

Title	Challenges encountered in building preservation and revitalisation in Hong Kong
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Issue Date	2016
Issue Number	5
Paper Number	1
Citation	Chan, J., Wong, A., Chan, T. & Yu, C. (2016). <i>Challenges encountered in building preservation and revitalisation in Hong Kong</i> (Working Paper Series No. 1, Issue 5, 2016). Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, College of Professional and Continuing Education, School of Professional Education and Executive Development. Retrieved Feb 6, 2017 from <a href="http://weblib.cpce-polyu.edu.hk/apps/wps/assets/pdf/w20160501.pdf">http://weblib.cpce-polyu.edu.hk/apps/wps/assets/pdf/w20160501.pdf</a>
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## **Challenges Encountered in Building Preservation and Revitalisation in Hong Kong**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Heritage Preservation and Revitalisation has become a controversial issue in Hong Kong since the last decade. There is an increasing trend in the local community to concern for the retention of historic buildings to preserve the history of Hong Kong. The Urban Renewal Authority (URA) is one of the major organisations to perform preservation and revitalisation (P&R) projects. However, criticisms received throughout the years reveal that it may not be an easy task for URA to deliver P&R projects smoothly. Based on a review of contemporary literature, this study aims to analyse the social values obtained from P&R projects in Hong Kong, explore the challenges encountered P&R and provide insights to minimise the impacts of the challenges in P&R projects. This study is expected to benefit the profession of building management at large by pointing out the problems encountered in P&R and providing insights for tackling these problems.

**KEYWORDS:** Preservation, Revitalisation, Historical buildings, Challenges, Hong Kong

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Adaptive reuse of historic buildings has been widely recognised as a sustainable approach to building conservation (Yung et al., 2014). Heritage Preservation and Revitalisation is a popular issue in Hong Kong regarding the balance of development and retention of historical footprint in the past decade. Heritage is widely defined to include different resources that people have reasons to treasure them behind the usage, and it can be specifically referred to historic buildings which consist of invaluable collective memory in the community (English Heritage, 2008; ICMOS, 1999). Revitalisation can be considered as a lively process to conserve built heritage rather than merely preserving it to retain the current state (Greed, 1996, cited in Au, 2013). Revitalisation can be achieved by the method of adaptive re-use which involves upgrading work in an old building for new usage of that building (Douglas, 2006; Sharpe, 2012).

As stated in the Urban Renewal Strategy 2011, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) is responsible to initiate heritage preservation and revitalisation (P&R) if it composes part of the urban renewal work (Development Bureau, 2011). Tenement buildings, which are also known as traditional Chinese shop-houses (Yung et al., 2014) or “Tong Lau” in Chinese, is one of the common types of historic buildings in Hong Kong that P&R projects of URA usually involve tenement buildings in the process of urban renewal (Lee, 2010). Yung et al. (2014) opined that adaptive reuse of shophouses often result in dissonance and gentrification in our society. One common criticism on the performance of those P&R projects is that only the external appearance and the physical building are retained without concerning the internal spirit and the traditional setting of the building (Au, 2013; Yung et al., 2014) and the authenticity of the area and the original way of living are sacrificed (Gotham, 2007). It is therefore significant to explore the challenges affecting the performance of P&R projects in Hong Kong in this study.

Previous studies focus on the “Revitalising Historic Buildings through Partnership” Scheme of the Commissioner for Heritage's Office (CHO) while other researches analyse different values of heritage conservation such as economic values and political values, and the reasons for failure in some of the heritage conservation cases; but the challenges encountered in P&R have not been adequately addressed in the previous studies. This study is expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by analysing the performance of P&R projects, recognising the challenges of the projects, and providing some insights to minimise the impacts of those challenges.

## 2 SOCIAL VALUES OF PRESERVATION AND REVITALISATION

Social values can be found when there is the conservation of heritage and living cultures, as well as the integrity between the environment and the heritage (ICMOS, 1999). One of the social values obtained in P&R is that the sense of belonging and identity is established among Hong Kong people as heritage revitalisation passes on the history and culture of the previous generations (Throsby, 2002, cited in Yung and Chan, 2015). Also, Lu (2009) opined that heritage revitalisation, which contributes more spatial area to the community, reduces the conflicts between the poor and the rich since the working class always feel discontented for the aggressive property developments by a few large-scale developers. Yung et al. (2014) also shared similar perception that intangible cultural value in the society is enhanced by prolonging the original lifestyle in the community and extending the history of the district.

