A Place to Live
More Effective
Low-Cost Housing
in Asia
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A PLACE TO LIVE: More Effective Low-Cost Housing in Asia

Editor: Y.M. Yeung
Résumé

Dans un climat d'urbanisation rapide et de pauvreté générale, le problème du logement des populations pauvres constitue un défi pour la plupart des gouvernements de l'Asie. Cet ouvrage passe en revue les principaux programmes d'habitations à loyer modéré qui existaient à la fin des années 1970 dans six pays asiatiques. 

A Hong Kong et à Singapour, les programmes de logements sociaux ont contribué considérablement à répondre aux besoins d'une grande portion de la population. Cet ouvrage examine l'expérience récemment acquise dans l'aménagement de nouvelles villes et la construction subséquente de logements sociaux. Dans les deux villes-états, on a tenté de mettre l'accent sur la gestion du logement en l'adaptant plus étroitement aux besoins, nouveaux et réels, de la population.

En Thaïlande, aux Philippines, en Malaisie et en Indonésie, des programmes semblables, mais adaptés aux pays, ont été mis sur pied afin d'améliorer les conditions d'habitation de la population pauvre. La plupart de ces programmes visent plus particulièrement les bidonvilles et les taudis des grandes villes, mais certains portent sur les besoins d'habitation de la population rurale. Ces pays ont lancé beaucoup de projets d'aménagement des sites et des services et d'amélioration des services existants. Leurs gouvernements accordent de plus en plus d'attention au problème du logement, et ce changement d'attitude a été renforcé par l'aide financière internationale qu'ils reçoivent depuis quelques années. Des projets innovateurs entrepris par la population même, qui a dans une certaine mesure réussi à satisfaire ses propres besoins d'habitation, viennent s'ajouter en complément des programmes subventionnés par des organismes nationaux et internationaux.

Resumen

Frente a la acelerada urbanización y expandida pobreza, la vivienda para los grupos menos favorecidos se ha convertido en un reto para la mayoría de los gobiernos Asiáticos. Este volumen reseña los principales programas de vivienda de bajo costo realizados a finales de los setenta en seis países Asiáticos.

En Hong Kong y Singapur, el progreso de los programas de vivienda popular para hacer frente a las necesidades de grandes sectores de la población ha sido considerable. Se resume la experiencia reciente en desarrollo de nuevas poblaciones y la provisión de vivienda popular. En ambas ciudades-estados ha habido un intento por colocar mayor énfasis en la administración de la vivienda, haciéndola más receptiva a las necesidades nuevas y reales.

En Tailandia, Filipinas, Malasia e Indonesia, han surgido programas similares, específicos de cada país, para mejorar las condiciones de vivienda de los pobres. La mayor parte de estos se centran en los tugurios y barrios marginales de las grandes ciudades, aunque algunos están dirigidos a las necesidades de vivienda de la población rural. Entre los proyectos destacados en estos países están los de lotes con servicios y los de mejora comunal. Los gobiernos respectivos dedican cada vez más atención a la vivienda para lo cual han contado con el respaldo de la asistencia internacional en los últimos años. Complementando estos programas apoyados nacional e internacionalmente están también los empeños innovadores de la misma gente, los cuales han alcanzado un cierto grado de éxito en la provisión de la vivienda propia.
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In 1972, a new public-housing program was launched in Hong Kong under the instruction of the Governor. The program was aimed at rehousing some 1.5 million people in public housing within the next 10 years.

Up to 1972, the development of public housing in Hong Kong had concentrated mainly on the urban areas of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula, although a few housing estates had been built in Tsuen Wan and other parts of the New Territories. The new-housing program envisaged that, because of the shortage of land in the urban areas, half of the population to be rehoused would be in the New Territories. This brought about the rapid expansion of public housing in the development of the new towns (Figure 1).

At the start of the program, three new towns were identified, Kwai Chung, Tuen Mun, and Shatin. Each was designed to house eventually a
population of more than half a million, 60 to 70% of which would live in
public housing. Public housing and commercial developments in the new
towns, not unlike those in the overcrowded urban areas of Hong Kong and
Kowloon, are high rise. Residential blocks are currently being built to a
height of 20 storeys or more, and commercial centres, if not located within
residential blocks themselves, will usually be in three- to four-storey build-

ings.

