

Urban Renewal Strategy (URS) Review Gist of Envisioning Stage Focus Group Discussion

Date: 8th December 2008 (Monday)
Time: 6:30 p.m. – 8:10 p.m.
Venue: HKIA Conference Room, 19/F, One Hysan Avenue, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong
Group: The Hong Kong Institute of Architects (HKIA)
No. of participants: 19

Representative of A-World Consulting Ltd. briefly introduced the background of the URS Review. Mrs. Sandra Mak, the facilitator, and Mr. Ivan Ho, the moderator and Chairman of HKIA's Planning & Lands Committee, invited participants to express their opinions, the key points of which were as follows:

1. URS Review

- 1.1 A more balanced approach should be adopted when presenting the URS Review at the Public Engagement Stage.
- 1.2 The existing URS was not a strategy; it was at most a modus operandi.
- 1.3 The URS Review should focus on the following 5 areas:
 - 1.3.1 Development density – It was a problem that Urban Renewal Authority (URA) always opted for the upper end of the development plot ratio.
 - 1.3.2 District / local identity – the URS should specify how the local characteristics and community network could be preserved.
 - 1.3.3 People-centred approach – the affected residents should be involved at an early stage.
 - 1.3.4 Mindset and approach – the present development-led approach should be substituted by a preservation-led one.
 - 1.3.5 Design excellence – design excellence should be encouraged in urban renewal projects.
- 1.4 It was necessary to consider urban morphology, a fundamentally redesigned paradigm in urban renewal emphasizing street scale and small land ownership.
- 1.5 The URS Review should examine what roles the professionals such as architects should play in the process of urban renewal. For example, whether they should be allowed to make suggestions in addition to simply following the given briefs.

2. People-centred approach

- 2.1 Under the people-centred approach, public views should be heard and

the affected residents should be involved at the initial stage of plan formulation.

3. Mode of urban renewal

- 3.1 The current “bulldozing” and “complete demolition” approach of urban renewal should be abandoned.
- 3.2 The Government should consider charging less land premium on urban renewal projects so that private developers would not focus too much on financial returns.
- 3.3 A more macro planning strategy on urban renewal was needed and the Government should seriously consider how the city should grow and change for the future.
- 3.4 URA should consider starting a pilot scheme to redevelop government sites where a low development plot ratio could be adopted as there would be no worry over the amount of compensation.
- 3.5 URA should not set physical boundaries for urban renewal projects as it might restrict the design of the projects.
- 3.6 The Government should consider how to break through inter-departmental barriers when it came to urban renewal, e.g. hawker problems could not be handled by the Development Bureau or URA alone.
- 3.7 The mode of no or low carbon emission should be assumed for urban renewal projects.
- 3.8 A new paradigm exercising optimal rather than maximum development plot ratio should be adopted for urban renewal.
- 3.9 URA now lacked, and so should develop, an urbanist-led vision for urban renewal.

4. URA and 4Rs

- 4.1 With the 4Rs in operation, URA had shown improvement when compared to the Land Development Corporation. However, the community now wanted more, e.g. URA should plan urban renewal projects on a regional or even territory-wide level.
- 4.2 While the 4Rs were fine, the problem was how they should be interpreted and implemented.
- 4.3 It was questionable whether URA was needed and its role should be fundamentally examined. The town planning systems adopted by other cities should be considered.

- 4.4 While private developers might develop up to the maximum plot ratio, URA should not follow. Instead, URA should aim to achieve public benefits and it should act as an enabler of urban renewal.
 - 4.5 URA should focus on projects that could not be carried out by private developers and involve professionals to identify the optimal development density.
 - 4.6 URA's financial sustainability could be achieved by counting on the government allotted sites in new development areas (e.g. Kai Tak) to subsidize those projects that did not generate profit.
 - 4.7 URA should work more closely with professionals, advocacy groups and affected residents.
5. Preservation and regeneration
- 5.1 Hong Kong was running out of old areas / buildings with characters. An urban renewal system focusing on preservation and regeneration should be adopted.
 - 5.2 Parts of the city could be reinvigorated without direct involvement of the Government, as shown in the Lan Kwai Fong and Soho cases where they were achieved mostly through market forces.
 - 5.3 URA should be more conscious and flexible on buildings with historical background, e.g. the Graham Street area, and should treat them differently. URA should prepare options for the public to choose whether they wanted to preserve or demolish such historical buildings.
 - 5.4 Some historical buildings should be preserved as treasures of the city to attract tourists.
6. Public education
- 6.1 The public should be educated on urban renewal and life expectancy of buildings so that they would understand that redevelopment had to take place when the time came.