

# **Urban Renewal Strategy (URS) Review Public Engagement Stage Gist of Topical Discussion 2: Heritage Preservation & Revitalisation**

Date: 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2009 (Saturday)  
Time: 2:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.  
Venue: Room 502, The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong, 3 Lockhart Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong  
No. of attendees: 71 (including 1 member of the Steering Committee, 8 representatives from the Development Bureau, Urban Renewal Authority and Leisure and Cultural Services Department as observers, and 6 members of the Hong Kong Institute of Architects as discussion group facilitators)<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Sandra S.C. Mak of A-World Consulting Ltd., the host, briefly introduced the background of the URS Review, and pointed out that representatives from the Development Bureau (DEVB) and Urban Renewal Authority (URA) were present to listen to the opinions expressed during the session. Participants were then invited to give public presentations and to join the group discussions. The key points were as follows:

## **Gist of Public Presentations**

### Presentation 1

Topic: Role of URA in preservation  
Speaker: Professor David Lung Ping-ye, member of the URS Review Steering Committee and Professor of the Faculty of Architecture, The University of Hong Kong

The current Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance (URAO) mainly focused on urban redevelopment. It had not stated clearly what URA should or could preserve, or how preservation could be carried out. At the start of the year, URA responded to government demands of conducting research and initiating preservation of tenement buildings. One of the projects involved a row of tenement buildings on Prince Edward Road. However, the project received much opposition. This revealed a discrepancy between URA's implementation in compliance with the law and the appeals of the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Starting from Topical Discussion 2, the breakdown of attendees will be recorded according to this categorisation in the discussion gists.

Declared monuments were under the protection of the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance (AMO) while there is no legal definition of historic buildings. At the same time, graded historic buildings did not have legal status. On the other hand, according to the World Heritage Convention, cultural heritage could be classified into three groups: monuments, groups of buildings and sites. The speaker suggested that URA, through the URAO, should be empowered to transform, for example, the whole Wan Chai district into a heritage zone, and to preserve not only individual buildings but also the interesting intangible culture.

Regarding the acquisition of properties, URA applied the 7-year old flat value compensation principle. The AMO stated clearly that the amount of compensation should be negotiated between the Authority and home owners. Should there be any objections from owners, the cases would be transferred to the district courts. The speaker suggested that opportunity should be taken during the URS Review to further explore the alignment between the AMO and the URAO.

## Presentation 2

Topic: Heritage preservation and revitalization of old urban areas

Speaker: Ms. Betty Siu-fong Ho, The Conservancy Association

Revitalisation aimed at enhancing the economic and environmental networks of different districts, while heritage preservation had the objectives of preserving local characteristics and community functions. In heritage preservation, not only should buildings of value and virtue be preserved, but of equal importance, the characteristics, history and nature of the society should also be maintained.

Government claimed to have policies in place related to heritage preservation, but when compared to other cities, Hong Kong's policies were weak and insufficient. For example, in Australia and Mainland China, there were strict stipulations on in-situ heritage preservation. Since there was no such regulation in Hong Kong, the Murray House was moved from Admiralty to Stanley for the purpose of preservation, resulting in its downgrading from Grade I to merely an ordinary building.

The speaker was also concerned about the uses of many historic buildings after rehabilitation. The former Stanley Police Station was adapted for use as a supermarket, Murray House was transformed into restaurants, and Wo Cheong Pawn Shop was turned into a fine-dining restaurant. It was questioned whether this was a kind of 'gentrification'.

The speaker concluded that the challenge, which Hong Kong is facing, is a lack of proper cultural preservation policies, therefore preservation and revitalisation were always decided spontaneously and subjectively, and sometimes relied only on the efforts of individual government officials. Such actions did not contribute to sustainability. The government also lacked visionary planning and internal coordination (e.g. regarding the building and fire prevention regulations). She hoped that government would value the opinions expressed by members of the community.

### Presentation 3

Topic: Review on redevelopment mode of revitalisation by users of Shanghai Street

Speaker: Mr. Chan Wing-chi, neighbourhood of Shanghai Street

The speaker opined that the URA moved away the 'software' (i.e. the neighbourhood) during the heritage preservation process, leaving behind only the preserved buildings themselves. He thought that the neighbourhood was a part of the community who should not be forced to move out; otherwise, after the 'preservation' process, the community would never be the same again. He also questioned the sincerity of the concerned policymaking officials in their approach towards heritage preservation.

