

Empowerment Games: Community participation and sustainable public housing development in the social context of Hong Kong

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Abstract

The paper is a case study in community participation in housing development in Hong Kong, documenting the community participation process from the perspectives of different collaborators such as social scientists/academics, facilitators with different backgrounds such as design and social work, and participating resident groups. The paper aims at demonstrating how local citizens have become actively involved in an urban redevelopment program to achieve re-housing to a location near their current estate, and to formulate and express their comments and suggestions for a more appropriate future living environment. Through a series of workshops, these citizens participated in understanding and commenting on the design of their future estate which is going to be built at a location of their choosing, after three-years negotiation of relocating to a nearby “reception” estate.

1. Introduction - Social content of public participation in Hong Kong

Realising that the sense of community is vanishing rapidly as a consequence of the type of urban redevelopment which has been practiced in Hong Kong, as in many other cities, the Hong Kong government has adopted community development as one of the main social welfare strategies to improve the quality of life in the city through measures aimed at restoring a lost sense of community. This has become a principal strategy of the Community Development Programme of the Hong Kong Social Welfare Department as stated at their website: “*to promote social relationship and cohesion within the community, and to encourage the participation of individuals in solving community problems and improving the quality of community life.*” All these community participation projects aim at improving people’s lives by involving specific users in the process of creating their living environments. However, there are many possible interpretations of the appropriate methods and applications of such a “bottom-up” approach. This paper documents a series of community participation activities, which constitute a process of collaboration between different facilitators such as social workers and architectural designers working intensively with residents groups.

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2. Start-up process of community participation – a social worker/ facilitator’s perspective

2.1. The community profile of the Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate (II)¹

The Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Ngau Tau Kok Community Development Centre (NTKCDC) commenced the Community Development Service in February 2000 to serve residents of Block 8-14 of Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate (II), one of the oldest public housing estates in Hong Kong. The estate was built in 1967, comprising about 4,500 households, with a combined population of 11,000. Over 30% of the residents were elderly, living either alone or as couples. It was listed as one of the estates to be redeveloped in the course of the Five-Year Program under the Comprehensive Redevelopment Program (CRP)² of the Hong Kong Housing Authority, and was originally announced to be cleared in 2003-2004.

2.2. Background of residents’ participation in Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate (II)

The NTKCDC assisted the residents in various matters arising from the resettlement plans, including ensuring that the residents be re-housed in a location near their former home. After more than two years of effort, the Hong Kong Housing Authority decided on June 7, 2002 that the residents of Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate (II) would be re-housed at the existing Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estate site. The clearance plan was also postponed to 2008-2009, to correspond with the completion of the reception estate on the said site. Thus, Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate (II) would become the ‘historical symbol’ of the end of the Hong Kong Housing Authority’s Comprehensive Redevelopment Plan (CRP).

2.3. The achievement of the participation process

This was a significant achievement by the residents’ group, not only because they would be re-housed in nearby reception estate, but also because they got a reflection on their attitudes and values in concerning the community affairs. Looking back on the beginning of this participation process, some residents recall feeling sceptical that the Housing Department would be at all receptive to residents’ expressing their needs and opinions. The general opinion seemed to be that the authority would not consider the residents’ voices as it already had its own comprehensive plan and policy for the re-housing process. Other residents were merely complacent and trusted blindly in the Housing Department to arrange for their resettlement. However, there were some residents with an interest in influencing their future, who felt helpless that they did not know how to express their opinions and let the Housing Department hear their voices.

Through two years of rational and amicable negotiation with the Housing Authority, the residents came to realise that they have the right and indeed the responsibility to express their opinions and preferences to the Authority. Throughout the participation process, they became more aware of their identity as members of Ngau Tau Kok Estate and were encouraged to participate in solving community problems and improving the quality of community life. Furthermore, they have developed a sense of belonging and a realisation of their vested

¹ The Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate has 14 blocks of public housing buildings, including Block 1-7 (Zone I) and Block 8-14 (Zone II). The Zone I have been cleared in June, 2003.

² In 1985, the Comprehensive Redevelopment Program was extended to clear sub-standard blocks built in the 60’s began.

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interest in the redevelopment process.

At the same time, they have learned how to express their opinion as well as provide information and collect opinions from the community. In the beginning phase, the group had a strong agreement that they should collect the residents' opinions about the reception estate and delay of the clearance date. They understood that they were only a small subset of all the residents of the estate, and that their opinions would not necessarily represent the opinion of a majority of all residents. Hence, the Centre assisted the concern group in launching a survey and a series of residents' meetings in order to collect opinions on resettlement, especially the location of reception estate. Over 2,500 questionnaires were collected and the result showed that over 93% of residents preferred to be re-housed at a location near to their current home. The concern group then met with concerned parties, such as the Committee of the Housing Authority, the officials of the Housing Department, the Legislative Councillors and the District Council, in order to have a direct dialogue. In the course of these negotiations, the group members learned how to have a sincere and rational communication with the concerned parties in order to arrive at a compromise with the authorities concerning this issue. In the end, the Housing Authority was convinced to adjust the clearance plan in order to accommodate the requests from affected residents.

