the Government for the implementation of the proposed development is incompatible with the conservation objectives for the site as identified by the Heritage Consultants;
- (d) The fundamental issue of selling off public land with high heritage value has not been addressed or justified; and
- (e) Should the TPB follow the approach outlined by the Government then it would be inconsistent with the way it has dealt with other GI/C sites regarding building heights and the need to provide areas of low rise contrasts with the high rise environment of the city.

3.2 The controls currently contained within the planning parameters on the Outline Zoning Plan are not strong enough to ensure that the Town Planning Board has adequate power to ensure that the most appropriate form of conservation is achieved on this site. It is therefore necessary to propose changes to the Outline Zoning Plan to ensure that these are put in place.

### **4. Planning Context**

4.1 The site is zoned "GI/C" on the Central Outline Zoning Plan Number S/H4/13. The Notes to the Zone include a statement of Planning Intent. The existing zoning represents the existing use of the site as the Central Government Offices.

4.2 It is considered appropriate that the zoning and planning intention for the site be reconsidered at this time as the administration prepares to move into its new offices in Tamar. In this respect the following factors should be properly considered:-

- (a) Heritage Context and Conservation,
- (b) Possible Future Use of the Site,
- (c) Public or Private Ownership and Implementation,
- (d) Traffic Implications

### **5. Heritage Context : The Heritage Assessment and Conservation Policies for the Site.**

5.1 The Town Planning Board Paper simplified an important discussion on the heritage and architectural importance of the CGO site and buildings and the issue of future use into a statement that the West Wing may be demolished. It then proceeded to assume that demolition was the only option and that sale of part of the site for office development was the only way forward.

- 5.2 The following quotations from the Purcell Miller Tritton “Historic and Architectural Appraisal” (the Appraisal) are relevant to the broad discussion which took place, and the qualifications and observations that were made, in reaching the conclusion that for architectural reasons, why the West Wing was the least important building on the site (emphasis added). However, the importance of the site as a whole, and the site in the surrounding context, point to a need for a more cautious consideration of the way forward.

#### “4.4 Historic Use

Government Hill has been described as “perhaps Hong Kong’s last remaining heritage precinct (Wordie). It is a rare collection of historic buildings in central Hong Kong that has always been in governmental uses. Once the government move to their new site in 2011, there will be a risk that all reminders of the former use of the CGO disappear.

#### 4.5 Future Uses and Potential Development

Perhaps the most important question to be settled is whether any new development should be permitted on the site and if so how much and where should this take place.

There is little doubt that it is feasible to reuse the existing buildings. The buildings are generally in good condition and conversion to another use is a feasible and practical proposition that could be achieved relatively easily were the right use to be found. There would be no need for wholesale repairs, or doubts as to whether conversion would be viable because of the poor state of the buildings and the need for major repairs.

However, the nature of the buildings places some restrictions on what uses could be contained within them. Plans are shallow, with relatively small cellular internal spaces, although some flexibility is available...

Uses that are suitable for the site and buildings include:-

Public Library; this could conceivably be accommodated within the buildings; the original accommodation actually included several libraries for government departments. However, an extensive public library is already available at nearby City Hall.

Educational Institution; it is possible that such a use could be accommodated within the buildings, although the incorporation of larger spaces such as lecture theatres could be problematic.

Commercial Office; the buildings could continue in this function. However, it is worth noting that the office spaces within the buildings are somewhat outdated, lacking the necessary servicing and features such as access floors. The building framework is robust and with a major refit the building could be converted for modern office use. The main question here would be the suitability of any tenant given the historic and cultural significance of the buildings. A straight forward commercial use would lose much of the significance of the site. A more appropriate use might be to let the building to an appropriate NGO – however, it seems unlikely that any local NGO would require even a modest proportion of the available space.

- 5.3 The following observations were made in relation to the rezoning of the site:-

“There will, of course, be the possibility of having the site rezoned once the Government departments have moved to the new Tamar Building. Re-zoning, however, is really only a technicality and finding a use which is appropriate in terms of significance will be the major challenge. Ideally it wants to be some sort of public facility – in whole or in part. This would allow for free access around the exterior of the building, as well as internal space for appropriate education and interpretative facilities.

If this could be achieved the site could perhaps be made to work in conjunction with the Sheung Kung Hui complex and the Central Police Station as three significant sites that demonstrate the development of all facets of Hong Kong.

The question must, therefore, be addressed as to whether these buildings are so significant that they must all be retained or whether there is scope for some or all the buildings to be demolished to allow the site to be redeveloped.

#### 5.4 The Appraisal made various observations on the arguments for redevelopment:-

“Perhaps the most convincing lines of argument for redevelopment are:

- (i) that Government has an obligation to maximize the potential value of any site and the best way to do this is by permitting redevelopment

and

- (ii) that it may inevitably be very difficult to find a use for the buildings which is both commercially viable and respects the historic significance of the site. The demolition of some or all of the buildings and the sensitive redevelopment of the site may be favourable to the buildings being used inappropriately. This should only be considered as a course of action when all other avenues for suitable reuse have been explored. Given the significance and architectural quality of the building such an outcome would be a cause of serious regret.

The arguments against redevelopment are, of course, primarily to do with the architectural quality of the building and its significance in cultural, political and historic terms. A compromise will be to keep some parts of the complex and demolish others. As has been seen from this study the quality of the different parts of the complex is uneven.

The Central Block and the East Wing being of a higher architectural quality (at least as far as the exterior of the building is concerned) than the West Wing. A good case can be made for keeping the Central and East Wings but for the demolition of the West Wing.

