



St. James' Settlement
Community Development Service (Hong Kong)

Proposing Community Heritage Preservation Model through the Blue House Project

Introduction



Before 1997, Hong Kong was a highly capitalist place going through rapid market expansion. Urban renewal was always been viewed as a purely capital accumulation process and all old buildings were cleared mainly because of economic reasons. All owners and tenants were compensated at a “reasonable amount” and it is hard for us to advocate a more sustainable urban renewal strategy to maintain social network as well as renewal community economy. The economic recession in October, 1997 definitely lowered the income of Hong Kong people and raised the unemployment rate. However, it also slowed down the urban bulldozing process and gave us time to reflect the real meaning of urban renewal. In 2001, Urban Renewal Authority in Hong Kong started their new urban renewal projects committed in 1997. At this time, the urban renewal process was not so smooth and URA was faced direct confrontation about traditional urban bulldozing strategy and residents started to raise issues like maintain social network, heritage preservation, develop local economy, etc. There was awareness among Hong Kong people to reflect on traditional urban redevelopment and propose new model of urban renewal.

In 2006, Hong Kong Housing Society, another semi-government organization announced the Blue House preservation project to try to maintain the history as well as the culture of a pre war building cluster. However, the unchanged traditional mindset of government officials would probably turn the preservation project into another urban redevelopment project by vacating all social capitals, local histories and community economy.

With the joint effort of Wanchai District Council and a group of professionals and academics, St. James' Settlement Community Development Services started to engage residents inside and surrounding the Blue House to propose a more comprehensive model of Community Preservation.

Background



- 1 The Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS) and Urban Renewal Authority (URA) announced the Blue House preservation project on 31st March, 2006. According to them, all the buildings, except the orange one will be preserved and the proposed adaptive reuse idea was to go along the themes of a Chinese Tea and a Chinese Medicine museum. The planning period is expected to take 16 months (starting from 1st April, 06).
- 2 According to government statistics, there are over 20 households in the blue house while majority of them are elderly people. Several residents lives in the blue house for over 50 years when there were children. For them, the Blue house is not just a living place, but a place with their family histories and memories.

The blue house is also an evidence of past 80 years' urban development in Hong Kong.

- 3 St. James' Settlement Community Development Services collaborated with the Wanchai District Council to invite opinions and participation by organizing workshops and interviews with the local community, surrounding shops, professionals and concerned academics. During this period, we organized workshops, exhibitions, residents' meetings, community bazaars and consequently, a Blue House area community participatory preservation model evolved out of more than half a year of community engagement programs
- 4 Our service also organized a Blue House concern group which consists of professionals, academics, artists, residents and other stakeholders. Based on this preservation model, we develop project details and even financial sustainability proposal. The group submitted a people's representation generated out of a participatory design process to the Town Planning Board for the consideration of official rezoning procedure on 8/12/06.
- 5 Some of the achievements are the Town Planning Board's amendment of the zoning to include "Flat Use" in column two and its demand on the HKHS to prepare a comprehensive preservation proposal before taking action to resume ownership and tenancy.



Community Importance



1. The whole Blue House area includes 3 buildings and 1 open space. Namely, the Blue House (No. 72 -74A, Stone Nullah Lane), the Yellow House (No. 2-8, Hing Wan Street), the Orange House (No.8, King Sing Street) and their surrounded opening space.



2. Both the Blue House and the Yellow House are pre-war buildings and they are two of the very few blocks of Chinese-styled tenement buildings left in Hong Kong. Indeed, they witness to a page of Hong Kong urban history when tenements were the predominant building type.
3. The tenements of that period were entirely pragmatic in design containing only a dash of decoration in response to the economic development of Hong Kong between the 1920s to the Second World War as well as during the influx of Chinese migrants to Hong Kong. We literally call this “Chinese Building” as Tong Lau (唐樓).
4. “Tong Lau”’s are building type that can be found in southern China. It is a hybrid model of China and West. “Tong Lau”’s are mainly 2 to 3 storied Chinese dwellings. They had pitch roofs, gray brick walls and timber floors. Moreover, these “Tong Lau”’s are characterized by the projection of narrow balconies with iron balustrades supported by wrought-iron poles. Briefly speaking, “Tong Lau”’s are representing the livelihood of Hong Kong in pre-war era.
5. In addition to architectural importance, the Blue House area is also an essential place for residential, religious, commercial, as well as community functions. It used to be union office, temple, school, community gathering place, residence and shops, etc. It also served the purpose to maintain community network and nurture local identity.
6. In other words, the blue house area is not just a physical entity, but a public space for the engagement and participation of local community. Accordingly, the preservation of the Blue House area should be a synthesis of both tangible as well as intangible heritage.

Planning Principles



The Blue House Preservation Project will be guided by the following principles:

- 1 Heritage is not just an object carrying our collective memories; it should also be a documentary of our history, culture and stories. Moreover, linkage of the heritage and the future should be identified and presented so as to ensure the sustainability of the project and the community.
- 2 Preservation of the tangible cultural heritage - the architectural character of the Blue House area, including the illegal structures as they are part of the vernacular heritage of Hong Kong.
- 3 Preservation of the intangible cultural heritage, including stories, local culture, livelihood patterns, oral histories, vernacular cultural elements, etc.
- 4 Participatory bottom-up approach rather than traditional top down strategy.
- 5 Original utilization of the heritage should be adopted as far as possible to avoid “mummification”¹ of heritage.

