



Construction of site-specific 45-storey blocks of HKHA public rental housing underway at Kai Tak Site 1a, Kowloon, in 2012; this view shows a prefabricated services unit (bathroom/kitchen) being winched up.
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The “Densification” of Modern Public Housing: Hong Kong and Singapore

BY MILES GLENDINNING

In the Asian mini-city-states of Hong Kong and Singapore, massive public housing programmes, far more extreme in density and height than their European and North American predecessors, have played an unexpectedly prominent role in development policy since the 1950s. This article explores some of the ways in which the original conventions of public housing were transformed and “densified” in these territories, and argues that the key influences in this process were not so much *avant-garde* modernist architectural discourses as the organisational mechanisms and political pressures within late British colonialism and decolonisation.

In its original heartlands — Europe, North America and the former USSR — public housing is widely seen as an obsolete 20th century legacy chiefly requiring management, dismantlement, or occasionally heritage protection. In built-form terms, this legacy has many common features, including a paradoxical combination of modernist multi-storey blocks with often rather spaced-out, low-density planning. But the picture is different in Eastern Asia, where there is currently a boom in new public housing construction, especially in fast-urbanising Mainland China. This follows a very different physical pattern, with serried ranks of tall blocks packed tightly together. The roots of this high-density pattern are to be found in two very special places — the mini-states and former British colonies of Hong Kong and Singapore, whose massive housing programmes stretch back over two generations. This article explores some of the ways in which the European conventions of public housing were transformed and “densified” in Hong Kong and Singapore — not so much through the medium of any kind of *avant-garde* modernist discourses as through the organisational mechanisms and political pressures within late British colonialism and decolonisation.

In the decades after 1945, these largely ethnic-Chinese port city-states both experienced significant geopolitical isolation, as “siege societies” facing grave demographic and political pressures, following the decline of British imperial power in Asia and the Communist revolution in China — which, in the case of Hong Kong, prompted successive floods of refugees from 1949 onwards. As such, they resembled some earlier “enclave” hotspots of high-density mass housing, such as “Red Vienna” or New York. And in both places, mass housing became a foundation of decolonisation, shifting from emergency expedients to settled long term “embedding” strategies and adapting relevant British precedents to those purposes.

What, however, were those precedents, and how relevant were they? Interwar and early post-war British public

housing was organised around the distinctive principle of “council housing”, directly built and owned by urban authorities, and thus subject to the intense pressures and fluctuations of local politics — although the 1940s onwards also saw a separate programme of “New Towns” overseen by professionals and civil servants. In built-form terms, where continental countries largely built mass housing on vast suburban sites — referred to by the French as *grands ensembles* — British council housing combined these with large-scale urban “slum redevelopment”. Architecturally, after 1945, some authorities, such as the London County Council, built up-to-date modernist housing featuring varied groups of high and low blocks in open space or, later, denser, “mega structural” patterns, but other places perpetuated more conservative patterns, such as low-rise tenements. Everywhere, though, the overall designed population density of new urban council housing was rather low, ranging from around 50 persons per acre (p.p.a.) in suburbs to a maximum of 200 p.p.a. in inner London.

In Hong Kong and Singapore, very different, denser patterns of modern public housing would prevail, but these, as we will see, were generated not by purely architectural discourses but by the extreme shortage of land and by other more complex political and cultural factors. Both were “societies of crisis”, and in neither case was there anything resembling the localised framework of “council housing”. British influences were imported via a more centralised process led by colonial administrators and professionals. They coordinated housing on a “city-state-national” rather than “local” basis — reflecting an overriding aim of social stabilisation. And paradoxically for these free-market bastions, their policies were motivated by political ideologies every bit as strong as in any Western welfare-state country. These ideologies, however, were differently framed in the two territories: aggressively “ideologically” in Singapore as part of the PAP’s master narrative, more “neutrally” in Hong Kong.