The revitalisation project of Mallory Street and Burrows Street in Wai Chai, which involves 10 buildings built before World-War II (WWII), is the first successful case in improving the social values in the district (URA, 2014). It is also the first P&R case which is

not involved in any redevelopment project (URA, 2014). URA selected Hong Kong Arts Centre to operate the site as a “Comix Home Base” that offers a place for promoting comic and other cultural activities in the community (URA, 2014). URA (n.d.) also stressed to enhance the living surrounding and business environment, so the residents have greater sense of belonging to the community. To attract both residents and visitors, the completed project provides an additional open space for the public to enjoy different events and exhibitions, and shops for selling art-associated products (URA, 2014).

URA also revitalised a series of tenement buildings at Wing Lee Street in Sheung Wan that was originally under the plan of redevelopment for the project of Staunton Street and Wing Lee Street with only three buildings preserved (URA, 2015a). Despite the fact that Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) did not regard the tenement buildings at Wing Lee Street have much historical value, URA initiated the revitalisation of totally 12 buildings with special terrace feature in response to the great concern of the public for nostalgia of the living style in the 1960s after the release of a local film recorded at Wing Lee Street (URA, 2015a; Guzman et al., 2013). URA transformed the terrace to a public space for social activities while modifying the buildings for offering residence to needy families or youth (URA, 2015a). Although URA seemed to put effort in preserving the buildings for community use, it resulted in dissatisfaction in the society. Since these buildings were built more than half a century ago, it required large-scale renovation but it was discovered that the structure of the buildings had different degree of problems that it may not be able to preserve the buildings for more than 20 years even if there is large-scale renovation (Cheng, 2010; Ho, 2010). Leung and Wu (2011) also stated the common type of tiles used in 1960s on the rooftop was replaced by the modern outdoor wood flooring and the traditional wooden door in the building was replaced by the glass door, which implied the building materials used for the renovation destroyed the original style of the buildings, leading to a loss in the meaning of preserving the buildings. Notwithstanding the fact that it is one of the missions of URA to improve the social values of the district through revitalisation, not all of their P&R projects are successful in achieving the social values as illustrated in the project at Wing Lee Street (URA, 2016).

### **3 CHALLENGES OF PRESERVATION AND REVITALISATION**

#### **3.1 Financial Support for P&R Projects**

The first challenge faced by URA, which is the main agent of P&R projects in Hong Kong, is to administrate revitalisation projects by its own financial support since it is a self-financing organisation (Au, 2013). Au (2013) discovered that URA would maximise the profit generating method of the revitalised buildings to balance its expenditure on revitalisation.

Criticisms are resulted from the revitalisation of Woo Cheong Pawn Shop in Wai Chai as URA rents the revitalised heritage to a luxurious restaurant, in which not all citizens are welcomed, for obtaining high rents to balance its financial account (Au, 2013). Woo Cheong Pawn Shop is formally named as 60-66, Johnston Road, which are four tenement buildings built before WWII with a mix of Western and Chinese architectural style, with some of the building components built in 1888 (URA, 2011). Woo Cheong Pawn Shop was located at one of the buildings, which is 66, Johnston Road, and it was owned by a famous local pawn shop trading family for more than a century (URA, 2011). As the buildings formed a portion in the redevelopment project of Johnston Road launched by URA in 2003, URA used HK\$16 million to renovate the buildings (Yung et al., 2014).

Although it is understandable that URA has to overcome hardship on balancing financial account when the expenditure on renovation is so high, it may not be desirable for URA to ignore the actual wants of the community. Wan (2010, cited in Yung et al., 2014) also judged the revitalisation of Woo Cheong Pawn Shop that URA is more likely to consider it as an income generating project rather than a heritage and cultural preserving project. Some studies also argued that the redeveloped high-rise modern building next to Woo Cheong Pawn Shop is a mismatch with the traditional Woo Cheong Pawn Shop, so the overall streetscape is badly affected (Yung et al., 2014; Lam, 2012). Moreover, the rooftop at Woo Cheong Pawn Shop was originally designed for the free access of the general public, but Yung et al. (2014) realised that the general public is merely allowed to enter the rooftop in business-hour of the restaurant and they can only visit the building when they enjoy meals in the restaurants.

Apart from Woo Cheong Pawn Shop, the tenement building at 18 Ship Street in Wan Chai is another case that URA turns the building into a mixture of luxurious restaurant and private offices without free public access (Yung et al., 2014). Therefore, it is reasonable for the study of Yung et al. (2014) to conclude that URA creates gentrification, which makes an apparent replacement of the number of higher income people on the number of lower income people in a district that destroy the original community network (Reece, 2004), in the process of revitalisation. As Langston et al. (2008) suggested, a more holistic approach could be adopted in decision making in P&R in Hong Kong by considering the overall adaptive reuse potential of the buildings. They were of the opinion that such approach would ensure that buildings with significant remaining capacity to serve the city could be retained and given a new breath of life.