### Presentation 4

Topic: Provision of art & cultural centres and parks through revitalisation of old urban areas

Speaker: Mr. Lam Chan-hung, neighbourhood of Sham Shui Po

The speaker indicated that cultural and art features of a district were often overlooked in the process of revitalisation of that area. He suggested that the government should build venues such as art museums or cultural centres in Sham Shui Po for organising cultural and art activities, as well as for showcasing community culture and history. There are similar venues in Sha Tin and Sai Wan Ho. He also recommended establishing community cultural facilities especially for people of South Asian origins in Sham Shui Po, because they have been residing in the area for quite a long period. The speaker also hoped that the government would carry out the Lui Seng Chun preservation project as soon as possible.

## Presentation 5

Topic: Transfer of floor area ratio

Speaker: Mr. Shum Hok-man, Community Cultural Concern

The transfer of floor area ratio referred to the transfer of development rights of property in order to preserve buildings of historic value. The concept was originated from the New York Landmarks Preservation Law in 1968, which designated buildings, streets or districts that were assessed as historically significant or having aesthetic value as specially-designed areas. Restrictions on private development were imposed. To compensate for the potential losses of owners due to such restrictions, the interest of owners was protected by the transfer of ownership (i.e. transfer of development rights from one site to another). In the business district of New York, almost 20 historical areas including the Grand Central Terminal and another unique railway station with historic value were preserved via floor area ratio transfer. In 1978, the Federal Court adjudged that the transfer of floor area ratio would serve to secure the economic interest of property owners, and was thus constitutional.

Many successful examples were also seen in Japan and Taiwan. Dihua Street was designated by the Taipei City Government as a 'reserved area' in order to preserve groups of historical buildings in that district. Through the transfer of floor area ratio, the City Government did not have to exercise mandatory land resumption nor pay any compensation. The losses of property owners for not being able to demolish their buildings and erect extra structures were compensated while the aim of preserving historical buildings and cultural assets was also achieved.

To ensure no abuse of the transfer of floor area ratio, stringent restrictions and regulations on the transfer and receipt of floor area ratio should be strictly observed, including applicable usages, location of the sites for transfer and receipt, as well as the amount of floor areas to be transferred, etc.

## Presentation 6

Topic: Redevelopment project of the former Marine Police Headquarters

Speaker: Mr. Raymond Wai-man Wong (王煒文), lecturer of the City University of Hong Kong

When compared with overseas cities and Shanghai, only very few historical buildings were left in Hong Kong. Many buildings with local or colonial characteristics and even streets of historical value had all been demolished. Even those preserved (e.g. the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Museum) were small in scale.

The speaker elaborated further by quoting the case of the former Marine Police Headquarters in Tsim Sha Tsui. The former headquarters was built some 120 years ago at the top of a hill in Tsim Sha Tsui, facing the Victoria Harbour. In 2003, Cheung Kong (Holdings) Limited won the bid at HK\$300 million for the right to develop and utilise the headquarters for 50 years. The hill was subsequently flattened, and the whole building, after renovation, was full of colonial colour. Old trees and stone walls of historical value were also transplanted or preserved through advanced technology. With the addition of commercial elements, the former Marine Police Headquarters would be expected to become a tourist spot.

The speaker opined that as heritage preservation was a long and costly process, the people of Hong Kong should give more thoughts and express their opinions sensibly about the issue of preservation.

### Presentation 7

Topic: Old Wan Chai Market and Wo Cheong Pawn Shop

Speaker: Ms. Wong Sau-ping, neighbourhood of Wan Chai

The Old Wan Chai Market (also known as the “Big Market” among the Wan Chai neighbourhood) was built in 1937, with a background of rich history, cultural characteristics and long established community networks. The speaker pointed out that the market was built with steel-framing concrete which was the most advanced construction technique in the 1930s. Such technique was also adopted for the construction of the New York Empire State Building and Golden Gate Bridge, etc. The rear portion of the Old Wan Chai Market had already been demolished. The façade of the front portion would be preserved, and a 46-storey residential building would be built above it. The project was met with intense opposition from the Wan Chai neighbourhood, who had requested the government to acquire the market from the developer before demolition, but the plan was finally abandoned due to the extremely high costs<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, after revitalisation, the rooftop of Wo Cheong Pawn Shop was meant to be public space, but members of the public must now book in advance in order to use it, because the restaurant has the priority<sup>3</sup>. The speaker conveyed that there was a lack of

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<sup>2</sup> For various reasons, which included URA’s obligations as stated in the contract signed between the then Land Development Corporation and the developer, the redemption plan of the market was not feasible.

<sup>3</sup> Iris Tam of the URA clarified that Wo Cheong Pawn Shop’s rooftop was stated in the lease as private space. Due to goodwill, the public would be allowed the opportunities to appreciate historic buildings in private space. URA would define clearly private and public spaces in future similar cases.

public participation in revitalisation projects, which are gradually becoming commercial activities; for example, people must patronise the restaurant in order to enter or visit this historical heritage.

She believed that the URA should look into the revitalisation process and approaches in order to preserve community networks, community characteristics, history and culture through revitalisation.