In both cases, the post-war era began with a low sense of identity and affiliation, combined with a loss of legitimacy of Britain's colonial rule following wartime Japanese occupation. In Singapore, moves towards self-rule began in the 50s, with devolved governments headed until 1959 by the moderate left-wing administrations of David Marshall and Lim Yew Hock, and after that by the increasingly authoritarian rule of Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party, or PAP, which eventually led the country to independence in 1965. The idiosyncrasy of the "semi-welfare-state" in Singapore was bound up with the ambiguous, shifting position of the PAP. It gained power in 1959 through communist-supported agitation against Lim's moderate left-wing rule, but then shifted rightwards to a combination of anti-communism with technocratic social planning. In Hong Kong, the political balance only reached a tipping point in the 70s. Here the reversion of most of the colony to China in 1997 meant there was no "independence option", so any reform would have to stem not from politicians but from an administrative elite. In the 1970s, after serious anti-government rioting in 1966–1967, the Hong Kong government set in train a series of radical interventions in the built environment, including centrally-directed planning and public housing.

As early as the late 1950s and 60s, the wider governmental framework in Hong Kong and Singapore had sharply diverged. Hong Kong pursued a slow, steady decolonisation but Singapore plunged abruptly into so-called "Malayanisation" in the late-1950s, which incapacitated the colony's longstanding housing-planning agency, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT). Yet at the level of specific policies, there was no question of Hong Kong adopting more "British" policies than Singapore. In the area of housing policy, both set up a unitary central authority, Singapore in 1959–60 and Hong Kong, eventually, in 1973. In planning strategy, both territories rather echoed British norms, adopting a dual formula of radical urban redevelopment and a planned population overspill to new towns. The way this strategy was implemented differed sharply, though. Singapore, with its authoritarian government and more favourable land supply, set about a British-style programme of dirigistic urban and new-town planning. This was combined with a drive for social home ownership — a policy relatively unknown in Britain — in a redistributive programme hailed by Lee Kuan Yew as a "Robin Hood adventure". Hong Kong, with its looser government and free-market economy, and its highly-constrained demographics and land-supply, followed a more sharply-fluctuating course in housing policy. In neither case, though, were the built forms of public housing very reminiscent of Britain, as both were entirely reliant on high-density, high-rise flats.

Both territories' housing policies featured prominent tensions, between emergency expedients and long-term strategies, and between social renting and home-ownership tenures. In the first case, Hong Kong saw a linear progression of policy, from emergency resettlement towards a long-term permanent housing strategy integrated with planning; while

Singapore fluctuated from strategic planning to emergency expedients and back again.

At the beginning of large-scale public housing in the 1950s, the two territories were at their most distant from each other in policy and architecture, with Singapore focusing on carefully-coordinated but low-output efforts, and Hong Kong emphasising a crash programme of emergency shelter for displaced squatters. By the late 1950s, Singapore had developed a long-term strategy of housing and planning, overseen by the Singapore Improvement Trust, whose overall production had reached 23,000 flats (10% of the total permanent housing stock) — a position unparalleled in any other European colonial territory. The SIT also developed a British-style master plan for the territory, including a network of new towns, commencing with Queenstown in 1953: its housing output combined terraced houses and modernist low-rise flats, with occasional tall blocks: the densities of these estates were hardly much higher than contemporary standards in London. By 1958, with full devolved self-rule impending the following year, political expectations were rising further, and the devolved Labour Front government, prodded by SIT chief J. M. Fraser, became convinced that a step-change in housing and planning administration was needed. Accordingly, in 1958–1959, Lim's government legislated to establish a "Housing and Development Board", tasked with boosting housing output still further and to oversee all housing and begin large-scale redevelopment of squatter settlements; for these Fraser designed slab-blocks of "emergency" one-room flats. This careful strategy, however, was swamped in the political upheavals of the late 1950s, especially the anti-colonialist rhetoric of Ong Eng Guan, the PAP's left-wing housing spokesman. On the PAP's election victory in 1959, Ong was appointed housing and planning minister, and purged all key expatriate officers from the SIT: Fraser promptly moved to Hong Kong to head the Housing Authority there (on which, see below). In the short term, because of this chaos Singapore's public housing drive, far from increasing in pace, seemed threatened with total collapse — but, as we will see, the position would soon change radically.

