

Political Legitimacy and Housing

Stakeholding in Singapore

Chua Beng-Huat



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In memory of
Chua Teng Hoe and Robert S.Wong

The best stake we can give to Singaporeans is a house or a flat, a home. It is the single biggest asset for most people, and its value reflects the fundamentals of the economy.

Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister of Singapore

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Preface

For the citizens of the island-nation of Singapore, high-quality public housing is the single most important tangible material benefit derived from the impressive national macroeconomic growth over the past three and a half decades. Correspondingly, universal public-housing provision has been, and will continue to be, a foundation stone upon which the single-party dominant government of the People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore since its political independence in 1965, builds its legitimacy among Singaporeans. Housing has become a covenant between the people and the government in Singapore: a promise of continually upgraded housing units and environment in exchange for political support. This once unwritten agreement became the explicit campaign strategy of the PAP in the 1997 general elections.

Due to its strategic significance to the PAP government, the national public-housing programme in Singapore has acquired many features that are very dissimilar to more conventional programmes elsewhere. For example, instead of being relegated to the margin of a housing market which is dominated overall by private-sector developers, public housing is the primary mode of housing consumption in Singapore. The state public-housing agency, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), has close to a monopolistic hold on new housing supply in the market. Started modestly as an agency entrusted with building 1- and 2-room rental flats for the poor in 1961, the HDB had by the mid-1990s constructed more than half a million high-rise flats, housing more than 85 per cent of the three million population resident on the island. Furthermore, the small rental flats have largely been demolished, making way for larger flats which are offered as 99-year leasehold properties to the tenants, reflecting the increasing affluence of the population. With the overwhelming majority of the population residing in public-housing

estates, their satisfaction as housing consumers has become crucial to the popular political support for the ruling government.

The HDB is thus constantly seeking new ways to improve its services not only in housing design, but also in the development and maintenance of ancillary facilities in the housing estates. To fulfil this responsibility for the total housing environment, the HDB undertakes all the planning and design work of housing estates; only the actual construction is contracted to private construction companies. Thus, instead of being a permanently cash-strapped public agency awaiting grudging dispensation of public funds, the HDB is an agency with enviable delivery capacity because it is financially well endowed, first, by the proceeds it derives from the rental and sale of housing units, shops, and other ancillary facilities such as light industrial parks and factories, and, second, by a substantial annual grant from the government.

Concurrently, the government, through the Ministry of National Development, which oversees the HDB, is constantly finding new ways to accommodate any population segment that may have been excluded by existing rules from eligibility for the 99-year leasehold public housing. This facility results from very dynamic changes in the national economy and other changes in the financial circumstances of Singaporean families. Two commonly used strategies are: lowering the level of income above which people would qualify for public housing; and the introduction of different housing types for emergent social strata. Consequently, in principle, up to 90 per cent of the total population are eligible for public housing. This inclusive plan enables the government to distribute its subsidies to practically the entire population, with the exception of the top 10 per cent of income-earners, who in any case are not in need of subsidies. Property ownership is democratized rather than restricted to a small segment of the population. Being able to gain a share in this distribution of national wealth undoubtedly binds the people, in gratitude, to the government.

Unlike the marginalized sector that it is in almost all developed economies, therefore, public housing in Singapore is a very significant and dynamic sector of the national economy. Obviously, it is the largest player in the construction sector. It is also an arena in which almost every household in Singapore has a stake as property owners. The rules governing the buying and selling of the leases on the flats constitute an arena in which households could potentially make financial gains or build their financial assets. Through the leasehold arrangement, the government is able consistently to maintain a large supply of new housing within a tolerable margin of subsidy from the annual national

development budget. Thus, instead of being an economic bottomless pit of unrecoverable state capital expenditure in construction and maintenance, the public-housing sector is a substantial contributor to the dynamics and growth of the country's domestic economy.

Singapore's successful national public-housing programme stands as a significant exception to failures of social housing programmes in many other developed nations around the world. In the last few years, in addition to the much discussed British council housing, the list of failures can be extended to include European social democratic countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, as governments in these countries retreat from the extensive social-welfare programmes which have been built up since the end of the Second World War. In comparison with these numerous failures, Singapore's success has not gone unnoticed. The HDB and its housing estates are part of the public and international relations showcase of the Singapore government; the HDB is one of the national institutions which usually host visiting foreign dignitaries. Nevertheless, the programme remains largely neglected by public-housing analysts in particular and public-policy experts in general.

In many instances, no sooner is this success noted than it is dismissed as an interesting case but holding few lessons for other, larger nations because Singapore is only a small island-nation. Such dismissal is premature. That there are substantive lessons of policy to be learned is recognized by many governments who send their functionaries to the HDB for technical training in all aspects of the public-housing programme.

Analytic neglect may be partly due to the general perception that the long-ruling PAP government is essentially an authoritarian regime. Thus the impressive results in public-housing provision, as in other spheres of social and economic life, are deemed achievable only through repressive measures, and it is unlikely that such measures would be permissible in more democratic societies. Hence, it is argued, Singapore's success in this field would not provide a useful lesson for its more democratic counterparts in the developed world. Conceptually, however, while it is true that larger nations would not be able to control their populations as thoroughly as the PAP government controls the Singapore population, the underlying principles and practices of the latter's public-housing programme remain of comparative heuristic value. At the very least, understanding how the programme succeeds would point up where other systems of provision may have gone wrong.

Whatever the reasons for neglect may be, further analysis of the successful public-housing programme is made difficult by the dearth of substantive information about that programme. Indeed, given the high level of confidentiality maintained by most public agencies in Singapore, little is known of its operational details. Except for two commemorative volumes published by the HDB itself in 1985, in celebration of its 25th anniversary, little is known about the operations of the HDB. Without the requisite substantive information, it is of course difficult to place the successful programme within any theoretical discussions on public-housing issues.

My own interest in adding to existing information and discussion about the public-housing programme stems from the early 1980s, when I had an appointment as a research sociologist working within the HDB. As the head of the Social Research Section, I was in a position to observe at close range how the HDB functions as a highly integrated and effective organization. I was present at top management meetings where the range of issues that concerned the HDB management at that time were discussed. After leaving the HDB in 1985, I continued to work on planning teams with architects in private practice and involved in government-commissioned planning projects, and for a brief period taught courses in comparative public-housing policies at the Faculty of Architecture at the National University of Singapore. The cumulative experience gained from these related activities continues to inform the research issues that I have explored in this collection of essays.

I have therefore set out in this book, first, to provide additional substantive information on Singapore's public-housing programme. Second, drawing from the empirical information, I want to demonstrate that the underlying principles and practices of the successful programme bear comparative analysis with the successes and failures of other modes of public-housing provision in other nations. By placing the programme in comparative perspective, my third objective is to take part in the conceptualization of the field of 'housing study' as part of the larger examination of welfarism in capitalist societies. In this last concern, and pre-empting the detailed discussions in some of the chapters in this book, it is worth noting here, as a closing remark, that while all developed countries in western Europe and North America are entering a phase of retreat from welfarism, the PAP government in Singapore continues to expand public-housing provision, together with other collective consumption goods—and all within a vehemently anti-welfare rhetoric.

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In 1981, while on what I called a ‘filial piety’ visit to Singapore, my birthplace, I was offered a job by the public housing authority, the Housing and Development Board, to head the Social Research Section. That was the beginning of my research interest in architecture and housing. The man most instrumental for this beginning is Liu Thai Ker, then Chief Executive Officer cum Chief Architect of the Board. To him I owe much of my education about housing problems. In the course of my employment, many colleagues at the Board were instrumental in my learning about different aspects of the entire field of housing study. They include: Chong Kim Chang, Chief of Estate Management and subsequently Deputy Chief Officer; Tham Yew Fang and Phang Wong Yew, estate managers; Goh Hup Chor and Loh Swee Seng, architects; Lau Woh Cheong, planner; Lim Koon Poh, administrator; and fellow researchers in the Social Research Section.

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Introduction

Some necessary conditions for a successful public-housing policy

Inequalities in affordability, distribution and consumption of housing are intrinsic to market economies, reflecting the class structure of these societies. The multiple ways in which the market fails to provide adequate housing for all make state provision necessary, even if interventions are often undertaken reluctantly. Thus social housing becomes unavoidably a political commodity. State provision can take different forms: direct provision, subsidies in rent or mortgage, subsidies on cost of construction undertaken by private developers, concessions to developers on prices of state land in exchange for a proportion of low-cost housing, infrastructure upgrading of privately developed squatter areas, or a combination of these strategies. The actual shape of a particular state provision is largely determined by the ideological system of the nation in question, the balance of social political forces and economic contingencies at the points when specific policies were formulated. Hence the modes of provision are likely to be divergent across nations (Kemeny, 1992) and each mode is best explained historically.

Whatever the actual mode and strategies of intervention, the materially tangible and highly visible presence of good social housing is a powerful symbolic monument which testifies to the efficacy of the government in power and contributes significantly to its legitimacy to govern. In spite of this potential for accumulating political legitimacy, continuing shrinkage of social housing appears to be the norm in capitalist societies, as the fiscal crisis of welfarism deepens in the late twentieth century. Since the 1980s, retraction from social housing is increasingly acute throughout western Europe and North America, causing analysts (Cole and Furbey, 1994; Priemus, 1995) to predict that social housing is likely to be eliminated completely by the first decade of the twenty-first century.

PUBLIC HOUSING AND ITS FINANCING

Arguably, the greatest potential legitimacy that can be gained by a government is through direct provision of housing because its efforts and results would be most visible. To distinguish it from other modes of social housing, housing which is directly provided by the state will be nominally designated as 'public' housing. Yet direct provision is the exception rather than the rule. For example, in the European Union, Britain is the only country with a substantial portion of directly provided housing units; all the other member nations have other modes of financial subsidies to social housing (Power, 1993). Now even the British programme is under serious threat of extinction.

One reason for the demise of public housing in advanced capitalist nations lies in the definition of housing as a consumption good. According to Cole and Furbey (1994:3), the extensive British council housing programme 'has been hedged with contradiction, inconsistency and ambiguity from the outset', because, within capitalist Britain, housing remains a commodity which requires and promotes private ownership, rather than a social right. The hegemonic logic of private property dictates that public housing should be limited as a contingent response to market failures in providing affordable housing for all. Public housing is, therefore, always a residual and marginalized sector within the logic of the market. As a result, the changing depth of state participation in public housing over time is largely dependent on the shifting balances of political strengths between private developers and home owners against those who are marginalized or neglected by the market.

However, for its own political interests, ideally when a government undertakes to provide public housing, it should commit itself first and foremost to good housing in a good environment and affordable to the entire population. Theoretically, then, the best strategy to avoid marginalization or 'residualization' of public housing is through 'universal' provision: that is, a programme which, in principle, does not discriminate against anyone who wishes to avail themselves of the right to public housing. This argument for universal provision appears to be consistent with certain conceptual rethinking of welfarism.

The conventional logic of class politics requires working-class voters to vote, for both self- and class interests, for welfare expansion. However, in Britain, it was found that working-class individuals who are able to pay for their own consumption needs in essential goods and services are more inclined to vote against increased state welfare spending; conversely, those who are dependent on state subsidy tend to vote for welfare

expansion (Dunleavy, 1979). Home owners are thus inclined to vote against expansion of public housing, regardless of their class positions. Therefore, as with other 'collective consumption goods', it appears that the politics of public housing cuts across production class lines because of the presence of two modes of meeting similar needs; namely, a private-individualized mode and a social-collective mode. Accordingly, it has been conceptually extrapolated that social fissures across and within production classes could be avoided, and demand for public housing sustained, if housing provision were entirely socialized through universal provision by the state, thus removing much of the 'contradiction, inconsistency and ambiguity' of public-housing policies.

Indeed, the ideology of universal provision of social services was espoused in the immediate postwar years in Britain. However, unlike education and health care, it was never implemented in the case of housing (Cole and Furbey, 1994:64). Consequently, the division between private home ownership and public-housing provision has been allowed to continue favouring the former and marginalizing the latter through the politics of welfarism in a competitive commoditized housing market.

However, even if housing needs were ideologically institutionalized as a social right, problems of adequate provision would still not be readily solved. Without proper financing, provision problems may be aggravated. This is clearly illustrated by the history of state housing in the ex-socialist economies of eastern Europe, where housing was ideologically/legally instituted as a social right. It quickly became obvious that this right could not be implemented, because the artificially low rent levied for state-developed housing was so grossly disproportional to the cost of housing production that provision became a constant drain on national wealth. It is little wonder that, according to Szelenyi, socialist economic planners came to see housing as a 'returnless expenditure', 'a necessary evil to be minimized as far as possible' (1983:32). The burden of production cost has also contributed to the shrinkage of public-housing provision as part of the welfare package in developed capitalist nations. As in Britain, 'the single most important political consideration surrounding the welfare state over the last twenty years has been its cost' (Pierson, 1994:112).

Whereas the British case points to the marginalization of public housing in a capitalist market system, the ex-socialist case illustrates a lack of economic 'realism' regarding provision cost when the fiscal disciplinary effects of the market are completely absent. It seems, therefore, that a public-housing programme can hope to succeed only if it is rationalized within the disciplinary constraints of the market: that

is, it must be able not only to recover production cost in order not to become a constant drain on the national economy, but also to develop subsequent cycles of housing.

HOUSING TENURE

Grounded in their own housing history and experiences, British housing analysts, who have been said to be excessively concerned with issues of tenure (Sullivan, 1989:186), tend to equate public (council) housing with subsidized rental housing. For them, council rental housing has always been conceptually contrasted with privately developed owner-occupied housing—a dichotomy which sharply divides analysts into pro-council rental housing on the political left and pro-private home ownership on the right. This dichotomy also provided the ideological justification for the Conservative government, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, substantially to dismantle the council housing programme by instituting the ‘right to buy’ policy in the 1980s. This policy entitled sitting tenants of rental council housing to purchase the dwelling units at large price discounts. The result was that more than a million households changed their tenure status from renting to home-owning (Saunders, 1990). The ideological justification was, of course, also concurrently a cloak under which to subvert Labour-controlled municipal councils and concentrate power in central government (Cole and Furbey, 1994).

However, contrary to the British experience and argument, universal state provision with market discipline is neither intrinsically nor necessarily contradictory. The linkage between public provision and rental housing in any nation, as in Britain, is a historically contingent event and not a logical necessity. Conceptually, the mode of subsidy and the mode of tenure should be treated as two separate variables which may be correlated in many ways: for example, regardless of mode of subsidy, tenure can be either highly privatized or collectivized (Kemeny, 1992:108–26). Strictly speaking, universal state provision is primarily one of monopolization of supply of housing by the state to the entire population. This can be ideologically justified in terms of ensuring affordability of, at least, the first home to a family.

Once the monopolization of supply is secured, housing tenure is of lesser concern and can take different forms. State-built or public housing can be leased to tenants under different contractual terms, from monthly rental to long-term leasehold. In the latter case, leases can be traded in the open market in a commodified form through which owners are free to use or dispose of the leases as property rights. Therefore, long-term

leasehold home ownership and marketization of housing can remain relatively unhindered under the umbrella of direct state provision. Market factors will, in turn, enable state housing agencies to recover a substantial level of construction cost, within tolerable margins of subsidy, in order to continue the next cycle of new housing construction.

Severing the link between public housing and subsidized rental housing through long-term leasehold ownership also avoids a number of other issues that have plagued public-rental housing programmes. First, it avoids the stigmatization of rental housing and its residents, which made public housing unattractive both to newly formed families and to sitting tenants. The most extreme example of this is the ghetto effect that is prevalent in public housing in the United States. Second, without a market mechanism, allocation of public-rental housing is dependent on the discretion of bureaucrats at the housing authorities, which leaves applicants for public housing at the mercy of the different modes of bureaucratic corruption that were, for example, prevalent in ex-socialist eastern European states (Szelenyi, 1983; Paterson, 1975). A bureaucratic allocation system is thus correctly characterized as one which 'strengthens the power of service producers while disabling and stigmatising the consumers who are dependent upon them' (Saunders, 1990:356). With universal provision, allocation can be rationalized on the basis of first-come-first-served, without undue bureaucratic intervention. Third, maintenance costs of public-rental housing estates tend to be much higher than those which are owner-occupied. This is largely due to tenants' neglect of not only common areas, but also the dwelling units themselves; the underlying sentiment is, 'Why should people be expected to care for the symbols of their own social inferiority?' (Reade, 1982, quoted in Cole and Furbey, 1994:112). With marketization of long-term leases, pride of ownership can be restored to residents of public housing.

RESETTLEMENT AND REDEVELOPMENT

An initial obstacle to starting a public-housing programme has been the need to clear slums and squatters in order to gain access to land for new housing construction and related developments. This is certainly the case with contemporary developing societies: for example, in Southeast Asia, problems of slum clearance stand in the way of comprehensive urban planning in general and housing programmes in particular. It had been true also of the well-established programmes in Europe, which were first instituted in the early part of this century. For example, in Britain, almost four million people were evicted from slums between

1930 and 1939, another 600,000 dwellings were demolished in the decade between 1955 and 1965, and 'a further million had been destroyed through official slum clearance' by 1976 (Power, 1993:182 and 190). However, since the 1980s, in every major city in the United States, Australia and western Europe, municipal initiatives in urban renewal activities have, in the face of political and economic difficulties, been replaced by the process of 'gentrification' of inner-city, working-class and poor neighbourhoods. As gentrification is generally undertaken by private developers, displaced residents from the gentrified areas are often left with even less means of recourse than if they were affected by a municipal renewal scheme (Smith and Williams, 1986).

Two central problems in resettlement of households and individuals affected by slum clearance are disruption of the meagre livelihood of those affected, which is often tied to local marginal economic opportunities (*Environment and Urbanization*, 1994) and lack of adequate financial compensation and housing replacement, often leaving those affected just ahead of the bulldozer (Wilson, 1966). Mismanagement of these issues leads to the further marginalization of the underclass, often in spite of their initial enthusiasm for the prospect of improved housing compared with their existing conditions. As a result, evictions and settlement defence emerge as the overt characteristics of the political and economic problems of resettlement (Aldrich, 1985). The common legacy of resettlement failures is due partly to the legal difficulties of appropriating land under extant property legislation. A state's ability to appropriate land is in part dependent on its ability to mobilize political resources in order to override existing legal rights and obligations.

PUBLIC HOUSING AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

Successful resettlement of residents affected by slum clearance does not end with the replacement of housing. It extends to the adaptation of these people to new housing forms and housing environment. Determined largely by constraints on production cost and architectural and planning ideologies, new houses tend to be standardized throughout a neighbourhood, if not an entire estate. Resettlement into the standardized dwelling units radically alters the symbolic universe of the individual households (Cole and Furbey, 1994:111–12). Affected households, each with its own cultural practices in its previous home and environment, are expected to accommodate their different practices within the standardized provisions. In the process, many routine cultural practices have to be reworked into the new structure, while others are discarded.

The ability of an affected household to adjust is often hindered by restrictive regulations imposed by the housing authorities, not least of which are the values behind architectural designs and town-planning ideologies that are embedded and inscribed in the layout of the standardized housing units and the estates. For example, architectural modernism demands that facades of high-rise blocks should be maintained in uniform colours for visual, architectural aesthetics, thus reducing the residents' freedom to choose the colour of their dwellings. Moreover, structural elements of the building which determine the layout of housing units cannot be tampered with, thus reducing residents' ability to redeploy the allocated interior spaces. These restrictions make it difficult for affected households to break away from the monotony of standardized housing units and transform them into individualized 'homes', which reduces the chances of satisfactory readjustment by these households.

Resettlement also inevitably disrupts the community life of those affected. Successful resettlement should, therefore, include the re-establishment of a new residential community. Here again, the obstacles to community development that are erected by building design and estate planning have been well documented, especially in the case of high-rise estates in developed nations with temperate climates. High-rise, high-density environment has been generally cited as the cause of destruction of the community while simultaneously encouraging crime infestation (Coleman, 1985; for a cautiously more optimistic view, see Bulos and Walker, 1987). Critical antagonism towards high-rise estates has been iconically etched in the 1972 intentional implosion of blocks of buildings of the award-winning Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in St Louis in the United States (Wolfe, 1981:80–2). Indeed, as Power (1993:5 and 196) suggests, high-rise has come to symbolize the problems of mass housing in Europe, 'though only in France were a majority of social housing estates built in large multi-storey blocks'. Overall, community development in high-rise public-housing estates faces an uphill battle against existing critical opinions.

Critics of high-rise public-housing estates have often fallen, perhaps inadvertently, into the same architectural determinism with which they charge architects and planners. For example, criticism of high-rise environment is seldom tempered by comparison with other modes of housing in terms of community development. Evidently, upper-middle-class residents of detached or semi-detached housing on the ground in suburbia are no more community oriented than high-rise residents, on account of their housing design and neighbourhood planning. Indeed, failure of high-rise public housing is more often the result of the social

composition of residents rather than its physical structures, which are often superior to those of the slums which they replaced.

Nevertheless, the physical design and planning of the public-housing estates are obviously important factors in their ability to either obstruct or facilitate everyday-life cultural practices and community development. They are, however, not equally deterministic on both counts. As a rule of thumb, whereas architectural features can obstruct social communications (nothing obstructs communication better than a solid wall), they are unable to promote social exchanges. Ultimately, social exchanges remain human activities realizable only by the residents themselves. Thus architectural and planning features constitute, at best, the 'stage' within which individuals enact their lives, and cannot be held solely responsible for failures in community development in any environment.

Clearly, satisfying residents' community concerns will affect their overall appreciation of the public-housing environment. This, in addition to cultural adjustment to the dwelling unit itself, will in turn affect residents' sentiments towards the government and its agencies and the government's overall legitimacy to administer and govern.

THE PUBLIC-HOUSING PROGRAMME IN SINGAPORE

Although drawn largely from discussions on the British council system, the above features of public-housing provision can be gleaned from close examination of any operating public-housing programme. Differences between programmes are likely to be those of degree along similar dimensions, rather than of qualitatively different issues. The ability to find satisfactory solutions to the multidimensional problems—economic, social, cultural and political—under changing historical conditions will provide a significant political dividend to the ruling government, enhancing its legitimacy to govern. Given their general applicability, these features of public-housing provision should apply to the three decades of successful public-housing programme in Singapore that are examined in this book. Before we look at the details, a brief comment on the characteristic features of the Singaporean polity is in order, as they contribute significantly to the success of the housing programme itself.

Singapore, an ex-British colony, obtained its political independence by joining the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. However, differences between the island-state, with a Chinese majority, and the federal

government, dominated by Malays, led to Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965. Being a small island without any natural resources, it was not the wish of the leadership or the people to be an independent nation: rather, political independence was thrust upon Singaporeans. Deprived of the larger Malaysian market for its nascent industries, Singapore embarked on export-oriented industrialization and turned towards the global market. The economic success of this strategy is by now well documented and well known internationally.¹

Credit for the economic success of Singapore as an independent nation must be given not only to its people, but also to the government of the People's Action Party (PAP), which has governed Singapore since 1959 without interruption. The early history of the PAP's rise to power was dotted with instances of repression of dissent, such as the imprisonment of radical opposition leaders, the deregistration of radical labour unions, and the reorganization of labour under the government-sponsored National Trade Union Congress. In 1968, three short years after independence, the only viable opposition party at that stage, the Barisan Socialis, boycotted the general elections, leaving the PAP to win every seat in Parliament, and establishing its absolute hold on power (Bloodworth, 1986). For more than a decade, the PAP ruled without a single opposition Member of Parliament. Since 1981, there have been between one and four opposition members elected in each parliamentary session. As recently as the 1997 general elections, opposition parties managed to gain only two seats.

Critics continue to label the PAP government as an 'authoritarian' regime both because of its past history, and also due to the continuing presence of some less than democratic legislation. Nevertheless, the PAP does have a great deal of legitimacy among Singaporeans and there has been a high degree of ideological consensus between itself and the population, especially during the first twenty-five years of nationhood (Chua, 1995). This legitimacy is in very significant measure derived from the success of the PAP government in 'delivering the goods' to the people. The material life of the entire population has improved immensely as a result of successful economic policies. In a brief three and a half decades, Singapore has been transformed from a declining backwater trading post of the British Empire into an industrial economy that is highly integrated into global capitalism, with its citizens enjoying one of the highest standards of living in the world. The continuing popularity and legitimacy of the PAP government is built on this track record.

Among the benefits delivered by the PAP government is, of course, public housing, making Singaporeans among the best housed in the world. The comprehensively planned public-housing new towns, with all the amenities of modern urban living, stand as monuments to the economic success of the nation, and to the efficacy of the PAP government via the Housing and Development Board. This book is an examination of the different aspects which have contributed to this success, which is widely recognized and often studied for guidance, particularly by developing nations.

The policies responsible for this relative success are examined within existing conceptual discussions on the economics and politics of public housing, and also substantively in terms of the daily living experiences of the approximately 85 per cent of the three million Singaporeans who live in public-housing estates. On balance, substantive concerns are emphasized, with attention given to their conceptual significance for comparative analysis of public-housing policies.

The book opens with a broad analysis of Singapore's public-housing programme in comparison with those of the United States and the ex-socialist economies of central Europe. We look at the divergent ideologies of the three systems: the US programme typifies the free-market mode in which housing is a consumer good; the ex-socialist economies were ideologically committed to housing as a social right; while the Singapore programme avoids the pitfalls of the other two, and is able to institutionalize universal provision without eliminating the ability of market forces to exercise discipline on housing consumers. In order to locate the extensive housing programme within the city-state, in Chapter 2 we study the overall physical planning and management of the island, and in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 we examine in detail the process of resettlement from squatter and urban housing on the ground to high-rise flats. Adjustments to the latter house-form are viewed at the individual, household and community levels. Relatively successful adjustments at these levels in Singapore provide a significant contrast to the negative experiences with high-rise public housing in Britain and the United States. Drawing from the experiences of the resettled households, we attempt in Chapter 6 to develop a practicable concept of 'community' in a high-rise, high-density environment. In Chapter 7 we return to a theoretical level to look at the political credit that has accrued from the successful public-housing programme for the dominant single-party government of the People's Action Party, which has ruled Singapore throughout the thirty years of political independence. In the concluding chapter we shall see that even though Singaporeans receive public housing that is the

envy of the citizens in many other countries, the idea of 'community' in the old settlements that predate public housing continues to have deep cultural resonance in the nostalgic memories of contemporary Singaporeans, as they reflect on the stresses of daily life in a city that is very competitive in a globalized capitalism.

Chapter 1

Public-housing policies compared

United States, ex-socialist nations and Singapore

INTRODUCTION

In a world of nations replete with instances of failure to meet the housing needs of their respective citizens, Singapore's successful public-housing programme is one exception. The programme was initiated in 1960, a year after domestic self-government was gained from the British Colonial Office. Influenced by the social democratic ideology of its British-educated leaders, the newly elected government of the People's Action Party (PAP) launched the comprehensive housing programme as a covenant with its recently enfranchised electorate. The task was entrusted to the new public-housing authority, the Housing and Development Board (HDB). Since then, the HDB has been given extensive powers in all development work—land acquisition, resettlement, town planning, architecture design, engineering work, and building material production—but not in the actual construction of the buildings, which is undertaken by private construction firms. It is also responsible for the allocation of flats and, until recently, the management of all aspects of the housing estates.¹ In other words, it is responsible for the total management of the public-housing programme, except for setting the sales and rental prices of flats, which is undertaken by the Ministry of National Development.

The programme began modestly, providing basic rental units for the poor who were living in overcrowded urban shophouses and 'squatters' (settlements) at edges of the central business district. The latter areas were among the first to be affected by the physical rebuilding of Singapore, which eventually transformed the city into its present modern form

(Chua, 1989a). Construction activities proceeded very rapidly. After only one year spent in setting up the necessary bureaucracy, the second year saw the completion of more than 7,000 rudimentary flats, and more than 11,000 under construction (HDB, 1961). A large supply of new housing has been sustained on an annual basis ever since. Then, in 1964, the HDB introduced a 'home ownership' scheme, in which 'owners' purchased a 99-year lease on their flat instead of ownership in perpetuity. The leasehold arrangement separated the flat from the land. Under this scheme, land is retained by the state in inalienable public ownership, leaving it free to compensate and resettle any lessee if or when redevelopment becomes necessary. After three and a half decades, the HDB has completed more than half a million flats and a massive volume of related facilities—such as commercial spaces, recreational facilities and light industrial estates—all within comprehensively planned new towns. Currently, more than 85 per cent of the three million population live in public housing, of which about 85 per cent is 'owner-occupied'.

To extract the essential ingredients of the HDB's success, we will now compare analytically the mixed state-and-market system of providing public housing in Singapore with two other systems of housing provision: namely, the relatively free-market system of the United States and the state-controlled economy of socialist nations. Notwithstanding the fact that the once socialist states of eastern Europe are currently in the process of restructuring and integrating their economies into global capitalism, the mode of housing provision in the days of socialism remains conceptually a system in its own right. As a model, it retains its heuristic value. Knowing why it failed may contribute significantly to the successful formulation of public-housing programmes elsewhere.

THE THREE MODES OF PROVISION

The three public-housing programmes to be compared may be placed on a continuum with reference to the role of the market mechanism in their respective housing sectors. At one end is the United States, characterized by dominance of the market, with little government intervention (Hartman, 1983:4) and government provision restricted to specific groups that are not adequately served by the market itself. At the other end is the ex-socialist nations, where the market mechanism was eliminated in principle, housing was ideologically instituted as a natural right—'not a market commodity; and its production and distribution should not be a means of unearned income' (Szelenyi,

1983:28)—and the state was ideologically committed to universal provision. Between these two ends is the credible notion of a mode of provision that reduces the role of the market without eliminating it and which aims at universal provision without raising it to the level of rights or entitlement. Such is the public-housing policy of the Singapore government. The following analysis will begin with the free-market strategy, followed by the socialist mode. Failures at these two extremes will serve to highlight the success of the middle path.

United States: free play of the market

Housing for Americans has improved significantly since the Second World War, largely through a filtering-down process in which the government had at best a marginal role (Weicher, 1982:27; Kain, 1983). Indeed, it is one of the most convincing cases for free-market provision of housing (Nesslein, 1988). However, even those who are enthusiastic about free-market provision readily agree that the poor remain inadequately housed (Nesslein, 1988:102). Under the 1937 US Housing Act, the federal government had subsidized, via local housing authorities, direct construction of public housing.² Nevertheless, the total output of 1.1 million dwelling units in the forty years following the inception of the programme was marginal relative to the housing needs of low-income groups (Weicher, 1982:34). In 1968, Congress set a target to build and rehabilitate, with public subsidies, 6 million dwelling units that were needed for low- and moderate-income families. This target was missed by a wide margin; even by conservative estimates, 3.8 million households remained in substandard housing a decade later (Weicher, 1982:17).

Persistent relegation of the poor to substandard housing is a consequence of the US federal government's dependence on the market to provide housing for the entire nation. In addition to an ideological commitment to a free market, the government's reluctance to provide public housing may be due partly to negative experiences with conditions in public-housing estates themselves. To an American, the demolition in 1972 of the barely twenty-year-old, architecturally acclaimed Pruitt-Igoe high-rise projects in St Louis symbolizes all that is wrong with public housing. Three factors have been identified: poor quality, inadequate maintenance and the social climate of public-housing estates. These factors are, in turn, some of the consequences of financing policies and of restricting tenancy conditions to the lowest-income groups that are variously socially disadvantaged.

Financially, the federal government paid for the capital cost of construction, while local housing authorities had to operate the programmes from the rent derived. This was a viable arrangement as long as the housing units were fully occupied and rent could be readily collected from stable tenant households, which was the case from the late 1930s to the early 1950s (Meehan, 1979:59; Wright, 1982). However, there was an intrinsic ideological weakness in the federal funding programme: 'the prime goal of federal policy was to exclude from public housing anyone with enough income to obtain housing in the private market' (Meehan, 1979:23). Since income ceilings for eligibility for public housing were determined by rent levels, real estate interests, who were against direct public-housing provision, sought to ensure that minimum possible levels were used. Consequently, families with stable and above minimum incomes were forced out of public-housing estates, leaving behind only those who were unable to meet simultaneously their rents and daily necessities.³

Over time, public-housing estates increasingly became concentrations of the underclass: the black, the elderly, the female household head with children, the unemployed and the unemployable. Rent collection proved more and more difficult—indeed, impossible. Furthermore, until 1972, no effective operational subsidies were granted to local housing authorities, which had to survive on dwindling rent collection and rising costs. Under this income-cost squeeze, instead of being benevolent public-housing agencies, local housing authorities were forced to act like slum landlords: that is, to increase rent, defer maintenance and reduce services. The outcome was gloomily summarized by Meehan (1979:35): 'a ghastly landscape of mutilated buildings, broken glass, empty apartments, abandoned automobiles, litter and garbage; a wasteland hostage to the criminal, vagrant, truant, and street gang; a hazard to the passerby; and a nightmare to the resident'.

Ironically, such disasters did not occur cheaply. Without any statutes to govern land cost for public housing, or restraints on profits for the building trades—including tax exemptions on interests for public-housing-bond investors—public-housing estates were very expensive failures indeed. The various subsidies have been estimated to add up to almost US\$6,000 per year for each unit of public housing through the 1970s (Weicher, 1982:60). In spite of the cost, only a small fraction of target households were placed in public housing (Weicher, 1982:62). This 'failure' intensified proposals for replacing direct provision by rent subsidies, in the face of a projected massive shortfall in rental housing stock for the 1980s (Downs, 1983). In fact, a much larger rent supplement

programme has always run alongside direct state construction. Details of the programme change with time, but in essence it requires the federal government to pay the difference between the rent which a needy family can afford out of its own income and the market rent charged by private landlords. Everyone who is involved in the production of housing obviously favours this programme (Weicher, 1982:33)⁴ because it leaves all the profit-making opportunities for the real-estate industry largely undisturbed: that is, the market is free to determine land prices, cost of housing units and rent.

The effect of the market on the existing condition of rental housing in the United States can be readily observed. According to Kain, in the 1970s several market factors made home ownership more attractive to an increasing number of renters:⁵

Their shift to the owner market has reduced the demand for rental housing, making it difficult for landlords to raise rents enough to keep pace with higher operating and capital costs. The decline in real rents, moreover, has reduced the value of rental properties, inducing landlords to convert owner-occupied units. Record-high mortgage rates have now all but halted new rental housing construction...new construction will not occur until market rents reach levels that justify private investment, or until the government provides subsidies that reduce the cost or increase the profitability of rental housing.

(1983:146)

What Kain describes is but the manifest effect of the structural contradictions between landlords and renters. Suppose, for instance, the potential yield of money on the capital market is 15 per cent per annum, and suppose that there is an abundance of low-income rental units in a particular city and that the rate of return is 5 per cent. Then, a rational landlord strategy is to reduce maintenance, milk properties of value, and actively disinvest, using the money so extracted on the capital market where it earns, say, 15 per cent. With declining maintenance, housing deteriorates in quality and eventually the worst units will be taken out of use—scarcity is thus successfully reproduced. Rent will gradually rise until the 15 per cent rate of return is obtained. 'If tenants are politically weak, with rising rent eating into an already limited disposable income, low-income tenants can respond only by subdividing space with the inevitable consequences—overcrowding and slum formation' (Harvey, 1983:254–5).

The problem of housing for the poor was exacerbated by declines in rental-housing stock due to demolition, condominium conversion,⁶ abandonment and, most importantly, lack of new housing start-up. Arguably, gains made by the poor in the fifty years since the enactment of the first Housing Act by Congress in 1934 had been threatened by absence of new housing construction since the early 1980s (Sternlieb and Hughes, 1983). Subsequently, housing policies under the anti-welfarist Reagan administration led to a crisis in homelessness (Hartman, 1983:1–3), which became a serious blight in every American city by the late 1980s (Rossi, 1989) and remains so today.

Given the underlying structural conflict, trying to solve the housing problem for the poor through rent subsidies appears misplaced (Kain, 1983:147). Recognition of the structural conflict leads radical analysts to call for ‘decommodification’ of housing in America (Hartman, 1983; Achtenberg and Marcuse, 1983), which, as we shall see, has its own problems. For now, it should be noted that public housing failed in the United States not as a result of direct state provision, but because of (1) high costs of land and production due to profit maximization by all actors involved in the market-based economic organization of housing activities, and (2) restrictive allocation, which leads to concentration of the lowest-income groups, thus creating serious financial difficulties for local housing authorities.

European socialism: total decommodification

Total decommodification of housing was formally instituted in eastern Europe after the socialist revolution. According to Szelenyi (1983:45): ‘As it developed in the late 1940s, the socialist system was based on these principles: housing should not be market merchandise; therefore its rent need not necessarily be strictly related to housing quality; rent should be a very modest item of household expenditure; within the limits of economic growth, families should have a natural right to healthy, modern, self-contained housing, and they should receive it as distribution in kind, independent of their rent-paying capacities.’ In other words, the state was to assume universal provision of housing in order to reduce existing inequalities that it inherited as a legacy of its prehistory. Such a comprehensive position was consistent with socialist commitment to collective ownership. However, this ideologically motivated position was far from implemented.

Szelenyi points out that, for example, contrary to the scale of construction required by the stated policy of universal provision, total production of

new housing in Hungary in the first half of the 1950s was far less than in the previous three decades (1983:30). According to him, the reasons for the underproduction were fourfold. First, rent return was minuscule relative to capital resources committed to housing construction. Second, tenants who were allocated public housing were able to realize high proportions of savings and improve their levels of preferential consumption; in mid-1950s Hungary, it meant 'eight to ten years ahead along the road to consumer security' (Szelenyi, 1983:34). Hence, once secured there was no motivation to move out of public housing. Third, without residential mobility, new housing start-up was constantly required to meet fresh demands, demands that were relentless because, in principle, everyone was entitled to decent housing. Finally, as rent was marginal, new constructions meant a constant drain on the national economy, leading socialist economic planners to see 'housing as a "returnless expenditure", a necessary evil to be minimized as far as possible' (Szelenyi, 1983:32). Thus industrial development, which generated 'profitable' returns, inevitably received priority in fiscal allocation.

As actual housing output was kept to the minimum, the proportion of public housing in the total housing stock kept decreasing (Musil, 1987:27). Competition for the advantages of rented public housing was very high, rendering the bureaucratic mechanism for distribution vulnerable to pressures from different groups. The politically least influential were inevitably left out of allocation. Analysing the 1960s housing condition, Szelenyi found that half of the higher bureaucrats and salaried intellectuals lived in state rental apartments; on the other hand, half of the unskilled worker households had to finance their own homes with their lower incomes, private savings and interest payments on privately obtained bank loans. His conclusion is that in socialist countries, '[p]ublic policy thus provides that, on average, the richer classes get better housing for less money and effort, while the poorer classes get worse housing at the cost of more money or effort, or both' (1983:63).

There appeared to be two main causes for the housing inequality. First, low supply of state housing was unable to match demand. Evidence drawn from the 1970s in Poland, a period of relatively large supply of public housing, indicated that when supply was substantial, social status was a less significant factor than household demographics in housing allocation (Musil, 1987). To the extent that lower-income groups tend to have larger families, the implication is that with increased supply there is greater equality in allocation, even if basic structural inequalities still obtained (Musil, 1987; Szelenyi, 1987). Second, there was an absence of a market mechanism to tie quality of housing to tenants' ability to pay. Hence, once allocated state

housing at a nominal rent, a household would have no motivation to move unless it was to better housing at the same cost. Indeed, the Hungarian government accepted in principle that rent must reflect quality of housing from 1971 onwards, but did little to implement it (Szelenyi, 1983:77). From the evidence drawn from Hungary and Poland, it should be obvious, therefore, that complete decommodification, as desired by radical American analysts, is likely to lead to consistent underfunding by the state in housing, resulting in scarcity and inequality.

Singapore: mixing decommodification with market universal state provision

Judging by the failure of both the free-market and the no-market systems, it seems that a national housing programme, intent on providing decent housing for all, should at least have the following features:

- 1 There must be an ideological/political commitment to universal provision.
- 2 Housing should be decommodified to a significant extent but the market should not be eliminated completely, so as to ensure a substantial return on the state's financial output that will, in turn, ensure subsequent cycles of new construction. Where subsidies are necessary, commitment to universal provision means that the state will periodically have to top up the housing budget.
- 3 Subsidies must be differentiated according to housing classes to ensure that the more needy receive greater direct subsidy. This means that rent return on public housing must be proportional to the quality of housing and the tenants' ability to pay.
- 4 To achieve the 'filtering down' effect within the public-housing sector, residential upgrading among public-housing consumers should be encouraged, thereby improving the quality of housing for all in the long term.
- 5 Finally, and crucially, financial resources for housing construction must not be dependent on competition with the financial demands of other sectors of the economy.⁷

Singapore's housing policies have, over the past thirty years, evolved into a system which contains much that is inherent in these features. This arguably may be the basis of its success, rather than any other incidental elements unique to the city-state. Admittedly, there are certain advantages to being a city-state, the most significant, where housing

provision is concerned, being the absence of both uncontrollable rural-urban migration and multiple levels of government, each with its own 'housing' policies.