## **Gist of Group Discussion Reports**

Group discussions were carried out in six groups. The discussion results were as follows:

### **1 Conditions and principles of preservation and revitalisation**

#### **1.1 Objective conditions of preservation and revitalisation**

Some participants believed that the following objective criteria should be considered in selecting old areas or old buildings for preservation and revitalisation: construction period (e.g. pre-war buildings), construction method (including rarity, whether the building was designed by a famous designer or architect), artistry, historical values (e.g. whether it was related to historical events or famous persons), cultural values and social networks (e.g. whether the project could demonstrate the living conditions and social networks of people at that time), etc.

Concerning the definition of 'cultural heritage', some participants pointed out that inheritance and evolution of history and culture are intertwined (e.g. certain temples in the New Territories might possibly be related to family successions). Some participants also suggested that unheard stories could be unveiled by ways like collating and publishing ethnographies (民族誌), e.g. Central and Western District chorography (中西區地方誌).

Some participants thought that preservation should be the highlight of urban renewal, but detailed planning in advance would be essential. During the stage of research and assessment, not only should individual buildings be considered, the conditions of the peripheral surroundings should also be taken into account. 'Community censuses' prior to preservation and revitalisation should also be conducted because assessment and research would be of utmost importance. Research into distinguished historic figures and their related monuments, local culture and characteristics, historic buildings and different components of the

community should also be carried out simultaneously. After results were obtained, detailed discussions on how to implement preservation and revitalisation could then be carried out. Some participants thought that government should be responsible for providing resources for this preparatory work but not the execution.

Preservation covers a range of issues. For example, the government was faced with the problem of private property ownership and that the general public might not support preservation projects in some districts. It was thus suggested to establish a Heritage Commission, inviting the participation of different professional bodies (including the Hong Kong Institute of Architects and the Hong Kong Institute of Planners) and universities, in order to provide independent and professional advice on preservation in different districts in Hong Kong as well as to promote public engagement activities or conduct studies.

Many participants pointed out the importance of community engagement. Regarding its priority, some participants suggested that local residents should be consulted first, followed by professionals or non-government organisations, and lastly those who live outside the district. The participants of the community engagement exercise should be given the right of decision-making to a certain extent so that different needs of the community would be respected. Some participants also pointed out that 'people' in the 'people-oriented approach' should refer to the local residents. For instance, when the authorities put forward the initial preservation and revitalisation plans for the Central and Western District, Gage Street was to be turned into an 'Old Shops Street', with no area reserved to accommodate a wet market. It was later through community engagement that the government listened to the appeals of the neighbourhood to provide space for such. Although it might be more time-consuming to carry out preservation through community engagement, it would be more desirable when compared to the current top-down approach.

## **1.2 Principles of preservation and revitalisation**

Some participants suggested taking the approach for revitalisation from the point-of-view of the 'users of the revitalised buildings'. Unlike the revitalisation of deserted districts in foreign countries, the old districts in Hong Kong still possessed extensive community networks. Thus, revitalisation should be based on the principle of 'no damage to the community networks'. Some participants pointed out that during the process of heritage preservation, the 'original flavour' of the landscape, the ambience of the buildings, the original functions and community activities should be preserved as much as possible. Another option would be to transform the heritage into community facilities (e.g., art performance

venues).

Furthermore, planning for development projects and preservation projects should not be separated, and planning should be district-based. In the case of the preservation of Graham Street, Central, the concept of preservation should cover the whole network of the neighbouring community, commercial activities and community vibrancy, etc., and not just the preservation of only one or two old shop(s). Designating a preservation area should be considered.

Other participants suggested that the principles of preservation and revitalisation were difficult to set out. On the one hand, there were needs for development. On the other, the needs of local residents, minimal changes to and protection of heritage were also issues to be taken care of. Thus it was difficult to balance the interests of different parties. It was hoped that the authorities could continue to make efforts on this subject.

## **2 Responsibilities of Government, URA and Owners**

### **2.1 Responsibilities of the government**

Some participants suggested that government should review the objectives of development: whether it was for the benefit of property developers, Hong Kong's overall economic development, certain buildings or local residents. Government should also allocate more funding to support preservation and revitalisation work, e.g. by establishing funds to provide assistance, and expenses which should not be solely borne by the government or owners. There were participants who suggested that balanced policies should be implemented to balance the needs and interests of residents and developers.

Specifically, some participants suggested that the government make reference to overseas experience. If owners wished to sell buildings of historical value, they could choose to sell them to the government rather than the developers. However, there were others who suggested that the government should not acquire property directly. Property acquisition should be the responsibility of an authority outside the government regime, for example, statutory civil organisations or independent, designated bodies, etc. Apart from property acquisition, different choices should be given to affected residents, for example, rehabilitation, the choice to stay or leave, transfer of plot ratio, etc.

