

LEAVE US ALONE

by Candy Chin Hoi-shan and Vinky Wong Hiu-ying

There were hugs, there were tears and there was anger. For two nights at the end of January, hundreds of music fans gathered at Hidden Agenda Live House for the *Ma Sheung Fung* concert. "*Ma Sheung Fung*" means imminently closing down, and the show was a farewell to Hidden Agenda's 2,000 square feet space in a Kwun Tong industrial building.

Situated in what has become a centre for independent music in Hong Kong, Hidden Agenda was set up as a place for bands to rehearse and hold gigs. The live house opened for business in Ko Leung Industrial Building in early 2009. Under a year later, it received a lawyer's letter. The owner of the industrial building was terminating the lease and Hidden Agenda had a month to move out. The owner wanted to redevelop the building for commercial use and let it out at a much higher rent.

But Hidden Agenda were not taking it lying down, "We will fight for our interests," Hidden Agenda's Steveo Hui Chung-wo told the crowd at the

Ma Sheung Fung gig. More than 20 local indie bands performed to show their support.

Hui believes his group fell victim to the government's policy to revitalise and redevelop old industrial buildings. In his policy address last year, Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-Kuen announced measures to encourage owners of old industrial units to redevelop them by making it easier to convert their use to non-industrial purposes. The idea was to turn vacant units into spaces that could be used by the so-called "six pillar industries".

The measures came into effect in April this year and Dick Lo Wai-tak, Sales Director of Centaline Property, says the average rent for industrial units in Kwun Tong has risen 21 percent after the policy was announced.

The Creative and Cultural Industry is one of the six pillar industries the government says should benefit from the policy, but Hidden Agenda's Hui takes a different view, "The government only wants to make money. It never

ever pays attention to the development of art," he says.

According to Hui, industrial buildings play an important role in art development in Hong Kong, because they are the only spaces artists have. Many local artists including painters, street artists, sculptors, bands and other performance artists have settled in industrial buildings, turning areas such as Kwun Tong and Fo Tan into enclaves for independent music and the visual arts.

Hui says industrial buildings are ideal spaces for artists, especially those who are just starting up. "All art activities, in their initial stage, need spaces like industrial blocks to develop. They have lower rent and greater flexibility in management." Hidden Agenda's new space, in another industrial building in Kowloon Bay, is 4,000 square feet and rental costs \$10,000 or \$2.5 per square foot.

But apart from the cheap rent, a major attraction of industrial buildings is their relatively lax management.

Bands cannot play in residential buildings as neighbours would complain about the noise, especially as most band members have day jobs and can only play at night.

Hui says bands performing or rehearsing in industrial buildings do not have to worry about keeping the volume down as they are pretty empty at night except for the artists.

However, these havens for performers and artists may not be here to stay. With the government's policy on revitalising industrial buildings, there is a high probability that owners would rather apply for redevelopment than continue to lease out their empty flats to artists. "The owners would probably raise the rent by between 40 and 50 per cent after redevelopment or conversion," says Centaline's Dick Lo. He predicts the rent will continue to rise and the owners will aim to let the spaces out to big enterprises for Grade-A offices or even as company headquarters.

Artists will have to either tolerate the soaring rent, or look for a new

place, or wait to be evicted. Many of them are now saying that a policy that was supposed to help provide suitable land and premises to meet the needs of the cultural and creative industries is forcing them out.

Horace Tse Kin-man, managing director of Loft Stage, a theatre production and rehearsal centre, says the government only wants to “make good use of the land in Hong Kong” to make an enormous profit.

Tse says he is disappointed that the government’s actions only benefit landlords and businessmen, but do not take the development of art in Hong Kong into consideration. For Tse, the lack of space is a major obstacle to that development.

Tse wishes the government would either leave the industrial buildings alone, or legitimise the renting of industrial buildings to arts and cultural groups. What he does not want is another art centre like the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (JCCAC), which is located in a revitalised industrial building in Shek Kip Mei.

