

A Study on
Historical and Architectural Context
of
Central Market



The Hong Kong Institute of Architects

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1.0 The History of the Central Market

The historical significance of Central Market may better be understood by first examining the early history of its predecessors, the Canton Bazaar and the former Central Market.

As early as in 1842, a market, named **Canton Bazaar (廣州市場)**, was already opened by the Chinese living in the neighbourhood. It was first established at the section of Cochrane and Graham at the foot of the hill near Queen's Road Central, then moved to Queen's Road East, where the Supreme Court is now located in Admiralty. At around 1850, the Canton Bazaar was renamed to **Central Market (中環街市)** and moved to the current site: Between the Praya (now Des Voeux Road Central), Queen's Road Central, Queen Victoria and Jubilee Streets. It was rebuilt again on years 1858, 1895 and 1938.

In 1895, the Government rebuilt the former Central Market to a more elegant, marble structure in western style.



Former Central Market on Des Voeux Road Central, c 1928.

It was originally built on 1895 and was demolished not long after and then rebuilt in 1938. (Source: Cheng 2001)



Former Central Market, the facade on Queens Road Central
(Source: www.zazzle.com)

In 1938, it was rebuilt again in contemporary western building styles of 1930s, inter alia, the Bauhaus was prevailing. The cost of construction for the new market was \$900,000 and it opened again on 1st of May 1939. This new three-storey (plus the roof floor) reinforced concrete structure, with over 200 booths, high ceiling and equipped with many facilities, is regarded as the most advanced market at that time. Since it is on a sloping site, the entrance on Queen's Road Central is on the second level instead of the first level. At the early ages, the roof level is used as offices and living quarters for hygiene inspector and other supporting staff.



The Central Market before the alternation for mid-level escalator link

In 1994, part of the Central Market was converted to the Central Escalator Link Alley Shopping Arcade (中環購物廊) and as a starting point of the mid-level escalator system. By the end of March 2003, the market ceased to operate.

1.1 The history related to the site context

Dating back to 1840s:

Central District was the earliest developed area in Hong Kong with the first land sale held back in June 1841. While the commercial and financial area was located between Queen's Road and the waterfront, the slope south of Queen's Road, the main thoroughfare, was a commercial and residential area. Chinese residents are located on the slope south of the Central Market, which known as Middle Bazaar. In 1843, the Government ordered the Chinese to moved to Tai Ping Shan Area and the Middle Bazaar vicinity became European residential Area.

The proposed major reclamation in Central initiated by Governor Sir John Bowring (1854-59) was abandon due to strong oppositions from landlords who owned land on the Praya.

By the end of 1800s:

After 1870s, the prospered Chinese merchants brought the western style buildings of area and converted them to tenements to accommodate the growing Chinese Population and the Westerns were moved away towards Mid-levels and the Peak.

During the governorship of Sir William Des Voeux (1887-91), the new praya project was finally implemented. Completed on 1904, the appearance of waterfront of Central District changed completely.



Map of City of Victoria c. 1886, the circle shows the location of Central Market.
 (Source: Zhang 1997 Government Record)



Location of Central Market since 1887
 (Source: Government Record)



The new parya project undertaken during 1889-1903. The former Central Market is on the top-center of the photo. (Source: Ho 2004)



Queen Victoria Street looking from Connaught Road, c.1930, with the former Central Market on the right.
(Source: Cheng 2001)



Jubilee Street looking from Queen's Road Central to the harbour, c.1925, with the former Central Market on the right.
(Source: Cheng 2001)

