

Art Space and the Community

Joanna Lee, Pesce Lam Translation: Joanna Lee

The sense of nativeness has been gradually growing since Hong Kong's handover sixteen years ago. The community is concerned about the preservation of buildings imbued with historical values. Arts practitioners, through community arts, explore what "Hong Kong" means to its citizens besides economic activities. The HKSAR Government takes reference of overseas examples and "revitalizes" some old buildings by taking in tenants from the "creative industries." Hence, the old Police Married Quarters on Hollywood Road, Central, has been refurbished as "PMQ". Another form of revitalization is to turn the venue into exhibition space, for example the old Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club is now "Oi!". Following the trend of "revitalization" and responding to the demand of artists, ADC made an agreement with "Hip Shing Hong" and launched "ADC Arts Space Scheme". Some from the community felt that revitalization projects of such nature had buildings refurbished at the price of severing community network. "Woofert Ten", the organization which has been building relationship with local residents through arts by being stationed on Shanghai Street for four years, would no longer receive ADC venue subsidy and would have to move out of its current premise on December 31.

Information:

- Local newspaper. For details of newspaper coverage please see Chinese version.
- Press releases of the Information Services Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR)
- Press releases of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department
- The House News
<http://thehousenews.com/>
- Hong Kong In-media
<http://www.inmediahk.net/>
- Woofert Ten
<http://wooferten.blogspot.hk/>

PMQ

2013/02

- On February 4

According to the *Oriental Daily*, potential tenants complained that "PMQ Management Co. Ltd" (the Management) required for excessively long studio opening hours, which impacted their work of creative nature. The criteria for being a tenant are stringent and the rent is 1.5 times higher than studios of similar nature. Emerging artists can hardly be part of it. Industry practitioners criticized the Management for running the venue in a commercial mindset, turning PMQ into a tourist-facing shopping mall, which is in contrary to what the creative industry needs. Many artists simply said that they could not afford PMQ. Chow Chun-fai, Chairman of "Factory Artists Concern Group" said that the Management required the 130 studios in PMQ to be opened to the public between 11am to 8pm, and that the tenants should interact with the visitors. However, certain design and creative tasks cannot be conducted among crowds. One cannot expect a designer to be "at-your-service" around the clock like a salesperson. "To me, PMQ is not into (artists') studios! Putting aside the rental factor, it does not encourage art creation in its pure sense. It promotes art commercialization." Chow said that a few artists have considered taking up studios there but abandoned the idea because of PMQ's management rationale. The size of PMQ

studios vary between forty to sixty-two square meters. Its rental rate takes reference to the Rating and Valuation Department's data on the average rental of grade-B office buildings in Central and Sheung Wan at the beginning of last year. Take the example of the smallest studio of which monthly rent is HK\$16,200: while local designers are entitled to up to 50% discount, the minimum rent per square meter stays at \$220, 1.5 times higher than that of JCCAC. Yeung Shau-lun, a newly graduated ceramics, sculpture and jewelry artist said that he simply would not consider PMQ because of its high rent. The Management said that PMQ's rental should not be compared with those in other districts.¹

- On March 12

There are 130 studios in PMQ, monthly rent of which ranging from \$10,000 to \$18,000. The venue will see its soft opening by the end of 2013. The Management told *The Sun* that it had received 155 tenant applications. The first round of tenant evaluation will take place within this month by a panel of fifty members. Shortlisted applicants will be interviewed and a final list will be further examined by the tenant selection committee. The tenant list is scheduled to be finalized by May.²

2013/12

- On December 26

Victor Tsang, Executive Director of PMQ Management Co. Ltd, told *Sing Tao Daily* that there already existed a number of incubation bases for cultural creation. While JCCAC focused on nurturing emerging artists, PMQ put emphasis on uplifting the operation capability of the practitioners. He believed such a difference helped avoid duplication of work and wastage of resources, "Tenants would have reached certain levels of achievement when they move-in. We will help them move further forward." Therefore while encouraging creativity, PMQ also valued entrepreneurship and hence has introduced an elimination system to ensure its corporate competitiveness and agility. Tsang explained the reason for requiring a fixed period of "open studio" was to demonstrate to the public the achievement of Hong Kong's creative industry and helped the tenants to understand their customers better. He believed that "the studios are partitioned so while there will be a display area, the designers can work in a private area."³

"Oi!"