During the mid and late 1950s, owing to this political instability, it was not Singapore first unleashed a large-scale programme of public housing, but Hong Kong. And the pressures of overcrowding and refugee influx here led to very different solutions from Singapore's careful debates and modest designs. The years after 1945 had seen repeated efforts in Hong Kong to tackle the colony's problems of overcrowded, dilapidated housing by starting a Singapore-style programme of low-cost, self-contained flats. These included the founding of experimental housing societies and, in 1954, of a "Hong Kong Housing Authority" modelled on the SIT, but far smaller in scale. All these, however, were dramatically eclipsed by a far larger and more urgent programme, the "Resettlement" drive. This was chiefly motivated not by humanitarian concern about poor housing but by hard-headed anxiety over the way industrial development land was being sterilised by refugee squatter settlements, whose frequent fires caused massive dislocation across the colony.

01 “Mark 1” Resettlement block as built 1954 at Shek Kip Mei, Hong Kong: reconstruction model housed in Mei Ho House, the last surviving Mk. 1 block, converted after 2011 to a heritage centre and youth hostel.
© Miles Glendinning, 2014.



02 Queenstown Neighbourhood 2 (Duchess Estate), late 1950s low-rise blocks designed by the architectural staff of SIT: the flats in the background (blocks 45, 48, 49) were the first completed by the HDB, in 1960.
© Miles Glendinning, 2011.



03-04 Choi Hung Estate, Hong Kong, one of the largest of the low-income developments by the “original” HKHA: (a) 1963 commemorative plaque, and (b) general view of estate interior road. © Miles Glendinning, 2011.

Following a particularly destructive fire at Shek Kip Mei at Christmas 1953, existing low-key resettlement efforts using lightweight huts were pragmatically replaced by multi-storey slab blocks. These were built cheaply yet solidly in reinforced *in-situ* concrete, and were managed in a minimal manner, by a military-style “Resettlement Department” evolved out of the colonial Public Works Department. The early (“Mark 1”) 6 or 7 storey resettlement blocks were, in effect, ultra-high-density utilitarian tenements, housing up to nearly 4,000 persons per acre in back-to-back sub-serviced single rooms, arranged in “H” layouts with continuous external balconies: latrines and communal services were placed in the central links of the “H” blocks.

At first, during 1954, this was all merely an *ad-hoc* emergency expedient. But very soon the Resettlement programme became institutionalised as a rolling strategy for clearing development land of squatters, and annual output of these basic shelters was exceeding 10,000: the all-time

maximum was 23,000 in 1964. But even this could not keep pace with the waves of refugees, and squatter numbers had actually doubled by 1964. The Resettlement programme was also overtaken by wider social and political instability stemming from the colonial administration’s continuing failure to secure popular legitimacy. By the mid-1960s the Resettlement estates were permeated not only by triad-based crime but by communist agitation. Housing and architectural professionals were by now demanding a co-ordinated housing strategy, steered by a single unified government department and linked into a planned network of new towns in the New Territories. But the wider Hong Kong establishment consensus against long-term planning and public social spending still prevailed; only the 1967 riots would eventually shift the balance of expediency away from the *status quo*.

During these years, frustrated Hong Kong reformers — including J. M. Fraser — still often cited Singapore as a

beacon of enlightened planning and coordinated development. But by the later 1960s, most outside attention was being attracted to Singapore not by the past glories of the SIT but by the forceful output achievements of the new HDB, now under the control of Lee's fledgling PAP government. This achievement was impressive enough in reality, but it was hugely elaborated in hindsight by PAP propagandists into a nation-building foundation myth of orderly, controlled regeneration, complete with a cathartic equivalent to Shek Kip Mei, the Bukit Ho Swee fire of May 1961. In reality, the early years of the HDB were dominated by uncertainty and *ad-hoc* improvisation. Especially in the two years following the 1961 secession of its left-wing as the *Barisan Sosialis* (Socialist Front), the PAP administration was fighting a life-or-death struggle simply to survive — and housing was a key area within its devolved powers, where it could stage highly visible actions to win public support. In 1960, highlighting the PAP's transformation from "poacher" to "gamekeeper", Lee had begun to split decisively from the PAP left wing over the direction of the new HDB, ostracising Ong and appointing businessman Lim Kim San as first head of the Board. Pragmatically, Lim Kim San perpetuated most of the SIT's policies and practices — although for propaganda purposes the Trust was henceforth caricatured as an ineffective anachronism and the HDB as a PAP — devised corrective. The real contribution of the PAP was not in policy innovation but in a massively bolstered implementation of *existing* practices.

