



A review of recent studies on sustainable urban renewal



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A B S T R A C T

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Urban renewal and sustainable development are two popular issues in both policy agenda and academia. Although their importance has been increasingly recognized, an integrated review covering sustainability, planning, and urban renewal has yet to be produced. Based on 81 journal papers, this paper presents a critical review of recent studies on sustainable urban renewal over the period 1990–2012. The review focuses on the planning sub-system and the social sub-system of urban renewal in terms of the evaluation of sustainability. The complexity of achieving sustainable urban renewal is emphasized and discussed. To better clarify the mechanism behind the urban renewal process and improve urban sustainability, recommendations of future research directions are also provided.

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Introduction

Urban renewal has been regarded as a sound approach to promoting land values and improving environmental quality (Adams & Hastings, 2001); rectifying the urban decay problem and meeting various socioeconomic objectives (Lee & Chan, 2008a); and enhancing existing social networks, improving inclusion of vulnerable groups, and changing adverse impacts on the living environment (Chan & Yung, 2004). In order to help tackle these issues, many studies have been conducted in this field. As sustainable development corresponds to urban renewal in terms of social, economic and environmental sustainability, it has been recognized that urban renewal and sustainability should be combined together. The urban renewal process involves various planning issues and different stakeholders, the relationship between which complicates the process. In order to achieve effective and efficient sustainable urban renewal practice, it is first necessary to understand the mechanism behind it. Discussions by other researchers on these issues are scattered in different areas with an integrated review covering sustainability, planning, and urban renewal yet to be produced.

This paper therefore presents a critical review of recent studies on sustainable urban renewal. It starts with the background of sustainable urban renewal, followed by the research methodology and an overall picture of the research progress. Selected papers are then discussed from three aspects, namely planning sub-system in

sustainable urban renewal, stakeholders and their engagement, and evaluation of sustainable urban renewal. Finally, the discussion section includes a summary of the findings from this study and recommendations for future related research.

Background of sustainable urban renewal

Urban renewal has become a major element of urban policy in many countries and regions. Couch (1990) gave two reasons for its growing importance. Firstly, people increasingly moving to and living in urban areas, in particular old urban areas, give rise to the need for renewal of the urban fabric. Secondly, urban renewal responds to the concern of urban sprawl and large quantities of abandoned urban areas. Nowadays, it is closely involved with sustainable development.

Definition of urban renewal

Urban renewal, urban regeneration, urban redevelopment, and urban rehabilitation share similar meanings in the town-planning field but are significantly different in terms of scale. Urban renewal and urban regeneration have very similar meanings and both involve work of a relatively large scale: urban renewal is defined as the process of slum clearance and physical redevelopment that takes account of other elements such as heritage preservation (Couch, Sykes, & Boerstinghaus, 2011); while urban regeneration is a comprehensive integration of vision and action aimed at resolving the multi-faceted problems of deprived urban areas to improve their economic, physical, social, and environmental conditions (Ercan, 2011). By comparison, urban redevelopment is more

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specific and on a smaller scale, being any new construction on a site that has pre-existing uses, such as the redevelopment of a block of townhouses into a large apartment building (De Sousa, 2008), and urban rehabilitation is restoring a building to good condition, operation, or capacity (Zuckerman, 1991). In summary, urban renewal (used interchangeably with urban regeneration throughout this paper), aims at improving the physical, social-economic and ecological aspects of urban areas through various actions including redevelopment, rehabilitation, and heritage preservation.

The links between urban renewal and sustainability

The term 'sustainable development' dates back to the 1970s, but it was not until the 1990s that it was used in the context of urban renewal policy (Bromley, Tallon, & Thomas, 2005). Sustainable development is a complex concept (Weingaertner & Barber, 2010) made even more so by the fact that there is no commonly agreed definition of sustainability. There is a growing body of research that attempts to conceptualize urban renewal sustainability in different contexts. Lorr (2012) reviewed three of the most common theoretical approaches to sustainability: the *inter-generational and intra-generational equity and justice perspective*, the *comprehensive environmental, economical, equitable change perspective*, and the *free-market greening perspective*. These approaches were applied in the context of North American cities and provided a working definition of urban sustainability, in which studies on multiple scales were emphasized. In the UK context, sustainability has been conceptualized by a case-based study of the Eastside regeneration of Birmingham, based on three pillars of sustainability and a weak-strong sustainability continuum (Lombardi, Porter, Barber, & Rogers, 2011).