**Development of New Towns**

The development of new towns has been carried out under a new
government department called the New Territories Development Depart-
ment, established within the Public Works Department in 1973. Each new
town project is under the direct control and supervision of a project
manager who discharges the duties of developing the land as well as the
infrastructure within the new town, and who coordinates the various
services to be provided. The general concept is that the development will
be divided into different parts and care is taken to see that, at each stage of
the development, housing and industries grow in parallel steps, together
with the full range of community and social services.

It is estimated that a large proportion of the population in new towns will
be living in housing provided by the Housing Authority. For example,
when the new town of Shatin is completed, some 300,000 people living
there will be either tenants of rental public housing or owners of their own
flats under home-ownership schemes.

Thus, the Housing Authority, as the executive arm of the Housing De-
partment, is the main agency for the provision of housing in new towns.
The pattern of development of public housing in the new towns follows
that developed by the Housing Authority in the late 1960s and consolidated
in the seventies, of which the Wah Fu Estate on Hong Kong Island is an early
example. Basically, each housing estate provides not only dwelling units
but also the full range of community and social services, as set out by the
Hong Kong Outline Plan standard. Commercial facilities include shops,
markets, and restaurants, and community services comprise schools,
nurseries, kindergartens, social welfare centres, and agencies. Generally
speaking, apart from employment opportunities, each housing estate is
self-contained and provides for the general well-being of the residents.

Hong Kong is so acutely short of land that the provision of open space in
housing estates is often looked upon as a luxury. Although the Authority's
more recent developments in the urban areas compare very favourably
with many private equivalents in this respect, public-housing estates in the
New Territories fare even better. Earlier projects used a standard of some
2500 persons per hectare — a figure that suggests comparatively low-
density development in Hong Kong! The recent trend has been for higher-
density provisions, but because of the Authority's ability to adopt more-
efficient designs and layouts open space in the estates remains relatively
well provided for.

**District Administration in the New Town**

As previously mentioned, the detailed planning and development of
Shatin is being carried out by professional teams under the control and
direct management of a project manager. These tasks are carefully moni-
tored at every stage of development.

To achieve proper coordination, a District Management Committee has
been formed for each new town. This is a working committee comprising
representatives from all the departments that have an interest in the de-
velopment of the new town. Housing, being a chief component, is repre-
sented at a very high level. Other core members are representatives from
the New Territories Services Department (providing such services as
cleansing, marketing, and garbage disposals, etc.), police, transportation,
sports and recreation, and the project manager. Other government
departments such as Social Welfare, Education, Labour, Fire Services,
Medical and Health, may be called upon to discuss specific subjects rele-
vant to them. Committee meetings serve the useful purpose of exchange
of records of progress as well as information relating to various stages of
development, thus enabling the departments concerned to gear their own
activities to the needs of the new town.

On the political side, consultative machinery of local administration
exists in the form of the District Advisory Board (DAB). The Board is chaired
by a district officer of the New Territories Administration, and represented
on the official side by various major government departments including
Housing, New Territories Services, Social Welfare, Sports and Recreation,
and a number of unofficial representatives appointed from the local com-
munity. In March 1982, an election was to be held so that a number of
directly elected members would be able to serve on the District Board. The
main tasks of this board are to advise on matters affecting the well-being of
the inhabitants of the district and on the provision and use of facilities, to
undertake minor environmental improvement schemes, and to promote
recreational and cultural activities.

Within the public-housing estates the general formation of Mutual Aid
Committees (MACs) has been encouraged. These committees generally
confine their activities on the basis of a particular block, housing usually
from about 700 to 1000 families. The primary responsibilities include coor-
dination of the efforts of tenants in combating crime and on matters of
cleanliness. Many of these MACs have proved to be very effective and
useful in these specific tasks and form an important link between the
tenants, as a group, and the estate office in their monthly meetings with the
housing staff.

Structure of Estate Management

The development of new towns calls for an additional structure in the
management system to cope with the expanded responsibilities, both
functional and geographical. One significant feature of the management
system that has emerged has been the division of the whole territory of
Hong Kong into a number of districts for management purposes, each
under the direct supervision of a senior housing manager. The old practice
of grouping estates into "A" estates (former Housing Authority estates) and
"B" estates (former resettlement estates) for management purposes now no longer exists. Each district senior housing manager is responsible
to an assistant director for the complete range of management duties of the estates under his charge. Although based in headquarters in central Kowloon, the compact size of the territory of Hong Kong permits frequent commuting between a district senior housing manager and the estate offices. The manager, therefore, acts as a very useful direct link between the operational management “fronts” and the central headquarters policy machinery, which enables quick decisions geared to tenants’ needs to be made, thus ensuring efficiency in management. It also enables headquarters to assess the tenants’ reactions to important policy issues with a certain degree of accuracy. In the Authority’s numerous rent increases in recent years, both in the residential and commercial sectors, information provided by housing managers, co-ordinated and monitored through senior housing managers, proved to be of tremendous value in the implementation of such increases.

