

Robert Ho Hung-ngai is used to giving money away, a legacy from his grandfather Sir Robert Hotung. He tells *Barclay Crawford* about his new charity, a foundation to nurture HK's creative side

Philanthropist has art in the right place

History and philanthropy run deeply in the veins of businessman Robert Ho Hung-ngai.

Framed above him, as he outlines his multimillion-dollar vision for protecting Chinese art, culture and heritage, is a portrait of his grandfather, Sir Robert Hotung, chief comprador of Jardine Matheson, financier of the Chinese revolution and, perhaps, the founder of Hong Kong's philanthropic tradition.

"It was all started by this man, my grandfather," the 73-year-old Mr Ho says in his Wan Chai offices, pointing to the regal Eurasian figure above him.

"My grandfather always said that if you take from society, you must give back. None of his offspring have deviated from this."

Mr Ho's father and namesake, the decorated Kuomintang general and Taiwan presidential adviser Robert Ho Shai-lai, who settled in Hong Kong in 1962, always emphasised the importance of charity until he died in 1998.

Now, the latest chapter of Sir Robert's legacy is the Robert Ho Family Foundation, which has turned a personal charity guided

by whim into a legal entity with a specific, narrow focus on funding arts and culture, with the help of a US\$100 million kick-start.

"This is a first for Hong Kong—a sizeable charity focusing on arts and culture," Mr Ho said. There were plenty of foundations focusing on arts, medicine, education or the disabled, but this was the first dedicated to the arts.

There is another motive, born out of Mr Ho's failed \$500 million bid to transform the Central Police Station, Victoria Prison and former Central Magistrate's Court into an arts centre.

His vision was for a "living, breathing arts environment", as Mr Ho put it in 2004, which would preserve the oldest buildings on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon.

But the Tourist Commission, which co-ordinated the tender, rejected Mr Ho's offer to buy the buildings for a nominal \$1 in exchange for an undertaking to spend at least \$500 million on their extensive refurbishment and renovation.

While there has been no word from the government on when it will put the site back out to tender, Mr Ho believes the Robert Ho Family Foundation may give him

more clout the next time it is offered for development.

"Next time, it won't be an offer just by me, but by the foundation," he said. "But that's not to say there will be an offer. If the government says the site will be put up for commercial auction, [we would not bid] because we could not compete against bidders seeking commercial profits. Then we will say no and walk away forever."

Mr Ho is guarded when asked why the government might reject his proposal for the Central project, and whether the demolition of old buildings with heritage potential could happen in New York or London.

"Well, I wouldn't want to say anything that could get me into trouble, but in London you can't even move a window on a house of historical significance," he said. "The prison is the oldest structure still standing in Hong Kong or Kowloon and surely that is worthy of preserving?"

Does the government not want to preserve these buildings?

"I don't know what the government is thinking," Mr Ho replied. "They are beautiful buildings, which need to be preserved. Hopefully, [the government will] share my views."

Mr Ho's vision for the Central arts project is to create a space where the public can enjoy lectures, exhibitions, music events or merely enjoy a slice of Hong Kong's history.

"Most important of all is that handing the buildings over to a foundation like ours guarantees the buildings would be preserved for all to enjoy forever," he said.

However, Mr Ho admits the original proposal is now dead. "We don't know what [tender] the government is going to put out. And when they do, it will take six months to a year for a decision."

With his ambitions for the Central buildings pushed to the background, Mr Ho can now consider other elements in the arts spectrum.

The foundation's projects include sponsoring the training of 10 of the mainland's best musicians with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra.

Another is preserving kunqu opera, the traditional form of Chinese performance art that in 2001 was listed by the United Nations heritage body as one of 19 masterpieces of "oral and intangible cultural heritage".

Mr Ho also wants to sponsor an ambitious exhibition of national Chinese treasures at the British Museum—the largest ever taken out of China.

With the scope of the foundation's significant work set to broaden in the next few years, the finances required are likely to soar beyond the foundation's initial allocation of US\$100 million.

This means Mr Ho will not be taking a step away from his business interests.

"We've got to have something to give and if we don't keep working it will all be empty pretty soon."



Robert Ho Hung-ngai's grandfather, Sir Robert Hotung (in the portrait), would have been proud of his grandson's latest philanthropic gesture, the setting up of a charity to focus on arts and culture. Mr Ho has not given up hope of gaining the tender to redevelop the Central Police Station and surrounding historic buildings (below), despite his failed \$500 million bid. Photos: Jonathan Wong, Oliver Tsang, David Wong



Sir Robert Hotung (right) with Sir Shouson Chow in 1928. Photo: SCMP Picture

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Robert Ho Hung-ngai Arts patron