2013/05

- On May 10

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) introduced the to-be opened "Oi!" to the press. "Oi!" is the old Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club on 12 Oil Street, a Grade II Historical Building now refurbished with HK\$19 million dollars to become a visual arts space. There are two exhibition galleries of respectively 2,000 and 990 square feet, and a piece of 3,200-square-foot lawn for outdoor artwork display. According to *Sing Tao Daily*, LCSD is intending to bring the community and the arts closer to each other with this new art space on Oil Street. It therefore will invite artists to collaborate on a regular basis but will not offer any space for hire. Many visual artists are worried that this "by-invitation" approach will lead to the more well-known artists dominating the use of the space. As the current supply of exhibition space cannot meet the demand, artists hope that LCSD should at least be transparent about the criteria of artist selection should it decides not to entertain any hiring request.⁴

The opening exhibition of "Oi!" on May 21 will feature artworks from local artists Cédric Maridet, Tang Kwok-hin and Tsang Kin-wah, and Mainland artist Yuan Gong. The concurrent "Living Art Project" will focus on "green art": using upcycled materials to add value and significance to previously discarded objects.⁵

Lesley Lau, Chief Curator of the Art Promotion Office, said that the Office will make its best endeavor to preserve the originality of the heritage building while bringing new experience to the visitors.⁶

- On May 20

Lesley Lau told *Headline News* that “to those in the arts circle, Oil Street carries a connotation of ‘arts.’ This space is just getting started and we would like it to be closely connected to arts.” Due to the limited space, Oi! Will focus on exhibitions and art activities. Ivy Lin, Curator, said that the “Oil Street Artists Village” was a beautiful collective memory, and that “(Oi!) is a facilitator which brings different organizations together to an open collaborative platform, on which they share their experiences.” One direction Oi! is going is to develop community relationship. Lau said that “Oi! will be the incubator of young artists and curators.”⁷

2013/09

- On September 6

Architect Vincent Ng wrote in *Wen Wei Po*, pointing out that while the building’s historical value and atmosphere had been preserved at Oi!, its connection with people was blurry. The best it could do was to indirectly build a relationship with local residents and the regular passers-by. He failed to understand the relationship between repurposing the building into exhibition space and revitalization, how will the art space connect to the community’s emotion, or what is so special about this building to make it an exhibition space.⁸

- On September 26

LCSD announced that the "Sparkle!" exhibition series will take place at Oi! from 2014 to 2015. Seven guest curators and designer partner Karr Yip will narrate the relationship between art and the community. The exhibitions include: "Collector Club" by Kwok Ying, "Zoo as Metaphor" by Orlean Lai, "Notice Board for 'WHAT IF' Artist Village" by Lee Chun-fung, "I Wanna Eat! Yummy! Yummy!" by Janet Fong, "Regarding Lightness - The Weight of Lightness: Bio-gravity" by Yeung Yang and Susi Law, Wong Chun-hoi, Joao Li and So Wai-lam, "When Art Becomes Attitude..." by Vivian Ting, and "After One Hundred" by Gum Cheng.⁹

“ADC Arts Space Scheme”

2013/06

- On June 28

The Hong Kong Arts Development Council (ADC) made an agreement with Hip Shing Hong and launched the first “ADC Arts Space Scheme”. Art studios of size between 400 to 1,300 square feet in a 10-foot ceiling unit are available to visual or media artists in a factory building at 33-35, Wong Chuk Hang Street. Basic renovation, air-conditioning and ventilation system come with the rental. \$8 million dollars of government funding has been allocated as renovation and rental subsidy for emerging artists. ADC will charge local artists and organizations a rent of \$5.5 and management fee \$2.5 per square feet in the first two years of the tenancy period. The Scheme is tentatively planned to run for six years and tenancy renews every two years. The rent will be \$6.5 per square feet in the third and fourth years of the tenancy period, \$8 in the fifth and sixth. The management fee will be later determined. The application deadline for the Scheme will be August 23.