Besides acting as a useful link between headquarters and the district, the senior housing manager leads a team of five or six housing managers, in carrying out the day-to-day management functions on the estates. The senior housing manager, being familiar with local situations, also acts as the departmental representative on district advisory boards, management committees, and other inter-governmental meetings. Each housing manager takes charge of one or two housing estates, depending on size, supported by a staff of estate officers.

Another significant introduction to estate management since the mid-1970s has been the adoption of a centralized allocation system and the use of a computer for application work. The old practice of allocating a certain number of flats to a particular rehousing category meant that prospective tenants did not always get what they wanted in terms of location, size, and rent. Furthermore, any operational delay would result in flats not always let in time and flats standing empty for a length of time, whereas long queues of applicants were waiting anxiously to obtain any housing that could be made available. The centralized allocation system, introduced in late 1974, overcomes many of these problems, and the freedom of choice of available properties now afforded to applicants proves an invaluable tool for satisfying tenants.

The computerization of applicants’ and tenants’ records, operative since 1978, means not only a more speedy and efficient processing of cases of rehousing, but also enables the Housing Department to uncover a fairly large number of duplicate applications and tenancies. This results in action being taken to recover premises from families who hold more than one tenancy with the Authority.

Apart from such basic functions as repairs and maintenance, rent collection (performed by housing assistants door-to-door), tenancy control, and lettings, the housing manager has now a much wider range of duties to perform that, relative to past practice, now take up a much larger proportion of the staff’s time. The letting of commercial properties can be cited as an example. In this respect, the housing manager’s duties include the study of the design and layout of shopping centres with a view to making comments for project architects for possible changes and improvements. In conjunction with the district senior housing manager a pattern of designated trades is also worked out, and at the same time, a program for letting is considered. This may involve dividing the letting of the shops into
several stages so that the need of the tenants can be carefully assessed while the business of the centre can be built up steadily. When the actual letting is invited, the housing manager interviews the prospective tenants and makes recommendations to senior officers for the acceptance or rejection of the tenders. After the acceptance of a tender, the housing manager continues to be associated with the tenants in the subsequent control of the shop. What has been described, however, applies only to the most straightforward cases. With some special lettings, such as that for a cinema or a large department store, there is even greater involvement.

All in all, the presence of a housing manager on the estate is found to be very important for good and efficient management. A better service is provided to the tenants, and problems are dealt with speedily on the spot.

Community Development

Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, housing managers in Hong Kong do have to spend a good deal of time in community development work in the new towns. They generally agree that because of the gregarious nature of the Chinese, little effort is needed to help the families moving to new towns to settle down happily and quickly. For example, the problem of loneliness in new towns has rarely become a major concern. Whereas the special characteristics of Chinese tenants may have accounted for this rather happy condition, the comprehensiveness of housing developments in Hong Kong must necessarily be considered another factor that makes the move to a new town so acceptable.

Housing blocks and housing estates are usually let within months of completion, with the provision of commercial and community facilities at about the same time. Getting to know the various provisions within a housing estate is never very difficult because the developments are compact and there is always an on-site estate office with a willing staff ready to help. Other community agencies nearby also make life in the new towns easier and more pleasant. On a new estate in a new town, a tenant never has to go very far to have arrangements made for the decoration of the home, or to have gas and electricity and other services connected to the flat. All these facilities are usually situated almost next to the estate office. Whereas a housewife living in the urban centre may have to put some effort into finding a suitable school for her children, the tenant of a new town always finds several schools in or near to the estate from which to choose. The list of conveniences could go on.

Estate management staff do try to make things even better. It is the habit and duty of a housing assistant to give time to a tenant during the signing-up interview so that the families can ask questions about schools, clinics, bus and train schedules, and the like; other information on social centres for the elderly, boys’ and girls’ clubs, and welfare and recreational agencies is readily provided in freely distributed booklets. Housing assistants are also instructed to visit families during the first week after their move to give advice on decoration, maintenance, and any other matter with which the family may need help. These actions are considered tremendously helpful to a family moving in, and provide a start to establishing a good landlord-tenant relationship.
As soon as a block is fully occupied, the housing manager watches out for potential tenant leaders, encouraging the formation of MACs. Such committees have as their basic function the organization of tenants into responsible groups to help to maintain peace and security within the block and also the staging of "Keep Clean" campaigns. Through such activities, tenants develop a sense of organization and community spirit and eventually get themselves interested in other matters of mutual concern.

