

# **Memories of Home – 50 Years of Public Housing in Hong Kong**

## **Preface**

Public housing in Hong Kong enjoys a history that now dates back 50 years. With over 3 million people living on public housing estates today, there is almost always someone around us, perhaps even you or I, who is or has been a public housing resident and who still has vivid recollections of going to public bathrooms with their own bucket, of patronizing itinerant hawkers in the estate's open spaces and of playing and chasing each other through the long corridors. Life on Hong Kong's public housing estates has already become a part of our collective memory.

With the aim of revisiting life on Hong Kong's public housing estates over the past five decades, this exhibition reviews their development through historical pictures, daily items used by residents, reconstructed scenes of resettlement blocks and extracts from interviews with residents who have lived in public housing blocks in different eras. The exhibition also includes an introduction to the changes that have been made to the design of public housing in recent years to make it more "people-oriented".

We are grateful to a large number of people who have either donated valuable items, provided information or shared their past experience in interviews with us. To many people in Hong Kong, this exhibition gallery covering several hundred square metres will bring back treasured memories and personal recollections of events that span half a century of Hong Kong's history.

## **Part I Squatters Everywhere**

### **The Early Days**

The development of housing in Hong Kong has always been limited by its hilly topography. In its early years as a trading port, Hong Kong's housing developments were concentrated along the coastline on both sides of Victoria Harbour. The continuous influx of immigrants led to an upsurge in demand for housing, giving rise to the emergence of tenement buildings, into which many households were crammed.

A further influx of 750,000 refugees in the four years following the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 worsened the already severe housing problem. Those living in the crowded tenement buildings had to pay high rents just for a bed space. And those who could not afford these had to shelter in simple and crude squatter huts built on rooftops or hillsides. Between 1947 and 1949, hundreds of thousands more people sought refuge in Hong Kong from the civil war on the Chinese mainland, swelling its population to 2 million. All the existing accommodation was packed, and yet more people swarmed into the sprawling squatter areas on the hills. It was estimated that 300,000 people lived in squatter huts scattered across the hills of Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon peninsula.

### **Raging Flames**

While squatter huts gave people a temporary solution to their housing problem, they had to face the risks to their lives and property that existed there.

Squatter huts were usually built of wood and thin metal sheets. Most of their residents used primitive stoves and fuel such as twigs, branches, cardboard and kerosene for cooking; and oil or kerosene lamps for lighting. These, coupled with the crowded environment and narrow passages in the squatter areas, caused fires to spread rapidly once they started. So, squatter residents lived in a state of constant anxiety.

The fire that swept the Shek Kip Mei squatter area on Christmas Day 1953 raged for six hours and made 53 000 people homeless overnight. It prompted the Government to get directly involved in providing housing.

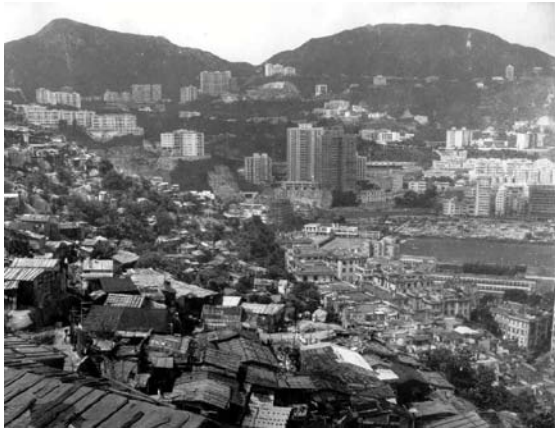
### **Barely Sheltered**

After the big fire in Shek Kip Mei, some victims moved to tenement buildings or sought temporary accommodation with their relatives and friends. However, more than 20 000 people had nowhere to go. They put up sheds on the streets as transitory shelters. The Government distributed relief money and household necessities, such as rice, bowls, dishes and blankets, to the victims. The Government spent up to \$50,000 a day on such emergency relief.

### **Swift Action**

The Government directed the Public Works Department to construct shelter homes immediately to rehouse the victims. The Urban Council was also asked to set up an emergency committee to explore long-term and methodical solutions to the squatter problem in the territory.

