

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

Date: 3rd December 2008 (Wednesday)
Time: 6:30p.m. – 8:30p.m.
Venue: 901, 9/F, Hong Kong Scout Centre, Scout Path, Austin Road,
Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon
Group: Advocacy groups
No. of participants: 8

Representative of A-World Consulting Ltd. briefly introduced the background of the URS Review. Dr. Joseph Chan, the facilitator, invited participants to express their opinions, the key points of which were as follows:

1. Standards and criteria for urban renewal
 - 1.1 There should be a set of transparent standards and criteria to determine which parts of the city should undergo urban renewal.
 - 1.2 URA had not provided clear definitions for dilapidated buildings, resulting in the demolishing of certain buildings which should be rehabilitated rather than redeveloped.
2. Suspending current / new projects until the new URS was available
 - 2.1 Urban Renewal Authority (URA) should suspend all current and new projects until the new URS was available. This was to ensure that no projects would follow the existing strategy which was being reviewed.
 - 2.2 Existing projects should be scrutinized now before they were allowed to move on.
3. URA Mode of Operation
 - 3.1 URA should be renamed as “Urban Regeneration Authority” as urban regeneration should be the theme of urban renewal in Hong Kong.
 - 3.2 URA had to admit its problems and explore alternatives in redeveloping Hong Kong.
 - 3.3 URA was deficient, protective and bureaucratic. It should be abolished.
 - 3.4 URA was just like a property developer.
 - 3.5 The power to resume land had made URA too powerful. It needed checks and balances.
 - 3.6 URA had to be more transparent in its operation.

- 3.7 URA had inherited many problems from the Land Development Corporation.
 - 3.8 Urban renewal should be carried out through the market but not the Government. The pace of the former approach might be slower but it would be able to fulfill the market needs. Government intervention, where necessary, should be based on good planning reasons instead of financial considerations.
4. Urban renewal should be more macro in scale
 - 4.1 Urban renewal should be more macro in scale as shown in the Kwun Tong project. Projects that built high-rises in small lots such as the one in Sham Shui Po should be discouraged. The more comprehensive and broader district based approach as demonstrated in Kwun Tong was the right direction of future urban renewal.
 - 4.2 Urban renewal had too many problems and a clear vision for the future of Hong Kong was needed.
5. Speeding up the urban renewal process
 - 5.1 The urban renewal process should be speeded up as it took too much time to complete some projects currently.
6. Balancing the 4Rs
 - 6.1 The 4Rs needed to be more balanced. At present, redevelopment was so dominant that it was just like "blanket redevelopment". There should be more emphasis on the other 3Rs.
 - 6.2 More funding should be provided for rehabilitation of buildings.
7. Social problems
 - 7.1 It was a social problem that residents were displaced from redeveloped areas as they could not afford the new buildings. URA did not help residents return to the redeveloped areas and benefit from the redevelopment projects.
 - 7.2 Urban renewal should emphasize equality so that no one would be marginalized in the process.
 - 7.3 The problem that people could not afford the maintenance of their own buildings should be addressed as a welfare issue rather than a redevelopment issue.

8. Preserving old areas

- 8.1 If the current urban renewal approach was allowed to go on, all neighborhoods in Hong Kong would become homogenous and boring.
- 8.2 Hong Kong should preserve its old areas and communities to make it unique and attractive.
- 8.3 Many streets no longer existed as a result of the urban renewal projects which simply focused on building big podiums. All redeveloped areas looked the same these days. Hong Kong should learn from Boston to keep the characteristics of the city. Diversification should be valued.

9. URS Review

- 9.1 While URS emphasized the quality of life, many people's living quality had actually been declining as a result of URA's projects which took possession of private property and constructed ultra tall buildings at the expense of air space.
- 9.2 Public expectation had changed a lot in the past 10 years. Now people wanted to get involved and be given choices when it came to urban renewal.
- 9.3 The Government had to acknowledge the problems related to the present urban renewal policies and the URA.
- 9.4 The URS Review was a policy issue in which URA should not be involved.

10. Overseas experience

- 10.1 Hong Kong should make reference to the Singapore model in which the objective of urban renewal was to make Singapore beautiful.
- 10.2 The policy model in Holland should be considered as they strictly enforced the policy of maintaining buildings by owners.