Under Lim's regime, the HDB unleashed a no-holds-barred drive for maximum output. Its new chief architect, Teh Cheang Wan, mass-reproduced the SIT's new range of "emergency" one-room flats in modernist slab blocks (mostly of between 9 and 13 storeys, and arranged in parallel *Zeilenbau* patterns), and completed 54,000 dwellings over five years. During the mid 1960s, the HDB appropriated and forcefully expanded a number of other SIT policies. The "Master Plan" programme of British-style new-town construction was transformed into a national development strategy (the "Concept Plan", 1967), with Toa Payoh the first of the next generation of New Towns commenced, in 1965. Another, more tentative 1950s SIT policy experiment — the building of government-sponsored homeownership flats — inspired what would ultimately become the PAP's central housing strategy. Initiated in 1964 largely by accident, as part of an attempt to lower ethnic tensions during the brief Malaysia union, the HDB's "Home Ownership for the People" scheme began with a group of 16-storey *Zeilenbau* slab blocks in Queenstown (area 3). The scheme made little progress until it was decided to link it up with another vastly expanded pre-PAP policy, by allowing people to buy HDB flats with their savings in the "Central Provident Fund" — a compulsory pension's scheme introduced in 1955. Thereafter the Home Ownership scheme grew so rapidly that it replaced mainstream rental housing almost completely, and by 1987, 85% of Singaporeans were housed in 585,000 home-ownership HDB flats. Of course, the state promotion of mass "social homeownership" as a means of "embedding" an unstable populace was hardly a

unique discovery of Singapore's; what was unique was the close interrelationship of social homeownership and high density, high-rise blocks.

In Singapore, the 1970s was a time of consolidation — but in Hong Kong, the position was very different. Under a new, reformist Governor (1971–1982), Sir Murray MacLehose, the colony witnessed a veritable housing revolution, which swallowed up the old, fragmented, utilitarian programme and transformed it into something not unlike Singapore's comprehensive strategy — while protecting the essentials of Hong Kong's *laissez-faire* world-outlook. This included a unified housing administration, permanent self-contained dwellings, new towns and a home ownership scheme. The 1967 riots had triggered a crisis of political legitimacy and challenged the old Hong Kong distrust of excessive "big government". MacLehose launched a vastly enhanced "ten-year" housing programme, and in 1973 set up a new, unitary Housing Authority (based on the structure of the old, smaller-scale Authority) to run it. The 10-year strategy began by increasing production of rental housing, both in new towns and in redevelopment of resettlement estates, but the 1973–1975 global recession intervened almost immediately. To counterbalance rental production cuts, MacLehose in 1976 instituted a social Home Ownership Scheme designed to enlist lower-middle income families in the housing drive. Although the HOS's short-term aim was to boost output, and the scheme lacked the high-octane fuelling provided by the CPF, MacLehose's longer-term strategy was the same as Lee's in Singapore — to stabilise society and foster community belonging; indeed, the two city-state chiefs met periodically to "compare notes". In contrast to Singapore, the Hong Kong housing apparatus was decolonised quietly and steadily, over the following decades. Expatriate British staff members dominated technical and administrative fields until the early 1990s, but Chinese professionals steadily took over, led by the Housing Authority's post-1960s head, the architect Donald Liao — achieving the same result as in Singapore but without conflict.

