

MESSAGE FROM THE NEW CHAIRMAN

Mr CHOW Chung-kong, GBS, JP



United Front: Urban Regeneration for Better Living

As I familiarised myself with the work of Urban Renewal Authority (URA) through meetings and visits to URA project sites after assuming the Chairmanship in May 2019, I contemplated the distinctive role of the organisation, and have perceived the fundamental dissimilarities between the URA and private developers in undertaking urban renewal. This was especially true when I visited various URA project sites where I was very impressed by the Authority's urban renewal work under the "5R strategies" — Redevelopment, Rehabilitation, pReservation, Revitalisation and Retrofitting (5R works), carried out in accordance with its vision and mission of creating quality and vibrant urban living in Hong Kong. For years, the URA has committed to fulfilling the great responsibilities entrusted in it, not only for regenerating old districts, but also improving the living environment and fostering the sustainable future development of the city.

During other visits to residents in our renovated rehousing blocks and families affected by our redevelopment projects, who are now rehoused in public rental housing, I felt the pressing need for urban renewal as these people recounted their days of living in dilapidated areas with poor environment. I have also realised that to effectively improve residents' living conditions, the work of urban renewal requires not only an upgrade of hardware provisions, but also on the software side to put people first in our work to address the genuine needs of the residents, thereby bringing benefits to the people and the community at large.

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Shouldering Social Responsibility for the Greatest Benefits of Community

The URA takes on the social responsibility of pushing forward urban renewal under the directives of the Urban Renewal Strategy. In addition to turning dilapidated structures into buildings that meet modern standards, complemented by environmentally friendly features, the URA also capitalises on the opportunities of redeveloping the built environment to replan and rationalise land use for better design and availability of recreational green space and community facilities for greater public enjoyment.

Through the work of regenerating old districts, not only has the URA enhanced community landscape on a holistic level, but also improved the quality of housing and living environment for local residents. With the offer of ex-gratia payment and rehousing measures, the URA has helped relocate affected tenants from their dilapidated buildings to better new homes. Meanwhile, beyond the scope of helping those affected by its projects, the URA has also appropriated more than 60 flats to the Hong Kong Council of Social Service. These provide transitional housing under the Community Housing Movement to render assistance to people living in poor conditions or those long awaiting public rental accommodation in order to improve their living conditions. I sincerely hope that the living quality of every resident whom we have engaged will be enhanced, thus fulfilling the objectives of urban renewal.



Visiting residents affected by redevelopment project who have been rehoused to public rental housing flat in the same district.

Realising that the living and built environment in old districts cannot be improved by redevelopment alone, the URA attaches great importance to building rehabilitation as one of its two core businesses. Over the years, the URA has proactively offered subsidies and professional support to building owners and assisted them in organising building repair works, thereby improving the safety and hygiene condition of the old buildings, while helping to slow down ageing of buildings and alleviating the pressure for redevelopment. Last year the URA commenced a comprehensive New Building Rehabilitation Strategy Study which aims to review the current regulatory framework and measures on building rehabilitation, with a view to formulating prospective strategies for rehabilitating buildings of different ages. These measures, aimed at establishing a preventive maintenance culture, will furnish building owners with all-round assistance for undertaking building rehabilitation.

Redevelopment, Rehabilitation and Preservation — work in parallel with equal importance

As stipulated in the Urban Renewal Strategy, the URA is required to uphold the long-term objective of a self-financing urban renewal programme. This does not, however, translate into a directive of maximising profits in its operation. In fact, the URA puts much emphasis on the optimal use of resources and its full utilisation, by making use of the income generated from the redevelopment projects to fund its 5R works and to embark on strategic studies in order to explore new innovative ideas and strategies for the implementation of an integrated approach of 5R urban renewal work geared toward sustainable urban regeneration.

To enhance the safety and living environment of buildings, for many years the URA has provided financial and technical assistance to owners of old buildings through various building rehabilitation subsidy schemes. Of equal importance is the awareness of owners to discharge their responsibilities to proactively maintain their own properties for longer serviceability, thereby arresting the problem of building decay. To this end, the URA has allocated additional resources to advocate awareness on building rehabilitation among owners, to enhance their capabilities in organising building repair works and to instill a culture of preventive building maintenance. The all-in-one Building Rehabilitation Platform was launched early this year to equip owners with professional and comprehensive knowledge and technical assistance on building maintenance, thereby strengthening their confidence in carrying out building rehabilitation works. Partnering with the government the URA has launched three subsidy schemes, namely Operation Building Bright 2.0, Fire Safety Improvement Works Subsidy Scheme and Lift Modernisation Subsidy Scheme. It has also added manpower resources, in particular the engagement of legal consultants to help owners of “three nils” buildings (old blocks without owner corporations, resident organisations and property management companies), examine relevant provisions governing the validity of resolutions in their Deeds of Mutual Covenants. These initiatives are designed to help building owners organise building repair works in order to protect the safety of the residents and the public. While it is the owners’ responsibility to undertake building maintenance, which cannot be taken up by the URA, our effort to provide multi-pronged assistances to owners is indispensable.

