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THE PUBLIC HOUSING SCENE IN SINGAPORE

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Introduction

The story of public housing in the Republic of Singapore has been one of commitment, enterprise and achievement. Serious efforts to provide comfortable housing for the people began only 18 years ago when the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was formed.

By the end of Dec 1977 59% of the total population of 2.3 million were living in HDB new towns and estates. In these new towns and housing estates are over 280,000 housing units comprising mainly flats and shops which have been built largely during the Board's three five-year building programmes (1960-65, 1966-70, and 1971-75). When the fourth five-year building programme (1976-80) ends in 1980, there will be another 150,000 new housing units and seven out of ten Singaporeans will become HDB residents.

The Background

In the 1950s and early 1960s Singapore was faced with a critical housing problem. From a population of 150 when the island was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, it grew to 210,000 by 1900, 938,000 by 1947 shortly after the end of the Second World War, and 1½ million by 1959. The provision of public housing by the Singapore Improvement Trust established in 1927 during the British administration was insufficient to cope with the increase in population. During the Trust's term of office from 1927-1959 a total of 23,000 housing units was built. During the same period the population trebled from 500,000 in 1927 to 1½ million in 1959.

The deteriorating housing condition was accorded priority attention with the establishment of the Housing and Development Board when the present Government was first elected into office in 1959.

The Housing and Development Board

The Housing and Development Board is a statutory body established on 1st February 1960 by the enactment of the Housing and Development Act (Chapter 271). The Board is under the portfolio of the Minister for National Development.

At the helm of the Board is the Chairman (Mr Michael Fam), Deputy Chairman (Mr Cheng Tong Fatt) and four Board Members (Messrs Baey Lian Peck, C V Devan Nair, Albert H K Hong and Hsuan Owyang), all appointed by the Minister. Under the direction of the Board is the Chief Executive Officer (Mr Teh Cheang Wan) and Deputy Chief Executive Officer (Mr Liu Thai Ker) who are supported by the Building and Development Division; Estates and Lands Division; Finance, Accounting, and Administration Division; and the Resettlement Department.

As Singapore's public housing authority the Board is responsible for the planning and development of new towns and housing estates, and the provision of community facilities such as sports and swimming complexes, commercial, shopping and social facilities. The Board acquires land for public housing, clears designated areas for redevelopment, and resettles families, shopkeepers and farmers on State Lands needed for development projects such as public housing, urban renewal, airport expansion and road schemes.

Eligibility for Public Housing

An applicant must be a Singapore citizen not less than 21 years old. He and the proposed occupiers must not own any landed property. To purchase an HDB flat the applicant's family income must not exceed S\$1,500 per month at the time of application. For rental, the income ceiling is S\$800 per month.

Planning Concept

Public housing estates are residential communities with a complete range of physical infrastructure and commercial, shopping, social and recreational facilities. Our new towns are structured on the basis of the "neighbourhood principle" which basically aims at self-sufficiency not only in the basic necessities, but also in a large measure the shopping, recreational and social needs of residents. Each neighbourhood has up to 6,000 housing units so that the population can support the community facilities, most of which are concentrated in the neighbourhood centre. The neighbourhood centre has a market, a hawker centre, shops, clinics, schools, kindergarten, gardens and playgrounds.

Where three or more neighbourhoods are in proximity a town centre is provided. The town centre is normally centrally located amidst a number of surrounding neighbourhoods. Because of the larger supporting population, the town centre is able to serve as the focal point of orientation for the whole new town's shopping, commercial, transport, communal, and recreational activities.

Facilities in a town centre include shopping/pedestrian malls, emporiums and departmental stores, supermarkets, restaurants, transportation terminal, cinemas, post office, banks, HDB Area Office with social function hall, library and creche.

New Towns

Three new towns at Queenstown, Toa Payoh and Telok Blangah have been completed. Under the Board's current fourth five-year programme another four new towns are under development at Woodlands, Bedok, Ang Mo Kio and Clementi.

Queenstown (285 hectares) in the southwest was largely developed during the Board's first five-year building programme (1960-65). It has 27,000 housing units in seven neighbourhoods with a population of 150,000. In addition to the neighbourhood centre facilities, Queenstown also has a town centre, two swimming complexes, and a sports complex. Plans are underway to provide another sports-cum-swimming complex in Queenstown.

Toa Payoh (325 hectares) in the north has 36,600 housing units in five neighbourhoods for 190,000 people. From conception to completion, Toa Payoh was planned as a new town in its entirety. Development began in 1965 on virtually virgin land. The town was completed in 1973 with neighbourhood and town centre facilities, a town garden, a swimming complex believed to be one of the largest in this region, and a sports complex. Toa Payoh made its landmark on the international scene when it was designated as an official demonstration project for delegates from 120 countries participating in "HABITAT: United Nations Conference on Human Settlements" held in Vancouver in mid 1976.

Telok Blangah (365 hectares) is the third new town with five neighbourhoods on the foothills of Mount Faber (100 metres above sea level). There are 13,400 housing units for 70,000 people in Telok Blangah. There is easy access to Mount Faber by road and footpath, and to the port nearby. A town centre and a swimming complex are under development.