First, the PAP government in Singapore is committed to universal provision of public housing; the eligibility income ceiling for lease ownership is reviewed and raised periodically, in step with economic growth, to include up to 90 per cent of the households in the country.⁸ This commitment is, in part, ideologically motivated by the PAP's belief that home ownership, in giving the people a greater stake in the nation, will induce in them a greater measure of nationalism. However, unlike in the socialist system, this belief does not extend to regarding the level of housing as a natural entitlement or right.

Although financially supported by public funds, the HDB behaves like any private developer. It is free:

- to set guidelines of eligibility for the range of apartment-types that it produces;
- to draw up standardized contractual terms with applicants/lessees which entertain no individual variations; and
- to determine the level of new housing start-ups, depending on the length of the waiting list, which it uses as a measure of housing demand.

Allocation is on a first come, first served basis. The waiting time for a flat has been consistently reduced with each subsequent five-year building programme, and can be as short as one and a half years for less popular estates. The only restraints on the HDB are political, imposed by the government and motivated by the latter's interest in continuing its legitimacy to govern. This is a question that we shall address in a later chapter.

Decommodification

Second, decommodification of public housing is obvious in two of the systems's features. The more crucial of the two features is decommodification of land necessary for public housing. The 1966 Land Acquisition Act empowers the government to acquire any land that is deemed necessary in the interest of national development, with the rate of compensation fixed by the statute itself. For example, a 1973 amendment to the Act allowed the state to compensate owners of acquired land at the 1973 market value or at the date of notification, whichever was lower. In determining the 'market' value, either existing use or zoned use was considered, whichever was lower; no consideration was given

to the potential value of the land for any intensification of use. The main reasons for paying the excessively low prices were to curb land speculation and to limit the cost of acquisition. The government knew that the Act violated common laws governing property rights, and there was no absence of critics (Koh, 1967). However, in the straight-speaking official language of the HDB: The majority of the acquired private lands comprised dilapidated properties or neglected land where squatters had mushroomed. The government saw no reason why these owners should enjoy the greatly enhanced land values over the years without any effort put in by them' (Wong and Yeh, 1985:41). In a land-scarce city-state, this draconian land policy effectively cut down speculation because every land holding was constantly vulnerable to government acquisition. The 1973 compensation rate was not adjusted upward until 1986, when the government deemed that it had already sufficient land banked for development purposes. By 1995, it started to pay the market rate for all future acquisition.

In addition to the draconian land policy, the prices of flats were removed from market determinism. With more than 90 per cent of existing households eligible and 85 per cent of them already in public housing, the HDB is virtually the monopolistic provider of housing for the nation. With monopolization, the market ceased to be a mechanism in determining the prices of new flats produced by the HDB. Prices are now fixed by the government with reference to the general state of the economy and levels of affordability for different types of flats. This price-fixing had led to artificially low prices during the first decade of the leasehold-ownership scheme. Selling prices set in 1964 were not adjusted until 1974 and rentals not until 1979, although per capita GNP grew annually through those years. The result was a dire need to adjust prices upwards by about 40 per cent in the early 1980s, spurring a rush of applicants who were afraid that sharp increases would be the way of the future. However, since then, price increases have been rationalized and adjusted annually.

Subsidies

Third, in terms of subsidies, until the 1987 budget statement, land costs to the HDB were not reflected in the selling prices of the flats. Only the aggregate subsidy for the difference between the construction costs and the selling prices for different types of flats was reflected.⁹ Several regulations ensure a more equitable distribution of the subsidies. In the range of public-housing flats, from 1-room flats to 5-room split-level

executive maisonettes, the 1-room and 2-room flats are exclusively for rent and 3-, 4- and 5-room flats exclusively for sale; the smaller the flat, the greater the subsidy.¹⁰ (Given the greatly improved economic conditions of Singaporeans, the rental flats are being demolished for lack of takers and the construction programme now builds only 4- and 5-room flats.) To ensure that lower-income groups were not edged out of smaller flats, an income ceiling for each type of flat was imposed; for example, only households with less than S\$800 monthly income were permitted to rent, and households whose incomes exceed S\$ 1,500 were not permitted to buy 3-room flats, but had to purchase more expensive flat types. However, in order to encourage households to upgrade—and since it appears that higher-income groups are unlikely to purchase small flats—the income ceilings for sales flats by flat type have been removed.

Compulsory savings and mortgage financing

Fourth, financial resources needed by the government for public-housing construction and those required by the people for housing consumption come essentially from the same source: namely, the state-managed, employees' compulsory social security savings fund, the Central Provident Fund (CPF). Availability of this CPF makes possible a closed circuit of housing funding and consumption, which does not compete with capital demands in other sectors of the economy.

Instead of a conventional general pension plan which pools contributions from the economically active in order to redistribute it to pensioners, the British colonial government instituted the CPF in 1955. Under the scheme, an employee is compelled by statute to save a certain percentage of his or her monthly income and the employer is required to contribute the same rate to the former's savings. The CPF is thus a tax-exempt compulsory savings fund where 'an individual's total benefits are equal to his total contribution plus interest credited into his account' (Lim *et al.*, 1986:1). Indicative of the rapid economic growth of Singapore since self-government in 1959, membership in the CPF rose from 180,000 to 1,847,000 in 1984. The rate of contribution for both the employee and employer steadily increased, from 5 per cent in 1955 to 25 per cent in 1984, while the contribution ceiling was raised from S\$300 a month in 1971 to S\$2,500 in 1984. Contributions received by the CPF increased from S\$9 million in 1955 to S\$5,386 million in 1984. During the 1985–7 mini-recession, the employer's contribution was reduced to 10 per cent, but increased steadily as the economy turned around, reaching 20 per cent in 1995. Henceforth, the rate is to be allowed to fluctuate

according to the general health of the economy, thereby acting as a wage-regulating mechanism.

The huge national savings in the CPF constitutes the bulk of the national capital formation. It has enabled the government to build up a hefty foreign reserve, which by the mid-1990s stood at over S\$100 billion. A portion of this reserve goes towards continuing investment in public housing and urban infrastructure, with the remainder invested by law in government securities that are used to capitalize government-owned companies in strategic industries and in equity holdings overseas by the Government Investment Corporation (Castells, Goh and Kwok, 1990:175 and 181). For the purpose of our present discussion, the most significant point is that as a source for financing public-housing construction, the CPF allows the government to draw directly from the savings of the people rather than have to compete for expensive loans from commercial financial agencies or funding instruments.

On the consumption side, the very high CPF savings rate has had a tremendous effect on the 99-year lease-ownership programme. When the programme was introduced in 1964, only about 1,500 households out of then 11,000 public-housing tenants opted for ownership. Then in 1968, residents were allowed to utilize their CPF savings to purchase the lease. The 20 per cent down-payment may be drawn from the accumulated CPF and monthly mortgage payments deducted directly from monthly savings, thus making it possible for a family to own a flat for a period of 99 years without suffering any reduction in monthly disposable income. With this facility, and the fact that the substantial savings can be spent immediately on housing or withdrawn only at retirement, public-housing ownership soared (Pugh, 1985). In 1968 alone, 44 per cent of all public-housing applicants elected to 'buy' their flats. By 1970, 63 per cent applied to buy, and in 1986 the figure reached 90 per cent.

The CPF, therefore, constitutes a closed circuit of monetary transfer within the public-housing sector. The huge fund is used to purchase government bonds that are used in part to finance loans and subsidies to the HDB. The HDB is, in turn, able to act as the mortgagee for all the households living in public-housing flats. Consequently, it is the largest mortgagee in the nation. The CPF then acts on behalf of its members and pays the HDB via direct deductions from members' monthly contributions. The entire process constitutes an internal transfer, with favourable terms of interests on loans for all parties, and without involving any of the conventional banking processes (Lin and Tyabji, 1987).

In 1981, the use of the CPF was extended to cover mortgaging of private-sector housing, and this also led to the rapid expansion of home ownership. As a result, Singaporeans are among the best-housed populations in the world. So much so, in fact, that concerns have been voiced by critics that the scheme may have succeeded a little too well insofar as it has encouraged overconsumption of housing and may leave many households with few resources on which to live out their retirement years (Lim *et al.*, 1986; Wong and Yeh, 1985:232–4).

Market forces and the upgrading/filtering process

Finally, to stop residents from gaining undue advantage by sitting on low-rent public-housing flats, as in the ex-socialist economies, housing consumption is tied exclusively to ability to pay. The type of flat rented or purchased is dependent entirely on what the household itself can afford; no other measure of needs is considered. Consumers must pay for their choices. Here is where the market first enters the system. It motivates families to upgrade their housing consumption as their economic circumstances change for the better, leading to the filtering down of older housing stock to the lower-income groups.

This upgrading/filtering process has been developing well since 1970, ten short years after the public-housing programme began. In the 1980s, between 10,000 and 12,000 households moved annually from rental accommodation to their own flats, or from smaller to larger flats, and even to private housing with prices on average three times that of same-sized public-housing flats (Wong and Yeh, 1985). At the other end of the scale, prices of old 3-room flats have fallen significantly below the new, larger 3-room flats, making them affordable to the lower-income groups. For example, for the first eight months of 1995, 3-room flats constituted 41 per cent of the total resale transaction (*Straits Times*, 30 September 1995). With the sustained rate of upgrading—reflecting sustained national economic growth since 1960—the HDB stopped building 3-room flats in 1987 and began to demolish 1-room and 2-room flats.¹¹ Since then, the smallest new flat constructed is the 4-room flat, with three bedrooms, a sitting room, and kitchen and toilet facilities, which is considered the basic minimum for a family of four.

The very impressive upgrading/filtering process is directly encouraged by, and is a consequence of, the HDB's resale policy. After five years of occupancy, a lease owner is entitled to resell it to anyone eligible for public housing, at a price that is agreed upon between themselves, without HDB intervention. The vendor keeps all capital gains, tax free, and, in turn, is

permitted to apply for a new upgraded flat with the proceeds of the sale, or move downward and realize significant financial gains. Here market forces are allowed their full impact in determining the resale values of the flats. Each household is entitled to do this just once; if it chooses to sell its second public-housing flat, it must move into the expensive private sector. Public housing is thus an investment good. The resale mechanism has given the masses in Singapore opportunities to build up equity, instead of being excluded completely from real-estate investments, as in other nations (Saunders, 1990). The upgrading/ filtering process also benefits the HDB because the overall construction subsidy is reduced as larger room-types are subsidized at a progressively reduced rate.

The 99-year lease-ownership scheme has proved to be one of the strengths of the public-housing programme: income derived from the sale, rent collected from commercial and industrial premises, and revenues from ancillary services, like car parks and markets, combine to ensure a very substantial return from public-housing and attendant infrastructure investments. This return is then ploughed back into each new cycle of housing production. The result is that only a margin of government subsidy is required—about 2 per cent of the annual national development budget estimates since 1975 (Wong and Yeh, 1985:501). This subsidy is covered by a combination of government grants and long-term loans to the HDB at low interest.

CONCLUSION

It should now be apparent that the Singapore mode of direct public-housing provision is vastly different from both the US market-dependent system, in which rent subsidies become profits for landlords, and the socialist system, where absence of returns on capital resulted in stoppage of public-housing construction. The Singapore system, which combines strategies of decommodification with a limited role for the market, appears to have satisfied the conditions that are arguably necessary for a public-housing programme which can successfully upgrade the housing condition of the entire nation. This success has been lauded as 'an achievement of world significance' (Lea, 1987:196) and as an 'unorthodox success' (Pugh, 1987).

However, questions as to whether the programme could be successfully replicated elsewhere have also been raised (Van Vliet, 1987). The analysis undertaken in this chapter has demonstrated how Singapore's programme may be located within the theoretical possibilities specified by a comparative framework. Conceptually, it enables us to understand all three systems and allows for certain questions of replication

to be answered. This is especially so not only for ex-socialist nations of eastern and central Europe, but also for the remaining socialist nations in Asia, such as China and Vietnam. In all these nations, the commitment to universal housing provision can conceivably be continued within a restructured economy, as the Singapore case shows that universal provision and a capitalist economy are not incompatible.

Also, an important contributing element in the Singapore programme is the decommodification of land. This has, in principle, already taken place in all the socialist nations because the state in principle holds most, if not all, of the land. Singapore's strategy of housing provision should, at least, be given serious consideration and modified application. Indeed, analysts of housing in these countries (Szelenyi, 1983; Tosics, 1987) are calling and searching for a mixed state-and-market mechanism to resolve mounting housing problems. Significantly, some level of recommodification is already under way in some cities in the People's Republic of China (Forbes and Wilmoth, 1986:81).

On the other hand, Singapore's strategy is unlikely to be considered by nations which are ideologically, unreservedly committed to letting the market provide housing for the nation. For them, direct universal provision of public housing will always be ideologically unthinkable, being rationalized as financially too costly to build and maintain. They will, therefore, continue to ignore such a strategy both in principle and in practice, leaving a significant portion of the population poorly under-sheltered or unsheltered.

Chapter 2

From city to nation

Planning Singapore

Founded as a trading post of the English East India Company during the expansionist phase of British mercantile capitalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century (1819), Singapore has always been a planned city. Its land-use pattern had historically concentrated on developing trading and port facilities. The trading economy had by the late 1950s resulted in high rates of unemployment and underemployment. The immediate task of the newly elected government—initially charged exclusively with management of domestic affairs in 1959 and subsequently as a fully independent government in 1965—was to industrialize. The colonial land-use pattern had to be reordered to accommodate the projected needs of an industrial economy and a rapidly growing population. The entire island had to be brought into the planning process, and spatial allocation for all the activities, including public housing, that are essential to a ‘nation’ had to be rationalized. For a sense of where and how the public housing programme fits into the comprehensive concept plan of the island as a ‘nation’, this chapter will briefly chart the planned transformation of the island.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE CENTRAL AREA

Commercial developments

Singapore was a location for the exchange of merchandise from Europe, India and China, and a market for the produce of the Malayan Archipelago, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia (Wong, 1961:160). The early entrepot trade (Chiang, 1963) of colonial Singapore spawned a sophisticated merchant community with the requisite banking and finance facilities and a high level of entrepreneurial skill. This was reflected in

the eightfold expansion of trade between 1824 and 1872. By the end of the nineteenth century, export of rubber and tin from the then British Malaya was added to the entrepot trade, and the trading community further prospered.

Reflecting the trading interests, planned development was initially confined to an area around the mouth of the Singapore River and along the waterfront. When the first town plan was drawn up in 1822, three years after Singapore's founding, an area of swamp on the east bank of the river mouth was drained, filled and designated as the Commercial Square—renamed Raffles Place in 1853. On the opposite bank were sited the colonial administrative buildings. From the mid-1800s, and becoming more pronounced after the turn of the century, trading houses, commercial banks and retail establishments, particularly large department stores which catered to the Caucasian population, jostled for space in Raffles Place. Land on the waterfront was reclaimed from the sea at different times between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Within two years of the first reclamation in 1858, buildings housing European traders covered the entire seafront. Each was a 2-storey building with a piece of wharveside to facilitate the unloading of merchandise directly from the boats into the warehouse on the ground level and an open verandah-office on the second floor.

The preferred wharveside location of European traders was indicative of the importance of good port facilities to the entrepot trade. By 1852, the Peninsular and Orient (P&O) shipping company had established its own harbour facilities about two miles from Raffles Place, to avoid congestion in the Singapore River area. In 1864, the first docks were completed in Tanjong Pagar (Bogaars, 1956). This was given additional impetus by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and, later, a dramatic increase in demand for natural rubber for tyre production, to feed the mass production of motor cars in the United States. To handle increases in traffic of the international steamer and export trade, dock facilities had to be modernized. Since the private enterprise which owned the Tanjong Pagar dock was unwilling to undertake the necessary upgrading, its docking facilities were expropriated by the colonial government. The appropriated facilities formed the nucleus of the current extensive Keppel Harbour. Meanwhile, further land reclamations on the waterfront were carried out in the early 1880s and in 1910. With the harbour developments and the reclamations, warehouses began to disappear from the waterfront, and were replaced by commercial buildings consisting of offices, banks and retail establishments. By 1930, few of the original 2-storey buildings were left. The Depression, followed by the Japanese

occupation during the Second World War, imposed an extended moratorium on development. Redevelopment activities rebounded in the early 1970s when the area was gazetted as the first site for commercial urban renewal. This gave vent to the suppressed vigour that befits a central business district. The result is the contemporary wall of modernist corporate towers on the waterfront which, along with Raffles Place, constitute Singapore's premier commercial centre (Chua, 1989a). An example of an institution which embodies the entire process is the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. It first purchased and demolished the existing warehouse-office for the site of its first office in 1890, which was then demolished and replaced with a more imposing structure and intensified use of the site in 1919. This, in turn, was replaced by the present modernist building in the early 1970s.

Residential developments

In residential land use, the 1822 town plan allocated to each ethnic group a specific district surrounding the commercial area (see Figure 2.1). The European community of colonial administrators, merchants and bankers were, of course, allocated and resided in the best-drained area next to the administrative precinct, with a wide swathe of flat land at the seafront, the esplanade, for their recreation and promenade. The rapidly expanding Chinese immigrant population was relegated to a 'Chinatown', an area on the south bank of the Singapore River and adjacent to Commercial Square. The small indigenous Malay population, along with other Muslims—notably, a small but commercially successful Arab population—were resettled along the east coast beyond the town limits, on the assumption that they would continue their occupation as fishing people. A small area adjacent to Chinatown was relegated to a then small Indian trading community, showing no anticipation of subsequent significant immigration from South Asia (Hodder, 1953, figure 1).

The expanding population of new immigrants from China, the Malay Archipelago and South Asia were inclined to inhabit either their respectively allocated areas or parts of the central area where employment opportunities could be found. For example, take the Chinese community living in urban shophouses.¹ The ground floor was used as retail or artisan space and the upper floors as residential space, which were without exception divided and subtenanted to accommodate increasingly more inhabitants. However, instead of breaking out of the designated boundaries, new immigrants congregated within it, creating increasing squalor and hazards in the city area. Congestion and deterioration of

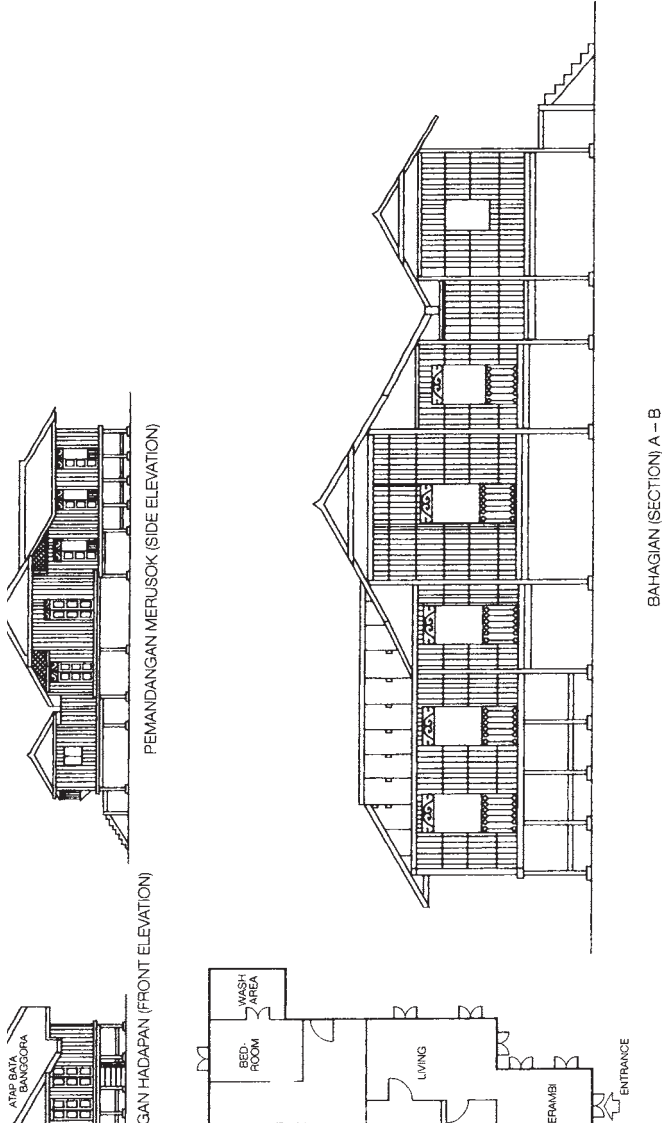


Figure 2.1 Proposed racial groupings in Singapore c. 1828, redrawn from a plan by Lt P.Jackson, showing the recommendations of Town Committee (Source: Courtesy of the Raffles Museum, Singapore; Hodder, 1953)

public health conditions were intensified by the colonial policy of providing public utilities only in the central area (Kaye, 1956).

It was not until the late 1880s that the original ethnic distribution pattern was disrupted. By then, the European community had begun to move inland on to higher ground in order to escape the squalid conditions of the central area. This suburbanization process was influenced by the Garden City ideology, which was then popular among the emerging middle class in England (Edwards, 1990). The Chinese moved into the space they left behind and began to put pressure on the adjacent Muslim population. In 1927, Malay leaders petitioned and obtained from the colonial administration one of four concessions of land for exclusive Malay settlements. One was in the north-east called Jalan Eunus, which remains today as part of the 'traditional' Malay area of Geylang Serai. The expanding Chinese population also moved west, in step with the various stages of development of the harbour, after the opening of the Suez Canal. Meanwhile, non-mercantile South Asian immigrants began to settle in new developments along the present Serangoon Road. Concurrent with changes in the ethnic distribution pattern in the central area, squatters were beginning to settle in impermanent housing at its fringes.

This pattern of ethnic and housing distribution held until the early 1960s. In 1918, however, deteriorating urban conditions had led to the appointment of a housing commission, which recommended the establishment of a housing trust. The Singapore Improvement Trust was eventually established in 1927, but with limited powers and resources the Trust was to have a very limited effect on the housing condition.

By the 1950s, the eve of local government elections, the central area had already developed into a very mixed land-use area. In it were the infrastructure and related services of the entrepot economy: harbour, warehousing, storage, transport and communication services, and wholesale, retail and broking activities. It was, of course, also very congested. For example, in Chinatown, 140,000 people lived in less than a square mile of land, and in buildings judged by the Singapore Improvement Trust as either 'ripe for demolition' or 'obsolete with limited life'. In some areas, densities reached 1,220 to 1,700 per hectare.² The poor conditions were exacerbated by rent-control legislation, imposed, following the destruction resulting from the Second World War, to prevent landlords from unreasonably increasing rent on existing but greatly reduced housing stock. In the meantime, squatter areas continued to develop outside the decaying core.

Inadequate interior space in shophouses or squatter housing meant that many activities normally contained within a house were carried out in the street: for example, child care and laundry. High rates of unemployment and underemployment meant an excessive dependence on streetside hawking and petty trading activities. The congested street scenes had both fascinated and disgusted visitors (Savage, 1992), but for the local population, their only desire was to escape such dire living conditions. The central area was therefore selected as the site for the first two public-housing projects to be undertaken by the HDB. Resettlement freed up the central area to accommodate the forecast commercial demands which would result from the projected greater economic role that an independent Singapore aimed to play, regionally and internationally. From 1959, therefore, the physical planning of Singapore became inextricably tied to urban redevelopment and provision of housing for the nation.

CONCEPT PLANNING OF THE ISLAND-STATE

Faced with the increasing deterioration in physical conditions on the island, the colonial administration adopted, in 1955, a Master Plan for the development of the city and its hinterland. Guided by British planning concepts of the time, the Master Plan called for the island to be divided into three zones: an inner city, a town area, and a rural ring (Teo, 1992:168). The city and the town area were to constitute, by British standards, a medium-sized town that would be able to expand radially in all directions, served by a network of ring and radial roads (see Figure 2.2). As a consequence of the transfer of power to locally elected government in 1959, the plan was never implemented.³

RING CONCEPT PLAN—INITIAL CONCEPTION

In 1961, the Parliament of Singapore requested advice and assistance on urban renewal from the UN Technical Assistance Administration. A two-step programme was proposed. Initially a single town planner was to do a preliminary survey of problems of urban renewal and assist in collection of the necessary data. This was to be followed by an urban renewal team who would be stationed in Singapore for a period of between 12 and 24 months, to work out details for redevelopment of the city. After the visit of the first planning adviser, the mandate given by the HDB to the UN-appointed three-man team was for the latter to sketch out island-wide plans, which would integrate urban renewal, housing,

Figure 2.2 The situation in Singapore in 1963, showing that the traffic system of the 1955 Master Plan produced congestion at the centre of the spider's web (*Source: Abrams, Kobe and Koenigsberger, 1987*)

and trade and industrial developments. More specifically, they were to produce a plan for redevelopment of the central area from which microplans might be developed at later stages. In actuality, the team spent a total of only two months in Singapore. In that brief duration, it initiated a new direction for planning Singapore that was radically opposed to the British-derived planning concepts of the colonial administration.

The UN team found the 1955 Master Plan wanting because of its Euro-centred assumptions, as follows:

- 1 A slow and steady rate of social and economic change.

- 2 The role of the government in the economy to be a passive one of providing welfare relief to the distressed.
- 3 A conservative disposition which considered the preservation of achievements and institutions of the past as a main objective of all planning.

In addition, there were gross underestimations of rates of population and vehicular growth. These underlying assumptions were totally contrary to political and economic conditions in Singapore at that time. The newly elected government was poised for rapid economic growth and the people were 'ready to accept government leadership and initiative in matters of urban development; their objective [was] not preservation, but growth and improvement' (Abrams, Kobe and Koenigsberger, 1987:98). Furthermore, if the physical form of the Master Plan were to be executed, the result would be '90 per cent of the island being covered by a concrete jumble of little semi-detached houses in their own gardens interspersed by groups of [public housing] flats and separated from each other and from the rest of the world by an intricate network of traffic jams' (ibid.).

Not surprisingly, the team threw out the Master Plan's suggestion of a three-zone division of the island. Then, drawing upon the urban development pattern in Holland where a group of large self-sufficient towns forms a ring around a central stretch of open country, a 'ring' was suggested as the guiding concept for developing the island as a whole. The idea was to develop a ring of population concentrations as self-sufficient communities along the coast, connected by freeways which cut through the interior. They could also be linked to each other by a singular or mixed system of ring roads, ferries, or a rapid mass-transit rail system. The many advantages of such a ring development were readily discernible. First, it satisfied one of the important planning constraints, namely, that the centre of the island must be preserved as a catchment and storage area for fresh water. Second, each of the relatively self-sufficient coastal communities would have economic and residential developments, thus encouraging population movement from the central area to these communities. Third, an ensuing consequence would be the decongestion of the central area, opening it up for its proper economic role. Finally, this plan integrated the island into one functional unit (Figure 2.3) and transformed the entire island into a singular planned unity for the first time.

After the departure of the three-man team, from mid-1967 to mid-1970 a team of between eight and ten UN consultants resided in

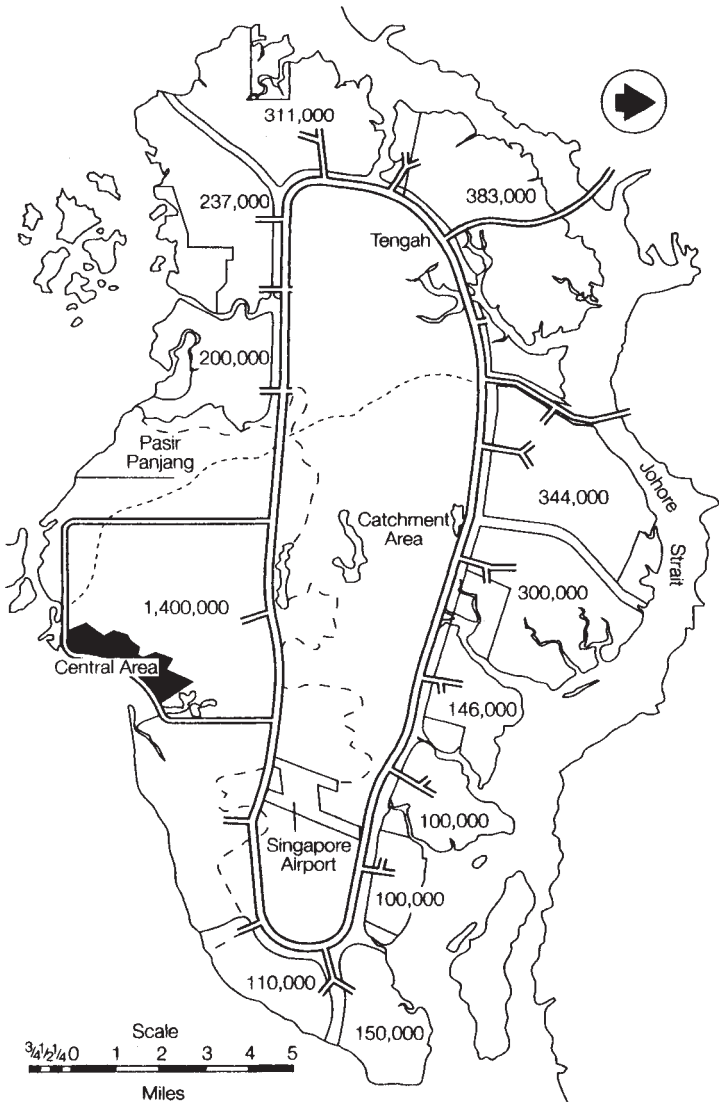


Figure 2.3 'Ring City' Singapore, showing new coastal settlements, with space for 2.3 million additional population (Source: Abrams, Kobe and Koenigsberger, 1987)

Singapore, in addition to short-term visits from other appointed experts, to further develop the concept plan. Working alongside them were about thirty Singaporean professional staff drawn from the Planning Office, the Public Works Department, the HDB, and the HDB's newly formed Urban Renewal Department. Together they constituted the State and City Planning Department, with the single objective of developing a long-range development plan for Singapore. It was disbanded after the plan was adopted.

The resulting plan was a serious modification of the original ring concept, but one which nevertheless reflected its influence. Instead of there being a ring of communities along the coast, a ring of high-density public-housing residential areas around the central water catchment area was proposed. This ring would be supplemented, at the southern end of the island, by an east-west corridor of development from largely residential Changi to the Jurong industrial area. This modified ring concept plan was adopted by the government in 1970 (see Figure 2.4) and has been broadly adhered to since then, though subjected to review every five years.

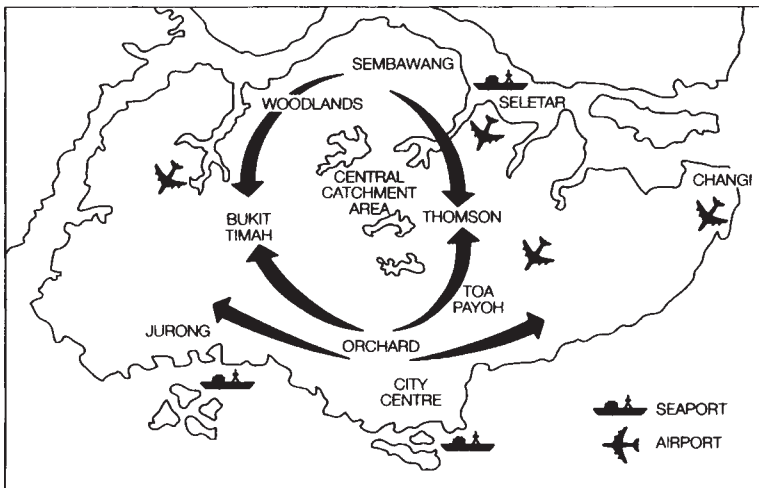


Figure 2.4 The ring concept plan that was adopted by the government in 1970

Urban renewal

In urban redevelopment, the broad strategy adopted followed essentially the suggestions of the first UN consultant, namely, E.E.Lorange, an architect-planner. Among his significant general suggestions are the following:

- 1 A radical redefinition of the planning authority from one of maintaining control to one which actively promotes growth in the urban renewal process.⁴ He argued that the planning authority should break out of the practice of using the Master Plan of the colonial government as essentially a development control mechanism, and should adopt instead an active policy of giving aid to private redevelopment within the framework of comprehensive renewal schemes.
- 2 Public authorities should actively make available suitable land, and should develop appropriate sites for economically realistic construction. If necessary, these authorities should help private developers to acquire additional land where sites are too small, through exchange of land where possible, or even through compulsory acquisition of land.
- 3 On acquisition, he recommended that legislation for compulsory acquisition for all planning purposes should be put in place and that land acquired by the state should only be leased to private developers, which would allow necessary future redevelopments to be carried out with relative ease.

All these crucial suggestions have been adopted by the Singapore government and constitute the parameters within which urban redevelopment programmes are executed.

On actual physical redevelopment, he recommended that an urban renewal programme should not be initiated at the already badly congested central core, for two reasons. First, because it had a very high proportion of private land and would incur significant compensation cost for the new government. Second, the large number of households that would have to be rehoused would overtax the emerging construction industry. Instead, redevelopment should start at the edges of the central area, where there was a large portion of state land that would be easier to clear and reparcel. As a further measure of his foresight—although not publicly discussed at that time—the potential conservation and

rehabilitation of Chinatown with its unique architectural heritage was another of his reasons for not starting redevelopment at the central core.

His overall strategy was to move from the periphery into the core. Finally, he suggested that the government should investigate the two possibilities, first, of extending the commercial centre at Raffles Place, and second, of establishing of new business precincts. All these substantive suggestions turned out to be judicious. Thus, when the Urban Renewal Department was ready for its first undertaking in 1965, it proceeded with the two peripheral areas identified by Lorange himself, one in the north and the other on the south edge. These first redevelopments were largely residential in order to facilitate rehousing of households who would be affected by subsequent redevelopment of the commercial centre.

Removal of rent control

A decade after the start of self-government, pressure for commercial development in the central area started to mount as modernization of Singapore's economy was well under way. However, the private sector was not responding to emerging demands for various reasons, of which rent control was arguably the most important. In spite of later amendments, the 1947 Rent Control Act still holds today: rent on premises covered by the Act may not be increased beyond its 1939 level; rent control continues to be effective even when premises are vacated; repossession of such premises by the landlord is permitted only under very stringent conditions; and a 1961 amendment further prohibits repossession for the purpose of demolition or the erection of new building. Therefore, there was no incentive for landlords even to maintain the premises, let alone redevelop them. Thus for redevelopment to progress, amendments to the Rent Control Act were needed.

Accordingly, the Act was modified in 1969 to empower the Minister for National Development to lift control from gazetted areas. Once areas were gazetted, landlords could now apply for exemption from the rent-control ordinance, terminate tenancy, and repossess the premises. To protect tenants from being summarily evacuated, the amendments provided for specific compensations to all classes of tenants. A Tenant Compensation Board was established to hear appeals on disputes arising. To avoid lengthy litigation, the Board's decision is final. However, it may by its own discretion defer and forward certain cases to the High Court for judgement.⁵ As the amendments are not meant simply to allow landlords to repossess premises, but also meant to compel them to redevelop repossessed parcels of land to appropriate use and value, landowners are given the following time

concessions: up to six months to notify the authorities of their inability to redevelop; one year from the day of gazette to submit to the authorities plans for redevelopment; and up to three years to begin work on approved plans. Failure to comply with these provisions constitutes sufficient grounds for the acquisition of any land by the state.

The 1969 amendments had potentially sweeping negative consequences: for example, massive displacement of tenant households would occur, and might overtax available housing supply; land prices in gazetted areas might rise sharply, reflecting the market value that had been suppressed by rent control and leading to runaway inflation; and, while it was hoped that decontrol would lead to an accelerated pace of redevelopment, uncertainties as to the kind of development that would take place were a serious concern. Total decontrol of the entire island, or even of the whole central area, was therefore considered unwise; as an alternative course, lifting of controls was to be managed in stages.

The new financial district

Given the prevailing healthy investment climate in 1969, one area had to be decontrolled immediately. It would also serve as a pilot scheme to study the effects of decontrol. The site chosen was an area, of approximately 32.5 hectares, situated between Raffles Place at one end, and a large parcel of virgin reclaimed land at the other, and with only two major institutional buildings on site: a conference hall, and the then Singapore Polytechnic, the present Shenton Way area. This site covered much of the waterfront and the lower half of Chinatown. With its established status as the commercial heart of Singapore, and hence with its ability to attract investors, the revitalization of Raffles Place was assured, while development in the virgin land area would constitute another growth location within the gazetted area. Finally, sandwiched between these two poles, the waterfront had, since the 1850s, been the site of established capital. Therefore, private institutional landlords could be counted upon to respond swiftly to investment opportunities presented by the lifting of rent control. Indeed, as expected, immediately following decontrol, a 29-storey project was announced, and this was soon followed by other projects.

From the outset, the intended transformation of the decontrolled site was conceived as a cooperative effort between public and private sectors. Public authorities would put in place the necessary legislation to facilitate development by private investors, improve the infrastructure system, and assemble, clear and develop parcels of land. Assembled and service

land was then auctioned to the highest bidder in the private sector for a 99-year lease with specified land use.

In terms of comprehensive planning concepts, the government noted that in spite of a clustering of banks in Raffles Place, their presence was scattered among other commercial and retail activities. Singapore lacked a focused financial centre and Shenton Way was to be developed as the nation's new financial centre. The large unencumbered and state-owned land parcel was divided into substantial building sites of generous proportions, ranging from 3,000 to 6,000 square metres to enable construction of corporate structures of podiums and towers. Stringent controls were imposed on design to achieve an architectural expression which would symbolically signify the dynamism of corporate enterprises. These were reinforced by the redevelopment of Raffles Place, with its own banking towers designed by international star architects, such as I.M. Pei and Kenzo Tange.

More than twenty years later, commercial towers line every street in the financial district, attesting to the success of the redevelopment process and, of course, the general economic growth of Singapore, the nation. Furthermore, every building has banks and other financial institutions, securities firms, law offices, accountancy firms and management consultants as tenants. To these private enterprises were added, in the early 1980s, large public buildings that house principal government financial institutions, such as the Monetary Authority of Singapore, the Treasury, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The area is now the financial district of Singapore that integrates the island with the rest of the world capital market.

In the meantime, other segments of the central area were similarly undergoing rapid transformation. Orchard Road was developed in the same period into the nation's tourist-shopping belt. The north and south edges, which were the first urban renewal housing projects, have also stabilized into mixed residential and commercial areas. In addition, the land mass of the central area has been expanded dramatically by reclamations along the waterfront. Three large new parcels, totalling about 650 hectares, have been added to the southern and south-eastern part of the island. With differentiation in land use and expanded land mass, further definition of the central area into smaller and more manageable planning units became necessary for future developments. Part of this new conceptualization was carried out in tandem with conservation efforts in the central area.

Conservation

Plans for the conservation of parts of the city had been postponed since

Lorange's recommendation in 1960. Indeed, impetus to initiate the process finally came from outside the planning agencies. A tourism task force, convened to examine falling rates of tourist arrivals in the early 1980s, concluded that one of the causes was that Singapore, in its relentless effort to build a Modern' city, had 'removed aspects of [its] Oriental mystique and charm...best symbolised in old buildings, traditional activities and bustling roadside activities' (quoted in Kong and Yeoh, 1994:251).⁶ In the interest of gaining tourist dollars, conservation took on a new meaning. It expanded from preservation of national monuments to conservation of entire areas, including, supposedly, the 'trades, crafts, customs and other traditional activities carried out in the conservation area' (Kong and Yeoh, 1994:251); in short, to 'retain a strong Asian identity' (URA, 1991). As elsewhere, there is a conflation here of tourism with the idea of 'heritage'.

The Planning Act was accordingly amended in 1989, giving the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) the central role in conservation. Three 'historic' areas of Chinatown–Kampong Glam, Little India, and a Civic and Cultural District—were designated for conservation in 1989. These are, respectively, the colonial designated areas of concentration of the Chinese, the Malays and Indians, and the area of colonial administrative buildings which continue to house many of the civil service activities of the independent government. For redevelopment purposes, rent control on all these areas has been lifted, the immediate result of which has been a rapid and continuing rise in the prices of properties that had hitherto been allowed to deteriorate because of rent control and fear of acquisition by the state.

The Civic and Cultural District

The Civic and Cultural District is a historic area which contains the administrative and cultural buildings of the colonial era, such as the City Hall, Supreme Court, General Post Office, Fullerton Building, Victoria and Memorial Concert Hall, Raffles Hotel, and St Andrew's Cathedral. It also has some of the best open spaces in the central areas, such as the Fort Canning Park, the Padang and the Esplanade, the waterfront and the banks of the Singapore River. All these elements are sited within a corridor that links the tourist shopping/entertainment centre of Orchard Road to similar developments in Marina Centre, a reclaimed land parcel at the waterfront.

