



香港建築師學會

The Hong Kong Institute of Architects

18 December 2009

Our Ref.: P&L/URSR/AK/cw/0912

Mrs Carrie Lam, JP
Secretary for Development
Development Bureau
9/F Murray Building
Garden Road
Hong Kong
(Attn. : URS Review)

By Fax and By Post
Fax No. : 2845 3489

Dear Mrs Lam

Urban Renewal Strategy Review – Public Engagement Stage

Thank you for your Bureau, Urban Renewal Authority, and your consultant, A-World Consulting, to deliver a briefing on the progress of the Urban Renewal Strategy Review, and also to have an informal discussion with members of our Institute in the evening of 1 December 2009. We would like to draw your attention to the following views and comments brought up by our members during the discussion session as well as our internal discussions :

General

- When identifying which parts of the urban districts to carry out renewal, the criteria should include not only the age, but also the physical conditions, of the buildings. We are pleased to learn that the Bureau is developing a database, through empirical building surveying, to identify dilapidated buildings, which contributes to the criteria of identifying renewal areas.
- A "bottom-up" approach that involves soliciting and analyzing opinions of the local residents is desirable in developing the renewal strategy of a district. It takes into account the different aspirations and demands of the residents in forming a consensus in the general direction of the renewal strategy.
- While it may not be necessary for there to be a consensus among different districts on the detail implementation of urban renewal in the districts, it is imperative that guiding principles should be established for urban renewal of the whole of Hong Kong in order to prioritize the numerous renewal projects.
- Enhancing the existing conditions and configurations of the physical, social and cultural fabrics should take precedence to replacing them with new ones in urban renewal. To this end, the government should encourage private owners to upkeep their properties, while the government itself should improve the public facilities, e.g. sanitation, transportation, etc.
- Vehicular traffic provisions normally dictate the constraints and solutions in planning as in urban renewal. A paradigm shift towards less polluting transportation and sustainability, in terms of both livability of the city and community in human scale, is called for.

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- Hong Kong lacks a well-defined urban renewal strategy – the 4 R's currently adopted by URA, even taken collectively, are actually options for renewal but not a strategy. Since the days of the LDC, the initiative for urban renewal has predominantly been based on the need and means to tackle the problem of dilapidated buildings. This reactionary initiative has heavily stressed on the institutional setup to curb the ever-increasing problems caused by aging buildings and to tackle the difficulty of uniting private owners to upkeep their properties. Even after the URA took over, the general initiative was still being driven by such needs, and the only means before the 4 R's appeared was Redevelopment. The introduction of the 4 R's has been an improvement, in that there are now more than one means. Yet there is hardly a strategy, as Redevelopment is still the predominant mode of urban renewal by default. Therefore, the government should re-appraise the value of Redevelopment vis-à-vis the other R's, namely, Preservation, Revitalization and Rehabilitation, and formulate a real urban renewal strategy that gives justice to its name.

On the Self-financing Principle

- Urban renewal by the government, in itself, does not necessarily require it to be profitable or self-financing. There are many other non-financial factors justifying urban renewal and the government should consider freeing up urban renewal from this overly restrictive principle of self-financing. It is also difficult, if not impossible, to carry out urban renewal without redevelopment under this restrictive principle for existing buildings that have not reached their allowable development potential. And this has led, all too common, to the removal of local residents to other districts due to the "gentrification". Financial viability should not be considered as the first priority or the ultimate goal of urban renewal.

On Bulk and Density

- "Canyonization", happening where huge buildings replace existing low-rise ones without corresponding setting-back and evident in recent urban renewal projects, is alienating for street users and should no longer be continued.
- Careful consideration should be given to the effect of increasing or decreasing the density of a district due to an urban renewal project. In particular, and especially if urban renewal is freed from the self-financing principle, opportunity exists for the government to reduce the density of overcrowded areas by replacing dilapidated buildings with lower density ones or open spaces.

On City and Community Fabrics

- Preservation of heritage or community fabrics should be carried out with a holistic approach, taking into consideration both tangible and intangible fabrics rather than focusing only on the built elements.

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- For non-redevelopment projects, intervention to the city and community fabrics should be kept to a minimum, and relocation of residents (domestic, commercial, or institutional) should be in situ to maintain the community fabrics.
- A more three-dimensional and human approach to urban renewal should be adopted. As the city fabrics are interwoven with each other, the context and relations of areas within and outside community areas (which do not actually have boundaries) must be taken into consideration. The interfaces of one area to another must also be addressed and taken care of to maintain an integrated community and cityscape. Two-dimensional dissection of land parcels as renewal targets can create more problems than solutions.

On Engaging the Public and the Professionals

- Distinction must be made between popular solutions and desirable solutions. As urban renewal inevitably involves complex issues in many different professional disciplines, it is necessary for the government to take lead and take heed the inputs from the professionals concerned, in order for the complex issues to be meaningfully addressed.
- The communities expect the government to take public gain as the first priority of urban renewal. What they see, however, is that public institutions are making money in the process of urban renewal, while the original residents are displaced from the districts. To address this public sentiment, the government should carefully re-consider the self-financing principle and not repeat what private developers can do in urban renewal.

We trust that, together with the opinions we expressed in last year's Focus Group Discussion (on 8 December 2008), the above views and comments are helpful for your Review. To help formulate the new Urban Renewal Strategy, we would be glad to offer our expertise and further discuss with you on the way forward as well as any particular aspects of the Urban Renewal Strategy. Please feel free to contact our Institute to this end.

Yours sincerely

Anna S Y Kwong *MH FHKIA*
President

c.c. Prof Hon Patrick Lau, SBS, JP, Legislative Councillor (Architectural, Surveying & Planning)