Housing managers have regular meetings with the MACs and discuss with them matters of mutual concern. Through these contacts, the department is constantly made aware of the views of its tenants and, in return, conveys the management view on policy matters to the tenants. Very satisfactory results have been produced.

On new public-housing estates in the new towns, various social agencies have been set up. Also, there is always either a community centre or a community hall where activities are staged not only for young people but for the adult population, such as sewing classes, photographic exhibitions, or drama groups organized by voluntary or government agencies. This provides further scope for community development. There is, in recent years, a tendency for estate tenants to stage carnivals, festival celebrations, and small sports events. Thus, although commercial entertainment in a new town such as Shatin is generally underdeveloped in the early stages of development, social activities are rarely lacking.

In the early days of public housing in Hong Kong, landscaping did not play a significant part in the housing manager's duties. A number of very pleasant schemes were produced because of the individual efforts of the housing managers in charge. In recent years, in the development of large housing projects, landscaping and planting have become an important part of the development program. Not only have funds been set aside at the outset of the project to provide for amenities but much more effort has been given to the planning and setting up of amenity areas on estates.

Housing managers in Hong Kong, because of their traditional interest and skills in planting, have played a very active part in the development of landscapes on the estates. Many of them have worked hand in hand with the Authority's landscape team to provide schemes for estate planting; sometimes the more experienced are entrusted with the production of landscape schemes by themselves.

For the new town of Shatin, the government commissioned a comprehensive landscape study. The importance placed on this significant feature in the development of the new town is echoed enthusiastically from the public-housing estates. Tenants' response to this amenity provision has been most encouraging. There has been very little damage or vandalism, thus enabling such new housing estates as Lek Yuen and Wo Che to have already a rather mature and pleasantly green outlook. To foreign visitors such amenities may not always be appreciated immediately, but for the average families in Hong Kong used to the sight of concrete jungles in urban areas, gardens and amenity areas in public-housing estates provide almost the feeling of suburban living. This is of significant social and environmental value, and contributes enormously to a feeling of pride for living in a housing estate.
Commercial Facilities in Public-Housing Estates

With a few exceptions, early public-housing estates in Hong Kong incorporated very little commercial development. Where shops were provided, they were usually small convenience shops aiming to meet tenants' daily needs, with items such as cigarettes, candies, and groceries. Tenants were expected to do their main shopping outside the estates. Whereas such a concept produced some very pleasant residential schemes under the old housing authority, the result was not wholly satisfactory. It has been argued that because of the lack of adequate shopping facilities, hawkers were drawn to operate inside the estates thus causing various environmental problems. However, this has been viewed with a certain degree of skepticism by some, because on a number of housing estates where shopping facilities were adequately provided hawkers were still attracted. It is now generally accepted that where shopping facilities are provided, they have to be planned with extreme care. The location of markets and shops must be in such a way that they are not open to the outside public roads or public open grounds where hawkers can take advantage by congregating nearby. Also, estates should be built with distinct boundary lines to indicate the authority and jurisdiction of management. In this respect, designs of new housing estates are now much better planned than before and the management has been able to exercise more effective control over hawkers.

The provision of commercial facilities, i.e., shops and markets, has become a standard feature of the housing-estate design in the 1970s, although earlier schemes such as Wah Fu and Ping Shek had already set the pattern of development. More recently, commercial facilities on public-housing estates have achieved such tremendous success, both financially and from the viewpoint of planning, that many private developments have followed suit.

The typical shopping centre of a public-housing estate now contains almost the full range of shopping facilities from day-to-day wet-market stalls to high-class boutiques and jewelry shops. Also, there are invariably large restaurants and banks and, where justified, a full-service post office. A good example of such a shopping centre is on the Wo Che Estate at Shatin. This centre provides a pleasant air-conditioned shopping environment and full parking facilities for tenants and outsiders.

In Wo Che Estate, apart from this large commercial centre, there is provision for medical clinics close to residential blocks so that private medical practitioners can rent space to cater to the medical needs of the residents, while complementing the services of district government clinics. Also, a large number of cooked food stalls, each 45 m², are provided inside the estate. These stalls, grouped together, provide cheap snacks and meals for the estates' residents and are very popular. They are also becoming a regular feature of new public housing estates (Figure 2).