In February 1954, just two months after the fire, the Public Works Department completed the first two-storey bungalow housing to rehouse the fire victims near the scene of the fire in Shek Kip Mei. These were known as “Bowring Bungalows”, after the then Director of Public Works.



Squatter huts built on hillsides

1950s

1997.212.7



Shek Kip Mei fire victims

1953

1995.57.53



Fire victims searching the devastated ruins of their homes after the fire

1953

1999.57.52



Fire victims residing on the street

1953

1999.57.58

## **Part II Life in Resettlement Estates**

### **Resettlement Plan**

In April 1954, the Urban Council's emergency committee submitted a report recommending that the Government set up a fund for the construction of multi-storey resettlement buildings to accommodate victims of natural disasters, and squatter residents affected by clearance exercises. The Resettlement Department was set up to construct and manage this effort. In the same year, eight Mark I blocks were completed at the scene of the fire in Shek Kip Mei. Those fire victims originally accommodated in Bowring Bungalows were gradually rehoused in new flats in these blocks. In early August 1955, a Han tomb was found when workers were levelling a hill slope to make way for the former Lei Cheng Uk Resettlement Estate.

As the resettlement blocks were built to accommodate an enormous number of people within the shortest possible time, they provided only primitive facilities. Mark I blocks consisted of six to seven storeys. Most were in the shape of the letter "H", while others were in the shape of the letter "I". The flats were arranged back-to-back, with access via a corridor. To improve ventilation, openings were made in the partition walls at the rear of each flat. There was no electricity or running water in them. Water standpipes, communal latrines and bathrooms were provided in the cross bars of the H blocks. Most flats had a floor area of 11.15 square metres to accommodate five adults, which meant that each adult occupied an average of just 2.23 square metres. Between 1954 and 1964, the Government constructed more than 140 Mark I blocks on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon.

### **Low-cost Housing**

In addition to building low-cost resettlement blocks under its resettlement policy to accommodate squatter residents after the Shek Kip Mei fire, the Government subsidized the Hong Kong Housing Society, a voluntary organization, to develop rental estates. Meanwhile, the semi-independent Hong Kong Housing Authority (hereafter referred to as "the former Housing Authority") was set up in 1954 to develop low-cost housing that provided a better living environment. Unlike the Resettlement Department, the former Housing Authority was not established to provide an immediate solution to the risks posed by squatter huts. Instead, it was tasked to implement longer-term measures to improve the living environment of middle and

low-income citizens who lived in overcrowded conditions.

The former Housing Authority produced housing blocks with better facilities than the resettlement blocks. It provided self-contained flats with kitchens, bathrooms and balcony facilities. Moreover, its developments were better planned and managed. However, owing to limited resources, the former Housing Authority was able to supply far less low-cost housing than the Resettlement Department.

### **Mark II Blocks**

Following the hasty construction of the first batch of resettlement housing in 1954, the Government made ongoing efforts to improve the design and facilities of the blocks.

The first Mark II blocks were built in Tung Tau Tsuen in early 1961. They were seven or eight-storey buildings, and they looked different from the Mark I blocks. Their unique features were four flats – each of 28.8 square metres and with a kitchen, water taps and a balcony – located on each floor at the ends of the two “arms”. These were intended to accommodate indigenous land-owning villagers whose buildings had been demolished for development. The residents of the other flats still relied on water standpipes, communal bathrooms and flush latrines located in the central corridor. End staircases were also added to the blocks. In this way, their courtyards were enclosed, giving the building the shape of the Chinese character “日”(sun).

