

S. C. M. P.

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A message and ray of hope

DESPITE the current controversy over the pros and cons of the Antiquities and Monuments Board, the Government is deserving of praise over their first step in the right direction to preserve the past - the plans to refurbish Observatory Tower on Blackhead Hill.

Surely there is both a message and a ray of hope here for all who are in any way committed not only to seeing some of old Hongkong remains, but to seeing it continues to play a useful role in a community well blessed with material assets and in many cases wealth, but still sadly lacking in aesthetic assets that contribute to the quality of life.

That the Government at last appears to recognise that some people at least do care about the past as well as the present and the future, instead of simply making another dollar, augurs well for the Hongkong Club and other valuable links with our past.

Sadly, the Heritage Society seems silent, but surely here is the key to what could in time save the KCR Station - and not just the clock tower - and see both continue to play an important part as a community asset.

Despite the many obstacles, excuses and, on occasions, even deceptions by the Government and, in particular, by the Urban Council, put in the path of what in the main appears to be a genuine attempt by the Heritage Society to preserve this asset, the fact that the building and tower still stand must be of significance and hope.

At a time when not only is the housing shortage again acute, but when Hongkong's newly recognised economy balancer, tourism, clearly needs all the drawcards it can get to continue its remarkable growth, the fact that this building stands empty and unused is nothing short of criminal.

As regular overseas travellers know, many tourist departments are currently both attracting and retaining visitors longer with diverse attractions such as arts and crafts or handicraft centres and in places in the region the trend seems to be to attract business visitors for meetings and conventions supported by

impressive new centres and facilities.

It is sad that for an industry which apparently contributed over \$4 billion last year, non-commercial crafts and convention centres are not government-financed at least in part - for it is the Government who ultimately appear to reap the benefit of the tourist spending.

And where better to locate such facilities - other cities have shown that they can be combined successfully under the same roof - than in an already constructed prime site, easily accessible and government-owned building, the KCR station?

A meetings facility on Kowloon side which, like the Arts Centre has provided on occasions for Island residents, can be utilised by all sections and interests in the community as well as for visitors, would be as much of a public asset as would a really good handicrafts centre be a diversified drawcard for visitors and residents alike.

What better way to complement the futuristic community appeal and benefit of a planetarium than a centre which preserves the crafts, skills and cultures of the past? I would suggest that our children would benefit just as much from exposure to the latter and if it increases tourist spending, then all the better for all of us.

Intelligent and total community use of the entire KCR building, in harmony with the progressive plans for the other part of the site, could do much for Hongkong - not only as a tourist venue where there truly are attractions to encourage visitors to come and to stay longer, but for Hongkong as a community which provides for its people.

Even in the helter skelter of "progress" there is always time and the chance to reconsider. If His Excellency's first major move after the extension of his term is the wise use of CR 55 for the benefit of the total community, then perhaps if Mr Sales and other arch opponents of retaining any part of the KCR building can be as foresighted and as flexible, the total community really can benefit in this aspect too.

GARY R. ROSS