The question must then be faced as to what form of redevelopment would be permitted – would a high rise building be appropriate on this site? When the CGO complex was designed the height of the building was determined by the desire to preserve the view of the harbour from Government House. The view has, of course, long since disappeared but the low rise buildings and surrounding open space have taken on a wider significance.

The CGO site forms a part of a much wider open area which runs from Hong Kong Park in the east to the Sheng Kung Hui site in the west and from the Battery Path in the north through the CGO site, the Government House Gardens and the Botanical Gardens to the south. This now forms a very green space with very little high rise building. It would be undesirable to see a high rise building over the majority of the CGO site as it would encroach into this ‘low rise green area’ and would also be undesirably close to Government House.

The area of the site where some high rise development could most easily be accepted would be at the west end of the site where the thirteen storey block sits on the corner of Ice House Street and Queens Road. Development along the ‘foot’ of the ‘L’ shape of the West Wing, which is at the lower end of Ice House Street, could also be considered. There is already high rise development on the opposite sides of the road.

The possibility of creating some new public garden space on the site is interesting. This idea was discussed in the 1980s – demolishing some of the buildings and creating a new garden space and some low density commercial buildings. Any commercial development now seems to be inappropriate but a new public garden in the place of the bulk of the West

Wing would be a fine resource for this central area of Hong Kong. Such a garden could reclaim the main forecourt as a route across the site and over the wider area a newly planted garden would cement the green space of Government House Garden with the trees on Battery Path.”

5.5 The relevant discussion of recommendations arising from the Appraisal is as follows:-

“Conclusions and Recommendations

- The buildings are of a high architectural quality and are exemplars of the beginning of modern office design in Hong Kong and of 1950s architecture generally.
- The Central Wing is the best piece of architecture of the group and the East Wing is also a good piece of architecture. The more functionalist West Wing is the least good piece of architectural design out of the three.
- The site itself is arguably of higher significance than the buildings. This has been the seat of Government since the foundation of Hong Kong as an independent colony. This is the site of the earlier Government offices (demolished to allow the CGO to be constructed) and is closely related to Government House and to the Murray Building.
- The significance of the site is enhanced by the other adjacent buildings – the Cathedral, the Old French Mission Building and Government House.
- The potential significance of the site is further enhanced by the historic sites in the wider area; Hong Kong Park (the former site of the Military), Sheng Kung Hui (the site of the church) and the Central Police Station (the site of Law and Order). These sites, taken in conjunction, offer very interesting opportunities for the interpretation of the history of the development of Hong Kong.
- The low rise nature of the site and the open spaces and trees around the buildings are significant. The buildings, in conjunction with the surrounding sites (Government House Gardens, Botanical Gardens, Hong Kong Park, Battery Path and the Sheng Kung Hui site) make up a large, low rise, green area in the heart of this otherwise dense highly developed part of the city. Any new development should respect the low rise of the existing buildings and open space around them.
- It is suggested that there might be a case for making all the low rise and well planted area into a ‘Special Protected Area’ where the presumption would be against any significant redevelopment work.
- The buildings are well maintained and in good condition. They can continue to be used once the Government Office move out – though the standard of servicing in some areas will be low compared with a modern office block.

The conclusion that is drawn from these headline issues is that the Central Wing and East Wing should if possible be retained and should be internally altered to fit some appropriate new use. The West Wing may be demolished.

If the West Wing site is cleared any new development should either respect the footprint and height of the existing buildings or should be restricted to the western edge of the site where a more high rise development would be possible on the corner of Ice House Street and Queen’s Road Central. This would comprise the area occupied by the ‘foot’ of the ‘L’ shape West Wing in this area.”

## **General Building Recommendations**

- 5.1.1 Consideration should be given to creating a 'Special Protected Area' to acknowledge the well wooded spaces and low rise buildings in the Hong Kong Park, Botanic Gardens, Government House Gardens, the CGO site, the garden between the Cathedral and French Mission building, the Battery Path area and the Sheng Kung Hui site.**

### ***Purpose of the recommendation***

*One of the main reasons why the CGO are significant is because they are part of a large open green space made up of the above sites, which are within the centre of an urban area. A 'Special Protected Area' would be a tool which could be used to protect this area from inappropriate development. The area also encompasses several significant historic buildings that are Declared Monuments and which would also benefit from the retention of this open space. The designation of the area would recognise the importance of the individual historic buildings and also highlight the historic nature of Government Hill, as well as recognising the significance of the green space.*

- 5.2.1 The Central and East Wings should be retained and should be converted to some appropriate new use while the majority or the entire West Wing could be demolished.**

### ***Purpose of the recommendation***

*The CGO buildings are an interesting and relatively well preserved example of Functional architecture of the 1950s. The most interesting building architecturally is the Central Wing which embodies this style and demonstrates an attention to detail. The East Wing is also an interesting piece of architecture showing a transition from the beaux arts style to the functionalism of the Central Wing and includes some attractive details. The West Wing is the least interesting building being fairly utilitarian in nature. The West Wing is the least significant of the Wings and if any demolition is to be considered this would be the most acceptable building to demolish.*

- 5.2.2 If the West Wing is demolished the part of the site that could be redeveloped is the west end on the corner of Ice House Street, with the new development occupying the area of the existing building that faces onto Ice House Street. Any new development of a building higher than the present West Wing should be contained at this west end of the site.**

### ***Purpose of the recommendation***

*It is desirable to maintain and enhance the open green nature of the CGO complex and surrounding area and therefore a tall building covering something similar to the current ground plan of the West Wing would have a negative impact on the current setting, blocking out light and overlooking Government House as well as the remaining Central and East Wings. Towards the west end of the site there is some capacity for a new building, given that this is at the very edge of the open area. The steep slope of the ground at this point also enables a new building to incorporate more floors with less impact on the surroundings.*