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E V E N T S W A T C H

Twin challenges

This year's HKIS annual conference grappled with the problems of an ageing population and ageing buildings facing Hong Kong, writes **Prudence Lui**

An ageing population and ageing building stock are twin problems Hong Kong is being forced to grapple with. But the surveying sector is taking a proactive approach, as this year's Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors (HKIS) annual conference attested.

After decades of economic growth and development, Hong Kong is facing two highly serious problems of ageing, that of its population and also of the buildings in which we live and work, many of which are approaching the end of their period of safe usage. With this critical situation in mind, the HKIS theme for its 2017 Annual Conference was "Golden Opportunities in the Ageing Community and Built Environment". The conference was held at the JW Marriott Hotel on September 9, drawing an attendance of some 300 professionals.

Secretary for Development Michael Wong Wai-lun delivered the opening speech and warned that we must all prepare for these two changes. "Our population is ageing rapidly," he said. "Our median age went from 20 in 1966 to 43 in 2016, and will rise to 50 by 2034. By the same year almost 30 per cent of the population will be over 65. Meanwhile our buildings are also ageing at an alarming rate. There are over 40,000 private buildings in Hong Kong and about 7,000 are over 50 years old. This will rise to 17,000 by 2034."

Wong also highlighted the efforts and initiatives of the Planning Department, Buildings Department and Urban Renewal Authority (URA) in this

regard. "Under HK 2030+, we set out the vision for Hong Kong to become a liveable, competitive and sustainable 'World City', with many of those now present taking part in the consultation process. On the building front, old buildings need proper maintenance or they will pose a threat to people, so the Mandatory Building Inspection Scheme (MBIS) and Mandatory Window Inspection Scheme (MWIS) were introduced in 2012. The URA has provided various schemes and the appropriate financial and technical support to owners to fulfil their responsibilities."

Director of Planning Raymond Lee said ageing was not all negative and asked the audience to look at "double ageing" from new perspectives, like a single-malt whisky or balsamic vinegar which grows in value as it ages. "Our elderly populace of tomorrow will be different from the elderly of recent decades," Lee said. "They will, in general, be better educated and represent a social capital that should be better utilised. It's more likely they will play an active role, even in their golden years."

Lee estimated that in 2015 there were only 1,100 private housing units aged 70 years or more but this figure is estimated to rise to 326,000 by 2046. "This problem will become acute in the years ahead as the current pace of urban renewal is left far behind," he said. "Between 2011 and 2015, on average, only 2,100 private units were demolished for redevelopment per year. We also estimate that over 70 per cent of these ageing private units were located in five districts. Compounding

this double-ageing problem, districts like Sham Shui Po, Yau Ma Tei, Tsim Sha Tsui and Mong Kok have an above-average proportion of elderly residents. Many elderly owners are also less able to deal with the lengthy and costly procedure of maintenance or redevelopment."

Director of Buildings Dr Cheung Tin-chesung touched on care for aged building and stressed that the Buildings Department's vision is to make built environments safe and healthy for all. "Prevention is better than cure and the ageing building issue can't just be handled by government," Cheung said. "Owners must take responsibility as well."

As of June 2017, the progress of MBIS and MWIS was not promising. For instance, the Buildings Department issued a total of 51,000 and 440,000 notices respectively but the compliance rates were 35 per cent and 84 per cent. Compliance rates for the common areas are even lower - 11 per cent for MBIS and 50 per cent for MWIS.

Cheung blamed limited resources and intensive workloads. "Our resources are stretched to the limit and there is a large backlog of notices. It's a heavy workload, so we have adjusted downward to 400 target buildings in 2017. Other challenges are RIs who are unfamiliar with the requirements, higher risks in dealing with aged buildings, and prosecutions."

"Out of a total of 490 RIs, only 150 carried out work regularly and about 200 served only once. Therefore, it's a huge opportunity for surveyors to take up the role. There is a total of 5,300



HKIS president, Thomas Ho (left) pictured with guest of honour, Secretary for Development, Michael Wong Wai-lun at the HKIS annual conference 2017. Photo: HKIS

buildings aged 50 years or more, with inspection and supervision costs estimated to be HK\$1-2 billion."

According to Dr Lam Ching-choi, non-official member, Executive Council, chairman of the Elderly Commission and chief executive officer of the Haven of Hope Christian Service, there will be a significant increase in the elderly population. At present there are six working adults to support one elderly person but by 2034 this ratio will be only two to one.

"Therefore," Lam said, "we need to change our physical landscape to cater for the future needs of the elderly. I have two new concepts for town planners and surveyors. The

Build-for-Health concept strives to keep the elderly alive through healthy practices, like exercise, which is largely affected by physical environment.

"As our elderly are evenly distributed across 18 districts, we really need to make sure that in every district's estates the relevant elderly services are provided. While the Housing Authority and Housing Society provide universal design solutions for the aged, what more can private developers do for the coming elderly population?"

Lam praised the government for the facilities already provided on its estates, like walkways, lifts, escalators and some additional seating. "Transport is also crucial," he added. "When-

we encourage the elderly to leave their flats and do exercise, as well as visiting relatives and friends or becoming volunteers. I would like to give full credit to the government for its HK\$2 public transport fare concession scheme, which is used every day by more than one million elderly people."

Lam reiterated that planning is essential for the elderly of the near future. "We should plan ahead as the lead time is very long to build an institution. It can take 10-15 years to construct an age home. We should also do as much as we can for inclusive inter-generational support and build for health, with technology, and all this should be part of cross-sector efforts."