“It may not work even if there are more centres like JCCAC,” Tse warns, “Things that are driven by



Karen Kwok Ka-yun

Local artists have settled in places such as Kwun Tong and Fo Tan, yet they may not be able to stay there for long.

the government may not match the ideas of artists. Don’t be happy if the government says it will assist you.”

Critics of the centre, such as Wong Chun-kwok say the Shek Kip Mei site has become too commercial and that there are too many restrictions, including strict limits on audience sizes. Wong is the spokesperson for Revitalisation Independence Partnership, or R.I.P., a group set up by active industrial building artists.



Vinyl Wong Hin-ying

Located in an industrial building, Hidden Agenda is a place for bands to rehearse and hold gigs.

The lack of space for artists is not a new issue.

Back in 1998, the government leased out of one its disused offices in Oil Street, North Point at cheap rents. This attracted around 30 artists who made it their base and held art fairs and exhibitions. The Oil Street site quickly become an art village. However, a year later the government refused to renew the leases due to “economic concerns”.

The artists and art organisations started the *Save Oil Street* campaign, which succeeded in persuading the

government to consign the old Cattle Depot in Ngau Tau Kok as the new base for the artists who were forced out of Oil Street. More than a decade after the Oil Street campaign, the artists have formed the Revitalisation Independence Partnership to fight for the space to operate.

The group’s name, R.I.P. for short, is no accident. It represents what the artists believe the government’s revitalisation policy is doing to them.

“We are trouble-makers,” states R.I.P.’s Wong Chun-kwok.

R.I.P. works as a support group to unite individual art practitioners or small groups to fight against rent rises and evictions triggered by the revitalisation policy.

After Hidden Agenda received its eviction notice, R.I.P. organised a march against the revitalisation policy. Up to 400 people, most of them artists working in industrial buildings, marched to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) to express their dissatisfaction with the policy. They also held street concerts to draw the public’s attention to the issue, and called meetings with government officials.



Courtesy of R.I.P.

R.I.P. held street concerts to draw the public’s attention to the revitalisation policy.

R.I.P. met Secretary for Development Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor in March. “It is only a one-sided meeting that did not help with anything at all,” says Wong, “She banned all our suggestions directly.” He says Lam encouraged art practitioners to rent commercial buildings, which cost at least \$12 per square foot, instead.

Wong’s current rent for the industrial building unit he uses is just \$4.6 per square foot. He would have to pay three times what he does now if he were to move into a commercial unit of the same size. “The government doesn’t really understand what we need,” he says.

The HKADC is currently conducting a survey on the impact of the revitalisation policy on the arts and cultural sector. It aims to collect information on the occupancy of industrial buildings for art and creative activities, the situation of art practitioners currently working in industrial buildings and the potential demand for use, as well as considerations on using industrial buildings.

But Wong has dismissed the HKADC’s efforts, “The Council has done nothing to promote the survey. Many artists have never heard of it,” he says, “The survey could hardly reflect the truth.” R.I.P. circulated the survey themselves through channels such as Facebook.

The HKADC says it has announced the survey via different channels like Chinese and English newspapers, culture magazines, its own website and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Artists like Wong would like to see the HKADC take a more active role in promoting policies that advance the development of Hong Kong’s arts and culture. But Angela Yu, planning and research manager for the HKADC, says the body’s actions are restricted by its official role, “Being a statutory body of the government, what we do is to forward the results of the survey to relevant bureaus for their reference.” The HKADC has no idea about what follow-up actions the bureaus will take.

They have moved from Oil Street to the Cattle Depot, to Shek Kip Mei, Fo Tan and Kwun Tong, but perhaps what the local artists want is simply a place to settle, so they can continue their work. Instead, they seem to be shunted from one place to another, chasing around Hong Kong in a restless search for their paradise. They may not know where it is, but they do know one thing.

“Everything always withers once our government revitalises it,” says Hidden Agenda’s Steveo Hui, “I don’t want any help from the government. All I want is space. Please leave me alone.”