According to the URA (1991), conservation and redevelopment of the District is to be executed within a national Cultural Master Plan.⁷ A Singapore Art Centre is to be built at Marina Centre in the 1990s.⁸

A museum precinct will be developed in the District. Already in place is the new museum of modern art, occupying a conserved and retrofitted boys' school run by a Christian mission. Other museums, such as one for Southeast Asian ethnology and natural history, are planned. It should be noted, however, that in spite of the plans, the government continues to be of two minds regarding heritage preservation and encouraging cultural developments: it wants to get the best financial returns for its land holdings but conservation and cultural developments do not usually even pay for themselves.

The ethnic historic districts

In the designated 'ethnic' historic areas, through either acquisition or expiration of leases, the state owns about 47 per cent of the housing stock in Chinatown and about 35 per cent each in Kampong Glam and Little India. The rest is privately owned. Conservation and revitalization, therefore, has to be a cooperative effort between the two sectors. As the building form in these areas is primarily shophouses, constructed between the 1820s and the beginning of the Second World War, the URA has a similar development plan for all three areas, as follows:

- to retain and enhance existing activities which are a part of the historical and cultural heritage of the areas;
- to restore buildings of historical and architectural significance;
- to improve the general physical environment;
- to retain traditional trades while consolidating the area with new compatible ones; and
- to introduce appropriate new features to further enhance the identity of the place.

The URA undertook detailed studies of representative units of the different architectural periods and set guidelines for restoration and acceptable reuse. Stylistic periodization is largely determined through the nature of ornamental embellishments on the front elevations.

It undertook some restorations in the Chinatown area, including the complete rebuilding of individual units, as exemplars for the private sector. All three areas have begun to take on a new look and new commercial life. However, apart from restoration of buildings, little else of the original ambience, social life and organization has been retained. The current trade mix at the ground-level shop fronts appears to be skewed towards restaurants and pubs, overwhelming other retail services,

of which many are lower-market arts-and-crafts shops oriented mainly to tourists. The upper floors are almost entirely occupied by offices. High costs of property and necessary renovations prohibit both the re-establishing of the traditional trades and the return of the residential population. Thus, despite the explicit commission in the Planning Act, the restored areas hardly reflect, let alone enhance, previously existing trades. Nights remain relatively quiet, except for the bars which cater for the white-collar workers from the financial district. Tourists seldom figure in the user population. However, it is still early days in the transformation of the historic areas into tourist sites, and a verdict is yet to be reached on its level of achievement.

Significantly, Singaporeans appear to be largely unsentimental about both the loss of so-called historical authenticity and the absence of traditional lifestyle in these rebuilt areas. In a 1991 survey, two-thirds of those surveyed held the following opinions: (1) while the physical fabric may be conserved, lifestyles and activities should be allowed the flexibility to change; (2) it is perfectly acceptable to have new uses and new lifestyles in old buildings; and (3) keeping traditional activities would only be per-petuating an inauthenticity, given that old lifestyles have no place in the present modern Singapore (Kong and Yeoh, 1994:260–1). These responses reflect, perhaps, a general orientation of a nation propelled by deep anxieties about survival in the contemporary world and consequently looking to the future, with only a shallow sense of the past. Moreover, all three sentiments are continually encouraged by the ruling government itself.

The relative 'failure' in rejuvenating the historic ethnic districts may be contrasted with successful gentrification processes in Western cities. In the latter instances, high-income population moves into run-down inner-city areas to capitalize on existing inexpensive properties and to renovate them elaborately into highly desirable residences (Smith and Williams, 1986). They are followed by upmarket and personalized services. Mutual support between high-income residents and upmarket services gives the gentrified areas new vitality. These essential elements for successful gentrification were absent in Singapore's conserved historic ethnic areas.

First, given the scarcity of land on a small island, there are no 'inexpensive' properties. Houses in the city core were in poor repair because of rent control and the threat of compulsory acquisition by the state. With the removal of these restraints, prices have rocketed upwards, to the extent that only commercial users can now afford to purchase and renovate them for adaptive reuse, thus edging out the Singaporean equivalent of

'gentrifiers'. This accounts for the predominance of commercial use, with a very limited residential gentrification of shophouses in small pockets at the peripheries of all three historic ethnic districts.

Second, due to sustained redevelopment of the central area over the previous twenty-five years, the three conservation areas had been deprived of residential population. From being among the most densely populated areas, they had been transformed into the least populated. For example, one of the census wards in Chinatown lost more than 60 per cent of its residents in the decade between 1970 and 1980 (Humphrey, 1985). Without a residential population as a stable user base, and with competition from the established tourist and entertainment areas elsewhere in the city, the strength of these renovated conservation areas is likely to be limited. A massive infusion of residential population is necessary to revitalize these areas, and indeed, this is a provision of the 1991 Revised Concept Plan for the 'new' downtown.

1991 REVISED CONCEPT PLAN

As mentioned earlier, since its adoption in 1970 the ring concept plan has been maintained and subjected to five-yearly reviews. Thus far, overall infrastructure development has largely followed the plan. In the 1981 review, plans for the eastern part of the island, to the right of the ring, were added. These were essentially plans for two large public-housing new towns (URA, 1991:9). For the next ten years, much of the planning work consisted of microplanning of the different areas delineated by the ring concept. Then, in 1991, in part because of what the government called Singapore's 'Second Industrial Revolution'—in which the direction of economic development was radically changed from low-cost, labour-intensive to high-technology, capital-intensive mode (Rodan, 1989)—the Concept Plan was subjected to an 'overhaul' in order to push towards a more lofty goal of creating a 'tropical city of excellence' (URA, 1991), 'excellence' being the new ideological currency for a nation which sees itself as having already attained a satisfactory level of economic development and material life for its population. In this context, striving for excellence is thus a motivational device to sustain development effort. Speaking generally, much of the 1991 revisions focused on the commercial demands of a changing and expanding economy. Microplanning was to be institutionalized in the drawing up of development guide plans (DGPs) for different areas, with a total of fifty-five DGPs to be developed to cover the entire island. In more detail, four particular features of the revision can be noted, as follows:

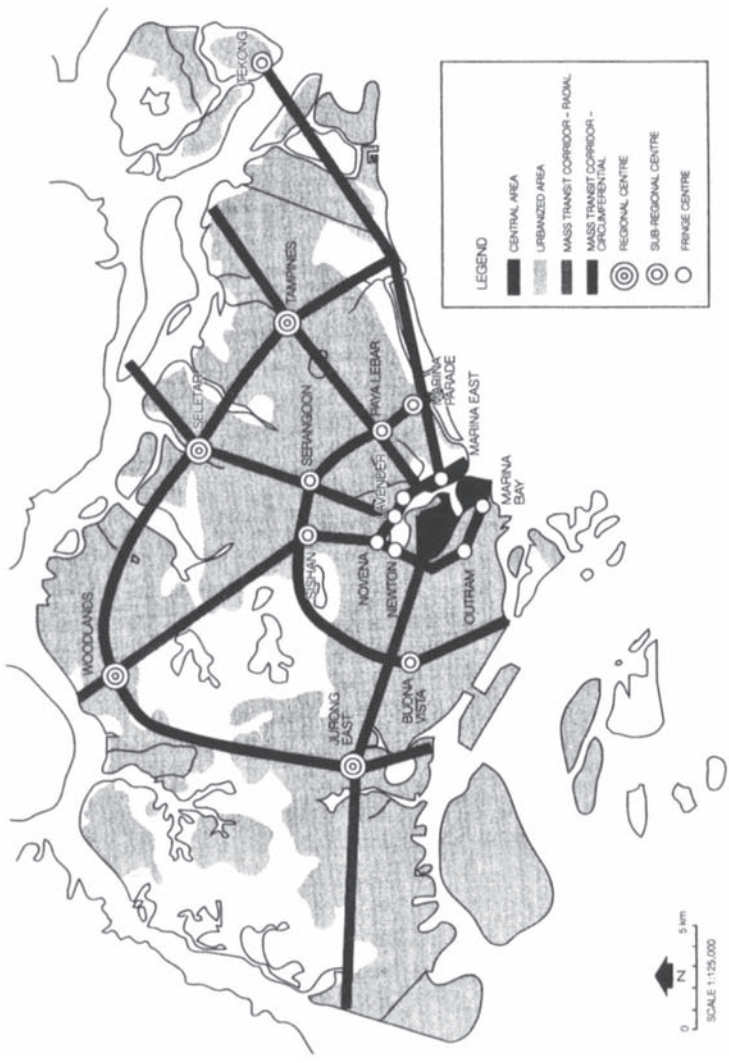


Figure 2.5 The central are of Singapore and the four designated regional centres (Source: URA, 1991:19)

- 1 To avoid future congestion of both population and commercial activities in the central area, four 'regional' centres have been designated; one each in the west, east and north, and the fourth between the last two, as the city centre is in the south (see Figure 2.5). Each of the regional centres is located within a public-housing new town and is in effect an expanded town centre. Their primary purposes are:
 - (a) to diffuse recreational demands, including shopping facilities, except for the highest-order goods and services; and
 - (b) to accommodate some office activities, especially back-office functions, from the current concentration in the central area. They are, therefore, to have a greater degree of retail, recreational and office developments than would be found in conventional new-town centres (Teo, 1992:180).
- 2 With the national economy moving from labour-intensive manufacturing to capital-intensive and higher-technology industries and services, land and other provisions for the manufacturing sector had to be rethought. Instead of the large industrial estates of the 1960s, which were meant to have heavy industries, two 'business and technology corridors' have been designated in which industries that are related in technology and knowledge are to be placed in close physical proximity in order to achieve synergy and cooperation. For example, the corridor at the southern end of the island is located close to the two national universities and other institutions of higher learning and research. In line with the ideological and professional sensibilities of workers in high-tech industries, the businesses are to be housed in buildings of a human scale placed in an environment conducive to creative work (Castells, 1989:66-7).
- 3 The newly reclaimed land on the waterfront offers an opportunity to reshape the city core. To correct the 1970s planning legacy, in which very large buildings in the financial district effectively blocked the sea from sight, the bay that is formed by the reclaimed land and the existing shoreline will be given prominence in the replanning of the city centre, with the idea of increasing the sense of 'islandness' (URA, 1991:4) (see Figure 2.6). Furthermore, a very significant portion of the reclaimed land has been designated for residential development so as to inject the much-needed residential population that will hopefully enliven what is currently a dead downtown at night.
- 4 Finally, the 1991 revision reconceptualized the island into what the URA calls a 'mass transit' nation. The existing and planned rail system is to be supplemented by light-rail branches where necessary, and public bus and rail systems are to be integrated at interchanges located *Figure 2.6* The new shoreline of the city centre (*Source*: Chua, 1989a: 103)



Figure 2.6 The new shoreline of the city centre (Source: Chua, 1989a: 103)

in the public-housing town centres. The overall aim is to reduce the pressure created by an ever-increasing volume of vehicles on the road.

The 1991 Revised Concept Plan is meant to serve the nation until what is now known among local planners and architects as ‘Year X’, the year that Singapore is expected to reach what the present government considers to be the island’s optimal population of four million.

THE PLANNING AUTHORITY STRUCTURE

Continuous and smooth execution of urban planning since 1970 has been facilitated by the extreme stability and continuity of the single-party (PAP) government in Singapore for the last thirty-five years. The centralization of power under such a state structure is itself reflected in

the centralization of planning authority under the bureaucratic umbrella of the Ministry of National Development.

Under the 1970 Planning Act, development control power is vested in the Chief Planner of the Planning Department and the Deputy Director of Development and Building Control Division (BCD) of the Public Works Department. The two offices are responsible for both public-sector and private-sector development. More specifically, the Deputy Director of the BCD chairs a Development Control Committee which considers all private-sector projects. This committee is made up of representatives of the Institute of Architects, Institute of Planners and government departments.

As the government is the largest developer of infrastructure and public housing, the most important role of the Chief Planner is as chairman of the Master Plan Committee. This committee has nine members, each representing a major public development authority: the Ministry of National Development, Economic Development Board, Jurong Town Corporation (state-owned industrial estate developer), Land Office, Public Works Department (Roads Division), Housing and Development Board, Urban Redevelopment Authority, BCD and the Ministry of Defence. The Chief Planner's role is to coordinate and advise on all the development proposals from all the members, in order 'to ensure that the proposals are in line with national policies on urban growth, transportation, and infrastructure investments and that they conform with provisions of the master plan, and the long-term objectives of the island-wide Concept Plan' (Castells, Goh and Kwok, 1990:214). Proposals from the Committee are submitted to the Minister of National Development for approval. It should be noted that three of the nine agencies represented—the Public Works Department, HDB and URA—are housed with the Ministry itself, thus further concentrating executive powers.

The centralized decision-making structure is reinforced by continuity and long service of personnel in the various departments and statutory boards. For example, the man who was Chief Executive Officer of the HDB until 1989 began his career as an architect, and rose to be the Chief Architect when his predecessor became the Minister of National Development. In 1989, when the Planning Department was transferred from the Ministry to the URA, he became Chief Executive Officer of the URA and, simultaneously, Chief Planner. His deputy was also a long-serving senior architect transferred from the HDB, while another of his senior assistants became Chief Architect of the latter. He resigned from public service after completing the 1991 review of the Concept

Plan and joined a premier private-sector architectural firm. The national planning duty was then transferred to his deputy.

Finally, as a result of their long service, the planners of all the government ministries and departments are known to each other personally. They constitute a planning élite, working closely with each other. This undoubtedly assists the negotiation and resolution of conflicting claims made by different ministries on the finite amount of available land. This élite tends to treat planning problems as entirely technical problems which require 'professional' solutions, a technical rendering of planning issues that is ideologically intentional as it serves to depoliticize those issues. What has evolved is a planning system with almost no public participation, and within which a small élite works without interference.

This arrangement continued until around the mid-1980s, when the government experimented briefly with public participation. This 'opening-up' was induced in part by the fact that the ruling party had suffered a serious decline in popular votes in the 1984 general election (Chua, 1995). Architects in private practice were invited to participate in drawing up Development Guide Plans for designated areas, in competition with the URA's in-house designs. The competing plans were then publicly exhibited for a brief period, and individuals were invited to submit comments on the proposals and state their preferences. Subsequently, an open forum would be conducted with relevant professionals to debate the merits of each proposal. The URA was to make the final decision regarding competing proposals after giving due consideration to the input from professionals and lay individuals. Unfortunately, this was to be a short-lived exercise. Not accustomed to competing ideas and public opinions, and unsure what to do with either, the planning bureaucracy found the process 'clumsy'. The competitive process was then replaced by 'collaboration', in which outside architects were invited to work with those from the URA as part of a team that would produce only one plan for each designated area. Even this process had ceased by 1994 and all Development Guide Plans are now once again solely in-house products of the URA.

CONCLUSION

Given unyielding government support for 'rational' planning and 'optimization' of land use, the process and result of the 1991 Revised Concept Plan was in a way a planner's dream. To the extent that maps are ideological constructs that encourage an impulse to efface blank

surfaces by 'colouring' them in (Cooper, 1994:152), the planners have left no space on the island unaccounted for. Singapore is already a fully conquered island in the imaginary, in that every foot of space is already assigned to a particular use, as signified by the multicolour coded planning maps. No space has been left to chance, and even nature has to have the permission of the planning agencies to survive. The implications and consequences of such planning intensity are too complex to ponder here.

Returning to more substantive levels, the entire physical face of the city-state has been transformed within the first thirty years of political independence by the following factors:

- 1 A functional concept plan that redistributes the population into residential housing estates.
- 2 Successful redevelopment of the city centre and a nascent effort at the conservation of the historic areas.
- 3 Efficient resettlement of established communities which have had to make way for the redevelopments.

It is through the resettlement process, which has directly or indirectly affected almost the entire population, that an entry to public-housing estates can be gained.

Chapter 3

Resettling a Chinese village

A longitudinal study

By the 1950s, Singapore was already covered by settlements (Humphrey, 1985). Demolition of the settlements to make room for public housing was unavoidable. Between 1961 and 1984, more than 230,000 households were resettled (Wong and Yeh, 1985:316), taking up more than 40 per cent of public-housing flats built in the same period. An overwhelming majority of resettled households opted to purchase the 99-year leasehold on public-housing flats, reaching more than 90 per cent in the mid-1980s (Wong and Yeh, 1985:318). By 1990, only 28,000 people were estimated to require resettlement. Thus a very significant proportion of households in public housing are either resettled in their entirety or have one or both spouses originally from resettled families. Having to adjust to standardized flats from different house-forms and different environments is, therefore, a widely shared experience for a substantial number of Singaporeans.

Significantly, the resettlement process has solved the most fundamental problem in urban renewal and slum clearance: namely, that of rehousing those affected in improved premises. Consequently, with the exception of some early resistance (Gamer, 1972; Aldrich, 1985), resettlement is a reasonably smooth process. This is a major achievement in itself. However, how well the resettled households adjust to their new houses and environment remains a question to be answered. That answer can be obtained only through longitudinal studies of affected individuals and households, from their times in the squatter, through an initial settling-in period, up to the point when a stable life pattern is established in the new environment.

However, it is by now difficult to conduct such studies because samples of villages of substantial size are no longer to be found. Furthermore, high-rise, public-housing living is now the national norm, and adjustment

to it is therefore less significant than it used to be. Indeed, substantively in Singapore, the issues surrounding resettlement have become more of historical interest than public concern. However, the theoretical and conceptual significance of the problem of adjustment to resettlement remains in comparative resettlement studies. Reported in this chapter, for its heuristic value, is a longitudinal study which was undertaken between the end of 1981 and early 1985.¹

Slums and squatters have their own culture and communal sentiments that develop out of the residents' daily lives and, as such, suit and provide a lifestyle for them. However, most residents in slums and squatters recognize how undesirable are their physical conditions, public hygiene and other private or collective amenities. While the possible transplantation of the positive features of the squatter village—particularly its community sentiments—into high-rise estates is at best uncertain, a significant proportion of its negative physical and health aspects should be eliminated by the move. For this reason, most residents are at least ambivalent towards resettlement, rather than necessarily negatively predisposed; some may even favour it, especially the younger people. A new way of life will inevitably emerge out of the adjustments to the constraints and opportunities of the high-rise environment, and to the economic, social and psychological issues of resettlement. When this new way of life becomes an established routine, and when those who are resettled look back, compare, and take stock of the changes and find to their own satisfaction that life has worked out for the better on the whole, then, and only then, can success be claimed by the planners and executives of the entire process.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The resettlement process can be viewed broadly as consisting of three related stages: pre-resettlement life in the existing settlement; an initial stage of settling into the new residential environment; and then the emergence of a new pattern of daily life in the new environment. In 1982, an opportunity to investigate the complete process was made available with the targeted clearance of a semi-rural, self-contained, exclusively Chinese village.² By September 1981, with the exception of the village enterprises, almost all the households that were eligible had already been allocated HDB housing in a nearby new town. However, the households remained in the village, awaiting compensation. By December, business premises had been allocated and compensation paid to all, and families began to move into their new HDB flats.

Interviews were conducted before the families began to move into new HDB flats. Research on the settling-in stage was conducted about six months after moving in, between May and November 1982. It was found that respondents settled very quickly to new routines. It was then decided that a two-year lapse would be sufficient for the affected households and individuals to establish a pattern of daily life in the HDB environment. Research on the stabilized pattern was completed in July and August of 1984.

In contrast to available quantitative surveys on resettlement in Singapore,³ this study aimed to obtain as many details as possible by letting respondents define their own areas of concern. Interviews were therefore more like conversations, with little prompting from the interviewer. Occasionally, however, the interviewer had to guide the conversation along with an unstructured interview guide containing topics relevant to the research. The taped interviews were supplemented by time budget records, layout plans of each dwelling and business premises, as well as observation records of casual village activities and organized community activities. In the second and third stages, respondents were also asked to draw perceptual maps of their surroundings to gauge their familiarity with their new environment.

SAMPLING AND FIELDWORK

In the first stage, as many households in the village as possible were covered; interviewers simply went from house to house and interviewed whoever was at hand. At least one interview per household was carried out, usually with the 'head' of the family, and one additional younger family member if available. A total of 74 out of 107 households in the village were covered, and 142 interviews were carried out.

The data were analysed at four levels: individual, household, community and economic activities.⁴ From the consistency of responses to issues regarding resettlement, villagers could be analytically classified into identifiable subgroups. Consequently, in the second stage, it would be sufficient if a representative sample of each subgroup was interviewed, rather than attempt to cover all respondents from the first stage, and thus 46 families were chosen, from which 66 individuals were interviewed. All 46 families were again involved in the final stage; after accounting for dropouts and replacements, the third stage involved 65 individuals.

PHYSICAL CONDITIONS OF THE VILLAGE

The village was located near the centre of the island, about eight and a half kilometres from downtown Singapore, and was part of the larger area which had been undergoing clearance for a number of years. It was bounded by a main road to the south-west, from where entrance to the village was to be gained, another main road to the east, with no entrance or exit to the village, and a private housing estate to the north. The village itself was hidden from immediate view by bushes along the main roads.

The topography of the village revealed many 'lanes' branching from the main axis. These were unpaved dirt tracks that subdivided the village into various pockets. For ease of reference, the bigger lanes were given names by the researchers (see Figure 3.1). Each pocket had its own distinct physical, social and economic characteristics. For instance, the main axis and the first three lanes that branched out from it were on low, flat ground with dwelling structures arranged in an orderly linear fashion. In contrast, the back end of the village was hilly and uneven ground and the dwellings were correspondingly more haphazardly arranged. Houses near the front of the village were more modern and followed a standard plan while those further in were older, unique and traditionally Chinese in design. Those along the main axis were usually in terraced rows and had no compounds, while those in the lanes usually had some compounds. In terms of social class, the richer section was where most of the village business entrepreneurs lived and worked. Poorer households were on the hilly section, where some dwellings were little more than shacks and had no piped water or electricity. The sections were more than geographical divisions: they were also the social boundaries of the villagers. The residents of each section were familiar with each other, but were more distant with those living in other sections.

PROFILE OF THE VILLAGERS

Out of an estimated village population of 700 people, 27 per cent were below the age of 25; 49 per cent were between 25 and 54 years old; and 24 per cent were aged 55 or above. From the point of view of resettlement, a significant division among the villagers was between 'Village-bound' or 'non-village-bound'. The former referred to those who spent most of their daily lives within the village, and included the retired, the housewives and those who both worked and resided in the village. 'Non-village-bound' referred to all gainfully employed

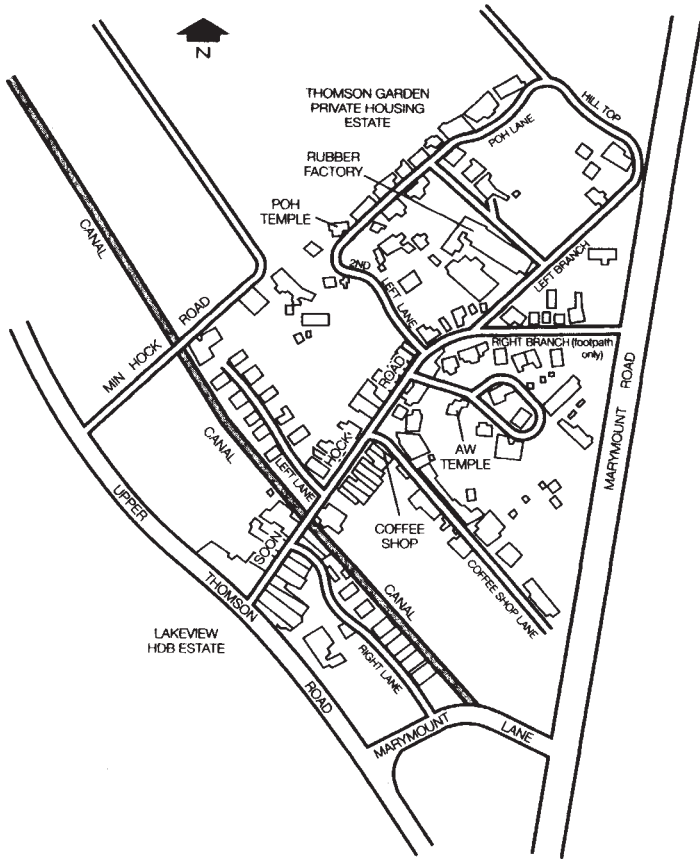


Figure 3.1 Topography of the Chinese village

individuals who worked outside but resided in the village. As the routine lives of these two groups varied, their images of and attachment to the village as a community would also vary. Community was therefore not a monolithic structure or uniform image that every villager subscribed to equally.

Within the village, social networks of the village-bound residents were formed mostly within the lane or section where they lived. Furthermore, among the original residents of the village, neighbours, friends and relatives were often synonymous. Many of these villagers had little or no social contact with people outside the village except for very infrequent

visits to other relatives. This was especially so for housewives and economically inactive elderly women who were also housebound. Their social networks were extremely residential-based and social interactions usually took place close to home. Interaction was characteristically casual, non-prearranged and frequent, occurring as they went about their daily household chores. For example, two women living in the same lane might 'bump into' each other as one was returning from market and the other hanging out laundry in the compound. Greetings and casual conversation would follow for a short duration before each would return to their own tasks. The village-bound men tended to gather, away from the women's domain of the home, at the village coffee shop or outside the two provision shops where there were benches. Interaction was again casual and non-prearranged, each coming to the coffee shop as and when his work routine allowed.⁵ 'Visiting' between villagers, male or female, was a practice reserved for formal and ritual occasions.

The village-bound, with their established circle of friends and neighbours, therefore had a positive identification with the village as a whole. The sentiment of an elderly lady was illustrative: 'When they came to take resettlement census, I was heart-broken. I have stayed here for 57 years, know all my neighbours.' Other positive expressions included, 'all the neighbours are good' and 'everybody knows everybody'. The respondents were, of course, well aware that, in reality, quarrels between neighbours existed and that it was not possible for everyone to know everyone. Nevertheless, the positive expressions did reflect the sense of security and sense of belonging that they had with the village.

Ironically and significantly, this sense of security was best illustrated by the non-village-bound. They could not be said to be socially familiar with other villagers because their social contacts were largely with colleagues at their workplace. However, they too expressed a strong sense of security about the village. They were similarly convinced that the village was crime-free, that it was safe to leave doors wide open until late at night and for young women to walk alone late at night without any risk of sexual assault. The young non-village-bound women themselves shared this view and practised it. An unmarried, twenty-something nurse remarked: 'We come back 11–12 at night, we still come back without fear because I am from this kampong, no doubt you don't know them, they know you more or less, they don't do any harm. One stranger comes in, everybody will know it.' This situation attests to the general observation that security is derived from 'the observance of standards of right and seemly conduct in the public places in which one

lives and moves...one's home, the places where one shops, and the corridors through which one walks, there is for each [of them] a public space wherein [their] sense of security, self-esteem, and propriety is reassured ...by the people and events [they] encounter' (Wilson, 1969:457), and not from the intimate knowledge among the villagers.

Overall, the sense of security was the result of two factors. First, the village's physical environment was highly differentiated. Each lane had its own features and focal points and every house had its own character. The physical environment was, therefore, full of visual information. Consequently, no one familiar with the village would get lost and, given its limited boundaries, it took very little time to become familiar with the surroundings.

Second, in contrast to the richness in physical character, the 'human-scape' was stable and monotonous, which resulted from the residential stability of the small village population. The most 'recent' villagers had been there for at least ten years. This stability made it possible for the villagers to be recognizably familiar with each other. All villagers would invariably pass the same scene with the same faces doing the same activity as they moved about in the village. For example, without fail each day from seven in the morning until nine o'clock at night, the shopkeepers would be sitting in front of their shops; for the villagers, they were part of the normal village landscape. Strangers would be instantly recognized and their activities would be watched by villagers until their intentions were established as acceptable.

Both the richness of the physical landscape and the stable monotony of the human-scape provided all villagers with a strong sense of normality in which they could carry out their daily lives comfortably and securely without fear of strangers or unannounced happenings. One may deduce, therefore, that the visual comfort of both the physical and the social environment was the fundamental element for the development of a sense of security; one which is reinforced by but does not originate from active social interaction. This is a significant point, both substantively and conceptually, which will be further examined and utilized in the next few chapters.

ANTICIPATED IMPACT OF RESETTLEMENT

The impact of resettlement may be analysed broadly in economic and social terms. Economically, at the household level, all the families would face very substantial increases in cost of housing: from about \$ 13 for ground rent to at least \$ 150 monthly mortgage for a 3-room flat.

However, only a small number of families who did not have CPF savings to draw on for the mortgage would face difficulties in meeting the increase. Those who had family businesses, although they did not have CPF savings, were nonetheless able to meet the increased housing cost without difficulties.

The financial condition of a family was also determined partly by its family structure. Nuclear families with aged parents and adult children with low income-earning ability, and also families with middle-aged, low-income parents with children who were too young to be gainfully employed, would both potentially face financial difficulties. It was estimated that about 30 per cent of the village families which were being moved into 128 HDB flats were of these two family types. In the longer term, the first type would probably continue to face difficulties, whereas those families with middle-aged parents would find some relief when their children were able to work.

Socially, one impact of the resettlement on households would be the splitting up of the multifamily households. From both the physical and social-psychological aspects, the experiences of members of large multifamilies in the village were different from the commonsense notion of 'one big happy family' living together. Each branch of a multifamily would have had only one bedroom and all the daughters-in-law felt oppressed by the control, however nominal, exerted by the patriarch/matriarch of the extended household. Understandably, therefore, the younger women were not averse to resettlement, which furnished the necessary reason or excuse to split up the multifamily. Upon resettlement, each daughter-in-law would become mistress of her own flat and family. On the other hand, the elderly women of these families, whose sense of self was invested in their sons and families, anticipated social isolation.

At the individual level, the village-bound were anxious about resettlement for several reasons. First, conscious of unavoidable increases in housing costs and loss of opportunity to supplement their food, such as rearing poultry and growing some vegetables, they felt financially insecure. Second, their long-standing social networks would be dispersed. The women, in particular, expected to find it difficult to re-establish their networks as the HDB environment was perceived as an unfriendly environment where neighbours shut their doors. The housewives expected to be kept within the flats due to housework. The elderly women's movements might also be hindered by the physical barriers of locked doors, staircases and lifts. The result in both cases might be serious social isolation. The men, being culturally less housebound, might be better able to regroup at new-found gathering points in high-rise estates.

The extent to which these anxieties might be realized or dissipated was left to be seen in the second and third stages of the study.

In contrast, the non-village-bound would logically be the least affected. Resettlement would not disrupt their work or social networks and would only minimally disrupt their daily routines and transportation patterns, which would be quickly overcome because of the superior services in the new town. They therefore generally welcomed the move to a public-housing estate with its attendant amenities and facilities. The only negative impact for them was the loss of the village sense of security.

LIFE IN THE NEW TOWN

Spatial adjustments and renovations

The public-housing new town could not have been more different from the village. The villagers had moved from a small insular village to a large, planned, urban new town. Coping with new urban complexities began, for all households, with the 'naked' flat that they had purchased from the HDB. Upon allocation of their flats, the immediate task was to renovate and furnish it as fully as one could afford. In many cases, the entire resettlement compensation was spent. In fact, there was a pervasive feeling of having to 'keep up with the others' whenever the resettled talked about renovations. These renovations usually included: marble or terrazzo flooring for the whole flat; an altar cabinet and lounge suite in the living room; and built-in cabinets and countertops in the kitchen. The result was a transformation from bare uniformity to a renovated and furnished uniformity—except for colour codes—among similar-sized flats. A few did make special changes to the flat to meet specific space requirements. For example, two families knocked down their storerooms, one for more space in the bedroom and the other to create a formal dining area. There was a general increase in the number of rooms for most families. Other than that, the functional allocation of these rooms did not change very much from village house to HDB flat. A few did complain about room sizes, but on the whole, the resettled were satisfied with the flat itself after spending money to 'beautify' and 'individualize' their standardized flats.

However, many villagers experienced difficulties in coming to terms with certain physical barriers which they saw as restricting their movements. Remembering their past practice of keeping front doors open at all times, the inconvenience of having to open/shut and lock/unlock the front door, because 'everybody does it', was most cited as a

necessary nuisance of high-rise living during the settling-in stage. The practice especially restricted the movements of the elderly, who also had initial difficulties in handling locks. For example, one 64-year-old man felt so restricted that, soon after moving into the flat, he started to pick quarrels with his wife. Fortunately, his children managed to persuade him to take walks regularly and he lost his temper less often. The lock-door practice also hemmed in children, who were likely to be confined to playing within the limited space of the flat. For all residents, the outside space could no longer be claimed as an extension of one's own social space.

Beyond the flat, other obstacles had to be surmounted. The middle-aged and elderly had to overcome the fear of using the elevator, and initially, many could not figure out the combination of vertical and horizontal movements within a block. One middle-aged housewife walked from her flat on the sixth storey down to the ground level, then walked to the other end of the block before climbing up the stairs again to her relative's flat on the second storey. She did not realize that on certain floors there were common corridors that allowed her to use the different staircases, so she had to go right down to the ground floor to reorient herself.

Beyond the block, the resettled fairly quickly acquired a sense of the new town as an abstract whole. They soon learned that the new town was divided into neighbourhoods which are nominally designated by the first digit of the block numbers; all respondents were able to identify their neighbourhood this way. Everyone also knew that there was the neighbourhood centre and the town centre, these being synonymous with the market and departmental stores respectively. Their actual familiarity with the town was tied to their daily routines: a predominantly linear and functional user pattern, from flat to market in the neighbourhood centre for regular marketing, and from flat to town centre for higher-order consumer and recreational goods and services. Many were initially apprehensive about wandering beyond this necessary, regular route. Movement within the new town was generally more extensive for younger ex-villagers. However, even for them, inter-neighbourhood linkages were lacking.

Two and a half years after they moved into the new town, this linear and functional user pattern was little changed. By then, they were fairly well adjusted to HDB living. The more elderly women who had had initial problems in moving in the high-rise environment had also managed to tackle their problems by that stage. For example, an elderly woman

who had led a very sheltered life in the village was amused when she was asked whether she knew how to ride the elevator on her own.

Her reply: 'Know! Over two years of stay here already...No, not scared. Initially didn't know how to press the button. Then watched them...Stayed for over two years, how come don't know?' In the main, the physical barriers encountered in the early months, especially by the elderly villagers, had been satisfactorily overcome. Finally, overall, improvements in the physical environment, especially in terms of cleanliness and public hygiene, were readily admitted; however, awareness of increases in the cost of living was never far behind: 'Living here is good, cleaner, no mosquitoes, but you need money.'

Social economic conditions of the household

The most significant impact on all resettled households was the tremendous increase in housing costs. By the end of six or more months of settling into the HDB flats, all those affected had established some pattern of household financial management which could be assessed. At the end of the settling-in period, based on mortgage or rent arrangements and level of household income, the families were classified into the following three household-finance categories:

- 1 families with no financial difficulties;
- 2 families making ends meet; and
- 3 families with financial difficulties.

When considering household income, the extent of pooling of family earnings among all income-earners within the family had to be noted. In addition to reflecting the respondents' evaluation of their own financial conditions, the categories also provided a means of assessing these conditions more objectively. We will deal with the simpler category first.

Of the forty-six families studied, twenty-one were in the 'no financial difficulties' category. Although they had had to adjust to a drastic increase in housing cost, financial adjustment was more psychological than actual. These were mainly business households or those whose monthly mortgage was paid entirely through CPF contributions. Barring unforeseen circumstances, these families were likely to continue to be financially stable.

Only three of the forty-six families were 'families in financial difficulties', with household incomes being less than total expenditure. If they were able to meet the monthly expenditure, it was at the cost of

a very low subsistence standard of living. One of them was a household comprising an aged couple, one son in a drug rehabilitation centre, another doing conscripted military service, and a working daughter who was the main breadwinner. As a cleaner she could contribute only 50 to the household each month, less than the amount for the flat's monthly instalment. The mother lamented: 'Last time I stayed in old house, only \$20, now additional more than \$200 plus, just think, just think.' The ailing husband, therefore, had to continue work as an odd-job labourer, earning \$10 a day whenever he could get work. As for herself, trying to make ends meet became a daily struggle. Her overriding concern was paying the monthly instalment. 'Staying in HDB flat, everyone says you must economize on food, instalments must be paid first, living in a village house, we could buy better food because we did not have to pay the instalments. Now I have to be thrifty.'

The remaining twenty-two families fell into the 'families making ends meet' category, where household incomes just managed to cover expenditure, usually only because of the presence of multiple income-earners in the family. Household members' earnings were usually stretched to the limit, and they could continue to manage only as long as there were no crisis. It was hypothesized at the six-month point that barring crisis, such as deaths or serious industrial accidents, which would remove an income-earner from working, the economic condition of these families would in all likelihood improve incrementally in the future. This was because while the monthly mortgage payment was fixed for the long term, the income of the regularly employed wage-earners would increase annually, and therefore the proportion of the income going to mortgage payment would be a decreasing fraction.

Two years after resettlement, the families remained largely within the same classifications, with the following exceptions. One of the three families in financial difficulties had experienced better conditions as a result of employment for both the husband and the wife. Four families who were just making ends meet had improved their financial situation as hypothesized. Three were households in business and the improved financial condition was a result of the stabilization of business operations in new locations. The fourth improved through the wife's new and higher-income job. Finally, one family which had no financial difficulties initially had moved into a situation of only making ends meet due to a loss in earnings.

Comparatively, the circumstances of those families making ends meet were the most complex. In instances where there was pooling of incomes, the arrangement was only a short-term advantage for various reasons.

First, the long-term mortgage with substantial monthly payments exacted rigorous demands on both the level and the regularity of the contributions to the pool. Should any contributor 'default' for whatever reason, it would immediately become stressful for the head of the household.

Second, the flat was usually co-leased by the father and one of the sons who had CPF. The contribution from this son was thus equivalent to an investment in the property. On the other hand, contributions from other siblings were for family consumption purposes without any future value. In the long term, it was foreseeable that there would be disputes of rights to ownership of the flat among the sons, who, culturally, expect inheritance of family property. Indeed, in three cases, the one parent who was a co-lessee was planning to transfer his/her share of the flat to another son, so that two sons would be co-owners. In these cases, besides parental desire to keep the family together, there was also a fear that the sons, who were low-income earners, might not be able to save enough for the 20 per cent down-payment for their own respective flats. However, the common occurrence of conflicts among siblings and siblings-in-law in multifamily households suggested that the long-term viability of co-ownership between two brothers might be problematic.

Routines of individuals

With regard to individual adjustments, it was found that the non-village-bound had very few adjustments to make; their material and social wellbeing had always been independent of the village. Even their apprehensions about public security in HDB estates faded when they found that 'nothing has happened'. With their pre-resettlement lifestyles not disrupted and a vast improvement in the environmental quality of their new home, an end result of resettlement for them was an overall upgrading of living conditions.

The daily routines of those who were village-bound, on the other hand, were drastically changed. They had to develop various social mechanisms to adjust to the new environment and to fashion a new stable and comfortable daily routine for themselves. Among these ex-village-bound, differential rates and patterns of adjustments were found for the various subcategories. As the adjustments among this group were tied to the restructuring of their village-based families, their adjustments should be examined in the context of the break-up of the large families.

Of the thirty-three multifamily households studied before resettlement, thirty-two split up upon resettlement into seventy-seven nuclear and fourteen extended families. Of these ninety-one families, forty-two applied

to live as neighbours, under a special allocation scheme aimed precisely at preserving extended families, seventeen moved into neighbouring blocks with at least one branch of their original family, and sixteen families went to different neighbourhoods which were about five minutes' drive away from each other. The rest moved to other new towns.

The young housewives

Even before resettlement, the young married people were overwhelmingly in favour of moving away from their multifamily households. This sentiment persisted and intensified with time; young housewives, in particular, continued to highlight the advantages of the nuclear family arrangement. They settled into their new home very readily and were most satisfied. The gains they had desired and expected were being realized. These included greater privacy, greater freedom of movement and in the scheduling of one's daily routines, more control over the upbringing of one's own children, and a greater cohesion within one's own small household. On the whole, their status in the family was radically elevated: from being one among many daughters-in-law in a village multifamily household, they were now accorded the appropriate status of being mother in their own nuclear family. Beyond this, there was also the benefit of increased contact with members of their family of origin.

In the two and a half years after resettlement, young housewives were also able to build up social ties with new, mainly immediate, neighbours. For example, one said: 'Here next door, Malay, also know them. This side, two units, Chinese, we are on better terms with them. The rest, just go out, greet them, that's all. [With neighbours from those two units] always come and sit, come and go. We sometimes ask each other to buy things [from the market].' Therefore, although these young housewives were physically more isolated in the confines of their own flats than in the village houses, they were very satisfied with their new-found situation.