The provision of commercial facilities brings significant financial benefit to the Housing Authority, as shops and stalls are let out at full market rents. In the early days, a system of premium tendering at a fixed rent was adopted. Although this brought in a substantial lump-sum cash flow for the Authority, problems of tenancy rights and adjustment of rents on tenancy renewal were encountered. Also, such a system of tendering seemed to
give preference to the bigger shop operators who could afford a bigger financial capital outlay, whereas the smaller, but genuine, shopkeepers were very often excluded because of their inability to raise sufficient premiums.

Beginning with the estates in Shatin, a system of rental tendering has been used. Although the attractive lump-sum capital return for the Authority is thus diminished, the long-term financial and social effects more than compensate for this. A much higher rental return for the Housing Authority on the letting of its commercial premises has now been realized and, for the first time, a true indication of the rental values of the Authority’s commercial properties can be established. In turn such rental levels can be used effectively for the renewal of tenancies for the Authority’s old lettings. For example, a banking premises at Wo Che Estate was let as of mid-1980 at the rate of HK$500 to 550 (US$91 to 100)/m², a figure considered very high even in the centre of the most prestigious central area of Hong Kong. This price has since been exceeded by other lettings, giving sufficient evidence to the Authority’s own advisers on rental values as well as guidelines for intending tenderers of the Authority’s commercial properties. The example of Wo Che Estate shows the benefits that the Authority has been able to realize since it changed its policies on commercial lettings. The commercial rent roll is HK$2 015 836 (US$366 516)/month for 202 units as against that of HK$1 930 086 (US$350 924) for 5885 domestic units. More precisely, the rents collected from the commercial lettings in this estate range from HK$58.66 to 619.69 (US$10.7 to 112.7)/m² as compared with HK$94.29 (US$17.1)/m² from domestic lettings.
The Housing Authority has come to accept that there is no reason to give concessional rents to the commercial operators on the estates. This is a change from the early thinking that shopkeepers were providing services to the tenants and that they would not be able to make a good return from their business. Modern housing estates are generally large, providing a guaranteed clientele for the shopping centre. Shop premises are well planned and a sensible designation of trades keeps the tenants in fair, but not too intense, competition. Furthermore, big corporations, such as banks and supermarket chains, had come to realize that the public-housing tenants, now constituting nearly half of Hong Kong’s population, provide a big potential market for their business. Because of the good mix of tenants, a phenomenon described in the next section, public-housing tenants are not necessarily drawn from the poorest population. In fact, because of the relatively stable rental expenditure pattern, an advantage not commonly enjoyed by private-sector tenants, public-housing tenants have more expendable cash for consumer goods and services. Thus a general pattern of high rental value for the Authority’s commercial properties has now been established.

Other factors may contribute to the significant financial success of the Housing Authority’s commercial properties. One factor that cannot be overlooked is the sensible position that the Authority takes in not relating the provision of commercial premises to their capital costs. Land is provided free by government in conjunction with the provision of rental housing. The cost of capital construction is absorbed in the total cost for the construction of the rental estate. The management is therefore not constrained in any way to recover investment costs. The net result of this had been a free hand and therefore a more imaginative design of shopping centres, and the subsequent freedom in a well-balanced trade designation was reflected in a good mix of tenants. The housing manager does not always aim to designate shops that will bring in the highest return on rentals, but rather works to provide a comprehensive range of shopping facilities that will bring life and efficiency to the shopping centres. Thus, instead of increasing the number of high-rental premises such as medicine shops, book stores, and sporting goods shops, the housing manager aims to provide shops of lesser commercial value as well so that the shopping centre contains a fairly comprehensive range of shops that will attract tenants and other shoppers. Large restaurants are normally also provided in or near the shopping centres. Such lettings do not individually always bring in the highest rental return to the Housing Authority, but, in the long run, the comprehensive facilities provided in the shopping centre enhance its total value.

