

Restoration of TAI O Stilt Houses

Living Improvement for Squatter Poor and Conservation for Heritage Area

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Current Situation and Needs of Tai O

Tai O possesses a rich quantity of local-styled Tankas stilt house groups, which can rarely be found elsewhere in Hong Kong and the world. Tankas fishermen from South China built and settled in the stilt houses since 200 more years ago. Variety of house layouts has been evolved by the community. The houses partially or fully situate on water with verandas facing waterside. Staircases conveniently connect residents from verandas down to their fishing boats. Verandas are multi-functional and lively space for families to rest and dine, repair fishing nets, make salted fish, interact with neighbors and so forth. The diverse and unique layouts facilitate and at the same time reflect different families' lives. This old fishing village represents Hong Kong's development history and tells our local culture, whereas the stilt houses characterize the place and image its identity. They are not graded heritage, yet contain rich tangible and intangible cultural elements. The public sees them as a valuable community heritage asset. Nowadays, many people are attracted to Tai O for visiting stilt houses. They "consume" the heritage and, ironically, also "sightsee" the poor living conditions of many stilt house residents. While not few development activities well cater for tourists' desires, local people basic shelters actually require prompt care.

Habitat For Humanity China* (HFHC/we) conducted an in-depth "Survey on Tai O Stilt House Community 2010" in between May and August. We identified that about 360 stilt houses with squatter licenses are still being occupied under residential use. Sampling over 80% stilt house families, we found that about 60% of the community are frequently residing in their houses 5 days or more per week. 90% have already settled in Tai O for more than 50 years, 76% even for more than 100 years by over 3 generations of families. They developed Tai O, make the history and witness the place's changes. Yet, replacing the previous big household sizes is current typical sizes of 1 to 3 only. About 70% households have only one retired elderly staying alone usually, regardless of the household sizes. 68% of the about 800-people stilt house population are elderly, whom majority express having long-term health problems, physical difficulties or disabilities. About 80% families are low-income, only having less than HKD4000 average household monthly incomes. Over half of them, mostly elderly families, mainly rely on HKD1000-2300 monthly governmental subsidies to survive, supplemented with minor income generated from home-making salted fish and shrimp paste. These facts strongly indicate the community's aging problem. At the same time, near 60% of the houses face different levels of significant physical damages; near 90% are under unacceptable to poor hygienic condition. Many houses have old, damaged and unstable building structures; water leakage on envelop; insufficient and improper ventilation, sanitation and cooking facilities; no or dangerous electricity wiring. Unfortunately,

being poor or old, most occupants are incapable of initiating improvement by themselves. Over 40% houses are reported unrepaired for more than 10 years despite serious damages, 20% even for over 30 years. Many people live in unsafe and unhygienic houses, particularly suffering during storm and flooding. The heritage exposes to risk of collapse and disappearing.

About 37% stilt house families have already moved out and only come back during some holidays and Tai O's festivals. A few tens house structures even appear disused over years. Neighbors observe such population loss is mainly due to the lack of local job opportunities. Poor house conditions, insufficient transport infrastructure, social and leisure facilities also greatly discourage young people from staying, but moving to the near urban areas (e.g. Tung Chung, Tuen Mun), leaving mainly elderly staying in Tai O, or empty structures instead of living heritage. However, despite the problems, the elderly actually prefer to stay in their stilt houses instead of moving to any other where within or out of Tai O. The families built the houses by themselves, see them as their own properties and key assets in lives. They love and belong to the place. People grow up together, know and take care of each other. Because of the strong neighborhood, the elderly do not feel lonely even though they live alone. Tai O is a simple, happy and harmonious home for them. They are intrepid, cherish what they have and respect to their lives. These are what development planners should note and respect. Responding to the situations, HFHC has implemented a "Tai O Stilt House Restoration and Community Development Project" since this May. Adopting sustainable development approach, the Project aims to better the house living and hygienic conditions and support community development. We suggest both the architecture and occupants should stay; keeping the houses' locations and diverse features; respecting to residents' living habits and preferences; continuing their lifestyle and sentiments. No redevelopment, relocation or replacement of culture is introduced.

House Restoration, Area Conservation, Facility Improvement and Community Capacity Building

Preserving the houses' features and area's cultural landscape, we restore the stilt houses by adopting local traditional building style, techniques and materials. Works include strengthening structural frameworks and foundations; repairing roofs, eaves, walls, floors, railings, balconies, verandas and home entry paths; replacing or installing proper doors, windows and indoor staircases; improving toilet and kitchen facilities; and equipping barrier-free entrances, electricity wiring and home lightings. As houses face different physical problems, we discuss with families to assess the needs and decide different tailored solutions. Restoration solutions on house components are applied, instead of rebuilding the whole houses or changing the structures' sizes and core materials. In





between May and November 2010, 24 houses were restored. Beneficiaries were elderly families in emergent needs - relying on limited governmental subsidies to live and suffering from poor shelter conditions. Our partnering local social welfare organization helps family income assessments; we grant and organize restoration.

