

Memories of a Bygone Era: Resettlement in Hong Kong

1950-1972

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Hong Kong's population soared from approximately 500,000-600,000 on Victory over Japan Day in 1945 to 2,200,000 in 1950; at the end of 1949, at least 300,000 people lived in illegal squatter settlements. These settlements lacked basic public services, and many had serious problems with sanitation, crime, and fire safety.

In the first post-war year, Hong Kong authorities had occasionally deported people living in such settlements if they were not Hong-Kong born. Not all squatters were recent arrivals – some simply could not afford rising rents – but many were. However, as Cold War tensions increased, the border with the Mainland closed in 1950, eliminating that option. This left two basic avenues for policy-makers: either accept the squatter settlements as a fact of life and try to make them more livable, or shut them down and create new housing elsewhere. At first, the government's policy vacillated: some public housing were built, but in the form of relatively low-density cottage communities, later officially known as cottage areas.

Recurrent fires in squatter settlements helped to force the issue, pushing the government towards emphasizing large-scale resettlement. During the 1950s, fires displaced over 190,000 squatters according to government statistics – which likely undercount the true number significantly. The most dramatic fire broke out on Christmas Day, 1953 in Shek Kip Mei: it left 53,000 people homeless in a single night. With a disaster of this magnitude, direction from the government had to be given; failure to do so might well have endangered public health and, to an even greater extent, led to political troubles. The government was, however, reluctant to do much to improve fire safety in the squatter settlements themselves, fearing that measures such as installing fire hydrants would create the impression that they were recognizing these communities as legal settlements. The government was willing to clear fire lanes through the settlements, and squatters themselves organized some fire protection, but this was woefully inadequate. Large-scale construction and resettlement thus emerged as the main pillar of government policy – even though the government also hoped to keep its spending as low as possible.

In early 1954, the small resettlement section in the government, which had previously

built some cottage properties, was reorganized and expanded into the Resettlement Department. Its most urgent task was to rehouse the homeless people from the Christmas Day squatter fire. It was never the purpose of the Department to try to deal with the housing needs of the people in Hong Kong. The emphasis was geared towards the eviction of squatters and rehousing as many of them as possible in permanent accommodation, at high densities and low standards.

The first annual report of the Commissioner for Resettlement (1954-55) stressed that squatter clearance and resettlement were “...not a welfare operation in any sense. What was required was not primarily to improve the living conditions of that section of the community which happened to be breaking the law (i.e. squatting)... the task was to devise a rapid and practical method, at a cost at least less than prohibitive, of removing, in the interests of the whole community, the fire risk and the threat to public health and public order presented by the worst squatter areas.”

Measured in terms of these objectives the resettlement programme was conspicuously successful, resulting in the rehousing of half a million squatters by 1964 – though thanks to further population increase, the number of squatters had actually increased. Three years later, the figure hit the one million mark: over one-quarter of the population lived in the resettlement estates. By then, the number of squatters was finally falling.

The principal characteristics of the early resettlement block designs (Mark I and II) were extremely basic, including open corridors, communal washing, and toilet facilities. Heavy emphasis had been laid on the fully utilising the allocated sites for the housing blocks, at the expense of community facilities.

The blocks contained flats of various sizes, most of them of 120 square feet. No kitchen space was provided, and most residents cooked in the balcony outside their room (though this was initially prohibited). Another feature of these blocks was the use of rooftops. These were allocated to various agencies and societies to run primary schools and recreation centres.

As early as 1955, the Resettlement Department was confident, and concluded that a practical solution to the squatter problem had been found. The decision was therefore taken to press on the programme as rapidly as possible.

The initial momentum of the resettlement programme was very striking. The 100th resettlement block was completed in Wong Tai Sin in late 1959. By 1964, 240 Mark I

and Mark II resettlement blocks had been constructed. Government officials, referring to the sheer quantity of the resettlement blocks constructed, often described the programme as a glorious achievement. Many heads of states, royalty, government ministers, overseas legislators, international agency heads, Imperial Defence College (now College of Defence Studies) staff in the UK, as well as ordinary tourists, visited these resettlement estates. They were led to believe that a solution to deal with refugees was successfully found and carried out in Hong Kong. Many did not realize that the purpose of the resettlement programme was simply not to house refugees, much less to improve their conditions, but to clear people who stood in the way of development. And from that point of view, the programme was a spectacular success: the million-plus squatters who had been resettled by 1971 occupied only 34% as much land as their squatter settlements had once occupied. Moreover, rents in the housing estates were often actually less than what people had paid to those who controlled squatter settlements; this made it somewhat easier for people to get by on the low wages that characterized this period in Hong Kong's economic development, and helped make Hong Kong manufacturing globally competitive.