The most significant consequence of resettlement for them remained undoubtedly the 'rite of passage' which had elevated their status in the home. As one of them said: 'Here, definitely better. Quieter, one person by myself. In the old house so many people around, it was tiring to see them all the time. There, you can't do as you like.' This status elevation, which was concomitant with the nuclearization of the family, seemed to overshadow whatever general negative aspects of HDB living were cited by the resettled, such as financial burden and confined space. Even

isolation in the flat was not an issue: on the contrary, it was seen positively as gains in privacy and in freedom in their own home. In addition, they have not, in fact, become socially isolated, but have been able to build up social contacts with their neighbours. All these factors accounted for their overall satisfaction with HDB living.

The aged and the middle-aged women

The aged and the middle-aged women who were the nominal heads of the multifamily households were the most upset by the prospect of family split-up after resettlement. However, whether this strong negative sentiment persisted after resettlement depended on whether the 'splintered' families opted to live in close proximity, even as neighbours, with each other. Of the seventeen multifamily households studied in the post-resettlement stages, eight opted to continue as neighbours. Among these, the elderly people expressed satisfaction with this alternative arrangement compared with the previous living mode of 'one big family'. The new arrangement not only allowed them to continue to revolve their routines around the activities of the members of the extended households, but also provided opportunities to extend the scope of their activities beyond their own household to include new neighbours. Younger respondents also found the new arrangement to be a good compromise because it combined the advantages of nuclear family arrangement with some of the tangible benefits of big-family living, including cooperative housekeeping and childcare arrangements, looking after each other's flat, and availability of help when needed.

For the remaining nine women, who live in different neighbourhoods from their married children, the reduction of interaction with their children and grandchildren was a source of emotional and psychological difficulties in the first few months after resettlement. However, these strong emotions were not as evident once a pattern of social life had been established and intensive and close interaction with neighbours became routine: neighbourly interaction seems to replace the interaction among family members and relatives.

There were, broadly speaking, three patterns of adjustment among older women. The first pattern concerned mainly aged women who had no household responsibilities and middle-aged housewives with grown-up children and thus minimal household duties. These women tended to spend much time at a regular gathering of women neighbours in the ground-floor open deck. The grief over the split-up of the

multifamily household was compensated by 'membership' in new social groups—a phenomenon which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The second adjustment pattern included those women who do not gather at the ground level but have, nevertheless, been able to form their own social support among immediate neighbours. For example, two elderly women who resettled to the same block but on different floors went to market together every morning, turning this outing into more of a social occasion than a chore. On returning, they would sit on the steps in front of one of their flats to talk. Frequently, they were joined by two other elderly women neighbours living on the same storey. These meetings broke up only when one of them had to prepare lunch.

The third established pattern of adjustment covered those who faced demanding household responsibilities, particularly childcare. If they could develop close interaction with immediate neighbours, as in the second pattern, their routine would still be satisfactory. However, the most adversely affected were those who had none of the forms of social interaction experienced in the first two patterns. These were the most socially isolated. For example, an elderly woman who had to take care of her 4-year-old grandson kept him and herself confined in the flat because, according to her: 'This one likes to run about, I can't catch up with him. I don't dare go downstairs.' Even infrequent visits to her next-door neighbours were stopped for fear of her grandson breaking their things. Her contact with the outside was almost entirely visual, watching the goings-on from her living-room window and chatting with the few neighbours who walked past her third-storey flat.

The village-bound working women

This category referred to a small group of women who continued to work in their family factories or hawker stalls after resettlement. Besides adjusting to the work routine outside the home, they lamented the loss of the frequent casual interaction with neighbours that used to occur in the village. After resettlement, their social circle, comprising mainly other female relatives and immediate neighbours, had become smaller. For those working in family factories, interaction tended to be limited to the other few female relatives who were either co-workers or staying nearby. Similarly, the long working hours away from their place of residence made it difficult for the few women hawkers to interact with ex-neighbours or to build up neighbourly ties with new ones. Their social contacts were therefore mainly with other hawkers. To this extent, they have become more like those who work in the urban economy: their social networks have become work-based, not residential-based.

The village-bound young working men

This subcategory of the resettled felt most socially displaced during the settling-in stage because of the dispersion of their village social networks of predominantly fellow male villagers, who used to meet together regularly. They had great difficulty in finding suitable gathering places in their new surroundings. The ground-floor deck was unsuitable for the younger men because of fear of police checks and of being branded as 'bad hats'. Therefore, from the very beginning of resettlement, these young men, who were previously accustomed to nightly gatherings in the village, complained about social isolation.

They had been unable to regain the same level of interaction with their village friends, even after two years. Nor had they been able to make new friends among new neighbours. In addition to the dispersal of their social contacts, most of these young men had, as a result of increased household costs (and also in a few cases, marriage), greater financial responsibilities to their respective households. There had been a general speeding up of their lives that left them with little time or energy to do much beyond resting for the next day's work. Therefore, upon returning from work, they tended to finish the day by watching television in the flat. Social life was drastically reduced to nominal exchanges with immediate families and relatives.

In the initial period following resettlement, the older working men were equally confined to their flats in the evenings, but they were less upset by their situation because of their overwhelming concern at that time for their relocated businesses. However, as they became more assured of the continuing viability of their businesses, they began to interact more with members of their former social networks. Their gathering places have not changed: either the eating house in the shopping centre near the old village or at one of the relocated Chinese temples. One of the men said that he went to the shopping centre at least three or four times a week to drink and chat with ten or more old neighbours who also gathered there. They all live in the same new town but they do not feel comfortable gathering in any of the places within it.

The retired men

In contrast to their female counterparts, the aged men had not been as quick to re-establish their village social contacts or to form new ones. During the first six months, these older men, whose common gathering place had been the village coffee shop, shunned the new neighbourhood coffee shops because of the unfriendly, business-oriented atmosphere in

them. But their physical mobility did at least enable them to spend a large part of their day going to places, rather than being confined to the flat. After two and a half years in their neighbourhoods, however, some level of familiarity between themselves and the proprietors of the new coffee shops had been established, and these premises were becoming meeting points. For example, one man had established new and regular contact with a group of retired men in the neighbourhood who met for morning coffee in one of the coffee shops in a nearby block. They also began to use the ground-floor decks more frequently.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, within two and a half years the individuals' grief for the lost home and village had been forgotten, suppressed or filed away in other ways in their memories and family records, and was now seldom expressed: in other words, the lives of the resettled people had stabilized. Even the more elderly, who, in the first two stages of the research, had been the most emotional and vocal about their grief for lost homes, now expressed a certain dissociation from the former village site. As one elderly woman commented: 'Think of the old village also no use. It is not ours any longer. The new flats are already built there.' On the other hand, the little segment of the large new town in which they live had become 'home'. The same lady continued: 'After one year of difficulties, this time I am used to it. Know everybody already. Those people gathering downstairs, all I know. We greet each other.' This comment suggested that, at the individual level, adjustment to the new living arrangements and environment had been generally satisfactory and had occurred within a relatively short period of time. The only group that was still feeling socially isolated after two years was that of the village-bound young working men.

At the same time, some problems persisted at the household level. The financial impact had resulted in increased psychological stress for all, reduced disposable income and savings and, in some cases, reduced quality of food, this being the most flexible item in the household budget. Two of the forty-eight families studied continue to face financial difficulties.

Changes at the community level must be assessed against the different sentiments among the villagers towards the village community itself. There appeared to be two levels of community relations and sentiments in the village: the first was the small established social networks that existed within specific geographical pockets in the village; and the second was a generalized identification with the village, and the sense of security and belonging that pervaded it. For the village-bound, the two levels

were mutually reinforcing and difficult to distinguish experientially. For the non-village-bound, identification with the village was at a more abstract and generalized level, expressed primarily through their sense of security in the village because of their general level of familiarity with and within it. Analytically, given that the non-village-bound's sense of security and belonging was not grounded in any intimate contacts with other villagers, it could be argued that the necessary condition for a true community feeling was a visual and intuitive familiarity with the physical and social environment, resulting primarily from residential stability. Intimate social networking was, of course, a reinforcing factor.

It is important to bear this observation in mind when considering the processes of development of community in a high-rise, high-density environment where, contrary to the village conditions, even a superficial claim that 'everybody knows everybody here' is impossible. Remember, also, that the villagers' familiarity with their physical and social environment was built up gradually, over time, through casual but regular face-to-face contacts, which initially established mutual recognition as 'living in the same neighbourhood' and subsequently led potentially to other neighbourly activities.

In the next chapter, we shall examine the community development processes in the public housing estates, for indeed, a sense of community in the new environment has emerged for the resettled residents. However, it is a different community not only in terms of the people who constitute it, but also in structure and shape, for like the old village community it is conditioned by the physical environment in which the resettled have become residents.

Chapter 4

Modernism and the vernacular

Public spaces and social life

Prior to the universal provision of public housing, the three main ethnic groups—Chinese, Malays and Indians—lived in one of the following two house-forms:

- 1 Timber houses with roofs of ‘atap’,¹ corrugated zinc plates or asbestos sheets, found mainly in Malay *kampung*s or in urban squatters.
- 2 Rows of urban shophouses of more permanent materials, such as bricks and mortar and concrete.²

Furthermore, in the first instance the Chinese and the Malays had their respective vernacular house-forms. The Indians lived in Chinese-style houses, although the two groups used similar layout differently—a phenomenon which will be examined in the next chapter.

Embedded in the Chinese and Malay vernacular house-forms, and in the larger village spatial organization that contained them, were spatial expressions of the cultural practices of each ethnic group. These settlements might be appropriately called Vernacular’ settlements (Hillier, Hanson and Peponis, 1987:217). With the establishment of the public housing programme, Singaporeans from these settlements and old environment have been rehoused in standardized high-rise flats in systematically planned high-density new towns or smaller estates: that is, they have been transferred into a ‘modernist’ environment. The question of particular sociological and architectural research interest, therefore, is: how has this transformation changed the daily life of Singaporeans in general and of the different ethnic groups specifically?

In this chapter we shall compare the ways in which public spaces in the modernist environment are used with those in the vernacular environment in rural Malay *kampung*s or urban Chinese squatter villages. The differences

in usage are themselves an instance of the changes that have taken place in the community life of Singaporeans.³ As indicated in the previous chapter on resettlement, a substantial number of the residents have in fact lived in both environments. This fact is analytically valuable. By holding the residents constant, their behavioural patterns can be better explained in terms of the effects of the building environment in which they reside: that is, the level of architectural determinism on user behaviour will be analytically more focused and easier to verify. Differences in the patterns and intensities of usage of public spaces at both the individual and community levels can be better attributed to, if not explained by, the spatial layout of the two environments. The concept, 'corridor of activities', pertaining to the conceptualization of community in the high-rise environment, will be introduced and its planning implication suggested.⁴

Methodologically, to preserve the unity of the multiple levels of usage of open spaces as a distinct and coherent phenomenon, the discursive strategy adopted here is to present the uses of public spaces in each environment separately and sequentially, from the vernacular to the modernist. So juxtaposed, the profound changes that this chapter seeks to document will be immediately noticeable. With such a documentary strategy, the descriptive substance is also the analytic.

THE VERNACULAR ENVIRONMENT

In the vernacular environment, *atap* houses clustered in unplanned settlements, with an apparent rather than real absence of spatial logic, as this description of a Chinese squatter, which was razed by fire in 1961, will show. The village was sited at the edge of the functional urban area of colonial Singapore, adjacent to the general hospital, the city jail and its extensive police barracks, the oldest primary and secondary English schools for locals and the then modern housing estates built by the Singapore Improvement Trust for the local middle- and low-ranking civil servants. Despite this proximity, the squatter had no hygienic amenities, except running water.⁵

Only the two main roads of the village were paved. Single-storey timber houses, with dried palm fronds, corrugated zinc plates or asbestos sheets as roofs, formed a continuous facade along the well-defined edges of the roads, punctuated only by openings for unpaved tracks that branched off the roads themselves. Shops serving the minimum daily necessities for the villagers—such as dried provisions, Chinese herbs, barbers' and coffee shops—were interspersed among the homes. Shop owners lived either adjacent to their shops or behind the shop fronts.

The physical environment along the main roads was quite good. The relative width of the roads provided the houses with good frontage. The

substantial sizes of the houses and the heights of the roofs, sometimes reaching twenty feet at the pitch, kept them well ventilated. Simple glass panels wedged between palm fronds and thin wooden slats brought ample daylight into the houses. The relative wealth of their owners kept them in good repair. The 'T' junction of the two main roads was the hub of both social and simple commercial activities pertaining to daily needs, giving the roads a constant social liveliness.

Beyond the main roads, however, there was a quite different environment. A network of unpaved tracks spread out from the two roads. Each track was again generally lined with houses, and each track, in turn, had its own, even narrower branches, which were often merely gaps between adjacent houses. One such gap might run the length of several houses or lead, surprisingly and quickly, into an unkempt open clearing, often surrounded by houses facing into the opening. The state of maintenance of houses within the network of tracks depended entirely on whether they were owner-occupied or rented premises. The former were generally well maintained and substantial in size and were adequately ventilated. The rented houses were just the opposite, consisting generally of only one sitting-room and one or, at the most, two bedrooms, and a small kitchen either at the front or in the back section of the house. These premises had very low ceilings, often without windows in the bedrooms. If so, the only source of light and ventilation was the main door, and hence it was common to find an oil lamp lit throughout the entire day within the house. Interspersed with dwellings were outhouses, as there was no modern plumbing, and the occasional pigsty. Only the smell of cooking in the late afternoon substantially alleviated the stench from these two sources. Thus, if the main-roads segment was what the vision of proverbial village *Gemeinschaft* was made of, then the rented premises were where the inhuman poverty of the majority of the villagers was to be found.

In contrast to Chinese villages where houses pragmatically lined both sides of all the footpaths or unpaved dirt tracks, the distribution pattern of houses in a typical Malay *kampung* followed a set of more complex rules. Each Malay house was oriented not to the traffic paths, but to the houses that were built earlier around the site in which a new house was to be erected. The result was often free-standing buildings, possibly with circulation paths all around them. There was a tendency to keep the houses as far apart as possible 'and in such a way, that the view is never blocked by houses' (Evers, 1978:335). These tendencies gave the village a more open feeling but without a clear pattern, in contrast to the Chinese village where houses jostled to squeeze into rows lining the pedestrian paths (see Figure 4.1).

This spatial and visual freedom in a Malay *kampung* was further accentuated by the absence of fences around the free-standing houses, thus reducing to a minimum the distinction between private compound and public space. Indeed, boundaries between houses did not seem to matter—again in contrast with the Chinese propensity to demarcate the limits of their property by fences. The result was that the Malay *kampung* possessed a much more complex spatial organization than the essentially linear arrangement of Chinese villages.

Each village, though, had its own individuality. Consequently, it was rather easy to become familiar with the spatial organization of a village, even for strangers. After walking through a village several times, the ability to orient oneself—that is, a sense of knowing exactly where one stood *vis-à-vis* other sections of the village—would readily be acquired. This was largely because of the following characteristics which were described in the previous chapter:

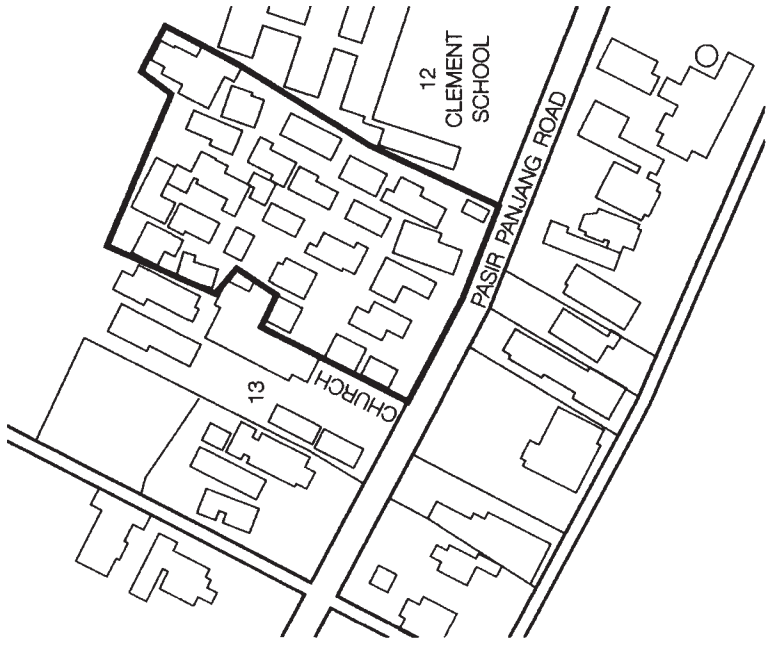
- 1 Its small scale.
- 2 The visually different character of each house in terms of size, colour and state of repair; cumulatively, they constituted the character of each footpath in the village.
- 3 The stability of the village population and their daily routines, a significant number of which were enacted outside the house, and hence, were readily observable (Wong and Chua, 1983).

These characteristics were essential to the villagers' sense of security in that environment.

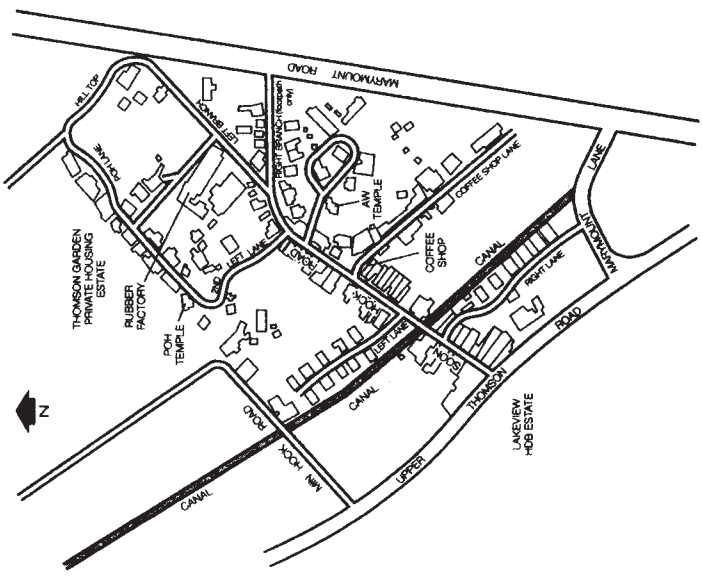
THE MODERNIST ENVIRONMENT

Despite contrary experiences in different countries—ranging from the well adjusted (Brown, 1989) to the socially disastrous (Coleman, 1985)—the presence of similar housing estates in different countries does point to the international popularity of high-rise building as a solution to housing problems, at least up to the late 1960s. To substantiate this, take the following description of what is recognizably an HDB housing estate:

The planning and architecture of the new communities exhibit an initial appearance of overwhelming conformity, being composed of long rows of apartments, constructed in linear blocks with occasional point blocks located near community centres. These buildings are



(b)



(a)

Figure 4.1 Examples of a typical layout of (a) a Chinese village, and (b) a Malay kampung

evenly distributed and set apart to create extensive public open space, in relationship to the road systems that both serve as the linkage between the various communities and are internal to the various groupings within each community. The overall concept is one in which buildings are seen as being set in the open countryside.

Variations in architectural massing and expression are reduced to a minimum and the sense of spatial complexity is reduced to a rather mundane level with little typological or architectural variation. This lack of differentiation becomes quite apparent when one attempts to move around the new communities with any sense of orientation.

This monotony has been noted:

surface treatment of walls helps to offset the tedium implicit in the basic form of construction. Decorative treatment on a larger scale is also evident in the mosaic murals that adorn the exposed ends of some blocks. These abstract designs also serve as 'place markers' in what would otherwise be placeless continuum of similarity. Decorative complexity is appearing in the balcony fronts that are used on point blocks.⁶

If one adds to the above the complexities of roof form, the above description is recognizably that of an HDB estate. It is, though, a description of East German public-housing estates. However, the similarity in spatial organization of the respective estates attests to the international influence of modern architecture.

The high-rise residential environment may be said to be the result of two historically consecutive architectural concerns. To the concern for 'healthy' living in a clean and green environment of the early twentieth-century British 'garden city' movement was added the 1920s modern architects' socialist sentiments and their search for a 'new architecture' appropriate to an industrial-age technology. Thus the country cottages were replaced by industrially constructed high-rise slab blocks set in a green environment. In Singapore, even if the explicit reasons for choosing the high-rise solution are constraints of land, construction costs, and speed of completion—all in the face of a continual housing demand from a young population⁷—the spatial organization of such estates is inevitably influenced by the 'garden city—modernist' sentiments.

PUBLIC SPACE COMPARED

Village: informal spaces only

The use of public spaces in the two environments can now be compared. The most obvious feature about open public spaces in a village was their informal nature: that is, they happened by the way rather than intentionally. But they were not without hierarchy in terms of the levels of usage and the size and membership of users. It is thus possible to describe them in order of their degree of 'public-ness'.

Public spaces around the house

The starting rung in the hierarchy was the spaces attached to the house itself. Of these, the verandah of the Malay house was most prominent (see Figure 4.2). Constituting an essential front part of the house, it was commonly subjected to different degrees of embellishment: brightly painted flower pots hung from the beams or sat on the railings, relatively comfortable sofa chairs arranged for friendly conversation. The degree of embellishment depended on the verandah size, which reflected the economic circumstances of the household. Informal because of its openness, the verandah was nevertheless a place to receive guests.

This was a space where the men of the house met casual visitors—usually other men from the same village who were passing or whose intention it was to drop by just for casual conversation. It was a man's domain precisely because of its openness, in accordance with the dictates of both gender segregation and the relative seclusion of women in Islam, as practised in Singapore. Eventful visits, such as marriage negotiations and religious meetings, would be conducted in the main room, immediately behind the verandah.

However, women had their own space too, at the back end of the house. It was essentially a large enclosed kitchen where food was prepared, although actual cooking often took place outdoors in order to avoid the soot produced by wood fires. Sometimes, a substantial wooden platform would be installed in this room, much like a bed with a grass mat. This served both as a place for the women of the house to meet their casual visitors and as a bed space for children throughout the day.

Another public space attached to the original Malay house on stilts was the space under the raised wooden floor of the house. It was of varying heights, depending on the height of the stilts on which the wooden floor was laid. This was also generally a space for women and

PLAN RUMAH LIMAS BUNGKUS
 ANGGHAN (SCALE) $\frac{1}{8}$ DAN $\frac{1}{4}$

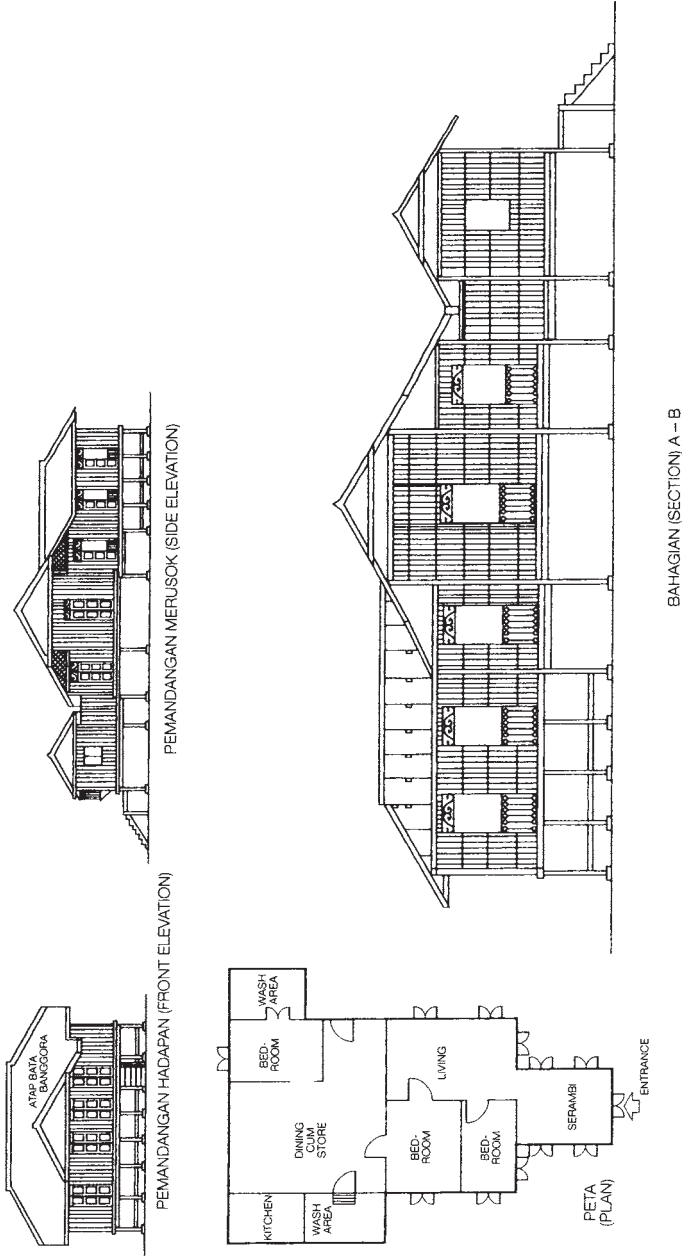


Figure 4.2 A Malay house (Source: Sheppard, 1969)

children. Routine household chores were carried out here, such as drying of laundry, rearing of poultry, and caring for children in the cool of this well-shaded space. Children were also wont to use this space for passive recreation and rest.

By the 1950s, Malay houses sitting on the ground could already be found. With this change of architectural form, the distinction of spaces described above disappeared altogether. The only public space attached to these houses was the area under the thatch roof in front of the house. A makeshift bench or table that could seat several individuals would be placed under the shade of the eaves, for the convenience not only of the members of the household, but also of fellow villagers who passed by and stayed to chat. This arrangement made it more difficult to maintain gender segregation and instances of mixed gender interaction were common. As the seats were placed immediately adjacent to the edge of the lane-ways fronting the house, the activities in these spaces inevitably spilled on to the paths. The paths thus doubled up as both circulation paths and social spaces, giving the lanes a social liveliness.

These Malay houses on the ground resembled Chinese village houses. The spaces under the eaves, therefore, corresponded with the first set of public open spaces in Chinese villages. A Chinese house had a broad frontage with a centrally placed main entrance, and sat squatly on the ground. The cement flooring of the house extended outside to form a skirting around it. The skirt was often much wider where it ran along the front under the eaves. In line with the Chinese propensity to be more protective of private property, this corridor might have a fence surrounding it (see Figure 5.1, p. 92). This was the public space attached immediately to the Chinese house proper, and it was a women's space.

Female Chinese villagers of all ages, except very young children, were not meant to wander about the village with the sole purpose of seeking social interaction. They tended to be confined to the immediate surroundings of the house (i.e. home-bound). Any interactions away from home were either specifically purposeful or in passing as part of an ongoing routine activity. For example, as one went to market, one might stop to have a brief exchange with another who was hanging up the day's wash in the vicinity of the latter's house. The corridor in front of the house was, therefore, a convenient space for older ladies to gather, while young women should preferably not be seen idling in full view of all (i.e. culture-bound). Indeed, all spaces that were attached to the Chinese house were female spaces, in contrast to the Malay houses, as noted earlier.

Public spaces away from the house

For both Chinese and Malay men, much of the socializing within the village tended to be away from the home. Among the most readily accessible and well-used spaces were those in the immediate vicinity of village retailers or mundane services, such as barbers. Usually these premises would have some simple benches in the shop front, thus providing a space for men to idle collectively. Beyond these spaces, the following differences could be observed.

Commonly found in Malay *kampung*s were makeshift structures erected specifically for social purposes in the open spaces between free-standing houses. Some of these might serve as market stalls for the women in the morning and as gathering points for men in the evenings and at weekends. Others were identifiable by a weatherworn low coffee table surrounded by cast-away chairs. All these spaces were sparsely used in the day but well used by men in the cool of the evening, because unless unemployed, Malays in Singapore were 'urban villagers' engaged in wage labour in the urban economy.

In the case of Chinese villages, the men's domain *par excellence* was the village coffee shop, with a wide, open shop front, and tables and chairs spilling beyond its sheltered premises. It was seldom without several males of all ages, huddled in groups or scattered at different tables. The process of socialization as a regular member of the coffee-shop crowd began early in a village boy's life. Young boys regularly sat idly alone without being able to enter the adult conversations. Nevertheless, being there was all that counted and this idling was a rite of passage into the adult world.

The activities at these 'collective idling points' for men, Chinese or Malay, were always the same: namely, plain idling, with intermittent repartee and sometimes gambling. The substance of the conversation was never rarefied discussion of weighty issues, but rather trading of jokes, mild put-downs, boastful self-defence and aggrandizing embellishments of one's own exploits.

Analytically, one cannot resist the desire to theorize about the difference between a communally set up gathering spot and that of a commercially run coffee shop. The difference might arguably reflect the more pecuniary orientation of the Chinese in that the coffee-shop proprietor saw the opportunity of gains in providing a much needed and appreciated service; or it might also reflect the different economic circumstances of the two ethnic groups, with the relatively better-off Chinese being able to purchase the service itself. Whatever the reason,

these exclusively male domains, away from their houses, but within the village, completed the types of open public spaces to be found in the vernacular environment of Singapore.

The informal character of village public spaces emerged unintentionally from the routines of the everyday life of the villagers themselves. In sharp contrast to this informality, the public spaces in the modernist housing estates constitute an intentionally planned hierarchy, with the different types of social activities unfolding in such spaces as intended.

Hierarchy of planned places

With the exception of small infill sites, all public-housing blocks are laid out in comprehensively planned new towns, according to a prototype model (Tan *et al.*, 1985). This model is constantly undergoing refinement, such as optimizing land use with better distribution of facilities, increasing the town's self-sufficiency in terms of necessary daily services, and creating occupational opportunities for the residents. Guided by the prototype, all spaces in a new town are 'planned spaces' that abide by a geometrical order. Even undeveloped spaces are left intentionally undeveloped as 'reserved sites', and their development at a later date allows for the injection of a historical element into an environment which is otherwise planned at one point in time.

The hierarchy of open public spaces corresponds approximately to the hierarchical distribution of activity nodes, which are divided into town centres, neighbourhood centres and subcentres. Accordingly, the town centre is first located at approximately the geographical centre of the site of the new town. The locations of the rest of the hierarchy are then determined geometrically in terms of both the distance from the town centre itself and the maximum tolerable distance for residents who use the spaces. In the town centre, higher-order goods and services can be found, such as shopping emporia, recreational facilities, a library, restaurants and cinemas (Ooi, 1986).

After the town centre comes the neighbourhood centre, where a fresh-produce market with a hawker centre is located. This market is supported by rows of shops that provide services ranging from doctors to hairdressing salons. The market-cum-hawker centre is used only for a brief four to five hours in the morning. Consequently, in the interest of optimal economic use of space, these centres were phased out in the new towns of the mid-1980s, and replaced by small fresh-produce shops and eating houses. However, public sentiment was generally against such substitution because, as shown later, it signified the end of an important

social institution that generates community, especially among the housewives and the retired. So the centres were reinstated in the late 1980s.

Next is the ground floor of the block, which is left empty and is colloquially known as the 'Void deck'. However, to increase ground-level activities in order to improve social surveillance, shops have been introduced in some of the ground-floor space, especially in those blocks that are furthest from the neighbourhood centre. These shops constitute the subcentres earlier mentioned.

In addition to the individual void decks, a common focus is provided for several adjacent decks, with the aim of organizing them into a 'precinct'. The focus is usually a small children's playground, and whenever possible a shoplet, or kiosk, is also provided for the convenience of the residents. It is hoped that such provisions will improve the frequency and pattern of social interaction among precinct residents (Kwok and Tan, 1986).

Finally, there is the common corridor shared by residents on the same floor in a residential block. Long corridors had been found to be uncondusive to neighbourly interaction, therefore short, segmental corridors that serve six to eight households have become the norm. This arrangement also provides an extra design element for the elevation of the blocks and even the flats.

Apart from this hierarchy of essentially passive activity nodes, a town garden, a sports complex, a swimming pool (very occasionally two), and jogging tracks with exercise areas are also provided. Children's playgrounds are generously scattered throughout the new town. It should be noted that the large green spaces between blocks are not meant to be used by residents; they are intended essentially as visual, green relief from the concrete blocks of buildings.

Inverting planning logic: the logic of use

The logic of planning requires that spaces be conceived in a hierarchy that moves from the centre to the periphery. Significantly, from field observations and interviews, however, it is clear that the users understand the spaces in exactly the reverse order: that is, from the space that is most immediate and frequented in one's daily routine in the housing environment to that which is furthest and most infrequently used.

Corridor space

By the logic of use, then, the space most immediate to residents is the shared corridor on the same floor. Although surveys indicated that neighbours tend to be acquainted with each other (Wong and Yeh, 1985), field observations showed that the social interactional level is quite low, as too is the social use of the corridor space. This is partly because the corridor is too close to the residents. Activities in this space readily become disturbances to those in their flats. It is also partly the consequence of the nature of neighbour relationship: that is, a relationship that avoids intimacy (Ong, 1974:9), while simultaneously calling for a fairly high level of mutual responsibility, especially in times of emergency. The result is a pattern of social relations that is extensive in the number of neighbours known, but known only superficially (Tai, 1988:190).

The low usage level of the corridor is reinforced through constant exhortation by the police that residents should padlock their grill-gates and front doors to prevent crimes. Several social consequences follow when the residents pay heed to this. First, the shut doors cut off all possibilities for casual, even simply visual, social contact. Second, with no eyes on the corridor, the informal surveillance that helps to make the corridor secure is absent, and the closing of doors is therefore counter-productive to crime prevention. Finally, to both the residents and others, the 'shut door' symbolizes the anti-social nature of the high-rise environment. This is a particularly common complaint among resettled villagers whose doors were never shut during the day in the village.

Regardless of the architect/planner's intention of making the corridor a social space for the residents (Wong and Yeh, 1985:506), empirically it remains an intention that is largely not realized. From the point of view of developing community sentiments among residents, the public spaces on the ground are of greater consequence.

Void decks

The most important public space at ground level is the void deck. In addition to being a space for occasional rituals that cannot be accommodated within the flat—such as Chinese funerals and Malay wedding receptions—it is even more importantly a point for daily gatherings of certain residents. The following social activities can be observed daily at the void decks by everyone.

On weekday mornings, it is mainly a point of departure to work, school and market. People going to work usually step out of the lift and hurry along their separate ways at the lobby. Opportunities for social

contact are minimal, limited at best to nods or slight gestures as they pass one another. Social contacts are less cursory for those waiting for pre-arranged transport, as the waiting period is also an extended occasion for conversations.⁸

In the evenings, the void decks are also waiting points. For example, on one occasion two women were observed seated at the table with their pre-school children running about them, while they waited for their husbands or older children to come home. A third woman with two children walked by. Greetings were exchanged. The third woman then went on to the shops in the next block, leaving her children with the other two women. Soon she returned with a loaf of bread and chatted for the next ten minutes. A school bus arrived. A schoolgirl paused by the group of women—one of them was her mother. After a while, the girl went upstairs on her own, watched by her mother.

Besides the short-lived waiting groups, there are day-long informal gatherings. An example is an 'old women's corner', with well-defined territory marked by potted plants along the front and rear kerb of the void deck. There is generally a continuous daily gathering between about 10 a.m. and 9.30 p.m., with a lull during the lunch hours. An observable feature of such a 'corner' is the diversity of informal 'membership'. Apart from its 'core' members, membership operates entirely on random encounters: that is, by visually coopting whoever is in the vicinity of the group. Women back from the market rest here before going upstairs. Someone who is down for a stroll decides to stay. A visitor stopping to ask for directions may, in return, be asked whom he or she is visiting. If the latter is known to the women, the visitor is briefly inducted as directions are given. Such corners are common sights in HDB new towns. Men are not intentionally excluded from the women's corners, but they tend to have their own void decks at which they gather. Thus gender segregation is still maintained.

Other activities in the void deck include the playing of games such as chess, table tennis and badminton, and the practising of whatever is the latest fad among the youths. Seen separately, each of these social settings—'old women's corner', waiting points, recreational areas and gathering places—is linked to the respective daily activities of the elderly, children, housewives and youths. In their simultaneous presence at the void deck, these activities and their participants constitute an 'open' community characterized by multiple and often competing uses of the same space.

It should be noted that most void decks are not used at all, which accounts for the generalized sense of emptiness throughout the neighbourhood. The used void decks, in turn, appear to be social oases

in this emptiness and seem to share similar physical characteristics, the most important of which is that they face some major activity focus. For example, those which face the road where activities can be observed are more inclined to be used as collective idling points than those in the middle of residential blocks.

For the men, coffee shops in public-housing neighbourhoods, whether in the form of stalls at the hawker centre or in eating houses (local fast-foods are sold in both premises), do not possess the same aura of familiarity as those in the villages. Consequently, they are used functionally rather than as social spaces. Of the two forms, hawker stalls are more likely to be used in the mornings by regulars, usually retired men, whereas the high rent of eating houses imparts a sense of their being places of business rather than places simply to gather at and share time.

Pedestrian paths

To the extent that the void decks are areas where residents gather for sustained sociability, the architectural and planning intentions of this space may be said to be realized. One space that is not consciously planned as a possible community space but turns out to be extremely well suited for generating social interactions among residents is the extensive network of pedestrian paths that lead to functional areas. This is largely a result of the routine behaviour of the residents.

Generally, most residents tend to be creatures of habit in that they will use the same paths to the same facilities rather than wander adventurously through different routes. Furthermore, if such facilities are used daily or at regular intervals, usage by individuals will be at approximately the same time daily or at the same interval. Hence, the tendency is quite high for the individuals who use the same services to meet regularly and become acquainted with each other, especially for those whose daily lives are tied to a fixed routine in their residential vicinity, such as housewives and retirees.

The housewives' daily routine, for example, consists of taking children from their flats to the kindergarten, then going on to the market and back to pick up the children before returning to the flats. As the timing of these activities is determined institutionally by the kindergarten, the women who use the same circuit are likely to meet each other regularly in the course of completing their daily chores. No special effort is required for them to become familiar socially. It is these unplanned, casual and brief contacts that are the fundamental building blocks of their sense of being a community of users rather than an aggregate of strangers.

Conceptually, every specific group of residents who routinely use a similar set of facilities in a residential environment may be perceived as a 'community of users', and the complete circuit of their routines may be seen as a 'corridor of activities'. The total residential population of a new town may be stratified into different 'communities of users' according to the services used predominantly by each group. The implication of this conception will be drawn out in the conclusion to this chapter.

DIFFERENCES OBSERVED AND INTERPRETED

As the vernacular and the modernist residential environment each has its own set of open public spaces that follows its own logic, a point-for-point comparison between them will not be a fruitful analytic exercise. However, certain differences in the patterns of social interactions in the two environments can be discerned at both the community and the individual levels.

Community differences

At the community level, the most obvious difference is the change in character of the residential 'community' itself. Needless to say, over time, acquaintances are made and a sense of identification with the residential location does emerge among the high-rise residents, as it did with villagers. However, these phenomena are more stratified in high-rise environment according to one's fixed routines in the estate.⁹ On the other hand, the ubiquity of incidental social activities in all the informal social spaces in a village, from very brief casual exchanges to prolonged idling together at a gathering point, gave villagers a sense of belonging and of security, as expressed in their generalized sense of 'knowing everyone' in the village, an organic sense of community. This sentiment is not likely to develop in the high-rise neighbourhood.

The small collectives of residents in selective void decks or along selective 'corridors of activities' are indeed limited communities in themselves. Therefore, while high-rise physical features do not entirely deny the possible development of community sentiments, the limited communities exist unavoidably within a larger population of strangers because of the sheer size of the population of a new town. Consequently, a generalized sense of community feeling as in the village is no longer possible. It is now replaced by much more personalized sentiments localized at a particular void deck or in one's routine routes in the high-rise housing estate.

Differences can also be identified between the respective gathering points of the two environments. First, the regular users of void decks are Chinese. With the exception of male youths, all other Malays, male or female, are seldom found in void decks. Although they used all the informal village spaces frequently, they have refrained from using those in the new towns and have withdrawn into their flats. Given their numerical minority in the new towns, and without any assurance of meeting their own group if they do go out, Malays tend to refrain from venturing out to idle alone or among strangers. The very prominent mosque, one of which is found at every new town centre, has become the community space for all Malays in the respective new towns. Comparatively, their community ties and their village way of life are more affected by relocation into the modernist high-rise environment than those of the Chinese.

Second, the users of the void decks are predominantly elderly men and women, although teenagers may be found there in the evenings. Conspicuously absent are able-bodied men, whereas in the village their presence in the open spaces was as frequent as that of the elderly throughout the day. This difference, however, may not be due to the physical environment. The absence or presence of the able-bodied men and women may be regarded as two sides of the same coin: their presence in the village during the day was a result of high levels of unemployment and underemployment before the 1970s; conversely, their absence in the public-housing estate is the result of full employment. For these individuals, the day is now spent under the regime of ongoing economic production, and their residential base is reduced to a sphere of rest, necessary for recharging their labour power.