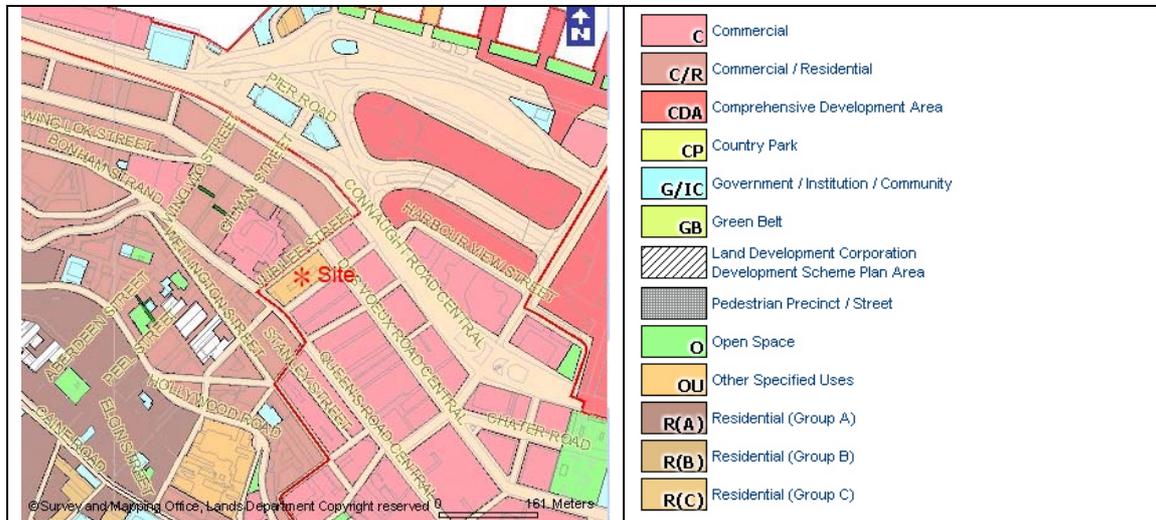
The current situation:

With the further reclamation by the end of 20th Century and the redevelopment of nearby sites, the area is now a predominantly commercial and financial district with high-rise buildings. With most of the residential buildings moved further up to mid-levels, the Central Market was under utilized to a point that it was closed and converted a link for the mid-level escalator system.

The government intended to demolish the Central Market for private, commercial high-rise development and the site is now listed in the List of Sites for Sale by Application.

The Wan Chai Market of similar modern style was completed in Wan Chai in the same year of the completion of the Central Market. Since the site of Wan Chai Market shall be redeveloped under an Urban Renewal project, the Central Market will become the only available building in Hong Kong of such architectural style.

The current zoning of the site is Other Specified Use (Bus Terminus, Open Space and Commercial Development), as shown in the map below:



Zoning of the site and adjacent area (Source: Statutory Planning Portal)

The government intended to put the land for private development and many developers expressed the interest in obtaining the land for building Grade-A office tower.

In May 2005, the Antiquities and Monuments Office has discussed if the Central Market should be declared as Monument and if so the extent of conservation.

1.2 Some tales related to the Central Market:

During the time of Japanese Occupation: The Chinese name of Central Market was changed from “中環街市” to “中央市場”. Until the 1980s, this name was remind displayed on the entrance of the market on Des Voeux Road Central! The original Chinese name was finally reverted at 1993.

During the post-war period, since pork is relatively expensive, long queue were formed at the Central Market whenever the cheaper horsemeat was available for sale.



The entrance of the Central Market with the Chinese name “中央市場”.
(Source: 香港島訪古遊, 1992)

As a place of gathering and entertainment: During 1896-1903, Hong Kong has screened various short documentaries and movies from overseas. Such screening, in form of fee-charging open-air cinema, attracted a lot of the public. And the open space right in front of the Central Market was used for such alternative entertainment and gathering points for the Chinese residents.

Southeast Asia’s Biggest: During a visit in 1967 to the Central Market by the Governor of Hong Kong of that time, Sir David Cilve Crosbie Trench, he announced that the Central Market was the biggest meat market in Southeast Asia.

The Mix of Shoppers: With its dominant position and the only meat market of the region, it attracted regular customers as far as those from Happy Valley and the Mid-levels. It also served clients of a wide spectrum of social classes: from the riches to maids and the local people. Its status as a market was so significant that even Governor Sir Alexander William George Herder Grantham paid a visit to the Central Market during its Governorship.

Generations of stall keepers: With its long history as a market, many stalls were remain in business for decades and even passed the business ownership for generations! For example, Mr. Yip entered the trade of fishmonger as a trainee when the Central Market first opened in 1939 and his son kept the business running until the closure of the market.

