



CREATIVE QUARTER

TWO FORMER HOUSING BLOCKS FOR HONG KONG POLICE WILL TAKE ON A NEW LINE OF DUTY AS A HUB FOR DESIGNERS AND THE CREATIVE INDUSTRY.

WORDS CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF



The sun has already fallen behind Hong Kong's skyscrapers as architect Daniel Patzold strolls through the lower courtyard of the former Police Married Quarters on Hollywood Road. Beneath a row of tall banyan trees, on what was once a basketball court, 70 young designers are gathered to sell their products at Detour, a festival of creative culture held every December.

"Look at this," says Patzold, gesturing at the cardboard stalls of the makeshift market. A young, fashionably-dressed crowd browses through books, leather goods and jewellery. In the distance, a group of designers takes photos of people wearing paper masks that look like landmark Hong Kong buildings. "This kind of thing should be happening here every weekend," he says.

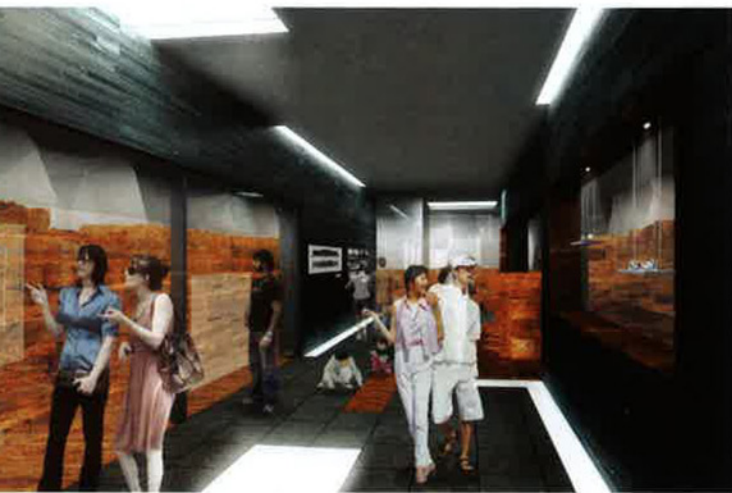
That could soon be the case. The Police Married Quarters have sat empty for more than 12 years, except for the occasional festival like Detour. Until recently, the complex was slated for demolition, but lobbying from preservationists and the creative community has saved it from the chopping block. Now work has begun to transform it into the PMQ, a 15,400sqm design hub that will open in 2014.

"This project will be a milestone in the development of design in Hong Kong and the entire region," says Billy Tam, who is the PMQ's architect-consultant. "There are lots of talented designers in Hong Kong and they're just waiting for a chance to develop their reputation and their business. PMQ will become a name that represents design of the finest quality."

When it was built in 1951, the Police Married Quarters were an anomaly: functional, modern housing in a neighbourhood of old tenements. Located on a steep, terraced hillside, two eight-storey blocks contained 196 living units arranged around a central courtyard. Each unit consisted of a single open room facing a broad open-air corridor with small kitchens and communal spaces for eating and gathering. Below the residential blocks was a clubhouse and recreational space. "When I was a kid, all of this area here was my backyard," said Hong Kong Chief Executive Donald Tsang, who grew up in the Police Married Quarters. In a speech two years ago, he waxed nostalgic about the "kung fu shows, fortune tellers, and people telling old folktales" on the street outside the quarters, where he lived until getting married in 1969.

The complex was closed in 2000 and the government planned to auction it off for redevelopment. But heritage activists and nearby residents lobbied against the sale, fearing the quarters would be torn down for yet another luxury high-rise. In 2007, excavations at the site revealed the ruins of the Central School, a Victorian-era academy where Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen once studied, which had been destroyed during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in World War II. The discovery helped convince the government to conserve the site.

Those ruins will now be incorporated into an underground interpretive centre. Above ground,



(PREVIOUS PAGE, FROM LEFT) The former Police Married Quarters will soon be transformed into a design hub; Billy Tam, PMQ's architect-consultant.

(THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Built in 1951, the former Police Married Quarters is a typical postwar housing complex with a simple, functional design and two slab-like blocks that share a central courtyard; PMQ would include design studios, living units for designers-in-residence, exhibition spaces, a resource centre, library, retail shops and restaurants; An interpretive centre will allow visitors to explore the foundation of the 19th century Central School, whose alumni include Chinese Nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen.

the former housing blocks and clubhouse will be transformed into low-rent design studios, galleries, cafés, restaurants, a bookstore and design boutiques. Plans also call for a design library, resource centre for young designers and living units for international designers-in-residence. All told, 55 percent of the PMQ will be studio space, 25 percent commercial space and 20 percent communal space. "There is a big potential, but the site makes it a challenge," says Tam. The focus will be on "enterprising creativity," he says, which means providing a space for production and exhibition, but also space for designers to find customers for their products. For that to happen, the public will need to be able to circulate easily throughout the entire site – no small matter when the PMQ is split into three distinct blocks.

The solution is what Tam calls "the Cube": a large glass structure that will link the upper floors of the two main residential blocks. The Cube itself will contain an exhibition hall, while the sheltered space underneath will be a weatherproof venue for film screenings, music and fashion shows. A public garden will be built on the Cube's roof and restaurants, cafés and bars scattered throughout the PMQ will also attract people to the complex.

Designers will be asked to observe an open-door studio policy.

At the very least, the PMQ can rely on its location to bring in the crowds. Immediately adjacent to the complex is Soho, one of Hong Kong's most popular bar and restaurant districts. To the west is Sheung Wan, a focal point for Hong Kong's design scene, with dozens of spaces like the Square Street Studio, which produces watches, shoes and leatherware, and Konzepp, a sharply-curated design shop and informal gathering space.

The PMQ is also a short walk from the Central Police Station and Victoria Prison, a 160-year-old compound that is now being converted into a contemporary art centre to be overseen by British curator David Elliott. "Nowadays the distinctions between contemporary art and design are not so clear, so there could even be a collaboration between the two sites," says Asia Art Archive director Claire Hsu, who is an advisor to the Central Police Station project.

For the moment, collaboration remains a hypothetical. Many Hong Kong artists and designers remain wary of government attempts to build venues for creative industries. Recent projects like the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre – an

artists' village located in a renovated factory that shares more than a few similarities to the PMQ – have been criticised for aloof management and timid programming.

"If PMQ becomes another boring showroom, it won't benefit anyone," says photographer Martin Cheung, who spent time at the site as an exhibitor at last year's Detour. He points to the grassroots development of Hong Kong's design industry in the cheap loft spaces of Hong Kong's industrial areas as evidence that creative talent thrives with minimal intervention. "I'm very glad PMQ is happening, but it doesn't have to be so complicated. Give them cheap rent, water and electricity and these creative guys can do brilliant things."

But Tam insists that "just providing space for designers' studios is not enough. There needs to be an active effort to incubate young design talent and promote local design talent," he says. "What we're trying to achieve is quite a complex programme. We want retail traffic but we don't want it to be a shopping arcade, and we want designers to have studios but we don't want them to close their doors. It will take some time to find the right approach, but when we do, it will be worth it." pmq.org.hk 