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Wan Chai in danger of losing its unique character, academic says

Town-planning and heritage experts have warned that the sparkle of Wan Chai will fade with the pulling down of decades-old shops and residential buildings in Lee Tung Street.

Sidney Cheung Ching-hung, a Chinese University anthropologist who specializes in cultural heritage and tourism, said the character of the district would be lost if the government demolished structures that residents saw as historic symbols.

“There are people who believe that the concept of heritage and tradition should be confined to buildings that are hundreds of years old. But I believe you don’t need to rigidly stick to this old definition,” he said.

The professor added: “The most important thing is whether the buildings and activities that go on inside are considered by the residents as a vital part of that place. In that sense, residents should be the ones to decide what is or is not their heritage.”

Instead of demolishing the buildings, the government could add vitality to the area by building small museums to introduce tourists to the history of the place, Professor Cheung said.

“The Ruinas de Sao Paulo in Macau is a good example. It has become a vibrant tourist and cultural spot after the government repaved roads, built small museums and encouraged the growth of antique shops in the area.”

Ada Wong Ying-kay, who chairs Wan Chai District Council and also represents the local cultural sector, said it was frustrating that the government often recreated historic buildings in museums after pulling them down. It was time to review the policy on heritage preservation, which currently applied only to individual buildings but not areas, she added.

Alan MacDonald, town planner with consultants Urbis Ltd, said the government should refurbish rather than demolish the buildings. The government could learn from Britain, where owners and tenants were given grants to upgrade their buildings, he added.