

Politics of the High-rises

Councillors in the making of public housing in Hong Kong (1952-1973)

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Abstract

This paper examines the interface between politics and urban planning in the creation of high density public housing in Hong Kong. The history of Hong Kong public housing in Hong Kong is often presented as a linear progression: from the spartan resettlement blocks, communal low-cost housing, finally towards modern tower blocks – a triumph of government planners and architects alike. Less known was the involvement of the councillors in the Urban Council. Until 1973, Hong Kong Urban Council was the government arm in executing housing projects in Hong Kong through its control of the former Housing Authority and their oversight power to the Commissioner for Resettlement. As the council was the only public body with direct election in Hong Kong until 1983, it brought a rare taste of citizen participation and accountability into the housing project. They were pivotal in the management of the estates, from the rent policy, public space, zoning, to receiving complaints, and even filling the applications forms for the estates. They were the force that transformed the high-raising estates into the most well-sought accommodation for Hong Kong residents. With their political clout, councillors acted as a counterweight against critics of the public housing project, such as neo-liberals like John Cowperthwaite, ensuring the celebrated continuity of the project. This paper challenges the technocratic or government- centred narrative about public housing in Hong Kong by bringing council politics to the centre of discussion.

Keywords

Public housing, Hong Kong Urban Council, Hong Kong Housing Authority, Local government, Urban history

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a new housing estate was built. An engineer's job is finished when the buildings are built. For residents, it was only the beginning. Who would be entitled to move in, and how? After moving into the unit, who would deal with the electricity, water, rubbish, or noises? Where could job be found? Public housing has always been more than just buildings and designs, but administration and management.

Alan Smart argued that Hong Kong, similar to other colonial cities in the world, has a dual-city structure: one Western city super-imposed onto the native city. They were physically in the same place, but architecturally and socially different, defined by sanitary-insanitary and legal-illegal dichotomy.¹ The story of housing in Hong Kong could be seen a transition from the native city to the Western city, people moving from the unregulated, unserved slums to the highly-regulated, intensive housing unit. The difficulty in this transition should not be under-estimated, both sides having a lot of reasons to mistrust each other.

Urban Council and its councillors had facilitated this transition. Urban Council was entrusted with the supervision of resettlement, and low-cost housing in the early 1950s. Councillors had been responsive to grievances and demands. They checked official power by parliamentary procedures including questioning and debates, bring a taste of participation and accountability rarely found in colonial Hong Kong into the housing project. Employing the official records of proceedings the Urban Council and the Housing Authority, this paper shed light on the previous overlooked political aspect of Hong Kong housing.

ENTRUSTING HOUSING TO THE URBAN COUNCIL

The Hong Kong Housing Authority today “develops and implements a public housing programme.” It has two official members and 20 non-official members. Appointments are made by the Chief Executive.²

Before 1973, the governance structure for housing was rather different. The Housing Authority was practically a part of the Urban Council. Housing Ordinance 1954 s(3)(2) defined its membership as “all members of the Urban Council” in addition to the Commissioner for Housing. The Housing Authority operated like a committee under Urban Council, even using the same room for meeting. For the sake of convenience, this Housing Authority before 1973 will be referred as the “former Housing Authority” in this essay.

Moreover, housing function was taken up by another government department responsible: the Resettlement Department. Resettlement and low-cost housing were seen as “two sides of the same token”³ to the general problem of housing. Administratively, they were different operations. The former Housing Authority built buildings for low-income family, which eligible families could apply. Resettlement Department cleared the informal settlements (“squatters”) and resettle the squatters onto the multi-storey resettlement estates. No one could “apply” for a resettlement unit, only to be arranged into one. Although they were dealing with the same problem, they were different operationally.



Fig. 1. Foundation stone of Choi Hung estate. Note the Chinese name of the former Housing Authority was 香港屋宇建設委員會, which was different from today.

The Urban Council exercised control over the Resettlement Department. The Commissioner for Resettlement was the ex-officio member of the Urban Council, where he had to answer questions. Two committees of the Urban Council, the Resettlement Policy select committee, and Resettlement Management select committee (merged in 1971), discussed and made policy regarding resettlement. These committees sometimes served as an appeal board for decisions such as evictions.

Hong Kong government introduced the “Government Low-cost Housing” (GLCH) programme in 1961. The GLCH was completely funded by the government, building units to be rented to poorer families of monthly income up to HKD\$500. The management of the GLCH estates were entrusted to the Housing Authority. In this way, the Urban Council had a major influence on the management of public housing in Hong Kong before 1973.

