

Striking a balance in Central



Parts of the Central district have showed signs of ageing, and the city's prime business hub faces a dilemma: How can the government, developers and landlords strike a delicate balance between preserving its heritage implementing sustainable development? President of the Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors Sr Vincent Ho, and Chairman of Planning & Development Division, Sr Dr Tony Leung, share their thoughts.

Wilson Lau

Attributed to the “holistic” urban planning approach adopted by the government, urban development has put more emphasis on preservation and revitalisation in recent years. Central is among Hong Kong earliest developed districts, and many buildings have historical value. It’s a good idea to preserve some historical structures as part of the collective memory of Hongkongers, says Chairman of TL Property, Sr Dr Tony Leung.

“Central is an area rich in history. Although redevelopment may be the solution for some areas, the main future development direction for Central should be ‘rehabilitation, revitalisation, preservation and redevelopment’,” he notes.

Ho thinks that redevelopment in some areas is necessary as there is need to completely change the function of some buildings to meet the demands of a transforming community. “This also applies to buildings that are in very poor condition, but they are becoming few.”

For ageing single buildings, the potential for redevelopment should be considered, Leung notes. “When it comes to buildings whose plot ratio has not been maximised, they can be redeveloped into taller buildings. It will help increase office space supply. For those whose plot ratio has been maximized, and plot size does not exceed say three-four thousand square feet, design can be challenging and the increase of office space after redevelopment may be limited. Therefore renovation is a better option. It is more efficient and more environmentally friendly as fewer discarded materials are created.”

Ho observes some ‘organic change’ in the function of some buildings in Central. “The changes have been driven by the community and landlords from the standpoints of the market and landlords, and taking into account

the returns on investment. This transformation is bottom-up,” Ho continues.

The organic change has had relatively limited impact on the community and helps enhance value of the land and beautify the areas, Ho says. “Rehabilitation, or renewal, has a wide definition. For instance, there can be adequate expansion of existing buildings, preserving part of the buildings’ current functions, while changing some parts in line with current market demand. If we can introduce this more holistic approach to the developed districts in Hong Kong, it will help reduce the substantial amount of material waste resulting from demolition. It also helps minimise the time when the sites are not in use due to construction because refurbishment and expansion takes less time.”

Both Ho and Leung conducted guided tours as part of HKIS’ “Touring Central with Surveyors” programme to help deepen public understanding of one of Hong Kong’s oldest districts.

Examples of upcoming revitalisation projects in Central include the Victoria Prison on Old Bailey Street and the Central Market. The updated enhancement plan by the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) proposes spending HK\$600 million on revitalising Central Market. The plan allocates around 10,000 square feet for leisure and recreational activities and approximately 100,000 square feet for commercial purposes. To upgrade the accessibility, there is a plan to open up the sides on both Jubilee Street Central and Queen Victoria Street and create additional entrances. This will help modernise the structure, Leung believes.

Other sites suitable for revitalisation are at 120 Wellington Street and 26 Graham Street. URA is working on redeveloping some of the dilapidated old structures and aims to preserve

the sections occupied by grocery vendors. This approach helps retain the unique features of the district. This project encompasses redevelopment, revitalisation and preservation, Leung says.

The constant traffic congestion in Central is worrisome, Leung notes, and hopefully the Central-Wanchai Bypass can help ease the situation. Although some have suggested canceling the tram service in the segment between Admiralty and Central, Leung thinks trams are an integral part of Hongkongers' heritage. "Hong Kong will not look the same without trams."

In line with global trends, many developers are trying to incorporate green building features when they redevelop a site. Leung believes that if the site is sufficiently big, redevelopment should be able to maximise the benefits of green buildings. "One of recent green buildings that has maximised its potential is Hysan Place in Causeway Bay," Leung says.

Ho thinks that when developers consider the green option, they should consider whether it will produce significant contributions towards sustainability. "It's not worth doing it for green buildings' sake... The ultimate goal is sustainability. We need to take holistic consideration," he adds, pointing out green building features should be tailored to individual buildings and they can be incorporated in the buildings' redevelopment or renovation.

In terms of community facilities, after the URA's renovation of Central Market, there will be a space for leisurely pursuits in the dense commercial area, Leung believes. "It'll be nice. At least office workers can take a stroll after lunch as the place is connected by footbridges with the other commercial high-rises in Central."

The square-mile core area of Central lacks community facilities and open space, Ho observes. "It'll be great if the renovated Central Market can add these elements. More important is the practical function. As there are residential buildings in the district, there should be consideration for facilities that complement a residential area, such as children's daycare centre, kindergarten, community centre, youth centre and recreational space."

The Central escalator has helped spur commercial activities in the neighbourhoods it passes through, both Ho and Leung think. For example, many single buildings have been refurbished into hip serviced apartment blocks and many eateries, pubs and entertainment venues have been opened, catering for high-spending professionals and hipsters. Government should consider extending the escalator further west to the Mid-levels of Sheung Wan. The area is densely populated and has interesting unique neighbourhoods. If the escalator is extended, it may help drive the transformation of these neighbourhoods. They can be developed into another SOHO, they believe.

Ho says the development cycle of Central is constant, and the redevelopment and revitalisation projects by URA and other private developers/owners are still in progress. "The cycle of large-scale transformation will be less frequent compared with the past. As redevelopment and acquisitions of old buildings have become a less viable option due to the escalating costs and the existing high density of the district, more will consider rehabilitation in the next 20 and 30 years."