Others, horrified by the tedium of the design, the density of the population, and the poverty of the environment in these estates, blamed the government for its bad housing policy. They also questioned the desirability of continuing along these lines while the economic prosperity of Hong Kong was growing rapidly.

Perhaps one of the reasons why this minimum housing was accepted was that the Resettlement Department was run by government employees with a great deal of administrative experience but no professional housing management training, no idea of the needs of the family, no knowledge of housing achievement and no housing vision.

Despite the vigorous resettlement programme, squatter housing did not disappear. Rather, it grew at a rate that was unparalleled in the history of Hong Kong. People of meagre income had very little opportunity of improving their housing conditions. Though a small number of low-cost housing estates were built, they fell far short of the demand, while some (early Housing Authority estates such as North Point Estate) had set a minimum income requirement for the applicants. Many low-income families were not even qualified to apply for these estates.

Overcrowding in the older estates soon became a serious problem. Tenants found it impossible to turn away family members, and other relatives newly arrived from the Mainland also needed help. Many were taken in on a temporary basis until they got

settled. In those difficult times, when working hours were so long, the basic need was to find somewhere to sleep rather than a permanent place to stay. There were always more people in the flats than had been registered or permitted, and the initial allocations of space at 24 square feet per adult and half for children soon fell, in practice, to an even lower figure.

Hawker control was certainly a major management problem in most estates, which usually had limited space assigned for regular stores. Hawkers supplied a wide range of goods from food of all kinds to clothing and simple kitchen hardware at minimum prices. Hawking also provided a full- or part-time occupation through which many households could supplement their income, and many hawkers were residents of the estates. Some estates were more affected than the others because the hawker bazaars attracted shoppers from adjacent built-up areas where circumstances did not offer hawkers the same opportunities to set up their stalls. Near anarchy ruled in many places. Triads and other petty criminals, and when they could, even some of the estate staff, tried to make a dishonest dollar by pressuring the hawkers.

In 1963, the government was convinced that its housing policy had to be revised. A year later, the government announced new policies concerning the provision of resettlement, and clearance and re-siting of squatters. The construction of resettlement estates was accelerated. For this reason, the resettlement blocks were soon to be built higher. Large-scale resettlement estates to house over 100,000 people, like Tsz Wan Shan and Sau Mau Ping Estates, appeared within years after the introduction of the new policy.

At the same time, more thoughts on residents' living conditions was incorporated in the new design of the estates. These resulted in the construction of Mark III blocks between 1964 and 1965, which were seven or eight storeys high. Their distinctive feature was that flats were built on both sides of the central corridor. 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 a few years later. The Mark IV, V, and VI blocks, constructed from 1965 onwards and similar in appearance, were generally sixteen storeys high equipped with lifts. Each flat had a private balcony, water tap, and finally, a private lavatory.

From 1970 onwards, the average living space per person increased to 35 square feet per adult. This brought it back to the level that had been mandated by the Public Health Ordinance of 1935 but widely ignored during the post-war housing crisis.

Shortly after, major changes were made in the provision of public housing and its management, resulting in the restructuring of the Resettlement Department, and the absorption of its staff and duties into the newly established Housing Department and Housing Authority in 1973.

The new governor, Sir Murray MacLehose, addressed the Legislative Council in October 1972 that the inadequacy and scarcity of housing and the harsh situations that result from it was one of the major and constant sources of conflicts between the government and the public. To remedy what he clearly considered to be an unsatisfactory situation, he announced a Ten-Year Housing Programme. Thereafter, all new estates would be designed and planned by the new Housing Authority's own architectural and other professional staff to criteria arising from the application of housing management principles and experience, rather than from the needs of the government's clearance operations.

The government finally showed its determination to treat housing as a major policy issue, twenty years after the great fire of 1953 which sparked off a resettlement programme in a scale hitherto unseen in any city elsewhere. The resettlement experience constituted one of the most important shared memories of "home" for many Hong Kong people who lived through the trying time before Hong Kong emerged as the financial hub with high-rise buildings we know today.