### **White Paper on Public Housing Policy**

The Government introduced the resettlement programme in the early 1950s. By 10 years later the number of people living in resettlement estates totalled 500,000, but more than 600,000 people still lived in squatter huts. The Government realized the resettlement programme alone could not solve the squatter problem. On the other hand, people had begun receiving steady incomes as Hong Kong’s industries developed rapidly, and they demanded higher living standards. Therefore, in 1964, the Government released its white paper, “Review of Policies for Squatter Control, Resettlement and Government Low-cost Housing”. It decided that:

- The construction of resettlement and low-cost housing would be accelerated. In order to meet the huge demand for housing, large-scale resettlement estates would

be developed and taller buildings would be built;

- More concern would be given to residents' personal living space and facilities in the design of estates. Each flat would have a private balcony, water taps and a bathroom;
- The eligibility criteria for admission to resettlement blocks would be relaxed, with priority given to former tenants of dangerous domestic buildings or buildings scheduled to be demolished for urban redevelopment; and
- Homeless people would be allowed to build temporary shelters in certain designated areas (which led to the development of temporary housing).

### **Mark III Blocks**

The Government continued to improve the design of public housing. Kwai Chung Estate, which was completed in early 1964, was the first to consist of Mark III blocks. The buildings were eight storeys high. Their distinctive feature was that flats were built on both sides of the central corridor that gave access to them. Each flat was provided with a private balcony, although households of two or three families still had to share lavatories located in the middle or at the end of the building. Initially, water taps were not provided in the flats. However, most had water taps installed inside them a few years after they had been built.



### **Mark IV, V and VI Blocks**

The White Paper, “Review of Policies for Squatter Control, Resettlement and Government Low-cost Housing”, issued in 1964 had a significant influence on the design of public housing and its facilities. This was reflected in the Mark IV blocks constructed between 1965 and 1969. They were generally 16 storeys high and had lifts. The flat sizes were similar to the Mark III blocks. The difference was that they were the first resettlement block flats to have private lavatories, which were located on the balcony of each flat.

Mark V blocks were built between 1966 and 1971. They were not significantly different in design from Mark IV blocks, although they had a greater variety of room sizes, to suit families of different sizes.

The first batch of Mark VI blocks was constructed in 1970. They generally had 16 storeys. Compared with the Mark I to Mark V blocks, Mark VI blocks gave more space to residents, an increase from 2.23 square metres to 3.25 square metres for each adult. Thus, residents enjoyed a more spacious living environment.

### **Twin Tower Blocks**

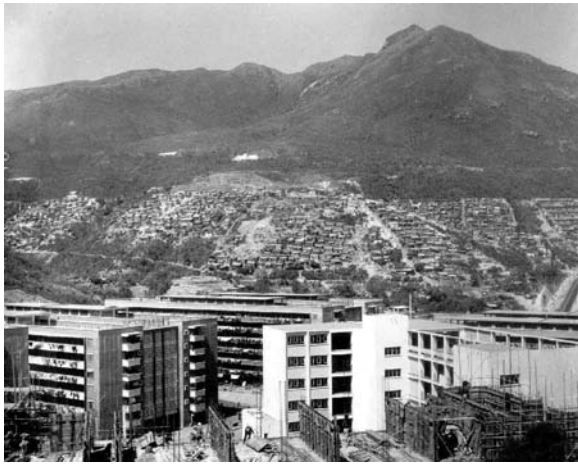
Twin Tower blocks were built in the 1970s in estates such as Oi Man and Wah Fu. The estates were also equipped with commercial facilities and improved standards. Each estate had its own shopping mall. The flat sizes in these 20 to 23-storey blocks ranged from 36 to 46 square metres.



Shek Kip Mei Resettlement Estate under construction

1960

1997.212.13



Upper Wong Tai Sin Estate under construction

1962

1997.212.14



North Point Estate, the first low-cost housing estate built by the Hong Kong Housing Authority

1960s

2005.49.42

## **Part III Homes for a Million**

### **The Ten-year Plan**

Large-scale riots erupted in Hong Kong during the mid- and late-1960s. The overcrowded environment in resettlement estates was thought to be one of the causes of this social unrest.

In 1971, Sir Murray MacLehose assumed the governorship of Hong Kong. He was particularly concerned about the housing problem. In 1972, the Government announced the biggest ever Ten-year Housing Programme for the development of public housing. This had a far-reaching effect on public housing development. It also accelerated the development of new towns and their infrastructure, as well as ancillary facilities.

