

Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs

Heritage-related Initiatives in Old Wan Chai Area

PURPOSE

This paper reports on the latest progress of the efforts made by the Government and the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) in preserving the heritage of the old Wan Chai area.

BACKGROUND

2. In his 2007-08 Policy Address, the Chief Executive declared that the Government would press ahead with our work on heritage conservation in the next five years. One of the initiatives is to task the Development Bureau and the URA to jointly adopt a new way of thinking and a district-based approach when considering preservation and revitalization of the old Wan Chai area. This signifies that heritage conservation is no longer limited to the preservation of historical buildings in a piecemeal approach, but based on a small area so as to preserve local characteristics.

OLD WAN CHAI AREA

3. The old Wan Chai area generally refers to the area south of Johnston Road, north of Kennedy Road and along both sides of Queen's Road East. It is one of the earliest developed areas on Hong Kong Island of a significant historic value, and has also witnessed the dramatic development of Hong Kong. The shoreline formerly along this area has also been extended north-ward with a number of reclamations.

4. The old Wan Chai area is identified for district-based heritage conservation for it embraces a wealth of historical buildings. With only about 32 hectares, the old Wan Chai area has 10 conservation projects, with all together 29 graded historical structures, including the declared monument of the Old Wan Chai Post Office; Grade I historical buildings like Hung Shing Temple, Yuk Hui Temple, privately owned Nam Koo Terrace and Blue House cluster (involving Grades I and II historical buildings); Grade II historical

buildings like tenement buildings at 186-190 Queen's Road East, 18 Ship Street, buildings along Mallory Street and Burrows Street; and Grade III historical buildings like Wan Chai Market and Sikh Temple. Other heritages include Woo Cheong Pawn Shop being conserved and preserved by the URA's project and being assessed by the Antiquities and Monuments Office, and the open-air bazaar at Tai Yuen Street and Cross Street under a comprehensive preservation plan announced earlier.

5. The old Wan Chai area has also been the key area where the URA promoted its 4Rs Strategy (namely Redevelopment, Rehabilitation, Revitalisation and pReservation) over the years. With the gradual eastward extension of the central business district beyond Central and Admiralty, the old Wan Chai area is facing increasing pressure of development. It is time to take forward conservation of the old Wan Chai area under a district-based approach so that the local Wan Chai characteristics can be retained in the course of development. The aim is to achieve integration of existing and new developments as well as balancing of development and conservation.

MODE OF IMPLEMENTATION AND RESOURCES

6. In taking forward the conservation of the old Wan Chai area, the Government and the URA will adopt a "People-oriented" approach emphasizing public engagement and will work in partnership with the Wan Chai District Council (WCDC). After the assumption of duty of the new-term WCDC in January 2008, we will discuss with them the ways to facilitate their monitoring and steering over our revitalization work. A possible way is to set up a steering group comprising of representatives of the Development Bureau, the URA, the WCDC, professionals and conservationists.

7. District revitalization work involves a number of Government departments in coordinating matters such as road traffic or the environment. The Development Bureau will form an interdepartmental committee, chaired by one of its Deputy Secretaries, to coordinate and liaise with the various Government departments involved in order to support the work of the steering group.

8. The URA will also provide resources and manpower to support the steering group and discharge daily administrative and liaison duties. Where

minor works, beautification or other related programmes are needed, the URA will cover the resources incurred by using the provisions for rehabilitation and revitalisation work set aside from the \$10 billion already injected by the Government. Furthermore, special provisions amounting to \$300 million has been earmarked for district councils to carry out district minor works in 2008. It is hoped that the WCDC will allocate part of the provisions for minor works in the old Wan Chai area as necessary. We also hope that developers and shop operators will take part in the revitalization of the old Wan Chai area by street beautification, greening and art displays with local characteristics.

HERITAGE CONSERVATION PROJECTS

(i) Blue House Cluster

9. The Blue House cluster is an urban renewal project which the URA and the Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS) have agreed to be undertaken by the HKHS. According to the original conservation proposal for the Blue House cluster, all occupants would have to move out. With the support of the HKHS, we are able to adopt an alternative approach which emphasizes on “community network” in the conservation of the Blue House so that “both the Blue House and the occupants are retained”. We will acquire, through the HKHS, the two building blocks of the Blue House cluster under private ownership and will then offer rehousing or compensation to those tenants or occupants who would like to move out of the Blue House cluster. For those who would like to stay behind, they will become a key element in the future conservation plan for the Blue House cluster. On completion of the acquisition and re-housing arrangement, the HKHS will hand the Blue House cluster over to the Government for incorporation into the Development Bureau’s “Revitalising Historical Buildings Through Partnership Scheme”. Non-profit-making organizations will be invited to submit conservation and revitalization proposals capable of retaining the local network. Such proposals will have to cater for the needs of the existing residents who wish to stay in the Blue House conservation project. This new conservation initiative has been welcomed by the existing residents and the concern groups.

(ii) Wan Chai Market Building

10. Wan Chai Market Building is within the scope of a redevelopment

project already commenced by the URA. The URA's predecessor, the then Land Development Corporation, signed a redevelopment contract with a joint venture developer a decade ago. The URA must respect and honour the spirit of the contract signed. At the meeting of the Subcommittee on Heritage Conservation held on 11 July 2007, Members listened to our report and endorsed the view that the URA must respect the spirit of contract. They passed a motion, urging the Government and the URA to make every endeavour to renegotiate with the developer for in-situ preservation.

11. The Development Bureau notes that the URA should respect the spirit of the contract, but also supports the URA to discuss further with the joint venture developer. After several rounds of discussions with the developer, the URA and the joint venture developer have reached in principle agreement to consider the feasibility of taking a "core elements preservation" approach to preserve the market building. This approach would make it possible to preserve the key elements of the market building in-situ, including the entire exterior and façade, the main interior structural elements as well as a good portion of the original floors. Instead of starting at ground level as originally planned, the residential tower will now be supported by piles going through the rear part of the market floors and will rise above the rooftop of the preserved market. To further reinforce the conservation elements, the URA will explore jointly with the developer the exterior design of the residential tower in order to match and blend in with the "fin-like" cantilevers of the market building façade as much as practicable. Details of the proposal are still under discussion with the joint venture developer. If all goes well, the URA aims to submit a revised master layout plan to the Town Planning Board in the first half of 2008.

(iii) Open-air Bazaar at Tai Yuen Street and Cross Street

12. At the meeting of the Subcommittee on Heritage Conservation held on 13 November 2007, we briefed Members on a proposal for the preservation of the entire open-air bazaar at Tai Yuen Street and Cross Street, and are pleased that Members were supportive to the proposal. Subsequently, we have approached some of the hawkers, whose feedback has been positive. They have indicated that they would take part in beautifying the open-air bazaar. After the assumption of duty of the new-term WCDC in January 2008, we, together with the URA and the stakeholders, will start the relevant work.

13. Apart from the above heritage conservation projects, the Civil Engineering and Development Department has commissioned a consultancy in early 2007 to prepare a Greening Master Plan (GMP) for Sheung Wan to Causeway Bay, which includes the formulation of greening measures for Wan Chai. The GMP is almost completed. We believe that community greening initiatives and heritage conservation projects will complement each other and achieve a magnificent effect.

14. “District-based” revitalization and development in a holistic approach is a new concept and a new way of thinking. Should the adoption of this approach in the old Wan Chai area become a success, we will introduce it to other old areas so as to provide quality living environment for our community and better attractions for the tourists.

Development Bureau
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