Urban Council became responsible for housing for administrative reasons. After the Second World War, wartime destruction and the influx of refugees created massive housing shortage, and informal settlements (“squatters”) in Hong Kong. There were already plans of government interventions. Hong Kong Government planned to let the Urban Council be responsible for housing, as housing was a municipal responsibility in Britain, and the Urban Council being its closest equivalent in Hong Kong.⁴ Following this logic, Hong Kong government let Urban Council to supervise the resettlement programme, and the low-cost housing programme under the former Housing Authority later.

	Former Housing Authority	Resettlement	Government Low-cost Housing (GLCH)
Aimed group	Family with monthly income from HKD\$400 to HKD\$900	People living in informal settlements ("squatters"), regardless of their financial status	Family with monthly income up to HKD\$500
Involvement of the Urban Council	Direct controlled by the Urban Council	Accountable to the Urban Council	Estates managed by the former Housing Authority
Source of finance	Loans; rents	Hong Kong government	Hong Kong government
Design	Unique	Standardised	Standardised
Current status of its buildings	Mostly standing, with planned reconstruction	Mostly demolished	Mostly demolished
Examples	Sai Wan Estate; Choi Hung Estate; Wah Fu Estate	Mark I blocks; Mark II blocks; Mei Ho House	Mark III blocks; Mark IV blocks

Table 1. A summary of three types of public housing before 1973.

Urban Council was constitutionally special under the Hong Kong colonial setting. Hong Kong government has refused any attempts to liberalise until after the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1983. There were no popularly elected members of the Legislative Council, the local legislature, until late 1980s. Yet, the Urban Council had directly elected councillors since 1887.⁵ Until 1983, the Urban Council was the only public body with direct election, elected around 2/5 to 1/2 of its members through a qualified, limited franchise. The rest of the councillors were appointed or government officials. It was agreed among political scientists that the electoral turnout in the Urban Council election were not impressive, and its franchise being too limited.⁶ Nevertheless, meaningful, competitive elections produced some of the earliest politicians in the Urban Council in Hong Kong, such as Brook Bernacchi, Elsie Elliot and Hilton Cheong-Leen.

Nevertheless, Urban Councillors were more similar to city councillors rather than parliamentarians. They lacked a shared cohesive political agenda in Hong Kong. Not to mention political line was drawn on Nationalist- Communist divide, which councillors were keen to avoid. The political role of the Urban Council should not be over-emphasised.

In 1973, three housing functions merged and consolidated into a singular Housing Authority as we know today, after a general restructuring of the Urban Council. The restructuring withdrawing some of its powers, including all of its responsibilities over housing, in return for more autonomy. This was an attempt to limit the political ambition of the councillors, and delay constitutional reforms as I argued in my thesis.⁷ Even though councillors continued to pay close attention to housing affairs, the official relationship between Urban Council and housing was severed in 1973.

COUNCIL POWER IN HOUSING

Urban Council, like local governments in the Commonwealth, adopted a parliamentary structure in its operation. In the monthly plenary meeting, questions were tabled, motions were debated, and various decision were voted on. The routine business, such as reviewing documents or discussing policy details, were conducted in its select committees. There was also an annual debate, where all councillors have a chance to speak whatever they wanted. A standing order following the Hong Kong Legislative Council was adopted. The former Housing Authority adopted a similar structure, though only meeting once a year with its own committee system doing most of its works.

Housing affairs, like all the other responsibilities of the Urban Council, were subjected to a parliamentary style of scrutiny. Officials were expected to answer and gave account for questions tabled in the meetings. When a question was tabled, an answer must be given whether the officials like the question or not. The Commissioner for Resettlement was questioned monthly in the Urban Council meetings, and the Commissioner for Housing once a year in the former Housing Authority meetings.

Any questions related to the portfolio of the Urban Council, which included resettlement or low-cost housing, could be tabled, sometimes to a meticulous amount. Hilton Cheong-Leen (Civic Association) questioned in 1957 about a malfunctioning latrine flushing system in one resettlement block.⁸ In all fairness, the toilets in the resettlement estates were communal, so the nuisance of a malfunctioning flushing must be considerable. In 1966, the Council investigated and denied an allegation about air circulation in lifts of Tsz Wan Shan Estate being so bad that they caused suffocation.⁹ These questions sounded trivial at first glance, but it showed the amount of attention and knowledge the council and councillors in the estates. They were able to quickly address questions and grievances to an extremely small details.