### **3.2 Heavy Reliance on Property Development**

Difficulty in achieving cost efficiency is considered as one of the major challenges in P&R projects as pointed out by the case studies conducted by Yung and Chan (2012). Lu's study (2009) found that revitalising heritage is difficult in Hong Kong as there is a lack of developable land and its economy relies heavily on property development. Yung et al. (2014) had similar findings that the great demand on land for housing development in urban renewal districts gives the second challenge for URA. Since revitalisation is not the core business of URA, it focuses more on redevelopment. Lee Tung Street in Wan Chai, which has a high cultural value for wedding product shops, was redeveloped with only three historic residential buildings at Queen's Road East revitalised (URA, 2015b).

The redevelopment project of Lee Tung Street and McGregor Street covering 54 tenement buildings was first initiated in 1998 by the Land Development Corporation, which is the former organisation of URA (Law, Chui, Wong, Lee & Ho, 2010), and URA addressed the redevelopment as a commercial and residential development consisting of shopping centres and residential buildings in 2003 (Huang, 2009; Ng, 2013). Since the process of a few redevelopment projects carried out by URA before this project was quite smooth, it was surprising for this project to obtain a great opposing force (Ng, 2013). Shortly after the release of the redevelopment plan in 2003, owners of the shops on the ground floor of the buildings and residents established a concern group to initiate preservation campaign requiring the retention of the wedding card printing industry along the street, which meant to oppose to the redevelopment project (Lee, 2009; Ng, 2013). Although they gained much attention in the society, their efforts in the protests failed to stop URA's project. The new development began in 2013 and completed by the end of 2015 (Tam, 2015).

Redevelopment projects also lead to a loss of tenement buildings where Chinese traders traditionally run their business on the ground floor and a loss of social heritage (Lai et al., 2007; Yung et al., 2014). Huang (2009) commented on the redevelopment of Lee Tung Street

that the precious social network of the wedding product industry was ruined and it was hard to gather all or most of the wedding product shops within the district again with the high rents and the limited amount of available shops nearby.

According to URA (2007), it promised to use “wedding” as the theme of the commercial development in the project and it hoped the affected shop owners would return to the redeveloped area for continuing their business later. However, Tam (2015) pointed out that the shops in the European architectural style of the new commercial development are mostly rented to well-known international brands, so the rents are not affordable to those running small-scale wedding-related business.

### **3.3 Compliance with Conventional Building Regulations**

The third challenge is the compliance with building regulations for the re-use of heritage (Yung and Chan, 2012b). With the development of building regulations over the years, it would be very difficult for old buildings to exactly comply with the current regulations, especially for the regulations regarding fire safety such as means of escape (Langston et al., 2008). Yung and Chan (2012b) explained that tenement buildings constructed before WWII do not have sanitary facilities, fire safety facilities as well as barrier-free access such as lifts.

As a result, modification on the structure of the buildings or adding of extra facilities would be required to follow the current regulations (Langston et al., 2008). In the revitalisation project of Mallory Street and Burrows Street, renovation work was carried out to equip the buildings with lifts, fire services facilities as well as other updated facilities for building services (URA, 2013). However, architects criticised that the historic value of the buildings would be threatened since some of the historic components in the building would have to be removed to add extra facilities (Yung and Chan, 2012b).

Moreover, the induced great renovation cost may affect the finalised plan for renovation (Yung and Chan, 2012b). The new design for the revitalisation of Central Market in Central was finally approved by Buildings Department after many times of modification to comply with ordinances (Hong Kong Business, 2013). Not only did it postpone the time for the public to use the revitalised heritage, but it also posed financial threats to URA. The delay greatly increased the construction cost from HK\$500 million to HK\$1.5 billion (URA, 2015c). Due to the overrun in cost and structural problems, the project was finally simplified to cost HK\$600 million in 2015 (Au Yeung and Ngo, 2015).

## **4 INSIGHTS TO MINIMISE THE IMPACTS OF THE CHALLENGES IN P&R PROJECTS**

### **4.1 Considering the Public’s Expectations**

To minimise the impacts of the mentioned challenges, three recommendations are suggested for URA and the Hong Kong Government (the Government). Firstly, the usage of the revitalised heritage should consider the expectations of the public rather than only concerning for URA’s own financial support. Yung and Chan (2012a) believed that social inclusion, which means the psychological and physical satisfaction of the public, should be considered in revitalisation. For example, the plan of re-use of Woo Cheong Pawn Shop could be modified to increase the fairness of the general public to use the revitalised building. The first floor of the heritage could be changed to an exhibition of the pawn shop industry while the second floor could be remained as a restaurant. This avoids the loss of original feature of the heritage and ensures the income of URA. It is also able to maintain the internal spirit of

the building by displaying the history of the traditional pawn shop industry in Hong Kong. Successful exhibition of the history of pawn shop is found in Tak Seng On PawnShop in Macau (Macaumuseum, 2012). This pawn shop is a successful case of adaptive re-use in Macau as it obtained an “Honourable Mention in the UNESCO 2004 Asia-Pacific Awards for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage” (Macaumuseum, 2012).