Their absence points to the importance of economic factors in the transformation of residential-base community life. With Singapore's development into an industrialized nation, income differences now influence the pattern of social contacts among the residents of housing estates. For example, middle-income professionals may now belong concurrently to several trans-spatial social collectives that are based on interests and class homogeneity rather than on residential proximity. In contrast, due to financial constraints, working-class individuals are more confined to their residential areas for their simple recreational needs. For example, they are inclined to patronize the neighbourhood hawker centre nightly, and a sense of community is likely to exist among them, which is localized at the hawker centre itself. This is quite observable in the older housing estates, which have a greater proportion of lower-income groups than new towns of recent vintage.

Economic development also means higher overall material wellbeing. This produces greater social and psychological self-sufficiency among individuals and families, and reduces the mutual dependencies imposed on them by the material deprivation that was the lot of villagers in the 1950s. It also increases the premium individuals place on privacy, which is itself facilitated by the high-rise environment. All these related factors contribute to the decline of neighbourliness and residential-based community life in the modernist environment.

Individual differences

The effect on individuals of changing their residential environment depends significantly on the degree to which each one is bound to that environment in their daily life.

Let us look first at the elderly residents. Older women who were home-bound in the villages have gained a greater measure of freedom in their daily social life. In the village, they used only the open spaces that were directly attached to their houses, thus restricting their interactions to direct neighbours and villagers who happened to pass by. In the high-rise environment, many can escape the confinement of the flat and gather daily at the void decks. That a village of 250 households can be accommodated within only two blocks of flats automatically increases the potential for social contact, even if one were to restrict oneself to the residents in the same block. In fact, the women who gather at particular void decks usually come from three or four neighbouring blocks. The number and frequency of social contacts have therefore correspondingly increased for the elderly woman. The same is true for retired men. However, as noted earlier, they have lost their village coffee shops where they could while away the entire day. The intensified business character of coffee shops in the housing estates precludes this. A substitute is therefore often found in the hawker-centre coffee stalls, but only for the morning period when the stalls are in business.

Finally, some housewives have also made gains in their social interactional patterns. Apart from the void decks, they also acquire new acquaintances along the paths in which they carry out their routines. A typical example is the already mentioned circuit of flat to kindergarten to market to flat. It is common for them to spend time together at the market, or at the kindergarten awaiting the release of the children from classes. Generally, the need to venture out of the flat simply to carry out necessary routines has resulted in a greater degree of freedom for all women residents.

CONCLUSION

With the transformation of the residential environment from the vernacular to the modernist, changes in the patterns of use of open spaces by residents are inevitable. As these patterns are constitutive of the residential community, there is a corresponding transformation of the spatial organization of the community itself.

The effect of the transformation is not evenly distributed among the residents. The groups that gain most, in terms of expanded level of social contacts and increased degrees of social and physical freedom, are the elderly women and housewives who are bound to the residential environment. The need to escape the confinement of the flats-in-mid-air has disrupted the cultural sanctions that previously denied the women access to most public places except those attached to their house. Now, they routinely gather at the very public void decks, with no problems about the consequent public exposure. The void decks are, of course, planned as public social spaces. However, the ensuing change in cultural rules that has led to the relative 'liberalization' of women's presence in public is wholly unintended. Ironically, it is precisely in engendering this cultural change that the void deck as a planned social space fulfils its intended function of having generated a 'potential field of co-presence and encounter' (Hillier, Burdett, Peponis and Penn, 1987:248).

For the housewives, the reproduction of their daily life will take them to several parts of the high-rise estate along a familiar corridor of activities. This corridor and its nodal points, such as markets and kindergartens, constitute for the individuals who use them a social space wherein acquaintances are made; it is a social space that embodies a community of users. The concept of a 'corridor of activities' as constitutive of a community also applies to other groups, such as the working-class individuals and retired men, who are bound to the high-rise residential environment.

The segregated communities of users in the high-rise blocks are qualitatively different from the inclusive sense of a community comprising residents of vernacular villages. This results from differences in the demographic and spatial make-up of the two environments. First, the small population and the limited boundary enabled villagers to recognize all the faces that they came into contact with routinely. Second, since village houses were all at ground level, this facilitated easy visual contacts and encouraged casual interactions. In the high-rise environment, instead of a small population there is a high density of residents, and instead of houses on the ground there are flats in mid-air. Consequently, rather

than an all-inclusive sense of community, there are small collectives that routinely share time and space on the ground level.

At the abstract spatial level, this difference in the sense of community corresponds with the extensive comparative analysis of established vernacular or traditional environments that Hillier and his colleagues have undertaken (Hanson and Hillier, 1987). The community life in a Singapore village reaffirmed the importance of both the close proximity—that is, spatial shallowness—between houses and public spaces, and the axial dimension which gave to the village a global pattern, a pattern that rendered the environment not only intelligible, but also conducive to casual encounters between the villagers and between villagers and strangers (Hillier, Hanson and Peponis, 1987).

The analysis of Singapore's public-housing estates also fleshes out Hillier's more elliptical statements regarding social activities in modernist planned environments (Hillier, Hanson and Peponis, 1987:230). The high-rise housing estate is, as Hillier suggests, influenced by both the planning ideology of the hierarchy of public space and the social ideology of the premium of privacy. The combined effect of these two beliefs led to the increasing distance, or spatial depth, between houses and open spaces. From the Singapore example, we may suggest that such a deep spatial arrangement need not be entirely devoid of community potential, especially if the public spaces in the configuration contain essential services. Residents who routinely use these services along the specific linear paths in the configuration will undoubtedly encounter each other and, over time, will establish acquaintances that are essential to, and which underpin, a community—albeit a community which has a much more restrictive membership than in a vernacular environment. In planning terms, the services may be laid out and distributed in such a manner as to facilitate the casual meetings of their respective user groups. This will speed up the development of community sense among the different groups because a precondition for community already exists: that is, these differentiated groups already possess social affinity through their use of the services. The substantive features of community in the HDB estate will be detailed further in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5

Adjusting religious practices to different house-forms

Apart from the transformation of community life, resettlement also induces changes in cultural practices that are embedded in the indigenous architectural idioms; such practices have to be recast so as to fit into standardized modern high-rise flats. Such cultural changes, which constitute an aspect of resettlement adjustments neglected in the literature, will be examined in this chapter.

Prior to resettlement into high-rise flats, Chinese and Malays lived in architecturally distinct houses, each reflecting the social, cultural and religious values of the respective groups. Significantly, although constituting up to 8 per cent of the total population, and often concentrated in certain districts close to their places of employment, Indians in Singapore did not develop their own ethnically distinct architecture. Among the possible reasons for this is that until after the Second World War, family formation among Indians, though not entirely absent, did not occur in significant numbers. Indian men who came in search of employment lived largely in dormitories or in quarters provided by the employers. Those who did form families appeared to have adapted themselves into existing house-forms (Siddique and Puru Shotam, 1982). For example, in a village in the northern part of the island where there was a concentration of Indians because of proximity to the naval base which provided substantial employment opportunities for them, the Indians lived in houses that were similar in layout to those of the Chinese, described below, but with a different pattern of usage.

Exclusive ethnic settlements have been dispersed as a result of the **HDB's** first-come-first-served allocation procedure and the government's explicit policy goal of physical ethnic integration through public housing itself—a policy which is analysed in Chapter 7. As it happened, a major

adjustment to living in flats concerns the religious practices of the three ethnic groups, disclosing the deep-rooted significance of religion in what is ostensibly a cosmopolitan and secular Singaporean population whose uppermost preoccupation is making a living in a diversified modern economy. Conceptually, this analysis of religious adjustment stands only as an example of the entire field of research that can be conducted.

First, we shall describe the 'typical' layout of a Chinese house and its cultural significance, followed by the variations evident in the Hindu Indian house, and then the Malay house. Finally, we shall examine the cultural adjustments that each group has to make in the standardized layout of an HDB flat.

THE TRADITIONAL SINGAPOREAN CHINESE HOUSE

Kohl (1984), who traced the development of Chinese architecture in Malaysia and Singapore, suggests that, 'satisfied with their fitness of purpose, serviceability, and aesthetics, the Chinese have not altered their architectural forms, with architecture becoming more a rule of thumb than an art after the Tang dynasty'. One consequence of this is that the 'plan of a house and of a temple may be identical, and the use of buildings may change from temple to home or school quite easily' (*ibid.*). Significantly, this architectural continuity not only cut across time, but also survived transplantation from its origin to a new environment. A general description of the Chinese house, therefore, applies not only to those whence the Chinese immigrants from Singapore came but also to those built in the new environment by the very same immigrants.

Ideally, a Chinese building should have a symmetrical plan oriented on an axis that runs 'north-south', speaking metaphorically, because the 'south' does not necessarily refer to the compass south but rather to the 'south' which is determined by a geomancer. Buildings face and open to this 'south' in order to capture the positive, warmth-oriented Yang. Similarly, the 'north' is constituted by a solid wall to deflect the negative Yin. The roofs and extending eaves are supported by a truss system resting on pillars. The intervals between the pillars are known as 'bays'. A building is often enclosed on three sides, with the bays facing 'south'; this open side, paralleling the roof, forms the facade of the building. In Singapore, instead of establishing a geomancy-south, houses, more pragmatically, simply face village laneways or urban roads. The bays with their extended eaves are often half fenced in to form a verandah. This appears to be a tropical adaptation resembling the verandah of a Malay house, which is indigenous to the region (see Figure 5.1)

In the layout of the house, the main entrance is centrally placed in the



Figure 5.1 Typical semi-rural Chinese house in Singapore

open facade and leads directly and immediately into the square or rectangular ‘reception’ or ‘ancestral’ hall. Immediately facing the door is the altar, upon which is placed the household gods,¹ represented either by paintings or by wooden sculptures. Photographs or tablets of ancestors are placed to the left of the gods, generally on a separate altar. Centrally placed below the altar is often a square table used for setting up sacrificial foods on ritual occasions. Other functional rooms surround the three closed sides of the hall. The overall impression is one of symmetry.

There are substantial variations to the distribution of the functional rooms. For example, bedrooms may be found on the left and right sides of the hall, while the kitchen and dining space are placed behind the wall which faces the main entrance. Alternatively, bedrooms may surround the hall and the kitchen is housed in an extension to the main house or in a completely separate structure. The distribution is largely dependent on the wealth of the inhabitants. Figure 5.2 shows plans drawn from different locations, illustrating both the variations in distribution and the symmetry.

Maintenance of rigid symmetry of layout whenever possible is, of course, culturally and socially significant. Two non-mutually exclusive plausible reasons may account for this significance.

The first reason relates to an underlying philosophy of buildings, as expressed through the concepts and practices of geomancy. The late, eminent anthropologist of Chinese society, Maurice Freedman, suggested that ‘buildings are culture in a special sense; what men make for themselves in their construction may be a challenge to the natural world, and *feng-shui* [geomancy] shows both the risks attending that challenge and the means of minimizing them’ (1979:331).

The practice of geomancy involves, first, selecting a site and establishing the proper orientation of the building within it, so as to

avoid evil or bad luck, and to ensure health and fortune for the family. In brief, the two primary elements of the Yin and Yang should be balanced. This balance is mediated by the five elements of Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth. Hence, natural elements such as mountains, rivers, forests and even a single tree are to be considered in the assessment of the site. If preventive measures are not possible at the outset, as in instances when the building is already erected, then elements of the structure may be corrected, realigned or rearranged, such as by digging a well to symbolize water, to alter *the feng-shui* and hopefully ward off ill fortune. Instead of such corrections, a priest may be engaged to ritually appease the evil spirits. This shows the close link between geomancy and Chinese religion; in many instances, the same person is both geomancer and priest (Freedman, 1979:322–5).

Generally, it was impossible from a practical point of view for landless immigrants, who had to build their own impermanent houses wherever they could, to abide by the geomancy rules. Nevertheless, the balance of the two complementary forces of Yin and Yang can be encoded and given material expression in the building itself. Hence the stress on symmetry in the houses.

The second reason relates to the structure of the Chinese family, which is rigidly hierarchical in apportioning authority: ‘One of severe subordination of the sons and of correlative authority on the part of the father’ (Freedman, 1979:236). One should expect cultural artefacts to carry this structure symbolically. It is, therefore, my contention that the symmetry of the Chinese house is an architectural-spatial encoding of the hierarchical order of the family structure because this layout allows for the ease of locating a ‘centre’ in the house.

This symbolic, and not necessarily spatial, centre is precisely the seat of power and authority of the household. It enables the family to install its head at a precise spot in the reception hall. Thus, on ritual occasions when deferential gestures rendered to the elders are to be performed, the elders are always seated either immediately in front of the altar or immediately to its two sides. This placement of the head at the symbolic centre, with the subordinates distributed to the left and right sides, is standardized on every formal occasion involving the co-presence of the head and his subordinates. This is reflected in the stylized arrangements of all the different levels of the dynastic Chinese courts, culminating in the emperor’s audience with court officials, which, in turn, reflects yet another observation about the Chinese family, namely, that it is a microcosm of the society at large and the emperor is structurally equivalent to

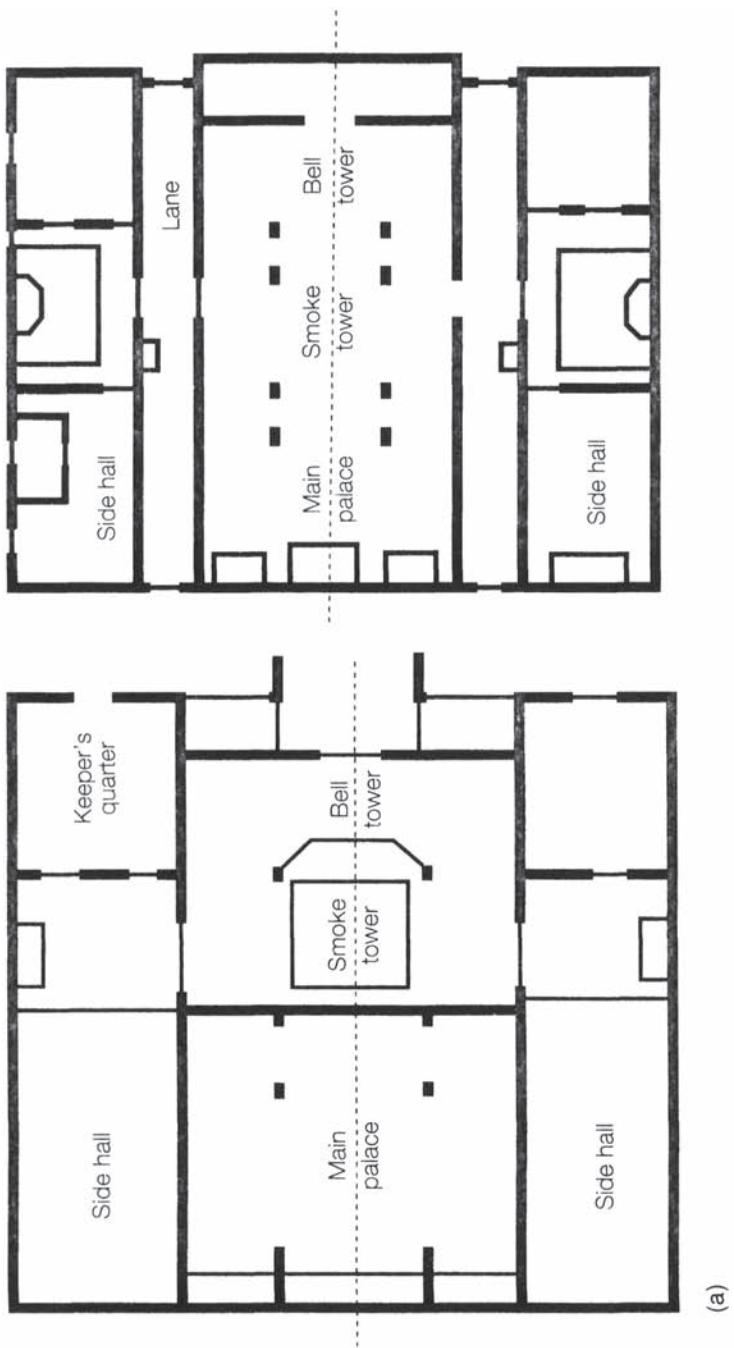
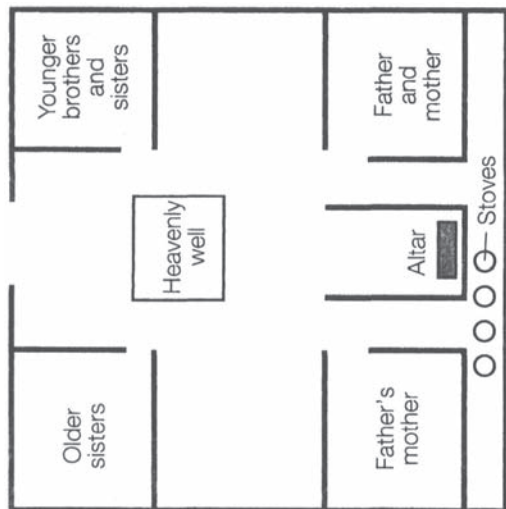


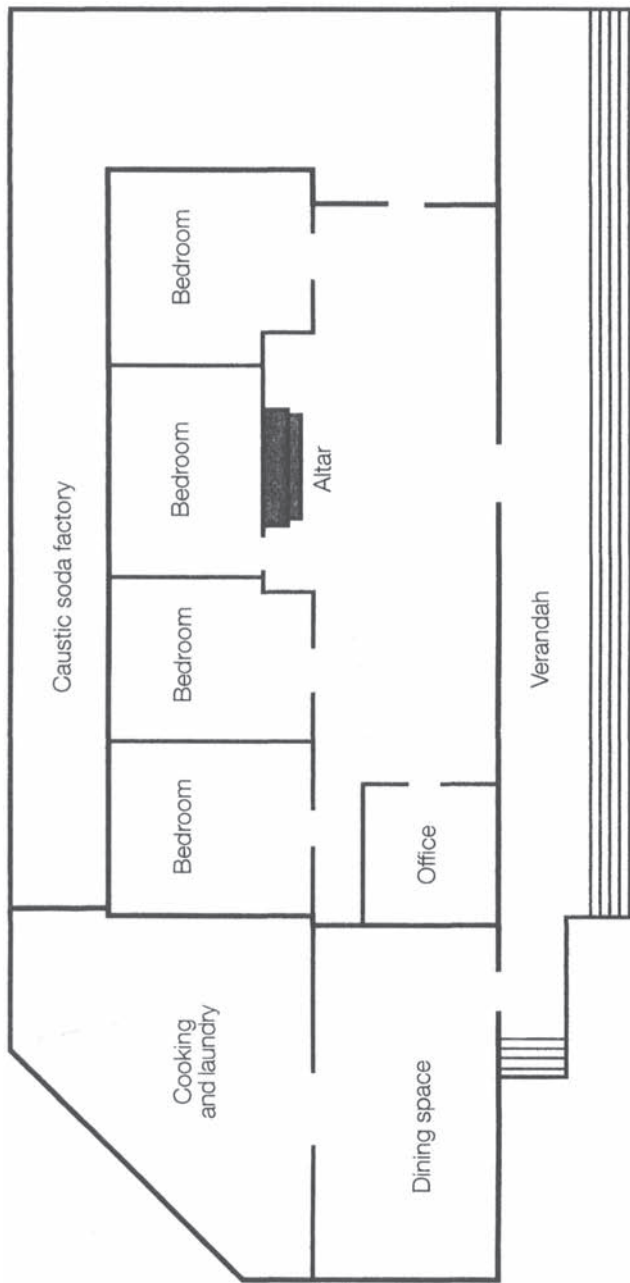
Figure 5.2 Floor plans of traditional Chinese buildings drawn from different location: (a) Chinese temples; (b) shophouse; (c) rural house; (d) house-cum-factory (Source: (a) Kohl, 1984:92; (b) and (c) Newell, 1962:102; (d) original plan)





(c)

Figure 5.2 (continued)



(d)

Figure 5.2 (continued)

the father. If this interpretation is plausible, then one may conclude that it is because the symmetrical layout facilitates the location of a formal symbolic centre that this layout is adopted by the Chinese.

THE INDIAN HOUSE

Indians have accommodated themselves to the layout of the Chinese house. To identify and understand the different ways in which Hindu Indians use the house, one needs to have some general understanding of their concern with purity and pollution in everyday life.²

In Hinduism, purity of castes and avoidance of contamination by other castes has been generalized to an overall concern with 'purity' and its polar opposite concept 'pollution' (Douglas, 1966:147). Pollution is divided into two forms: permanent and impermanent. Permanent pollution is ascribed to a person by virtue of birth in a high or low stratum and cannot be removed by purification. According to a Singapore Indian sociologist, 'migration and cosmopolitanism had altered the [Singapore] Indians' mind to such an extent that "untouchability" has been replaced with tolerance and understanding', and 'distance-maintenance between different castes, because of their birth into that particular caste, is a forgotten phenomenon' (Mani, 1977:60-1). Consequently, purity- and pollution-related practices have to a large extent been withdrawn from general view. They have instead taken a domestic turn and are now largely focused on the home and in very personal relations. At this level, it is the impermanent pollutions arising from the normal functions of daily living, and which can be removed by ritual purification, that have become the chief source of concern and greatly influence the use of the house.

In direct opposition to the Chinese geomantic preference for a 'south'-facing house, a Hindu would want to avoid the south because it is the direction of death. The preferred orientation is east-west because the first ray of sunlight is invested with purification functions; such is the orientation of all Hindu temples in Singapore. However, like the Chinese, this preference is not easily realized and often on a pragmatic basis the house simply faces the road. Among the more religiously knowledgeable, the furniture is arranged in the east-west direction, but this practice is not commonly observed.

When one enters the house, no altar or religious artefacts are to be found, with the single exception that in some families, a pictorial icon of a Hindu deity or some dried palm leaves hang above the main door. The icons of deities, pictorial or sculptural, tend to be placed in a separate

room away from view. The amount of space that is devoted to the deities varies from an entire room that is exclusively designated as the prayer room to a simple cabinet with curtains or doors, placed in a cluttered store room. Obviously, the space allotted is irrelevant.

However, non-visibility is intentional. In Hinduism, polluted persons are barred from ready relations with the deities and fellow believers. They are not allowed to perform acts of worship and must keep their distance from others lest their polluted state contaminates and prevents the others from worship. The icon is the material manifestation of a deity, and for the devotee even to look upon or to approach it is a sacred act (Matics, 1981). So, to avoid defilement, deities are kept safely at a distance and closeted away from view, lest polluted eyes are inadvertently cast upon them or a polluted body rubs against them.

A common source of impermanent pollution within the household is bodily emissions, such as saliva, menstrual blood, faeces, urine and semen. Every visit to the toilet is an act of pollution, and so too is love-making. Most of these impermanent pollutions can be removed by the simple act of washing with water as an act of purification, or with a simple prayer, or both. As these biological functions are unavoidable, the deities must be protected from them. Avoidance can be better maintained if all washing and toilet facilities are kept in a separate structure away from the main house. Ritual purification by washing can then be performed prior to stepping into the house proper. The separation of toilet facilities in the Hindu home, as in the Chinese house, is more than a question of general hygiene: it is part of the religious practice.

If bodily emission is polluting, then conversely, food must be pure. This is logically consistent because food is ingested and becomes part of the self, while contamination will pollute the self. To ensure purity, the preparation of food must be safeguarded; the kitchen must be maintained as a sanctum of purity. Here again, the clear separation of the kitchen from other functional space helps to maintain its ritual purity. Indeed, in more spacious houses, it was observed that the area for washing utensils was placed at a great distance from the cooking area itself (see Figure 5.3) because the utensils, having been contaminated by handling and worst of all by saliva, must not be allowed to pollute the kitchen.

As menstrual blood is polluting, women during menstruation should be exempted from the kitchen. In fact, they should be exempted from all normal activities, not even being allowed eye contact with men lest they contaminate the latter. In India, menstruating women have been known

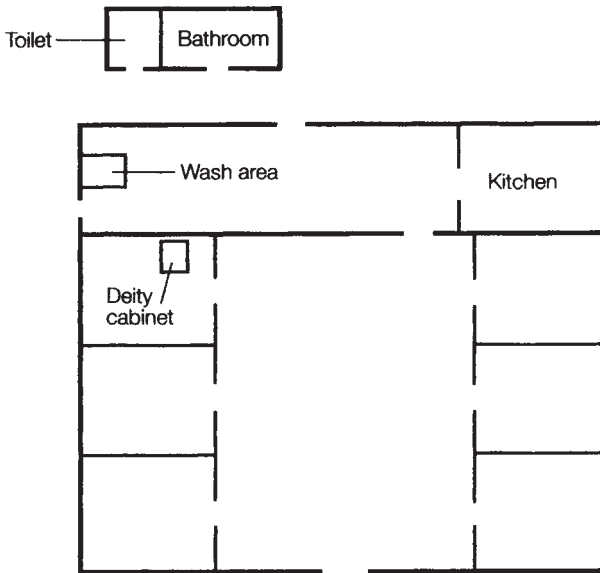


Figure 5.3 An Indian house (not to scale)

to spend a ritually determined number of days outside the house. This practice is not observed in Singapore, though the women must maintain certain purification rituals within the house, such as morning and evening baths, and avoid the prayer space for three to seven days. At a generalized level, all women between puberty and menopause are in a sense in a state of ritual pollution. Hence, where space permits, gender segregation of sleeping spaces is maintained among non-married couples.

Finally, the separation of all the washing and toilet space in a separate structure from the main house also helps to avoid the impermanent pollutions that are derived from outside. The best illustration concerns the attendance of funerals. Death is considered a highly polluting event. 'Proximity to death imperils a person from the supernatural sphere and disables him in the social sphere. Funeral rites are directed towards restoring all those who have been so imperilled and normality' (Mani, 1977:92). The elaborate rituals apply to the bereaved family; others who attend the funeral are required only to conduct a simple washing purification. Upon returning from a funeral, a Hindu must go straight to take a bath and must wash all his apparel before entering the house itself: that is, he must enter only in a purified state. Indeed, generally, an

orthodox Hindu would wash at least his feet after having been out before re-entering the house. The separation of the washroom and toilet clearly facilitates the avoidance of pollution.

THE MALAY HOUSE

In contrast to the symbol-laden Chinese house and Indian purification rituals, the Malay house is consciously behaviourally determined.

Although there are regional differences, a traditional Malay house can be given a generalized description (Hilton, 1953; Sheppard, 1969). It is built on stilts and has a high-pitched roof. The pitched roof is functional in a tropical climate because it 'permits rapid removal of rain water and creates a high sloping ceiling ideal for inducing air movement, ventilation and the escape of hot air—hence comfort' (Sudin, 1981:57). The stilts appear to be related to comfort as well; the raised floor provides better ventilation for the entire house (see Figure 5.4).

The house is divided into two components, sometimes three. The two basic parts are the *rumah ibu* (main house) and the *dapur* (kitchen area). The third component, if built, is the *serambi* (the verandah) in which casual guests are received; this component may also contain an enclosed area for formal reception called the *anjung*. The *anjung* is the front and the *dapur* the back of the house, each having its separate entrance. The

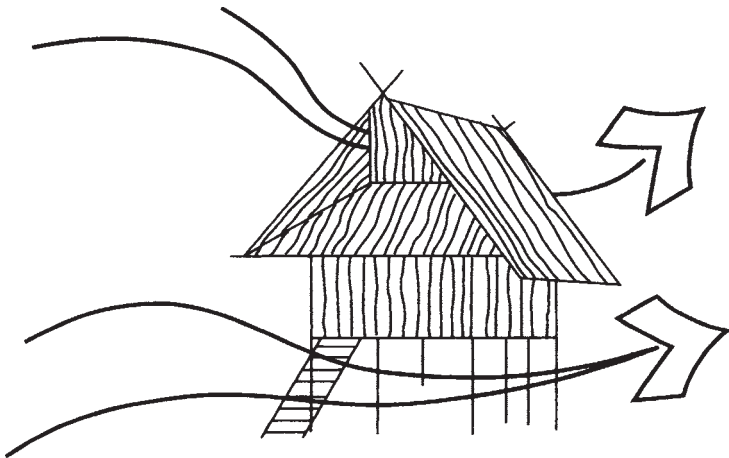


Figure 5.4 Tropical house on stilts for better ventilation

multiple entries are culturally significant in terms of gender segregation, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

The components may be housed under a single roof or in three separate but linked structures, depending on the wealth and social status of the owner. In fact, the house may be built in different stages: 'Poor families would initially construct the *dapur* to serve all family needs. As the family's circumstance improved, the *rumah ibu*, and sometimes the *anjung* is added. Otherwise the *anjung* is added as a third stage' (Sudin, 1981:62). The three components are built at different levels, with the *rumah ibu* sitting higher than the *serambi*, and the *dapur* at the lowest level, sometimes even on the ground. The layout is open-plan, and the functions of the spaces change with activities. For example, the eating space may be readily converted into sleeping space by the introduction of sleeping mats. However, partitions for bedrooms are commonly found (see Figure 5.5).

In contrast to the Chinese house, the Malay house is quite devoid of religious symbolism. The Malays are Muslims. In Islam there is only one significant geographical location, Mecca. Prayers must be offered in the direction of Mecca but may be conducted, in principle, anywhere devotees find themselves. Thus, although the house is used by Malays as a place for prayers, especially for the women, it is not actually invested with religious symbolic values. In some instances, the house may itself be oriented towards Mecca, but conventionally in a Malay village their orientation to each other is the main concern in the siting of the houses (Evers, 1978).

Religion, however, does figure in the layout of the house. In the Islamic code, *Khalwat*—the close proximity between two individuals of marriage potential—is a punishable offence. This taboo against co-presence of two individuals of opposite gender is generalized in the practice of strict segregation between non-family members. This religiously determined behaviour is facilitated by the spatial separation of the house. So, even in modest houses, the *rumahibu* is for men and the *dapur* for women, each with its own entrance to avoid any contact between them. The different levels of the two components also reflect the different social status attributed to the two sexes. Finally, the *serambi/anjung* is yet another feature that helps to maintain gender segregation, for it further shields the family from others. Generally, female guests are received in the *dapur* directly and men in the *serambi*, especially casual guests. Routinely, among family members gender segregation is not maintained, but on all ceremonial occasions, strict segregation is required.

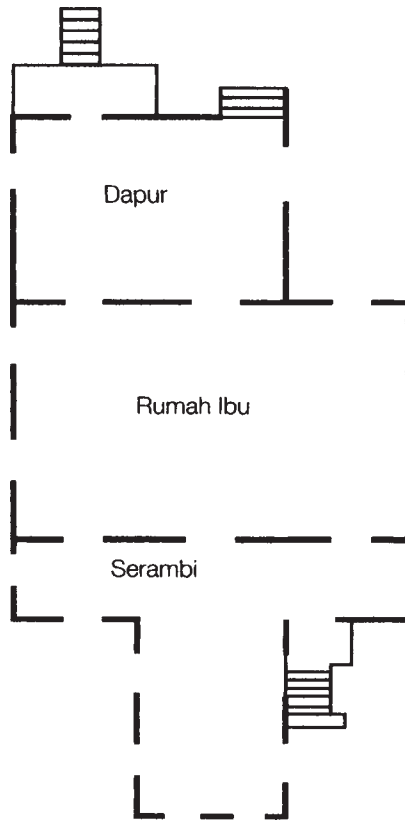


Figure 5.5 Typical Malay house layout

So, in contrast to the Chinese house that encodes a symbolic universe in both religious and social structural terms in its layout, but enforces no behavioural restrictions, no symbolic universe is to be read into the layout of a Malay house. However, the latter's layout both determines and is determined by the actual behaviour of the users. The Hindu house, of course, constrains behaviour in order to maintain symbolic purity. With such fundamental differences between these ethnic groups we should expect to find disparate patterns of adaptation when these groups were resettled into standardized high-rise flats.

THE HDB FLAT

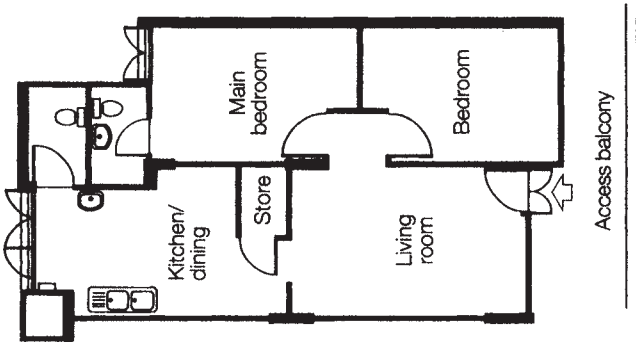
The total physical development of the island-state has required residents of vernacular houses to be resettled into public-housing flats. In designing the flat itself, the twin objectives of low cost and optimal space utilization are stringently maintained by the HDB. In general, flats are built as bare shells with cement-rendered floors and hollow block walls without plastering. Minimum dimensions that meet the needs of the residents are set. Accordingly, the width of the smallest bedroom is no less than 2.88 metres, that is, sufficient space for the bed and to allow movement. The width of the living room is no less than 3 metres to accommodate furniture and ease of movement. Bathroom/toilets are standardized according to the use of the different fixtures. Renovations, carried out by the residents themselves according to their tastes and budgets, reduce the monotony of the standardization (see Figure 5.6).

The layout of the flat is asymmetrical due to constraints imposed by block design. Every two adjacent units are mirror images of each other, divided by the common wall they share. As can be seen from the plans for the 3- and 4-room flats in the figure—the most common types purchased by resettled households—the only entrance to the flat is asymmetrically placed with reference to the living room itself, that is, against one edge of the room rather than centrally. Immediately next to the door is the window; these two items, plus some wall space, constitute the ‘facade’ of the flat. It is to these standardized flats that the three ethnic groups must adjust their symbolic universe and actual behaviour. Some of these adjustments are built into renovations undertaken by individual households.

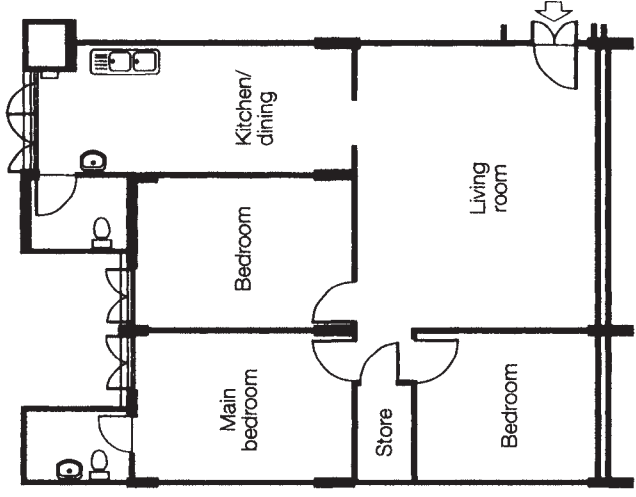
ADJUSTMENTS TO THE HDB FLAT

Chinese adjustments

Obviously, given the layout of the flat, symmetry cannot be obtained. The following adjustments are therefore made by Chinese households to maintain the symbolic universe of their dwellings. Just as in the traditional house, the end wall of the living room is the focus and this is where the altar is placed. In the case of the 3-room flat, the entrance to the kitchen/dining space is often centrally located. The rationale in this arrangement is to allow kitchen necessities, such as cabinets, store, refrigerator and a simple dining set, to be placed on both sides of the room, leaving a central circulation path. However, with this arrangement



Floor area: 65 sq.m.



Floor area: 105 sq.m.

Figure 5.6 Prototype layout for 3- and 4-room flats (Source: HDB 1984:185)

the walls on both sides of the kitchen entrance become too narrow for the installation of the altar. Consequently, Chinese residents commonly shift the kitchen entrance to either the left or the right, whichever is convenient. With this shift, the end wall is significantly increased and the altar is then installed centrally against it. The space in front of it is kept as free of furniture as possible to allow praying, which involves a great deal of kneeling. In the 4-room flat, which has a larger living room, the width of the end wall is generally sufficient without modification, yet similar changes are not uncommon even here.

In this adjustment, it appears that the residents have conceptually, and, arguably, even perceptually, reduced the space of the living room by an area of the width of the main entrance that runs the entire length of the room to the end wall. A symmetry is then striven for in the remaining rectangular space. It is as if the actual asymmetrical layout of the living room, due to the position of the main entrance, is perceptually and conceptually suspended in order that symmetry may be achieved.

In some flats, especially the end units of a block, the entrance is placed at the side. Side-entrance houses are not uncommon in China; the entrance is often so placed intentionally to make it 'difficult' for evil spirits to gain entry into the house. In this instance, the 'conceptually reduced space' is determined by the circulation path that extends from the kitchen door to the front wall of the flat. Significantly, the place at which the altar is placed corresponds to that found in a side-entrance Chinese house (see Figure 5.7).

As with all interpretations, one can only claim a certain degree of plausibility for the above argument; its reasonableness is nevertheless strengthened by counterfactual cases. To reduce the monotony, in view of the vast quantity of blocks to be built, the HDB varies the block designs. This often results in creating some flats with irregular layouts (see Figure 5.8). While the irregularity may appeal to the contemporary minded, they are often rejected by the more elderly residents who are more inclined to abide by the elements of Chinese religious beliefs. Such flats are rejected because an appropriate place for the altar cannot be found.

Hindu Indian adjustments

In contrast to the Chinese, the Hindu Indians have no problem at all in siting their deities. If a store room is provided in the flat, this is often converted into the prayer room where all religious artefacts are kept and the door shut so as to avoid contamination. If the store room is not

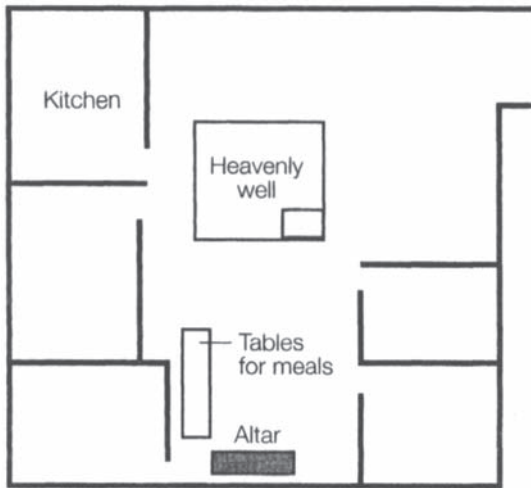


Figure 5.7 Floor plan of side-entrance to Chinese peasant house (Source; Newell, 1962:102)

available, a corner of the house, either in the sitting room or, more commonly, in a bedroom, is set aside for the cabinet that houses the deities, with curtains drawn until prayer time. If there is gender segregation of sleeping arrangements in the household, then the religious artefacts are kept in the male room; it will be recalled that females, between puberty and menopause, are in a state of ritual pollution. Such segregation is not necessary in young nuclear households.

An interesting consequence follows from gender segregation. In flats where one room is designated as the 'master' bedroom because of the convenience of an attached bathroom/toilet, this room tends to be allocated to the women precisely because of the polluting proximity of the toilet and its compatibility with the ascribed ritual status of the women. Here is an inversion of the architecturally ascribed symbolic order of spatial significance. What is, for the architect, the most important bedroom, is occupied by the lower-status individuals among the users.

The first obstacle a Hindu family faces in public housing is orientation. Given the tropical climate of Singapore, housing blocks are built, as far as the site permits, in a south-facing orientation, the inauspicious direction of death for the Hindus. However, as previously mentioned, Hindus have pragmatically accepted the forfeiture of the desired

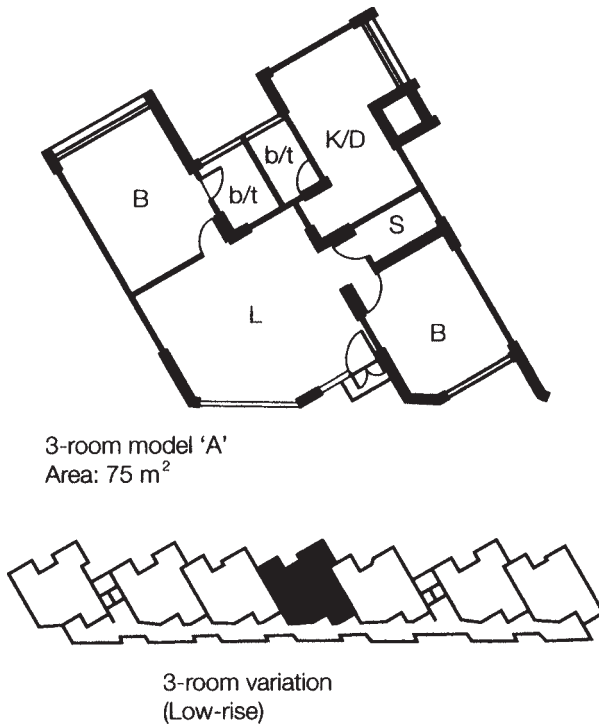


Figure 5.8 Irregular layout and block design (Source: Wong and Yeh, 1985:74 and 64)

orientation by facing their houses towards the street. So, little issue is made of the south-facing flats. Unfortunately, there is no statistical data to verify whether non-south-facing blocks are more popular with the Hindu families.

