

# **Urban Renewal Strategy (URS) Review Public Engagement Stage Gist of Public Forum Discussion**

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> May 2009 (Saturday)  
Time: 2:30p.m. – 5:00p.m.  
Venue: Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre, Kowloon Park, Haiphong Road,  
Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon  
No. of participants: 53 (including 2 members of Steering Committee, 2 from Development Bureau and 5 from URA)

Ms. Sandra S.C. Mak of A-World Consulting Ltd., the public engagement consultant, briefly introduced the background of URS Review and major discussion topics. Subsequently, Dr. C.K. Law, senior lecturer of Department of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Hong Kong, was invited to moderate the public discussion. The key points of discussion were as follows:

## **Gist of public discussion**

### 1. The vision and scope of urban renewal

For the vision of urban renewal, many participants considered that whether the residents could enjoy the fruits of renewal and the “people-centred” approach employed in the Urban Renewal Strategy (URS) are the most important issues. They believed that the URS review should not only be led by economic interests, but should place the long-term benefit of Hong Kong first together with social interests. On the other hand, there were participants who pointed out that the crucial problem of urban renewal was that Hong Kong people treated old properties as potential redevelopment projects only in a utilitarian manner. The Government also appeared to have a similar attitude, thus worsening the problem.

Regarding the scope and scale of renewal projects, some participants considered that it was better to have redevelopment in smaller scope and scale. For instance, a small-scale redevelopment project with a single building block which did not involve redevelopment of the whole district or street could minimize the impact on the completeness and sustainability of the social network. On the other hand, large-scale redevelopment plans might bring about negative impacts to the owners of small businesses or even strangle opportunities for business start-ups. In addition, there were

opinions that less redevelopment projects should be carried out.

On the other hand, some other participants doubted that small-scale redevelopment could hardly achieve comprehensive urban renewal. They considered that the “4Rs” strategy of urban renewal should be integrated and reviewed at district level and that redevelopment should be carried out under the “district-based” approach so as to facilitate the comprehensive and healthy development of the district.

## 2. 4Rs strategy of urban renewal

### **Redevelopment**

Some participants pointed out that the current redevelopment projects destroyed the social network. Therefore, community regeneration should be considered first before redevelopment. They believed that old buildings should be graded and only dilapidated buildings should warrant redevelopment. The definition and criteria of “dilapidation” should also be established. The reasons and criteria for redevelopment should be made known to the public. There were also suggestions that the proportion of redevelopment in the 4Rs should be reduced to 25%.

### **Rehabilitation**

Some participants pointed out that the Government should encourage owners to rehabilitate and refurbish buildings for the purpose of sustainable development of Hong Kong. Buildings with good quality should not be demolished early. Many opined that owners should be responsible for building maintenance and the Government should regulate the maintenance matters by legislation.

There were suggestions that the Government could establish a “Maintenance Authority” to provide technical advice and funding to owners on maintenance. Some concerned about the way that the Government and Urban Renewal Authority (URA) handled the projects which might influence residents’ wishes on building rehabilitation indirectly. Taking the projects of Graham Street and Staunton Street as examples, the participants expressed that some owners lacked the incentive to carry out rehabilitation after the districts where they lived were announced as redevelopment target areas, thus deteriorating the living environment. Therefore, a premature announcement of redevelopment plans would have negative effects on building rehabilitation.

Some participants pointed out that it might not be the best arrangement to carry out rehabilitation only. They also doubted that some non-owners made a loud appeal for rehabilitation simply because they did not need to bear any responsibility.

### **Preservation**

Some participants were concerned that the Government should preserve not only the buildings, but also the social network.

### **Integrated review**

Some participants welcomed a comprehensive review of the URS by the Development Bureau. They also believed that 4Rs should be integrated and considered at district level in order to benefit most of the stakeholders.

### 3. Role of stakeholders (Public and private sector participation and owner participation in redevelopment)

The participants considered that the affected parties (i.e. residents or tenants) should have the right to decide on redevelopment. Some suggested that the Government should encourage and support owners on the issue of maintenance. The mechanism of redevelopment should also be discussed.

Regarding the work of URA, some participants considered that there was a lack of regulation. The URS did not have a constitutional or legal status and there was no disciplinary mechanism to check and balance URA's work. Also, some pointed out that URA should carry out urban renewal in public interest. Commercial benefits should not be the sole concern and transparency should be maintained.

Some participants pointed out that the then Land Development Corporation and subsequently the URA had been established for 20 years, but there was still no improvement in urban decay. URA should be dissolved to allow other organisations to carry out the concerned projects. There were opinions on the overlapping functions of URA and other government departments such as Buildings Department and Housing Authority. URA should not be responsible for housing welfare policies and there was a need to improve the accountability and transparency of all organisations. Some also considered that redevelopment projects should be carried out by private developers.

Some participants did not wish URA to compete for redevelopment projects on behalf of developers. Many participants considered that the role of URA should be changed from an active implementation agent to a facilitator and arbitrator. In so doing, URA would be able to facilitate rehabilitation or redevelopment by private developers and owners, assist redevelopment through assembly of property ownership and provide legal and financial assistance, etc.