1.3 Historical Significance

The Central Market has a high value of historical significance because:

- It embraces over 160 years of history and is a symbolic representation of the Canton Bazaar and the former Central Market;
- The existing Central Market has already inherited the role and function of the former Central Market for more than 60 years;
- The existing site had once been a historical landmark of the neighbourhood which witnessed the development of the district;
- It had witnessed a historic event – the Japanese troop renamed the market;
- It represents a pioneer of the development of the modern indoor market proposed by the government at the time, i.e. a single multi-storey building within which a diversity of market activities are possible;
- It was once the biggest meat market of the Southeast Asia;
- CM was built in the prevailing movement between WW1 and WW2 (1919-1939). It was a very unique 'period' of political, socio- economic changes and architectural movement went along with it. This is also the departure point that Hong Kong's built environment transit from the 'colonial' towards "International" influences.

1.4 Contextual Significance

The Central Market has a high value of contextual significance because:

- It is in close proximity with other cultural heritages in the same district, such as the Central Police Station Compound and other heritages in the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Heritage Trail;
- These heritage sites, together with the street markets nearby, possess a rich diversity of social, architectural and historical significance which is of the interest of the general public, tourists and academics.

2.0 The Architecture

2.1 Design of 1930s Contemporary Architecture

The design of Central Market was undertaken by the then Public Works Department, which constituted solely at that time a group of British architects and engineers who **kept in pace with the contemporary British and international architectural styles**. During 1930s, various architectural styles were prevailing in the Europe and the States, such as the Bauhaus.

The Bauhaus

“The Bauhaus was not an institution... it was an idea”

-Mies van der Rohe

Originally founded in Weimar, Germany in 1919 by Walter Gropius, the fundamental idea of Bauhaus is to integrate the architecture, science and technology (unity between arts and all creative works). Later, due to various political reasons it moved to the city of Dessau with a new building complex expressing such ideas through the celebration of technology and design into daily objects and architectures.

The new complex, especially through its functional space distribution and the naming of building blocks (i.e. Workshop Block and Technical College Block, and others), illustrated what Bauhaus wanted and has achieved: The industrialization of art and craft (industrial design and mass production) and the pursuance of machine aesthetic.

One dominant idea evolved from the Bauhaus is the “Form Follows Function”, which in simple architectural term is the design of building and its components are guided by the function to be performed. There should be neither unnecessary refinements nor added ornaments, such that the form faithfully expresses the functional property of the building and its elements. (This can be contrasted by, say the Colonial or Edwardian architectural styles.)



The Bauhaus complex at Dessau, built 1926
 (Note how the form follows functions and the
 celebration of technology and its unity with
 Art.)

(Source: Sharp 2002)

The linear window wall (not window), as found in the Bauhaus building, can be considered as the very early generation (if not the first) of curtain wall system, which used widely in modern architectures and even nowadays. The ideology of Bauhaus and hence the architectural style, for better or worse, placed a significant influence on the subsequent development of architecture in the history and even the built environment today.



The Horizontal Window Walls at Bauhaus, Dessau
 (Source: Sharp 2002)

The Horizontal Window Walls at Central Market

The movement of Art Deco

Apart from the Bauhaus, the design of Central Market is also slightly characterized by Streamlined Moderne, a style derived in the later stage of Art Deco. Art Deco rooted from the influence of Paris Exposition – the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in 1925. It was

then prevailing in European and American countries during 1920s to 1940 as exemplified in various realms of design during the period and had great significance in the modern movement in the post Second World War era.

Bearing with less decorative motifs as compared to the early Art Deco, Streamlined Moderne in architecture was characterized by the symmetrical layout, streamlining or curvilinear profiles of elements such as parapets, railings, fins and overhangs.

The round corners, the symmetrical facade fronting Des Voeux Road Central and the predominantly symmetrical interior layout of the Central Market are all possibly influenced by the Streamlined Moderne.

In Hong Kong, the trace of Bauhaus has almost been extinguished, only the Central Market and the Wan Chai Market (which will be demolished soon and replaced with a high-rise development) remains. If we, as a society, do not try to conserve the Central Market, this only remaining gem will soon be disappeared.



