

Historic Building Appraisal
St. Joseph's Church
Ma On Shan Tsuen Road, Sha Tin, N.T.

For decades, the mountain village in Ma On Shan was catered to by two churches – one Catholic church whilst the other a Lutheran church, which offered food and supplies to the miners and their families. St. Joseph's Church (聖若瑟堂) was built in 1952 with the advice of a Belgian father, Eleutherius Van Hoye (胡文義神父) who could speak Mandarin and some other languages. Expelled from China (Hubei province) the previous year, Fr. Van Hoye kept serving in Ma On Shan where groups of refugees from China found work, in an iron mine. St. Joseph's Church is a component of a Catholic building complex established in the 1950s, including a church, a school, a clinic and a convent standing on the top of a small hill. *Historical Interest*

The Ma On Shan Iron Mine, opened in 1906, developed on a vast scale shortly after the Second World War when the refugees who flooded in from all over China provided workforce for the extraction of deposits. Also, a great change in the methods of iron ore mining took place in Ma On Shan in 1953, when underground mining was resorted to. These led to great increases in the output of iron ore. Consequently, the small village of Ma On Shan Tsuen was swamped with new arrivals, nearly all of them came from China. With them, the miners brought their families to live in the area.

At the inauguration of St. Joseph's Church on 25 April 1952, the Catholic community numbered scarcely a dozen. Within just six years, the number of Catholics has risen to 800. Every Sunday, the Church was filled to capacity and an evening service was introduced for those who could not attend the morning mass. With the help of sisters of Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (瑪利亞方濟各傳教修會), St. Joseph's Primary School (聖若瑟小學校) was set up adjacent to the church, followed later by a convent (修道院) built next to the school playground, a kindergarten and a small clinic. The church was promoted into a parish in 1955.

From the Catholic as well as the Lutheran churches, the miners often obtained relief food or clothing which was of great help to them, who had to eke out their living and provide the main source of income for their families. The churches were places where they listened to the sermon. Occasionally, they had film-shows provided by the churches. The churches also provided free education to their children. For economic reasons the mine ceased operation as from 1976. The population of the village decreased with the departure of the miners and their families since then. The Sunday mass in St. Joseph's Church ceased in 1999, and the church complex became vacant.

The entrance to the church compound is situated at the top of a flight of steps leading up from the village. The entrance is built of two granite rubble piers supporting a curved pediment inscribed “天主堂” surmounted by a bottony cross, that is a cross with the ends of the arms shaped like trefoils. The gate is a simple metal gate of wire mesh and steel framing.

*Architectural
Merit*

The church itself is a simple single-storey pitched roof building built of rendered mud walls strengthened at intervals by buttresses or piers (actually protruding portal frames). The pointed metal framed lancet windows are protected from the weather by hood mouldings. The main entrance is at the south-east end of the church and consists of a pair of wooden glazed and paneled doors with fanlight protected by an enclosed porch. The Chinese characters “天主堂” are inscribed over the doorway. Another bottony cross is placed at the apex of the south-east gable wall.

Internally, the church has a T-shaped plan consisting of a nave, a chancel, small rooms on either side, with arched openings in the dividing walls. At the south-east end of the nave there is an organ-loft reached by a simple staircase with ornamental ironwork balustrading. The underside of the corrugated sheet roof is exposed showing the purlins and portal frames. The walls are plastered and painted, with a chequered tiled dado at the north-west end. The floor is screeded. Furnishings consist of wooden pews, wooden stands and shelves, ceiling fans, and a simple altar on a raised dais at the north-west end. Dampness has caused partial collapse of internal walls.

The other buildings in the compound comprising the priest’s house, primary school, latrines and convent are simple one-storey buildings with pitched or flat roofs, plastered walls some with granite rubble plinths, tiled floors, open verandahs, metal windows, and metal and wooden doors. Decorative features include a shrine to the Virgin Mary, a stair-shaped mosaic plaque of the Madonna and Child over the school office entrance, and a carved name plaque over the school entrance.

Although incomparable with other Roman Catholic churches at urban area in Hong Kong, St. Joseph’s Church is a rare piece of built heritage with considerable historic interest in former Ma On Shan Mine, partly because it occupies an eye-catching location of a hill top at the village and partly because other residential houses are only small and short squatter area. The building itself and the surroundings are maintained in a satisfactory state and the site still retains its authentic appearance.

*Rarity,
Built Heritage
Value &
Authenticity*

For a long time, materials and goods distributed by the Catholic were of great help to the miners, many of them become Catholics converts. During end-1940s and early 1950s, the majority of miners and their families were

*Social Value
& Local
Interest*

from mainland China and seldom made contact with local people outside. St. Joseph's Church therefore played an important role as the centre of religion, education and social activities of Ma On Shan villagers for decades. Their lives got improved because of the missionaries. Therefore the building has a high local interest.

The eye-catching splendour of the church also makes itself a choice for location filming for film production. Several scenes of the film *Tactical Unit - Comrades in Arms* (機動部隊—同袍) (2009) directed by Law Wing-cheong were shot at the church. Such films make Hong Kong people more familiar with the building.

St. Joseph's Primary School, the small clinic and the convent built within the same period of time were annexed to St. Joseph's Church and formed a catholic church complex. Also this complex has group value with several historic buildings inside the mine, such as Lutheran Yan Kwong Church (信義會恩光堂), mineral preparation plant (選礦廠), and the Exterior wall of Mines 110 ML and 240 ML (110ML 及 240ML 礦洞外牆). Due to its unique historical value, the site was proposed to be developed as a a cultural and eco-tourism destination include visiting the abandoned iron mine, viewing geology, rocks and minerals in the area, and villages, churches and schools. **Group Value**

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