The greatest problem of adjustment stems from the fact that the bathroom/toilet is placed at the end of the kitchen, with the door opening directly into it. This arrangement is tantamount to creating a permanent state of pollution, for it brings two diametrically opposed elements, which must be kept absolutely apart in the Hindu symbolic universe, into constant, immediate and unavoidable contact. The ritual purity of the kitchen can no longer be maintained, not only because of its proximity to the toilet, but also because it is no longer out of bounds to non-kin since every visitor must trek through the kitchen in order to use the washroom. Finally, the kitchen is constantly subjected to contamination from the outside because returning members of the household must

first pass through it in order to wash themselves. In other words, contamination will already have taken place before the necessary act of ritual purification.

This very difficult situation is managed in several ways. First, if possible the bathroom/toilet door is repositioned to open away from the kitchen; some older flats have such an arrangement. Otherwise, a screen can be erected in front of the toilet door to render it symbolically out of sight. Second, a more drastic measure, but easier in practice in the end, is for the household to give up the kitchen completely as a space of sancti-fied purity. The purity of food is symbolically transferred exclusively to the preparation processes and to the utensils used, and the larger spatial context of the kitchen itself totally ignored. This is acceptable because the actual preparation processes have always been a necessary part of the purity of food. To ensure the purity of the utensils, separate sets are kept: one for mundane uses and thus less concerned with absolute purity, and the other to be used only for ritual occasions, where purity must be stringently observed (Mani, 1977:118).

Finally, contamination brought in from contact with the outside world is largely ignored except for those instances that carry an explicitly high symbolic significance, such as funeral attendance. Then, before he enters the house, a small container of water is handed to anyone returning from a funeral, so that he can pour or sprinkle the water on himself, thus symbolically purifying himself before entering. Then, on entering, he heads directly for the washroom for the full bath and change out of the polluted clothes.

Malay adjustments

The strenuously maintained gender segregation, made possible by different entrances for different parts of the house, is no longer possible in the flat. There is now only one entrance; women must pass through the living room to reach the kitchen. Gender contact is therefore unavoidable. In the two-room deep, 3- or 4-room flats, a wall separates the kitchen from the living room, and no door is provided for the kitchen entrance. Beaded curtains are often used to signal a partition—a symbolic gesture, since the activities in the kitchen remain visible.

Unlike the Chinese and the Hindu Indians, whose religious uni-verses are accommodated symbolically, Malays have to make actual behavioural adjustments, which can be illustrated from the *kenduri*. The *kenduri* is a village- or neighbourhood-based ritual occasion on which neighbours gather at a particular house to help a household offer prayers to mark a special event,

such as house-warming, circumcision of a child or the hundredth day after a funeral. Conventionally, both women and men are invited, although only the men are engaged in prayers (Fraser, 1985). After prayers, food is offered by the household in appreciation of the visitors' help. Then, during socialization after food, issues of mutual concern among participants may be raised before the occasion comes to a close. Several behavioural adjustments have to be made as a result of living in flats.

First, ritualistically, ablution involving the cleansing of face, hands and feet must be done before a man enters into prayers. In the vernacular Malay house, standing pipes outside allowed this to be done readily, but this is not possible in the HDB context. There are two possible behavioural alternatives. The men who come to join in prayers can perform the ablution at their own home before setting forth to the *kenduri*, ignoring any possible contamination that results from the journey; or the master bedroom's washroom, if there is one, can be used for the cleansing. The need to pass through the master bedroom is apparently of no serious concern because traces of women's existence are not significant; only co-presence is to be avoided. Using the master bedroom also avoids the necessity of going to the kitchen, the women's preserve. Hence, it is common to find that Malay families do not use the toilets in these washrooms for elimination, again undermining the intention of the architects.

Second, the women have to walk past the gathering of men in the living room to reach the kitchen. To circumvent this problem, the women adopt a symbolic gesture to veil themselves from the men. They will walk through the living room hugging the wall, with a slight stoop, and with the right hand extended and raised above shoulder level, as if they were cutting a path through the room. Eye contact is avoided. This gesture puts an imaginary division between themselves and the men in the room.

Finally, in order to avoid the awkwardness of unavoidable gender co-presence, the women may simply decide to not attend the gathering. That is apparent insofar as a *kenduri* held in HDB flats tends to be predominantly an affair for men, as compared to that in Malay villages where both genders participated, albeit in segregated activities.

THE ADJUSTMENTS COMPARED

Comparing the adjustments made by the three ethnic groups, three observations can be made. First, when icons serve as embodiments of deities, then a proper place for them must be found within the flat; what is proper is entirely dependent on the specific religion in question. The Hindu practice of completely shutting out their deities from view would

be absolutely unacceptable to the Chinese, whose deities must face outwards, into the open, in commanding view of the domain they oversee and protect.

It should also be noted that pictures of Christ and crucifixes are to be found in Christian families in Singapore, which include Chinese and Indians but not Malays. However, such icons have no doctrinal status. Their absence in Christian homes is not a religious infraction. A sculpture of Mary on an altar may sometimes be found in Catholic homes. However, there is no specific place for the altar, which can be found in different parts in different flats, where space is conveniently available. No system of spatial significance is discernible.

Second, where similarity of behaviour within a flat is found, the underlying religion-determined motivation and reason may be very different. Gender segregation in a Muslim house is determined by implied sexual-ity between individuals who are not family members and, therefore, is not maintained among the latter. In a Hindu family, segregation is motivated by the necessity to maintain ritual purity of the house and the body. Consequently, segregation is extended to family members to the extent of isolating female members, especially during menstruation periods.

Finally, it appears that religion-determined activities and behaviour are simultaneously space-determined. Where space permits, they will be enacted fully, yet where spatial constraints render full expression impossible, they are not simply discarded. Instead, they are transformed into more abstract symbolic acts that still preserve and express the underlying beliefs and motivations. This is entirely fitting because religion is ultimately concerned with the worlds beyond, even if it dictates some aspects of life here and now.

CONCLUSION

The adjustments of the three ethnic groups discussed above are clearly necessitated by the standardized public-housing flats in which they find themselves. In the process of moving from their traditional house-forms to the flats, some of their social and cultural practices are inevitably dropped and others are modified and retained. An important substantive and theoretical issue is which practices are dropped and which are retained. In seeking an answer, it seems necessary to distinguish between symbolic and behavioural adjustments, although it may not always be possible to make clear-cut divisions. For example, the Malay women's raised hands and stooped bodies are constitutive elements of a gesture

that is at once both behavioural and symbolic. Nevertheless, a classificatory distinction may provide some measure of conceptual clarity and serve as a useful research tool. Assuming such a conceptual distinction, it appears that purely symbolic items can be adjusted more readily because they have no direct behavioural constraints, and since what influence they have is always indirect, they may be subjected to rationalization more readily. Conversely, purely behavioural items may be difficult to accommodate in the new environment, which may prevent their practice altogether, as in the case of decreasing female presence in the Malay *kenduri*.

The HDB gives no consideration at all to the particular religious practices of its residents. Given its policy of wanting to achieve physical integration of the three ethnic groups—an issue that will be discussed in the final chapter—and its first-come-first-served allocation policy, it may be impossible for the HDB to take the differences between the groups into account in its design processes, without creating ethnic enclaves and/or becoming bogged down by allocation difficulties. The same problem would not, of course, face a housing authority that caters for a culturally homogeneous population. This raises the final point of this chapter, which refers to resettlement research in general. It is significant to note that detailed analysis of cultural/behavioural adjustments of the type analysed in this chapter is seldom found in the literature on resettlement that emanates from Europe and America. Of the many possible reasons, perhaps the most obvious is that analysts tend to presuppose cultural homogeneity insofar as those affected by resettlement are assumed to be either thoroughly secularized or Christians whose religious practices are not embedded in their homes but in churches or in spirit alone, as in Protestantism.

Chapter 6

A practicable concept of community in a high-rise housing environment

'High-rise public housing estates are uninhabitable; they are unsafe for the residents because they are crime infested, a phenomenon generated, or at least encouraged, by the building structures and layout of estates.' Such slogans are legion among American and British commentators. There is no need to rehearse the litany. The high-rise built-form had been declared 'unfit' for family living by a US National Commission on Urban Problems (quoted in Weicher, 1982:63). In Britain, one critic summarily stated, 'No more flats should be built' (Coleman, 1985:171). The demolition by bombing of Pruitt-Igoe has been transformed into the symbolic embodiment of failure, even by architects themselves (Jencks, 1986:16). Middle-class professionals, critics with noble intentions, aim to save the poor from themselves by taking them out of high-rise buildings. Yet similar house-forms have been very successful with the wealthy who choose to live in city centres, such as Manhattan or the south side of Chicago, and avail themselves of the facilities which those city centres offer. This difference should readily point us away from simplistic architectural determinism and suggest that perhaps the problem with high-rise public housing is not with the built-form but with the financing, management and, indeed, the tenants themselves.

A further irony is that the most severe criticisms should come from the United States, where public housing accounts for a grand total of about 1 per cent of the national housing stock, and from Britain, where only 13 per cent of the total public-housing stock were actually 'high-rise' flats. This is because in these two countries housing has to a considerable extent conventionally meant houses on the ground. The criticisms are therefore mounted from an ideological assumption that the single-family-house-on-the-ground concept, with a clearly delineated

private patch that offers a maximum sense of privacy and territorial control, is universally the preferred form. The plain fact is, however, that the US and British practices are certainly not the rule but the exceptions. Indeed, as the comparative study of state housing in Europe by Power (1993:197) points out: 'The British experience of mass housing was quite distinct, with local authorities as direct providers on a huge scale, houses dominating over flats.' On the other hand, that country's western European neighbours have been living in flats since the nineteenth century.

The intention in this chapter is not to continue with the possibly interminable debate about house-forms, but to develop a practicable concept of community in a comprehensively planned high-rise, high-density environment. With about 90 per cent of its three million population relatively successfully housed in both public and private high-rise buildings, Singapore would appear to be a suitable subject for this purpose.

BASIC CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS IN HIGH-RISE ESTATES

The most basic necessary condition for successful high-rise living is acceptance of such living as a way of life, even if the acceptance results from want of other options, as in Singapore. As was pointed out in Chapter 3, planning according to British 'garden city' guidelines would have been disastrous for a demographically and economically rapidly growing island with limited land. Therefore, Singaporeans across all class lines accept high-rise living. In fact, Singapore's dwellings range from very exclusive multimillion-dollar condominiums in the tourist belt to small one-room flats in public housing.

Acceptance of high-rise living is crucial for the development of a generally tolerant attitude towards certain inconveniences that are characteristics of such living arrangements, such as a higher noise level and less privacy—conditions that the British are apparently unwilling to tolerate (Power, 1993:197). Beyond the initial learning curve of living in high-rise blocks, residents are likely to develop the attitude of 'avoidance of conflict, tolerance, accommodation, and respect with which residents deal with specific cultural-religious difference' (Lai, 1995:117). Whether this emergent attitude was one of rationalization, naturalization or actual appreciation of the values is in a sense behaviourally inconsequential.

However, acceptance of high-rise living is itself dependent upon an absence of stigmatization of both the estates and their residents according

to the social and economic norms of non-high-rise residents. Stigmatization becomes unavoidable when only families and individuals with multiple social disadvantages are placed in high-rise public-housing estates, as in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Britain. It could be reduced by the ubiquity of high-rise estates and if residents were allowed to own and individualize their standard flats through interior renovation, within, of course, the built-form's structural limits. Both conditions of ubiquity and individualization of flats are met by public housing in Singapore; extensive renovations of 'owner-occupied' flats have become the norm, spawning a growing business in interior decoration.

HOMOGENEITY OF SOCIAL LIFE IN SINGAPORE

Near universal provision of high-rise public housing has led to a certain level of homogenization of the social life of Singaporeans. Ninety per cent of the people live in public-housing estates, which all have the same level of comprehensive provision of ancillary facilities for daily needs. For example, most children in the estates attend neighbourhood schools. Shopping facilities are everywhere, particularly in instances where the town centre is also a 'regional' centre. Moreover, fresh-produce markets and hawker centres, where local fast foods are sold, are central in the configuration of residents' daily life. The hawker centres provide ready access to local fast foods, making eating out an increasingly routine activity across all income levels. The markets operate only in the morning, compelling all housewives to schedule a trip to the market into their morning routines. During these trips, they develop a measure of familiarity with each other, thereby breaking down one layer of the impersonality of a large housing estate. This is an effect of the 'socialization' of private activities determined by the institutional coordination of routines, and hence of time.

Only a few families own cars, the bulk of the residents being dependent on public transport. A particular benefit to public-housing residents is the rapid mass-transit rail system. Typifying the 'pragmatism' of the PAP government, train terminals are sited only in centres of high population density. Thus, every housing new town is, or will be, served by the system, which ferries residents to both employment and the city centre. The same transit system also helps to implement the planned decentralization of employment and shopping facilities into the earlier mentioned 'regional' centres.

But Singapore is a capitalist society, and the relative homogenization of the lifestyle of the overwhelming majority in public-housing estates

also calls attention to existing inequalities among residents that require examination and comparison. For example, private apartments, houses-on-the-ground and cars have become coveted objects and are displayed as icons of success when compared with the sea of public-housing residents using public transport. By the early 1990s, only about 10 per cent of the working population earned sufficient income to be able to afford private housing, a car and an annual vacation abroad (Leong, 1995; Foo, 1995). Singaporeans have thus had to decide whether to resign themselves to never possessing such goods or to compete aggressively for them. For middle-income individuals, the choice will either mean relative contentment, with a comfortable material life in a 99-year leasehold, top-end public-housing flat, or stressful adjustments to all other aspects of social and material life just to possess the desired status goods. These inequalities of the economic system, of course, cannot be solved by housing policies. Nevertheless, near universal provision of public housing has helped to mask these differences, and the relative homogenization of social life should assist positive community development.

COMMUNITY IN A HIGH-RISE ENVIRONMENT

Appreciating the obstacles to its emergence, the need for community in high-rise residential housing estates has always been an important concern of planners and architects. Invariably, every architectural drawing of a single block of flats will provide designated 'community' spaces, and in planning an estate, there is usually a hierarchy of such spaces. For example, in Singapore's public-housing new town, such 'community' spaces begin with the void decks and move hierarchically upwards to precinct playgrounds, neighbourhood centres and a town centre. Consequently, if community fails to emerge, it is usually not through lack of concern on the part of the planners.

In the attempt to find community in a built environment, one must begin empirically with the behaviours of its users and then attempt to distil from the findings a practicable concept for community development. Substantive residential-based community is the result of the routine social behaviour of residents within a physical space that is phenomenologically determined by the residents themselves.

LEARNING FROM THE *KAMPUNG*

From the longitudinal study of the resettlement of a traditional Chinese village, two sets of behavioural observations can be made: the first concerns the sense of community of the villagers, and the second concerns their adjustments within the high-rise public housing environment.

Regarding the 'sense' of community, first, in spite of the villagers' general perception and claim that 'everybody knew everybody', this 'knowledge' was not evenly distributed, depending on whether an individual was bound to the village in his or her daily life. Second, for those who were village-bound, routine social interactions between the villagers were brief, casual, incidental, and took place in the course of each villager following his or her own schedule of activities. These interactions constituted the behavioural building block of community. A general conceptual conclusion to be derived is therefore that community is an unintentional product of daily life within a stable physical location.

Third, for villagers whose social networks were outside the village itself, a strong sense of community was tied to a sense of personal security within the village. This feeling was derived not from casual acquaintances with other villagers, but from the visual familiarity with the social and physical environment of the village, where the richness of the physical environment was in sharp contrast to the monotony of the social-landscape—the monotony being the result of the high level of residential stability and the insularity of the village. Another conceptual point can be drawn: since all villagers shared a similar sense of security, but differed in depth of social acquaintances in the village, one might deduce that familiarity with the stable social and physical landscape was more fundamental than active social interaction to the development of the sense of security, though no doubt social interaction was a reinforcing factor.

When the villagers were resettled, the following behavioural adjustments were identified. First, regardless of the size of the entire new town, as residents they were only concerned with a limited physical area within which they reproduced their daily routines. Second, they were generally not adventurous, in terms of time and place, in reproducing the routines. As new residents of the housing estate they would explore various alternative paths and places to meet their routine needs and necessities, but once the most convenient routes and places were worked out, they tended to stay with these. Third, in addition to physical space, they were creatures of habit in the scheduling of the routines. Every worker tended to go to work not only along the same route, but also at approximately the same time, as did housewives with their marketing

and escorting young children to and from kindergarten. This scheduling was in part determined by the institutions of work or services. Finally, once resettled, not everyone desired to be part of the new residential-based community; the less one was tied to local services, the less one desired a community.

TRANSLATING TO A HIGH-RISE ENVIRONMENT

To translate the idea of community from the village into the high-rise estates, one must first recognize the differences between the two environments. The differences are determining and modifying factors of the concept and substance of 'community' in the high-rise environment. To begin with, an HDB new town has a population of between 150,000 and 300,000. The new town is subdivided into neighbourhoods of from 4,000 to 6,000 dwelling units, averaging four persons to a unit. In turn, each neighbourhood is divided into precincts of four to eight blocks, with between 100 and 200 families in each block. Obviously, given the town's size and number of residents, a generalized familiarity with the social and physical environment which was achievable in a village is not possible in a new town. However, as noted, residents are not concerned with the entire housing complex in a new town, or even with an entire smaller estate. For them, a generalized social familiarity with others in the same and adjoining blocks in the same neighbourhood is still possible. This familiarity is, of course, built up over time. It is, therefore, dependent on residential stability. Rapid upgrading in HDB estates would continuously disrupt individual residents' sense of familiarity with others.

Familiarity with the physical environment of a new town is a more differentiated phenomenon. Empirically, the level of familiarity achieved by a resident is dependent in large part on the primary mode of transportation used. For example, someone who drives will be familiar with the road network of a new town but may have no detailed knowledge of any part of it, except perhaps for the path between his or her apartment block and its car park. Conversely, someone who walks routinely to use the services and facilities within a new town will have an intimate knowledge of the physical environment along their normal route, but may be quite lost once he or she departs from it. Overall, whatever the pattern, the development of a sense of familiarity is aided by the fact that the high-rise environment is very stable. And although this environment can be, but need not be, monotonous, a richness can be introduced in different ways and by various means.

The necessary conditions for the development of a residential-based community may therefore be said to be present in a high-rise environment. What needs to be explored next is the social processes that will activate these elements and, together, generate an organic community among the residents. Clearly, for this purpose, much greater consideration should be given to the walking residents who are highly dependent on local services than to those who drive into and out of the estate.

THE PROCESS OF COMMUNITY

Recall here that residents are creatures of habit in the execution of their routines. Despite architectural intentions, all public spaces provided are only potentially social spaces until activated by the residents themselves. The following is an empirically recorded everyday scene in a void deck of the neighbourhood where the Chinese villagers were resettled.

Two women meet. One is a factory worker waiting to be picked up by pre-arranged transport. The other is an elderly woman who is resting after her daily morning exercise. The factory worker is in an already familiar setting, built up of impressions received in walking through the same space day after day: for example, of the same people, who like herself go to work daily; of the same housewives going to or returning from the market; of the same elderly lady she sees daily. Similarly and correspondingly, the same scene is familiar to the elderly woman. The two greet each other very simply with obvious comments. The younger woman says, 'So early, ah!', not amounting to a question because it is so obvious, to which the elderly lady responds with 'Going to work?'

Once a level of visual familiarity between two residents has been established, only a simple greeting is needed to transform familiarity into social acquaintance. In this process, the very first verbal greeting holds some special significance. It discloses a number of taken-for-granted elements embedded in the situation:

- 1 That the coincidence of their separate routines which brought them at approximately the same time to the same place in the morning was a recurring event.
- 2 That the recurrence of what could have been a chance meeting pointed to their being from the same neighbourhood.
- 3 That they acknowledged (1) and (2) above by their initiative in addressing each other.

Subsequent greetings would seal and renew the recognition and acknowledgement that they are from the same neighbourhood.

The progression of the process from visual familiarity to social acquaintance is established, multiplied and replicated among different stable groups of residents throughout the entire new town, especially at peaks of activities such as the morning and evening rushes. Precisely because residents' routines are predictable and regular, they will see the same faces at approximately the same time every day. Collectively, they constitute the abstract community in the new town.

CORRIDORS OF ACTIVITIES

Community in the high-rise environment emerges and operates as a variable from the point of view of individual residents, and varies as people routinely encounter each other in the course of everyday life in the new town. To this extent it is similar in process to that of the village community. However, unlike in the village, this sense of community can never be generalized to cover the entire new town. This difference requires us to modify the concept of community in the new town to reflect the more restrictive sense in which it operates.

The particular paths along which different residents' routines are carried out can be conceptualized as 'corridors of activities'. Each corridor contains its own community of resident-users. Along each corridor, a high degree of social and physical familiarities can be achieved and maintained, as the resident-users continuously reaffirm and revitalize their acquaintances in their incidental face-to-face encounters.

At a more abstract level, the corridors are not completely individualized and separate ribbons of physical spaces. Rather, in a neighbourhood, they overlap and share common focal points, resulting in overlapping activities and memberships and thus potentially expanding the horizons of the sense of community beyond each particular corridor. An obvious example is evenings at the void decks of HDB new towns. The deck serves as a waiting point for parents of returning students, a playground for young children and their carers, a gathering point for both retirees and teenagers, a brief resting place for someone returning from elsewhere, and a venue for badminton, Chinese chess and table tennis. In their simultaneous presence, these activities and their participants constitute an 'open' community characterized by multiple uses of the same space, and thus provide more opportunities for repeat encounters and varying levels of face-to-face interactions between residents. That there is a community sense is reinforced by the informal processes of negotiation between different groups in taking turns to use the same spaces. Such is

the spontaneous and organic community which develops out of the necessary reproduction of everyday life of and by the residents themselves.

SUPPORTING ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

It is obvious that the possibility of community in a high-rise environment, learning from the Singaporean experience, requires a very high level of pedestrianization and use of outside spaces. The HDB new town is laid out to facilitate pedestrian activities; no block of flats is more than 400 metres from a neighbourhood centre where all the daily necessities can be obtained. All other facilities are also within walking distance, except for the town centre, which is a short intra-estate bus ride. The emphasis on pedestrianization reached its highest, almost absurd, expression when the management arm of the estates began to construct covers on every stretch of pathway that is exposed to the tropical sun, sprouting unattractive and often unnecessary dragon-like structures everywhere.

The residential blocks are designed with an eye to increasing informal surveillance and community security in high-rise estates. Oscar Newman (1972) has pointed out that external corridors reduce incidence of crime, and that the number of dwelling units per entry way should be small enough for residents who are sharing the same entrance to know each other. Accordingly, to reduce anonymity and increase surveillance, each large slab-block should have internal horizontal and vertical partitions to divide it into small segments (Coleman, 1985:14). All these design features are in fact built into HDB public-housing blocks. Due in part to the tropical climatic conditions, all blocks have external corridors where activities are readily visible to passers-by; the only exception is the now disappearing, lowest-cost 1-room flat rental blocks which have double-loaded corridors. The slab-block itself is horizontally divided into segments of six to eight dwelling units per storey with all the doors facing into the short corridor and stairs-landing, thus keeping all these public spaces within the visual attention of the residents. Residents are permitted to territorialize the corridor by tiling the floors and providing plants.

All the design features above are in sharp contrast to high-rise public-housing estates in Britain and the United States. Determined in part by their temperate climates, with cool to cold temperatures and short daylight hours during the autumn and winter months, the public-housing blocks in these countries generally have double-loaded or internal corridors. Screened away from sight, these corridors become possible sites of crimes and mischief. During the autumn and winter months, or even all year

round, there is much less pedestrian activity and a concomitant high dependency on automobiles—two factors that contribute very significantly to the failures of high-rise public-housing estates in Britain (Coleman, 1985:9).

Another focus of concern, which also produces conflicting experiences, is the public spaces. In high-rise housing estates, all public spaces are of dubious ownership. In the British and American cases, such public spaces are prone to vandalism, littering and crime because the responsibility for jurisdiction and policing over them is unclear, and consequently, no one bothers with what is happening in these spaces (Coleman, 1985:45–6). From the point of view of housing management, it has to be accepted that the public spaces require a high degree of maintenance, which must be delegated to a specific authority. Graffiti and vandalism do occur in the public spaces in HDB estates. However, the levels are low and the immediate attention these acts receive helps to keep the levels down. The cardinal rule in public housing is: ‘maintenance deferred is an open invitation to vandalism’ (Meehan, 1979:28).

CONCLUSION

Obviously, the negative experiences with high-rise public housing in Britain and the United States cannot be universalized. The most significant cause of their respective failures may be the fact that these estates concentrate all the multiple-disadvantaged individuals and households, often unable to maintain themselves and the living environment simultaneously. Besides, as one analyst suggests, why should they contribute to the maintenance of the symbol of their stigmatization as social failures (Cole and Furbey, 1994:112)? The problem of stigmatization can be reduced with universal provision of high-rise flats. It can be further reduced, and possibly even eliminated, if residents are given greater freedom to individualize the flats and turn them into ‘homes’, a process that generates pride for the abode, rather than shame.

Without intending to be climate deterministic—for to be so would only detract from the argument for its suitability—it has to be recognized that climate does play a role in the success of turning high-rise flats into homes. In contrast to the cold climate in temperate countries, high-rise living has certain advantages in the tropics: it is cooler, cleaner and free of insects. These are advantages that residents, especially those resettled from squatters, greatly appreciate. The tropical climate also encourages the use of public spaces as a way of escaping the confinement of the flats and heat.

It is the high level of pedestrian usage of public spaces which provides ground for arguing that it is possible to generate community sentiments in high-rise estates. However, in the conceptualization of community, the high density and the physical environment have to be taken into consideration in order to arrive at a practicable concept that is useful to estate planners. Grounded in the empirical observations of resident-users' behaviour, the architect/planner's task should begin with prefiguring what common activities exist among different identifiable groups of residents. Subsequently, related activities can be designed and placed within 'corridors of activities', which would facilitate the development of a sense of community among the members of the identifiable groups. The overlapping of these corridors will make the groups visible to each other, and this will help to integrate the individualized corridors of users into a more abstract level of a generalized community in the estate. Nevertheless, realistically this process is likely to achieve less than may be achieved in terms of community by smaller estates consisting of houses on the ground.

Chapter 7

Public housing and political legitimacy

That a successful national housing policy generates political legitimacy for the ruling government should be a truism that defies challenge. Yet in European countries where there has been extensive state-provided social housing, such provisions have been in retreat since the early 1980s as part of the attempt to reduce the rising costs of social welfarism—and this in spite of the political legitimacy that such provisions have generated for past and present social democratic governments.

In the British case, because the current general restructuring and shrinking of the welfare state coincides with the so-called post-Fordist restructuring of both national and global capitalism, it has been argued that the retreat of the welfare state is caused by the latter process. However, as pointed out by Pierson (1994), co-occurrence of restructuring is not tantamount to a causal relation between the two. The example of Singapore's relatively successful universal provision of public housing would certainly increase scepticism regarding the post-Fordist thesis.

As a very late entrant to industrial capitalism, Singapore was never burdened with a Fordist economy. Indeed, its economy is one of the more celebrated by-products of global restructuring of capitalism that began in the 1960s. Its economic growth has been largely fuelled by transnational capital engaged in non-traditional industries. For a very brief period, between 1960 and 1970, Singapore may have been a labour-intensive manufacturing platform for foreign capital under the new international division of labour, but the service sector began to overtake the manufacturing sector by 1970 (Castells, Goh and Kwok, 1990:167). Since 1985, when the government initiated what was called Singapore's Second Industrial Revolution, labour-intensive industries have dwindled further and, correspondingly, service and high-tech industries have expanded, as

reflected in the aggressive promotion of Singapore as a location for multinationals' regional headquarters for their operations in the Asian-Pacific theatre. Throughout all these phases of economic development, the PAP government in Singapore has never strayed from its commitment to provide public housing for the whole nation. This raises further doubts regarding any suggestion of causal linkages between post-Fordism and welfare provision in general and social housing in particular. For the PAP government, continuing support for public housing is, like economic development, one plank of its legitimacy to rule.

In a related conceptual development concerning the rethinking of the welfare state, it has been noted, again in Britain, that individuals tend to vote along 'consumption-class' rather than production-class lines. As a result of the presence of two modes of consumption, the 'individualized-commodity-private' mode and the 'collectivized-service-public' mode, consumers of the former category, regardless of their production class positions, are inclined to vote against expansion of the welfare state. This is because for them, as employees who are themselves able to pay for the necessary services, welfare expansion would most likely translate into tax increases and reduction of disposable income. Indeed, the evidence is that in most capitalist countries, tax levels have risen partially to defray rising costs of collective consumption because the redistribution has been largely one of transfers within the wage-earning class, rather than vertically from capitalists to employees (Offe, 1984:154). Consequently, those who pay tax are pitched against others who benefit from public provisions: that is, the gains of the latter are seen as the losses of the former. The two modes of consumption thus constitute the basis of a vertical political cleavage that cuts across production-class positions, with the former group voting right and the latter left, thus fragmenting the working class. The political cleavage between consumption classes results, therefore, not from any intrinsic features of the collective consumption goods themselves but from the two different modes of provision.

THE DEPOLITICIZATION THESIS

Accordingly, it has been argued that without split provision, politicization of consumption at the societal level may not arise at all. Complete absence of state provision would, of course, remove political considerations altogether, as in the case of the entirely privatized consumption of consumer durables. Conversely, Dunleavy argues that 'near-universal provision' by the state also effectively 'depoliticizes' collective provision

of any goods and services (1979:419). The idea that state provision of a particular good or service could be depoliticized bears closer examination.

The 'depoliticization' thesis is premised on what Offe (1984:159) calls 'the most superficial and most visible level of politics': that is, politics as various groups or classes of people united behind respective, articulated interests, and entering into open negotiation, as expected by liberal democratic theory, or into class struggle, as anticipated by Marxist analysis. In electoral politics, the voting behaviour of the electorate is read as a reflection of the result of the negotiations. Where overt negotiation or confrontation is not observable, 'depoliticization' is deemed to have occurred.

Such a concept of depoliticization is ideological in three ways. First, being descriptive rather than explanatory, it glosses over rather than exposes, and explains the political dimension by equating political behaviour with politics as such. In contemporary nation-states, the body politic is far more deeply penetrated by administrative and government strategies than by the formality of periodic elections. It is in the administrative strategies, of which universal provision of collective consumption is one, that a larger and more adequate conceptualization of politics is to be found. From an electoral perspective, politics may have submerged but it has far from disappeared as a strategy of government. Those who stand to benefit from the reduction of universal provision, including the state itself, are merely kept in the wings of the political stage, waiting to make their re-entry at the first opportunity, and, with their re-appearance, to 'repoliticize' the issue of public provision as quickly as possible. This is abundantly clear in the state's own efforts to privatize any provision when the political cost of doing so is manageable without losing the electoral majority.

Second, the descriptive concept reproduces precisely the way the state would have its citizens believe and how it would have them behave. The state would prefer the electorate not to make political issues out of the provisions. Instead, it would rather encourage the electorate to treat such provisions as a purely administrative matter, and to confine their comments and criticisms to improving the bureaucratic effectiveness of the agencies entrusted with the delivery of the goods, rather than making a political issue out of them. This strategic division between technical administration and politics is part of the management procedure of the modern state (Habermas, 1975:68-75).

Third, while the state desires to administer the provision without public hindrance, it nevertheless will not entirely 'depoliticize' it. For the success of state provision, measured in terms of the electorate's

appreciation of the government's effort, is the very basis of building political capital, of maintaining the popular support that legitimizes the government. Hence, the ruling government will always attempt to make political capital out of such successes; conversely, it will distance itself from failures, blaming them on state functionaries.

Thus it should be recognized that every state intervention is necessarily a political act, even in instances in which the political dimension is submerged. To keep the political dimension of collective consumption provision in view, we should conceptualize this submersion as an effect—the 'depoliticization effect'—achieved through precisely those strategies of state intervention. Instead of accepting it at face value, the ways in which this 'effect' is achieved and sustained should be analysed.

My contention in this chapter is that the depoliticization effect results from the ruling government's ability to maintain ideological hegemony or, in its own terminology, to achieve ideological consensus on issues that surround a particular provision as a social need: that is, the state is able to supply the terms of discourse that circulate in public discussion on the provision and, in being accepted as discursive currency, the terms concurrently delimit the horizon of such public discussions. Furthermore, since the ideological hegemony/consensus is not achieved once and for all, the government must be constantly engaged in ideological work to prevent the provision from being politicized: in other words, from dividing the electorate into different alignments which may rupture the hegemony/consensus. This is especially the case when, inevitably, different sets of administrative strategies have to be deployed within the general terrain of a particular good or service. Such differences must be normatively justified if the 'diffused mass loyalty' necessary to the legitimation of the government is to be sustained. The ideological work required to maintain the depoliticization effect is therefore never done.

In contrast to other developed nations, Singapore has successfully achieved near-universal provision of public housing. This level of provision 'appears' to have made public housing a political non-issue. A small minority of dissatisfied real-estate developers and related professionals, unable to put their dissatisfaction on the political agenda, have had to restrict their profit-making to the small market of very expensive private-housing developments and commercial real estate. The Singapore experience should therefore be an exemplary case to substantiate the proposed reconceptualization of the politics of universal provision of collective consumption—from a concept which emphasizes the disappearance of politics to one which uncovers the ideological effects of successful welfare provision in generating ideological hegemony/

consensus among the citizens. Immediately, some clarification of the concept of ideological hegemony/consensus used in this chapter is in order.

DEFINING IDEOLOGICAL HEGEMONY/ CONSENSUS

By ideological hegemony/consensus, we mean the following conditions.

First, an ideological system is not conceived by a ruling group as a coherent system at a particular point in time; there is no 'ideological time zero'. Instead, it is a loosely organized complex conceptual system that develops over time, with an ever-expanding network of concepts as the ruling group copes with solutions to problems in the body politic. This expanding network of ideas is not conceptually random but is guided by a few core concepts, although conceptual inconsistencies occur frequently. Analysis of how ideological concepts work must therefore focus on their contextual rationality rather than their systematic rationality. The distance between the demands for systematicity and contextual rationality may, nevertheless, be analytically exploited as grounds for ideological critique.

Second, ideological hegemony/consensus designates a condition in which the system of ideas of the ruling group is loosely accepted and reproduced by the governed as part and parcel of their 'natural reality of everyday life'.¹ Individual members of the governed population take up the ruling group's ideas as the rational conceptual template with which to organize the everyday world into a loosely coherent and meaningful entity, within which they act and respond to others and events (Geertz, 1964). When this condition obtains, the legitimacy of the ruling group to govern is greatly enhanced. Under such conditions, policing of the society—an indication that hegemony is never complete—is treated as a reasonable and necessary step to maintain the welfare of the society as a whole, because the governed and the governing constitute themselves as a political whole in pursuit of a social order according to the 'shared' ideological concepts.

Third, as a framework for the organization of everyday life and overall social order, ideological hegemony/consensus is necessarily a generalized and diffused condition throughout the body politic; it cannot be achieved restrictively in specific spheres of social life. This is how we understand the Gramscian idea that ideological hegemony enables the ruling group to claim moral leadership over the governed.

Finally, the hegemony/consensus is constantly at risk of rupture at conceptual and substantive points (i) because of potential inconsistencies

between concepts within the ideological system, and (ii) because, as mentioned earlier, the ideological concepts operate within contextual rather than systematic rationality. These two features make it possible for related or competing concepts to be invoked as equally 'reasonable' readings of a given situation, leading to multiple interpretations which may question the one preferred by the governing body, thus temporarily rupturing its hegemony. Each rupture exposes the governing hand of the ruling group and potentially unmasks its political domination.² Each rupture is, therefore, yet another avenue of ideological critique.

However, under hegemonic/consensual conditions, temporary ruptures and critiques will not undermine the political legitimacy of a ruling group that is supported by a diffused mass loyalty (Offe, 1984:53; Habermas, 1975). In this context, political legitimacy may be conceptualized in terms of political capital which can circulate very much like monetary capital itself. If a government has been efficacious in the provision and management of collective consumption goods, it would have been accumulating legitimacy over time, thus possessing a surplus of legitimacy. A portion of this surplus can be used to underwrite certain policies which may give rise to temporary ruptures in the hegemonic system.

Every temporary rupture poses two possibilities. First, the 'risky' policy in question may turn out to be beneficial to the population, in which case the investment of a portion of political capital would pay dividends and the legitimacy surplus would then be augmented. This has indeed been a fundamental belief of the PAP government in Singapore: that policy decisions which are unpopular should nevertheless be taken if they are 'good' for the nation. Second, a temporary rupture may ossify into a permanent cleavage in the system; the threat to legitimacy will then, of course, be greater. The overall position of the ruling government's legitimacy need not be seriously affected if the government has a surplus of legitimacy; the balance of account may still be in its favour. Concretely, the population will have to weigh the positive pay-offs of the government's overall social and economic programmes against the singular instances of irksome policy interventions, and decide whether or not to stay with the government. This is of course part of the exchange relations between the governing and the governed. Obviously, should the governing authority already be in legitimacy deficit, every rupture would probably have a further destabilizing effect.

Ideological hegemony/consensus is therefore not achieved once and for all; its dynamic is a complex process of balancing the budget on the part of both the government and the governed. Given that ideological

hegemony/consensus must be a generalized societal condition, the analysis of the public-housing sector in Singapore must, therefore, be placed in its larger ideological discourse context, which must now be outlined.

OPERANT IDEOLOGICAL SYSTEM IN SINGAPORE

The long-governing PAP's ideological system unfolds from one central concern, namely, the survival of an independent island-nation. This has always been the structuring and rationalizing centre for the policies by which Singaporeans are governed since self-government in 1959 (Chan, 1971). Ideologically, it is encoded in a local, particularistic meaning of 'pragmatism', which was in part historically and materially imposed on the PAP by the domestic economic condition and the geopolitical situation in the early 1960s (Chua, 1995: chapter 3). Faced with a declining trading economy and growing population, the material concern of 'making a living' was the most urgent problem that had to be resolved. Rapid industrialization was absolutely necessary. The question was, which model to adopt (Rodan, 1989).

The geopolitical situation precluded a socialist model. Being an island-nation with an overwhelming Chinese majority, and surrounded by Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, Singapore had to avoid being perceived as 'the third China' by its immediate neighbours. A socialist orientation would certainly have given rise to such a perception (Chan and Evers, 1978:199). Therefore, the developmentalist-capitalist path was the only one open, despite the social democratic orientation of the founding PAP leaders. The result was, and continues to be, an ideology that embodies a vigorous economic development orientation which emphasizes science, technology and a centralized, rational public administration as the fundamental basis for an export-oriented industrialization programme, financed largely by multinational capital (Castells, 1988:4-13). Given the historical constraints, the PAP government may be said to have had little choice but to do what was clearly necessary: that is, to adopt the path it did adopt as the central principle of government.

Consequently, from the very outset of state formation, capitalist development strategies have always been identified as the 'natural', the 'necessary' and the 'realistic' solution to the problems of nation-building. It is through their 'naturalness', 'necessity' and 'realism' that the PAP's economic and social policies have come to acquire a sense of being 'pragmatic' and have crystallized into a loosely coherent system. Over

the past three decades, this pragmatism has been articulated and elaborated upon, so that it is possible to abstract its logical structure and the limits of its rationality.

The overriding goal of economic growth is the single criterion for both initiating and assessing all state activities. Since it is argued that domestic political and social stability is foundational for strong economic growth, legislation is enacted either to promote or to repress activities which may be presumed respectively to enhance or disrupt this stability. In practice, potentially every sector of social life can be administratively and instrumentally harnessed to serve the singular economic goal. The result is the emergence of a highly administered society (Chan, 1975).

Targeted interventions in particular sites of the social body are determined entirely in terms of the economic growth picture at a particular conjuncture. Justification for an intervention is therefore always contextual, and never related to any 'in principle' political-philosophical arguments. This intervention strategy has its consequential entailments. First, each intervention is a discrete and discontinuous act, such that one intervention in a social site may radically alter the trajectory that an earlier intervention might have put in place. Second, the combined effect of contextualism and discontinuity results in what one of the MPs of the ruling government called a 'crisis' mentality in his own government. One characteristic of this crisis mentality is the desire to make pre-emptive interventions, which may produce unforeseen consequences that compel the government to change course, sometimes drastically. The government characterizes possible course-changing as the positive result of its 'pragmatic' flexibility in policy-making and administration, rather than due to confusion or contradictions.