The Project will be scaled up to serve more needy families through both grant and subsidy schemes. In addition to the 24, over 64 more physically damaged stilt houses and 12 neighborhood walkways will be restored in elderly-friendly way. It serves all stilt house zones of Tai O, preserving the cultural architecture by area. More other conservation actions will also take place. Besides, we will introduce neighborhood solar-energy and sewage systems to enhance environmental sustainability. We are organizing education to residents about the proper use and maintenance of their houses, safe electrical appliances we gifted, community infrastructure we installed and the fire-prevention system building by public bodies. Other capacity building actions include inheriting the fast-disappearing building skills from the few old builders to young ones in Tai O. We also collaborate with training institutes to provide vocational trainings and certifications. Empowered with upgraded knowledge and recognized identities, they can access more income opportunities. For socio-economic development, we have also been hiring them for our Tai O project works in creating local jobs. We will establish a Training & Development Centre in Tai O, organizing job trainings and facilitating more local income generation opportunities. Focused subjects include house restoration, pipe installation, environmental management, local cultural products manufacturing and marketing; and also the revitalization of family-base businesses. We work with different sectors and will introduce Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Program for a Sustainable Tai O.

Promotion of Community Participation and CSR

The Project is one of the biggest scale community participatory human settlements and community development projects in Hong Kong. Our project design responds to the needs raised by local community. Families participate in the decision-making and restoration process. From May to November, we organized four volunteer-build activities, engaged over 530 volunteers to home-visit and participate in house restoration. Volunteers experienced Tai O culture and learnt stilt house building. These also raise public awareness and promote CSR. Corporate supporters provide staff-volunteers and various kinds of product/service and monetary donations and sponsorships; enhancing their social contribution, corporate image, employee team-building and moral. Our coming CSR Program will also facilitate corporate members develop business sustainability while serving the community.

Conclusions: Concerns on Public Policies

The Project has been well receiving by the Tai O community because they have raised their needs and waited for suitable help for long time. Relevant public policies determining Tai O's situations are highly concerned. First of all is the squatter's future. The stilt houses are squatter structures registered under the government, subject to the "Policy on Squatter Control and Clearance" - which has not been executed by now since the clearance plan was objected by the community from 1980s. While the unique squatter settlements offer cultural and tourism value and adding reason to be kept, the residents demand clear land policy plan and supports on upkeep or upgrading their poor houses. Questions are whether the stilt houses will unfortunately follow squatter clearance policy, the time frame, and if they will be seen as a kind of recognized heritage to be protected and helped. However, despite the high cultural and historical value, neither the stilt house architecture (as an individual or group) nor the whole village area is included as graded built heritage or cultural heritage site. Problem comes to the underdeveloped criteria and method of grading heritage in Hong Kong, and the lack of local policy on recognizing a whole area as heritage site to conserve alike what is well doing in many cities (e.g. Chinatown in Singapore, Historic Centre of Macao). Last but not least, while the government is putting efforts to revitalize Tai O, yet, this remote community is demanding suitable development planning which takes priority to accurately tackle the core community problems - poor job opportunities, squatter living condition, urban infrastructure and social facilities, and loss of young population to operate the place and give it life. Tailored locally-compatible hardware and software should be introduced. While NGOs are filling-up the gaps, good formulation, improvement and clarification of public policies on the above aspects should be central to the drawing of supports and facilitation of improvements to right serve and conserve Tai O.

Biography: Dr. Dennis Cheung Kin Keung obtained qualifications in Architecture, Development Planning & Management from HKU and UCL. He is the Principal Consultant - Human Settlements, Community Development & CSR cum Acting Program Director (Hong Kong) of Habitat for Humanity China. He is also the Founder and Chief Executive of Community Builders (a social enterprise providing consultancy services on Sustainable Development, CSR, Community Engagement & Partnerships); PT Lecturer of City University of Hong Kong; and Fellow of RCE Penang, United Nations University - IAS. His team won the first runner-up (professional group) of Tai O Revitalization Design Competition. Email contact: dennischeungkink@gmail.com *Habitat For Humanity is an international non-profit housing organization established in 1976, locating over 100 countries. Acknowledgement: Thank Summer Interns from ASc ArchStud Program, BST, CityU HK, for well-supporting site surveys.