Mix of Tenants

Some early public-housing estates in Hong Kong suffered from design faults and the layouts as well as external finishings tended to be dull. Tenants of these housing blocks came mostly from clearance operations, and, as a result of this rather single-class tenant structure, and generally lower-income status, the feeling of a low-income neighbourhood was created.
The new towns of Hong Kong are planned to overcome this problem. Better estate planning and management have produced a better living environment. Although a great proportion of the tenants in the new town housing estates still originate from clearance and squatter-control operations, a significant proportion of the tenants is drawn from the general waiting list. Generally those on the waiting list, although not necessarily of a higher economic group than the clearees or squatters, are, nevertheless, more responsive to improving their own living conditions. Many of these people, who may have waited for a long time in private-sector housing for a chance to improve their own living conditions, are more ready to put effort and money into up-grading their homes. They are more cooperative with the management and are generally better tenants. There is a general feeling from this group of waiting-list tenants that they are one step up the housing ladder. Clearees and squatters have been found to be more difficult as tenants, as they are generally less law-abiding tenants and, probably because of their previous free-for-all living pattern in the squatter areas, are less prepared to up-grade their living conditions.

Although the mix of voluntary and compulsory categories brings about a healthy heterogeneity of tenants, the new town housing estates have further designs by which to bring about a more middle-class suburban character. Most of the old public-housing estates managed by a Housing Authority in the urban areas of Hong Kong and Kowloon have now become really overcrowded because of the expansion of tenants' families, and the overcrowded situation cannot be easily solved within the resources of the Authority's urban estates. Hence, for those tenants wishing to improve their living conditions with larger accommodations the only opportunity for the majority of them would be to move to a new estate in a new town. The Housing Department actively encourages such movement by making available on each new housing estate a large number of new units for application by overcrowded urban public-housing tenants. As a result, many tenants who can afford to pay higher rents and the additional expenses of living in a new town have opted to move there. Generally these long-term public-housing tenants are usually better-off tenants and they have a fair income. Thus, an analysis of the median income of a tenant's family in the new towns is about 10% higher than that of families in an urban old estate. The average distribution of the origin of public-housing tenants of a new town is listed in Table 1.

The design of new town estates is now superior and includes many amenities in the form of sitting-out areas, play areas for children, and sport

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>(%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Victims of fire and natural disaster</td>
<td>0.90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compassionate rehousing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenants of buildings demolished as dangerous</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Areas cleared for development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenants of properties acquired for urban renewal</td>
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<td>Group B estates which are to be developed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reuse of licence areas</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief of overcrowding in public-housing estate</td>
<td>17.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting-list applicants</td>
<td>24.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior civil servants and pensioners</td>
<td>9.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental quarters, shop tenants, etc.</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
grounds for teenagers. Other ancillary facilities such as community halls, schools, and car parks create a feeling of middle-class living in Hong Kong. No longer do architects concern themselves only with the design of accommodation, but are now prepared to accept management's suggestions for special amenities such as gardens, fountains, and water features as an integral part of the estate design. The layout of public housing in Hong Kong now compares extremely well with that of private developments.

The Authority's new higher-income home ownership schemes are also being provided fairly extensively inside, or adjacent to, lower-income rental housing estates, which further provides a more desirable mix of tenants.

**Housing for the Elderly**

As part of the proposal to assist in housing the elderly made by the government in 1977, the Housing Authority agreed specifically to provide accommodation for 10,000 elderly persons in addition to those who are normally housed with families. This is being achieved in three ways. Firstly, the 10-year program of hostels for the elderly is expected to accommodate 6050 persons by 1987–88 on the basis of one hostel in each new estate with more than 3000 flats. There are already 10 hostels with a total of 1300 places in operation; another 12 are due to open in the current financial year providing another 1482 places. Secondly, the Social Welfare and Medical & Health departments refer cases to the Housing Authority for rehousing through the compassionate quota (see Table 1) in which case about 300 persons over 60 years of age are being housed in a year. Thirdly, an annual quota of 300 flats within the waiting list (see Table 1) has been set aside since 1980–81 for the elderly. Although an ordinary applicant on the waiting list must have a family of at least three and will have to wait for about 7 years if he opts for Shatin, this Elderly Priority Scheme enables three unrelated elderly persons to join together and apply for a flat and have their waiting time reduced to about 1½ years if they opt for accommodation in the same new town. Whereas the first category of elderly is accommodated in hostels that are run by voluntary agencies and subsidized by the government, the second and third categories are housed in normal domestic flats and managed by housing staff within their own resources.

Housing Assistants play a nominal role in the day-to-day management of those hostels administered by voluntary agencies. In Shatin, every public-housing estate completed or under construction is provided with either a hostel for the elderly, or a social centre for the elderly, or both. Two sections are provided in a hostel: first, a "hostel" section for the able-bodied elderly who do their own cooking and generally look after themselves; and secondly, a "home" section for the more frail elderly, where meals are cooked and served.