Motions were also debated. Since officials also have to vote for the motion, they had to defend and give account of their positions. For example, Hilton Cheong-Leen (Civic Association) moved in 1962 that the “(g)overnment is urged to accelerate its public housing programme.”¹⁰ During the debate, councillors debated whether the government was doing enough for housing, and the officials had to defend themselves by making promises and quoting statistics. In this way, council control contributed to openness and accountability of the housing programme.

An amount of discretion could be used by councillors. Due to construction delays, 30,000 people first moved into Choi Hung Estate with two banks, but no shops, clinics, schools, kindergartens, nor playgrounds. Since Urban Council also controlled hawking, councillors used their discretion to not to prosecute hawking in Choi Hung estate until the market was completed.¹¹

Outside of the council, councillors made use of their social status and prestige. The Reform Club and the Civic Association both offered to help any applicants to fill the application form to apply for the housing estates, since the application form was in English only and people were not necessarily literate. An officer in Resettlement Department accused Elsie Elliott (In-

dependent) to have written him 30 letters a day. Elsie Elliott denied, though she admitted that there might have been 30 letters a week.¹² Their activities further contributed to the accessibility of the housing programme.

Nevertheless, officials were only to give an account, with no obligations to act positively. For example, Alison Bell (Reform Club) received complaints of a rude Housing Authority staff. She brought with her the letter written by that person and demanded disciplinary action. However, this did not happen because the said staff could not be identified.¹³ There could be limits of the councillors' powers.

COUNCILLORS IN THE HOUSING AUTHORITY

Councillors' role in low-cost housing was more active. Urban Council's power in resettlement was supervisory, yet the power of former Housing Authority was directly exercised by councillors. The Resettlement Ordinance gave the power to the Commissioner for Resettlement, but the Housing Ordinance gave the power directly to the authority itself. Councillors did not need to question the officials – they could do it themselves, and they had only themselves to blame for any failures.

With more autonomy came more control. Unlike resettlement or GLCH which were funded entirely by the Hong Kong government, the former Housing Authority was financed by loans, mostly at 5% p.a., with land provided at 1/3 of market price.¹⁴ As generous as the provisions were, land development was still capital-intensive and costly. In the year 1967/68, 35.2% of the total expenditure, or over 9 millions were paid by the Authority to the government.¹⁵ Although councillors had more autonomy in operation, they were limited by their budget and other practical constraints.

With their tight budget, councillors juggled between building high-quality units, cost control, and supply. There were some truth when Brook Bernacchi (Reform) called the former Housing Authority “a rather cumbersome Land Investment Company”.¹⁶ Since the former Housing Authority had to cover its costs and repaid its loan, it had to set its rent at an economic level, which in most cases, were not low enough to be affordable to the poorest. Only 10% of the flats in So Uk Estate, 50% in Ma Tau Wai Estate, and 75% in Choi Hung Estate were planned for families with a monthly income of \$300-\$500, the lowest income group that could apply Authority flats.¹⁷ The speeches in the former Housing Authority were largely dominated by suggestions to push the costs down or to create new revenue.

Even though councillors may have their own visions on low-cost housing, they found it difficult to realise them in light of the practical constraints. For example, K. S. Lo (appointed) suggested to build the estate at a lower density, dropping the planning density from 2,000 people per acre to 1,000 people per acre. He was replied that the Authority intended to further increase density, only prevented by other practical considerations.¹⁸

Unlike resettlement blocks which adopted standardised designs, with archetypes known as “Mark I”, “Mark II” etc., the former Housing Authority did not adopt a standardised design. Each estate was individually designed suited to their sites. However, it was more of an accident. Land allocated to the Housing Authority were mostly located on slopes. It would be more efficient to make the maximum use of the land than to adopt a standardised design.¹⁹ Councillors and officials alike expressed desires to standardised their building designs. Accidentally, it made the former Housing Authority estates more unique on their own, experimenting different designs and spatial layouts.

Architectural designs tended not be controversial to be debated, except when the design was too radical in one instance. In late 1965, it was proposed to build five polygonal towers, 416 feet in height and 50 stories high each, on the site today known as Ping Shek Estate. It would hold a population similar to a convention design, but allowing for much more open space.²⁰ This plan proved to be visionary, as high-rising residential towers are now most common in Hong Kong. In late 1960s, however, councillors were divided on its merits. Cheung Wing-in (Civic Association) supported the scheme to provide more open space, while Henry Hu (Reform) questioned whether there would be psychological implications for residents living such high up.²¹ Ping Shek scheme was one of the rare incidents where an architectural design was debated in the chamber. Policy and management issues were more commonly debated by the authority.

