

THE REJUVENATOR

In a career spanning nearly 50 years, Sr Victor So Hing-woh, chairman of Urban Renewal Authority, has played a pivotal role in many projects that have affected the lives of the Hong Kong public, and become landmarks in the local cityscape. These projects include many commercial and residential developments along the MTR's Hong Kong Island Line, and housing developments, such as senior citizen homes and the Sandwich Class Housing by the Housing Society. Despite a prolific career, So is not thinking of slowing down, and he continues to develop innovative solutions to revitalise the city's ageing neighbourhoods. He has also sat on a number of statutory boards and committees, including the Housing Authority, the KCRC Board, the Lands & Building Advisory Committee, and the Town Planning Board, just to name a few.

Wilson Lau



Victor So is a living encyclopedia of knowledge on Hong Kong property developments. Although he started his career as a housing assistant at the Housing Authority in 1967, he began building his knowledge of the city's property market much earlier, as his late father was a construction contractor involved in some large residential projects in the city.

This profound knowledge of the sector, combined with his excellent professional capabilities and people skills, has propelled So to top positions at influential private developers and public organisations.

In the early 1970s, So did an apprenticeship before earning the general practice surveyor qualification from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors in Britain while working for Hutchison Properties (now Hutchison Whampoa). After 10 years at Hutchison, he joined MTR as its general manager and advanced to property director shortly after. "I was the first locally groomed board director. All my predecessors were expats," he says.

Apart from major projects along the Island Line, So oversaw the development of successful shopping malls, such as Telford Plaza, which was geared for sustainable financing and recurring incomes. He built strong working relationships with private developers, thanks to successful joint-venture projects. "The edge of general practice is that its scope is broad," So says.

Some projects were challenging, and demonstrated the resourcefulness of the managers involved. For instance, while the construction of Kornhill development was in progress in the late 1980s, its finances were in crisis due to a surge in interest rates in the US.

As a result, the lower blocks were completed as a Private Sector Participation Scheme to supplement the cash flow.

So says working on projects above MTR stations was a great learning experience, because there were a lot of restrictions that could deter private developers' interest in becoming project partners. At the time, Hong Kong Island's Towngas supply pipeline network did not cover Heng Fa Chuen and the use of liquefied petroleum gas for cooking would have posed a danger to the MTR workshop under the podium. "After analysing many suggestions," So says, "our solution was 'pipe in pipe' – a pressurised outer pipe with alarm mechanism which will be triggered when it detects gas leaks." Another consideration was the construction work above the railway podium, which should in no way have hindered the progress of the railway construction below – this principle is also known as "Railway Paramount".

So went on to become the executive director of the Housing Society in 1990. "They wanted a professionally trained expert to oversee the Society, which had established the tradition of a housing laboratory," he notes. Under So's leadership of 12 years, the society launched unprecedented projects such as senior citizens' homes and the Sandwich Class Housing Scheme.

The society also adopted highly-flexible 'stopgap measures' such as Sandwich Class Housing for the middle class and the Flat-for-Sale Scheme, which is similar to the Home Ownership Scheme. "Because we had had ample experience in these types of projects, the government entrusted us with the Sandwich Class Housing," he notes. "Before we took on the projects, there were debates, such as whether the Sandwich Class Housing should be closer to HOS standard or the

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standard of private developments. That's when our professional expertise came in handy. We succeeded in convincing the others and adopted standards similar to private developments... we call it one notch down from private housing." However, the society had to fund the 50 per cent of full land premium for Sandwich Class Housing and Flat-for-Sale Scheme, plus the construction cost, on its own.

Given his extensive experience in the development and management of commercial and residential portfolios, So assumed the chairmanship of the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) and met the many challenges posed by the city's ageing urban fabric.

Because the economic environment has changed significantly in Hong Kong, featuring skyrocketing construction costs, So believes the URA faces many challenges. "We do not want to uproot the residents to gentrify a district... our goal is to enhance the living environment through regeneration. This requires innovations."

So draws on his extensive experience and expertise to lead the URA in developing a holistic approach to urban renewal. "It needs new thinking. I aim to draw on the experience of the other board directors for innovative approaches as well... we aren't looking at the 'slash and burn' approach anymore. Rehabilitation covers building repair. A lot of innovations go into repair. This can enhance the living environment without uprooting the existing residents," he notes.

Extensive experience in government departments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations, has given So insight into operations in different types of organisations. "In the private sector, staff will already have the solution when they report a problem to their supervisor. Public sector emphasises procedures which can pose obstacles to problem-solving sometimes. While the private sector enjoys a higher degree of flexibility, the private companies I worked with entrusted me with enhancing their systems, such as IT. They aimed for more systematic operations. Hence I could apply my experience at MTR and the Housing Society to projects at private developers. At semi-governmental organisations, I have to avoid over-systemisation to get the best of both worlds," he reflects.

This article is published courtesy of Classified Post.