Wilfred Wong, ADC Chairman, said that there were four times when landlords offered space but failing to meet the necessary requirements, for example not in compliance with the “Fire Services Ordinance”, or the application for land use change rejected by the Planning Department. The Scheme had been therefore put on hold and Wong hoped that its implementation would be beneficial to local artists. ADC also launched “Emerging Artists Rental Subsidy Scheme” to artists who had left school for no more than three years.

There is a subsidy pool of around \$2 million dollars to support 50% of the rental for up to two years.¹⁰

2013/07

• On July 22

A contributor to the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* pointed out that two years ago, Wilfred Wong claimed to have secured a total of 100,000 square feet of space in two factory buildings at Wong Chuk Hang and Tsuen Wan, available for artists. Finally, visual artists' studios are offered at Wong Chuk Hang this year, but surface area reduced to 10,000 square feet and good for about ten artists/tenants. It was not considered cost effective to devote the administration cost required to handle the Lands Department and Planning Department procedures for a merely 10,000-square-foot space. The scale was also insufficient for an art cluster to be formed. It was suggested that the Government should purchase a few blocks of factory buildings while old factory areas were refurbished. By doing so, the aesthetics of factory areas could be preserved and provides contrast to the new developments. Low rental rates would also allow for a substantiated growth of studios in factory buildings. Otherwise these studios would only pave way for further commercial property development.¹¹

2013/08

• On August 31

A spokeswoman from a gallery being invited (to join the ADC Arts Space Scheme) told *Sing Tao Daily* that there was no way the gallery would consider joining. She wondered if ADC was doing all these to support the interest of property developers. She said, "The most important consideration for running a gallery in a factory building is whether one can legally hold an exhibition. I made an inquiry to ADC and they said that that building was for recreation and commercial purposes. It would be illegal to hold exhibitions." In other words, there is no room for business should the gallery move into that factory building. The spokeswoman felt that the government should redefine "industrial land use." John Batten, Chairman of International Association of Art Critic Hong Kong, also felt that the rent offered by ADC was not concessional. It might even be higher than market rate. "The Scheme does not allow for galleries to share the space or hold public exhibitions. It does not at all support arts development and audience building." He said that the government should legalize as soon as possible the use of factory building for art purposes.

ADC responded that the rent was determined by the landlord and would be reviewed every two years. ADC also pointed out that the building at Wong Chuk Hang had been converted into a commercial building and the unit in discussion an art studio. Public exhibitions would not be allowed unless required applications had been made by the tenant to government departments involved.¹²

"Woofers Ten" Tenancy Renewal

2013/07

• On July 30

The local arts organization "Woofers Ten" has been managing the "Shanghai Street Artspace" since 2009. In July, 2013, its tenancy renewal application was rejected by Hong Kong Arts Development Council (ADC). "Centre For Community Cultural Development"(CCCD) would take over the management. Woofers Ten filed an appeal but lost the case. *The House News* made an inquiry to ADC on the reasons for the rejection of Woofers Ten's tenancy application. According to ADC, three parties applied for the "Curatorship and Management Scheme of Shanghai Street Artspace 2013/14" (2013/14 年度上海街視藝空間策展及管理計劃). After meeting with the applicants, the assessor panel selected the appropriate organization based on selection criteria, ADC's budget and

the proposal made by the applicants. While the panel felt that “Woofers Ten has developed a sound network with the community and the proposed ideas meet the interest of the parties it serves,” the panel rejected Woofers Ten’s application after evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each applicant. ADC expressed that “Woofers Ten should have enriched the contents and variety of its proposed ideas so that the public’s art appreciation ability could be raised.”¹³