The key points of the Ten-year Housing Programme were:

- Flats with a complete range of facilities and a decent living environment would be provided for 1.8 million Hong Kong citizens between 1973 and 1982;
- The existing housing organizations were re-structured in 1973. The new Hong Kong Housing Authority was established to co-ordinate various programmes, and the Resettlement Department and Housing Division of the Urban Services Department were amalgamated into the Housing Department as the executive arm of the new Housing Authority. The Urban Council was not responsible for construction and management of low-cost housing at that time;
- The problems of illegal hawkers in estates would be resolved through the clearance and redevelopment of old resettlement blocks. Estate management would also be improved to enhance the quality of public housing and relieve overcrowded conditions; and
- The need for the Government to seek sites outside the urban area for the construction of public housing led to the development of new towns.

### **Reorganization**

To implement the Ten-year Housing Programme effectively, the Government announced the reorganization of existing public housing bodies, and the establishment of the new Hong Kong Housing Authority in 1973. The responsibilities of the new

Housing Authority were to:

- Manage all the existing public housing estates and conduct the future development of public housing estates;
- Control and prevent squatting activities, and clear land for housing development; and
- Advise the Governor on housing policies and related matters.

### **Redevelopment Programme**

As early as the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Resettlement Department had begun conversion work on some Mark I and Mark II resettlement blocks. For example, two back-to-back flats were joined to form one, and independent kitchens and bathroom facilities were added. However, the project turned out to be rather uneconomical. After the new Housing Authority was established, it was decided that, instead of undertaking conversion works in them, the old resettlement blocks should be redeveloped. Over 18 years, the Housing Authority redeveloped 12 old resettlement estates. Illegal hawker stalls in other estates were also cleared, to improve environmental hygiene and living conditions.

### **Community Planning**

Due to the growing population and shortage of land available for development in urban and suburban areas, the Government had to find suitable sites for constructing of public housing estates in remote areas. However, the concept of town planning had to be incorporated into their design, to cater for the everyday social and recreational needs of residents, in addition to satisfying their housing needs. Completed in March 1971, Wah Fu Estate was the first to incorporate this concept. It was a self-contained community providing various essential services, such as shops, car parks and a bus terminus, as well as community and recreational facilities. The development model of Wah Fu Estate laid the foundations for the future development of new towns.

## **New Town Development**

Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin and Tuen Mun were the first three areas chosen for the development of new towns as elements of the Ten-year Housing Programme. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, public housing estates like the Fuk Loi, Lek Yuen, Wo Che, Tai Hing and Yau Oi estates were completed in these new towns, and more and more residents moved in.

In the 1980s, Tai Po, Yuen Long, Fanling and Sheung Shui successively became second-generation new towns. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Government developed three more new towns, Tin Shui Wai, Tseung Kwan O and Tung Chung. Although the designed populations for these new towns were smaller than those developed in the earlier stages, the populations of their estates were still very high. Overall, the development of new towns has significantly influenced the distribution of Hong Kong's population. Traditionally, the population was concentrated in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New Kowloon. It has since been effectively dispersed to districts throughout the New Territories. The construction of public housing estates has played a leading role in promoting the development of new towns.

## **Commercial Development**

Shops on the ground floors of resettlement blocks were the only commercial facilities provided in the estates developed during the early years. There was no specific design or management arrangement for these shops. Their major function was to satisfy the basic shopping needs of residents. After the announcement of the Ten-year Housing Programme, the Housing Authority introduced the concept of comprehensive community development. Under this, more shops were provided for different types of businesses in estate shopping centres. Moreover, particular attention was paid to the management of shopping centres, and commercial principles were emphasized to provide residents with a better environment in which to enjoy their daily shopping.

## **Home Ownership Scheme**

In the early stage of its implementation, the Ten-year Housing Programme only aimed to provide public rental housing (PRH) of a higher quality for needy people. With Hong Kong's rapid economic growth, many people began to earn a stable income and

accumulate savings. In response to this, in 1976 the Governor appointed a Working Party chaired by the Financial Secretary to investigate the planning and implementation of a Home Ownership Scheme (HOS). This would help residents buy their own flats, so as to help them improve their living conditions. The Housing Authority acted as the Government's agent in designing, developing, marketing and managing the flats. There were two principles for selecting sites for the construction of HOS buildings. First, the HOS buildings had to be near existing public housing estates, so that residents could continue with their lifestyle and remain in a familiar environment. Second, HOS buildings had to align with new town development, so that a wider variety of residents could be attracted to live in the new towns.