¹ In Hong Kong, it is usual for the Government and public organizations to preserve the cultural heritage by removing the original utilization. We would like to use the word “mummification” to describe such kind of preservation.

- 6 Endeavor to build up a sense of local community and identity.
- 7 Integration of community art and community culture into the project.
- 8 Cooperating with local schools to integrate the project into the syllabus of secondary school courses, like Liberal Studies or General Education.
- 9 Avoid gentrification of residents and local businesses, especially there are many car repairing shops surrounding the Blue House. Rapid business development according to government plan would only clear all these shops away from the original places.
- 10 Establishment of local management committee to include local stakeholders, including residents, professionals, academics, artists, government officials and NGOs to develop the local community's ownership of the project.
- 11 Facilitate the establishment of various forms of SE, namely Organic Bazaar Cultural Tourism and Art Flea Market, etc. with the objectives of social inclusion, community participation and community building.
- 12 SE can also facilitate economic development in the community and then provides economic participation and empowerment for marginal groups (e.g. middle-aged unskilled men and women, etc.).

Concrete Preservation Proposal



By pursuing these guiding principles, in parallel the following activities and outcomes could be nurtured in support/response of the objectives outlined above:

- 1 For the Blue House : Residential theme
 - 1.1 “Residential” purpose, facilitate original residents to stay in their own home after renovation and maintenance work and avoid “Mummification”
 - 1.2 Preserve the social network in the community
 - 1.3 Preserve the whole physical structure as well as the whole typology of the Blue house area, including physical wall, internal structure, roof, floor, staircase, partition and even “illegal Structure”
 - 1.4 Original residents would contribute their histories and stories to nurture the consolidation of local culture in the community
 - 1.5 Residence for community artists, researchers and academics
 - 1.6 “Wanchai Livelihood Place” to consolidate and promote community culture and local livelihood
 - 1.7 Resource centre for Community Preservation and Revitalization

- 2 For the Yellow House: Social Enterprise theme
 - 2.1 Purpose for Social Enterprise and Community Economy
 - 2.2 Gathering and exchange place for Community Economy project
 - 2.3 Small scale organic farming
 - 2.4 2nd hand shop
 - 2.5 Community College
 - 2.6 Community centre

- 3 For the Orange House: Community Art theme
 - 3.1 Theme as “Community Art and Gallery”
 - 3.2 Local exhibition (community history, oral history, ghost stories, etc)
 - 3.3 Community art gallery & workshop
 - 3.4 Performance venue

- 4 For the Open Space: Community Bazaar theme
 - 4.1 Public space for the community
 - 4.2 Local community bazaar (local art performance, story telling, handicraft demonstration/sales, organic food and vegetable market sales)
 - 4.3 Community Artist flea market
 - 4.4 Street Festival

Issues and Reflections



1. In Hong Kong, urban renewal projects in old urban areas are mainly conducted by semi-government bodies or just by private developers. Different operators of urban renewal may have different objectives and purposes. It is understandable for private developers to conduct urban renewal projects to maximize profit. They may do some measures for social goals but the contribution may be decorative. Put aside the debate of government/ semi-government bodies (supra structure) are representing developers to continue the expansion of capitalism in Hong Kong (infra-structure), it is easy for these institutions to maintain a traditional and conservative position to avoid taking risk during the urban renewal process.

Accordingly, exploring different funding sources in civil society to do heritage preservation and urban renewal in Hong Kong is urgent in 2 aspects. Firstly, it can demonstrate a more proactive model and give confidence to government/ semi-government bodies to push them move faster. On the other hand, funding from society (i.e. Heritage Trust in UK) may take up projects that government/ semi-government feel inappropriate or controversial to implement (i.e. social enterprise)

2. Another issue parallel to external funding sources for the preservation of community heritage preservation is the development of sustainable business model of these projects. As the successful experience of UK to develop social enterprise, it is essential for these projects to develop their own business model to sustain financial expenditure. Cultural tourism, souvenir selling, community

culture and art may be good examples of social enterprise in this preservation projects. The business model may not cover all costs but has to demonstrate the business potential of these projects. The final financial model may be a mixture of government funding, social trust fund and operation income of the preservation project.

3. There are over 20 households living in the preservation area and majority of them are elderly people. However, different residents may have different opinions and different concerns. In this project, over half of residents want to remove to public housing estate not in the same district to upgrade their living condition and one-third of them want to stay. In principle, their opinions and concerns are not mutually exclusive. But in practice, they are easy to be persuaded to blame the other for opposing their opinions. It is our main task to engage all residents to voice out their opinions and minimize the potential contradiction or even conflict within this project.
4. The last issue we are encountering is to handle the relationship with semi-government bodies. In this preservation project, the basic contradiction is not so obvious since all of them agreed to preserve the heritage. The difference is the strategy to do preservation while their proposal is a more traditional top down approach and ours is a community engagement model. Besides adopting different views in heritage preservation, HKHS and URA are important stake holders in this project since they contribute the preservation money and resettlement housing resource. Without a fully elected government, it is a key issue of us to develop and maintain effective relationship with these semi-government bodies in orde to put forward our ideal model.

Conclusion



For a long time, urban renewal in colonial Hong Kong adopts the model of “Community Bulldozing” which all social networks, local culture and community heritage are cleared and removed. After 1997, it is high time for the post-colonial Hong Kong to develop a visionary urban renewal and heritage preservation strategy to rebuild community identity as well as to engage community participation.

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