

A Study on  
Historical and Architectural Context  
of  
**Wan Chai Market**



The Hong Kong Institute of Architects

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## 1.0 The history of two fatal endings

The historical significance of Wan Chai Market may better be understood by first examining the early history of its predecessor, the former Wan Chai Market, which was built as early in c.1858 and finally demolished in 1937. The demolition of the former market building is regarded by the writer as the **first fatal ending** in the historical development of Wan Chai Market. Disappointedly again, it has been learned that the **second fatal ending** of Wan Chai Market will be happened very soon.



The Wanchai Market - a building style of “Streamlined Moderne” - will be facing another fatal ending in its historical development.

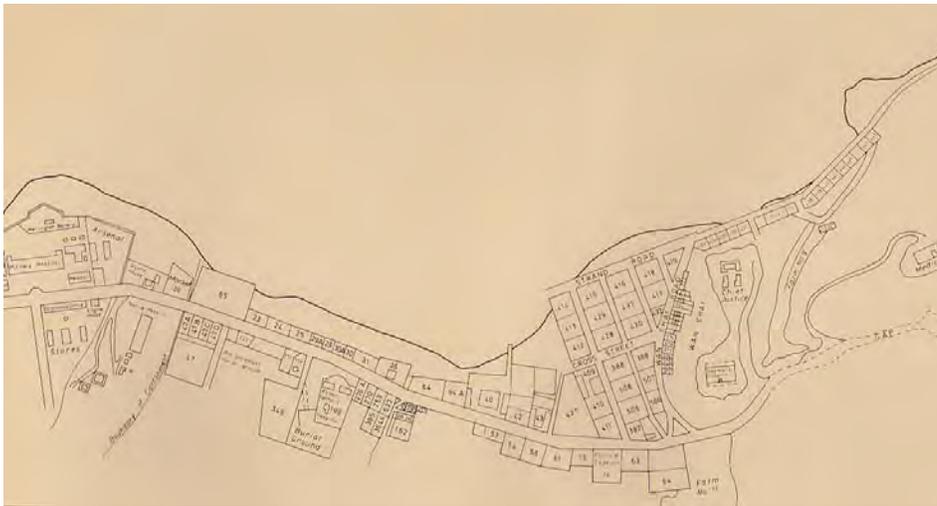


Photo taken in 1910 shows the former Wan Chai Market (at right) in Queen's Road East. The existing Wan Chai Market is at the opposite today.

## 1.1 The chronological history related to the site context

**Dating back to 1840s** - after the British administrative offices and barracks had settled down in Central (中環) and Admiralty respectively, Wan Chai, used to call “Lower Circuit” (下環) began to develop into a residential and business hub at the eastern stretch of Queen’s Road.

Major business firms established their bases and European-style houses for the upper class clustered around “Spring Garden”, which is today the area between Spring Garden Lane and the foothill along Wan Chai Road.



Map at 1856 delineates Spring Garden and Queen’s Road – the East Praya. The former Wan Chai Market had not been appeared until 1858.



Map at 1889 marks the original site of the former Wan Chai Market.

**In 1850s** - the increase of inhabitants, especially the middle-class, in the area called for building the former Wan Chai Market which was completed in 1858. The building lay at the junction of Queen’s Road and Wan Chai Road the location of which was very

prominent. In fact, the site was so situated that it should be easily accessible to the upper/middle-class people who came from the Spring Garden.



The site of Wan Chai Market was prominent. Note that an obelisk was erected at the road junction (at right) marking the eastern end of Queen's Road.

According to recorded photos, the former Wan Chai Market revealed a design and construction style that tailored for the foreigners' taste and reflected a strong Colonial influence. The wall was made in plastered masonry on which a pitched tiled roof was rested. The whole design looked bourgeois by referring to the classical arches, keystones, high window sills and the overhung cornice. This was definitely a "City-Super" of the classical version for the upper/middle-class at that time!

One essential aspect of the historical significance is that the former Wan Chai Market had once been **the earliest built indoor market of Colonial style in the history of Hong Kong** according to the findings so far.



Queen's Road East, c.1905.



Spring Garden Lane, c.1925.

**After 1860** - due to the occupation of barracks and naval yards in Admiralty resulting in the problem of "bottle-neck" for traffic in the area, the economic mobility between Wan Chai and Central was found to be relatively inconvenient. Major commercial establishments and associated foreigners moved out from Wan Chai leaving more lands being taken up by the Chinese people. The Chinese population then grew resulting in the demand for more lands for Chinese quarter and public facilities. Since then, **the former Wan Chai Market had therefore become more popular in role and function with the local people.**



Photo taken in c.1880, note that the former Wan Chai Market is shown near the bottom centre (with three little arches and slant roof).

**1880s - 1930s**, continual reclamations took place over the years. The coastline was extended from the original Johnston Road in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the northern edge of Gloucester Road in 1930s. The change resulted in a greater demand of market places when the population continued to soar in the district. A new and larger market building was required to replace with the old and small one to cope with the need.



