

Rule change could bring life to old factories

'Industrial use' could be redefined to cover aquaculture and hydroponics

Activities such as fish farming and plant cultivation could be permitted in the city's old factory buildings, after the Planning Department recommended relaxing the definition of "industrial premises".

The idea was put forward in the department's latest land-use study, released yesterday. The study examined how the 27.85 million square metres of the city's 1,448 privately owned industrial buildings were being used.

Just 7.8 per cent of the space was devoted to actual manufacturing, while the largest proportion, 41.8 per cent, was used for storage and 24 per cent was used for offices. Offices in industrial buildings are allowed only if connected to legitimate industrial use.

Some 5.1 per cent of floor area was devoted to "other uses", not all of which are allowed in industrial buildings. That included shops, showrooms and data centres, as well as the new fields of aquaculture and hydroponics – or growing of plants in water, without soil.

"It is the first time we found hydroponics and aquaculture practised in industrial buildings. We didn't see these activities in our past surveys," a department spokeswoman said. The study, which did not determine whether a particular use was legal or not, was the fourth by the department since 1999.

"We will consider relaxing the restrictions over the use of industrial zones to accommodate other suitable uses ... Yet we still need more detailed studies ... We must ensure the new uses are compatible with other uses in the buildings, and that they comply with fire safety and other requirements," she explained.

She pointed to a Town Planning Board decision in April to allow art studio use as "industrial" in its zoning plan for Sha Tin – as long as artworks were not sold.

But the department has ruled out large-scale rezoning of industrial sites, given the anticipated growth in the logistics industry.

Vincent Ho Kui-yip, president of the Institute of Surveyors, supported expanding the definition

of industrial use, adding: "Some businesses have violated rules just because industrial uses are too narrowly defined." But he cautioned against allowing shops and commercial offices, even though many factories were used for such purposes illegally. Doing so would "defeat the purpose" of industrial zoning, he said.