#### **4.2 Developing More Sustainable Methods on P&R**

Secondly, URA could develop more sustainable methods for improving the overall satisfaction on P&R (Yung & Chan, 2012b). According to Godwin (2011), sustainable methods are the ways that build up the harmonic relationship between social, economic, and environmental aspects of the issue concerned. In the social aspect, revitalisation should ensure the social life within the community could be continued (Yung et al., 2014). In the economic and environmental aspects, Yung and Chan (2012b) believed that revitalisation of heritage avoids the uneconomical demolition and reconstruction process, in which a lot of energy and construction materials are consumed and greenhouse gases are emitted, to achieve protection of environment and cost saving. Moreover, physical environment, urban streetscape, and architectural features in the district could be enhanced by maintaining the harmony between revitalised heritage and future development (Yung et al., 2014; Yung & Chan, 2012b).

According to Yung et al. (2014), the trend for preservation and revitalisation gradually develops from individual historic buildings to entire streets. A series of tenement buildings form a unique streetscape in Hong Kong that it is particularly important to preserve them if they are found to have high cultural and heritage value in the district (Leung, 2013). URA initiated the revitalisation of 14 tenement buildings at Shanghai Street and Argyle Street as well as 10 tenement buildings at Prince Edward Road West and Yuen Ngai Street in 2008 for cultural and social activities in the district (Legislative Council, 2015). These projects tends to be sustainable in social, economic, and environmental aspects of re-using historic buildings, so URA should continue in the direction of revitalising a series of historic buildings along the streets.

While redevelopment is unavoidable in the process of urban renewal, URA could redevelop the area with only two to three old buildings which offer less development potential than larger sites (Yung et al., 2014). This is for avoiding a large number of old buildings being demolished similarly to the 54 buildings at Lee Tung Street. It is suggested that URA should retain the cultural characteristics at the revitalised site, for example, the wedding product characteristics could have been retained at Lee Tung Street if the site had been revitalised but not redeveloped.

#### **4.3 Careful Consideration in Restoring Original Features**

To avoid the loss of traditional components and original features of P&R projects of URA, the third suggestion for URA is to carefully design the renovation plan of P&R projects so as to retain not only the physical building, but also the original architectural features (Yung & Chan, 2012b). For the conventional building regulations require the provision of modern facilities in the revitalisation process, it is understandable that some parts of the buildings may need to be modified inevitably when there is the limited space in the buildings. However, URA should retain all traditional components in the buildings if it is possible, for example, URA should try to add new facilities in the light well if there is such space in the building.

The addition of modern facilities in the light well could be illustrated by a successful case in Australia that new electrical services, lifts, and fresh-air ducts were provided at the



light well of a revitalised building called The Bushell's Tea Warehouse (UNESCO, 2007). It obtained the "Award of Distinction in the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation" in 2001 to recognise its effort in providing modern facilities without sacrificing its original structure (UNESCO, 2007).

Apart from the effort of URA, the Government could also make reference to a recent framework of the "Protection and Management Plan for the Historic Centre of Macau" established in 2014 (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2014). This plan set the guidelines for restoring the heritage within the Historic Centre of Macau (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2014). It emphasises the authenticity and integrity on building Materials, craftsmanship, and design of adaptive re-use of heritage so as to maintain the original features of the heritage (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2014). It would be possible for the Government to set similar guidelines to monitor the process of restoration in the P&R projects of URA, which could be useful to avoid the unnecessary damage of the traditional setting in buildings similar to that in the project of Wing Lee Street.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This study gives an original investigation on the significant issues in heritage and P&R in Hong Kong. In light of one of the criticisms against the P&R projects is the ignorance of the traditional setting of the buildings being revitalised, this study explores the challenges affecting the performance of P&R projects. As illustrated in the case studies cited, the social values examined in this study are the sense of belonging, increase in spatial area in the community as well as the enhancement of cultural value in the society. As for the challenges encountered in P&R projects, it is found that the administration of revitalisation projects by URA's own financial support, heavy reliance on property development; and compliance with conventional building regulations are the three major hurdles to be overcome for successful delivery of P&R.

In light of the challenges extracted from literature, three recommendations are made in this study, including more consideration of the public's expectations in designing the use of the revitalised buildings, development of more sustainable methods on P&R projects and careful consideration in restoring the original features of buildings. This study is expected to provide a solid foundation for further research in P&R in Hong Kong. The recommendations made in this study could provide some insights to the building professionals undertaking P&R projects in future. Further studies could be launched to draw the lessons learned in P&R from other countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia which are more experienced in building preservation and revitalisation.

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