Map in 1940s shows the new Wan Chai Market had already been in place opposite to the former site.

**In 1937**, the new Wan Chai Market of the “contemporary” design was completed at the opposite site of the former Wan Chai Market. **The new market inherited the original role and function of the former market.**

Compared to the conserved Post Office just at the opposite edge over the Queen’s Road East, the former Wan Chai Market was not fortunate enough for being conserved. The

building was demolished in 1937, having the replacement by the new one in the same year. This marked the **first fatal ending of the historical development of Wan Chai Market.**

The Central Market of the similar modern style was completed in Central in the same year of the completion of the new Wan Chai Market. In the earlier years, there were several market buildings completed in town such as Causeway Bay Market (1904), Kowloon Market (1911) and Western Market in (1906) according to the government record. Most of these market buildings are still existed except for the Kowloon Market but not long for the Wan Chai Market as well.

	Causeway Bay Market	Western Market	Kowloon Market	Central Market	Wan Chai Market
Completion	1904	1906	1911	1937	1937
Heritage Grade	3	Declared Monument	3	3	3

Heritage grading for existing market buildings (Information from Antiquities and Monuments Office).

**During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War** – according to a research, an old stall owner in the Wan Chai market told that the **Japanese troop once occupied the basement of Wan Chai Market for the storage of corpses during the war period!**

**In 1961**, Wan Chai Market had undergone a major renovation to improve its facilities and environment in order to compete with other market places in the district.

**In 1995**, the former Land Development Corporation obtained an approval from Town Planning Board for a proposed large-scale commercial redevelopment project having a joint venture with a private developer. According to the approved plan, one can obviously see a complete rezoning of the area including a high-density development proposed at the current site of the Wan Chai Market – that imply its demolition!

The forthcoming demolition will **mark the second fatal ending of the historical development of Wan Chai Market and the ending of its almost 150-year history.**

## **1.2 Historical significance**

The Wan Chai Market has a high value of historical significance because:

- It embraces a nearly 150-year history and is a symbolic representation of the former Wan Chai Market, which had once been the earliest built indoor market of Colonial style in the history of Hong Kong;
- The existing Wan Chai Market has already inherited the role and function of the former Wan Chai Market for 67 years;
- The existing site had once been a historical landmark of Wan Chai which witnessed the 150-year development of the district;
- It had witnessed a historic event – the Japanese troop had once occupied the basement for the storage of corpses!
- 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.

## **1.3 Contextual significance**

The Wan Chai Market has a high value of contextual significance because:

- It is a key component amongst other surviving heritage sites such as the nearby traditional street market, the declared Post Office, Hung Shing Temple, Pak Tai Temple, the Blue House, the pre-war tenement houses and Nam Kwu Toi Residence. A linkage of these heritage sites can create a strong heritage characteristic of the Wan Chai district;
- These heritage sites possess a rich diversity of social, architectural and historical significance which is of the interest of the general public, tourists and academics;
- The Wan Chai Market and the other heritage sites are characterized by a sense of human scale, the pre-war history, easy accessibility as well as a local familiarity. They all contribute to a formation of a low-dense and comfortable built-environment of the district.

## 2.0 The Architecture

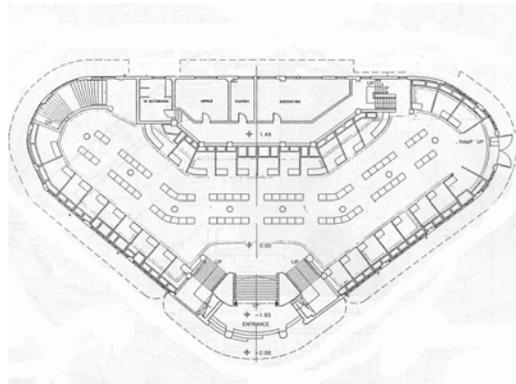
### 2.1 Design of Streamlined Moderne

The design of Wan Chai 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.**

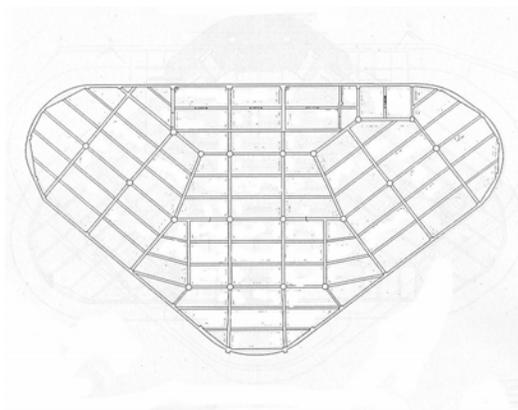


Buildings of the similar architectural style to Wan Chai Market are also found in London. They were also completed in 1930s at the same period.

The Wan Chai Market was characterized by the design of 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. Bearing with less decorative motifs 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, which are all consistently identified in Wan Chai Market.** The round corners also appear to be friendly in the sense of environmental and urban design.