Although Castells argued that both Hong Kong and Singapore's "housing policies were right in line with the Anglo-Saxon town planning tradition of creating social harmony through the manipulation of space", in architectural terms the two programmes could hardly have differed more from the fragmented British "precedent" of council housing. In both Hong Kong and Singapore, higher density and taller blocks were accepted as necessary from the 1950s onwards, whether in new towns or in redevelopments of existing urban areas. Soon, however, the architectural forms of the two programmes diverged sharply. Their contrasting built-forms were determined largely by topography — flat Singapore and mountainous Hong Kong — although the latter's land shortage was exacerbated further by the reserving of Hong Kong's "best" housing sites for private developers, which meant most public housing sites needed massive, costly formation works. In Singapore, the basic unit of planning was the individual flat-type, and the HDB's architects laid out housing estates in a distinctly

05 Bukit Ho Swee area 1, Singapore, post-1961 HDB redevelopment and (nowadays) PAP stronghold: 2011 National Day display, with Lee Kuan Yew at centre. © Miles Glendinning, 2011.



06 Toa Payoh New Town, Singapore, surviving HDB slab blocks from the first phase of development after 1965. The panoramic view is taken from the top floor of Block 53, a 19-storey Y-plan block whose roof terrace was used for many VIP visits (including that of Queen Elizabeth in 1972). © Miles Glendinning, 2011.



07-08 HDB precinct developments at Jurong/Jurong East New Towns, Singapore: (a) living room interior in Block 328, Jurong East Avenue 1, completed 1984; (b) external view of Jurong West Street 81, completed 1995, showing postmodern architecture and landscaping. © Miles Glendinning, 2012.

site-specific manner. Singapore's comparatively good land supply allowed the HDB to build exclusively self-contained flats from the beginning, with nothing remotely like Mk 1 Resettlement! Although at first, as we saw above, the spaced-out parallel slabs designed by Fraser's staff in the final years of the SIT were simply reproduced in great numbers, by the 1970s, Singapore's new towns, now set out on the ring layout of the Concept Plan, were moving towards a denser planning and architectural formula: 11-13 storey blocks, with taller landmark towers, all tightly arranged in enclosed groupings, or "precincts" of up to 1,000 flats, to exclude the intense tropical sunlight, while maximising access and ventilation permeability of the blocks. Singapore continued to favour balcony access and open ground floors (officially called "void decks"). All this housing design work was seen in social-engineering terms by the PAP as a setting for inter-ethnic community-building: from the 1980s, the HDB pursuit of neighbourhood "identity"

became increasingly bound up with the use of flamboyant postmodernist decoration.

In Hong Kong, the dominance of small dwellings survived the MacLehose era's transition from Resettlement basic-shelter blocks to permanent, self-contained flats. But just as in Singapore, the benchmark of "smallness" was also shifting in Hong Kong: by the mid 70s, flats of one room, kitchenette and toilet were now the smallest new dwellings. The MacLehose era also perpetuated the Hong Kong "British" tradition of standard block types, linking this to a very different kind of estate layout to the linear blocks and dense, low precinct layouts of Singapore — emphasising separate, very tall towers and slabs, both in new towns and in redevelopments of Resettlement estates and other early public housing. Starting off with idiosyncratic but economical "twin tower" and "H" plan blocks designed by Liao's staff in the 60s and 70s, Housing Authority designs became progressively taller, higher

09 Wah Fu Estate, Hong Kong: "twin tower" blocks designed by Donald Liao and his staff in 1965 and built by the "old" HKHA in the late 1960s and early 70s on this dramatic sea-panorama site. This view shows part of the Wah Fu (II) estate, opened between 1970 and 1978. © Miles Glendinning, 2014.



10 Siu Hong Court, Tuen Mun New Town, Hong Kong, 1981-1985: one of the HKHA's largest Home Ownership Scheme developments. The standard HOS towers were designed by architects of the Housing Department Construction Branch, and the project was opened in 1985 by Chief Secretary Sir Philip Haddon-Cave. © Miles Glendinning, 2012.



11 Construction of site-specific 45-storey blocks of HKHA public rental housing underway at Kai Tak Site 1a, Kowloon, in 2012: this view shows a prefabricated services unit (bathroom/kitchen) being winched up. © Miles Glendinning, 2012.