Compared with other types of housing, the amount of units built by the former Housing Authority was smaller. From 1963 to 1972, 156081 resettlement units were built, compared with 48534 GLCH units, and 27341 former Housing Authority units.²² Nevertheless, the former Housing Authority set a higher standard. After the housing functions were consolidated into the Housing Authority in 1973, the standard of the former Housing Authority was promoted to all types of government housing.

A REVIEW OF THE URBAN COUNCIL'S ROLE

The story of the Urban Council showed frequent dialogues between councillors and residents. Certainly, there were still strong power imbalance, with the councillors “spontaneously” listening to the opinion of the residents who had no formal right to be consulted. This type of interaction could not be titled “self-governance” or “democracy”. Nevertheless, this kind of interaction already gave a rare taste of participation and citizenship in the housing projects given the colonial context of Hong Kong.

The councillors in the Urban Council enjoyed a high amount of trust from the residents. Since councillors needed to be voted in, they acted differently than other types of public servants. Councillors adopting a critical stance to the government were enjoyed more popularity, seeing them as the voice of the people. The 1966 Kowloon Riots were triggered by the arrest of a protester protesting in support of Elsie Elliott's cause. In contrast, the official attempts of consultation has not necessary successful. The government installed suggestion boxes in all housing estates. In 1964, it was reported that nothing was found inside all the boxes for 3 months, suggesting that the residents were not willing to voice their opinion to those whom they did not trust.²³

Housing in Hong Kong was a controversial public policy matter. Cheung and Louie quantified the number of social conflicts from 1975 to 1986. They found out that housing matter created 2nd most conflict in Hong Kong, only less than labour issues.²⁴ This paper found out that the councillors had a huge role in mitigating these conflicts, even as early as the 1950s and 1960s. Public housing needed a lot of public services. Water, electricity, fuel, lifts, rubbish collection, maintenance of corridors, collection of rent, recreational spaces, road access all needed to be planned and managed, and could not be left to the wisdom of the residents themselves. In resettlement blocks, even toilets and kitchens were communal. Three days without flushing water could already made life of thousands unbearable. Councillors provided a speedy, responsive feedback system, effectively addressing the tension of living in an intensive setting.

With their political clout, the urban councillors also presented a political alternative. Hong Kong public finance in the 1960s was characterised by “positive non-interventionalism” promoted by the Financial Secretary John Cowperthwaite, where the government had been very reluctant to increase public spending and intervene with the market. Urban councillors were ardent opponents of this idea. They had been arguing for increased public spending and involvement, not just in housing, but also in welfare, education, and other services. Effectively, they have become a counterweight of the government narrative.

High-rise housing in Hong Kong are sometimes referred as “Corbusian”, comparing the housing estates with the ideas of architect Le Corbusier. Ironically, never once had any councillors mentioned the word “Corbusier” in the council records. The councillors never had any grand architectural visions to be imposed in their estate buildings, with their highly strained budget and the urgency of housing situation. In this context, the councillors approved using high-density and low-cost buildings suggested by the architect to solve their problems. They were a local solution to a local challenge that rhymed with Le Corbusier. The word “Corbusian” also discounted the importance of daily management, from flushing water, lifts, to rent and policy. It placed too much stress on the designers and the architects. The success of the public housing in Hong Kong did not lie only in its planning and architecture, but also in its management.

CONCLUSION

This paper studies the political aspect of the public housing in Hong Kong between 1952 and 1973. During this period, the Hong Kong Urban Council was entrusted with the function of housing, exercised scrutiny and control over resettlement, the former Housing Authority, and government low-cost housing (GLCH). The officials were subjected to a parliamentary style of scrutiny, giving the housing project a level of openness and accountability. Moreover, their management role in the former Housing Authority shaped the early public housing in its formative years. Their legacy has carried on to the Housing Authority in 1973 as the housing functions were transferred and consolidated into it.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Will (Wai Man) Wu acquired his MPhil in History from the Department of History, Chinese University of Hong Kong. His thesis “the Urban Council as a Political Institution in Hong Kong, 1935-1973” explored the constitutional history of the Hong Kong Urban Council. He is currently enrolled in the law school of Manchester Metropolitan University.

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