The papers in this session present a number of contemporary approaches to museum making all of which began with the presence of an historic site or building (or both). Together they raise a range of ideas and questions about the visions of use behind the new museums and the design solutions adopted.

The Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence

Speaker: Mr Kenneth Tam Si Wai, Chief Heritage Manager, Antiquities and Monuments Office, LCSD, Hong Kong

A very concealed fort located on top of the Lye Yue Mun headland on the seaward side struck me that it had the potential to become a field museum. The fort, considered as “The Jewel of the Crown” of the headland, was in a state of dilapidation but structurally intact and appeared to be in good condition. It was a fine example of Victorian fortification and also a good example of the art of the architects and engineers of that era. In mid-90s, the Government decided to revitalize the structure to a self-contained museum. As the architect of the project, my first reaction was “how to attract visitors to come to the museum?” particularly as the fort was originally designed to discourage people coming from where the opposite intention. As well as illustrating the story of this unique heritage project, it is hoped that the presentation will offer insights to others confronted with similar problems in dealing with historical buildings and structures.

Discover the fascinating history of the historic Fireboat Alexander Grantham

Speaker: Mr Jonathan Tse, Conservation Office, LCSD, Hong Kong

In 2002, LCSD acquired the Fireboat Alexander Grantham as a collection item after 49 years of service. With a firm commitment to ‘responsible stewardship and good preservation practice’, the acquisition serves to create a ‘living history’ experience to the public. By exhibiting the vessel on land, the public now can readily access a part of the history that was previously the preserve of sea captains. The experience in converting the fireboat into a live exhibit demonstrates how the complex issues of site constraints, layout design, preservation treatment, lifting and installation, and visitors’ accessibility could be resolved by the concerted efforts of various work parties without compromising the historic integrity of the vessel. The Fireboat Alexander Grantham is now not only the largest artifact in our museum collection, but also an oversized object which allows visitors to walk through and view each of her components in their natural context. The presentation will address how we adopted the ‘exhibition as communicator’ approach to promote effective communication between people and the object, as well as to share our experience in enhancing the overall accessibility of the display to prepare for the visitation by various groups.