No matter what conceptualization of sustainability is applied, the consensus appears to be that sustainable development has three pillars: social, economic, and environmental. This has therefore become the popular approach to achieving a more sustainable society in most contexts, and urban renewal is closely linked to it. Urban renewal aims at solving a series of urban problems, including urban function deterioration, social exclusion in urban areas, and environmental pollution. It is regarded as a sound approach to promoting land values, and improving environmental quality (Adams & Hastings, 2001); to rectifying the urban decay problem and meeting various socioeconomic objectives (Lee & Chan, 2008a); and to enhancing existing social networks, improving inclusion of vulnerable groups, and changing adverse impacts on the living environment (Chan & Yung, 2004). Specifically, urban renewal projects facilitate good-quality housing and reduce health risks to the community (Krieger & Higgins, 2002); promote the repair of dilapidated buildings (Ho, Yau, Poon, & Liusman, 2012); and improve the effective use of the building stock and land resources in the city (Ho et al., 2012). In these respects, urban renewal can significantly contribute to sustainable urban development if it follows a sustainable path. However, most urban renewal policies have tended to focus on economic regeneration rather than on environmental or social regeneration (Couch & Dennemann, 2000). For example, an examination of one military site redevelopment in Jordan indicated that although the development had been promoted by a political commitment to sustainable urban renewal, it was more profit-driven rather than driven by the need to solve environmental and community concerns in the redevelopment process. Thus, although the relationship between sustainability and urban renewal is complex, it does provide a direction for a sustainable urban future.

Methodology

Paper retrieval

Urban renewal, urban regeneration, urban redevelopment, and urban rehabilitation share similar meanings, but are used in different countries or regions. Therefore, the key words used in the literature search were *urban renewal*, *urban regeneration*, *urban redevelopment*, *urban rehabilitation*, *sustainable development* and *sustainability*. The search rule used was ("urban renewal" OR "urban regeneration" OR "urban redevelopment" OR "urban rehabilitation") AND ("sustainable development" OR "sustainability"), which was put in the searching criterion *Topic* in the SCI database. The procedure for retrieving papers was as follows:

1. Topics were scanned with the search rule mentioned above in the SCI database with a time span of 1990/01/01–2012/12/31 and the language of English. With this rule, 118 papers (including articles, proceedings papers, editorials, and reviews) were retrieved.
2. Papers in conference proceedings and editorials were rejected, leaving 115 articles.
3. The abstract of each paper was read to exclude irrelevant ones. Finally, 81 papers were selected for the literature review.

An overview of selected papers

A brief analysis was made of the 81 selected papers. Fig. 1 shows that the number of relevant papers published between 1990 and 2012 increased substantially, indicating an increasing research interest in sustainability and urban renewal. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 81 papers in the different journals.

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"Considering the city a spatial-constructional and social system, we may outline two large sub-systems: town planning and social sub-system. While the town-planning sub-system includes all material elements of a city, including environmental factors that form the territorial structure, the social sub-system consists of the number of inhabitants as beneficiaries of the whole system." (Ristea, Ioan-Franc, Stegaroiu, & Croitoru, 2010: 103). The above statement shows that in order to achieve sustainable urban renewal in a city, addressing the two systems properly is the only approach. Studies relating to sustainable urban renewal cover a broad range of topics, many of which overlap and thus cannot be easily classified into a certain field. To gain a better understanding of the research area and to identify possible gaps in the knowledge base, this paper discusses the findings of recent

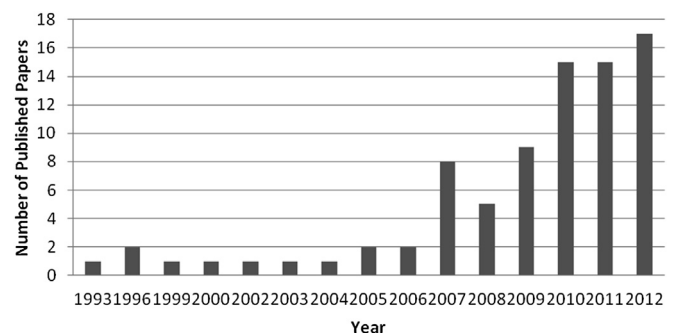


Fig. 1. Number of relevant papers published yearly in the selected journals.

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