

**THE COMMENTS OF THE HONG KONG INSTITUTE OF PLANNERS
ON
THE URBAN RENEWAL AUTHORITY BILL**

Since early 90s, the Hong Kong Institute of Planners has continuously explained to the public and the Government on the issues related to urban renewal in Hong Kong. In particular, it was made clear that redevelopment is not the only means of renewal and urban renewal can hardly be financially viable in commercial terms. The Institute has also urged the Government to formulate a comprehensive urban renewal policy with the support of an authority which can take up the management and co-ordination work.

The publication of the Urban Renewal Authority White Bill (the Bill) is welcomed against such background. We, however, see the prime function of the Bill, with reference to its actual content, as to speed up the implementation process through vesting additional power to the future URA. Much has been mentioned prior to the gazette especially in relation to social considerations and improvement on the overall environment of the old urban district but little is being delivered in the Bill. The Bill is still pointing to the physical condition of buildings rather than the social and environmental well-being of the old urban areas.

While we support the establishment of an Urban Renewal Authority, we cannot endorse the Bill unless the following concerns are properly addressed.

1. Social Considerations

Rehousing is an important social component of urban renewal and there is no dispute on that but clearly it is not the only social consideration. The Government commissioned various studies on strategic development and urban restructuring requiring social impact assessments that covered a wide range of issues including local culture and character, social and economic ties, employment, provisions of community facilities, rehousing and relocation requirements, etc. We consider that essential as the assessment will help revealing the social needs and concerns at the early stage such that proper mitigation measures can be identified to minimize the potential impacts and to maintain social stability.

Given the experience of the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance, we consider it necessary and practical to include the specific requirements of Social Impact Assessment in the Bill for the Urban Renewal Strategy, the plans, the schemes and the projects. The details of which can be provided in form of a Technical Memorandum attached to the Bill.

2. Public Accountability

The HKIP has long been advocating for the benefits of a participatory planning process in terms of openness and transparency. While declaration of interests by

the Directors of the Board and attending Legislative Council meetings are important, they are often inadequate in obtaining the mandate that is required for carrying out projects with significant impact on the daily life of people like urban renewal. Sufficient space for check and balance by the general public through the decision making process will on the one hand make the Authority more accountable to the public, and on the other hand help paving the way for smooth implementation.

Relying on the current planning procedures will to an extent achieve the objective but it should be noted that the current planning procedures are under review to allow for a more open process. In a nutshell, hearing objections through an independent channel should be allowed and proactive measures should be used to facilitate better public understanding on the issues related to each and every plan.

3. Rehabilitation and Environmental Improvement

Rehabilitation is a major urban renewal tool which helps minimizing resource wastage and disturbance to the community. However, the legislative framework required for effective implementation of urban renewal through rehabilitation is incomplete. Owners Incorporation as well as maintenance responsibility including the establishment of long term maintenance and management sinking-fund might have to be made mandatory prior to the launching of an extensive rehabilitation programme.

In addition, availability of public funding for assisting the incapable individuals is essential. The Building Safety Improvement Loan Scheme is inadequate in the sense that we believe the fund should also cover the need for general environmental improvement for a renewal area. For renewal, the external living/working environment is as important as the internal. This should also be a responsibility of the future Authority.

Last but not least, we would like to take this opportunity to raise our serious concern on using bonus plot ratio as a means to enhance financial viability of urban renewal projects. We are not convinced that in planning terms any bodies, be it private or public, should be considered more equal than others and be given favourable specific treatment that leads to violation of a commonly endorsed principle, particularly those embedded in the statutory plans.

More importantly, given the unique development context, Hong Kong is already in a leading role in terms of both population and building densities amongst all the cities. Further increasing the building density and/or population density is not a sustainable choice.

The content of this position paper simply outlines the major concerns of the Hong Kong Institute of Planners on the Bill. Our members are most willing to discuss with the Government on whatever details that is required to refine the Bill to a satisfactory shape.