

PREFACE

This book is part of a larger research project on the architectural works of the Public Works Department (PWD), the agency responsible for the design and construction of public buildings in colonial Hong Kong. Specifically, I study the PWD's efforts to promote modern architecture in Hong Kong. Led by architects and engineers from Britain, the PWD and its predecessor, the Surveyor General's Office, had built many impressive public buildings in the Western architectural idiom since the British occupied Hong Kong in 1841. Notably, the PWD's preference for neoclassical, Victorian, and Edwardian architecture, which not only prevailed in governmental but also private buildings sponsored by Western businesspeople at that time, changed in the 1930s. When it was commissioned by the government to construct a series of new public markets to meet the growing demand in expanding urban areas, the PWD abandoned the Western architectural forms. Instead, for the first time in the department's history, the PWD opted for a modern design, an architectural style that became popular in Europe in the wake of the First World War. Wan Chai Market, completed in 1937, was plausibly the first PWD-designed building that had absolutely no allegiance to the traditional forms of the past. Why, among all types of public buildings, did the PWD select markets as its first experiment with modern architecture?

The curious case of public markets as Hong Kong's first group of modern government buildings is intriguing and deserving of a more in-depth investigation than had been granted to it in the past. Throughout the research process, I discovered myriad interesting facts about Hong Kong's public markets that extended well beyond the scope of what was originally meant to be a study of modern architecture. For example, the public market was one of the first types of public buildings erected by the British after they set foot in Hong Kong. Furthermore, the erection of public markets in the nineteenth century followed the pattern of population growth in Hong Kong. The three earliest markets were erected in Central, Admiralty, and Sheung Wan, where the population was concentrated. Later, public markets were strategically planned—one in each urban district in Hong Kong. They were generally located at the focal point of the districts they served. Most of the modern markets, including those that are still in operation today, were reconstructed at the same location as the historic markets. Many of them have occupied the same site for more than a century. For instance, the present-day Central Market (completed in 1939) is the fourth generation of public market erected on its Queen's Road site, replacing the earlier generations completed in 1842, 1858, and 1895 respectively.

Thus, I found it impossible to isolate the discussion of modern markets from their colonial precedents. Focusing only on the modern period would limit our understanding of how public markets, as a building type, emerged in Hong Kong and what has propelled the changes in their architectural form. For this reason, the book expanded into a full-scale, longitudinal study of the history and architecture of public markets owned by the government. It covers the period from 1842, when the first public market was built, to the early 1980s, which was when standalone public markets were replaced by multi-purpose municipal services buildings.

A public market is a type of building that is closely associated with our everyday lives. We may not be aware of its importance until the day access to such a familiar facility is no longer possible. During my research on the history of Hong Kong's public markets, I discovered the important

role played by this building type in affecting a city's public hygiene, food safety, and cost of living.¹ Specifically, Hong Kong's public markets began to modernize in the early twentieth century in response to the Bubonic Plague and world wars. Coincidentally, COVID-19 broke out during the course of writing this book. Several public markets were temporarily closed for business for disinfection. Access to public markets and other public facilities in Hong Kong was restricted to people who could present a vaccine pass. While I am saddened by the ways the pandemic has created social distance between people, I am also impressed by the resilience of those people who have tried hard to keep our everyday lives normal amid abnormality.

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Note

- 1 The currency used in this book, unless otherwise specified, refers to Hong Kong dollar.