

Key points of Mr. Donald Choi's Presentation

In the redevelopment of dense urban area, the conventional wisdom is to reduce the density and move part of the original residents to other areas. Such good intention to improve the living environment by lowering the development density, in some cases, have resulted in gentrification and inequality because demand outstrips the supply which pushes out the residents with less financial means. In urban regeneration we should be mindful that density by itself, does not matter if it is low-density or high-density, is not necessarily virtuous or evil. In urban renewal, the question of how dense the redevelopment should be or how many units can we build, is not the right question to ask. We need to ask how the higher densification or lower density development would affect the community not only in term of the physical spatial experience but also pertaining to the everyday life of the users in the renewed urban environment. The new planning tools (plot ratio transfer, interchangeable uses, site amalgamation and street consolidation, etc.) should be assessed not based on how many extra gross floor area could be created but by the merit of qualitative enhancement made possible on the development node with improved interaction compacity (distance, travelling cost, time, dependency, etc.), ease of connectivity flow, proximity to other districts and service networks, etc.

In term of connectivity in high-density districts like Yau Ma Tei and Mong Kok with many high-rise developments, vertical urbanism should be promoted. It means multi-level connectivity as an urban form should be explored because of the functional convenience, people could safely get from one building to another without fighting the vehicular traffic on the ground and the use of congested overspilled footpath, as well as creating additional value for the connected upper floors or basements. This multi-level vertical connection system provides multiple ground planes for the city which suggests a new typology for tower design with continuous ground-planes going up and down the building. The connectivity also extends beyond individual building envelopes to connect buildings in cluster which provides choices on how a city can be navigated apart from following the street grid. Vertical urbanism is about multi-level connectivity in 3D, it brings verticality into the urban design thinking. In districts like Yau Ma Tei and Mong Kok with its underground mass transit stations, the vertical connectivity means not only going up but also can go underground.

A more diverse flexible use/interchangeable programming matters because it can encourage or discourage place making. The vibrancy of a district comes from not only different functional uses from one site to another but also comes from the mixed-uses in a tower which intensifies social interaction. The static stereotype of a high-rise with an extruded form and a homogeneous usage throughout the tower is insufficient to make a vibrant community. The accelerated technology advancement and rapid life style changes in the 21st century require us as planners, architects and urban designers to embedded intelligence and flexibility in our design solution. For urban renewal in the 21st century to work, we cannot rely on 2D sanitized zoning concept and planning theory that was developed back in the last century. We need to embrace mixed uses in verticality; dynamic zoning to allow programming diversity to accommodate community needs at different time, i.e. not only functional zoning in 3D but bringing in the 4th dimension of time to enable a better use of our urban infrastructure.