Some participants thought that the government should not grade individual



buildings as historic buildings. They suggested that the government should establish an authority, like the New York Landmark Preservation Commission, to specialise in assessing proposals from the community or government and designating certain districts or streets as landmarks for preservation. Government could also consider setting up a culture bureau or upgrading the status of the Commissioner for Heritage Office or the Antiquities and Monuments Office which currently responsible for heritage preservation, so that they could have the same policymaking power as other related departments.

In addition, there were participants who suggested that the policies and ordinances of government departments (including the DEVB) and the URA etc., should tie in with the implementation of heritage preservation and avoid being overly strict. Currently, approval would not be granted to a building for occupation if it could not fully satisfy the requirements of the Fire Safety Ordinance. The costs of preservation were ever increasing due to the rising standards of hygiene and environmental protection etc. In fact, historic buildings generally failed to comply with the Fire Safety (Buildings) Ordinance, and therefore the government should consider granting exemption when carrying out preservation. The society should also strive for a rational balance in order to lower the development costs.

## **2.2 Responsibilities of the URA**

Some participants thought that the URA, being not a government department, should not have policymaking or decision-making power. As a result, the URA should not be solely responsible for preservation policies. It should be the responsibility of the government (e.g. DEVB and Antiquities and Monuments Office). It was noted that the direction of preservation in some districts was correct but in-depth investigation into the methods of development and land use was needed. For example, whether making a historical building into a fine-dining restaurant would destroy the building's original structures or characteristics.

Some people believed that URA should remain neutral and actively listen to people's opinions. Participants pointed out that the URA should allocate resources to those old districts with real need of preservation and revitalisation. A district should not be demolished and intervention from the URA might not be necessary if it was still vibrant. Some participants suggested re-prioritising the objectives of the URA in the following order: preservation, revitalisation, rehabilitation and redevelopment. Moreover, some attendees indicated that the URA should carry out studies of different districts and collect sufficient information prior to working out an

outline plan and consulting local residents and merchants so that they could participate in discussions.

### **2.3 Responsibilities of Owners**

Some participants believed that it should be the government's responsibility to provide incentives and subsidies to encourage owners and residents to preserve and protect their buildings. However, many of them worried that some elderly owners would be unable to bear the maintenance costs even though they wished to preserve their buildings.

Concerning the ways to encourage active participation of owners in preservation, some participants thought that the authorities should provide local residents and community members with diversified choices, but not using a single 'bundled' method to handle different owners. Appropriate compensations should be offered to residents or owners who choose to leave; while 'flat-for-flat' and 'shop-for-shop' arrangements should also be provided as another option. If owners were given the choice to stay, they might be more willing to bear the maintenance costs or other relevant responsibilities. This could reduce arguments and conflicts, as well as achieving sustainable development.

Many people thought that there must be a mechanism to provide a platform for discussions among local residents and those who supported preservation. There were also suggestions that opinions of local residents and merchants should be given the priority.

Regarding the transfer of plot ratio, some participants pointed out that since the value of land would have a direct impact on the property owners and their property rights, they should get appropriate compensation in order to prevent them from suffering any losses.

### **3. Preservation, revitalisation and 'gentrification'**

On the issue of whether preservation or revitalisation would lead to 'gentrification', participants held different views. Some participants thought that the introduction of western-style coffee shops in a local community was already a phenomenon of 'gentrification' because it was just a matter of degree of gentrification. Some participants suggested that whether a district was suitable for 'gentrification' would depend on its local characteristics. For example, Wo Cheong

Pawn Shop, located in a common district, was not suitable for 'gentrification'. On the contrary, Tiger Balm Garden, located in an upmarket residential area, thus 'gentrification' was fine because nearby residents were willing to spend more. Therefore, most importantly, the relevant authorities should go through comprehensive public consultation and to understand the characteristics of each district before implementing preservation or revitalisation projects.

Furthermore, some participants indicated that Wo Cheong Pawn Shop was a heritage resumed by public resources, therefore usage of such after rehabilitation should be handled carefully. On the other hand, the transformation of the Soho area was developed naturally. Although it was unknown whether there were adequate channels for affected residents and business operators to express their views, it was believed that they had reasonable bargaining power.

#### **4 Other opinions**

Some participants suggested that detailed social impact assessments should be carried out before a preservation project commenced. Most importantly, the interviewees must be made to understand that they were participating in the assessment, and the transparency of the whole assessment process should be enhanced. Some participants opined that, at present, after the social impact assessment reports were submitted to the Town Planning Board (TPB), they were actually only examined by the Social Welfare Department, thus the TPB might not be able to fulfill its monitoring function.