From the sale of the first batch of HOS flats in 1978, the HOS was well received by the public. Almost all the sale exercises were oversubscribed. In more recent years, as property prices fell drastically, HOS flats apparently lost their attractiveness. By the time the Government announced the indefinite cessation of the sale and production of HOS flats from 2003 onwards, they had accomplished their mission in the history of public housing in Hong Kong.



Homes for a Million

1998

1999.79.11

## **Part IV Reforms in Management**

### **Management in Early Years**

Initially, the Resettlement Department and former Hong Kong Housing Authority managed public housing in Hong Kong. The former was responsible for managing resettlement estates, while the latter managed low-cost housing.

#### **Management of Resettlement Estates**

In the 1950s, resettlement estates were built to rehouse squatter residents affected by disasters. There was no long-term planning, let alone effective management systems. There were no professional or specific guidelines for the management staff of resettlement estates to follow either. In fact, residents rarely had the chance to meet management staff. In the 1960s, although the door-to-door rent collection service had become part of its daily operation, and a more stringent management system was developed, there was still a large gap between the management and residents. Their interaction was mostly limited to warnings given to residents about unauthorized decoration works.

#### **Management of Low-cost Housing**

On the other hand, low-cost housing under the former Housing Authority was managed more professionally. Right from the start, the former Housing Authority employed people with professional knowledge of housing management to lead its estate management work. It also arranged training for staff to obtain professional qualifications in housing management. Furthermore, it advocated the need to establish harmonious relationships between management and residents. The management philosophy of the former Housing Authority, which was based on professional housing management and orientated to serving residents in estates, laid the foundation of the subsequent professionalization of public housing management.



## **A New Scene**

### **Towards Professionalism**

After the Ten-year Housing Programme was implemented, significant changes took place in the management of public housing. Before the establishment of the new Housing Authority in 1973, owing to the high density of population and lack of proper management, various problems relating to public order, hawking activities and environmental hygiene arose in resettlement estates. After the new Housing Authority was established, the Resettlement Department and former Housing Authority were amalgamated into the Housing Department, which served as the new Housing Authority's executive arm. Based on the housing management experience and direction of the former Housing Authority, the new Housing Authority started to provide services to residents in a more systematic and professional manner.

### **Residents' Participation**

In the 1970s, public housing residents took the initiative to join hands and establish a large number of mutual-aid committees to help maintain public order in estates and take up the role of liaising and enhancing mutual communication among residents. When the Government launched campaigns such as the "Keep Hong Kong Clean", "Fight Crime" and "Anti-Corruption" drives, mutual-aid committees mobilized residents to give their support. Residents also put forward their opinions about estate management through mutual-aid committees. The establishment and operation of mutual-aid committees nurtured and trained a group of enthusiastic and outspoken residents who were quick to undertake responsibilities and courageous in committing themselves. However, there was no direct organizational relationship between these committees and the Housing Department. Whether the management staff took the residents' opinions seriously varied from case to case.

## **Quality Management**

### **Enhanced Communication**

The age of democracy began in Hong Kong in the 1980s. Meanwhile, residents were very concerned about fundamental housing policies, and even the management and maintenance problems in estates. This prompted the Housing Authority to take the

initiative to enhance communication and exchange views with concern groups and residents whenever new policies were introduced. This gave rise to a new estate management concept: that of letting residents participate in estate management affairs.

### Joining Hands

In the 1990s, the Housing Authority introduced the concept of privatization of estate management and maintenance services. Moreover, the new Estate Management Advisory Committee (EMAC) Scheme enabled residents' representatives to participate formally in discussions about management as well as maintenance and improvement works in estates. EMACs also helped to assess the performance of contractors serving the estates, and monitor the quality of their services. Through EMACs, residents could play a practical role in improving the living environment and quality of estate management, so that these could better meet their needs and demands.

