



Optimising urban development: Assessing the role of architects in the decision-making processes of development control department in greater Port Harcourt City

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Abstract

Globally, Development Control Departments play a crucial role in overseeing effective physical development in urban areas. Architects, as key figures within these administrative units, hold a pivotal role in shaping the vision that materialises into the built environment. Their active involvement throughout the developmental process is imperative. This research is centred on optimising urban development and specifically provides an overview of the 'Role of Architects in the Decision-Making Processes of Development Control Departments in Greater Port Harcourt City'. The objectives of the study are to determine whether the current representation of architects aligns appropriately with the scope and responsibilities of the Development Control Department of the Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority, outline the specific roles and responsibilities of architects within the department, and assess the extent to which architects' inputs are considered in the decision-making process for granting building permits. Additionally, the research aims to propose recommendations for optimising the integration and influence of architects in decision-making processes, ultimately contributing to sustainable and aesthetically pleasing urban development in Greater Port Harcourt City. Data collection for this study relied on a semi-structured interview guide, which aligns with a qualitative research approach. The results indicate that only two architects were employed, with one remaining. While architects' inputs were considered at the commencement stage of the authority, it was revealed that the current practice in the Development Control Department no longer involves physical vetting by architects. Instead, reliance is placed on a check-list that only requires the ARCON stamp and architects' paper certification. This approach has rendered the architect physically present in the department redundant. In conclusion, this study emphasises the critical role of architects in shaping urban development and underscores the necessity for an adequate number of architects actively participating in decision-making processes within Development Control Departments. It strongly advocates for the reconsideration of physical vetting processes, affirming that such practices contribute to better urban development outcomes and align with the overarching goal of creating sustainable and aesthetically pleasing urban environments in Greater Port Harcourt City.

Keywords: Urban Development, Architects, Decision-Making Processes, Development Control, Greater Port Harcourt City, Optimisation, Sustainability

1. Introduction

The rapid urbanization of Greater Port Harcourt necessitates a critical examination of the decision-making processes within development control departments, particularly concerning the role of architects. As key contributors to the built environment, architects play a vital role in shaping urban landscapes and ensuring the adherence to design standards. Understanding the representation and influence of architects in these decision-making processes is crucial for fostering sustainable and well-designed urban development.

1.1 Problem Statement

The current state of urban development in Greater Port Harcourt faces challenges related to the effective integration of architects in decision-making within development control departments.

Issues may arise from a misalignment of representation, insufficient acknowledgement of architects' roles, and potential gaps in ensuring compliance with design standards during the permit approval process. Addressing these challenges is imperative for optimizing urban development and promoting a cohesive and aesthetically pleasing built environment.

1.2. Aim of the Study

This study aims to investigate the role of architects in the decision-making processes of development control departments in Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

1. To provide an overview of the current representation of architects within the development control department.
2. To determine whether the current representation of architects corresponds appropriately with the scope and responsibilities of the development control department.
3. To outline the specific roles and responsibilities that architects play within the development control department.
4. To assess the extent to which architects' inputs and recommendations are considered in the decision-making process for granting building permits.
5. To propose recommendations for optimizing the integration and influence of architects in the decision-making processes for sustainable and aesthetically pleasing urban development in Greater Port Harcourt.

1.4. The Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority

In 2008, the Rivers State government of Nigeria initiated a visionary project aimed at constructing a dynamic, economically robust, and culturally diverse world-class