Moreover, some opined that URA could identify room for improvement by carrying out SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) or similar analysis. The actual functions of URA could be identified by comparing the similarities and differences between URA and the private market.

#### 4. Public Engagement

Concerning public engagement, some participants raised that meaningful public engagement should involve not only a few public forums or consultation, but also comprehensive and continuous community participation. A participant quoted a study undertaken after a riot in London in 1981 and pointed out that should the Government not allow the masses to participate in community planning effectively, the society would remain unstable. As such, the Government should have prescribed policies so that people would have the chance, the right and the resources to participate in community planning, thus paving the way for implementation of effective public engagement policy.

#### 5. Compensation and rehousing policy

Some participants welcomed the acquisition carried out by URA, which allowed owners to receive compensation. Some participants, however, mentioned the difficulties encountered by residents and tenants in past redevelopment projects. For example, the locals in Tai Kok Tsui rented new shops after redevelopment but their businesses were never the same again. As a result, they suffered high rent and their quality of life had not been improved. Similarly, the businesses on ‘Sneakers’ Street’ in Mong Kok could hardly be continued after redevelopment. Therefore, the participants considered that further discussion should be carried out and “flat-for-flat” and “shop-for-shop” exchange mechanism should be implemented so as to enable the tenants and owners to choose instead of forcing them to move out or rehousing them compulsorily. Some noted that there had been discussions on this approach in the past, but it was never implemented. They believed that “flat-for-flat” and “shop-for-shop” arrangement could prevent building costs from going up unreasonably and result in social harmony. Some

participants suggested allocating a number of residential flats in the district for on-site rehousing to preserve the social network.

Moreover, some participants considered it unfair that under the current policy, owners did not have the right to make a bid or negotiate on the amount of compensation. All properties, no matter whether they were for self-occupation or for lease, should entitle the same amount of compensation.

#### 6. Social impact assessment and community service teams

Regarding the social impact assessment (SIA), some participants opined that irrespective of the assessment result, URA could apply to resume properties under the Lands Resumption Ordinance and the owners would have to move out. The SIA hence could not reflect the impact of redevelopment on local residents and it in turn became an evidence in support of redevelopment. Moreover, some participants pointed out that currently no government department was responsible for reviewing the methods and results of the SIA. The first phase of the assessment was not open to the public, and the questionnaires were further simplified such that it was doubtful whether the assessment could come to a reliable and comprehensive conclusion. There were also opinions supporting that the SIA should cover the whole district rather than the affected residents only. Quoting the example of Sai Wan, the participants pointed out that although the redevelopment involved a small area only, many new chain stores were attracted to the vicinity of the project, which greatly affect the quality and way of life of the entire district.

At the forum, URA's representative clarified the following on the conduct of the (SIA):

- (i) The first phase of the SIA was translated as 'non-open' in Chinese. However, this simply meant that there would be no interviews with each of the households under this phase. The report would still be submitted to Town Planning Board (TPB), and would be vetted by the relevant government department. However, unlike the traffic impact assessment, the SIAs were not required to meet statutory standard.
- (ii) Regarding the scope of the questionnaire, all questions were devised based on the requirements in the URS.
- (iii) All data / cases collected in the SIA were to be followed up by the social service teams.

Regarding the social service teams, there were views that they should be detached from URA and operate independently.

Some participants opined that without tracking studies, the Government was unable to keep track of the residents after their moving-out, e.g. whether they stayed in the same district and whether there was improvement in their quality of life. The Government therefore had little idea of whether the existing redevelopment mechanism could enable the local residents to enjoy the benefits of redevelopment. Some considered that confidentiality agreements between URA and residents also hindered the implementation of tracking studies by community organisations. URA's representative stated that URA had launched a tracking study for the Hai Tan Street project which was well-received by tenants, yet most owners did not wish to be interviewed. URA would continue to follow up with the residents.

#### 7. Financial arrangement

Some participants pointed out that the method of increasing plot ratio and floor area to encourage redevelopment might not be able to achieve the aim of sustainable urban renewal.

#### 8. Others

Some participants expressed that urban renewal could not be separated from housing and planning policies. Under the current organisation of the policy bureaux, these two policy areas were under the purview of the Development Bureau and the Transport and Housing Bureau respectively. This arrangement affected the actual implementation and planning. Others pointed out that no matter how comprehensive the URS might be, it was still influenced by the TPB. The TPB should therefore be reviewed together with the URS.

Moreover, some participants hoped that the Government could provide assistance to residents so that the latter would have an opportunity to experience fair and affordable legal proceedings, as they would be under extremely high pressure when dealing with legal issues.

Some participants wished that public consultations could be carried out with adequate background information including, for example, the supply and demand of housing in Hong Kong, the definition and nature of urban decay and the area concerned

(including the whereabouts of the 225 urban renewal projects); the performance of the private sector in urban renewal; the views of URA and the Government on URS and the problems they faced, as well as the improvements they would like to see.

A-World Consulting Limited  
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