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URBAN RENEWAL STRATEGY REVIEW

Public Views and Future Direction : Paper for the Concensus Building Stage of the Urban Renewal Strategy Review (URSR)

Response by the Public Affairs Committee of the Hong Kong Institute of Planners

1. The URA strategy is currently being reviewed as it is widely regarded as being too over-simplistic and in large part ignores both the reality of urban areas as they actually function, and the ways in which they are appreciated by the public at large. This is fundamental to the current review as the strategy no longer meets certain fundamental societal aspirations. We agree that an objective of urban renewal is to "improve the quality of life of residents in dilapidated urban areas". However the emphasis needs to be selective in terms of priorities. While the first paragraph under 'Policy Background and Development' states that urban renewal is not a "slash and burn process", the recent emphasis on virtually comprehensive redevelopment of old established mixed use areas in Wan Chai and that proposed for the Graham Street / Peel Street areas are exactly that. In principle we support a 4R Strategy – the essential problem has been that while rehabilitation is being successfully carried out by the URA in certain situations, the holistic approach to urban neighbourhoods has not been applied, so that large urban quarters have (and are still) being subject to what is virtually comprehensive redevelopment.

We therefore support a holistic and "bottom up" approach to urban renewal and regeneration.

2. The HKIP welcomes the URSR as there have been significant changes in social attitudes towards development and redevelopment of the older parts of Hong Kong in recent years, not only related to urban renewal but towards various aspects of urban environment. In view of this it is considered necessary to review the objectives, mechanisms and operations of the URA and how these can be positively utilized to ensure that Hong Kong achieves the objective of "improving the quality of life of residents in urban areas", but also in regenerating older urban quarters in a way that benefits all stakeholders. Fundamental to this approach is that the process of urban renewal should be based on sustainable development principles in their widest sense and that this should involve an inclusive process of public engagement.
3. We are extremely concerned about the increasingly undifferentiated character of Hong Kong, the financially driven approach to renewal, the disappearing memory of the city and the questionable legacy we are leaving to future generations. Much effort goes towards maximising functional efficiency – a legitimate, but in itself, an insufficient basis for urban regeneration. Most great city quarters that we most admire, exhibit a balance between an appropriate level of urban management and user friendliness. We need to ensure that the URA lives up to its responsibility in this regard.
4. There is a need for a more sensitive process of urban change for large city neighbourhoods through a careful process of regeneration that might encompass rehabilitation, incremental redevelopment and appropriate levels of conservation in order to sustain a wide mix of uses, and other aspects that characterize these areas. The document 'Public views and Future Directions' lays emphasis on these issues, and we hope that this can be sustained. We also see no need for overly rapid solutions – regeneration should be viewed as an ongoing process. There needs to be a sensitive and continual development of appropriate measures to achieve urban renewal objectives. These should be based on sustainable development principles and provide alternatives to the resumption, demolition and redevelopment option which should become the implementation means of last resort.

5. Housing is recognized as an important issue and it is clearly important to ensure proper standards of domestic accommodation. What is also important is to try and keep the community together, as far as possible, through a combination of in-situ upgrading, renovation and selected redevelopment.
6. It is important in large, older, and well-used urban quarters to facilitate the retention of the street framework wherever possible, which builds on its incidental character and its ability to define the morphology, community character and place making potential of a neighbourhood, rather than redevelopment in the form of a single large site. We need to protect urban design values such as a distinctive street matrix or historical layout pattern, not merely the occasional single building that possesses historical or architectural merit.
7. In older urban quarters open space should be carefully integrated as small pocket parks and precincts related to wider pedestrian flows, whilst recognizing the attractive and well used pedestrian 'market street' environments, and the symbiosis between street markets and premises alongside. At the same time, strenuous efforts should be made by all parties to examine comprehensive pedestrian and open space connectors through parts of the urban area, linking together activity nodes and parks, and connecting older areas with the harbourfront.
8. It is necessary to facilitate a genuinely holistic urban renewal strategy, where all initiatives work positively together in the renewal of older neighbourhoods, to offer a range of ownership and letting conditions that respect natural market processes and changes of use, while acting to sustain both community and character. Under Section 5 of the Document – "Revitalisation" it is stated that "it is entirely due to market forces that LKF and SoHo have flourished". This is only part of the equation. It is the retention of older fabric in multi-ownership itself that facilitates economic change and the dynamics associated with this. Replacing this with single owned and managed commercial blocks cannot replicate this process. The underlying social and economic forces need to be better recognized.
9. The URA processes need to be more transparent. There needs to be a systematic system of establishing objectives for specific areas based on publicly available criteria and information. Options need to be identified and discussed with the various stakeholders and the financial implications should be made public. We support the suggestion to establish District Urban Renewal Forums (DURF) to strengthen the notion of properly considered urban regeneration with the participation of all stakeholders, planned at a district level with a "people centred" approach, and a "bottom-up public engagement process".
10. A proper consultation process for URA initiatives in large urban neighbourhoods needs to take place with participation by all stakeholders from the outset, so that appropriate solutions emerge through careful and considered dialogue. There is a significant opportunity here for the URA to act, not as a large institution that is largely geared to expedient redevelopment, but as an enabler, working with the community rather than on behalf of it, so that older city quarters are gradually upgraded, improved and revitalized in the best possible sense, that includes both the formal and informal. There is nothing wrong, and much that is right in a slow and incremental approach, that recognizes growth and change as an integral and necessary part of urbanism. If we do not do this, our remaining areas of urban contrast, character and community are going to vanish, just at a time when other cities in Asia, including those in China, are recognizing their value. The organizational process is going to represent a considerable challenge which should perhaps be reflected in the Document, as there will be a need for the type of 'advocacy' community planning that has formed a core part of urban planning in recent years in Europe and the USA.
11. For project proposals initiated by the owners and developers, the parameters and criteria for qualifying for adoption by the URA should be set out clearly and all information should be open and transparent. Consideration may be given for the URA to levy a service charge on a cost recovery basis for processing such project proposals instead of conventional sharing of profits accrued from implementation of such projects. In addition, certain considerations could be given to those projects that bring about 'planning gains' and 'community goods' which may or may not be borne out in the recommendations of DURF studies. As facilitator, URA may also consider proposals for conversion (including industrial areas), refurbishment and rejuvenation (such as upgrading to meet the current living standards and safety codes) of buildings in a designated regeneration area.

12. There is a need to be deliberately flexible in the approach to regeneration, particularly when it comes to redevelopment. Under Section 5 of the Document ("The Role of the URA in Redevelopment) there is an obvious need to differentiate between areas having very different socio-economic characteristics and stakeholder priorities. We welcome the potential role of the URA as a facilitator and in the need to build consensus. In certain areas there might well be both a need and a satisfactory rationale for more of a redevelopment approach. In others (and we would include the current Peel Street / Graham Street proposal in this) there is a need for incremental regeneration and upgrading with a degree of small lot redevelopment on the LKF model that would retain the essential and historic character, its broad mix of uses and associations. In all cases affected and eligible residents should if possible be relocated in the area itself through residential blocks that form an appropriate level of 'fit' within the existing urban framework.