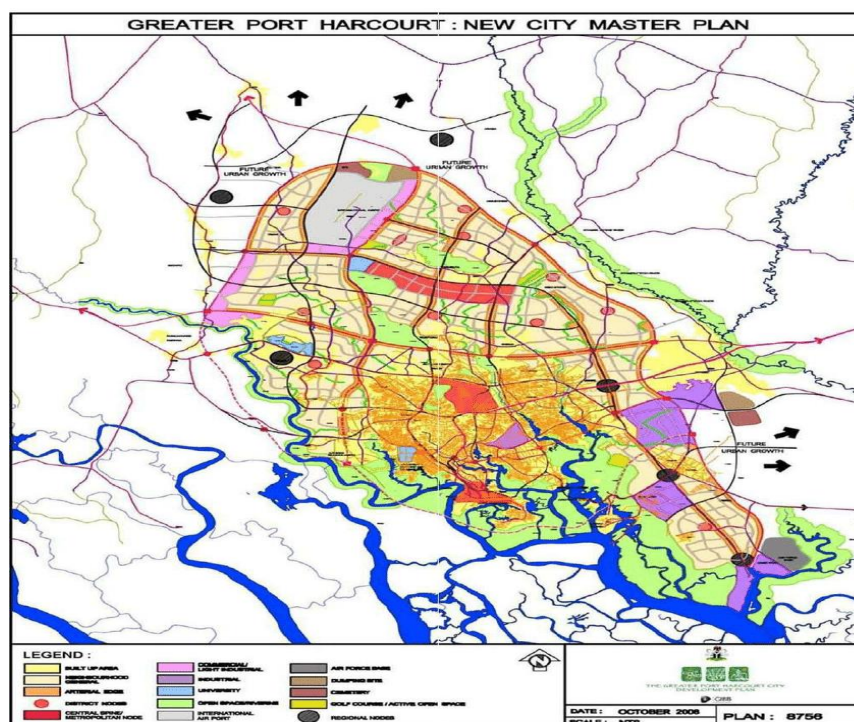
Garden cum Tourism city. This ambitious endeavor aimed to enhance the well-being of residents, foster sustainable development, ensure security, promote good health, and contribute to global economic integration (Ede *et al.*, 2011). The blueprint for this grand vision was articulated in the Greater Port Harcourt City Master Plan, meticulously prepared by the South African firm Arcus GIBB. The master plan sought to coordinate and integrate various projects in alignment with the overarching vision, addressing the imperative for urban renewal and the transformation of the existing city while laying the foundation for a new city with a focus on high urban quality and meticulously planned open spaces (GPHCMP, 2008).

To steer the implementation of the Greater Port Harcourt City Master Plan and the construction of the New City, the Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority (GPHCDA) was established by law on 2 April 2009 as 'The Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority Law No. 2 of 2009' (Enwin & Ikiriko, 2023) ^[1].

The Authority envisions a transformation of the Greater Port Harcourt Area into a globally recognized world-class city, celebrated for its excellence and established as the preferred destination for investors and tourists.

The primary goal is to construct a meticulously planned city by implementing and enforcing policies that guarantee top-notch infrastructure and the delivery of high-quality services. This initiative is designed to elevate the standard of living and overall well-being of the populace.

The Governing Body includes a part-time Chairman, the Administrator, and six other qualified professionals in fields such as Estate Management, Surveying, Engineering, Urban Planning, Architecture, Quantity Surveying, Building, and Law. Additionally, representatives from Ministries of Justice, Land Survey, Urban Development, Works, and Environment, as well as two individuals representing NGOs and other stakeholders, form part of the governance structure.



Source: Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority, 2009

Fig 1: Geographical Map of the Research Zone

Encompassing an area of approximately 1,900 square kilometers (40,000 hectares of land) across eight Local Government Areas (Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor, parts of Ikwerre, Etche, Oyiibo, Eleme, Ogu-Bolo and Okirika), Greater Port Harcourt is projected to have a population of around two million people. The envisaged New City serves as an extension of the existing Port Harcourt City, strategically planned to accommodate urban growth, densify the old city, and gradually integrate both areas into a cohesive single unit.

The overarching plan for the New City includes the establishment of modern amenities such as 24-hour electricity supply, a network of reticulated water supply, a bulk sewage system, well-designed roads and streets, a public transportation system, stormwater management, waste disposal systems, surveillance systems, and thoughtfully laid-out residential, commercial, and industrial areas, alongside parks and gardens.

2. Literature Review

2.1. History of Town Planning in Nigeria

The historical trajectory of town planning in Nigeria extends back to the early 20th century. The following key points highlight significant developments in the history of town planning in the country:

Early Legislation (1917)

The inception of town planning in Nigeria can be traced to the Township Ordinance of 1917. This ordinance vested the Governor-General with the authority to designate and administer specific townships. Its focus encompassed conservancy, sanitation, and building regulations within the designated townships.

Regionalization (1954)

Following the adoption of a federal constitution in 1954, town planning underwent regionalization. The emerging Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions re-enacted the 1946 Town and Country Planning Act as their respective Regional Laws. Lagos complemented this regionalization with its own planning legislation.

Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Decree 88 of 1992

The promulgation of the Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Decree conferred responsibilities upon the Federal Government. This included the formulation of national policies for urban and regional planning, marking a pivotal phase in the evolution of town planning.

Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Law, Cap. 138 LFN of 2004

The Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Law Decree 88 of 1992, along with subsequent amendments in 2004, played a crucial role in shaping the landscape of town planning. It led to the establishment of the National Planning Commission at the Federal level, State Urban and Regional Boards at the state level, and Local Planning Authorities at the Local Government level. These entities were instrumental in the realm of development control.

These historical milestones vividly depict the progression of town planning in Nigeria, from its early legislative roots to the establishment of formal structures dedicated to urban and regional planning, as well as development control.

2.2. Overview of the Law

The legislation outlining town and country planning in Nigeria is comprised of six main components and 92 sections, each addressing specific facets of the planning process. The first part, spanning sections 1-26, focuses on physical development plans, their types, and levels, along with the administration, composition, and functions of each planning level. The subsequent parts delve into Development Control, additional control in special cases, land acquisition and compensation, improvement area, rehabilitation, renewal, upgrading, and appeals.

In accordance with the decree, Part 6, section 90(1) repeals the previous 1946 Town and Country Planning Law, rendering it obsolete in the current legal framework.

Part 1(a) of the law delineates the three levels for formulating physical development plans—Federal, State, and Local Government. These levels are referred to as "the Commission," "the Board," and the "Authority," respectively. Each local government council is mandated to establish a planning authority (Part 1 Section 4), with detailed functions outlined in Part 1, Sections 11 and 12. The functions of the state ("the Board") and the Federal ("the Commission") levels are specified in Sections 6 and 7.

Recognizing the importance of development control, the decree empowers the "Commission," "the Board," and the "Authority" to establish a Development Control Department (Part II, Section 27), tasked with overseeing development control and implementing physical development plans.

At different administrative levels, the Development Control Department holds jurisdiction over lands within their respective areas (Part II, Section 27, subsections 3, 4, and 5). Approval must be sought before commencing any development, with government agencies required to obtain approval (Section 29). Planning bodies possess the authority to approve with amendments, delay approval, or reject development permits under certain circumstances (sections 31 and 34).

According to The Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Law No. 88 of 1992, as amended in 1998, entities such as the National Planning Commission, State Urban and Regional Board, and Local Planning Authority are mandated for development control at different administrative levels in Nigeria.

The composition of these entities ensures diverse expertise and representation, featuring professionals from various fields and representatives from relevant bodies and local governments. This comprehensive composition is vital for the effective implementation of development control policies and regulations.

2.3. Composition of the Commission, Board and Authority

The Commission consists of the following members:

A chairman.

One representative from each of the following professions, all of whom must be registered members of their respective professions:

Town planning.

Architecture.

Civil engineering.

Land surveying.

Law.

Estate surveying.

One representative each from the following entities:

Federal Ministries of Works, Housing, Agriculture, Rural

Development, Finance, Commerce, Tourism, Power, Steel, Environment, Transport, and Communications.

National Electric Power Authority.

Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation.

Nigerian Telecommunication Limited.

One representative from the Nigerian Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture.

Ten representatives from the States of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, rotating periodically.

The executive director, appointed by the Commission, who serves as its chief executive.

The chairman must have at least fifteen years of professional practice and must be registered with the Town Planners Registration Council.

The executive director must be a registered town planner with a minimum of fifteen years of professional practice.

The position of executive director is pensionable.

Compensation, fees, and allowances for the chairman, executive director, and members of the Commission are determined by the Commission with the approval of the President.

Composition of the Board

The Board comprises the following members:

A chairman.

One representative from each of the following professions, all of whom must be registered members of their respective professions:

Town planning.

Architecture.

Civil engineering.

Land surveying.

Law.

Estate surveying.

One representative from each of the following entities:

State Environmental Protection Agency.

National Electric Power Authority.

Ministries of Works, Housing, Agriculture, and Finance.

Five representatives from local governments in the State, rotating periodically.

A secretary, appointed by the Board, who serves as its chief executive.

The chairman must have at least five years of professional practice and must be registered with the Town Planners Registration Council.

The secretary must be a registered town planner with a minimum of five years of professional practice.

The position of the secretary is pensionable.

Compensation, fees, and allowances for the chairman, secretary, and members of the Board are determined by the Board.

Composition of the Authority

The Authority comprises the following members:

A chairman.

Not more than five representatives from the wards in the local government area.

One representative from each of the following professions, all of whom must be registered members of their respective professions:

Architecture.

Civil engineering.

Land surveying.

Law.

Town planning.

The works supervisor and education supervisor of the local government.

