

CHarMing the Victoria Harbourfront – Public Engagement Model on planning issue in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Traditionally, urban planning in Hong Kong usually uses a top-down approach as the professionals, mainly as public office and supported occasionally by planners from the private sector, are the major force to decide and design on planning of land uses. Although the Planning Department, in line with the practice of the government as a whole, will conduct public consultation on nearly every planning exercise, this paper argue that the traditional method employed by the government is not comprehensive. By proposing a new model for public engagement on planning issues, this paper uses a real case, the Central Harbourfront and Me “CHarM” project to demonstrate how this model operates, the merits, and limitations and difficulties faced. It is suggested that genuine Public Engagement should be employed in every single planning issue to ensure that the land uses thus decided are a result of public engagement with consensus.

1. Introduction

Sustainable Development and planning issues have drawn a lot of attentions from Hong Kong people in recent years. Starting from the debate over further reclamation on both sides of the Victoria Harbour several years ago, awareness of Hong Kong people to pursue for a sustainable city has increased. This is coupled with people’s increasing voice to preserve cultural heritages, with the campaign to stop further reclamation of Victoria Harbour as the climax.

In the midst of heated debates and controversy over this reclamation issue, the Final Court of Appeal of Hong Kong has ruled that any further reclamation should fulfill the requirement of Overriding Public Need test, which require the public officers (the government) to cogent and convincing materials to prove that no other reasonable alternatives exist and that the need to reclamation is present and compelling which goes beyond what is “nice to have”, desirable, preferable or beneficial.

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Following this ruling, at least two OZPs (Outline Zoning Plans) have to be revisited, namely Draft Wan Chai North OZP and Outline Zoning Plans for Kai Tak because some of the development scheme area would require reclamation in the harbour area.

The Harbour-front Enhancement Committee (HEC) was then founded on 1 May 2004 and serves mainly to advise the Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands on the planning, design and development issues including land use, transport and infrastructure, landscaping and other matters relating to the existing and new Victoria Harbour harbour-front and the adjoining areas; to advise on means to enlist greater public involvement in the planning and design of the harbour-front areas; and to explore a sustainable framework to manage the harbour-front areas, including public-private partnership.

New public engagement models and methods have then been advocated by HEC, with particular reference to and application on the revisit of the above mentioned OZPs which concern about the second phase development of Wan Chai (WDII) and the development of Kai Tak (the old airport).

At a different scale, HEC has also conducted a public engagement exercise to collect views of Hong Kong people on the further enhancement of the waterfront areas around ferry piers in Central (please see appendix map for the study area). This paper aims to introduce a new Public Engagement model based on CHarM experience, including the model framework, the implementation process, merits and limitations, and suggestions for public engagement models to be used in planning issues.

2. Limitations of traditional Consultative Model

Traditionally, public consultation on planning issues in Hong Kong uses a top-down approach starting from expert study to information delivery and then consultation on limited number of options. It is in fact a consultation rather than participation by the public. Alternative views and disagreements, and thus grievances, cannot be effectively absorbed and be considered by using this traditional model of consultation.

The characteristics of the traditional Consultative Model are: advisory, static, controlled, prescriptive, orchestrated, directive, fixed or rigid, company accountability, methodological, and linear. While the relative advantages of a Participatory Model are: non-directive, empowering, uncertain, evolving, innovative, shared, dynamic, mutual accountability, flexible, spontaneous, creative, and participatory.²

² Roberts, R. (2003). 'Involving the public.' In Becker, H.A. and Vanclay, F. (Eds.) *The International Handbook of Social Impact Assessment: Conceptual and Methodological Advances*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

3. The CHarM Model

It is a participation model based on the Social Learning Theory and Experiential Learning. The basic tenets of Social Learning Theory are: knowledge, modeling, practice, feedback and corrective practice, reinforcement, and transformation to daily practice. Experiential Learning emphasizes on input (knowledge and skill), experience (learning by doing), reflection (skill and attitude transformation), re-doing, and consolidation (of internalized attitude and skill).

Another special feature of this participation model focuses on the nature of target participants. It emphasizes on multi-stakeholder partnership, because throughout the process different ideas and views can be exchanged and stimulated so as to strive for a final option that is built on consensus rather than coercion of power.

Participation is another significant characteristic of this model, in that it provides ample opportunities for the participants to be involved right at the beginning, even when the concept is still at its embryonic stage. This helps to embed public opinion in the engagement mechanism which means that the public is a genuine stakeholder rather than just subjects for consultation. This sense of ownership by the public in turn contributes to the legitimacy of the whole project. It is less likely that the option thus chosen will face strong objection from the public, as their voices have already been absorbed and considered throughout the process.

4. Implementation of the CHarM Model

The Programme as launched in 2005 comprised a series of public engagement events:

(A) Brainstorming Session

The brainstorming session was designed in a form of general and open-minded approach in order to gauge development and design ideas, views and visions for the enhancement of the Area. Many creative ideas were generated from over 70 participants come from different sectors of communities including local communities, professional institutes, business sector and academics.