2013/08

- On August 5

Yeung Tin-shui, an art critic, wrote in the *Apple Daily* to criticize the ADC’s policy that led to Woofers Ten’s failure in tenancy renewal application. It is an ADC requirement to accept public tender every one or two years in consideration of the fairness required for the cooperation between the government and a non-government entity. It is stipulated in ADC’s proposal invitation documents that “the tenancy for organizations with satisfactory performance will be extended by one year. The extension will be limited to one-time only.” Yeung suggested that there should be more discussion on what makes “satisfactory performance” and how much time ADC would wait for the results to be shown, so that the strict time limitation in ADC’s policy could be lifted.¹⁴

- On August 15

Local artist Lam Tung-pang was interviewed by *The House News*. He said that he had been out of town in the first half of the year. When he returned, he expressed that he would like to be involved in the assessment of Woofers Ten’s tenancy renewal application, but was informed by ADC that the application had been rejected. Lam felt that it was a shame for the tenancy renewal to be rejected, “The assessors made positive comments about Woofers Ten and shouldn’t be further nurtured with more resources?” Lam suggested Woofers Ten to review whether it should rely entirely on a single funding source because he agreed that art organizations should not operate on and only on government subsidies. He suggested ADC to have clear guidelines on tenancy periods so that art organizations could get prepared. To Lam, five-year tenancy was appropriate for newly established organizations. He was worried about the imbalance between the vibrant development of art galleries and government-run venues, and the shrinking local art organizations, which has a negative impact on the options available for local artists.¹⁵

- On August 29

Jasper Lau, the ex-artistic and executive director of Woofers Ten, commented on the tenancy renewal in *Ming Pao Daily*. In response to Yeung Tin-shui’s point of view made in the press earlier on, Lau thinks that Yeung has only pointed out the limitation of ADC’s emphasis on fairness but has missed Lau’s own opinion. “There are so many ways to conduct community art and there really is no need, or outright impossible, to have an objective comparison. Actually, Hong Kong citizens (and art practitioners) are entitled to engagement in different forms of community art.”

Lau was positive about CCCD taking over the management of Shanghai Street Artspace. He said that it would be in line with Woofers Ten’s principle for the local residents to freely go into a space “run-by-no-matter-who” and do the same thing as in the Woofers Ten days. To him, ADC’s problem was “its failure to understand what makes Hong Kong’s community art develop. Rather, ADC is hiding behind the banal principle of ‘fairness’ and ignored the support it should be giving to art organizations that have been receiving sponsorship so that they could really pay back.”¹⁶

2013/09

- On September 29

The *Apple Daily* reported that Woofers Ten would continue its operation after its tenancy expiry by the end of September until the appeal procedure completed. The local residents planned for a petition in case the appeal was rejected. Lee Chun-fung, person-in-charge of Woofers Ten, pointed out that ADC rejected the renewal application even before reading the assessors' annual reports. Lee called for ADC to issue another tenancy agreement in a nearby location so that Woofers Ten could continue its community art activities.¹⁷

2013/10

- On October 1

Woofers Ten was informed that their appeal had been rejected on the previous day. Three from Woofers Ten including Yip Ho-lun, Lee Chun-fung and Fong Wan-chi formed a "Work-as-usual" group (繼續工作小組), claiming to stay in Shanghai Street Artspace for an infinite period of time. They also launched a petition, requesting for a vacant unit in the surroundings so that Woofers Ten could continue its operation. Lee was going to organize a "talk gathering" for local residents to discuss possible ways to keep Woofers Ten.¹⁸

- On October 20

According to the *Hong Kong Daily News*, ADC representatives visited Woofers Ten last week and claimed to Woofers Ten representatives that ADC would find a vacant unit for Woofers Ten to be re-settled.

Yip Ho-lun said that Woofers Ten had taken four years to develop a community art blueprint and a preliminary community network for the residents in Yaumatei. Fong Wan-chi stressed that "community art goes beyond running workshops for local residents. Community art is for artists to build people relationship with their skills. While painting for example is the medium for a painter, the medium for community art is people. It's about human communication and relationship."