12 Tuen Mun Area 44 (Siu Hei Court), Hong Kong, a Home Ownership development of 35-storey standard "New HOS" towers approved 1983 by the HKHA Building Committee at a density of 5.826 persons per hectare. © Miles Glendinning, 2013.

and slimmer. The Home Ownership Scheme pioneered the drive for tall, compact towers, with floor-plans that involved fewer and larger flats on each floor, minimising long, dark internal corridors — with architectural results that curiously echoed the British 1950s–60s fascination for slim “point blocks”. Public rental housing followed in the wake of this trend towards larger flats and taller blocks, at first through the 35-storey, three-winged “Trident” blocks of 1982 onwards, but from 1988 moving towards compact cruciform plans, in the form of the “Harmony” series: 41-storey towers that could accommodate up to 20 well-ventilated small flats on each floor. Both Trident and Harmony incorporated modular flat plans to allow varying plan-permutations around central lift/stair cores, and permit both rental and HOS use, but the 1980s–90s also saw a succession of slimmer, HOS-only tower types, including the “New HOS”, “Windmill”, “Flexiblock”, “New Cruciform” and “Concord”. The architectural pattern established after 1988 proved enduring: although 2005 saw a move from standard types towards Singapore-style “site-specific blocks”, responding to pressure from local architects, their component elements still recognisably derive from the now 25-year-old “Harmony”.

In density terms, Hong Kong’s evolving public-housing drive also stayed well above any European norms, or for that matter the levels in Singapore, but far below the extraordinary notional densities in new private housing (up to 7.400 ppa, or 18.300 pph) permitted under the 1955 Buildings Ordinance. After 1973, Liao’s Housing Authority staff succeeded in pushing down the net design density target for new public rental estates from 1.500 to 1.000 ppa (3.700 and 2.500 pph). However, these figures rose slightly again (up to 3.000 pph) with the move to the 35-storey Tridents. HOS projects, often built on small infill sites with smaller-scale school and community provision, were a different matter, and could yield very high net densities. In two estates approved by the HKHA Building Committee in late 1982/early 1983, for example — Diamond Hill HO27 (Lung Poon Court) and Tuen Mun Area 44 (Siu Hei Court) — the packing of small sites with arrays of 35-storey standard “New HOS” towers allowed net densities, respectively, of 1.548 and 2.358 ppa (3.824 and 5.826 pph) — up to 11 times higher than the maximum permitted density for 1960s/70s inner-London tower-block developments such as World’s End, Chelsea.

What, finally, of the present — and the future? Coupled with significant commercial and social facilities close at hand, intensive management and continuing high levels of housing demand, the high-density public housing programmes in both Hong Kong and Singapore have diverged significantly from the European stereotype of “failure” or “residualisation” — a pattern that still continues today. To be sure, in increasingly democratic Hong Kong, there have been some conflicts, especially in the wake of a crash building drive initiated in the mid-1990s by the last governor, Chris Patten, whose consequences included the post-1997 emergence of political bidding wars over housing output, and a 10-year suspension of

the HOS following a 2001 crisis over defective piling work (and the demolition of two brand-new 41-storey Concord towers at Sha Tin). In Singapore, conversely, the genuine achievements of HDB housing have often been difficult to disentangle from the propaganda of the PAP’s “Singapore Story”. But in neither territory has state housing been generally stigmatised — doubtless not least because of the close links between mass housing and continuing economic growth in both cases.

The longevity of both programmes has also allowed them to become a unique “bridge” between the mass housing traditions of “Old West” and “New East”, because today the mass housing tradition in Eastern Asia is dramatically booming, especially in mainland China. There Bo Xilai’s redoubt of Chongqing and many other cities in its wake have in the past 3–4 years launched huge public housing programmes as a means to counteract the country’s huge demographic pressures. Built in a frenetic hurry, including arrays of towers similar in scale to Hong Kong public housing of the 70s and 80s, these seem potentially quite vulnerable to the same problems of sudden, catastrophic obsolescence as the 1945–75 *trente glorieuses* in the West. In which case, might the lessons of Hong Kong and Singapore’s meticulous, multi-generational programmes help Mainland China avoid the fate of mass-housing “failure”? ■

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- This article also makes extensive use of the government file records of the Hong Kong Public Records Office and the National Archives of Singapore, for which see the following general links:
http://www.grs.gov.hk/ws/english/ps_online_cata_ar.htm#record
http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/

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