Wan Chai Market (1937)
(Source: 香港島訪古遊, 1992)



The past Rediffusion Building
(Source: Cheng 2001)

2.2 Design of Central Market

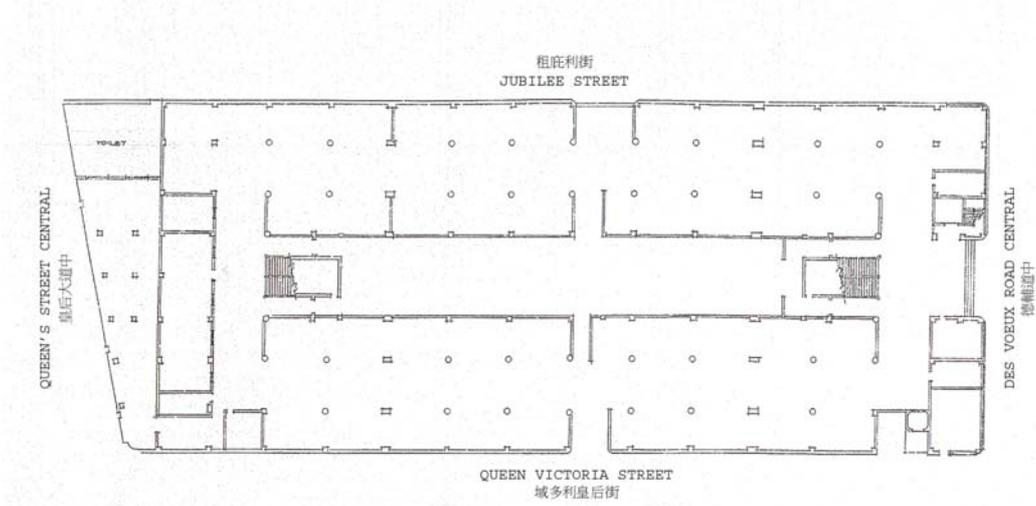
The Central market is a four-story high rectangular building with curved corners (typical of 1930s). The facades runs from the ground floor to the third floor (where the market spaces and some office are located), while the forth floor was recessed from the building perimeter (where the staff quarters and offices are located). The facade design is simple with no unnecessary ornaments—lines of strip window walls running across the facade with sun/rain shading overhangs at the East and West side. The strip window walls were not only to represent the contemporary architectural style which the building possess, but also of practical function—to allows maximum lighting and ventilation to the crowded, damp and possibly smelly market space.

There is a long linear centre courtyard in the middle of the building, this not only improved the circulation in the market but also enhanced natural lighting and ventilation of the building (Consider in the 1930s that mechanical ventilation and high efficient artificial lighting is not common). The courtyard also provided a warm and welcoming entrance to the market.

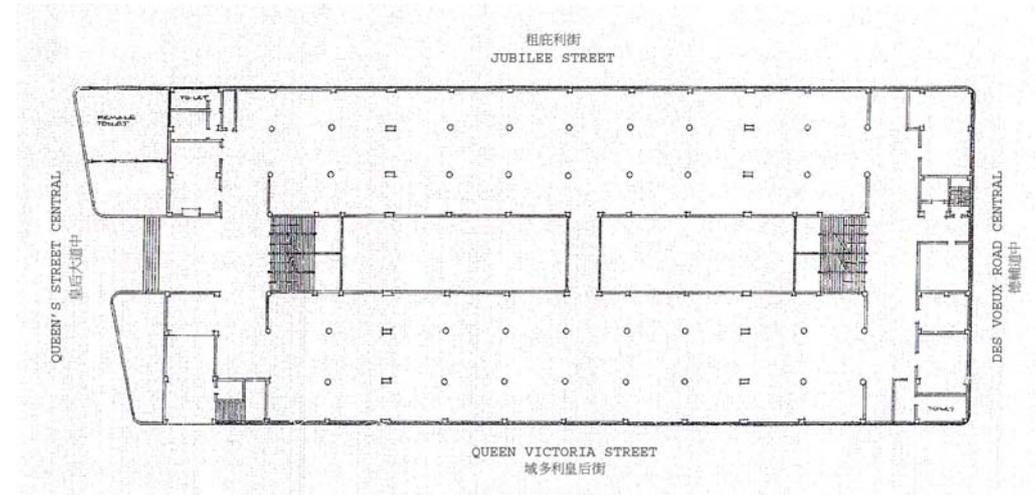
The Central Market was constructed by reinforced concrete for columns and beams with simple and flexible layout to fit for the market functions and environments.

