

Development coordination: bringing a lifeline to historic districts



A substation at Duxton Plain: designed to blend with its surrounding, it stands quietly and unobtrusively amongst mature trees.

The URA's mission is "to plan, facilitate and regulate the physical development of Singapore into a tropical city of excellence." The Authority's planning and regulatory functions are well-known to many. Not so well-known perhaps, is its facilitative role.

A key component of facilitating development is the coordination of urban re-development, or development coordination. But what exactly is development coordination? What value-added, if any, does the URA give in 'coordinating' development?

Plans to reality

Development coordination involves many elements and tasks. For certain areas identified for revitalisation or re-development, the URA develops detailed urban design and infrastructure layout plans. As the project manager, the URA then seeks funds, coordinates, guides and manages the implementation of infrastructural facilities by various agencies to bring the plans to fruition.

Said the URA's Director of Project Services Division Mrs Cheong Koon Hean: "The URA has drawn up many wonderful plans in the past few years. Now is the time for us to realise many of these plans. Effective development coordination and project management helps to ensure that these good plans are well-implemented.

Then, there is no dichotomy between formulation and implementation."

With new ideas and projects to try out, and huge areas to improve on, a central agency is certainly needed to coordinate all efforts. And that is where the URA comes in as the facilitator of development.

So far, the URA has helped to co-ordinate and implement public sector environmental improvement, infrastructural and building works project including projects within the Civic District, the Singapore River area, Tanjong Rhu and the historic districts.

To better understand its role in development coordination, let's take the example of the revitalisation of the historic districts of Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam.

Powered for revitalisation

These historic districts were gazetted as conservation areas in 1989. The plan is to restore the shophouses there, introduce new uses and inject new life into them.

Before re-development could take place, these historic areas needed infrastructural services. One very basic and important requirement is the provision of adequate electrical supply to 'power' the revitalisation of these historic districts.

"These substations bring about a 'lifeline' to these historic districts," said Mrs Cheong. "If there is insufficient electrical power, people and businesses will not be able to move back there and revitalisation will not be possible," she added.

The first substations to be built by the URA in the historic districts were in the Tanjong Pagar conservation area. In the early days, shophouse owners encountered two pressing problems. One, they found that the individual electrical installations for power supply were taking up too much valuable space within their premises. Two,



The substation at Perak Rd, Little India, merging into the row of conservation shophouses.

electrical power to the area was supplied on a 'need' basis and tended to be rather ad hoc, tapping from the nearest available source.

From the Tanjong Pagar experience, it became clear that it was unrealistic to leave the provision of something as basic as electricity to the private sector. More importantly, a central agency is needed to build a network of electrical substations based on projected demand to ensure that there is timely and steady supply of power and minimum disruption to businesses. The URA became that central agency.

Rigorous planning

In implementing the substations, the URA had to first identify the vacant land available for development. These land parcels must be of a suitable size, unencumbered and strategically located. The last criteria is particularly important for substations because each sub-station can only provide electricity within a certain catchment area. Shophouses outside this catchment will not have adequate power supply.

Once the locations are finalised, detailed planning and routes for cables are carefully mapped out. At this stage, the URA will need to work with the Power Grid, Ministry of Environment, the Land Transport Authority and other government agencies on their respective needs.

Thereafter, the URA carefully schedules all other environmental and infrastructural works to avoid possible clashes and to minimise noise and dust which could adversely affect the shops and cause public annoyance.

Careful attention is paid to the design of the substations to ensure that they blend in aesthetically with the surroundings. The building of substations is subject to the same rigorous planning control as other private sector projects in the conservation areas.

The mall at Duxton Hill. Notice the period lamp post, beautifully paved sidewalk and mall.



The result? Substations that are so tastefully and cleverly designed that you will not know that they are substations unless we point them out to you!

The URA has, so far, planned and built a network of some 31 electrical substations in the conservation areas at Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam at a total cost of \$18 million.

Environmental improvements

Development co-ordination does not stop here. Once the basic infrastructure like power supply, water and other utilities and modern sanitation are in, environmental improvements are initiated.

Environmental improvements include creation of open spaces, better landscaping, improvements to sidewalks, design and construction of malls and carparks, improvements to street furniture and signages.

These improvements are the 'softer' touches which are vital in helping to bring life back to a historic district. Some concrete



A specially-designed bus-stop along Tanjong Pagar Road.

examples include the Bussorah Mall in Kampong Glam, the Duxton Hill mall at Tanjong Pagar and the sidewalks at Smith Street. These have helped to improve and facilitate pedestrian movements, adding to the accessibility and vibrancy of the area.

The specially-designed street furniture (like benches, street lamps, bus-stops) and signages also help to retain the district's historic charm. Wherever possible, the existing public amenities are kept. If not, new amenities are designed to blend with the old-world charm of the district.

In a nutshell, these improvements make these areas more inviting and help to create a unique ambience and give each district a distinctive identity.

The URA's role in development co-ordination and as a facilitator of re-development has come a long way. We have systematically transformed what used to be slums and dilapidated enclaves into revitalised nodes of activities, without losing sight of our heritage.

This would not have been possible if URA had not taken a proactive role and worked hand in hand with all the various agencies to bring our planning vision to reality.