Policy contradictions and U-turns aside, pragmatism as an ideology has had much success in Singapore. The main tenets of the PAP pragmatism, which in everyday language translates simply into 'being practical' in the sense of earning a living, have been accepted by Singaporeans as conceptual currency to organize their understanding of the world in Singapore (Chua, 1995: chapter 2). This is further reflected in the suggestion by local social scientists that 'pragmatism' is not in fact an ideology (Chan and Evers, 1978). The stringent social discipline required to maintain political stability in the name of economic growth has been hailed by other social scientists as a model of social development (Quah, 1983). Finally, general acceptance can be understood from the successive landslide electoral victories of the PAP since 1965. Although there are always dissenting voices,

it can be said categorically that among Singaporeans there is a loosely held general ideological consensus around the idea of 'survival through pragmatism'.

This popular acceptance of 'survival through pragmatism' is primarily grounded in the tangible results of the 'practical' policies of the government: that is, the policies have 'delivered the goods'. Any social repression that attends these policies is seen as politically essential to continuing economic growth; this is the bargain the electorate makes with the PAP government. The massive improvement in the material life of the entire nation makes it very difficult to argue against 'success', a point not lost on the government, which is wont to remind the electorate of 'its' achievements in order to secure and enhance its very high degree of political legitimacy. One major 'good' delivered by the state is the massive improvement in housing for all Singaporeans. It is within the above complex ideological context that we must now examine Singapore's public-housing programme.

BUILDING HEGEMONY/CONSENSUS AROUND PUBLIC HOUSING

Universal housing provision in Singapore

The details of the public-housing programme have already been extensively covered in Chapter 1. The following discussion is therefore aimed at demonstrating the interactive effects of ideological hegemony/consensus and national public-housing policy. In it we shall indicate how commitment to universal provision allows the PAP government to take the strong moral high ground on acquisition of land for public housing. The government's stance is grounded obviously in the extensive homeownership programme that has given all citizens a material stake in the nation, especially since prices of public flats have increased immensely over time. Opportunities for home ownership and financial gain have engendered a strong ideological hegemony/consensus between the PAP government and the electorate. The hegemony/consensus is further reinforced by the 'coercive' effects of universal provision: the absence of alternative housing, except for those who could afford high-price private housing, has turned the overwhelming majority of Singaporeans into clients of the state as provider. As shown later, with ideological hegemony/consensus, backed by the absence of housing alternatives, the PAP government is able to use housing as a mechanism

to push through other less palatable social policies without risking serious damage to its legitimacy to govern.

Rationalizing different strategies of land acquisition

As suggested in the introduction to this book, one fundamental necessity for a successful public-housing policy is availability of inexpensive land. If the state has to acquire land at market prices, the likelihood of policy success is low. A key element of Singapore's programme has therefore been a draconian compulsory acquisition of land in the interest of 'national development', which has included state assistance in acquiring land for significant private development. In practice, the inclusion of private development may result in uneven application of the Land Acquisition Act and its effects. The Act may be said implicitly to favour large development capital at the expense of small landlords, as it can be invoked to acquire and amalgamate small lots, and then make the amalgamated parcel available for large private developments. For example, in the urban redevelopment of the financial centre in the early 1970s, property owners who represent both the domestic and the multinational corporate sector of the economy were given ample opportunities to redevelop their own holdings into commercial buildings. As a final resort, however, acquisition was invoked against small property owners who were unable either to redevelop their limited holdings or to sell to or amalgamate with adjacent property owners for economically viable commercial developments (Chua, 1989a).

Differences in acquisition treatment for commercial and public-housing development in the early years of nation-building were politically and economically significant. On the one hand, preserving commercial development in the private corporate sector was economically and ideologically necessary. Economically, the newly elected government was financially unable to redevelop the city on its own. Ideologically, as a nascent state which had identified foreign investment as the engine of economic growth, it had to demonstrate not only to existing corporate capital, but also to future investors its commitment to private property and profit. Indeed, an undertaking was given in 1970 by the then Minister of National Development that the government would not nationalize any of the commercial properties developed by corporate capital. This assurance was necessary to attract foreign capital into a city-state whose political and economic viability was then very much doubted by all concerned, and not least by the government itself.

Conversely, acquisition for public housing did not need to face similar economic and ideological issues. Ideologically, public-housing provision was politically embraced by the same nascent state as testimony to its commitment to improving the material condition of the newly enfranchised citizens of Singapore. This was all the more ideologically effective when set against the neglect of the British colonial government, which had resulted in overcrowding in the city area and proliferation of squatters on the urban fringe. Within this context, compulsory land acquisition for public housing could be executed with no apologies to the landlords; on the contrary, it allowed the government rhetorically to occupy the moral high ground in its commitment to the 'people'.

Affected landlords had either to accept their losses with altruism and recoup some level of self-esteem, or face their losses with bitterness and alienation from the new government. The popularity of the government's action among the overwhelming propertyless electorate enabled it to bear the rejection of this very small minority. With the increasingly tangible results of the public-housing programme, there is also evidence that the attitude of those villagers and squatters affected by resettlement has changed from resentment and resistance in the early years of the public-housing programme (Gamer, 1972; Aldrich, 1985) to one of resignation, even acceptance, on account of the fact that everyone in villages and squatter areas throughout Singapore is affected 'equally' and that the land is necessary for the housing of the nation.

The different strategy towards land acquisition is conceptually significant. It demonstrates that in an advanced capitalist society it is possible (i) to eliminate private small landlords without jeopardizing the economy or the legitimacy of the state, and (ii) to provide public housing without threatening the dominant position of capital, or, more generally, to provide for a fairly high standard of collective consumption goods without undermining capitalism. This is similar to the Swedish case (Duncan, 1981), where advanced capitalism and its demand for a high concentration of capital and a high growth rate coexist quite comfortably with a high level of social welfarism.

Within the political and economic context of Singapore in the early years of nation-building, the government offered no additional normative justification because the different acquisition procedures were 'obviously the practical thing to do'. Nor was the government in any legitimation deficit that required additional normative justification (Habermas, 1975).

Incorporating the population

In pre-industrial Singapore, the low cost of housing maintenance or low rents which were paid irregularly for congested rental housing in the central area and in squatters was an arrangement tailored to the financial condition of a population on irregular income. Underemployment spawned a lifestyle with a relatively high degree of personal freedom from toil. A population that was used to such a lifestyle had to be disciplined and transformed into the regular workforce needed for industrialization. Promoting public-housing home ownership was an important process that helped to speed up this transformation.

As discussed in Chapter 3, resettlement into 99-year leasehold flats immediately raises the cost of living of a household. Lease ownership ties the household into a regular mortgage structure that requires monthly payments. Both the cost increases and the regular payments can be met only by regular monthly income earned from the formal sector of the economy, often by pooling the wages of several, including the female, members of the family (Salaff, 1987). Home ownership was therefore an important step in the active proletarianization of the Singapore population, while simultaneously improving their material living conditions, as the government had promised. The unemployment rate declined steadily from 6 per cent in 1970, two years after the introduction of the CPF home-ownership scheme, to 2.7 per cent in 1984 (Krause, Koh and Lee-Tsao, 1987:190).

Ideologically, one of the effects of property ownership is 'the expansion of commitment to the prevalent social order by the development of personal stakes in its survival' (Agnew, 1981:457), not the least of which is the desire to protect or gain from such property investment. Extensive promotion of home ownership in Singapore has, therefore, the expected result. Furthermore, the resale policy has given every household an opportunity to make potential gains in real estate. Due to the artificially low prices of the early years, very real gains were made by the early owners, to the extent that they could sell their old flats and upgrade to larger, new flats with a manageable level of additional investment. Among these were lower-income groups that were the first to qualify for public housing. This further intensified their ideological and material commitment to the system as a whole, and reinforced the popular support base of the ruling government.

Avoiding claims of rights

To incorporate the population is very much the motivation behind the PAP government's promotion of a 'home-owning democracy' with 100 per cent home ownership. However, care is taken to avoid any possibility that housing provision should become a legal entitlement of citizenship. If public-housing provision were allowed to become part of state welfarism, this might well eliminate the consumption differences between those who are unemployed and those employed on the lowest rung of the occupational structure, and thus contribute to a decline in work commitment. Thus any risk of legal entitlement is avoided by making the HDB an independent statutory board, although under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Development.

As a statutory board, the HDB is financially and administratively an independent corporation. It is at liberty to impose sales or rental conditions on interested parties. The legal position of a Singaporean seeking to purchase or rent a public-housing flat is that of a client in the strict business sense, and the individual is regarded as agreeing willingly to the conditions stipulated by the vendor or landlord. Housing thus remains at the individual level of property rights, the government's commitment to adequate housing for the nation notwithstanding. This arrangement prevents housing provision from becoming part of a citizen's rights and legal entitlement, and hence a political and ideological issue. Moreover, unlike a government ministry, a statutory board—in this case, the HDB—is, in effect, formally removed from the political arena, even if Singaporeans routinely treat the HDB as synonymous with government, and public-housing flats as 'government housing'. Indeed, the PAP is not beyond claiming this identity when it is to its political advantage, while at the same time being able to distance itself from any public criticism of or dissatisfaction with the HDB.

The type of institutional independence which the HDB possesses has been identified as one characteristic of 'post-Fordist' restructuring of the welfare state (Pierson, 1994). However, contrary to the 'post-Fordism' argument, in Singapore such an arrangement is not a means of reducing the citizens' dependence on state financing of public housing, which would lead to a 'residualization of public provision' (Pierson, 1994:104). The HDB's autonomous status is an ideological mechanism rather than a financial one. The PAP government's commitment to affordable public housing has not wavered at all, precisely because of the importance of this commitment to the regime's legitimacy. Indeed, contrary to the post-Fordist expectation of shrinkage of state financial responsibility, the

Singapore government's commitment to universal provision has expanded its responsibility beyond that which is required by a limited welfare housing programme.

Eliminating class-based politics

Rather than espousing any ideological position on equality of housing for all as an intrinsic right or promoting housing as a welfare entitlement, the PAP government is committed to equality of opportunity for all households to purchase up to their capability as housing consumers. The class-specific beneficiaries of the early years of a limited rental public-housing programme were replaced by an abstract definition in terms of 'maximum income level'. Ideologically, this substitution of the concrete by an abstract category 'allowed the aid given to the poorest to justify the aid given towards improving and promoting the middle classes' living standards' (Mougenot, 1988:533). By removing class as a qualifying criterion, the state eliminated the potential dissension of those who would have been excluded by the class-specific definition of eligibility and expanded the incorporated constituency and its own financial responsibility. Finally, it also removes from the allocation process a source of moral and legal appeals by the lower-income groups regarding the adequacy of their housing conditions. As each household is responsible for its housing consumption, housing inequalities are the result of each household's own financial ability, rather than a government responsibility.

State subsidy continues to be treated ideologically by the government as benevolence towards the less privileged, as the government 'helping people to help themselves', rather than as state responsibility to a legal entitlement of citizens. Housing inequalities can thus be individualized as personal successes or failures against an ideological commitment to 'meritocracy', which the government vehemently upholds. However, the inability of some households to acquire a minimum-size flat by their own efforts has been recognized under the new Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong. As of 1994, the government will give \$30,000 to any household of four which has a monthly income of below \$1,500, towards the purchasing of a highly subsidized 3-room flat. These flats are bought by the HDB on the open market, refurbished and sold to the eligible household for a discount of about \$40,000. Within less than a year of the introduction of the scheme, more than 3,000 households had availed themselves of the opportunity (*Straits Times*, 30 September 1995). In addition, for sitting tenants in rental housing, a discount of 3 per cent is offered by the government for every year of residence—up to a ceiling of

30 per cent or S\$ 10,000, whichever is smaller—when their flats are converted to owner-occupied (*Straits Times*, 3 July 1995). Finally, in the face of continuing public-housing price inflation (*Straits Times*, 11 July 1996), the Prime Minister publicly pledged in his 1996 National Day Rally speech that 3- and 4-room public-housing flats will always be priced at rates that are affordable to the lower-income working households.

On the other hand, it has been recognized that the advantages of state subsidies within the public-housing programme are unevenly distributed, as in all instances of generalized provision. There are at least two points of unequal distribution, as follows:

- 1 Those who purchase a larger flat and carry a larger mortgage enjoy greater benefits than those who by force of financial circumstance must purchase a smaller flat (Lin, 1986).
- 2 This advantage is compounded by the gross differences in capital gains in the resale market of larger flats compared to smaller ones.

Consequently, as of 1995, the HDB will no longer build subsidized 'executive' flats that are bigger than those available in the private condominium on similar 99-year leaseholds. To meet the waiting list of thirty-two thousand applicants for executive flats, the HDB will build such flats at a rate of four thousand units a year (*Straits Times*, 21 August 1995). Alternatively, they can transfer their applications to a new category of housing, funded under a different formula and known as 'executive condominiums', which we shall discuss later (see pp. 147–8).

Spatially, inequalities of consumption may lead potentially to the physical segregation of housing classes in an estate and possibly the ghetto effect. In Singapore, potential class enclaves are eliminated by the planned interspersing of rental flats for the lowest-income groups among the various classes of purchased flats. Each housing estate or new town is a mixture of different-sized flats catering for different income groups. Furthermore, flats of different sizes catering for different incomes can be designed into the same block. Ideological acceptance of this mixing is reflected in the public opinion that mixing is beneficial to the lower-income groups because they may be served by the better educated who volunteer as community leaders (*Straits Times*, 18 May 1989).

Any possible class-based political organization which thrives on spatial concentration has, therefore, been eliminated by a combination of physical planning and allocation procedures. In a 'first-past-the-post' electoral system, the absence of spatial concentration effectively renders class irrelevant as a political element. As in public housing elsewhere, however,

the result is normatively defensible in terms of both national interests and the interests of the individual residents in avoiding class segregation and conflicts.

Rationalizing exclusions

While the government's housing provision is aimed at maximum inclusion, the presence of an eligibility ceiling nevertheless excludes those whose incomes are above it. Significantly, with 90 per cent eligibility, the lifting of income ceiling would not place an onerous burden of provision on the HDB itself. However, the preservation of a small private sector of very expensive housing is itself of ideological significance. By excluding only the very high-income households it also preserves the social status of this group, displayed precisely through their private housing. The prestige of private housing, including high-rise, 99-year leasehold condominiums, also acts as a social-status attainment target which potentially keeps up the work ethic of those at the top end of public-housing eligibility, since relative consumption advantage is a material incentive in capitalism. Thus exclusion does not raise political issues, but instead it reinforces the normative structure of developmentalist ideology.

There nevertheless appear in the press occasional complaints from the excluded high-income group. Policy changes in late 1980s, to allow every household, regardless of income, to buy resale flats, had effectively removed some of the grounds for dissatisfaction. However, the constraint that owners must live in their dwelling unit, rather than hold it as investment rental property, is likely to discourage high-income households—who view housing as much as status consumption as necessary shelter—from buying into public-housing flats.

Symbols of success

Finally, the materially tangible blocks of building are powerful symbolic monuments to the government's efficacy (McLeay, 1984:97). In Singapore, the overwhelming presence of more than 600,000 completed dwelling units is a constant reminder to the population of the PAP government's achievement. The extensive public-housing programme is symbolically, and hence ideologically, a powerful sign and constant reminder to the population of the existing regime's ability to fulfil its promise to improve the living conditions of the entire nation. The housing programme therefore gives the government a very substantial measure of legitimacy among the people, and also abroad.

FROM HOUSING TO OTHER SOCIAL POLICIES

Since it came to political power, the PAP government has adopted universal public-housing provision as a necessary and pragmatic strategy for stabilizing the social order, which is itself seen as a *sine qua non* of political stability and economic growth. In spite of its constant ideological denunciation of state welfarism, the government has never strayed from its position of housing the nation. In spite of stressing meritocracy and individualized consumption of housing, it ensures that housing is affordable for different income classes, and also provides additional financial assistance to individual households where necessary. The populist and popular idea of maintaining social stability by giving every citizen a stake in the nation has never been publicly questioned. Even the very small proportion of citizens who are excluded by income ceilings on eligibility accept the rationale of housing provision for the sake of social stability. In spite of the government's laborious insistence that public-housing provision is not a matter of citizenship rights but a 'privilege', universal housing provision, like state provision of education, has come to be taken for granted as a permanent state function. All these factors are reflected in the mundane reference, in the common parlance of Singaporeans, to public housing as 'government' housing.

While there are, of course, disagreements about the details of the provision—from long queues to allocation procedures to flat designs—there is without doubt ideological consensus on the need for and the positive consequences of universal public-housing provision. This generalized acceptance is probably made easier by the fact that allocation of public housing is through ability to pay and not by other means of measurement which may be too readily subjected to abuse.³ The constantly reinforcing success of the policy makes it difficult for critics to mount alternative ideological arguments around the issues of housing. Instead, the terms for debate on housing are set by the state. This is not to suggest that alternatives cannot be conceived and articulated, but simply that the alternatives generally fail to be incorporated by ordinary individuals into the routine rationalization of their real-life world. The high degree of ideological legitimacy derived from near-universal provision of housing translates, of course, into electoral support for the existing government. It is part of the PAP government's foundation of legitimacy, and accounts for a significant part of the government's continuous popular support during general elections. That the PAP will ever retreat from its promise of 100 per cent leasehold ownership of affordable public-housing flats therefore seems most unlikely.

The strong social agreement around state housing provision has enabled the PAP government to use it to underwrite other social policies. Being the sole provider of public housing allows the HDB to be used as an agent for the propagation of certain values that the government deems significant or 'necessary' for ongoing social stability. This objective is achieved by writing these values desired by the government into the conditions of sale or rent. Depending on the predisposing popular sentiment towards specific values, such interventions, as theorized earlier, may either generate more ideological surplus or cause a rupture in the consensus. If the latter occurred, the overall ideological surplus that is accumulated in the policy of universal provision is unlikely to be damaged and, having no alternative housing possibility, any citizens dissatisfied about a particular value will be coerced into accepting the conditions imposed upon them. The housing authority, the HDB, has thus extended its jurisdiction into non-housing realms on behalf of the ruling government, as the following two instances demonstrate.

Reinforcing the 'normal' family

The monopoly of housing provision has been used to shore up the family institution, which the government has ideologically adopted formally as the 'fundamental' institution of society (Clammer, 1993). Public housing is only available to households. Single people who it is presumed will never marry—males over 45 years old and females of over 40—are eligible to rent, but only then if they share with another person. However, the rules have been relaxed in the early 1990s to allow single people of 35 years and over to purchase 3-room flats at locations outside the central area. Young single people are completely excluded from the equation on the grounds that making public housing available to them would prematurely break up family units (Chua, 1982:330–2).

Housing is further used to support the family directly through the following scheme. Married children may apply to be neighbours with their parents or other married siblings. To promote the scheme, the eligible income-ceiling is substantially raised for a young family who choose to live with one of their parents. The joint applicants are given priority of allocation, with the waiting time for their flats reduced by as much as two years. In 1995, the attractiveness of the scheme was enhanced by the government offering a \$30,000 cash grant towards the purchase of a flat by any young family who elect to live within two kilometres of their parents. However, the stipulation that a 25 per cent premium has to be paid to the government when the family sells their

flat after at least five years' residence, or a 20 per cent premium above the purchasing price on second new flats from the HDB, has discouraged those in higher-income positions from taking up the scheme, although those at the lower-income end who purchase 3-room flats are more enthusiastic (*Straits Times*, 5 June 1995).

Finally, recognizing that young married couples may be facing difficulties in securing housing while waiting for their flats, the HDB has made refurbished 3-room rental flats available to them at below market rental price (*Straits Times*, 17 July 1995). Although not stated officially, this new rental policy is likely to have an effect in encouraging earlier marriages and childbirth, which suit the government's pro-natal population-planning programme. All these pro-family schemes also have an underlying policy rationalization: they form part of a voluntary, family-based welfare arrangement which is likely to reduce the government's share of social welfare costs and responsibilities to the elderly, as the population ages over the next twenty years; Singapore's population is ageing at a rather rapid rate due to the success of an earlier 'two-is-enough per family' policy (Singapore Census of Population 1990, Release 1). This self-help strategy is very much behind the government's promotion of the family as the fundamental social institution—a position that is given additional ideological baggage by insisting that it is in accord with the so-called Asian traditions.

Management of ethnicity

The second example of the use of housing provision to control non-housing spheres of social life is in the management of ethnicity in Singapore. That the public-housing programme has been used to break up ethnically exclusive communities and mix them in housing estates has already been discussed in previous chapters. This remixing of the ethnic groups is explicitly ideologically rationalized as a necessary step to pre-empt any possibility of race riots, last seen in 1964 (Chua, 1991). It reflects the government's tendency to make pre-emptive interventions in its management of society. A more positive view of the policy is that mixing the ethnic groups residentially will lead to national integration.

After thirty years of public housing, the degree of ethnic integration that has been achieved is itself rather mixed. Evidence drawn from both in-house studies by the HDB and independent research shows that intensive social interactions remain largely ethnically exclusive. For example, an HDB study shows that physical integration of ethnic groups

in the same blocks and neighbourhoods has led to a higher degree of acquaintanceship and a greater tolerance of differences across ethnic lines, without, however, a corresponding increase in cultural understanding. In addition, the most recent ethnographic study shows that, with four exceptions, all ninety-six residents studied, regardless of ethnicity, preferred living in a multi-ethnic environment mainly because they wished to avoid the closed and 'gossipy' ethnically exclusive communities and to enjoy the greater degree of privacy that anonymity brought them (Lai, 1995:116). However, for minority groups like the Malays, this is a qualified preference premised on the presence of significant proportions of Malays in a 'good' ethnic mix. Indeed, the earlier mentioned HDB study repeatedly reported intensive intra-ethnic interactions among Malays not only in the same block but also in the same neighbourhood, 'usually because of informal group activities like prayer and religious classes and social gatherings' (Wong and Yeh, 1985:473).

Unfortunately, the positive sentiments towards multiracial integration are marred by the serious dissatisfaction with the explicit 'quota' on ethnic mix which has been imposed since 1989. Up until that point, the HDB had quietly maintained a quota of no more than 20 per cent of new flats to be allocated to Malays in any estate or new town. However, the same control was not imposed on resale flats. The result was that certain new towns, which were close to traditional ethnic areas, began to gain a greater concentration of one or other of the ethnic groups. In January 1989, the then Minister of National Development warned that if the government did not 'nip the problem in the bud',

Communal enclaves would be re-created. Living in separate enclaves, the different races would find fewer opportunities to intermingle and understand each other. MPs and community leaders will develop narrow views of society's interest. The enclaves will become seedbeds of communal agitation. We will witness the unravelling of what we have so carefully knit since independence, (quoted in Lai, 1995:121)

Two months later, ethnic quotas were imposed not only at the neighbourhood level, but also for each block of flats. For the Malays and Chinese, each neighbourhood and each block is to have no more than slightly above 10 per cent of their respective proportions in the national population, while the Indians and others are restricted to no more than 5 per cent. Operationally, this means that a Chinese household can only sell to another household whose ethnic group has not already filled its

quota in the neighbourhood and/or block. While allocation of quotas ostensibly applies to all ethnic groups, with Chinese composing around three-quarters of the total population the effects of the system are inevitably unequal across the ethnic groups.

According to Lai (1995:123), few among her respondents approve of the quota policy and most reject it on grounds of: '(i) the importance of non-ethnic criteria and kin in choice of location, (ii) it reinforces negative thinking along racial lines, (iii) it discriminates against minorities, and (iv) it violates the individual's constitutional and personal right to choice of residence'. Furthermore, many also dismiss the likelihood of race riots in the future. That the quota policy conflicts directly with the pro-family schemes, discussed above, is also not lost on the residents: 'They are always talking about family being most important in our Asian culture. Yet, the policy makes it difficult for us to be near our family' (resident quoted by Lai, 1995:123).

One wonders that such negative sentiments were not known to the government. However, although these views are now known publicly, the government is unlikely to repeal the quota policy. The apparent 'reasonableness' of promoting interracial harmony for the sake of social stability places an ideological obstacle in the way of defending ethnic 'enclaves' and criticizing the repressive aspects of the ethnic quota system. In this particular instance, one has a glimpse of how, with a legitimacy surplus, the government is able to impose a politically problematic policy and ride out any resulting protests, without the risk of jeopardizing its governing position. Monopolization of housing through universal provision no doubt helps in the implementation of the coercive policy.

Linking promotions of normative values preferred by the ruling government to public-housing allocation is obviously politically motivated. Opposition to these values, however, is unable to generate much popular political support or sympathy; such opposition is 'normal' for most government policies, and requires no special effort by the government to deal with it. More importantly, absence of public interest in the few complaints that are made and in any opposition to the apparent inequity of certain housing policies is symptomatic of the legitimacy of the PAP government itself. As Offe (1984:53) argues: 'the autonomy and capacity of the political-administrative system to act is dependent on "mass loyalty"'. State intervention is possible, without precipitating destabilizing political troubles, only if there is sufficient legitimacy. In this case the necessary legitimacy is achieved through provision of a

standard of housing better than previously experienced by the citizens of Singapore.

LOOKING AHEAD: CONTINUING POLITICIZATION

With about 85 per cent of the population in public housing and the remaining 15 per cent in far more expensive private dwellings, Singapore has no problem of homelessness. With the exception of the bottom 10 per cent who are renting public-housing flats, Singapore is a nation of home owners. However, the politics of housing provision does not stop, and continues to demand attention. The emergent issues are obviously not about basic housing but about 'upgrading' into better housing and a better environment.

To derive political legitimacy from its policy, the government has to be constantly vigilant in maintaining the standard of provision to which the people have become accustomed and, indeed, have come to expect. To maintain the mass loyalty of the population, the PAP government is continually taking significant steps to modify its housing offerings, without any fundamental changes to the main features of its commitment to universal provision.

Upgrading old estates

In 1990, it initiated a programme of 'upgrading' old estates to the standard of new estates, or as close as possible, lest these old estates become undesirable and the residents' investment in their flats be devalued. The programme is undertaken on a cost-sharing basis with the residents and will cost up to one billion dollars per year for about fifteen years. For obvious reasons, this programme has received overwhelming support from residents. Many of the old estates are in preferred central locations, while each successive new town is further and further away from the centre. Consequently, the resale prices of upgraded flats rise immediately upon completion of renovation, turning into windfalls for sitting residents—gains of up to \$100,000 for a 5-room flat have been reported (*Straits Times*, 16 September 1996).

As the upgrading programme has unfolded, it has also become the focus for political discussion, reflecting the intensification of the politicization of housing provision under conditions where there is no homelessness. At the public level, complaints have been made by residents of private-housing estates, who either ask why they should be paying for the upgrading of already subsidized flats with their taxes (*Straits Times*, 25 August 1995) or want the government to undertake upgrading of

their estates also (*ibid.*, 21 April 1995). The Minister of Finance's response (*ibid.*, 9 August 1995) was that the upgrading programme is not being financed by taxing the affluent since the income tax rate has been reducing for the past several years, but rather it is a means of redistributing government 'budget surpluses in ways which would increase the assets of Singaporeans, and the HDB upgrading programme was a tangible way of doing so'. He also stressed that the healthy surpluses were 'the result of higher government revenues from strong economic growth and strict control of government spending'.

The government itself is not beyond using the upgrading programme to generate its own political support. Among the criteria for an estate to be selected for upgrading is that, all things being equal, priority is given 'according to the degree of support in the constituency for the upgrading programmes' (*ibid.*, 28 September 1996). The journalist Koh Buck Song comments: 'This has been interpreted broadly to mean support for the [PAP] Government, since upgrading is one of its key programmes. So, opposition wards would rank low on this.' This is not denied by the government itself. Indeed, the Prime Minister has waved the upgrading programme as a 'carrot' for voting for the PAP during the campaign run-up to the 1997 general election.

Similar tactics for garnering political support are used in the dispensing of the smaller 'community improvement' budget. This government fund is placed under the jurisdiction of a Community Improvement Projects Committee, within the Ministry of National Development, and the money comes from that Ministry's budget. Any project which requests funds from this Committee must first be approved by an estate-level committee, called the Citizens' Consultative Committee (CCC), whose main task is to fund community-level activities, including community centres. Members of the CCC are appointed by the Prime Minister's Office and can be assumed to be supporters of the PAP and the government. Between January 1992 and April 1995, constituting more than half the term of office of the elected parliament, all but four wards have received funds from the Project Committee. The four that were left out were the four opposition wards in a parliament of 81 MPs. Opposition complaints both inside and outside Parliament have been all but ignored by the government (*ibid.*, 2 September 1995). It is thus apparent that public-housing provision as a government measure is all but depoliticized under conditions of universal provision.

Executive condominiums

In 1996, public-housing residents had their opportunity to 'counter-attack' middle-class Singaporeans who were against the HDB upgrading subsidies. They complained and queried the government's wisdom in subsidizing 'executive condominiums'. As noted earlier, the HDB has terminated construction of large 'executive' flats in public-housing estates. Applicants for these flats are permitted to transfer their applications to a new category of 'subsidized' flats called 'executive condominiums'. These flats will be built by private developers and will have design, facilities and finishes comparable to private condominium developments. These flats are meant for those who are eligible to apply for HDB flats, but who also aspire to own private flats but are unable to do so because of the high prices. The same five-year occupancy rule applies before the flats can be resold to other HDB-eligible households; after ten years of residence, however, the flat can be sold on the open market to anyone. Subsidies will be in the form of reduced land costs to developers in exchange for selling prices which are within reach of their target market. In addition, the government will give a one-time subsidy of \$40,000 to any family that is a first-time home owner.

For the mid-1996 launch of the first project under this scheme, a government-linked development company was contracted to build flats priced at \$400 per square foot. This was a discount of at least a third below comparable private condominium developments. It was little wonder that 11,000 households applied for the few hundred executive condominiums. The radical price reduction was possible because the 99-year leased land was sold to the developer at a 40 per cent discount against prevailing land prices in comparable locations (*Straits Times*, 12 September 1996).

The generosity of the 'executive condominium' scheme did not fail to attract criticism. The complaints tended to come from HDB dwellers. For example, one such resident asked: 'Why should valuable tax dollars be used to help someone who feels that an HDB flat is not good enough for him and wants to own a private property?' (*ibid.*, 15 July 1996). This must be especially galling when the applicants are already reasonably well-off by the local income standards, judging by the fact that they would have to have a monthly income of no less than \$8,000 to be able to pay the monthly mortgage on the executive condominium (*ibid.*, 3 August 1996), while the median income of Singaporeans in 1990 was only \$2,300. In fact, the income of the applicants need not be as high as \$8,000 if they can finance their purchase partly from the proceeds of

selling their existing dwellings. The general tone of the complaints was best summarized by a letter to the forum of the national newspaper: 'The crux of the issue is whether it is justifiable and equitable to use taxation income to benefit a small segment of the population who cannot be considered poor but who have aspirations of luxury housing' (ibid., 28 July 1996). The same individual also roundly rejected the government's contention that the effective subsidies on executive condominiums are lower than those on HDB flats.

To date, the government has not been able to justify the scheme any further. Perhaps the only defence is that it is part of the general principle of a 'home-owning democracy', which compels the government to provide for all who are excluded from market provision. Less honourably, faced with the sustained erosion of about 10 per cent of its electoral support in the past three general elections, the government may be understandably keen to retain or regain the votes of executive condominium applicants. This is a small but vocal constituency as they are likely to be better educated; it is also likely to be less tolerant of some of the more undemocratic policies of the PAP government. The executive condominium may therefore be the proverbial 'carrot' that would swing their votes towards the PAP in future elections. The two reasons are, of course, not mutually exclusive.

Redevelopment of an entire old estate

In the middle of the confrontation between HDB dwellers and those who aspire to or are already in the small but highly status-engendering private-housing sector, a less contentious and, possibly, all-round more felicitous programme was initiated by the government. This is the *en bloc* redevelopment of the sites of old housing estates with very low density, whose continuing existence seems increasingly unjustifiable in view of the growing demand for land. Flats in the targeted estates will be compulsorily acquired by the state and are to be totally demolished to make way for high-density, high-rise developments. Residents will be compensated at the market rate and given priority allocation for new flats. For example, a family with a four-room flat will be allocated a flat of similar size plus cash compensation amounting to the difference between the selling prices of the two flats. The new flats offered to the residents will be in the same neighbourhood as their acquired flats. Hence, they will be able to stay in the same neighbourhood, and with a mix of original and new neighbours. Finally, they will not have to vacate their

present flats until the new replacement flats are allocated. In sum, there will be minimum resettlement disruption, except for changing flats.

Considering that a substantial period of the original 99-year lease on most of the flats to be acquired has already expired, residents generally appear to be pleased with the prospect of owning a new flat with a fresh lease, and without incurring further investment. The reduction in resettlement and adjustment difficulties outlined above appears to be an extra bonus. Of course, the government has gained also. The redevelopment potential for the acquired land, which is usually in prime central locations, far exceeds the total cost of compensation to the affected households. Thus we see the wisdom of the 99-year leasehold arrangement, which separates the flat from the land, being realized in less than forty years of the national public-housing programme.

Finally, after convincing the entire population to invest in leasehold ownership, one of the government's increasing concerns is to protect the substantial investment of the households, both individually and collectively. Having already provided adequately in terms of housing for the entire nation, the government must begin to control its supply. As the Prime Minister warned, 'it would be a "dangerous mistake" to create an over-supply of homes by building more flats' (*Straits Times*, 21 August 1995) simply in order to clear the waiting queue of applicants. Thus it is already looking ahead to the eventuality of what it calls the 'inheritance' problem: that is, where Singaporeans find themselves owning two properties, one inherited from a parent. If this were to become a relatively widespread phenomenon, then it could not avoid pushing property prices downwards and hurting all Singaporeans. The future supply of housing must therefore be sensitive to the need to buy up resale flats at a reasonable return to the residents, rather than simply to focus on supplying new flats for all who apply.

Beyond these directly housing-related problems, there are economic structural issues that are beyond the purview of housing authorities. It is clear that home ownership is a pay-as-you-go programme and that its success is due very significantly to the absence of unemployment in Singapore during the past three decades. This healthy employment situation is one of the effects of Singapore being a late-developing nation. During the early stages of industrialization, under conditions of widespread real material deprivation, the task of the state is, paradoxically, comparatively easy. Capital accumulation is of uppermost importance for development, and political and ideological dimensions are positively subordinated to the economy (Offe, 1984:39), as in the 'pragmatism' of the PAP government. The job of achieving 'a situation in which every

citizen can take care of all of his or her needs through participation in the market process' may be relatively easy, because the work ethic remains high in the face of material deprivation. Moreover, during these early stages, 'the inherent test of rationality of policy-making is the extent to which it approximates this situation' (Offe, 1984:138). Ahead, the task of sustaining the drive of the population—when the basic necessities are already satisfied and when incremental material improvement is no longer the sole criterion for assessing public policies—will increasingly be an uphill battle. These difficulties have been publicly recognized and proclaimed by the second generation of ministers, who have taken over the management of the state from those who gained independence for Singapore. These potential future difficulties pose two identifiable latent problems: (i) ideologically, when 'delivering the goods', including housing, is no longer sufficient ground for ideological consensus, the legitimacy of the Singapore state may become increasingly an issue, especially in connection with the more repressive measures in government policies in general and housing policies in particular; and (ii) should unemployment become an endemic element in the economy, as it does in all matured capitalist economies, the anti-welfare stance of the state will become increasingly untenable; indeed, welfarism appears to be a universal feature of all mature capitalist societies (Pierson, 1994:111). However, while these are conceptually logical future possibilities, they are not inevitable, as the state is not a static entity that just awaits the arrival of trouble.

CONCLUSION

The concurrence of the 'individualized-commodity-private' mode and the 'collective-service-public' mode of consumption of goods and services tends to give rise to a cross-class political cleavage, in terms of one's dependence on or independence from public provision. Hence, it has been suggested that universal provision of collective consumption goods would eliminate the political cleavage, thereby 'depoliticizing' public provision. We argue here that such a concept of depoliticization glosses over the massive and constant ideological work that the state has to undertake, and the consequent dividend in political legitimacy it receives in return, to successfully prevent universal provision from becoming politicized. Singapore's very successful near-universal public housing programme clearly substantiates this theoretical contention.

The ideological work of the state is necessary because the rules that govern eligibility for state provision are unavoidably also social control

mechanisms with repressive tendencies. These tendencies must be ideologically justified if they are to bind the electorate into the 'nation', rather than alienate them. The Singapore case shows that efficacious justifications may be obtained by invoking some 'higher' values of collective interests. This invocation may act to undermine, or at least reduce, the apparent legitimacy of complaints against the provision system itself.

Where the state is able to set the terms of public discussion regarding collective consumption goods provision, it may be said to have achieved ideological hegemony/consensus among the governed. This condition is empirically observable when public complaints are overwhelmingly of the type that attempt to make government agencies more efficient in serving the population, rather than involving issues of principle. In such cases, complainants aim to help the agencies as a way of helping themselves. Space limitation does not permit us to document this observation in relation to Singapore's housing programme, but perusal of letters to the editors of national newspapers will bear out this contention.

Finally, while near-universal housing provision in Singapore serves well in demonstrating the ever-present demand for ideological work to pre-empt overt politicization of public provision of collective consumption, conceptual generalization from the analysis must proceed with caution. For while the need for ideological work is unavoidable, the actual timing, strategy and substance of every ideological manoeuvre have to be specific to the social and political conditions of the particular state in question. Furthermore, the ideological history of the country which provides the substance for analysis also stands in the way of generalization. The same can be said for any attempt to link state provision of services to any extant economic conditions, as in the post-Fordist thesis.

In conclusion, to professionals who are concerned with housing provision, it should by now be apparent that the case of direct state universal provision of high-rise public housing in Singapore stands in very sharp contrast to all the powerful arguments against such strategies derived from British, European and US experiences. For this reason, the Singapore case bears close examination for lessons that will undoubtedly be useful to other nations, notwithstanding the advantages it may possess on account of its size as an island-nation.

Chapter 8

Nostalgia for the *kampung*

Here in Singapore, there is to be no respite for the government as its ideological work continues. However, the site has shifted from the materiality of housing to the imaginary of ‘community’. The desire to escape from the squalor of overcongestion and an unhygienic living environment has been realized by universal public housing. But desire realized is also a desire forgotten and replaced by another. This time, ironically, it is a desire to return to the razed but not erased habitat of old, the Village’.

As previous chapters on the resettlement process have identified, the village, known in Singapore by its Malay term, *kampung*, is no longer part of the Singapore landscape. Yet, within the short space of four weeks from mid-February to mid-March 1993, there were three references to the *kampung* in the English-medium newspaper, the *Straits Times*. This is not unusual. Although physically no more, the *kampung* remains alive within the collective memory of Singaporeans, which is substantiated by the newspaper references.¹

The first reference appeared in a press interview with people in the street concerning ‘stress levels’ in contemporary Singapore. One individual responded: ‘What do you expect when people no longer live in *kampungs* and are locked up in tiny cages called HDB flats?’ (*Straits Times*, 15 February 1993).

The second appeared in a feature article on the relocation of Singapore’s only mental hospital from where it had stood for sixty-five years to ‘a spanking new condominium-like building’, dubbed by an architect involved in its design as ‘Club Med’, in a public-housing new town. On the eve of its relocation one of the nursing officers, looking at the blocks of public housing visible from the hospital corridor, remarked, ‘Once

there were *kampungs* here and we would take the patients out for a stroll in the evenings or they would just sit around here. It was very relaxing' (ibid., 3 March 1993).

The third appeared during a parliamentary debate on the annual budget allocation for the Ministry of National Development, which is responsible for developing public housing and ancillary services. A Member of Parliament (MP) made a plea to the Ministry to ensure the continuing survival of 'coffee shops' in housing estates. According to him, 'Singaporeans will find it very uneasy to live in an environment without a coffee shop. Due to the competition from the established fast-food chains, if there should be insufficient eating houses in the neighbourhood centre, it is likely that the traditional fishball noodle and *roti prata* will be replaced by the hamburger and fried chicken' (ibid., 16 March 1993). He had obviously treated 'coffee shop' and 'eating houses' as functionally interchangeable establishments.

Yet, from a social cultural viewpoint, the two establishment—the coffee shop and the eating house—are very dissimilar institutions. The destruction of the former, fondly known by all Singaporeans, regardless of his or her native language, by its generic Chinese/Hokkien term *kopi-tiam*, and the emergence of the latter in public-housing estates, signify a sea change in the daily life of the Singaporeans. These changes are reflected in the differences in customers' behaviour in the two establishments: the camaraderie of friends who idled together through long-drawn-out cups of coffee in the *kopi-tiam*, and the self-service high-rent business premises of the 'eating house' where clients preferably take the minimum necessary time to drink and eat. This change is etched on the memories of all the resettled villagers in the public-housing estates.² The MP's conflation of the two institutions into a single functional reference to eating establishments in high-rise housing estates indicates that traces of the *kopi-tiam*, a quintessential *kampung* institution, have not been completely erased from the collective memory of Singaporeans.

