

A little more time won't hurt

No matter on which side of the Tsimshatsui tower you queue up, it should be fairly obvious that there have been a lot of unilateral decisions made in connection with the Kowloon Canton Railway buildings - and that the decision to get rid of them was railroaded through.

The exchange of letters between the Hongkong Heritage Society and the Urban Council, the contemptuous way in which the society's views have been dismissed and the reluctance by elements in Urbco and the Public Works Department to provide information clearly illustrate this.

As a last resort the Heritage Society has presented a comprehensive petition to the Governor, Sir Murray MacLehose, which we published in full yesterday.

Sir Murray has already made his decision but the society believes that the plans for the Cultural Complex are not so far advanced that they cannot be altered. The society wants a stay of execution and has pleaded that the KCR buildings be made the subject of a comprehensive conservation order.

As we have said before, we have serious doubts about the wisdom of keeping the railway buildings or even the clock tower. It is a group of tired, grubby old buildings which we feel have no place in the Cultural Complex setup.

It is all very well to talk about the "warm red brick" of the buildings, as one admirer has. But let's face it, the clock tower is no leaning tower of Pisa and its facade has little, if any, architectural merit.

However, there appears to be considerable public sentiment for the buildings and it is highly debatable whether this has been given adequate attention.

Because of the unsatisfactory handling of many of the issues relating to the Tsimshatsui buildings we cannot see how any harm can be done if the Governor at least delays demolition and the matter is reviewed, if only to clear the air.

Of more concern, we feel, are the proposals for the future use of the Victoria Barracks land, one of Hongkong's most beautiful sites.

It is no secret that many of our top developers have cast covetous eyes on the land and members of the Hongkong branch of the Royal Town Planning Institute who have visited the area say the proposed layout "has been largely determined by interests other than quality environment."

They point out that although the public was invited to comment on the proposals by the barracks' planning committee less than one per cent of the population was able to view the land. So how can public opinion be properly gauged?

Of course it may be argued that the average man in the street would not be able to properly envisage the scheme so there would be little point to opening the barracks to all and sundry. However, it is the layman who will be using the parks and his views should be encouraged. And he could conceivably see something which the experts have missed.

The deadline for comments on the proposals closed earlier this week. Although full details have yet to be released, we believe that there have been several objections to the plans.

These should be heard. It is, perhaps, too much to expect that all the 41 acres available will become an unrelieved green belt. But there must be a better way of carving it up - so that the community, not the developer, benefits.