

HOUSING PRACTICE SERIES



SINGAPORE



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HOUSING PRACTICE SERIES - SINGAPORE

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	V
CHAPTER 1: THE DECISION TO BUILD PUBLIC HOUSING IN SINGAPORE.....	VI
1. History of Public Housing Provision.....	1
2. Assessing the record.....	5
3. The Social Change which Public Housing Engendered in Singapore.....	6
4. Public Housing Issues and Policies	7
5. Introduction to the Monograph	8
CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL HOUSING	10
1. Introduction	11
2. Policy development	12
3. Policy provision	18
4. Policy impact.....	21
5. Conclusion.....	25
CHAPTER 3: PUBLIC HOUSING POLICY AND SOCIAL MIXING: PROMOTING SOCIAL INTEGRATION ALONG THE DIMENSIONS OF RACE, CLASS, AGE AND CITIZENSHIP STATUS	28
1. Introduction	29
2. The public housing population	29
3. A multidimensional public housing social landscape	30
4. Consequences of social diversity: tension or integration?	35
5. Race, citizenship status and social integration in public housing.....	37
6. Preventing the formation of enclaves and ghettos: facilitating social mixing between social classes in public housing ..	39
7. Keeping seniors in public housing communities	40
8. What are the key take-aways from this chapter?	41
9. Are Singapore's public housing policies applicable to other social contexts?.....	43
CHAPTER 4: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WITHIN PUBLIC HOUSING ESTATES.....	47
1. Community Development as a building block in the lives of a young nation.....	48
2. Community Organizations and Political Mobilization.....	50
3. The Collective Life of the Neighbourhood.....	52
4. Newer Policy Initiatives in Community Development	55
5. Conclusion.....	61
CHAPTER 5: POST-1990 HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT BOARD UPGRADING PROGRAMMES.....	63
1. Public Housing Upgrading Programmes in Singapore.....	64
2. Upgrading in Action	66
3. Learning from the Singapore housing model.....	74
CHAPTER 6: PUBLIC HOUSING AND SOCIETY	77
1. How Can Public Housing Be Part of the Social Welfare Infrastructure?.....	81
2. Can Public Housing Create an Undivided, Inclusive and Cohesive Society?	81
3. Can Public Housing Keep Pace with the Changing Aspirations of Society?.....	81

Executive summary

The UN-Habitat Housing Practices Series is an ongoing publication developed and produced by UN-Habitat in partnership with academic institutions and National Governments. It provides reliable and independent documentation of innovative and large-scale affordable housing programmes in countries around the world. Rather than drawing from theory or abstract models, the Housing Practices Series shares insights drawn from countries' experience. Each volume holistically documents one housing programme that has achieved significant results and is therefore showcased as a "best practice". The volumes are based on sound research that clearly describes the country's housing sector context, the elements of the programme, key achievements and challenges, and suggestions for further programme improvement.

UN-Habitat believes that disseminating up-to-date information on country-specific large-scale housing programmes is vital in revealing to other developing countries the programmatic opportunities for addressing their housing shortages, reducing slum formation and growth, and improving the housing conditions of their citizens. The hope is that these publications will contribute to deepen the understanding of the available measures to be taken to ensure access to adequate, affordable, and sustainable housing for all.

This volume presents the Singapore model of public housing, which is unique among countries with public housing systems in terms of both the proportion of residents living in public housing; and its focus on home ownership of public housing flats. Today, more than 80% of Singapore's residents live in housing provided by the Housing and Development Board (HDB). The volume highlights tangible, evidence-based measures implemented by the HDB in addressing housing unaffordability since the 1960s, as well as its shift from understanding public housing as shelter for resettled families and the poor to universal provision. Since 1961, in fact, the HDB completed more than 1 million housing units. Furthermore, its building programme was complemented by comprehensive and integrated planning to create a self-sufficient environment conducive for residents to live, work, play and learn - making housing the centre of a social welfare infrastructure.

This shift to universal provision has also given Singapore the opportunity to solve social and political issues (e.g., ethnic integration and community building) by tackling them through public housing.

Furthermore, the recent focus on upgrading the existing housing supply is based on principles of engagement, scale, and market research, and can be an example for housing

authorities that similarly seek to enhance the physical environment of their residential neighbourhoods as well as the interior of apartments within housing blocks.

This publication is intended for policy makers, public sector officials and urban practitioners. Accordingly, it aims to outline the design and effect of programmes on the multiple dimensions of housing (housing needs and demands, land, finance, infrastructure, the construction sector among others).

The first part of the publication gives a broad overview of the history of the public housing sector in Singapore and highlight its significance in its context. The second part outlines the programme and how it was tailored to address the poor and vulnerable segments of society. The third and fourth parts document the programme's performance, especially in community building, and how it has been used to strengthen place identity. Finally, the fifth part outlines the 'lessons learnt' and achievements of Singapore's public housing system and its record of meeting the needs of the society.



CHAPTER 1:

The Decision to Build Public Housing in Singapore

Author: K.C. HO

1. History of Public Housing Provision¹

The British had founded Singapore as a base to carry out essential distributive, financial, transportation and communications functions, with Malaya as both a hinterland for agricultural and mineral products, as well as a consumer market for British goods. Given the geographically strategic position that Singapore had, this type of entrepôt trade became very lucrative and remained the backbone of Singapore's economy. Its continued success over this period created the demand and guaranteed investment in the facilities connected with entrepôt trading. The dominance of entrepôt trading also gave rise to a complex network of financiers, traders, semi-wholesalers and agency house and skills that involved transshipment, grading, processing, packing, storage, breaking of bulk and access to markets and credit facilities (McGee, 1967:57-60, 137; IBRD, 1955:95). The settlement around the harbour and river area began to grow in density and economic diversity as trade grew. According to Choe (1975: 97), this settlement, known as the Central Area, is estimated at about 1,700 acres (about 1.2% of the total land area of the Island). The economic activities which encompass the Central Area radiated from the mouth of the Singapore River.

