

Has Tall Social Housing Been a Failure?

The world's rapid urbanization and densification of its cities will need to include its legions of economically disadvantaged people. Yet in many countries, the "obvious" solution – subsidized tall social housing – has been a subject of scorn. For more than 40 years, demolishing social housing has become a political campaign, even a spectator sport. At a time of rapid tall building construction and rising inequality the world over, the blunt question must be, "Has tall social housing been a failure?"

NO

Shi-Ming Yu

Associate Professor, National University of Singapore / Member, Singapore HDB

First and foremost, Singapore's high-rise public housing is quite different from the social housing programs in many other countries, in that it is sold to citizen families on 99-year leases. Today, more than 80% of the population lives in Singapore Housing Development Board (HDB) flats and more than 90% of them own their flat. Tall HDB blocks are ubiquitous and dominate the urban landscape, and Singaporean families have come to accept high-rise living as the norm. Obviously, at the beginning, there was need for adaptation as most people lived as squatters in the city and in low-rise rural villages (or *kampongs*). The transition was, however, short and smooth, as they realized that the high-rise flats provided amenities like water, electricity, and sanitation, which were not available where they came from. After the initial housing shortage was met, and as the HDB built more flats, the focus shifted to the building of communities.

Three main factors dominate. First, the HDB blocks were designed with common corridors and void decks that help neighbors socialize as they use common facilities. Indeed, the void decks in the HDB blocks have multiple uses, from simple gatherings, to wedding banquets and even funeral wakes.

Second, deliberate arrangements for socially and culturally mixed communities are made

through policies and various grassroots activities. Larger sold flats are interspersed with smaller rental flats. Activities like block parties and community gardens are organized for community bonding.

And third, proper maintenance and management of the common areas of the public housing estates is carried out by town councils.

Constrained by limited land area, Singapore had no choice but to build taller. However, with smart and creative planning and judicious and sensitive housing policies, the HDB has become a model for many developing countries.

YES

Reinier de Graaf

Partner, Office for Metropolitan Architecture

This is a tale of two buildings, built somewhere in Western Europe during the latter half of the 20th century. The buildings are identical implementations of the same prototype, like clones carrying the same DNA. They are designed by the same architect, commissioned by the same municipal authorities, built by the same contractor, completed in the same year, and intended to house the same (type of) people. The philosophy is simple: if something good is invented, what could possibly be held against realizing it more than once? For a while, both buildings are popular, providing a decent standard of housing for a group in need of exactly that.

Fifty years on, these two-of-a-kind buildings have come to suffer very different fates.

One of them has been (partially) demolished, converted into a complex of single-family homes with ground-floor access. Only four of the original 33 floors remain. Large municipal housing programs have become an anomaly, and even with most of the residents still on a social rent scheme, the buildings' reduced physical state mostly feels like an admission of guilt over the ambitions it once embodied.

The other building has been preserved in its entirety. Its dwellings have been sold at record prices to a new generation of inhabitants, eager to enjoy the qualities of a high-rise building in the middle of the city. Here they can enjoy privacy and unobstructed views, with the conveniences of the city never further away than a push of a single elevator button. The city's booming property market has allowed at least one of the buildings to save face.

As "tall social housing," each of the buildings has made its own significant concession: one is no longer tall; the other no longer contains social housing. In today's world, simultaneously entertaining both ambitions seems a bridge too far. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein: it seems that buildings can be tall or they can be social, but they can't be both.