Four new towns are under active development at Woodlands (1,000 hectares) in the extreme north for 290,000 people, Bedok (545 hectares) in the east for 210,000 people, Ang Mo Kio (730 hectares) to the north of Toa Payoh for 220,000 people, and Clementi (425 hectares) in the southwest for 120,000 people. These will be new generation towns based on the Board's experience gained over the past 18 years. Greater emphasis is given to planning and design considerations, improved building methods and mechanization, better estate management services to residents, more social amenities, and minimal relocation problems for the resettled.

Five town centres are under construction at Bukit Merah, Bedok, Ang Mo Kio, Woodlands and Clementi to serve the large population centres. Bukit Merah's town centre will be ready in the third quarter of 1978 with the rest scheduled for completion in different stages by end 1979.

Under planning is a new town at Nee Soon (907 hectares) in the north for 200,000 people. Work has begun on the master plan for Tampines New Town.

Central Area Redevelopments

The Central Area is undergoing systematic redevelopment to improve the living and working environment and to inject night life into the City.

To check the continuous flow of population away from the Central Area to HDB new towns and housing estates largely in the suburbs, the Board will be constructing not less than 10,000 units of public housing in the Central Area during its current building programme. Large residential-cum-shopping complexes developed by the Board include Tanjong Pagar Plaza, Rochor Centre, Outram Park and People's Park. Under construction are projects at Hong Lim, Kelantan Road/Jalan Berseh, North Bridge Road and Waterloo Street.

Light Industries

An important land use component in new town planning is the allocation of sites for light clean industries which will raise Singapore's standard of industrial technology and provide employment practically at the doorstep for residents, in particular the female labour force and young school leavers. A light industrial base has already taken root in our new towns. The emphasis is on pollution-free and relatively capital intensive industries possessing greater potential in skill development and upgrading of technology such as electronics and precision metal engineering industries. In addition to local industrialists, foreign investments in our new towns include Philips of Netherlands; Fairchild, Smith-Corona, General Electric and Sundstrand of USA; Rollei of West Germany; and Hitachi, Matsushita, Fuji, Nippon Miniature Ballbearings and Singapore Time of Japan. The bulk of the locally manufactured products are exported to world markets.

Home Ownership Scheme

Very favourable terms are incorporated into the home ownership for the people scheme. To-date 52% of HDB flats are owner-occupied. Central Provident Fund credits are used by flat owners to meet partial or full payments of HDB flats. This fund consists of monthly contributions from working citizens, 15½% each by the employee and employer. (Under normal circumstances the credits in the fund can be withdrawn only when the employee reaches 55 years of age).

An applicant makes a 20% downpayment of the selling price of the flat at the time of registration. The balance is payable in monthly instalments over 5, 10, 15 or 20 years bearing an interest rate of 6¼% per annum.

Flats are allocated to applicants on a "first come, first served" system based on registration numbers. As at 31 Dec 77, over 140,000 flats have been purchased under this scheme. The selling price of a three-room flat in new towns (the most popular type in demand) averages at three years of the owner's family income. Rentals have been kept at not more than 20% of family monthly incomes.

As at 31 Dec 77 there were 62,000 applicants on the waiting list (49,000 to buy and 13,000 to rent flats). The current waiting period of 3-4 years will be reduced to 1½-2 years by the end of 1978.

Estates Management

To ensure a high standard of management when buildings are completed, new towns and housing estates are managed by the Board. The estates management is on a decentralised system with Area Offices located within the various estates throughout Singapore. Each of the existing 21 Area Offices manages up to 15,000 units. The Central Administration in the head office co-ordinates the work of these Area Offices.

Estates management covers not only the management of all rented and sold flats, but also that of shops, markets, hawker centres, implementation of paid parking in housing estates, provision of 24-hour essential maintenance service for emergencies such as residents caught in lift breakdowns, power failure, or water pump breakdown, redecoration of buildings every five years, landscaping, and management of sites leased to light clean industries.

Financing of Public Housing

The capital expenditure for the construction of public housing is met by loans from the Government. The Board obtains from the Government two types of loans:

- 1 To finance public housing for sale -
10-year loan at 6% interest per annum.
- 2 To finance public housing for rental -
60-year loan at 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ % interest per annum.

For the current financial year 1 Apr 77 - 31 Mar 78 S\$900 million has been allocated for capital expenditure on public housing, a sum equivalent to about one-third of Singapore's total Development Estimates for this period.

Sources of funds for the Board's operation are mainly from rent, service and conservancy charges, and interest on mortgage loans. Revenue expenditure items consist of loan charges to the Government; property tax on rented properties; administration; and maintenance, service and conservancy charges.

Selling prices, rentals, and service and conservancy charges are fixed well below the actual costs. Hence, annually the Government provides a housing subsidy to cover the deficit incurred by the Board. For the financial year 1977/78 the subsidy is estimated at S\$70 million, or about S\$50 per HDB resident per year.