

Hong Kong Prison to Be Rehabilitated as Lavish \$231 Million Art Complex, With a Hand From Herzog & de Meuron



Photo by Isabelle de Wavrin, 2011
The Central Police Station, Central Magistracy and Victoria Prison compound will be transformed into an art museum.

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HONG KONG— In bustling Hong Kong, a nexus of wealth and power is making waves, with a much expanded **Hong Kong Art Fair** that drew 63,000 visitors last month, dramatic auction results tallying \$962 million during **Christie's** and **Sotheby's** spring season, and Western gallery incursions from **Gagosian** and **Ben Brown**. The city, however, still lacks a world-class contemporary art center. But that will change in dramatic fashion as ambitious plans for the British colonial era **Central Police Station, Central Magistracy and Victoria Prison** compound, located on Hollywood Road in the heart of the city and in disuse since 2006, will be transformed into a multi-venue contemporary art museum, performing arts center, and cinema.

Instead of demolition to make room for another batch of glass-skinned high-rises, this site will be largely preserved and interfaced with a brand new Kunsthalle, a **Herzog & de Meuron**-styled contemporary museum that will be about the size of London's Hayward Gallery. In almost fairytale fashion, the richly conservative **Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust** is initially bankrolling the **Central Police Station Project (CPS)** with a HK\$1.8 billion (\$231 million) commitment, along with the official blessings of the local government to launch the not-for-profit enterprise. According to the sponsors, CPS Project will establish "a centre for heritage, arts and leisure at this prime Central location [and] compliments the overall development of arts and culture in the city and adds an attraction with distinct Hong Kong character."

"Our planned mixture of commercial and cultural usage," said Hong Kong Jockey Club chairman **John Chan**, "will ensure the vibrancy of the entire area."

The buildings were declared monuments by the government in 1995 due to their historical significance and remain as the sole surviving architectural remnants from that bygone time of Colonial rule. The complex's 16 mixed-use structures come from the mid-19th to early 20th century, with some of them sporting wooden louvers and balconies. The site is just steps away from the bustling, eastern end of Hollywood Road, where Asian antique shops proliferate with a more recent sampling of contemporary art galleries moving in, some local and some not (including Chelsea's **Sundaram Tagore**, which is currently exhibiting **Sebastiao Salgado's** gritty photographs of poverty and labor).

The CPS initiative is a key part of the local government's "Conserving Central" initiative, "Central" being the name of the neighborhood where CPS, long cloistered from public view, is located. On a sunny and hot morning in late May, the official importance of the new initiative was underscored by a tour of the razor-wire festooned and ultra-secure derelict site led by **David Elliott**, the storied museum director and itinerant curator, who is serving the Trust in an advisory capacity. Elliott, who was the artistic director of the 17th **Biennale of Sydney** in 2010, expects the first phase of the project, the opening of the museum with "high-value exhibitions," by the summer of 2014.

"It's early days," said Elliott, casually clad in a cowboy shirt and blue jeans, standing in the middle of the parade ground of the police station, a kind of surreal oasis surrounded by gleaming high-rises, "but these historic buildings are all being restored."

Elliott estimates that 27 percent or so of the mixed-use site will be devoted to commerce, mostly art galleries and already existing non-profits working in Hong Kong. Those rent-paying ventures will help make the non-profit CPS independent. "We'll have to raise a lot of money to make that happen," predicted Elliott, who was the founding director of the **Mori Art Museum** in Tokyo and also served stints at the **Museum of Modern Art, Oxford**, and the **Moderna Museet** in Stockholm.

The plans also include an archaeological investigation of the Central Police Station and will be carried out before some of the less important structures are razed to make room for Herzog & de Meuron's cube-styled museum. It was evident during the tour that many of the original furnishings of the jail complex had already been removed, though the bare bunks were still standing in gloomy formation in the cell block, complete with peeling yellow paint and cautionary signs still warning inmates to roll up their bedding before exercising in the delightfully tree-shaded prison yard. In one of the stripped rooms, a lone painting of sail-masted junk boats skimming along Victoria Harbor at sunset hung in eerie isolation, as if part of a secret Mike Nelson installation.

Elliott has great expectations of the emerging art complex. "If the CPS is set up in the right kind of way, then I think that it will give a cultural shot in the arm to the whole of Central," he said. "Not only will it provide a new Kunsthalle focussed on contemporary art, it will also allow existing professional Hong Kong-based non-profit arts organizations to consolidate and develop their work on site. With its mixture of revitalized heritage buildings and inspired new architecture, its effect will be to regenerate an established cultural area which has become increasingly commercialized and moribund."

The CPS Project is scheduled to go live before the much bigger **M+ Museum**, sited on 95 acres of reclaimed land for the West Kowloon Cultural District on the riverfront. **Lars Nittve**, the founding director of London's **Tate Modern** (and, like Elliott, a former director of the Moderna Museet), has been recruited as executive director of this major new enterprise. During a boat tour of the famous harbor, Nittve told the assembled mix of art critics and dealers who flooded the city last month for the fourth edition of the ART HK, "the money [for the M+ Museum] is already in the bank to build the project and realize it. We don't have to fund-raise." Indeed, the local government has infused the project with an outright grant of HK\$22 billion (\$2.8 billion). The first phase, a 43,000-square-foot museum building on the scale of the current **Tate Modern**, is expected to open in 2016-17.

The two visual art ventures have the potential of transforming Hong Kong into something more than the 21st century mecca for the consumption and acquisition of luxury goods that it is now. What better way to start that than rehabilitating a cell block?