



Problem issues of public participation in built-heritage conservation: Two controversial cases in Hong Kong

Esther H.K. Yung*, Edwin H.W. Chan

Department of Building and Real Estate, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR, China

A B S T R A C T

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Since the last two decades, public participation has become a worldwide issue as the bottom-up approach has spread across the field of heritage conservation and city planning. This paper aims to examine the problematic issues in public participation in built-heritage conservation. The paper begins by highlighting the importance of public participation in built-heritage conservation and provides an understanding of the role of public participation in decision-makings in other countries; then, it examines a theoretical framework by which to understand the extent of public participation. Two controversial cases in Hong Kong illustrate the major problem issues in public participation in built-heritage conservation. This study found that the issues include different preferences regarding what is worthy of conservation; the lack of an effective public participation mechanism and integrated heritage conservation approach in the decision-making process; the different and conflicting interests of various stakeholders; power disparity; propaganda and mobilisation of interest groups; and the lack of knowledge on heritage conservation. According to the issues identified in the case studies, corresponding policy implications and recommendations to enhance public participation are made.

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Introduction

Major cities in developing countries face similar issues related to high development pressure, a lack of concern for cultural heritage, and little or no public participation in the decision-making process in urban development and conservation (Kong & Yeoh, 1994; Steinberg, 1996). Decisions on heritage conservation in Hong Kong have traditionally been dominated by experts and technocrats since the establishment of the first heritage legislation in 1976, and public participation has been considered insignificant. Since the change in sovereignty in 1997, the majority of Hong Kong's people have become increasingly attached to built heritage and have actively sought their right to participate in city development and heritage conservation matters. However, proper and effective consultation process in heritage conservation has yet to be established and enhanced.

This paper aims to examine the major problem issues of public participation in the field of heritage conservation. By examining the public involvement in the built-heritage conservation, Hong Kong is used as a case study which faces intensive redevelopment pressure.

Examples of two historically and socially significant, but contentious historic building sites, the Queen's Pier and Chinese historic tenement houses in Wing Lee Street are chosen for study. Both cases attract tremendous international attentions and provide insights into the major issues in public participation in heritage conservation. The debates on conservation of the Queen's Pier in 2007 have raised unprecedented public awareness and conservation activities in the society, which in fact, have accumulated and largely driven from the unsuccessful campaign to save the Star Ferry Pier in 2006 and the subsequent debates on urban renewal projects which involved demolition of historic buildings. It is undoubtedly that the Queen's Pier and the previous conservation campaigns have impacted on the government's heritage conservation policy and initiatives to more actively invite the public views. However, the recent debates on conservation of tenement buildings in Wing Lee Street highlight similar issues which have encountered in the Queen's Pier in light of the continued public enthusiasm to participate in heritage conservation. The two cases, therefore, are paramount examples of the problem issues in public participation in heritage conservation.

Case studies were chosen as the most appropriate approach. The paper is not intended to use these two cases to reflect all the issues regarding public participation in heritage conservation in Hong Kong, but is to provide detail descriptions of the mechanism, institution and governance involved, and highlight the problematic issues and difficulties in public participation in these specific cases.

* Corresponding author. Tel./fax: +86 852 2766 5829.

E-mail addresses: bseyung@inet.polyu.edu.hk, ehkyung@gmail.com (E.H.K. Yung), Edwin.Chan@inet.polyu.edu.hk (E.H.W. Chan).

Findings are based on an in-depth analysis on the mass media sources such as newspapers, internet and forums, communication letters of professional associations, NGOs and local concern groups, journal papers and policy documents, this study provides the perspectives that are publicly presented and identifies the major issues of inadequacies and ineffectiveness in public participation in heritage conservation. The issues identified were then verified by 15 in-depth interviews with experts and representatives from the major stakeholders, such as the professionals in planning and conservation disciplines, concern groups, owners, tenants and politicians at the latter stage of the research study. Quotations convey the opinions of and positions adopted by them. In the last section, the paper provides policy implications and recommendations for a more effective policy on public participation in built-heritage conservation.

Literature review

Importance of public participation in built-heritage conservation

Public participation can be defined as ‘a process by which people, especially disadvantaged people, can exercise influence over policy formulation, design alternatives, investment choices, management, and monitoring of development interventions in the communities’ (The World Bank, 1992: p. 2). Arnstein (1969) defines public participation as “the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens... to be deliberately included in the future” (Arnstein, 1969: p. 216).

The Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas 1987 (Washington Charter) clearly stated that: “The participation and the involvement of the residents are essential for the success of the conservation programme and should be encouraged. The conservation of historic towns and urban areas concerns their residents first of all” (ICOMOS 1987, Article 3). The Burra Charter emphasises that heritage conservation cannot be sustained without community participation (ICOMOS, 1999, Article 12).

Public participation in cultural heritage management can resolve conflicts (Sirisrisak, 2009), and it also helps to define the meaning of heritage in which community and experts’ values are usually different (Kerr, 2000; Pignataro & Rizzo, 1997). In addition, several trends in cultural heritage management have evolved (Hobson, 2004) and made public participation an essential part in decision-making process (Clark, 2000). First, the significance of the heritage has shifted from the national importance to a familiar, local interest, second, the support has also transformed from an elitist upper-middle-class minority to a grass-roots majority and third, people’s interests have shifted from the purely architectural and historic to the societal and cultural. It also argues that heritage by appropriation emerging from public perceptions rather than through organised lobbying can reflect the public’s view on cultural built heritage better than a designation determined by an expert’s evaluation (Tweed & Sutherland, 2007).

The role of public participation in the decision-making process in heritage conservation

Public participation in heritage conservation in other countries shows the possible roles in which it can play in the decision-making process. In U.K., Australia, and Singapore, an advisory committee which composes of representatives from the general public and professionals in different fields is set up (Yu, 2008). Proposals publish for conservation matters are then submitted for public discussion. Interestingly, the general public is involved in the identification of heritage items through the nomination of a place for designation in the UK (Chan & Ngao, 2004; English Heritage,

2010) and Australia (NSW Heritage Office, 2010). In some countries, there is evidence of integration between urban planning, conservation, and the involvement of the public in heritage matters. Australia’s local community is involved in the preparation and assessment of the Development Plan. In Singapore, the planning consultation process emphasises partnership with the community on how to make it a distinctive city and in making an identity plan (Yuen, 2006). In Bangkok, the Master Plan contributes well to the safeguarding of cultural heritage in which local communities are encouraged to make the Local Plan (Sirisrisak, 2009). There is also evidence of the increasing role of the voluntary and community sector in the policy-making process (Taylor, 2007).

Theoretical framework for understanding the extent of public participation

Arnstein (1969) stresses that the success of public participation depends on the power to influence decision-making. Arnstein (1975) used eight different forms of participation according to the degree of participants’ power to influence decisions and illustrated the hierarchy in a ladder pattern (Table 1) called “a ladder of citizen participation”. Painter (1992) criticises Arnstein’s model by suggesting that understanding power requires an assessment of outcomes. He also argues that consultation is not merely ‘tokenistic’ as the ‘exercise of influence [by participants] is effective’. Lane (2005) asserts that any analysis of public participation in planning must be concerned with both formal and informal policy-making arenas. Wilcox (1994) advances Arnstein’s theory by adding two other dimensions: first, the different phases in implementing public participation; second, the importance of identifying different types of stakeholders who carry different interests and seek different levels of participation.

Issues in public participation in built-heritage conservation

A number of issues in public participation are identified in the literature review. The success of public participation depends on the power to influence decision-making (Abbott, 1996; Arnstein, 1969, 1975). By contrast, tokenism is only a superficial exercise in which community participants become mere information providers, at best involved in consultation and not in more important and effective positions with decision-making power (Arnstein, 1969). The issue of tokenism in public participation may also affect the public’s willingness to participate as people do not feel that they can influence the outcome to readily participate, and thus, may not really wish to be involved in planning exercises and are happy to defer to experts (Potter, 1985).

Table 1

A ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969, pp. 217–224).

Citizen Control	These two highest levels allow the have-nots to have major decision-making or full managerial power.	Degree of Citizen Power
Delegated Power		
Partnership	Allows the have-nots to negotiate and engage in trade-offs with traditional power holders.	
Placation	Ground rules allow the have-nots to advise, but retain for the power holders the continued right to decide.	Degree of Tokenism
Consultation	Allow the have-nots to hear and to have a voice. However, “they lack the power to insure that their views will be heeded by the powerful”.	
Informing		
Therapy	Real objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programmes, but to enable power holders to “educate” and “cure” the participants.	Non-participation
Manipulation		

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