

TENEMENT TALES

by Samuel Chan Che-chung and Jennifer Kwok

Hong Kong's Chinese tenement buildings, or *tong lau* are an integral part of the cityscape. But these aging buildings, many of which were built 50 to 70 years ago are now at the centre of a tussle that is dominating public debate - the struggle between conservation and development.

On the one hand, conservationists and cultural critics argue that tenement buildings are part of Hong Kong's living heritage. While on the other, there are those who argue that the buildings are dilapidated safety hazards that need to be demolished before economic revitalisation can take place in a neighbourhood.

Here, *Varsity* meets some of the residents living in tenement buildings to hear their stories.

The long, steep staircase leading to Mok Fan-kai's flat is dimly lit by a bare lightbulb. It is 5:30 p.m. and the 82-year-old is having dinner alone. It is a simple meal: some pork, vegetables and a bowl of rice. The pale blue kitchen tiles are stained with grease, a kerosene stove stands next to the gas cooker.

Mok has been living in this flat on the top floor of a four-storey tenement building in Kowloon City for more than 30 years. At one point there were more than 10 people living in the 1,000 square feet flat: Mok and his wife, their children and relatives

from the mainland. His wife passed away eight years ago and the younger members of the family moved out after they got married.

What he likes most about his district is that there are many parks. "My favourite pastime is to go for a walk in the park after meals... I go there four times a day," he says. While doing his daily exercise routine, which he describes as "being a loony" and waving his hands and feet, he has made friends in the park. "There are many old people who have lived in this neighbourhood for decades as well. I chat with them everyday." They talk about everything from their families to current affairs.

Kowloon City has undergone considerable changes during the past few decades and Mok has witnessed them all. He remembers the noise of aeroplanes that had been part of the residents' lives before the relocation of the airport to Chek Lap Kok in 1998. He has watched the mushrooming of Thai and Vietnamese restaurants, which have steadily replaced the Hong Kong-style diners or *chaa chaan teng*, in the district.

Now, after 30 years, Mok wants out. The fatal collapse of a tenement building in Ma Tau Wai Road in late January is not what motivates Mok; rather, he thinks it would be better to stay in a smaller apartment than living

alone in this big tenement flat.

"I am thinking of moving out. I am waiting for developers to purchase my flat," Mok says. He expects his building to be the target of redevelopment soon. "I will not hesitate once the price is right, but the new home has to be in Kowloon City as well." He does not say what the right price would be.

Mok is not the only one waiting for the developers to make him an offer. The owner of a shop selling incense and Chinese traditional paper offerings, surnamed Yip, is also waiting for the area to be redeveloped. "After the demolition of the Kowloon Walled City and the relocation of the Hong Kong International Airport in the 1990s, there are fewer customers," Yip says. "Once my shop is acquired for redevelopment, I will retire."

Yip says there are a lot of problems in the tenement building, the cost and inconvenience of maintenance and repairs are a burden. "We residents have to fix everything ourselves, including water pipes and the external wall," she says.

"It will be wonderful if the whole Kowloon City is demolished and rebuilt," she adds.

Residents living in the block have to manage it themselves. When maintenance work is required, it cannot be done quickly because, without an owners' coporation, it is



There are old-fashioned tiles and tattered equipment in Mok Fan-kai's kitchen.

hard to reach a consensus on the how the costs should be shared between the households. It has taken the block's residents five years to just agree on repairing a broken sewage pipe because the unaffected households saw no reason why they should pay for their neighbours' problem.

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Ng Po-keung, district councillor for Lung Shing Constituency in Kowloon City, says imposing stringent regulations will not solve the many problems of the tenements, such as management, fire safety and illegal structures. Neither does he believe that repair work can solve the fundamental problem of structural decay in dilapidated buildings.

“The residents are mostly elderly or tenants who cannot afford to pay for maintenance again and again,” he says. Making matters worse, owners' corporations often cannot be formed in tenements because the elderly, who have received little education, think they are not capable of taking up such responsibilities.

Given the number of seemingly intractable problems, Ng says most owners want their flats to be purchased for redevelopment, as they all want to improve their living environment.

But Professor Woo Pui-leng from the School of Architecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong strongly opposes demolition.

“Conservation, ideally speaking, should preserve both the buildings and residents' lifestyle. In Kowloon City, street life is an essential part of residents' life,” Woo says. “In recent years, many ordinary buildings have become landmarks in Hong Kong since too many of their kind, which were more special, were demolished.”

“If it is impossible to protect everything, the second best option is to



There is a narrow staircase leading to tenement flats.

conserve the buildings so that people in the future can still get a taste of what the street used to look like. Renovation can bring new life to old buildings,” Woo says.

Her research on Central District shows that there is a demand for shops and apartments once the tenement houses are renovated. For example, several galleries and bookstores opened in Graham Street after the buildings were renovated.

Woo believes that renovation is a better option to fulfil residents' wish to stay in their old neighbourhood. However, she concedes that problems with tenement houses, such as scattered ownership and the absence of owners' corporations, are some of the key obstacles to rehabilitation.

Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung, a lecturer at the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and a former legislator, believes the core problem of redevelopment lies with “the government's mentality of treating houses as commodities.” Cheung criticises the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) and developers for only having their eyes on profitable

projects and neglecting tenement residents' real needs.

He says that the URA has the legal authority to implement government policies but does not need to be accountable to the Legislative Council. “It operates more like a business corporation as it is financially responsible for profits or losses and residents' interests are seldom their primary concern,” says Cheung.

“Political parties may not always be on the residents' side when facing election pressure.”

To make redevelopment more resident-friendly, he suggests the government set up a maintenance fund with an independent board of directors to provide economic assistance to those tenement residents most in need.

He believes non-governmental organisations are in a better position

to help tenement residents as they have fewer conflicts of interest than other bodies like political parties. “Political parties may not always be on the residents' side when facing election pressure,” he says. “The residents should always have their say during the process of rehabilitation and redevelopment.”

Katty Law, representative of the Central and Western Concern Group, says owners have become more aware of their own rights in recent years, especially when they witness old buildings being replaced by luxurious high-rise apartment buildings.

“Hong Kong people begin to realise the whole mechanism of redevelopment is based on sacrificing the interests of tenement owners and letting land developers make a fortune while the URA shares the bonus,” she says.

She points out that the URA's compensation in property acquisition cases is often inadequate for residents to buy a seven-year-old flat in the same locality.

“Many residents find the terms of acquisition offered attractive at first,” she says. “But the moment they get the compensation, they realise that it is



Anti-redevelopment signs are displayed at Wing Lee Street.



The remaining ruins of buildings are found at Ma Tau Wai Road.

different from their expectation.” URA uses the saleable area to measure the size of a flat in acquisition, instead of the gross floor area which is used in buying flats. Because of this shortfall, residents can only afford to either buy old flats in the same locality or move far away. This explains why there is growing discontent over redevelopment projects.

Indeed, in spite of the aging buildings and the problems that come with them, tenements have certain advantages that draw people to live there. For instance, their convenient location in the city centre is an attractive option to those who want to live in the centre on a limited budget.

Sixty-year-old Amy Siu Fung-kuen moved from Tai Po to a block on Fok Lo Tsuen Road in Kowloon City in 1997. She says she can save on transportation costs and people can visit her more easily. The only inconvenience is not being able to buy big pieces of furniture anymore as the staircase now is too narrow.

Siu says she will not move out, until maybe the day she finds herself being unable to walk up the stairs. ▼