## **Part V Advancement in Construction and Design**

### **People-orientation**

Regarding the general public as its target customers, public housing has all along aimed to cater for the needs of the able-bodied. Public housing specially designed for the elderly first appeared in the early 1990s. In view of Hong Kong's ageing population, the Hong Kong Housing Authority has adopted the concept of "Universal Design" in its public housing in recent years. "Universal Design" means designing public housing environments and facilities that address the needs of residents at every stage of their lives. This is accomplished in two ways; through the interior design of the flats and the overall planning of estates. In the interior designs, the height of door thresholds and the design and locations of light switches and electrical sockets are carefully arranged to cater for the needs of different groups of people. In the overall planning of estates, a barrier-free design is adopted to make the estate easily accessible for the mobility-impaired. Such people-oriented design provides a more comfortable and convenient public housing living environment for residents with different needs.

### **Space, Light and Ventilation**

In the early days, the living space for public housing residents was limited, with an average area of only 2.23 square metres per person. With the people's rising aspirations for a better quality of life, space allocations have been raised. Moreover, the ventilation system and daylight penetration inside the flats have also been improved. In the 1960s, most public housing flats that adopted a single-room design were narrow and long in shape. As daylight could enter the flat only via the windows of the balcony, the entire room was relatively dim and poorly ventilated. In hot summers, residents often slept on canvas beds in the corridors to get fresh air. From the 1980s onwards, a multi-room design was widely adopted for trident blocks. There were separate windows in the living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens of the flats, to allow sufficient penetration of daylight and the free flow of air. The residents' living conditions thus improved greatly. From then on, the sight of dozens of canvas beds in the corridors of public housing disappeared.

Period	Average Area of Flat (m <sup>2</sup> )	Average Living Space Per Person (m <sup>2</sup> )
1950s-1960s	11.5	2.23
1970s	36-44	3.25
1980s	28-55	4.25

1990s to date	17-52	7-10
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### **Composite Design**

As construction techniques advanced, the height of buildings kept rising. By the 1980s, buildings were already as tall as 35 storeys. To public housing residents living in densely populated multi-storey buildings, public space was essential. Covered walkways, pools, gardens, children’s playgrounds and semi-open cooked food centres developed during this period, becoming the basic facilities for new estates and forming the standard for the designs of future ones. In the 1990s, after their design became more standardized, the focus of planning and design in public housing estates shifted to commercial complexes, which included covered markets, shopping centres and a series of community service centres, thus creating more comprehensive facilities for them.

### **Harmony Blocks**

With the public’s growing environmental awareness, the Housing Authority began introducing environmental concepts into public housing design. The development of Harmony Blocks in the 1990s was a significant breakthrough. The extensive use of prefabricated building components and steelworks – such as timber doors and frames, stainless steel cooking benches and sinks, precast concrete facade panels, precast concrete staircases, lightweight concrete drywall panel partitions and metal security gates for harmony blocks – placed less reliance on wet trades in construction sites. This not only saved cost and time in construction, it also saved resources and reduced construction waste effectively, thus paving the way for the development of sustainable and environmentally friendly designs in the future.

Another merit of Harmony Blocks was that their residents were allowed to put partitions in their flats to suit their own needs. Windows were installed in every room, to allow daylight and air to enter. The long corridors in public housing, which had long been criticized, were shortened to a minimum, according to appropriate scales.

### **Sustainable Development**

The concept of sustainable development has been introduced into the planning of

public housing in recent years. It is hoped the adoption of environmentally friendly designs and building materials, as well as the improvement in living space and indoor lighting and air-conditioning, will create a more healthy and comfortable living environment for residents. As architectural design may affect the airflow inside buildings, and the ventilation and degree of sunlight in flats, the Housing Authority will carry out microclimate studies on new projects to explore the influence of different building designs and layouts on the unique climate (such as wind direction and daylight) of their respective sites. The Housing Authority is committed to improving the natural ventilation, daylight, solar penetration and energy efficiency of flats and public areas, to enhance the quality of the overall living environment, and reduce the expenditure of residents on energy.