Noting that public aspiration for urban renewal is more than mere demolition of old buildings and construction of new ones, the URA endeavours to preserve buildings and structures in its project sites that possess historical, cultural or architectural values, such that historical legacies and local characteristics can be passed on. In addition to preservation, the URA also incorporates the concept of “community-making” and deploys extra resources to revitalise preserved architectures and their neighbouring communities, so as to create a harmonious community environment integrated with old and new features for the enjoyment of residents.

In view of a surge in the demand for subsidised housing in recent years, the URA has launched various initiatives in response to the government’s policy to help address housing needs. On the premise of a prudent financial status, the URA has assigned residential units at its Kai Tak development as Subsidised Sale Flats, as well as those in Ma Tau Wai Road/Chun Tin Street Project for sale as Starter Homes, both sold to eligible applicants at prices below market rates, underpinning the URA’s non-profit-driven business model. Despite the fact that these initiatives would inevitably reduce the expected revenue of the URA, we are pleased to shoulder this responsibility in meeting public aspiration for home ownership.

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Working Hand in Hand for a New Chapter in Urban Renewal

The intensity of ageing of buildings is accelerating and on an irreversible trend. To meet public expectation on the URA in improving old districts, the URA has stepped up its commitment to push forward urban renewal by commencing a forward-looking district study for Yau Ma Tei and Mong Kok (Yau Mong District Study) with an aim to explore more effective approaches for urban renewal. While the Yau Mong District Study is still underway, the URA has applied some of the research insights and mechanisms therein to the preliminary feasibility studies for projects in other districts. Three of these have already been kicked off earlier this year for the old urban districts of Sham Shui Po and Kowloon City. Working to formulate blueprints that cover broader development areas, the Project Planning and Preliminary Feasibility Studies (PPFS) will examine different land uses and road network plans in respective areas, as well as their current planning constraints, in order to explore the feasibility of various planning and design proposals and identify urban renewal projects that can encompass the work of redevelopment, rehabilitation, preservation, revitalisation and retrofitting. These will be further included in the URA's annual Business Plan and its five-year Corporate Plan for accelerating the implementation of urban regeneration that can bring higher effectiveness and greater benefits to meet the needs of the community, thus achieving the long-term goals of urban renewal.

As we push ahead with our initiatives on Yau Mong District Study and PPFS, and in anticipation of the technical complexities and issues arising from policy frameworks, the URA must work closely with the Government, industry players and local communities, so as to garner support for working out concrete plans and implementation details of various proposals and measures.

Meanwhile, another study now underway on new building rehabilitation strategy is expected to be completed within this financial year. This explores new approaches to tackling urban decay through the formulation of holistic strategies for rehabilitating buildings of different ages. The work of building maintenance is never a simple task as it involves a wide range of fields and a great number of owners and industry practitioners. It is, therefore, important for the URA to strengthen its communication and collaboration with different parties and stakeholders to win their support for, and understanding of, joint initiatives on building rehabilitation. This includes raising owners' awareness and ability to organise works and of the availability of financial and technical assistance.

As it is beyond the bounds of possibility for the URA to realise these holistic and forward-looking objectives alone, we will continue to collaborate closely with the Government in various aspects, from policy advisory to the rendering of technical assistance as well as administrative and regulatory support, with a view to taking on board the new initiatives in land uses and planning, as well as building management. I sincerely hope that professional groups, owners, tenants and community stakeholders will continue to offer support to the URA, and to join hands with us in fostering the long-term development of urban regeneration.



Exchanging views with URA staff to understand their daily work.

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I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to our former Chairman Mr Victor So and all URA board members, for their contribution and professional leadership that have made the urban regeneration work of the URA fruitful, thereby laying a solid foundation for our future collaboration with the Government. Looking ahead, the URA will strive for better communication and strong partnership with different stakeholders in Hong Kong, and to push forward urban regeneration with more innovative ideas. In the spirit of 'people first' and fairness, let us join together in building a liveable city in which people will enjoy living, working and visiting.

CHOW Chung-kong, GBS, JP
Chairman

31 July 2019