

A democratizing planning governance in Hong Kong - for whose interest?

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The problem

With a populace itchy to establish full democracy and a political system not yet allowing political parties to form government, planning issues in Hong Kong have been politicized beyond the aim of prompt provision of land for economic activities, affordable housing and a livable environment. Since 2011, increasing planning and land development controversies arose partly because of the intensifying tension in the political system and partly because of the government's identification of severe land supply shortage as the fundamental problem causing severe housing affordability problems, thus making relentless effort to search and develop new land for housing development. A quick survey of the mass media reports between 1911 and 2014 would find that nineteen housing concern groups were formed opposing to government's proposed land use rezoning for housing development or government's public housing projects. These oppositions eventually led to the revision or review of nine development projects. The grounds of opposition were inadequate transport, infrastructure or community facilities. These are legitimate concerns, but they also led to a total reducing of 15,340 housing units. Apparently there are trade-offs in the democratizing planning system: a more participatory planning process and a more empowered civil society versus slower land and housing development processes and therefore higher housing prices; and better livability versus slower pace to improve the housing quality of the disadvantaged groups.

Objective

By examining the planning process of the extension of a new town near the airport, the Tung Chung New Town Extension, and applying the urban governance

concepts, this paper attempts to seek answer for the following questions: whose interest should have priority; who shape public value, for whom and for what; are the disadvantaged groups heard sufficiently even under a more democratized system? In a highly politicized planning system, how much is democracy, how much is politics, and how much is abuse; and what is the role of government in a democratizing planning system – as conflict manager, facilitator or director?

Methodology

This paper examines power relations in the making of urban plans, with a particular focus on the influence of local residents in the planning process. It also examines how the government play its role in a more open and participatory planning mode. Involved in the public consultation process as a member of the expert panel formed by the government, primary data were collected by participant observation. Secondary data were sourced from Census report, government documents and mass media reports.

Main results and contribution

The Tung Chung New Town was planned in 1992 to provide labour support to the new airport which due to be open in 1998, and owing to its proximity to the airport, it is also planned to serve as the gateway to Hong Kong. Its population target was 220,000, spreading over an area of 916 hectare. As a new town in a rather sparsely populated area and with a good public transport system, it is also expected to provide facilities at the regional level. Thus, its major land user is housing, community facilities and service industries. By 2011, it had completed three phases of development, accommodating a population of nearly 80,000 people. In 2013, the government started to plan for the fourth phase of development. After an initial and brief public consultation exercise, in 2013 the government proposed a total new extension area of 134 hectare, accommodating 153,000 population in 53,000 housing units, either public or private housing. However, in this second round of public consultation with the local residents, many of the livability issues were brought up. The plan was subsequently revised, scaling down the development area to 120 ha, the population size to 140,000, and housing units to 48,000. Responding to the much criticized socio-spatial inequity problems between the eastern and the western parts of the new town during the public

consultation process, the underground railway was proposed to be extended, and more housing and community facilities were to be provided in the western areas. This revised proposal was generally well received by the residents during the third public consultation exercise. Currently, the plan is being finalized by the government and is going through the environmental impact assessment.

The socio-spatial inequity problem was created by the planning and development approach of the new town. Four private housing estates, one subsidized owner-occupier housing estate, and one public housing estate were constructed in the eastern part of the new town where the underground railway station was constructed. As induced by the housing types, the population was mostly middle to lower-middle income families with higher consumption power. Also, due to the presence of the railway station providing good accessibility to residents and transient tourists from the airport, more and higher order of recreation, retail and entertainment facilities and goods were available in this part of the new town, making it a vibrant community.

In contrast, in the western part where only a very large housing estate accommodating half of the population of this part of the new town, and where there is no railway station and minimum community and retail facilities, it has become the concentration of the lowest income people. Due to its remoteness, it can only attract the poorest of the poor, that is, those who have no concern about commuting time and costs as they do not intend to seek employment but just live on government subsidy. Thus, in contrast to the eastern part, this section of the new town has a depressing and deserted atmosphere. During the consultation exercise, the local people expressed grave concern about not being connected with the railway line, the lack of higher-order facilities and the poor intra-town transport. There was also concern about the reclamation of a natural river and the removal of a religious institution. As a result, the revised plan reduced residential site areas, put in place a railway station, private housing and subsidized owner-occupier housing. Thus, then there are questions left to be answered: whose interests are heard more, and on what basis are they justified; who should attend to the needs of the politically less significant; what safeguards should there be in the planning process; has planning been over-politicized, shaping public value obscurely? A deeper analysis of The Tung Chung New Town case based

on the governance concepts concludes that while trying to strike a balance in meeting the needs and demands of different population segments, the planning authority should enhance community education in planning to help shape public value, enhance the transparency of the decision making process for public monitoring and education, and make known of the planning gains and loss to the public, that is, taking an 'planning with the people' approach.