

MASTER'S THESIS

Towards a socially sustainable urban renewal in Hong Kong: the case of Moon Lok Building rehabilitation

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**Towards a Socially Sustainable Urban Renewal in Hong Kong:
The Case of Moon Lok Building Rehabilitation**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

The discourse of urban renewal in Hong Kong always focuses on compensation, displacement and the selling prices of redeveloped properties. It is always claimed that the urban renewal practices in Hong Kong are property-led and economic-centered. Besides, many urban renewal studies focused mainly on property development in the private sector, and very little concern has been paid on the public housing in Hong Kong.

Social sustainability offers an alternative approach to guide urban planning and decision making aiming to achieve a more equitable outcome of modern living in our city. This thesis, therefore, attempts to specifically focus on the concept of social sustainability and to address this issue from the context of public housing in Hong Kong. Social capital, public participation and sense of place are the dominant concepts explored in the present analysis. The main objective of this study is to substantiate the argument that ‘rehabilitation is a better option than redevelopment in a socially sustainable perspective because intangible resources existed in old public housing estates (PHE) could be retained’.

This study uses Moon Lok Building (MLB) Rehabilitation in Tsuen Wan as a case to illustrate the possibility offers by rehabilitation as an alternative for redevelopment from the social sustainability perspective. Through in-depth interviews with the residents of MLB and staff members of Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS) in charge of the MLB project, the study investigates the relationship between social capital and sense of place and their impact on rehabilitation project. Field observation was conducted in MLB to complement the interviews to gather information in interpreting the behaviors of the residents.

The findings revealed that though residents care about their living environment, yet they were not eager to participate in formal (or institutionalized) meetings to exchange ideas with HKHS. However, they are more willing to exchange ideas informally, such as chatting with others in the courtyard. Therefore, the authority should not be too rigid while soliciting opinions from the residents and should adopt a less institutionalized structure to engage residents in the process to facilitate communication.

Rehabilitation had improved the living environment of MLB and the quality of lives of the residents. For instance, there is a significant increase in the usage of

the open space in the housing estate, which is crucial to community building. The findings also elucidated the importance of the place and people to the MLB residents. For example, without being dislocated in the rehabilitation processes, the social bonds and social networks are maintained and these contributed significantly to the development of social capital in the neighborhood. The residents would share information and offer helps to each other if necessary. They rely to the places in fulfilling their everyday lives. These are important resources to the residents which may not be found in brand new neighbourhood. Once these bonds or networks are destroyed due to redevelopment and relocation, it will require long time and effort to build them up again. Thus, by retaining the social bonds and networks, it is critical for the development of the social capital and sense of place of the residents, and this explains the relatively successful experience of the residents living in the MLB.

In deciding whether a particular public housing estate should undergo rehabilitation or redevelopment, the decision should not focus only on economic principle, but also the principles of social sustainability. The later is also of critical importance if we want to develop our city as an equitable society.

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