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發展中環：保育建設兩不誤

中環是香港的商業樞紐，而隨著區內一些樓宇日漸老化，該區正面臨兩難局面：在保育具文化、歷史價值的城市與建築元素與推行可持續發展之間，政府、發展商及業主該如何取得巧妙平衡？下文將由香港測量師學會會長何鉅業測量師及規劃及發展組主席梁家棟博士測量師分享他們的看法。

置業行董事長梁家棟博士測量師說，政府近年的城市規劃模式已逐步走向多元化，市區發展工作也更著重保育及活化。中環是本港最早開發的地區之一，許多樓宇具有歷史價值，城市發展的同時，可否也適當地保存一些具「歷史」價值的建築，成為港人的共同回憶。

「中環歷史悠久，雖然部分地區較適合重建，但是中環未來的發展方向應著重『復修、活化、保存及重建』。」

何鉅業認為，部分用地的確需要重建，從而徹底改變一些樓宇的功能，以配合該區轉型所需。「這也適用狀況欠佳的舊樓，可是這類樓宇已越來越少。」

梁家棟表示，老化的單幢樓宇有重建潛力，這點亦值得考慮。「一些未用盡地積比率的樓宇可改建加高，有助增加寫字樓的供應；至於已經用盡地積比率的樓宇，若用地面積不超過3000至4000平方呎，設計上會有困難，重建所能增加的寫字樓空間亦有限。因此，這類樓宇較適合翻新。翻新樓宇所產生的建築廢料較少，有效率又較環保。」

何鉅業察覺到中環一些樓宇的功能有所轉變。「這些改變由社區及業主帶起，從業主與市場角度出發，並以投資回報為考慮因素，是由下而上的轉變。」

他認為這些變化對社區影響相對有限，並有助提升土地價值、美化景觀。「復修或重建的定義很廣。舉例而言，現有的樓宇可充分擴建而保留某些功能，同時因應目前市場需求作部分改變。這個取向較能兼顧全局，若能在發展成熟的地區推行，將有助大幅減少拆除樓宇所產生的廢料，縮短翻新及擴建需時，從而盡量減少土地閒置的時間。」

何鉅業及梁家棟為「測量師帶你行街 GUIDE」導賞團擔任導遊，讓公眾深入認識這個舊區。」

中環奧卑利街的域多利監獄及中環街市將進行翻新。市區重建局的最新改善計劃將投入六億港元活化中環街市，將一萬平方呎左右的土地用作休閒娛樂活動，另外約十萬平方呎則作商業用途。市建局計劃開通中環租庇利街及域多利皇后街兩旁，增建入口，以便出入。梁家棟認為此舉有助使建築結構更現代化。

其他適合活化的地點有威靈頓街120號及嘉咸街26號。市區重建局致力於改建舊樓之餘，亦著重保留雜貨店聚集的地段。此舉有助保留該區的獨有特色。梁家棟說，這個項目涵蓋重建、活化及保育工作。

梁家棟指出，中環的交通經常擁擠不堪，希望中環灣仔繞道有助舒緩情況。雖然有人建議取消金鐘至中環段的電車服務，但他認為電車是港人文化遺產中不可或缺的部分。「一旦沒了電車，就不像香港了。」

因應全球趨勢所至，許多發展商於重建時會嘗試納入綠色建築特色。梁家棟認為，若然土地夠大，重建工程應能充分發揮綠色建築的優點。「銅鑼灣的希慎廣場就是綠色建築，充分發揮了綠色建築的特色。」

何鉅業認為，發展商考慮納入綠色建築特色時，應思考這對可持續發展是否大有助益。「若只是為建而建便不值得……加入綠色建築元素的宗旨始終是可持續發展。我們考慮時不能顧此失彼。」他補充，綠色建築特色須配合個別樓宇，亦可用於重建或翻新的樓宇。

在社區設施方面，梁家棟相信市區重建局翻新中環街市後，將會在稠密的商業區設置休閒活動空間。「這非常好，區內有行人天橋，與中環其他商業大樓相連，起碼能讓上班族在午飯後散步。」

何鉅業發現，中環核心區缺乏社區設備及開放空間。「中環街市翻新後若能加入這些元素，那再好不過了，不過更重要的是實際功能。由於區內有住宅樓宇，設施方面亦應加以配合，例如托兒所、幼稚園、社區中心、青年中心，以及休閒娛樂空間。」

兩人認為，中環自動扶手電梯有助促進沿途的商業活動。舉例來說，區內許多單幢樓宇已改建成酒店式公寓，亦開設了許多餐廳、酒吧及娛樂場所，為高消費的專業人士及青年人提供美食佳餚。政府應考慮擴建扶手電梯，往西面延伸至上環半山區，該區人口密度高，亦有一些獨特有趣的街區。扶手電梯若能延伸到區內，可能有助該區轉型，發展成另一個蘇豪區。

何鉅業說，中環發展循環不斷，市區重建局及其他私人發展商/業主的改建及活化項目仍在進行中。「大規模的轉型將不如過去頻繁。由於成本不斷上升，加上該區目前人口密度高，要重建及收購舊樓不易。未來20年至30年，各方會傾向考慮復修樓宇。」

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