城市妙手

市區重建局主席蘇慶和在他近50年的職業生涯中，擔任過許多工程項目的核心人物，這些項目不僅與本港民生息息相關，更成為了香港的城市地標，當中不乏港鐵港島沿線的商業和住宅發展項目，還有香港房屋協會轄下長者住屋及夾心階層住屋計劃等房屋項目。職業生涯碩果纍纍，但蘇先生並不打算放慢腳步，反而繼續開發創新方案，為本港日漸老化的社區添注活力。他先後出任多項法定機構董事會及委員會的公職，包括房屋委員會、九廣鐵路公司董事會、土地及建設諮詢委員會、城市規劃委員會等。

Wilson Lau

蘇慶和對香港的物業發展瞭如指掌，儼如一部活生生的百科全書。他在1967年加入房屋委員會擔任房屋事務助理，正式展開職業生涯，不過，由於父親生前是承建商，曾參與興建本港一些大型住宅項目，因此蘇慶和很早以前便開始認識香港物業市場。

豐富的物業發展知識，加上出色的專業能力與交際手腕，讓蘇慶和得以在具影響力的私人發展商與公營機構擔任要職。

蘇慶和在1970年代初擔任學徒，及後在和記物業（現為和記黃埔）工作，其間考獲英國皇家特許測量師學會產業測量師資格。在和記服務10年後加入港鐵任職總經理，不久即晉升為物業總監。「我是首位本地出身的董事，歷任董事全部均為外籍人士，」蘇先生說。

除港島沿線的大型項目外，多個經營有道的購物商場也由蘇慶和監督發展，德福廣場便是其中一例，而商場在規劃發展時，是以可持續的財務發展和經常收入為目標。多次發展合資項目的成功經驗，使他與私人發展商建立了深厚的合作關係。蘇先生說：「從事產業測量的優勢在於涉獵範疇廣泛。」

有些項目發展過程相當艱難，而項目經理是否足智多謀亦由此可見一斑。舉例說，在1980年代末期，康山花園興建項目進行得如火如荼之際，美國利率飆升使工程的融資安排陷入困境。

為補充現金流，位於山腳的數棟樓宇遂以私人機構參建居屋計劃建成。

蘇先生表示，參與港鐵站上蓋項目是絕佳的學習體驗，因為有關項目往往有很多限制，或會令私人發展商望而卻步，不願成為項目夥伴。當時，煤氣公司在港島區的供應管道網絡並不覆蓋杏花邨，住戶使用液化石油氣煮食，有機會對平台下的港鐵車廠構成危險。蘇先生說：「分析過眾多建議方案後，我們的解決辦法是『在管道外包管道』，選用配有警報機制的加壓外管，當偵測到氣體洩漏時便會啟動警報系統。」另一個考量是鐵路平台上方的建設工程絕不應阻礙下方鐵路的興建進度，而此稱為「鐵路至上」原則。

其後，蘇慶和於1990年成為香港房屋協會執行董事。「房協一直擔當『房屋實驗室』的角色，並希望由一位受過專業訓練的專家來監督房協的工作，」他說。蘇慶和在任12年，任內率領房協推出「長者住屋」和「夾心階層住屋計劃」等史無前例的工程項目。

此外，房協亦採取了高度靈活的「權宜措施」，例如為中產推出的夾心階層住屋計劃，以及住宅發售計劃，形式與居者有其屋計劃相若。他指：「我們處理這類項目經驗豐富，因此政府委託我們執行夾心階層住屋計劃。在接手處理項目之前，外界有不少爭議，例如：竟究夾心階層住屋計劃應較貼近居屋計劃的標準，還是貼近私人發展項目的標準？那時候，我們的專業知識正好派上用場。我們成功說服各方，採用與私人發展項目相若的標準……我們稱之為較私人住宅次一級的標準。」不過，房協須為夾心階層住屋計劃和住宅發售計劃自資一半的市值地價，另加建築成本。

憑藉發展及管理商業和住宅項目的豐富經驗，蘇先生出掌市區重建局主席，肩負起市區更新的重任，克服城市老化的種種挑戰。

鑑於香港經濟環境劇變，建築成本暴漲，蘇先生相信市區重建局面前仍有許多挑戰。他說：「我們不是要居民遷走，然後發展成豪宅區……我們的目標是透過市區更新，提升居住環境，而創新是不二法門。」

蘇先生以其豐富經驗和專業知識，帶領市區重建局制訂一套全面的市區更新策略。他說：「這需要新思維，同時，我希望借助其他董事的經驗開發創新路向……而不再只著眼於『零星拆建』的方式。市區更新同時涵蓋樓宇修復和保養，在樓宇復修加入新方法既可提升居住環境，又毋須現有居民遷走。」

蘇先生歷任公私營機構及非政府組織，因此明瞭不同類型機構的運作方式。他深思道：「在私營企業，員工向主管報告問題時，心裡早已有解決方法。公營部門則強調程序作業，但有時候可能會阻礙解決問題。私營企業處事較為靈活，而我服務的私人公司更委派我提升公司資訊科技等制度，希望業務運作更有條不紊，因此我可以將港鐵與房協的經驗運用到私人發展商的工程項目。在半官方機構，我得避免過於系統化，以便在兩種機構文化中各取所長，達致最佳效果。」

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