

Urban Renewal Strategy (URS) Review

Gist of Envisioning Stage Focus Group Discussion

Date: 24 September 2008 (Wednesday)
Time: 6:30pm to 8:30pm
Venue: Conference Room, A-World Consulting Ltd., Unit 2402, 24/F, Admiralty Centre II, 18 Harcourt Road, Admiralty, HK
Group: Academics and professional groups (Arts & Humanities) – social workers, artists, representatives from the cultural sector and historians
No. of Participants: 14

1 Issues Identified

Issues about definition

- 1.1 The long-term vision of Hong Kong's urban development
- 1.2 Heritage conservation as part of sustainable development
- 1.3 Community relations/networks

Issues about implementation

- 1.4 Preliminary studies
- 1.5 Social impact assessment
- 1.6 Role conflicts of social workers
- 1.7 Priorities of urban renewal
- 1.8 Public engagement
- 1.9 Opinions of local residents
- 1.10 Overall social costs
- 1.11 Innovative community solutions

Other issues

- 1.12 The role and social responsibilities of the Urban Renewal Authority (URA)

2 Summary of Views

2.1 The long-term vision of Hong Kong's urban development

- 2.1.1 Prior to urban renewal planning, it should be necessary to define the long-term positioning, characteristics and local culture of Hong Kong.
- 2.1.2 Urban development should include thorough considerations on traffic aspects, environmental aspects and physical planning, and should not be discontinuous and fragmented.

2.2 Heritage conservation as part of sustainable development

2.2.1 Heritage conservation should be “living”. There should be a mechanism to enable local residents to remain at the site if they so wished.

2.2.2 It should be necessary for the public to recognise heritage conservation as an integral part of urban renewal. Moreover, heritage conservation could alleviate social problems such as wall buildings and traffic problems.

2.3 Community relations/networks

2.3.1 It should be necessary to pay attention to culture of the local community, and to preserve the culture to allow the local community to sustain. The URA should take the initiative to understand the local culture of the districts under renewal.

2.3.2 The original local culture could hardly be traced from the present completed redevelopment projects. This adversely affected cultural preservation. District culture should be living and dynamic, which should not be confined in museums.

2.4 Preliminary studies

2.4.1 Relevant studies must be conducted prior to the urban renewal planning so as to grasp the local culture.

2.5 Social impact assessment

2.5.1 It should be necessary to attach importance to the rights of the disadvantaged group in the course of urban renewal. At present, there was nobody representing them.

2.5.2 Besides the local district, the URA should also consider the impacts of urban renewal on the nearby vicinity.

2.6 Role conflicts of social workers

2.6.1 The roles of the social workers involving in the present urban renewal project were conflicting. Their work was solely assisting the affected residents to move out as soon as possible.

2.7 Priorities of urban renewal

2.7.1 It should be necessary to consider who set the priorities of the urban renewal projects.

2.7.2 The priorities of the urban renewal projects should be set through an

interactive decision-making process between the authority and local residents.

2.8 Public engagement

- 2.8.1 Policy-making, planning and design processes should all involve public engagement simultaneously.
- 2.8.2 Taking the Sai Yee Street project in Mongkok as an example, public engagement might slow down the progress of urban renewal.

2.9 Opinions of local residents

- 2.9.1 Opportunities for local residents to express opinions about urban renewal should be provided.
- 2.9.2 Local residents should have the rights to express their opinions about urban renewal and to decide upon their own future.

2.10 Overall social costs

- 2.10.1 Reference could be made from overseas practices to assess the overall loss to the society by individual urban renewal projects. There were many assessment methods and experts on evaluation of overall social costs overseas.
- 2.10.2 In considering an urban renewal project, the URA should not focus on financial issues only, but should consider the overall social benefits. Under many circumstances, the overall social benefits might be able to offset the loss suffered by the URA in the project.

2.11 Innovative community solutions

- 2.11.1 Public and private partnership engaging local residents might be adopted. The establishment of an organization, such as Community Innovation Organization, which consisted of the Government, property developers and local resident representatives, might also be considered. Such organizations had been set up overseas.
- 2.11.2 Trust on non-government organizations by the Government and, delegation of power would be the prerequisites of the implementation of the above solution.
- 2.11.3 In the course of urban renewal, non-government organizations might even take up the role of property developers.
- 2.11.4 Some social workers have planned to set up an organization called “community planning centre” to provide community education in addition to community planning.

- 2.11.5 If such non-government organization mentioned above was to be established, it might take up certain functions of the present URA, and even the Planning Department or the Town Planning Board.
- 2.11.6 Hong Kong might also learn from the community renewal experiences of Taiwan.
- 2.11.7 Buildings in Hong Kong were demolished too early. Nowadays overseas countries emphasize on heritage conservation rather than redevelopment.

2.12 The role and social responsibilities of the URA

- 2.12.1 Being able to resume land for redevelopment and having enjoyed even more power than a property developer, the URA should assume substantial social responsibilities, including subsidizing low-income people to reside in the same-district after redevelopment.
- 2.12.2 The URA should adopt a holistic approach, safeguard social justice and should not jeopardize underprivileged groups. The URA had already destroyed urban networks and culture by “complete demolishing” and “homogenous approach”.
- 2.12.3 The URA should explore other financially sound operating models in addition to redevelopment.