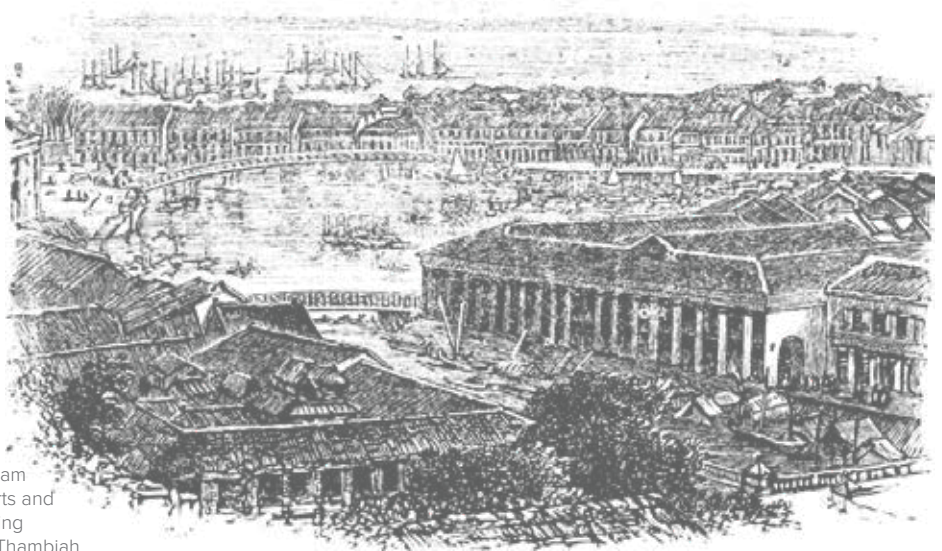
The attention of colonial authorities focused on nurturing and protecting the core technology that supported the island's key economic activity. Nowhere was this more

clearly seen than in the three years after the Second World War, where ten and a half million Malaysian dollars were spent rebuilding and expanding port facilities (Allen, 1951:6). The fact that the amount spent on port development for these three years came close to the total amount spent on housing for the entire 140-year colonial period gives an indication of the colonial attitude towards social expenditures. This colonial attitude towards trade influenced housing location. Residential areas for the various ethnic groups were determined when the commercial/port area was planned in the 1820's. Given colonial priorities, residential allocation was planned in

conjunction with mercantile and port activity. Accordingly, locations were planned only for the immigrant merchant population (i.e. the Chinese and the Indians) which were placed close to the mercantile area. The local Malays, which were mainly fishermen, were not residentially planned for and were found along the coast well outside the town area (Hodder, 1953:27).

Under the colonial municipal authorities, the Central Area had developed into an area of highly congested mixed land use. In it were the entrepôt infrastructure

Residential areas for the various ethnic groups were determined when the commercial/port area was planned in the **1820's**



¹ This chapter is drawn from Ho (1993: 369-381). I am grateful to Dean Danny Wong from Faculty of Arts and Society Sciences, University of Malaya for granting permission and to Associate Professor Shanthi Thambiah for facilitating this process.

(harbour, warehousing, storage, transport, communications), services (banks, trade houses, various traders and transport and communication services) and various types of wholesale activities that formed the nucleus of the Singapore economy. Rapid population growth and the inattention of the authorities led to high residential densities in the Central Area. The attempt by the colonial authorities to residentially segregate various ethnic groups in the central area also led to the identification of ethnicity with place, as various cultural and religious institutions developed in the midst of ethnic enclaves. The high residential densities in the central area also supported a wide range of retail and recreational activities, of a more basic nature as well as specialized goods and services supported by various ethnic populations.

As a result of the original plan to residentially locate the immigrant populations close to the business area, there was a continued tendency for the residential population to continue staying at or near places of work in the inner core of the city. With the work residence arrangement, rapid natural population growth and in migration, residential land use began taking on an increasingly larger portion of the city landscape. Conventional housing became rapidly congested through sub-tenancy particularly in the Central Area.

example of this attitude is illustrated by the following passage from the 1918 Housing Commission. Roland Braddell, a member of the commission directs the following question to B. Ball, who was the Municipal Engineer in charge of municipal public works:

Mr Braddell: Supposing that there was a City Improvement Trust in Singapore and that it had

the powers for the compulsory acquisition of land for the purpose of developing that area, would this be a suitable area for the Trust to buy the whole block up compulsorily and then lay out the roads and then dispose of the land?

Mr Ball: No... I do not think that a public body should be put to the expense and trouble of buying up that land and developing it.

(Housing Commission, 1918: para 752)

Aside from reluctance to direct intervention in the form of legislative changes to ensure

active public participation in acquisition and land development, the municipality was also unwilling to develop public amenities that might have assisted in private housing development in the suburbs. A mild condemnation on this latter point who reported at the end of the hearings, when the commission (1918:AI2) reported that one of the causes for housing shortages in Singapore “may be ascribed to difficulties arising out of, or connected with... the want of municipal encouragement and assistance to builders”. The report went on to elaborate what this meant:

“The initial difficulties by which an intending builder is beset would be made lighter if the Municipality were to drop its attitude of passivity, and adopt a policy of active assistance. We realize that the Municipal Commissioners feel that as custodians of the rate-payer’s money, they are compelled to consider carefully how they incur any expenditure in schemes which tend to assist in the development of private property. In respect to the supply of water and light to houses lying in the outer fringes of the suburbs, the policy of the



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