2013/12

- On December 23

Yip Ho-lun, Lee Chun-fung and Fong Wan-chi wrote an open letter to ADC, requiring ADC "to immediately stop all legal actions and renew conversation with Woofers Ten." They said ADC had asked them to move out today and terminate all activities, or else they would face lawsuit and claims. In the open letter, it was stated that the Director of Arts Support and ADC staff met the Woofers Ten team and local residents on October 9, and listened to their demand. The ADC representatives agreed to follow up and respond to the demand. However, ADC terminated the conversation with legal actions and did not respond to what had been discussed. The Woofers Ten team was very confused and disappointed with the sudden change on ADC's side. The team would continue to stay albeit the lack of subsidy and organize art activities such as local residents' gathering, "grass-root martial art filming project", etc.²⁰

- On December 31

Augustus Mok, Director of CCCD which will manage the Shanghai Street Artspace, said in *Hong Kong In-media* that in the past four years, he had twice applied for managing the Artspace and had twice been rejected. However he had been following Woofers Ten's events and much appreciated what had been achieved. Mok said that he would do his best to "fortify what had been achieved. CCCD will contact all those who have spent time there and are known to the locals, and invite them to continue on with their works."

Mok sympathized with the reason for Woofers Ten to stay on after the tenancy expiry, saying that "It really is unnecessary for ADC to take legal actions and forsake conversations. I wish that the new ADC council members would make pragmatic recommendations. It is important for Woofers Ten to remain on Shanghai Street to remind us all what makes true community art."²¹

¹ News coverage, *Oriental Daily* A08, February 17, 2013

- ² News coverage, *The Sun* A12, March 12, 2013
- ³ News coverage, *Sing Tao Daily* A08, December 26, 2013
- ⁴ News coverage, *Sing Tao Daily* A06, May 10, 2013
- ⁵ News coverage, *Ming Pao Daily* A12, May 10, 2013
- ⁶ News coverage, *Tai Kung Pao* B12, May 10, 2013
- ⁷ News coverage, *Headline News* P42, P43, May 20, 2013
- ⁸ News coverage, *Wen Wei Po* C01, September 6, 2013
- ⁹ "Sparkle!" exhibition series launched at Oi!", LCSD news release, September 26, 2013. http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/ppr_release_det.php?id=6245
- ¹⁰ News coverage, *Oriental Daily* A22, June 28, 2013
- ¹¹ News coverage, *Hong Kong Economic Journal* C05, July 22, 2013
- ¹² News coverage, *Sing Tao Daily* A18, August 31, 2013
- ¹³ News coverage, *The House News*, July 30, 2013. <http://thehousenews.com/art/%E7%A4%BE%E5%8D%80%E8%97%9D%E5%9C%98%E6%B4%BB%E5%8C%96%E5%BB%B3-%E4%B8%8D%E7%8D%B2%E8%97%9D%E7%99%BC%E5%B1%80%E7%BA%8C%E7%B4%84/>
- ¹⁴ News coverage, *Apple Daily* B12, August 5, 2013
- ¹⁵ News coverage, *The House News*, August 15, 2013. <http://thehousenews.com/art/%E6%9E%97%E6%9D%B1%E9%B5%AC%E8%AB%87%E6%B4%BB%E5%8C%96%E5%BB%B3-%E6%87%89%E8%A8%AD%E4%BA%94%E5%B9%B4%E7%A7%9F%E7%94%A8%E6%9C%9F%E9%99%90/>
- ¹⁶ News coverage, *Ming Pao Daily* D04, August 29, 2013
- ¹⁷ News coverage, *Apple Daily* A15, September 29, 2013
- ¹⁸ News coverage, *Apple Daily* A08, October 1, 2013
- ¹⁹ News coverage, *Hong Kong Daily News* Q18, Q19, October 20, 2013
- ²⁰ Woofer Ten, "Open Letter: Demand to immediately stop legal actions against Woofer Ten and to resume conversation" (in Chinese), December 23, 2013. http://wooferten.blogspot.hk/2013/12/blog-post_27.html
- ²¹ Augustus Mok, "Woofer Ten and me" (in Chinese), *Hong Kong In-media*, December 31, 2013. <http://www.inmediahk.net/13123101>