**SCMP Article**

**Wall collapse inquiry must be open, thorough**

The Sunday before last, a section of the historic married inspectors’ quarters at the Central Police Station compound collapsed. As chairman of the advisory committee to this Jockey Club-managed project, I visited the site soon after, and I have had plenty of media calls about it.

This incident took place soon after a “green” roof at City University collapsed, and just a few days before the report on lead in drinking water came out. In all these cases, the media and the public want someone to blame.

And they are essentially right: it is important that we identify what went wrong, and the community has a right to expect openness and accountability.

Where the Central Police Station site is concerned, I am sure everyone involved wants to find out exactly how this happened, especially as there are several other particularly old buildings at the site.

There is no point in speculating, but there are several possible factors that we all know about.

This was a 150-year-old building. If you could go back to the 1860s and tell a colonial official of that time that it would still be standing in the mid-2010s, he would probably think you were crazy.

A contractor could have made a mistake. Other construction work in the area could have affected the structure. Renovation work on the building itself might have played a role. Maybe the very wet weather was a factor.

Obviously, an independent inquiry will need to take place. And it will probably need to draw on expertise from beyond Hong Kong. The question is far more than just “who is responsible?” It will take some time – maybe a year – before we have answers.

This is perhaps frustrating for the media. In an era of 24-hour news and competitive news channels, the demand is for instant answers – look at all the chatter following an air crash. Instant answers can, in turn, lead to instant blame and punishment for the guilty. That is what viewers want and what drives ratings.

The Central Police Station incident is unlikely to be a source of this kind of entertainment for our local media. For one thing, it does not look like there is some sort of legal wrongdoing here. The Jockey Club’s role in this is essentially as a non-profit, non-government facilitator. There are no big interests – like developers – pulling strings behind the scenes.

The first priority must be safety.

With several very old buildings on this site, more checks and precautions are now essential. The safety of workers on the site and the public in the surrounding areas comes above everything else.

Then, with more information about what has happened, the experts will have to ask what to do with the remaining parts of the married inspectors’ quarters and other older structures.

This could prove to be controversial. If any of these buildings are simply too old and weak to be renovated and reused, should we just let them go? Or should we rebuild them as much as necessary, even if the result is a replica of the original structure, and therefore no longer of real heritage value?

Everyone wants this whole process to be done openly, and with community involvement.

In the meantime, it is important that the Jockey Club reaches out to the residents in the neighbourhood around the site.

Ideally, it will keep building managements and households informed – say, through leaflets – of what is happening. Perhaps, in due course, forums could be held to let local residents know how much longer work will continue.

The fact is the Central Police Station project is – at least partially – going to be significantly delayed as a result of the collapse.

This is a great pity. The preservation and reuse of the old Central Police Station, Central Magistracy and Victoria Prison complex is the most ambitious project of its sort in Hong Kong.

However, knowing the Jockey Club and other people involved, I am confident that the final result will be worth waiting for. I am sure this will still be a real treasure of Hong Kong’s built heritage.