

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

Date: 14th January 2009 (Wednesday)
Time: 2:30p.m. – 4:30p.m.
Venue: 10/F , Low Block, Grand Millennium Plaza , 181 Queen's Road
Central, Hong Kong
Group: Board of Directors and Urban Renewal Strategy Review
Committee, Urban Renewal Authority
No. of participants: 14

Ms. Iris Tam, representative of URA, briefly introduced the background of the URS Review. Mrs Sandra Mak, the facilitator, invited participants to express their opinions, the key points of which were as follows:

1 Urban Renewal Planning

- 1.1 Urban renewal should be part of the overall urban planning. Each district should preserve their remarkable culture, such as Chinese opera. Preservation or establishment of local characteristics for individual districts should be allowed. In fact, the preservation of community network and local culture as currently requested by the people were different from the traditional way of heritage preservation.
- 1.2 Infrastructure could coordinate with and support community development, thus facilitating local economic growth. For example, there had been an apparent increase in pedestrian flow after the construction of the escalator in the Mid-levels.
- 1.3 From the perspective of economic and business activities, the small and medium enterprises should be given an opportunity to survive. Should a district only develop large-scale commercial facilities after redevelopment, the small and medium enterprises would not be able to compete with large corporations, and they would eventually have to move out.
- 1.4 It was suggested that a better living environment should be provided for residents in their original districts, without acquisition of property ownership.
- 1.5 Another problem encountered during urban renewal was the relationship between regional town planning and planning on the basis of the URS.

2 Comprehensive consultation and extensive collection of opinions

- 2.1 There had always been a group of professionals staying in Hong Kong for short term visits or studies. The opinions of this mobile population should be collected by all means.

- 2.2 Non-local opinions and surveys should be taken notice of; for example, 《第一財經雜誌》 (a financial magazine in China) had carried out surveys on Hong Kong and other cities last December, its results revealed Hong Kong's relatively low ranking in areas of culture and conservation.
- 2.3 URS Steering Committee should not only take into account the opinions from advocacy groups, but also those from the URS Review Committee under Urban Renewal Authority (URA).

3 Ascertaining the aims of urban renewal

- 3.1 It should be necessary to ascertain the Government's stance on the level of importance of urban renewal and the public's views. Cooperation among government departments was of crucial importance; for example, cooperation with the Transport and Housing Bureau would always increase efficiency. It was suggested that an inter-departmental body should be established to facilitate urban renewal.
- 3.2 The premise of the review was 'What kind of city do we expect?'. A city with balanced development should not only emphasize on economic development, but also cultural elements. Sustainable development was an important concept where quality living was the key point.
- 3.3 From the sociological and cultural perspective, urban renewal should be people-centred. Technical considerations as well as community attachment should be considered. Individual values and judgments should not be imposed on residents.
- 3.4 The issues of urban renewal should be identified, and a consensus should be reached on how such issues could be addressed. For example, to which level should urban renewal improve the people's quality of living? Was it aiming at renovating the exterior of the buildings only, or an improvement of the living environment? The aim should be the latter, noting that the improvement of living environment through urban renewal would be extremely complex and difficult.
- 3.5 Although there were no preset or proven methods to measure people's living condition, the actual residential and living problems faced by the residents should be the core concern of urban renewal.
- 3.6 It was suggested that all issues were to be quantified; for example, carrying out investigations on the crowdedness of flats, and the percentage of flats without water supply. In so doing, people would be able to understand the current situation and prioritize the issues to be dealt with according to the level of seriousness.

4 The degree of transparency/ public engagement of urban renewal projects

- 4.1 Urban renewal faced difficulties in various aspects, including the contradiction between confidentiality and transparency. As a public organization, URA should enhance the transparency of the information that was currently treated as confidential so as to strive for the respect and trust from the public. Furthermore, keeping policies confidential would also hinder macroscopic town planning at a regional level, given that such planning should be considered for urban renewal in future. On the other hand, the increase in transparency would lead to problems such as market speculation which should also be taken into account.
- 4.2 People requested to engage in urban renewal as early as possible, but it could only be achieved by striking a balance between confidentiality and transparency. If discussion could be put forward in a macroscopic perspective and guidelines for selection of districts for urban renewal could be established, the problem of confidentiality could be solved. In addition, bottom-up regional planning could be achieved for people to engage in urban renewal as early as possible. In so doing, urban renewal could be carried out with more recognition from the residents.

5 Self-financing of URA

- 5.1 In view of the current role and mode of operation, it was impossible for URA to achieve self-financing. Therefore, there should be a change in mechanism, for example, more assistance should be given to URA from the Government.

6 Role of URA and mode of compensation and acquisition

- 6.1 The role of URA should be redefined.
- 6.2 It seemed that URA was more privileged in renewal and development. However, people might not agree that URA should continue to enjoy such privilege. On the contrary, they might consider that URA should follow the example of Hong Kong Monetary Authority to act as an administrator of urban renewal.
- 6.3 Regarding the compensation, many people still found it insufficient. The suggestion of “flat-for-flat” and “shop-for-shop” exchange arrangements still had a lot of issues and details that needed to be considered, and could not be implemented at the current stage. The mode of compensation should be reviewed again; otherwise, this would continue to be the source of conflicts.
- 6.4 Although the current compensation policy of 7-year building age was generous, not everyone was willing to accept, for example, some property owners might wish to redevelop properties on their own. In fact, URA could act as a “facilitator” to encourage people to contact them for redevelopment of properties after fulfilling certain conditions. But this might affect planning.

- 6.5 It was quite difficult for property owners to participate in urban renewal projects, but it was worth more in-depth study.
- 6.6 As the community was very concerned with the development density, it was difficult for renewal projects to achieve self-financing in the future. The current compensation criteria had to be reconsidered.