To sum up, the overall building design of the Central Market follows its functional requirement as a market place while each individual element follows its specific performance requirement. The building is truly form follows functions and a representation of Bauhaus—both literally and spiritually.

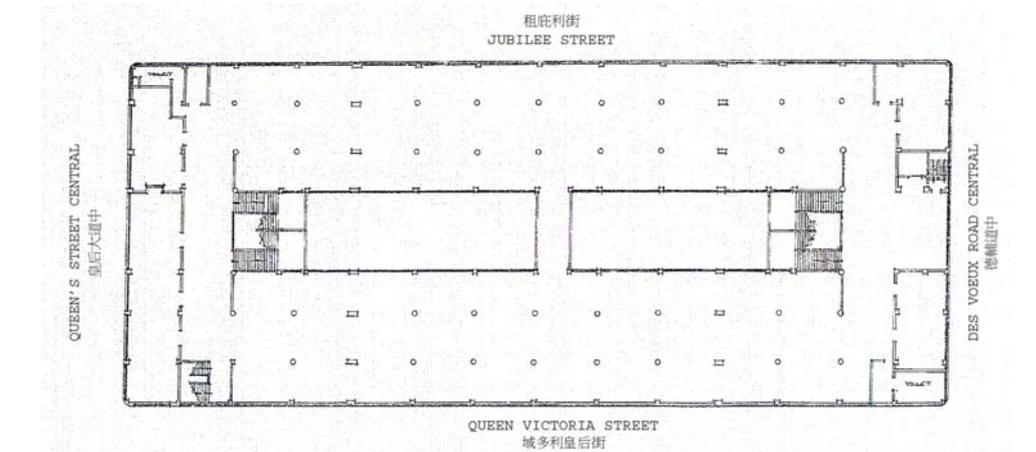
2.3 Plans of Central Market



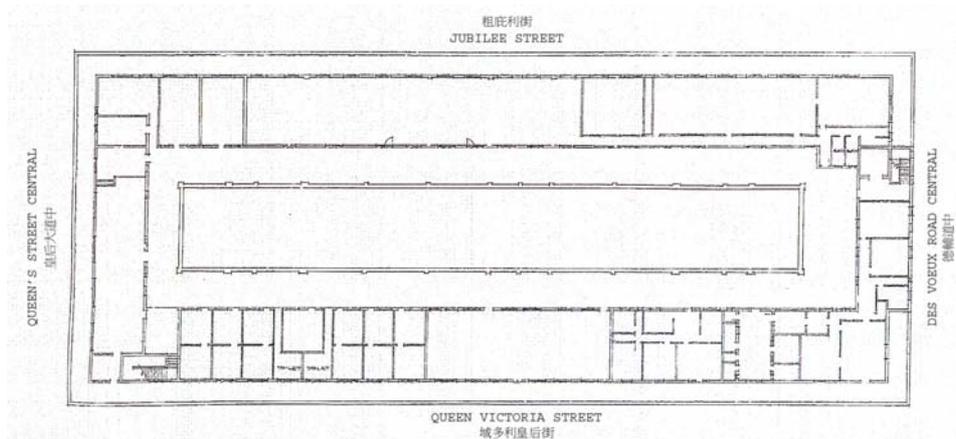
Ground Floor Plan *



First Floor Plan *



Second Floor Plan *



Third (Roof) Floor Plan *

* All drawings are not to scale (Source: Architectural Services Department)

2.4 Architectural significance

Central Market has a high value of architectural significance because:

- Apart the to be demolished Wan Chai Market, it will be the only existing building in Hong Kong designed with the contemporary architectural style in 1930s, inter alia, the Bauhaus was prevailing.
- It is an excellent example of the manifestation of “form follows function” of the Modern Movement in the case of a market building found in Hong Kong.

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