A secretary, appointed by the Authority, who serves as its chief executive.

The chairman must have at least five years of professional practice and must be registered with the Town Planners Registration Council.

The secretary must be a registered town planner with a minimum of five years of professional practice.

The position of the secretary is pensionable.

Compensation, fees, and allowances for the chairman, secretary, and members of the Authority are approved by the Authority.

Development control

2.4 Establishment and Jurisdiction of Development Control Department

Section 27 addresses the establishment and jurisdiction of the Development Control Department:

The Commission, the Board, and the Authority shall each establish a department known as the Development Control Department, referred to as "the Control Department" in this Act.

The Control Department is a multi-disciplinary department responsible for development control and the implementation of physical development plans.

At the Federal level, the Control Department has authority over development control on Federal lands and estates.

At the State level, the Control Department has authority over development control on State lands.

At the local government level, the Control Department has authority over the control of development on all land within the jurisdiction of the local government.

2.5 Powers and Functions of the Development Control Department

Section 28 outlines the approval process for land development:

Approval from the relevant Development Control Department is required for any land development.

Developers must submit a development plan for approval by the Development Control Department.

2.6 Application for a Development Permit

Section 30 focuses on the application process for a Development Permit:

Developers, whether private or government, must apply for a development permit in a manner prescribed by regulations, including submitting required information and plans.

No development by any government or its agencies can commence without obtaining approval from the relevant Development Control Department.

Plans required under this Act must be prepared by a registered architect, town planner, or engineer, in accordance with the Act's provisions.

2.7 Additional Control in Special Cases

Part III, Section 64, addresses additional control in special cases:

The Control Department, in its functions related to the control of advertisements, wasteland, trees, and buildings of special

architectural or historical interest, compiles a list of such buildings.

The Control Department may obtain lists of buildings of special architectural and historical interest from individuals and corporate bodies for compilation.

2.8. Conditions for Including a Building in the Development Control Department's List

Section 65 specifies conditions for including a building in the Control Department's list:

A building may be included if it is of historic or special architectural interest.

Its exterior contributes to the architectural or historic interest of a building or a group of buildings.

A desirable man-made object or structure is fixed to the building or part of the land within the curtilage of the building.

2.9. Control Department to Consult Persons with Special Knowledge

Section 66 discusses the Control Department's authority to consult persons with special knowledge:

The Control Department may consult individuals with special knowledge or interest in a building of architectural or historic interest before compiling a list.

2.10. Composition of the Development Control Department

The composition of the Development Control Department in Nigeria may vary depending on the specific administrative structure and regulations at the federal, state, or local government levels. However, in general, the department may include the following key positions and roles:

1. **Director of Development Control:** The head of the department responsible for overseeing and coordinating the activities of the Development Control Department.
2. **Town Planners:** Professionals with expertise in urban and regional planning, responsible for assessing development proposals, conducting site inspections, and ensuring compliance with planning regulations.
3. **Architects:** Professionals involved in the review and approval of building plans, ensuring that proposed developments meet architectural standards and regulations.
4. **Engineers:** Civil engineers and other engineering professionals may be involved in assessing the structural and technical aspects of proposed developments.
5. **Legal Officers:** Responsible for legal matters related to development control, including issuing enforcement notices and prosecuting offenders.
6. **Support Staff:** Administrative and technical support staff may be part of the department to assist in various tasks such as record-keeping, data management, and communication.

It is important to note that the specific composition of the Development Control Department may be defined by relevant legislation, regulations, and organizational structures at the federal, state, or local government levels in Nigeria.

3. Methodology

This study relied on literature review and key stakeholders information. The presentation is qualitative in nature as it entails discussions of salient points.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Overview of the Current Representation of Architects within the Development Control Department

Upon consultation with a key informant, a concerning observation emerged regarding the current composition of architects within the GPHCDA's Development Control Department. The available information indicates a glaring deficiency in the representation of architects, highlighting a noteworthy issue within the department's staffing dynamics.

As at present, the Development Control Department at the GPHCDA faces a substantial lack of architectural representation. The current scenario underscores a particularly stark reality, with the department currently able to lay claim to just one architect within its ranks. This situation is even more pronounced when considering that, during its initial establishment, two architects were part of the department. Regrettably, the departure of one architect through resignation has contributed to the existing deficiency in architectural expertise within the department.

