

Memories of a Bygone Era: Resettlement in Hong Kong

1950-1972

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the same time, greater concern for residents' living conditions were incorporated in the new design of the estates. These resulted in the construction of Mark III blocks between 1964 and 1965, which were seven or eight storeys high. Their distinctive feature was that flats were built on both sides of the central corridor. Each flat was provided with a private balcony, although households of two or three families still had to share lavatories located in the middle or at the end of the building. Initially, water taps were not provided in the flats. However, most had water taps installed a few years later. The Mark IV, V and VI blocks, constructed from 1965 onwards and similar in appearance, were generally sixteen storeys high equipped with lifts. Each flat had a private balcony, water tap, and finally, a private lavatory.

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

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

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

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

香江憶舊：1950 至 1972 年的徙置歷程

高添強

1945 年抗戰勝利時，香港人口約有五、六十萬；到了 1950 年，竟飆升至二百二十萬。1949 年年底，有至少 30 萬人居於非法寮屋。此等寮屋區缺乏基本公共服務，許多更是衛生惡劣、罪案猖獗、火災頻仍。

戰後初期，港府偶爾會把非本地出生的寮屋居民遞解出境。寮屋居民大都屬新來港人士，但並非全部，有些只因負擔不起日益上漲的租金才出此下策。然而，隨著冷戰陰霾日濃，香港與內地的邊界於 1950 年關閉，自此遞解無從。決策者剩下兩個根本的應對方法：一是接受現實，直面寮屋區，並嘗試使之更宜居；一是將之關閉，另覓地方建造新房舍。初時港府政策搖擺不定，推出公共房屋，卻以低密度小屋組群型式，這後來被稱為平房區。

火災一再肆虐寮屋區，港府不得不正視問題，轉而著眼於大規模徙置。1950 年代，遭受火劫而流離失所的寮屋居民超過 19 萬，這能只可是當局的統計，意味災民絕不止此數。1953 年聖誕日，石硤尾發生大火，一夜之間，5 萬 3 千人痛失家園。災情如此慘重，政府必須牽頭行動，否則會危害公共衛生；更甚的是，惹來政治麻煩。當局不願大力提升寮屋區的防火安全，恐怕諸如安裝消防龍頭等改善措施，會讓外界誤以為政府承認這些社區為合法集居地。當局只願意在區內開通隔火路，居民得自行籌組防火事宜，這不啻是杯水車薪。至此，大型建造及徙置計劃終於出爐，並成為港府的主要政策，即使當局同時也希望把相關開支盡量降低。

1954 年初，政府架構內一個曾經籌建平房住宅的徙置小組重組，並擴展成為徙置事務處。其最迫切的任務，自然是安置聖誕日大火後無家可歸的災民。至於照顧香港人的住屋需求，這從來不是該部門成立的目的，其工作重點只為寮屋居民遷出，並盡量安置他們於高密度低水準的地方作永久住所。

徙置事務處處長在首份年度報告（1954 至 55 年）中強調，清拆寮屋及徙置「……絕非福利舉措，重點並不在於為違法（即擅自佔用地方）的寮屋區居民改善居住環境……任務卻是為了社會整體利益，構想出一個迅速可行而又經濟的方案，來消除窳陋的寮屋區會帶來的火災、公共衛生和治安的威脅。」

根據這些目標來衡量，徙置計劃明顯成功。及至 1964 年，已有 50 萬寮屋居民獲得安置，但由於人口持續增長，寮屋居民數目實際上不跌反升。三年後，居於徙置屋邨的市民已達 100 萬之數，佔全港總人口四分之一。其時，寮屋居民

的數目終於下降。

早期徙置大廈（第一、二型）的主要特色是基本到極致，只有公共走廊、共用水喉房、公共浴室和廁所。設計重點在於盡用撥作興建住宅大廈的土地，所以並沒有社區設施。大廈包含不同面積的單位，大部分為 120 平方呎，不設廚房，多數住戶在單位外的走廊煮食（雖然初時被禁）。大廈的另一特色是善用天台。當局將之分配與各個機構和團體，以開設小學或康樂中心。

早至 1955 年，徙置事務處便充滿信心，認定已找到解決寮屋問題的切實方法，決定盡速朝這方向繼續努力。計劃初期的確聲勢浩大喧天，第 100 座徙置大廈於 1959 年末在黃大仙落成。到了 1964 年，共 240 座第一、二型徙置大廈矗立各區。政府官員總是單純以落成大廈的數量來衡量計劃的成就。許多國家領導人、皇室貴胄、政府部長、外地議員、國際機構負責人、帝國國防大學（現稱英國皇家國防研究學院）教職員，以至普通遊客，均慕名而來參觀這些徙置屋邨。他們被誤導，相信香港已找到處理難民的方法，並付諸行動。他們大都不了解計劃目的根本並非為難民提供居所，更遑論要改善其境況，壓根兒就是為了清理妨礙發展的民眾。若以此觀之，計劃確取得炫目成績。逾 100 萬在 1971 年已獲徙置的原寮屋居民，住所佔用的土地面積，只及先前寮屋區的 34%。此外，徙置屋邨的租金，較要付給控制寮屋區的人為少，讓居民仍可以靠微薄薪金勉強過活。時值香港經濟發展期，工資普遍較低，變相令本港製造業更具備全球競爭力。