Indeed, the *kopi-tiam* has been abstracted and absorbed into different systems of signification in the popular culture of Singapore. In one instance, it has been transformed from a generic institution into the formal name of a restaurant, the Kopi-Tiam, located in the tallest hotel in Singapore. In this recontextualization, it has been reduced to an empty sign, to be filled with new representations. Unlike the *kampung* institution, the clientele of Kopi-Tiam restaurant are no longer men in singlets, shorts and sandals or barefooted, but white-collar, necktied junior executives and similarly office-attired women of equal rank. Gone is the proprietor with his dampened towel, used for wiping the tables, slung over his

shoulder, to be replaced by uniformed wage-earning waiters and waitresses. This usurpation of the generic name of the lowly *kampung* enterprise and its elevation to a 'sign' by a highly capitalized international hotel reflects, of course, the *kopi-tiam*'s persistent symbolic significance in the cultural register of Singaporean everyday life.

EVIDENCE: LIVED EXPERIENCES

Beyond anecdotal references such as those above, lasting 'descriptions' of the *kampung* can be found in autobiographies. The author of *From Farm and Kampong*, Peter H.L. Wee, a medical doctor born in 1938, characterizes himself on the very first page of his text as a 'common man':

I am not a statesman or a politician, nor a diplomat, nor am I a nationally or internationally known personality. I am simply an ordinary citizen of Singapore, very much like you who may be reading this book.

(Wee, 1989)

He claims an identity with the reader, situating himself as a speaker for the 'commonness' of their shared experience, and, in so doing, he constitutes his text as the articulation of the writer and readers as a community. Indeed, readers who were children in the pre-independent and pre-industrialized era would recognize themselves in this text which evokes collective memories of Singaporeans growing up in the 1940s and 1950s.

The following are some of Wee's (1989) recollections of life in the *kampung*:

Despite the fact that we lived in cramped quarters in an atap hut without electricity and modern sanitation, the memories of our life there are generally happy and pleasant ones. It was a *kampung* that maintained the leisurely and relaxed pace of life in the past amidst the encroaching tensions and problems of more sophisticated living visible just beyond its boundaries, (p. 68)

Throughout our *kampung* and school days we were blissfully oblivious to all that the future promised or foreboded. Life was one long period of enjoyment with unwelcomed intermittent breaks for examinations. (p. 72)

School was immensely enjoyable. There was no pressure and everyone took lessons, tests and examinations in his stride, (p. 82)

People in our *kampung* lived a friendly and secured life. The houses were grille-free and fenceless, and their doors were usually open from dawn till late at night. (p. 82)

Cooperation was a hallmark of *kampung* life. (p. 83)

An important feature of *kampung* life was a high level of racial and religious harmony among the *kampung* people... Throughout the ten years stay in Kampong Amber we knew of no serious quarrels among the neighbours. (pp. 84–5)

The quoted text needs some filling out. The adjective ‘cramped’ is a gloss over the actual conditions in the quarters which, according to the author, meant seven children and two adults in ‘a little hall, a bedroom and an open kitchen’, forming only part of a house which accommodated four families, totalling twenty-eight people sharing one outhouse toilet (p. 69). As to the easy school life, the author points out that ‘there were more places available than there were students to fill them’ (p. 71). The bulk of school-age children were, in fact, on the street, either helping the family financially in petty jobs or idling, for want of employment, at the *kopi-tiam* or any of the other gathering points in the *kampung*.

The *kampung*, now past and inscribed only as lived experiences in the collective memory of all who are over 35 years of age, is being transferred to the younger generations through various modes of representation, such as the ones cited. The main theme that runs through all the ‘memorialized’ representations of the *kampung* as a part of Singaporeans’ collective memory is that of a ‘relaxed’ pace of life, communitarian cooperation, and happy days despite material privation. As Chase and Shaw (1989:1) suggest: ‘The home we miss is no longer a geo-graphically defined place but rather a state of mind’; as memories, these representations reside in the realm of the imaginary, with only partial veracity. Indeed, they are the results of intentional partial amnesia, a selective erasing and deletion of the past; a process that emphasizes, embellishes and exaggerates certain elements, and omits others. With every invocation, the past is refigured, and subjected to the logic of nostalgia.

In the present invocations of the *kampung*, the themes embedded in the ‘imagined’ *kampung* are the classic themes of nostalgia. Lost space is tied to lost time. Lost time is characterized as one infused with values which ‘once provided the unity of human relations, knowledge and personal experiences’, namely, ‘simplicity, personal authenticity and

emotional spontaneity' (Turner, 1987:150–1), the lost innocence of childhood at the level of individual biography and of collective memory. Lost space and lost time thus translate into a loss of community. Nostalgia, therefore, implies a negative assessment of the present;³ the past as lived experience is invoked as a critical mirror of the present. In this contrast, the image of the past is 'comfortable' and 'reassuring', while the present and future are 'stressful' and 'destabilizing'. Thus, in the direct or refracted metonymic representations of the *kampung* in popular discourse, it is this immanent critique of the present that is symbolically and politically important, rather than the veracity of collective memories. This state is succinctly captured by the observations: 'nostalgia is memory with the pain removed' and that 'pain is today' (Lowenthal, 1985:8). It is to this critique that the analysis will now turn.

REMEMBERING THE *KAMPUNG*

Negative assessments of one era in comparison with another emerge when two contiguous phases of social configurations, denoted as past and present, have acquired sufficiently fixed contours for them to be represented in 'stylized' forms. Only when the shape of the present is conceptually within grasp can it be contrasted with a past that is already abstracted and formalized into an image, and be found wanting.⁴ Such is the historical conjuncture of Singapore in the first half of the 1990s, and perhaps beyond.

In the immediate post-Second World War years up to its unexpected political independence in 1965, Singapore may be summarily characterized as an 'unstable' society. The devastation of the war had reduced the permanent housing stock, thus intensifying the overcongestion in the remaining buildings (Kaye, 1956). The bulk of the population lived in urban villages and rural *kampungs* (Goh, 1955). The trading economy was declining, a situation exacerbated by Indonesia's protest against the formation of Malaysia in the early 1960s.⁵ Then the winds of decolonization finally caught the sail of a tentative nationalism—tentative because neither the emerging political leaders, with perhaps the single exception of the first Chief Minister, David Marshall, nor the politically mobilized population 'dared' to think of Singapore as an independent island city-state.⁶

Singapore was not at that time a society which looked fondly at its past or its present: rather, it was a society looking for a better future, seeking to 'develop'—a condition which the then developing People's Action Party (PAP) ably turned into a programme for economic growth

and political consolidation. This programme promised a new world of permanent homes in a sanitary environment, employment for everyone willing to work, and a continuously improving standard of living. It was a 'materialist Utopia' cast in a simple language that urged the population to do whatever was necessary to survive (Goh, 1976:81).

Upon gaining power in 1963, the PAP coopted the labour movement in order to ensure the industrial peace that was crucial to the fledgling industrialization programme, and simultaneously embarked on the national public-housing programme. The National Trades Union Congress, the Economic Development Board and the Housing and Development Board—respectively responsible for labour, economic development and public housing—were all established in 1960. The subsequent rapid economic development and attendant increase in the standard of living across all strata of income levels are by now legendary (Rodan, 1989). By the end of the 1980s, material privation had been replaced by the primacy of individual preference in consumption, except for those at the bottom of the income structure who were dependent on friends, relatives and welfare agencies. 'Gracious living', with a high level of material wellbeing and cultural consumption, became part of the manifesto of the new generation of PAP leaders, as they took over from the founding generation and looked towards the twenty-first century.⁷

It is in this new world of material plenty and national self-confidence that a collective nostalgia for the *kampung* has arisen, grounded in a sense of loss, of something missing in the present society. It is necessary for us to return now to the *kampung* to examine the constitutive elements of this nostalgia for a lost time.

UNDERDEVELOPMENT: AN IMPOSED LIFE OF LEISURE

One central theme of *kampung* life, as it was recollected, was its 'relaxed' style. It is necessary, though, to re-examine the nature of the ingredients from which this recollection is drawn, and, in the process, to re-evaluate the present view of the past.

The Singapore of the *kampung* days was, for the overwhelming majority, one of unemployment or intermittent employment in terms of both the length of the working day and the number of working days per week.⁸ Consequently, one had plenty of time which was not taken up by wage earning and must be otherwise filled. Filling in time gave rise to its own institutions, of which the most important was 'collective idling', a

phenomenon which spawned its own intentional and unintentional activities and consequences.

The location *par excellence* for collective idling was, of course, the *kopi-tiam*.⁹ It was no more than a wide open shop front with a minimum of tools of the trade: an open-fire charcoal grill, upon which sat brass or stainless steel conical cylinders, open at the pointed end. Each cylinder had a handle, a spout and a cloth 'sock' containing coffee powder. Coffee-making was a simple process of pouring boiling water into the sock, draining the coffee into the cylinder and pouring the coffee into heavy ceramic cups for serving. The grill was also used as a toaster for bread, which was served with small squares of butter or a sweet coconut jam called *kaya*. Coffee powder was prepared by frying coffee beans, mixed with voluminous amounts of butter and sugar, in a large cylindrical drum that was mechanically rotated over a wood fire. With mass-produced coffee powder now the current norm, the search—occasionally featured in the mass media—for the 'best' traditional *kopi-tiam* coffee and *kaya* is part of the nostalgia for the *kampung*.

At the *kopi-tiam*, a daily life of inactivity unfolded for the unemployed. Business started early, catering for those who needed breakfast before starting a day's employment, and throughout the day until closing time a scattering of customers could always be found. Almost all *kampung* male adults and teenagers would spend part of their day at the local *kopi-tiam*.¹⁰ Day after day, the routine varied little. The morning paper was read out loud by the rare literate villager to an illiterate audience who would interrupt freely with their opinions. During the afternoon, the idling would be more listless, some nodding off to sleep in the tropical heat. Young and old would swap stories, well-embellished, self-aggrandizing narratives of real or imaginary exploits. Seldom did the stories go unchallenged, especially when the storyteller was young, forcing the teller to produce a lame defence or face embarrassment. Generally, the atmosphere was one of good humour, though occasional fights did break out when embarrassment boiled over into anger. Some reverence was still reserved for older men, and expressions of disbelief would be voiced only after an elderly story-teller had left the scene.

The other principal idling activity was gambling. This took many different forms, some rather creative. The most conventional forms were, of course, cards and dice. There were games played with coins, the simplest of which involved placing coins in the palm and throwing them into the air with a controlled movement, and those coins which flipped over were the thrower's gains. Fighting fishes, raised specifically for that purpose, were also part of the gamblers' repertoire. Some species were

so tenacious that they were left in the glass bottle overnight, with the result of the battle known only the next day. Fighting spiders, in contrast, settled their scores, and the bets, within seconds. Those who had money, gambled,¹¹ those who did not, watched and made comments. Age was irrelevant to either the size of the bet or the 'courage' to make it; teenagers would place their bets alongside much older individuals. Timid gamblers were known to the regulars and were called *kiasu*, a pejorative Hokkien word which means 'fear of losing'.¹²

Before the arrival of television, apart from story-telling and gambling, the only other source of entertainment was Rediffusion, a cable radio network. The most popular programme had to be the half-hour segments of serialized *kungfu* stories at nine o'clock on week nights. After the broadcast, and allowing just a few minutes to finish the last drops of coffee, the *kopi-tiam* would close at around ten, ending another day in the *kampung*. *Kampung* life was thus filled with many leisure hours imposed by the absence of wage labour. Hence, it was a relaxed life, though not necessarily one desired by the *kampung* dwellers themselves (Chua, 1989b; Chua, Sim and Loh, 1985).

Until the pace of industrialization quickened in the 1960s and employment became dependent on educational qualifications, schooling was not taken seriously by most. Nevertheless, opportunities for schooling increased rapidly, although most parents failed to recognize its importance (National Archives, 1993:33). Most children cut short their education and went out to work or on to the street at some stage before the end of the six years allotted to primary education. By their early teens, boys would begin their life of irregular employment, petty crimes and idling in the *kopi-tiam*. Stress in schools was unknown, but many youngsters had more than a passing acquaintance with the stress of street life. There was no expectation at that stage that the future would be any different from the present, nor was there any recognition of a need to prepare for a different world. Instead, *kampung* life took on a timeless quality.

It is these aspects, then, of *kampung* life which are crystallized as spontaneity and simplicity, sentiments central to nostalgia (Turner, 1987). The sense of community that emerged out of this everyday life was strengthened by the active provisions made by the *kampung* dwellers themselves for some of their collective needs. Given the negligence of the colonial administration, each *kampung* had to provide for its vernacular primary schools, maintain its religious institutions, organize its electricity supply through small generators, and, most significantly, provide its own rudimentary fire-fighting equipment. In an environment of relatively homogeneous poverty, these needs were largely financed by donations

from the better-off households, such as owners of village businesses. Taking care of their own collective requirements thus generated collective responsibilities and, correspondingly, a sense of community.

There is no dispute, therefore, that concrete instances of simplicity, spontaneity, community and the relaxed way of life can be found in abundance in *kampung* records and memories. Nostalgia, however, transforms these instances into abstract fond recollections by deleting the historical and material circumstances in which they emerged and relocating the instances in an imagined 'golden past', which lays claim to reality through the factual nature of the instances themselves.

THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

If nostalgia has emerged when the contour of the present and its projected future is relatively set, then this 1990s nostalgia for the *kampung* is symptomatic of a certain understanding of the present and its trajectory into the future.

Singapore in the 1950s was a society craving for a new future, predisposing the population to strongly support a development-oriented government. The government has since made good its original promise to improve the material life of the people. However, in the last three decades, the standard of accommodation and the cost of living have risen concurrently. The increased costs, often including monthly mortgage or rent, can best be met by full-time employment in the formal sector of the economy. Employment brings with it a train of attendant consequences. First, the schedule of daily life is tied to the rhythm of industrial production as fixed hours of labour are exchanged for wages. There is now little room for flexibility in one's daily routine: that is, when to rise, when to eat, when to idle, and so on. Second, improvements in material life appear to have no limits as consumer desire constantly expands. To maintain comparative material advantage over others, additional means of earning income must be found, such as enrolling on additional training programmes in order to upgrade one's skills and so gain better occupational placement.¹³

Neither is the drive for new skills restricted to wage-earning adults. Now that the future is no longer perceived as unchanging, but can obviously be improved by one's own educational efforts, students at every level are equally involved in the pursuit of new competences. Children are therefore not exempt from industry. Indeed, primary school is no longer the initial step in an educational process conducted at a leisurely pace as an end in itself, but the beginning of a paper chase in

the 'certification of the self for a place in the job market.¹⁴ This certification of the self can be an endless task. Those who fail to gain entrance to local universities may seek a far more expensive tertiary education abroad, straining family finances. If this is financially impossible, then educational upgrading has to be undertaken in tandem with full-time employment. Thus Singapore has become a rich poaching ground for universities in developed English-speaking countries—such as Australia, Britain and the United States—seeking to enrol Singaporeans in distance-learning degree programmes, usually organized in conjunction with local extension education agencies, such as the Singapore Institute of Management. These programmes are costly in terms of both money and time, further reducing the opportunity for leisure.

Competition at the level of individual income earners is compounded by competition at the international level. The latter is imposed on the population via a state-generated, all-encompassing imagery of an island-nation struggling for its very survival in a sea of competition crowded with larger nations with greater resources and a keen determination to displace Singapore from its current economic position. The less than felicitous conditions under which the nation was formed—an isolated Chinese majority population in the Malay world, a speck of an island endowed with no natural resources, a declining trading economy, large numbers of new entrants into the job market with no equivalent employment opportunities—were ideologically transformed and deeply etched into the collective consciousness as a permanent feature of Singaporean existence: that is, regardless of how high the standard of living is and how well the economy is growing, life is a constant struggle for survival, without respite.¹⁵

A fundamental component of Singapore's formulas for economic success is the transformation of its people, conceptually and substantively, into 'human resource'. In an industrialized society, the demands of the economy take precedence over those of the people. First, the economy must be fed its human resource, then the people can consume the products of economy. Abiding by this logic of capital, Singaporeans have attained the extant high standard of living by hard work against all odds. These odds are perceived as permanent; there can be no respite lest all the hard work is undone in one brief lax moment. The better the standard of living, the greater the fear of its decline, and thus the greater the need to keep up and, indeed, increase the human resource and effort.

To overcome the temptation for respite from a tiring, and more than occasionally tiresome, industrial regime, the stakes are increased at every turn and with every notch of material improvement. At the individual

level, the competition for comparative advantages in consumption never seems to let up. At the political level, the long-ruling, single-party government must constantly exhort the people to keep up the competition because it has built its legitimacy and right to govern on its ability to deliver an ever-higher standard of material life. Under conditions of improved material life, 'survival' has given way to 'excellence' as the basis for improving the present. While survival can be measured by basic needs, excellence is a permanently receding horizon to which one's efforts are directed, rendering the striving an endless endeavour. Paradoxically, it is against this background logic of capital which appears so inescapable that nostalgia for the *kampung* emerged.

THE *KAMPUNG* COMPARED TO THE PRESENT

Recollected as a place where childhood was free and innocent, where schools figured marginally and communities exhibited a high degree of tolerance and spontaneous cooperation, the representation of *kampung* life as 'relaxed' is an 'inarticulate' term that holds in excess, more sentiment, resonance and imagery than any explication of the word itself is able to uncover. It is this 'relaxed' way of life that is being juxtaposed against the relentless competition at every level of contemporary social life, where the national drive to stay ahead of other nations compounds the individual's self-struggle to consume more than others, and where calculated competition destroys spontaneity and community by pitching individuals against each other. Such relentless competition translates into an ever-present high level of 'stress', an equally inarticulate metonymic representation of the industrialized present in everyday language. It is against this background of 'sustained' stress that nostalgia for the *kampung* is developing in contemporary Singapore, as an intrinsic critique of the present by the ordinary people.¹⁶ It will be recalled that the very first reference to the *kampung* in the newspaper cited at the beginning of this chapter was a response to a question on the increasing stress levels in Singapore.

Concurrent with the nostalgic invocation of the *kampung* was the politicization of 'stress' in the pages of the same national English-medium newspaper. The Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew's attribution (*Straits Times*, 18 December 1992) to stress of political office as a cause of lymphoma suffered by his son, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, gave rise to a comment by a counsellor of standing, Anthony Yeo of the Counselling and Care Centre, that 'the government should rethink the national goal of striving for excellence' because 'constant push for material excellence

at the expense of a balanced life could lead to stress and illness' (ibid., 20 January 1993). Yeo's statement occasioned several responses from government quarters. In addition to several exchanges of letters between Yeo and the press secretary of the Senior Minister, two Ministers made categorical statements against Singaporeans' complaints about stress, of which Yeo's statement is taken as an example. The most sustained government statement came from the Minister of State for Health and Education, sociologist Dr Aline Wong. Likening the talk about stress in contemporary Singapore to a 'fashion', she questioned whether Singaporeans are actually experiencing more stress than 'compared to thirty years ago' in the days of *kompungs*. According to her, 'people worked 14, 16 hours a day, seven days of the week just to earn a meagre living' and 'compared to this, the present life of most Singaporeans is so comfortable' (ibid., 8 February 1993). Contrary to this image, thirty years ago, suffering as a result of unemployment and underemployment was greater than that caused by relentless toil. Closer to historical truth was the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wong Kan Seng's identification of the presence of stress in unemployment (ibid., 6 February 1993). However, different though they are, the Minister's suggestion that stress of unemployment is more serious than that derived from work would be debatable for some resettled individuals. As the *kampung* daily life showed, unemployment imposed on individuals a high level of discretionary freedom to fill the time.

Both Ministers' statements were further supported by a columnist who, while recognizing that 17 per cent of the adult population is said to have some symptoms of one mental problem or another, asked, 'could this not be due to a lower threshold for stress, now that we have discovered the rights of the individual, the quality of private space and all that jazz?' (ibid., 14 February 1993). It should be noted that increases in mental health problems are not disputed, in part because there are survey data on divorce and separation rates,¹⁷ suicide and attempted suicide rates and, by international standards, a comparatively high psychiatric morbidity rate. The issue is whether these rates can be attributed to the intensity and sources of 'stress'.

Government ministers and those who share their views argue that individuals themselves are responsible for experiencing high levels of stress. Thus the Minister of State for Health suggests that Singaporeans have lost their 'cultural capacity' to tolerate stress because of the much improved material life, which is itself the cause of Singaporeans' apparent complacency (ibid., 8 February 1993). Individual failure to manage stress was also cited by the head of the psychology department of the

Woodbridge Hospital, when he stated: 'When you start to blame others, it is the start of bad mental health' (ibid., 21 February 1993).

In contrast, individual citizens attribute intensification of stress in their lives to the 'system', which includes, among other features, the dull compulsion of economic competition and the government's emphasis on relentless pursuit of excellence by each individual. Yeo's identification of the government's relentless drive to excellence as a source of stress was echoed by a recent high-school graduate. Writing as one 'having recently been set free from the Singaporean education system', she quoted her junior college principal as saying during school assembly, 'I'm not going to read the two-As list since such a score is very mediocre, I'm sure all of you agree.' As a survivor recalling friends who had fallen, she continued, 'Burning out before the examinations is usual and some of my peers used to break into tears suddenly in the library while studying' and 'others ended up with gastric problems at the age of 16' (ibid., 3 March 1993).

This 'politicization of stress' is an important issue in Singapore's economic and cultural development in the 1990s and beyond. Invoking the spirit of the *kampung* is a popular, if inarticulate, response to the stresses of living under the 'disciplinary' effects of industrial capitalism. Lost are the joys of a carefree childhood, replaced by long hours of studying and compulsory extra-curricular activities. Lost are the spontaneous, simple, casual interactions among acquaintances which were fundamental to feelings of belonging in a *kampung* community, replaced by potential social isolation in a sea of strangers in the comparatively very large residential population of a new town. Lost are the high levels of discretionary free time to be filled with leisure activities, replaced by hours of toil at work that, as often as not, is more alienating than self-actualizing, and externally imposed.

Popular nostalgia for the *kampung*, regardless of whether one had lived in one, is rooted in this commonplace criticism of the stressful life of the present, dictated and disciplined by the logic of capital, and with no relief in sight. As Chase (1989:15) argues, 'some elements of the present are felt to be defective and [yet] there is no public sense of redeemability through a belief in progress'. It is an untheorized realization of the domination of that logic as the driving force in one's daily life. However, as recent arrivals, and still basking in the glory of new-found materialism (Ho, 1989; Thumboo, 1989), Singaporeans are not about to 'abdicate' from the present (Lowenthal, 1985:12). Thus invocation of the abstracted 'relaxed' social life of the *kampung* is not about the desire

to go back to the reality of the *kampung*, with all its material disadvantages. Hence it is only recalled 'nostalgically'.

However, nostalgia is a modality for distancing and relativizing the present (Turner, 1987). Knowing that the past is different enables one to relativize the present reality, to know that the 'present' is not 'the only way things necessarily are' and that 'reality' need not be bound by the immediate present in time and space. Thus nostalgia for the *kampung* points to an alternative construction of 'what life can be' in the presence of, and not without, improved material life. It is indicative of the desire to 'rest', to be content with one's lot after having striven for long and arduous years, instead of pushing oneself just that little bit more. In this sense, it is an attempt to control one's life rather than have it controlled by the logic of capital. It is a resistance to the relentless drive of economic development itself.

Conversely, the government cannot afford to allow this desire for contentment to take root as part of Singaporean everyday life. For a government whose claim to legitimacy to rule is based on the ability continually to improve the material life of the population, the logic of global capitalism is unavoidable. It is the logic of staying on the competitive edge, without rest, because to rest content is to risk being overtaken and sliding backwards relative to other nations, which in turn would bring into question the legitimacy of the government itself. For the government, it is a 'marathon without end'. Hence it seeks both to 'personalize' the problem of stress as individual failure to compete and to 'culturalize' it as the population's declining 'cultural capacity' or reluctance to manage stress. It should be noted that the government did not adopt a psycho-medicalized view of stress because the evidence for such a view—for example, higher rates of divorce and suicide—is being redeployed elsewhere by the government. Such data are read as symptomatic of the insidious individualism brought about by the global reach of Westernization.

The government thus continues to hold out the 'brave new world' of bigger, better and more material wellbeing as the 'carrot' to motivate the population to continue subjecting themselves to the demands of the industrial regime. This is encapsulated in a statement of jubilation from the Minister of Trade and Industry, during one of his constituency tours: 'Where we are now was a Malay *kampung*. Ten years later, it is totally different, it is an ultramodern housing estate' (*Straits Times*, 23 January 1995). Yet for a segment of the population, this transformation has been inscribed with exactly opposite sentiments. In contrast to the celebratory note, the *kampung* stands for a life different from the present 'stressful'

one; it is preserved in the collective memory as a desire for a more contented life. For those who embrace such sentiments, the world of constantly expanding material benefit, which was so important in the 1960s, appears to have lost much of its lustre. There is a feeling of alienation towards it, and change is desired.

CONCLUSION

Like all critiques, nostalgia for the *kampung* contains within it the possibility of an ideology for social change. Embodied in nostalgia as ideology is a set of concepts and sentiments which constitute a preferred way of life, preferred precisely because the present mode and the projected future are comparatively less desirable. If there were the political will and ability to bring about this preference, nostalgia could be transformed into a radical programme for change (Lowenthal, 1989:28). As such, nostalgia is no different from utopianism as a political ideology. However, in contrast to utopianism's fixed orientation to a new future based on critiques of both the past and the present, nostalgia's grounding in the past blunts its powers and its radical possibilities.

Substantively, in the Singapore context, nostalgia for the *kampung* is a sentiment that involves more than a lamentation for the lost life. It is all too conscious of its own selective amnesia; the material deprivation of the old lifestyle is neither forgotten nor desired. This accounts for why *kampung* life is recollected only in abstract sentiments. As the erasure of the past is never complete, the crucial political question is not about bringing back the past in *toto*, but rather it is about recovering control over daily life within the present zone of material comfort. It is about resisting being swept away by the unrelenting forces that turn daily life into a resource which furthers the accumulation of capital at the national level and of material possession, often in excess and useless, at the individual level. Raising the possibility of an alternative social and personal life at the current stage is indicative of a cognitive and intellectual distancing by a significant proportion of the population from a present that heavily emphasizes economic growth and expansion of material consumption. Unfortunately, faced with the sense that 'the past is the past', and no longer available as a moral/political resource for the present, the best that those with this realization can do is to withdraw from active participation in the present society. As Raymond Williams points out: 'Value is in the past, as a general retrospective condition, and is in the present only as a particular and private sensibility, the individual moral action' (1973:140, quoted in Tannock, 1995). Conversely, and ironically,

realizing that Singapore is entering economically into the slow-growth phase of a developed economy, and that expansion of material life may thus slow down, the political leadership has responded by intensifying its attempts to elaborate and inscribe the appropriate values that are to underpin Singaporean social life in the future. In this regard, it has produced its own nostalgia for a mythic Asian communitarian society, placed in an unspecified and unspecifiable distant past. The myth of communitarianism thus functions as a Utopian vision that reinvents a cherished past. The difference between the mythic Asian society and the nostalgia for the *kampung* is that while there is a lack of political power to realize the latter, the former is backed by the political desire of the PAP government to realize it as a future state. Paradoxically, the myth of communitarianism is able occasionally to invoke, if only through refracted means, the possibility of recovering some traces of the sense of 'community' that was inherent in the *kampung*.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 There are now several accounts of the success story of Singapore. Most notable are Drysdale (1984), Rodan (1989) and Sandhu and Wheatley (1989).

1 PUBLIC-HOUSING POLICIES COMPARED

- 1 Since 1991, each public housing estate is managed by a committee headed by an elected Member of Parliament and his appointees. Such committees have been given the rather grandiose name of 'town councils' (Ooi, 1990).
- 2 It has been suggested that the primary goals of this programme were job creation in order to alleviate unemployment and slum clearance and that provision of housing for the poor was secondary.
- 3 It should be noted that the issue is one of maintaining a reasonable mix of income groups, because exclusive provision for those who can afford to rent, as in the case of West Germany (Kratke, 1989), has the same result of leaving out the lowest-income groups from access to decent housing.
- 4 For discussion of excessive gains by private investors derived from tax incentives in providing low-cost housing, see Weicher (1982:41-3).
- 5 These factors included high rates of inflation, rising marginal tax rates, and favourable tax treatment of interest payments, property taxes and imputed rents (Kain, 1983:146).
- 6 There is some disagreement regarding the extent to which this conversion has affected the rental housing stock and the position of the rents; see Kain (1983:142-4).
- 7 Some of these elements are less explicitly spelt out by Szelenyi's suggestions (1983) for modification of the socialist housing programmes.
- 8 There is in principle or in practice no reason why income ceilings should not be removed completely. Doing so would only add a very small fraction to the demand for flats, which the HDB can easily meet. Possible reasons for not doing so are (a) to protect the private housing market where very substantial amounts of capital have been invested by Singaporeans themselves, and (b) to keep private housing as a socially differentiated

- housing class so that it may act as the 'prize' for those who have become financially successful.
- 9 To the extent that mortgages for all sales flats are fixed at the same belowmarket rate, the larger the mortgage, the greater is the saving; in this sense, there exists an inequality.
 - 10 The nominal number of rooms includes sitting-dining room and bedrooms; kitchen and bathrooms are excluded from the count.
 - 11 The poor living conditions of the first generation of 'emergency' 1-room and 2-room flats had been documented by Hassan (1973).

2 FROM CITY TO NATION

- 1 The shophouse was the most popular type of building in the first hundred years of Singapore settlement, each of about 16 feet frontage and 200-foot depth, with only a single front access. The back lanes that can be found in existing shophouse districts were first introduced during the 1920s (Ho and Lim, 1992).
- 2 These figures were given in the 1956 Survey of the Singapore Improvement Trust.
- 3 Excluded from the following discussion is industrial development planning; for a brief overview of this subject, see Yuen (1991).
- 4 The details of Lorange's work are abstracted from his report to the Housing and Development Board (see Chua, 1989a:12).
- 5 Among the scarce documentation on cases that came before the Compensation Board, there was evidence that it tended to act in favour of landlords rather than tenants (Chan, 1976:172-6).
- 6 For the period between 1976 to 1981, the tourist arrival rate increased by 11 per cent per year to reach 2.8 million by 1981; then it fell suddenly in the following year to 4.5 per cent and to 3.5 per cent in 1983.
- 7 Reference to concerted planning for the arts is made in the government's manifesto for overall development of Singapore for the twenty-first century, but no details are known (Government of Singapore, 1991).
- 8 The design of the Centre was exhibited to the public on 22 July, 1994.

3 RESETTLING A CHINESE VILLAGE

- 1 Two other published studies of resettlement of different periods are Hassan (1973) and Chew (1982).
- 2 Prior to the intentional policy of ethnic mixing in public-housing estates, settlements in Singapore tended to be racially exclusive, with only occasional families who were of different ethnic origins. The research site was no exception.
- 3 The following is a list of existing studies: S.Baharin, B.Dahlan and S.Vasoo (1971) 'The impact of public housing on Malay family life, with practical reference to Toa Payoh', in S.Ahmat and J.Wong (eds) *Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore*. Singapore: Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations; R.Tan (1972) 'The impact of re-location on HDB tenants—a case study', M.Soc.Sc. thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore; S.H.Lim (1973) 'Relocation, social networks and neighbouring

- interaction in a block of flats', academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore; E.J.Loh (1971) 'Sociological consequences of internal density on personal and family relationships', academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore; B.G.Ong (1974) 'The social structure of the resettled Malay community in Geylang Serai, Singapore', academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore; C.Robert (1972) 'The social and economic implications of relocation squatter settlements: a case study', academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore; T.Vijayakumar (1976) 'Life and living environment in kampongs and rural areas', academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore; L.H.Lee (1980) 'Resettlement of the Potong Pasir community: a study of attitudes and destinations', academic exercise, Department of Geography, University of Singapore; G.Y.Yap (1976) 'Family life-styles in high-rise and low-rise homes among the Singapore Chinese', academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore; M.MacIntyre (1976) 'A study of Malay family life-style in high-rise and low-rise homes', academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore; P.S. J.Chen and C.L. Tai (1977) *Social Ecology of Singapore*, Singapore: Federal Publications; Housing and Development Board (1980) 'Socio-economic impact of resettlement: views of the affected population', unpublished in-house research.
- 4 The resettlement of cottage industries found in the village has been left out of the present essay; see Chua, Sim and Loh (1985) for details.
 - 5 Similar scenes and lifestyles are still being enacted daily in the squatters of other Southeast Asian nations; see Berner and Korff (1995).
 - 6 The various family economic arrangements should provide substantive material for the current concern to reconceptualize 'welfarism' in terms of a combination of a host of agencies beyond just state institutions: that is, so-called 'welfare pluralism' (Kemeny, 1992:75).

4 MODERNISM AND THE VERNACULAR

- 1 'Atap' is dried fronds from a palm, similar to coconut fronds.
- 2 The exceptions to this rule are the bungalow houses of the colonial community and wealthy Chinese families. For details of this house-form, see Lee (1989) *The Singapore House*, which is of course a misnomer since these are not houses for the masses.
- 3 This environment is selected because as yet little is written about it, whereas the urban shophouse and its conditions have had extensive coverage since the 1950s; see Kaye (1956) and Savage (1992).
- 4 Information on the Chinese squatter is drawn from the author's own biographical experience in growing up in Bukit Ho Swee. Information on Malays is drawn from studies of several villages. These include detailed photographic documentation of the spatial layout and the social activities in the public spaces of two villages for archival purposes. Further substantiation is obtained from comparison with an urban squatter village at the southern tip of Malaysia, Singapore's neighbouring country, and from investigations of Malay social activities in public-housing estates. In each of

- these instances, intensive unstructured interviews with individuals over 10 years of age were conducted according to gender, age and occupation.
- 5 The village described here was Bukit Ho Swee, which was burnt down in 1961. On its site was built the very first HDB public-housing estate. Since the late 1980s, the first generation of emergency flats have been demolished making way for a new shopping centre. For a 'glorified' description of the transformation of the village, see *Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation to Progress* (Singapore: Singapore News and Publications, 1983).
 - 6 The lengthy summary is a paraphrase of Bradford and Rueschemeyer's (1988) description of an East German housing estate.
 - 7 From an interview with Liu Thai Ker, formerly Chief Executive Officer of the HDB and Chief Planner, in the *Architectural Journal*, Faculty of Architecture, National University of Singapore, 1984.
 - 8 For a study of the social significance of such waiting points, see Noschis (1987).
 - 9 Excluded from this discussion are membership in some government-sponsored organized groups whose reason for being is precisely to increase acquaintance among residents: for example, 'Residents' Committees'. That such committees are government sponsored and organized is itself indicative of the difficulties of the spontaneous development of acquaintances in a high-rise environment.

5 ADJUSTING RELIGIOUS PRACTICES TO DIFFERENT HOUSE-FORMS

- 1 The deities or gods worshipped by the Chinese vary from place to place, even household to household (Newell, 1962). A more general discussion on Chinese religion and temple architecture is given by Kohl (1984:83–129).
- 2 The Hindu household is used as an illustrative example because Hindus constitute the majority of Indians in Singapore.

7 PUBLIC HOUSING AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

- 1 I adopt here Marx's conception of ideological transformation as the 'naturalization' of historically specific class interests.
- 2 The hidden hand of intervention by the ruling group as political domination is, of course, the 'coercion' behind moral leadership in a hegemonic situation. For greater discussion of the separation between hegemony and political domination, see Kemeny (1992).
- 3 Popular support for state provision of collective goods varies across the goods and services in question. In spite of the apparent reduction of welfarism in Britain, public-opinion surveys consistently show that a majority of the population favours the expansion of state spending on mass-consumed services and 'a lower level of social security benefits, which were seen to be directed towards a "less deserving" minority' (Pierson, 1994:109).

8 NOSTALGIA FOR THE *KAMPUNG*

- 1 With the initiation of the national public-housing programme in 1960,

- resettlement of *kampung* dwellers into high-rise housing estates was executed with increasing haste, such that by 1989 all *kampungs* had been resettled (National Archives, 1993:89).
- 2 The disappearance of the *kopi-tiam* as a *kampung* institution has been used, in the highly acclaimed play *Kopi-tiam* by the accomplished Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun, to represent the massive social transformation of Singapore of the last three decades. Several levels of Singapore's transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial society are embedded in the very transformation of the *kopi-tiam*. These include the resettlement process; the disappearance of dialects and the emergence of English and Mandarin, which severs intergenerational conversations; and the passing over of the older generation, who hold on to their memories of the past, and the establishment of a new generation striking out to a new economic future.
 - 3 Significantly, both the past and the future can be invoked as critiques of the present; conventionally, the two strategies are known as 'nostalgia' and 'utopia' respectively (Chase, 1989:9). We are concerned here only with the former phenomenon.
 - 4 Such stylized contrast between past and present often constitutes the underlying grand themes and trajectories of nineteenth-century macrosociological theorizing, such as those of Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity, Marx's philosophical anthropology of primitive communism of unspecified past versus the capitalist present, and Weber's enchanted world of myth and religion versus the disenchantment of the modern world through rationalization and bureaucratization (Turner, 1987).
 - 5 Indonesia under the late President Sukarno launched what was known as a 'confrontation' campaign against Malaysia in 1963. The exact nature of this campaign remains difficult to define because it was not meant to be a military action, although some small acts of espionage and skirmishing did take place. The campaign effectively dissipated with the displacement of Sukarno from the presidency by General Soeharto after a bloody *coup* in Indonesia; see Legge (1972:361–80).
 - 6 Indicative of the difficulty of conceiving Singapore as an independent nation, Lee Kuan Yew, then already Prime Minister, in a by-election campaign speech in 1961, stated categorically that an independent Singapore was 'a foolish and absurd proposition' (quoted in Drysdale, 1984:249).
 - 7 The PAP government's 'manifesto' for making Singapore 'more prosperous, gracious and interesting over the next 20 to 30 years' is contained in *The Next Lap* (Government of Singapore, 1991).
 - 8 Unemployment in 1960 was about 13.5 per cent throughout the island and over 50 per cent lived in *atap* houses in urban *kampungs* (Pang, 1982:8 and table on 9).
 - 9 The following description is of Chinese *kampungs* rather than Malay ones; for a contrast of the physical features of the two, see Chua (1991).
 - 10 The *kopi-tiam* was an exclusively male institution; women were not seen in such premises lest tongues should wag regarding their sense of propriety and sexual mores.
 - 11 It was always curious how individuals who did not work obtained money to gamble; among teenagers, money was often obtained through petty crimes.

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- 12 This term has entered the historical dictionary of Singapore as ‘the widely considered national characteristic of Singaporeans in the late 20th century’ (Mulliner and Mulliner, 1991:80). In recent debates, it has either been criticized as a major Singaporean failing or embraced by Singaporeans as the quintessential national trait (Tripathi, 1993:16–18). It should be clear where a *kampung* dweller stood in the usage of this term.
 - 13 A nurse interviewed on the question of stress in contemporary Singapore reported: ‘I am doing a paediatrics course at the moment, on top of working, and it’s stressful shuttling between hospitals and juggling study and work’ (*Straits Times*, 15 February 1993).
 - 14 The achievement level of secondary school students is staggering and keeps improving; 155 students scored eight A’s or better in the 1992 ‘O’ Level examinations (*Straits Times*, 3 March 1993) compared with only two or three students each year throughout the 1950s and 1960s.
 - 15 The rhetoric of the ‘politics of survival’ was initiated in the early years of independence (Chan, 1971) and continues to have ideological currency in present-day Singapore. It is a theme that is differently coded and expressed on different occasions. The simplest expression is repeated by the most recent member of the cabinet, Commodore (Res) Teo Chee Hean, Minister of State for Finance and Communications: ‘We are a small country. There is no oil in the ground. No one owes us a living’ (*Straits Times*, 16 October 1993).
 - 16 The more articulate, although not always successful, critiques of the present tend to take on more explicit political angles, as in the theatre (Devan and Heng, 1993) or in the visual arts, which explore new conceptual dimensions.
 - 17 Significantly, the increasing divorce rate is constantly being used by the government as evidence of the ‘Westernization’ of Singaporeans and the decline of traditional ‘Asian’ values, around which the government mounts its own nostalgic construction of past society that was supposedly based on communitarian values. Space does not permit the exploration of this nostalgia here.

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