This insufficiency in the number of architects holds implications for the department's capacity to effectively address and manage architectural aspects of development control. The diminished representation raises concerns about the diversity of skills and perspectives available to assess, guide, and regulate architectural elements within the scope of the department's responsibilities.

Addressing this imbalance in architectural representation within the Development Control Department is crucial for ensuring a comprehensive and proficient approach to the intricate facets of development control. From key informant, it was gathered that there is seriously poor representation of architects in the development control department of the GPHCDA. To be precise, the authority can only boast of a single architect as at present. Only two architects were employed as at inception but one has resigned.

4.2. Current Representation of Architects and Scope and Responsibilities of the Development Control Department

The Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority (GPHCDA) shoulders the crucial responsibility of overseeing and regulating development activities across eight local government areas (Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor, Ikwerre, Etche, Oyiibo, Eleme, Ogu-Bolo and Okirika). This expansive jurisdiction implies that the approval process for development plans emanates from these eight LGAs. However, the current scenario, which involves only two individuals handling the vetting of plans across these multiple localities, is deemed inadequate. This was corroborated by Ikiriko and Udom (2023) who said that there is a deficit in staffing and resource capacity, and that has impacted the productivity of staff and delay the Greater Port Harcourt master plan implementation.

In addition to managing office-related tasks such as designing building plans for authority projects and vetting plans from the authority's clients, a significant concern arises when examining the building inspectorate team. It raises a pertinent question regarding the absence of architectural representation within this critical team. The omission of architects from this crucial aspect of the department's operations is a notable observation.

The existing practice of resorting to ad-hoc arrangements, which inadvertently supports unprofessional practices and involves the engagement of non-professionals and individuals lacking proper credentials, is a cause for concern.

This approach, often characterized by the involvement of unqualified individuals and, at times, the utilization of unofficial channels, paints a picture of the department as prioritizing revenue generation over maintaining its professional standards.

Upon thorough analysis, encompassing both field and office operations, it becomes evident that a minimum of eight registered architects is necessary to adequately oversee the operations of the Development Control Department across the eight LGAs. This calculation is not merely an arbitrary number; it is derived from a careful consideration of the complexity and scale of tasks associated with development control in such a diverse and expansive administrative region. Addressing this deficiency in architectural representation is essential not only for adhering to professional standards but also for ensuring the effective and comprehensive execution of the Development Control Department's responsibilities. The inclusion of registered architects in both office and field operations will not only enhance the department's professional status but also contribute significantly to its efficiency and efficacy in managing the intricacies of development control across the designated local government areas.

4.3. Roles and Responsibilities that Architects play within the Development Control Department

The pivotal roles and responsibilities assigned to architects within the Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority (GPHCDA) have, unfortunately, taken a back seat, with their contributions primarily associated with the design phase of buildings. This skewed emphasis raises pertinent questions about the architect's true impact, particularly considering the limited number of buildings the authority designs annually, inadvertently leading to a sense of redundancy for the architect. However, it is imperative to recognize that architects have multifaceted roles that extend beyond mere design.

As elucidated by Nambah and Adamu (2021), architects in the development control process in Nigeria bear specific responsibilities:

1. **Building Plan Preparation:** Architects are responsible for preparing building plans that align with the established standards and regulations set by local, state, and national governments.
2. **Vetting and Processing:** Architects play a crucial role in vetting and processing building plans for approval. This ensures strict adherence to government-mandated physical development policies and maintains the quality of construction and physical development in urban areas.
3. **Creative Conceptualization:** Architects are instrumental in displaying creativity in producing concepts related to land-use regulation and environmental considerations.
4. **Vision Realization:** Architects contribute to realizing the vision of well-designed urban areas through their designs.
5. **Ethical Upholding:** Architects safeguard the integrity of their profession and uphold ethical standards in the course of their responsibilities.

Several of these roles hold significant importance due to prevailing challenges:

1. **Proliferation of Quackery:** The infiltration of quasi-architects into the building industry, undertaking

projects for private developers and foreign investors, thereby replacing professional architects.

2. **Sub-standard Designs:** The submission of sub-standard building designs by individuals with knowledge of computer-aided drafting software, leading to the approval of non-functional designs in urban areas.
3. **Lack of Representation:** The absence of professional architects in development control offices, hindering efforts to address challenges posed by quackery and low-quality control.
4. **Status and Importance:** The diminishing status and importance of architects in the state due to the prevalence of sub-standard designs and the influence of non-professionals in the design and construction industry.