(B) Random Sample Survey and Interviews

The purpose of this exercise is to gauge public opinion on design and uses of the Area on the basis of the findings of the brainstorming session. The event comprises two parts: a

random sample survey and structured interviews. The former were carried out at three spots near and within the Area. Target respondents of 651 people were randomly selected on the survey spots. The target of the structured interviews was 70 persons mainly from the local communities, harbourfront-related organisations, professional institutes and users of the Area. Interviewees and respondents were asked to express their preferences on the development directions and suggestions of enhanced Area.

(C) Workshop Session

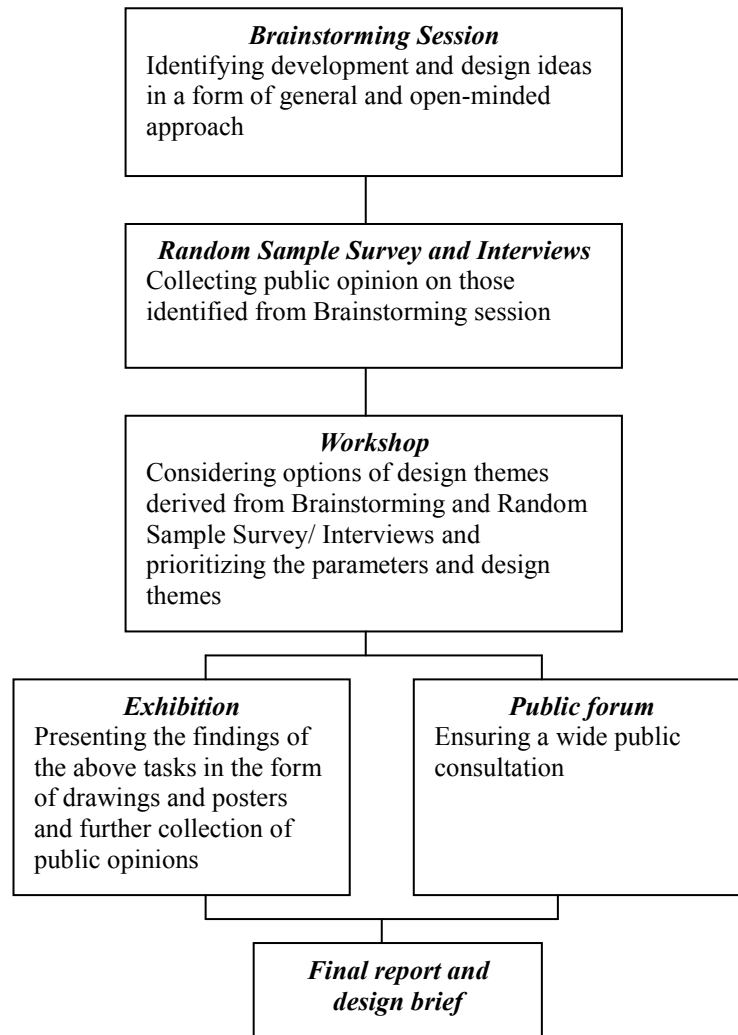
The primary objective of the Workshop is to achieve some consensus on the preferred design schemes for the Study Areas. Over 70 participants from different sectors of communities including local organizations, concern groups, professional, academics and business had attended to share information concerning the preliminary designs and obtain feedback. Discussion and debate within the workshop was more or less resulted in a consensus of the participants about some preliminary design schemes or concept for further study in the ensuing stages.

(D) Exhibition

The aim of the public exhibition was to show to the general public the preliminary design schemes or concepts devised in the Workshop and other related information. At the exhibition, the design ideas for the Study Areas were presented through 8 numbers of exhibition panels. At the same time, a questionnaire survey was used to invite viewers to express their preference to the various design ideas.

(E) Public Forum

The purpose of the public forum was to provide a platform for open public discussion on the design schemes or concepts. After a thorough comparing and contrasting of these schemes or concepts, the public choice of the preferred schemes will form the basis for preparation of the design brief. While the forum is open to the public, representatives of the local communities, concern groups, business sectors, professional institutes etc. were also be invited.



5. Merits and Limitations of the CHarM Model

From the experience of implementing this model in Hong Kong, it is found that there are merits of applying this model of public engagement in planning issues, while there are also limitations of this model:

Merits	Limitations
☺ stakeholders engaged	☹ more time consuming
☺ ownership by the public	☹ result unpredictable
☺ conflicts absorbed	☹ stakeholder list cannot be exhaustive
☺ consensus easier	☹ some will still get unhappy when the result is out
☺ creativity enhanced	☹ takes time for the government to buy in
☺ lay knowledge may be transformed into great concepts through lay-professional collaboration	☹ different languages used by laymen and professionals

6. Conclusion

Drawing from the actual experience of using the CHarM Model in planning issues in Hong Kong, it is suggested that the following Public Engagement Model should be used in future planning issues so as one the one hand to canvass creative ideas from the people and on the other hand to build up consensus among the citizens – a foundation on which a harmonious society rests on.

