

# Good To Be New?

by Cara Chan and Corina Cheung



**“Together with inflation, food prices have risen by about 20 to 30 percent.”**

The planned renovation of traditional mushroom-shaped kiosks in public housing estates by the Link Management Limited could either be a blessing or challenge to cooked food stall owners and their customers.

Some customers who visit regularly the renovated kiosks, which are better known as *dai pai dong-s*, or “mushroom kiosks” in Cantonese as they are built alike a mushroom, appreciated the refurbished stores and made compliments on the changes.

“You couldn’t possibly imagine how hot it is to eat in the kiosks in summertime, with only big fans hanging above to cool the place,” said Ms Chan Sau-kuen, who has lived at Oi Man Estate in Kowloon for 16 years, “People used to pour water and throw leftover food on the ground, making the place damp and dirty.”

“With air conditioners and toilets installed, the kiosks are now cleaner and more comfortable places to dine,” she added. “And people cannot smoke freely.”

The Link, which took over the management of the commercial properties on public housing estates from the Housing Authority, has invested HK\$17 million in refurbishing the outside of the 10 kiosks as well as upgrading the interiors in six public estates in Taipo, Wong Tai Sin, Kwun Tong and Sha Tin since 2007.

However, operators at the renovated kiosks need to spend more on operating their kiosks as extra cost

is incurred because of the installation of air conditioners.

Lee Lit-ching, one of the three owners of a restaurant at Lower Wong Tai Sin Estate said the cost of operation had increased by about 50 percent after renovation, as had their food prices.

“Since more electrical appliances are used in the kitchen and we have to switch on the air conditioners all day long, the electricity bill has increased, as has the gas bill,” Mr Lee said.

“Together with inflation, food prices have also risen by about 20 to 30 percent,” he added.

Small-scale restaurant owners must also consider the extra operating costs incurred as a significant consideration in whether they want their business to be renovated by the Link.

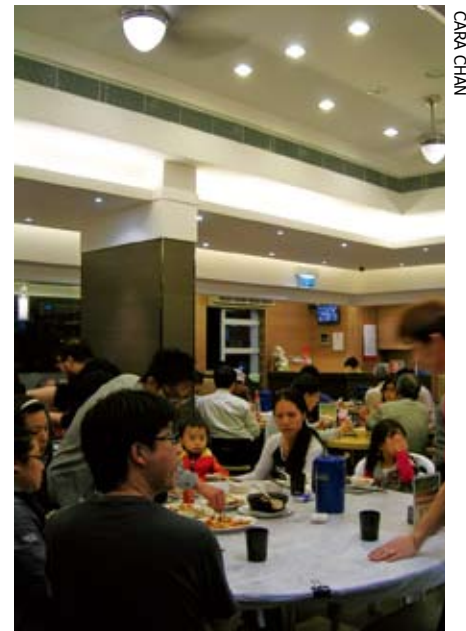
“Air-conditioning will come along with every renovated stall. That would mean an extra hundred thousand dollars on top of the monthly rent, which has already increased by 20 percent recently,” said Cheng Bong-man, the owner of a cha chaan teng (Chinese-style café) in Sha Kok Estate, Sha Tin.

To some regular customers, their sense of attachment to kiosks lies in their old-fashioned appearance and relatively low prices.

“Kiosks used to be ‘canteens for commoners,’” said Ms Tam, a 29-year-old resident at Sha Kok Estate. “If a meal in the kiosk cost you about HK\$30 to HK\$40 dollars, why not go out and eat in a tea restaurant or even a western restaurant, where the environment is cleaner and more comfortable?”



Owners and customers of cooked food stalls used to pour water and throw leftover food on the ground, making the place damp and dirty.



Air conditioners are installed in the renovated kiosks.

**“Kiosks used to be ‘canteens for commoners.’”**

## “Food diversity is the main feature of dai pai dong-s.”



Food in kiosks are relatively cheap and is welcomed by residents living nearby.

Ms Tam also worried about the decline in food choice if only one single food stall operated at the renovated kiosk rather than a variety of outlets. “Food diversity is the main feature of dai pai dong-s. Everyone knows it,” she added.

To keep providing residents with local dishes, according to Webster Tam Yiu-chung, the assistant portfolio manager of Link Management Limited, no food chain stores will be allowed at the renovated kiosks.

“New tenants must be local Hong Kong restaurants that cannot be found in the shopping centre at the same housing estate or within the district,” Mr Tam said.

He said after renovation, existing food stall operators, or existing tenants had the top priority to the refurbished space. “All food store owners who are currently operating at Lower Wong Tai Sin Estate are old tenants,” he added.

“Actually, the aim of renovating the kiosks is mainly to revitalise and revamp them. We hope to create a more comfortable environment for customers by enhancing the facilities, like the

installation of washrooms and better drainage pipes,” said Mr Tam.

Yet, not all cooked food operators welcome the refurbished kiosks.

Li Chung-hing used to operate a small stall at the kiosks at Oi Man Estate in Ho Man Tin. His free delivery of “love congee” to the elderly every morning for the last several months has captured much media spotlight.

He is currently operating two stalls in a four-stall area in a cooked food kiosk. He said the monthly rent is HK\$30,000 for 1,000 square feet.

The kiosks at Oi Man Estate are not included in the renovation plan by the Link Management Limited.

“After renovation, it will be undoubtedly more hygienic to dine at the kiosk, yet it makes no difference between a dai pai dong and an ordinary restaurant,” said Mr Li, who had stayed in the business since 1986.

“Hygiene of the kiosks can actually be improved by the stall owners themselves, rather than getting the kiosks renovated,” he added.

He said he preferred keeping the cooked food kiosks in their current form.

Wong Kwun, chairman of the Federation of Public Housing Estates, doubted about the advantages brought by the Link’s renovation plan. He said it was a dilemma for small food stall owners whether to rent a renovated kiosk or not.

“Apart from the rental expense, I need to bear an extra cost of at least HK\$800,000, to decorate the food stall at the renovated kiosk. There would be a possible rise in food prices due to the increase in cost,” Mr Wong said.

“It thus will be inconvenient for the elderly who may have inconvenience of travelling to other places to find a lower price,” Mr Wong said.

“However, the problem of an aging population is another factor which may hinder business in the refurbished mushroom kiosks,” Mr Wong said.

“The public housing estates were built decades ago. Many elderly people live there and they don’t spend very much. It will make business more difficult, especially for the small-scale ones, in addition to the higher operation cost,” he added. ▾