To address these challenges effectively, it is imperative to emphasize professionalism, quality control, and the elevated status of architects in the implementation of development control policies. In addition to their involvement in the design phase, architects also play integral roles in the inspectorate team, where they assess buildings against approved plans and contribute to the identification of buildings with historic architectural significance. This multifaceted involvement underscores the comprehensive contributions architects can make to the effective implementation of development control policies.

4.4. Extent of Architects' Inputs and Recommendations in the Granting of Building Permits

Presently, the contributions of architects within the Development Control Department (DCD) operations are not duly acknowledged. During the initial stages of the authority's development control operations, the presence of two architects was recognized, and their inputs held sway. These architects played a crucial role in vetting and recommending plans for approval. However, as the observation was made that the workload and diverse business activities hindered the prompt vetting of plans by these two architects, a gap emerged, prompting the authority to explore an alternative method for building plan approval.

This resulted in the adoption of a checklist and CV submission method, bypassing the direct involvement of architects in the vetting process. Under this approach, development control officers assess plans for the architect's stamp, CV, and practicing license, and subsequently make recommendations based on these criteria. The rationale behind this shift is the perceived expedited nature of the process. However, this workaround fails to address the root issue, as it introduces potential challenges.

The checklist method relies on a set of criteria such as the architect's stamp, CV, and practicing license. However, this system may inadvertently facilitate the approval of plans based on superficial criteria, potentially overlooking essential aspects such as the authenticity of practicing licenses or the registration status of architectural firms. In effect, this alternative approach may inadvertently create an environment conducive to the proliferation of quackery.

By bypassing the direct engagement or consultation of registered architects and opting for a checklist-based approval system, there is a risk of overlooking critical elements that only qualified architects can discern. The reliance on superficial markers, such as practicing licenses, may inadvertently allow for the operation of unqualified individuals who may present false credentials.

To address this challenge effectively, it is essential for the Development Control Department to reconsider its approach. Instead of relying solely on a checklist, a more comprehensive strategy could involve the employment or consultation of registered architects. This would not only uphold the standards of the architectural profession but also mitigate the risks associated with potential quackery. Balancing efficiency with accuracy is crucial in ensuring that building permits are granted with due diligence and in compliance with established professional standards.

5. Recommendations

Based on the identified challenges in the current approach to building permit approval within the Development Control Department (DCD), the following recommendations are proposed:

Increased Architect Representation

Advocate for the increased hiring or consultation of qualified architects within the Development Control Department. This would ensure a more thorough and professional assessment of building plans.

Collaborate with architectural associations and organizations to encourage the participation of registered architects in the building permit approval process.

Streamlined Vetting Process

Streamline the vetting process to address the delay observed due to the limited number of architects. This may involve reorganizing tasks or delegating responsibilities to enhance efficiency.

Implement technology solutions that facilitate a faster and more streamlined plan vetting process, reducing the burden on individual architects.

Enhanced Verification Procedures

Strengthen verification procedures for practicing licenses and company registrations to prevent the submission of false credentials. This may involve cross-referencing information with relevant licensing boards and business registries.

Training and Capacity Building

Provide ongoing training and capacity-building programs for development control officers to enhance their understanding of architectural principles, enabling them to make informed recommendations even in the absence of direct architect involvement.

Public Awareness Campaigns

Launch public awareness campaigns to educate developers, architects, and the general public about the importance of involving registered architects in the building permit approval process. This can help create a culture that values professional input.

Review and Update Policies

Regularly review and update existing policies related to building permit approval to adapt to evolving challenges and technological advancements. This ensures that the regulatory framework remains robust and effective.

Collaboration with Professional Bodies

Foster collaboration with professional architectural bodies to

establish a system of peer review or consultation, where registered architects not directly employed by the authority can contribute their expertise to the vetting process.

Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Implement rigorous quality assurance mechanisms within the DCD to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the building permit approval process. This may involve periodic audits, feedback loops, and continuous improvement initiatives.

Stakeholder Engagement

Engage with stakeholders, including architects, developers, and the public, to gather feedback on the current building permit approval process. This can inform adjustments and improvements to better meet the needs of all involved parties.

Regular Training and Professional Development for Architects

Encourage and facilitate ongoing training and professional development opportunities for architects to stay abreast of the latest industry standards, regulations, and technological advancements, ensuring their continued effectiveness in the building permit approval process.

Implementing these recommendations can contribute to a more efficient, transparent, and professionally sound building permit approval process within the Development Control Department.

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