

A forgotten treasure

Out of the Box

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ONCE IN A WHILE, I BROWSE old family photos, mostly in black and white, and be nostalgic. One particular favorite is one with my other three siblings, taken at the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens 60 years ago.

Last weekend, on one of my siblings' rare visits from the United States, we took the opportunity to find the same spot to repose. It was our first visit in 60 years.

To me, the garden has always been known as "The Governor's Garden," a name that most youngsters are probably not familiar with. It was established in 1871 and is the oldest park in Hong Kong.

It got its nickname because it was the site of Government House, which only later moved to its present site.

The gardens has undergone many rounds of renovation over the years. The old round central fountain is more octagonal now, but after some trials and errors, we did find the exact spot where we took our old photo.

The gardens still has many old trees, beautiful grounds, a 150-year-old pavilion, nostalgic photos of the park since its founding, and a bronze stature of King George VI.

Surprisingly, even on a Saturday, there were not many visitors (perhaps due to its inaccessible location, or due to the newer nearby Hong Kong Park).

The gardens is the last zoo in Hong Kong and we got to see orangutans, American flamingos and De Brazza's monkeys. Many young kids were in this section.

The zoo also brings to mind the Lai Chi Kok Amusement Park, which was at one time the biggest amusement park and zoo in the city, but it closed around 1997, another piece of lost history, living only in our collective memories.

We then walked to the Hong Kong Park. Established in 1991 on the grounds of old colonial barracks, it manages to be both modern and also preserve the relics from the past: the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware, the Marriage Registry and the Visual Arts Centre.

The Edward Youde Aviary, too, is a must-not-miss attraction. Its giant collection of birds has always been a magnet for photo enthusiasts. But the biggest find for me was the SARS Memorial, which was situated in a hidden section of the park.

Even though I was not living in Hong Kong then, the memorial did arouse my deep respect for those who gave up their lives selflessly in the battle against SARS – a dark period in the city's recent history.

To call the gardens and the park "oases of the city" may sound like a cliché, but it would also represent much truth.

Like Central Park in Manhattan and London's Hyde Park, they serve as an escape for those who want a break from city life, but right in the center of the city.

When I was a kid, going to the gardens on public holidays was a popular tradition for many families, but that does not seem to be the case today. In my view, the gardens in particular are a real forgotten treasure.

Many would probably argue that as one of the most expensive places to live in the world, it is only natural for Hong Kong to keep tearing down its past and build anew on top.

Lately, we have seen a surge of awareness among youngsters of our city's past, and we now often see pleas for conservation of different buildings and architecture.

But we must not forget that no conservation would be complete if we do not also preserve the soul behind each of them. As we worship these forgotten treasures, we should also teach the younger generation the stories beneath. Keeping the dead concrete alone would not be enough.

