

BUILDING A VISION

A new art studio in Wan Chai is a rare and very welcome example of culture trumping commercialism, writes Mary Agnew.

"THIS IS not a historical archive or a visual arts archive," says Alvin Yip, curator of the Wan Chai Visual Archive. "The closest thing I can think of is that it's like a Wan Chai Facebook page."

This is a unique way of looking at the aluminium-clad rooms that occupy the first floor of a large Wan Chai block of flats. The building is labelled for redevelopment, but is currently filled with the work of various community-focused exhibitions. According to Carl Gouw, property developer and director of the Wan Chai Visual Archive, there are a lot of unused buildings in Hong Kong. Commercial property developers regularly buy up buildings with the intention of building them in the future, but in the interim they remain empty.

This is the very state that he found the building which now houses the recently opened archive. His company, Goldig Investment Group, purchased the building and proposed to develop it into a boutique hotel within two to three years. But Gouw saw the opportunity to create a project that would not only give a purpose to the building, but enrich the cultural integrity of the community at large. He decided to join forces with Yip, who is also an assistant professor at Hong Kong Poly University's School of Design, and engage in community-focused art projects.

One such project, Urban Narratives, involved asking 35 postgraduate students from Moscow to create iPhone apps with Wan Chai as their point of origin. One app identified all the outdoor spots that one could best fly a kite,



Main image: Alvin Yip and Carl Gouw outside the Wan Chai Visual Archive building and some of the projects on display including Mute Works (top).

AT A GLANCE

WHAT: Wan Chai Visual Archive
WHERE: 5-9 Hing Wan St. Wan Chai
WHY: To help the local community understand, through art, the cultural changes brought about by urban development
MORE: visualarchive.hk
 Free admission



while another looked at the rhythms of the area and created a dance map app.

A second project, Mute Works, brought together members of the deaf community and attached LED lights to their hands; they were then asked to "talk" about Wan Chai through sign language, resulting in beautiful images.

However, both Gouw and Yip agree that the purpose of the archive is not to create commercial or even visually impressive works. While they are engaging artists to participate and create works, there is a joint authorship with the community that negates traditional artistic values. The goal is the creative process itself and the involvement of the participants.

"I look at it as a recreation of the family room in anyone's home, but for the community," says Yip. "A recreation of the room where you store your memories, so each workshop is about the moment that we engage the community. That is the most important part."

The life span of the archive is uncertain, but that is something they have known from the start. It's a shame to think that something non-profit and community focused is inevitably unsustainable in one location, but there is also the benefit of complete autonomy

from government funding. For now, rent from the flats above finance the project, but when the bulldozers and jack-hammers move in, the tenants and archive will have to move out.

When asked if they have plans to continue with this or similar projects after the final development of the site goes underway, Gouw admits that's something they are considering.

"We want to carry on," he says. "This always was going to be our dilemma. From our side, we will explore more ways of being a business but at the same time try to interface with art, culture and community."

Of course, the project can't be seen as a completely altruistic venture. There is a currency for the developer in the creation of such a project. Its creation ups the area's cool factor, raising the credentials of the final development of the site and attracting a higher socio-economic client.

A chic bar has opened next door. But with hundreds of buildings lying fallow in a city where space is at an all-time premium, a project such as this bridges the gap between faceless commercial developers and local businesses and communities that are so often ignored in the name of progress. **S**

POSTER BOY WONDER

Pop culture artist Olly Moss is making waves with his retro film posters, writes Ben Marks.

THE DESIGNER and illustrator Olly Moss likes to keep things simple. Sort of. His newest project for Mondo - the limited-edition art print arm of the Alamo Drafthouse theater chain in Austin, Texas - is a pair of posters for the film *Captain America*, which opened in Hong Kong yesterday. Resembling propaganda fliers from World War II, each poster is 18 by 24 inches and screen-printed in a run of 375. They are expected to sell out within minutes of going on sale.

"I've liked *Captain America* since I read Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch's *The Ultimates* [graphic novel]," Moss says. "I'm also a massive fan of 1940s propaganda posters, so it was a fun challenge to try and capture the style and attitude of that era."

One of the prints is dark and heroic, obviously the work of Allied propagandists. "A Is for Victory," it playfully proclaims. This is Moss at his finest - bold graphics, serious inspiration and a wry sense of humor. But this poster's evil twin is the apparent handiwork of an Axis artist, who has turned the captain's mighty shield into an arrow-pierced target. As for its Nazi-style lettering, in German no less, it's downright creepy.

Moss's "Captain America" prints leave the hipster-cool of his Mondo "Star Wars" posters very far behind. Released in late 2010, each three-color screen print in that trilogy was dominated by a waist-up outline of C-3PO, Boba Fett and Darth Vader, respectively. The coral, gold and teal voids created by their outlines were crammed with information, encapsulating, if not summarizing, *Stars Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. The twin suns of Tatooine doubled as C-3PO's eyes; Bespin's Cloud City mirrored the bounty hunter's mask; the forests of Endor ended in branches that drew in details of Vader's helmet.

Typically, Moss is sanguine about such comparisons. "It's obvious when I'm paying homage to Saul Bass and when I'm not," he says. But Justin Ishmael, Mondo's creative director, is frustrated by the Bass connection. "People compare him with Saul Bass, but he has more range. Only Moss does Moss." **S**



Film posters by British illustrator Olly Moss are becoming collector's items.



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