As stated by ex-chairman of the Housing Authority, Dr. Cheng Hon-kwan, the adjustment of the clearance plan was made to accommodate affected tenants who had indicated their strong preference to be re-housed in the Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estate Phase 2 and 3, rather than the originally-planned reception estate in the South East Kowloon Development Area. *"Many of the tenants at Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate are elderly who may have adjustment problems in a new neighbourhood. They have put to us many times before that they do not mind waiting a longer period for their re-housing to a reception estate nearby,"* Dr Cheng said.³

The residents recognized that they were being treated with respect by the Housing Authority. Their efforts at rational negotiation over the past two years were fuelled by collective faith and rewarded with an enhanced understanding of how, through active participation, they could have a real effect on design issues that affect their daily lives.

Another positive effect of the participatory process was to foster an awareness and concern for redevelopment and community issues amongst the residents. In the course of the exercise, they strengthened their neighborhood network and became more concerned about the needs of the elderly singles and couples. In the subsequent planning of the reception estate, the residents put a special focus on developing an 'elderly-friendly community'.

2.4. The beginning of active participation in planning the reception estate

After the confirmation of the reception estate, the concern groups started a discussion about why and how to get involved in the planning of their future community. As with the issue of resettlement, the group members initially felt impotent to influence their future homes by participation. They admitted that they had a lack of information and difficulty in understanding abstract design concepts. In their past experience, the design of all flats and

³ The statement quoted from the press release of the Hong Kong Housing Authority in 7th June 2002, topic of the release "Comprehensive Redevelopment Program Adjusted".

community spaces was determined by the experts of the Housing Department. The residents believed that the experts with their professional knowledge should understand and accommodate the needs of the residents. They seldom questioned the design of these spaces. However, after undergoing a process of gaining understanding of the design of their future homes, they were able to point out bad and good aspects of the new estate. For example, they objected to long staircases and sloped pavements and preferred outdoor facilities to be covered. They criticized some designs as not having considered the users' needs, especially those of the elderly.

Members of both the elderly group and the concern group have paid several visits to other new flats, evoking many insights into issues in the interior design of the elderly flats and the design of the community facilities. For example, the height of the window, the linear kitchen stove, the place for hanging clothes, the size of the living area for two elderly residents and the handrails for the handicapped elderly. After the visits, they realized the importance of their participation in the planning. If architects and designers were to understand more about the daily lives of the future users, they could design household areas as well as community facilities based on the realities of the users lives.

With the assistance of the designer and architect of the project, we organized several workshops for the residents to understand the design of their future estate. The aim was to help the residents become aware of their needs related to the design of the flats and the community spaces. The workshop asked residents to give comments on photographs of situations in other estates and used the responses as a catalyst for further discussion.

Date	Schedule	Content
8/2002-10/2002	The elderly group reorganized to form a new group named "Elderly Flats Concern Group"	The group members visited different new estates in Tai Hang Tung, Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estate Phase I and Yau Tong Estate, in order to understand the internal design of the elderly household units.
18/11/02-13/2/03	To submit an enquiry letter to Kwun Tong District Council and the Housing Department about the future plan of the reception estate	The group received an initial reply from the Housing Department, to have a rough information about the reception estate
3/2003-5/2003	To invite the officials of the Housing Department to have a meeting to discuss the questions of the reception estate	Due to the disasters of SARS, the invitation was turned down
14/6/2003	To invite another meeting with the Director of Housing Department, Mr Leung Chin Man	To urge for a meeting that the group can reflect their opinions to the Department
6/2003	To distribute a leaflets to introduce the new reception	Collect about 330

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	estate and have a questionnaire to invite the residents' to join the briefing session	questionnaires showed that they were interested in knowing more about the new reception estate
7/2003	The group members divided into two small groups to visit the new estate in Yau Tong Estate, Lei Yue Mun Estate and Po Tat Estate 	To take pictures of three new estate, and to pay visits to the households living there about their opinions towards the community design and facilities
18/7/2003	To have a meeting with the Assistant Director of Housing Department, Mr Tong Wing Shing 	To have a good and sincere dialogue with the Department officials, to express the initial ideas and clarify the design of the new reception estate
13/8/2003	To have a meeting with the Subsidized Housing Committee members 	To reflect the objection of "Deletion of Metal Gates of Future Public Housing Units"
8/2003	Designed three awareness workshops for the group members to understand the ideas of the new reception estate 	To help the group members to undergo the knowing and preparation process in introducing the new reception estate
9/2003 to 28/11/03	To prepare 8-10 times briefing sessions of the new reception estate, for about 250 residents, aims at providing information, facilitating and collecting opinions from other residents. 	To contact the residents from the questionnaire lists and break into small groups for the briefing sessions 

Fig 1. The timeline of the participation process in planning and design of the reception estate_ Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate (II) Redevelopment Concern Group and Elderly Flats Concern Group

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