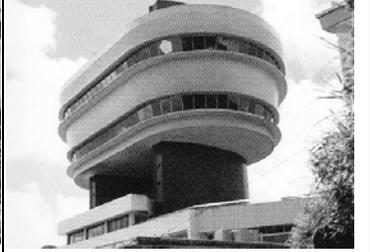
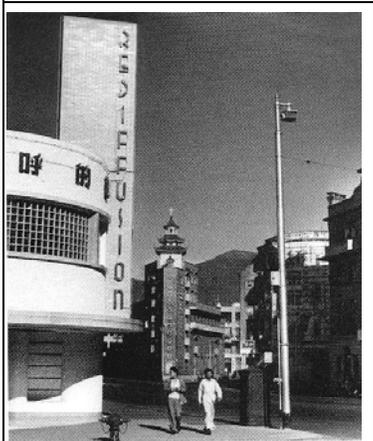
Symmetrical plan with round corners.



Structural simplicity using beams and columns to suit for flexible functions of market.

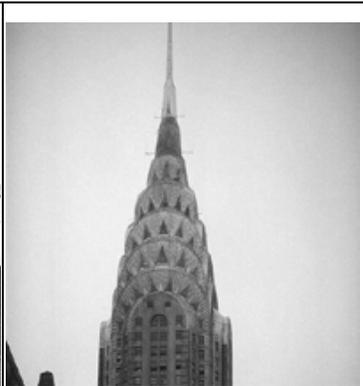
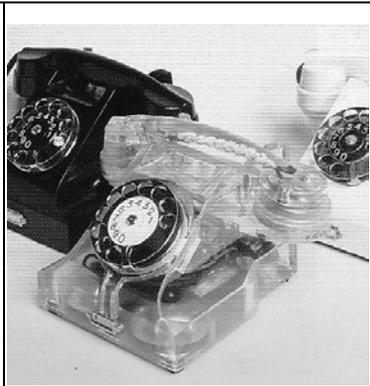
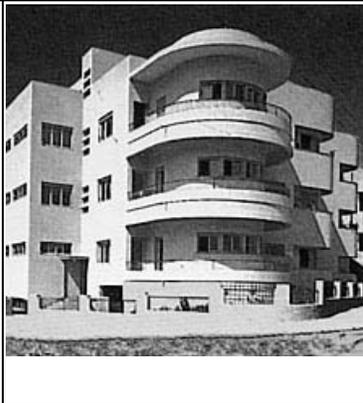
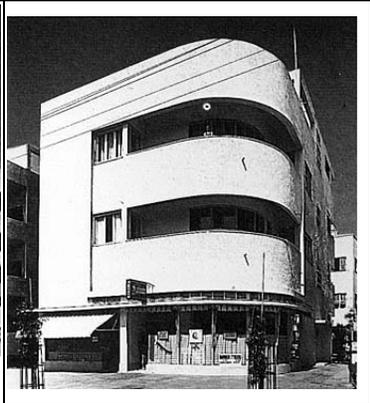
In Hong Kong, the trace of Streamlined Moderne has almost been extinguished except for the recalling by two remaining examples - Wan Chai Market and Central Market. Other findings can only be referenced to photographic records.

**Local examples of Streamlined Moderne:**

		
<p>Wan Chai Market (1937)</p>	<p>A past steamed ferry in 1930s</p>	<p>The past Old Peak in 1960s</p>
		
<p>The past Rediffusion Building (at left) in Hennessy Road in 1949. Note the Art Deco sign.</p>	<p>Central Market (1937)</p>	

Apart from architecture, the prevailing global style was, in fact, predominant mainly in the designs of consumer products and transport vehicles such as aero-planes, locomotives, boat, automobiles and etc.

**Overseas examples of Streamlined Moderne:**

 <p>1930s, its front end, rounded with rivets, resembles a helmet.</p>		
<p>Streamlined locomotive – the City of Salina M1000 in mid-1930s.</p>	<p>William Van Alen’s Chrysler Building,, NY completed in 1930.</p>	<p>Telephone in c1932-37 designed by Ericsson company in Sweden.</p>
		

Streamlined Villas in Tel Aviv in 1930s.

The Wan Chai Market was constructed by steel-framing concrete for columns and beams with simple and flexible layout to fit for the market functions and environments. According to an official record, the steel frames were shipped from United Kingdom. The arrival of the materials had been delayed which led to the late completion of the market. **The use of steel-framing concrete in the construction technique was considered as being advanced at that period.** Such technology could be comparable with that of the old Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank completed in 1935, in which the steel-framing construction was also employed.

## 2.2 Architectural significance

Wan Chai Market has a high value of architectural significance because:

- It is the earliest building in Hong Kong designed with the contemporary architectural style in 1930s, i.e. Streamlined Moderne, which was prevailing internationally at that period.
- 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.
- It is one of the few earliest buildings in Hong Kong constructed by steel framing concrete, which was considered as being advanced at that period.

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