

Panel on Planning, Lands and Works – 27 Feb 2007

“Developments creating the wall effect”

Representation by HKIP

Nobody likes wall buildings, town planners in particular. The adverse impacts brought about by wall buildings are so apparent – blocking natural ventilation and sunlight from their adjacent neighborhood. Those sited near the waterfront even obstruct air flows from reaching the inner parts of the city. They have thus also added to the poor overall air quality problem which has yet to be resolved.

The fact before us is: the construction of many of these buildings were driven by the then 85,000 housing units annual target policy. Many of them have obtained approval at a time when pressure to generate more flats was overwhelming. Whilst it is not my intention here to apportion the blame to any particular party, as a matter of fact planners are often blamed by the development industry to be creating obstacles to high density development, I do hope that the Government would learn from the past experience in order not to further aggravate the environmental problems and to arrest the damages if it is still possible.

The second fact before us is: the matter of high density development itself. Development density is arrived at by multiplying the site areas by the maximum permitted plot ratio. Over the years additional floor areas and building bulks are permitted through various means (exemption, bonus) and for various objectives (such as ancillary uses, green incentives, provision of public facilities and financial subsidy). With all these extra GFAs the buildings have to grow not only vertically but also horizontally in order to consume all the permissible GFAs. The increase in building bulk has accentuated in particular in the cases of large redevelopment sites and sites with long and narrow configurations such as those at the railway stations and depots. It is high time that Government should re-think its practice of trading monetary subsidy with higher development potential indiscriminately.

What can be done then? If we still pride our city as Asia’s world city then we should formulate better policies and promulgate effective measures to improve our built environment. Current development density should be

reviewed with a view to reducing them particularly in new towns, sites with potential to produce wall buildings and sites along or near the harbor. Other measures include the application of large site reduction factor, though advocated in the HKPSG but has been ignored, and the exclusion of public open space from plot ratio calculation. The pros and cons of bonus plot ratio should also be comprehensively reviewed. I understand HPLB and ETWB have signed a joint Technical Circular requiring Government projects to carry out air ventilation assessment. However, for private sector development it has not been made a mandatory requirement. In addition Government and statutory bodies including Housing Department, URA and railway projects should take the lead and set example for the industry. If there are major policy formulation in future that are likely to affect the living environment, professional groups should be consulted and potential impacts should be tested out.

Moreover, the bulk of such wall buildings also often present themselves as eyesores in the cityscape. Besides, many of us here perhaps also contribute because as consumers we prefer flats with views which would have a cumulative environmental impact on the adjacent areas and also on a much wider scale. If the HK2030 study, through its public consultations, has presented to us the future visions of a quality environment, due regard should be paid to built-forms and outdoor spaces. The ultra high densities and difficult site configurations of many of such developments have often made producing a decent building form difficult, if not impossible.

Sadly many new flats produced within these wall buildings are for speculative purpose instead of the use of real home owners. Government treasury may benefit from getting higher premium or reducing the cost in public spending by allowing such extra development potential. There are however heavy social and environmental costs resulting in a deteriorating environment and a discordant community. Very often it is the lower socio-economic sector who would suffer more. This is trading short-term financial gain with long term environmental and social costs. As Asia's world city, shouldn't we move towards the direction of sustainable development? Is it too much to demand for higher environmental quality by optimizing instead of maximizing development potential? It is now time for both the government and the private sector to change their

mindset of maximizing the economic return of land and try to balance the social and environmental needs. Isn't it time to treat this small fragile city with a bit more tender and care before it is too late?