

Hard to Say Goodbye

Residents treasure neighbourly bonds at Wah Fu Estate

By John Cheng, Godric Leung, Edith Lin, Stella Tsang





The sky turns pink as the sun slowly approaches the horizon of the South China Sea, casting a glow on the concrete blocks of the nearby Wah Fu Estate. Along the long narrow corridor in Wah Mei House, the air is filled with the comforting smell of tomato and potato soup, and the sound of the footsteps of parents heading home and the laughter of children.

“We’d play hide-and-seek together in a group of friends, along this corridor when we were in primary school,” says 47-year-old Francis Ng Chor-kee, fondly recalling his childhood on the estate.

To Ng and others who were born and raised in Wah Fu Estate, the public housing estate, built 47 years ago and located next to Kellett Bay, Pok Fu Lam in the Southern District, is a unique place that has witnessed the lives of different generations of Hong Kong people.

Ng who lived on the estate for 30 years, says that in the past, people came from similar backgrounds and had similar living conditions. They were not as well-off as they are now but the goal of every family was relatively simple and clear. They mainly focused on working hard and taking good care of their children.

The residents’ lives were simple but contented says 65-year-old Kwok Yau-ming, president of Wah Fu Estate Credit Union. “We didn’t have much entertainment after work, so we simply asked around for neighbours to come and play mahjong. We didn’t even need to close our doors like we do now.”

Friends and neighbours would come out and chat in the corridors after dinner. On Saturdays and Sundays, people from the grocery stores even came up to sell soft drinks and steamed rice cakes.

There were strong bonds between residents, which were not dependant on any monetary exchange.

Today, Kwok runs the Wah Fu Estate Credit Union and also organises activities for the neighbours on a voluntary basis from time to time. “One doesn’t serve the community for money. Just do what you can. We are in the same community, so as long as everyone is happy, we don’t need to talk about money,” he says.

Apart from the close relationship between residents, shopowners and workers have also built strong ties with their customers. Yuen Siu-ye, daughter of the owner of Ngan Dao Café, helps out with the family business. She feels deeply connected with the customers. Yuen says there was once a customer who would visit the café every Saturday and would give every staff member a gift.

She also has different interactions with



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Residents of Wah Fu Estate put many statues of Chinese gods near the beach of Waterfall Bay.

her customers. “Sometimes, I nickname them,” Yuen laughs, “I’ve named a man ‘Richard’ and call a granny ‘pretty girl’, which makes them really happy.”

Yet, as time goes by, the neighbourhood ties have changed as old families move out, and new families move in. “I even don’t know the name of my new neighbour,” says 67-year-old Chan Kar-chun. What is more, he cannot get along with his new neighbour.

Chan says he once helped to collect the mail for his neighbour when the postman came, but his neighbour later scolded him for being too nosy. He feels bad that relationships have changed.

At the same time, structural problems have appeared in the ageing Wah Fu Estate. There are water leakages and exposed reinforcing steel. Several rounds of renovations have been carried out, such as adding steel bars to support the building and installing elevators. However, rumours about redevelopment of Wah Fu Estate spread nonetheless.

The rumours stopped in 2008, when the Housing Authority confirmed that Wah Fu Estate was still structurally safe and declared it would not be demolished

within 15 years. This seemed to have answered the queries of residents at the time.

That changed with the 2014 Policy Address, when it was announced that the government is considering extending the MTR’s South Island Line (West) project. As a result, it has decided to lift the development moratorium on the south of Pok Fu Lam, the area close to Wah Fu Estate. It also stated that the area will be used for the future redevelopment of Wah Fu Estate. Although the Housing Authority is still conducting a technical assessment to examine the possibility of such a move, residents have already expressed different concerns.

Julian Au Lap-sing, the Southern District Councilor (Wah Fu Estate-1), has talked to elderly residents on the estate. He discovered that some hope to delay the redevelopment because they want to spend their remaining years peacefully at home. “Actually they do not want to move, but they understand that redevelopment is inevitable,” Au says.

Resident Chan Kar-chun says he has no choice but to accept the redevelopment. “The demolition really depends on

[the government],” he says, “I will definitely miss this place.” He cherishes the fact he can rent a place to live with good air quality and beautiful scenery for less than HK\$2,000 a month and thinks he will probably not be able to find another home like this again.

Legislator Aron Kwok Wai-ming, who started the Wah Fu Estate Redevelopment Concern Group, believes redevelopment is necessary for the continuous development of society as a whole. “New families will move in, which will bring new vigour to the public housing estate,” he says.

Boyhood resident Francis Ng Chor-kee says it is always hard to strike a balance between development and conservation. “Do we really need to forcefully preserve memories and waste the opportunities for development?” he asks. “I think it is enough if the memories can be kept in the world in another form. [Redevelopment of an old estate] is just like life and death.” Ng thinks it will be a pity when Wah Fu Estate is gone, but he understands there is no way to avoid it.

Society may not stand still for one estate housing ordinary people, but the residents will retain the memories and the ties built over the years. Wah Fu Estate is special to each one of them. The tangible things will be demolished but the intangible things will live on. ▣

Edited by Sharon Lee

