

Steering Committee on Review of the Urban Renewal Strategy

**Setting up of 3 to 5 community-based Participatory Design Studios
in the civic engagement process
of the review of Urban Renewal Strategy**

Purpose

This paper is prepared by Ada Wong to advocate and outline the rationale and framework for setting up 3 to 5 community-based Participatory Design Studios as a core and innovative public engagement process of the review of Urban Renewal Strategy (URS) and invites the Chair and Members' comments thereon.

The Public Engagement Process: Limitations of event-based consultations

2. In recent years the format usually employed by government to meet the public face-to-face and engage them in policy review exercises has inevitably been event-based. Be it large-scale town hall forums or smaller-scale workshops or focus groups, these events take place within a fixed time at a fixed venue, and will attract mostly the “usual suspects” with strong views (be they for or against) on such issues.

3. Most forums and workshops are half-day events. The public only has limited time to express his/her opinion (usually not more than 3-5 minutes for each person) and after all views are expressed, time does not allow those with opposing views to sit together, foster a deeper understanding of the issues and implications at hand, and attempt at consensus building.

4. Event-based consultations have the following limitations:

- (a) They are not knowledge-based, nor are they educational. Participants are not on the same page and have different levels of understanding of the background of relevant policies.

- (b) They provide government with a basket of diverse views but are not able to propose integrative and creative solutions, let alone the narrowing of differences. The reports produced after these forums are more a quantitative account of views rather than qualitative assessment of public sentiment.
- (c) The public, though interested in the subject, may not find time to attend unless they are “diehards” or “cheerleaders”. Elderly, women, young people and school groups are seldom involved but they are important stakeholders.
- (d) Mediation of these events (usually a consultancy firm hired by government) is seen to be skewed and has a pre-conceived agenda.

5. While forums and workshops are still key ingredients in any public engagement process, more innovative approaches targeting problem-solving and consensus building must be identified.

Participatory Design Studios (PDS)

6. The Chinese for PDS could be 參與設計工作室。PDS are, simply, visible shop front spaces located on streets well frequented by the community in different neighbourhoods in Hong Kong. The rationale behind the setting up of PDS for the review of URS is as follows:

- (a) They will nicely complement event-based engagements.
- (b) They will provide space from the more passive activities (displays) to the more active (community brainstorming and participatory design sessions). The visibility and “semi-permanent” feeling of the space will attract passers-by to drop in.
- (c) They will not be constrained by time and can reach out to more stakeholders. To encourage young people to understand URS, certain time slots should be reserved for school tours and youth focus groups.

- (d) They are conducive to the experimentation of different tools to facilitate discussion. For example, simulation software could be used.
- (e) They are more conducive to forward-looking discussions and consensus building. Stakeholders, including government officials, lawmakers, business sector, civil society groups, and interested public and kaifongs will have the opportunity to understand the interweaving economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions of URS and collaborate in developing new ideas.

7. The guiding principles behind PDS are: people-centered, community-led, respect for diverse views, interactive and innovative. An example of “respect for diverse views” is that different schemes and vision proposed by professional bodies/civil society groups could also be displayed in the PDS so that the public sees the full picture and is able to critically assess the various options. It is an “ideas sharing” space.

8. The mode of operation of PDS should be community-led, that is, Urban Renewal Authority (URA) partnering with NGOs with local knowledge, professional bodies (such as the Hong Kong Institute of Architects) and civil society groups in the organization and delivery of activities in PDS, utilizing the space fully.

Framework for implementation of PDS

9. In many districts subject to urban renewal, URA has acquired buildings with vacant shop front spaces which are feasible as a PDS. It is proposed that at least 3 PDS be set up, with one in Hong Kong (Wan Chai) and two in Kowloon (Shamshui po and Kwun Tong). If resources allow, a fourth and fifth PDS could be set up in Sheung Wan and Tusen Wan.

10. The criteria in selecting the right space for a PDS are:

- (a) Size – a 800 to 1,000 sq ft shop space will be perfect. If only smaller spaces are available, a PDS could be in two adjoining shop spaces.

- (b) Accessibility and visibility – the PDS should be on a busy street and be visible. It should ideally have full length glass panels at the shop front so that passers by can see what is happening inside.
- (c) Duration – the PDS should be available and set up during the entire engagement and consensus building stage of the review of URS, that is, for around 18 months.

10. The operator of the PDS should not be URA or its consultant. The day-to-day operation of PDS should be tendered out to NGOs with local network and knowledge of issues relating to URS. The NGO operator should garner support from professional and civil society groups so that members of these groups could become mediators and facilitators in the focus group discussions. Kaifongs could also act as volunteers in school tours. The PDS should open at least five days a week, and must be open during weekends. The engagement of the NGO operator will also allow more flexible opening hours.

11. Online broadcast – An important feature of PDS is dissemination and follow-up via the Internet. Clips of discussions will be uploaded on the URS review website. Some focus group discussions could be broadcast real time, like web TV, so that more people can participate by sending emails or phoning-in. The rich web content will be a good education tool and allow those who are busy to access the information and leave comments any time.

Financial Implications

12. The space for the PDS should already be acquired by URA awaiting redevelopment. The day-to-day operation will be entrusted to an NGO. A very rough estimation of the one-off minor renovation cost and operating costs for 18 months is not be more than \$1.8 million per PDS (\$300,000 renovation + \$80,000 x 18 months), and \$5.4 million for three PDS. It is estimated that each PDS will reach out to at least 2,000 persons (conservative figure) each month, and the unit cost is therefore \$40 per head. It is a reasonable and effective sum in the overall expenditure for the URS review.

13. The above sum does not include the production of displays at the PDS which should be the same for road shows already prepared by the Consultant.

14. The above sum also does not include the online activities proposed in paragraph 11. URA needs to issue a tender for the technical support for real time broadcasting and provision of simulation software for all three PDS.

15. The review of the URS needs the right process design to drive and innovate the civic engagement exercise. The Chair and Members are invited to comment on the concept of Participatory Design Studios and suggest improvements to this initial concept.

Ada WONG

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