不過，也有論者因目睹屋邨設計單調乏味、居住密度高、周遭環境枯燥，而感到震驚之下，紛紛怪罪港府房屋政策差劣。他們還質疑既然香港經濟正飛速增長，這樣的房屋發展方向是否值得嚮往。這類設施極度簡陋的單位之所以會推出，也許是因為負責徙置事務處的公務員只是由富有行政經驗，缺乏專業房屋管理訓練，他們對家庭生活所需毫無頭緒，缺乏對安居毫的認識和對房屋建設的願景。

徙置計劃縱然蓬勃開展，寮屋卻未見消失，反以空前的速率增長。市民收入微薄，改善居住環境的機會很渺茫。雖然當局興建了少量廉租屋邨，但遠遠供不應求，而某些更對申請人設有最低入息要求，例如屋宇建設委員會早期興建的北角邨，許多低收入家庭就連申請入住的資格也沒有。

過不多久，舊屋邨的居住環境便顯得過分擠逼。租戶不可能拒絕收容家庭成員，而剛抵埗的內地親戚又急需援助，唯有暫時收留，直至他們安頓下來。正值艱難歲月，工時又長，人們需要的，只是睡眠的角落，而非棲身之所。單位內經常住滿人，而且超過已登記或批准的數目，原先每名成年人獲分配的 24 平方呎空間（兒童減半），自然變得更小。

大部分屋邨最主要的管理難題無疑是小販。邨內劃作正規商店的空間有限，而小販以低廉價錢出售五花八門的貨品，由各類食物、衣服，以至簡單的廚房五金工具，一應俱全。當全職或兼職小販可補貼家庭收入，而擺買者大多是邨內居民。某些屋邨受到的影響更大，原因是小販市集吸引了鄰近樓宇密集區的居民前來光顧，因為他們住所周邊的環境跟徙置屋邨不同，容不下小販攤檔。許多地方差不多陷入無政府狀態，黑幫及其他小混混試圖搾取小販的血汗錢。而有時屋邨職員也想分一杯羹。

1963年，政府終於認同要修訂房屋政策，並於一年後宣布提供新設計的徙置居所、清拆及遷移寮屋戶的相關措施。在加速興建徙置屋邨的同時，徙置大廈也蓋得更高。推行新政策後，可容納過十萬居民的大型徙置屋邨，即於數年間落成，如慈雲山邨和秀茂坪邨。

與此同時，當局對住戶的日常起居狀況表現更多關注，並將之融入新屋邨的設計概念。具體成果是落成於1964至1965年間的第三型大廈，樓高7或8層，單位建於中央走廊兩旁，為一大特色。每個單位均設私家露台，但每兩三戶仍要共用位於樓層中央或末端的廁所。單位內最初不設水龍頭，但數年後，大部分都安裝了。1965年以後興建的第四、五和六型大廈，外觀相若，通常樓高16層，配備升降機，每戶設私家露台和水龍頭，以及居民期盼已久的獨立廁所。

自1970年起，每名成年人的平均居住空間增至35平方呎。標準終於回復至1935年公眾衛生條例訂立的法定水平，只因戰後初期的住屋危機，令各界無視法規。不久之後，公屋供應和管理方面出現重大變動。1973年，徙置事務處改組，其員工及職能由新成立的房屋署和房屋委員會吸納。

1972年10月，新任港督麥理浩爵士在立法局指出，不適切的居所及房屋短缺所造成的生活困境，每每是政府和市民之間出現摩擦和不快的主要源頭。他認為當時情況極不理想，於是推出「十年建屋計劃」作為糾正措施。自此以後，所有新屋邨的設計和籌劃，都由新成立的房屋委員會內的建築及其他專業人員負責，標準將依據房屋管理原則和經驗來制訂，而非單單為配合當局的清拆需要。

1953年一場大火催生的徙置計劃，規模之大，迄今世上未見。20年後，港府終於決心視房屋為主要政策事項。在香港蛻變成高樓林立的金融樞紐之前，對許多走過那些艱難歲月的香港人來說，徙置區生活成為他們對「家」最深刻的集體回憶之一。

翻譯：鄭瑞華