On the other hand, Housing Assistants pay special attention and extra care to the old people housed in domestic flats as ordinary tenants. The great majority of the first year's quota for the Elderly Priority Scheme was allocated to Sha Kok Estate, the third public-housing estate in Shatin. Three persons occupy a flat of 23 m², each with their own small cubicle, and all share the use of a common dining room, kitchen, balcony, toilet, and
shower within the flat. One of them is nominated as the tenant who is responsible for payment of rent, electricity, gas, and water charges, but in practice everyone pays their own share. Because the estate is planned as a self-contained community, the elderly persons need not in fact leave the estate unless for occasional visits to their friends and relatives elsewhere. They enjoy living in a community with children and young people, and, in this respect, they readily accept the idea of rehousing rather than the traditional arrangement of living in old people’s homes in the countryside.

Apart from the normal counselling service provided to estate tenants, housing assistants provide special services to elderly persons to make their lives in the new homes more enjoyable. Housing assistants, during their weekly visits to their homes, identify the frail elderly and refer these cases to the Caritas Social Centre, a voluntary agency situated 2 km from the estate providing, among other things, home services to the elderly. These include house cleaning, daily meals, laundry, and escorting for medical consultation. Whereas estate doctors are willing to call at the homes of the elderly in cases of emergency, housing assistants are in close contact with the social workers who escort them for regular checkups at the geriatric unit of a hospital. Staff at the community nursing centre may also be requested to call at their homes regularly to provide nursing care and assistance on all aspects of rehabilitation and health education. They approach their housing assistant first whenever they need help.

By special arrangement, the hostel for the elderly in the same estate, being equipped with automatic laundry machines, may help elderly tenants to do daily laundry, and estate caretakers assist in delivery. Meals may be cooked and served for them together with those living in the hostel, if required.

A social centre for the elderly set up and run by a voluntary agency in the same estate provides social and recreational activities for the elderly so as to enrich their social life and to maintain their fitness both physically as well as psychologically. It is as much the concern of estate staff as social workers and medical staff to deal with the personal, social, medical, and housing problems encountered by the elderly in housing estates.

**Rent Level**

When the present Housing Authority was formed in 1973 by the amalgamation of the two big housing agencies of the former Housing Authority and Resettlement Department, one of the major problems was the question of the public-housing rental anomaly. First, rents for old resettlement estates, which normally are situated in the middle of the urban areas and therefore, in theory, are very attractive to public-housing tenants, were unreasonably low and could hardly meet their running costs. Second, the rents of the old Housing Authority estates, which had been calculated mainly on a cost basis, showed a rather irregular pattern in that some central and popular estates, because of the period in which they were built, were much lower than those of new estates that were constructed at the time of higher building costs.

When the new-town movement started, this problem became even more acute. The construction boom in Hong Kong took costs to a higher
level than before. If tenants from old housing estates were expected to move to new towns, one of the main objectives must be to keep the rents in these new town housing estates as low as possible. To achieve this, the Housing Authority adopted the concept of estate value rents. Briefly, rents for new public-housing estates would not be calculated on a cost basis. Instead, an estate rent would be fixed according to the convenience of locality as compared with other estates and the amenities they provided. In a nutshell, the rent of a new estate would be decided by comparing its rental value with that of an estate in the central area. So far this system has produced a highly comparable rental structure among the new estates in new towns, and one which has been accepted by the tenants. As a corollary of this, the Housing Authority’s program of increasing the rents of outdated urban estates has also been generally accepted by the old tenants when they realize that their counterparts in new towns have to pay a modern public-housing estate rent.

Comprehensive Housing Management

In Hong Kong, the majority of public-sector housing is still in rental-housing estates. Quite naturally, many problems of housing management encountered in other parts of the world also have to be faced in Hong Kong. Generally, Hong Kong has faced up to the challenge of managing a large number of public-housing estates for over 40% of the total population of Hong Kong in an efficient manner. This may be attributed to a sensible system of comprehensive management adopted by the Authority.

It is not the intention of this paper to go into the detail of the system of comprehensive housing management in Hong Kong. A few highlights need only be mentioned.

In spite of the pressure from several quarters, the Housing Authority is still using the method of door-to-door rent collection. Critics generally base their arguments on the fact that there is a great security risk as well as a lack of efficiency in such a system. The first point has never really been very serious in Hong Kong and attacks on rent collectors are few and far between. It is suggested that with judicious arrangements for rent collection trips, potential risks can be diminished. As regards the second point it is really not accurate to say that the system of door-to-door rent collection is in any way less efficient than any other system. Before the present system of rent collection was introduced by the Housing Authority, rent arrears were recorded at up to 20%. The Authority’s actual rent arrear records are now rarely 1% of rents collectable. The Housing Authority now has a monthly rent roll of HK$90 (US$16.4) million. A 20% arrears would mean a constant loss of revenue of about HK$18 (US$3.3) million. Apart from this loss of revenue the social significance of responsible tenants who have a trained habit of paying rents regularly cannot be overemphasized. Taking a wider perspective, if Hong Kong should ever face a higher rent arrears record, as experienced in many other countries, then very heavy housing subsidies would have to be mobilized from other sources and this would make the housing program less successful.

Another important aspect of comprehensive management is the timely attention given to proper maintenance of buildings and grounds. The
Housing Assistant is entrusted with the responsibility of recording, ordering, and subsequent inspection of completed work, with respect to items of repair and maintenance. The Housing Assistant has the responsibility of seeing that no delays are being experienced in the execution of repairs, and is also responsible for dealing with tenants’ requests for repairs and making the decision whether the tenant or the landlord should be responsible for their payment. The other important contribution of the management staff is their ability to provide feedback information to architects and maintenance officers with regard to physical design as well as the durability of materials, and users’ reactions to the usage of facilities provided. The Housing Assistants derive their knowledge partly from their practical experience and partly from the invaluable contact with estate tenants.

Apart from the useful feedback information on design, maintenance, and repairs, the regular contacts with tenants provide the housing staff with a fairly reliable and accurate source of information regarding tenants’ reaction to certain policies of the Housing Authority as well as other important matters affecting the general population of Hong Kong. An important example of this is the Authority’s ability to increase rents on its rental housing with very little opposition from its tenants. The Housing Authority was able to make full use of estate management staff’s assessments of the tenants’ reaction to put forward rent increases that were generally acceptable to the tenants. Because of their regular and wide contact with tenants, and the satisfactory relationship so very often successfully built up, housing managers and their staff are able to give very useful comments and views on issues of a topical nature. This has proved very useful in many policy decisions.

The implementation of comprehensive housing management requires the basic element of a well-trained management staff of high calibre. Training of this staff is very expensive and time consuming, but the Authority has quite wisely taken a correct course. It now enjoys efficient service of a staff that not only provides competent implementation of its policies as well as giving good protection to the value of its assets by efficient maintenance and management, but also renders very efficient service to the tenants thus creating contented and well-satisfied communities. The ultimate purpose of housing provision is thus ensured.

Conclusions

The development of new towns aimed at creating a new pattern of happy life for their residents presents many new challenges for those concerned. Hong Kong seems to have met the challenges with confidence and efficiency. Maybe Hong Kong has been fortunate in possessing plentiful technical, managerial, and financial resources. However, the value of the experience of Hong Kong lies in the fact that, given the enormous constraints of scarcity of land and a huge population problem, reasonable living conditions have been created for the people through sound planning and management. So far, the experience of the creation of new towns in Hong Kong has been a happy one. Well-planned and coordinated building programs ensure that services are provided in time and that many of the
difficulties that could be experienced by those moving early to new towns are reduced. The emphasis on community development permits tenants to react and communicate at an early stage.

As far as estate management is concerned, new towns provide a new generation of public housing, probably akin to middle-class suburban living of the West. This has been brought about by an enlightened public landlord who believes in providing the best for its tenants within its limitations. More important, a well-trained management staff who recognize the rights of the tenants and who commit themselves to providing the best service for both landlord and tenant, go far in bringing about the intended results.

The Hong Kong experience has shown that public-housing tenants can and do respond to good management. They appreciate the opportunity afforded them of building a home for their families, where their children can grow up to become useful members of society. They also demonstrate that they can be responsible tenants through their rent habits, their careful use of communal facilities, and diligent up-keep of their own homes.

Thus, the future looks good for the immense public-housing program of Hong Kong. The production of a large number of flats is complemented by an efficient system of management, a practice very often neglected by public-housing bodies elsewhere. No doubt new problems will arise as the new towns continue to develop, but new techniques and skills will be learned to meet these problems. However the experience in this early stage of our new towns development seems to promise a fairly bright future.