



Singapore | Public Housing Estates

High Rise and High Trust

Originally built for functionality, Singapore's government-built high-rise housing estates have been strategically redesigned since the 1970s to enhance trust between residents and their sense of security. The guiding principle throughout this process is maintaining the precincts as fenceless, inclusive communities.

The Challenge

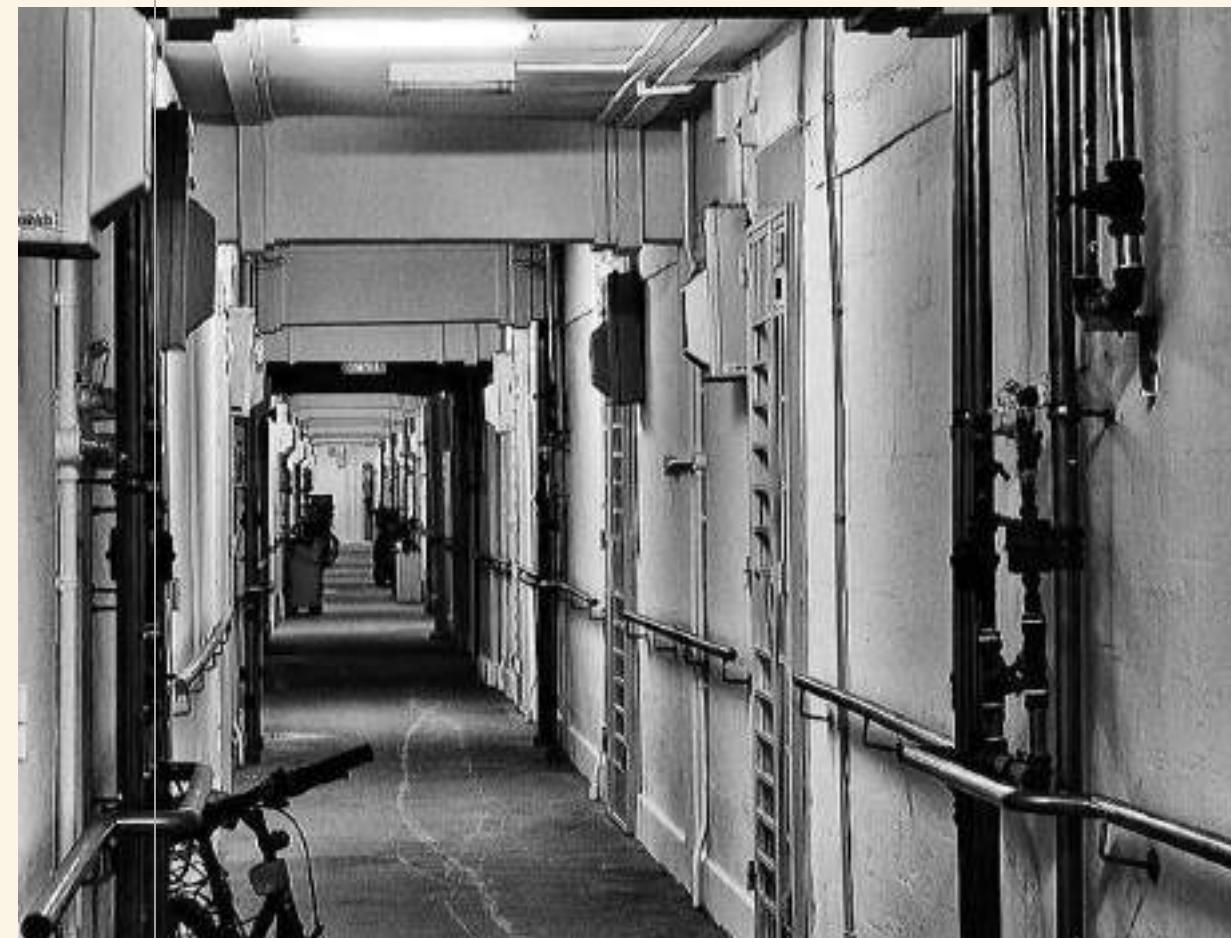
Singapore's major resettlement of villagers and squatters to high-rise flats built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in the early 1960s not only called for the physical relocation of its citizens, but also a behavioural and cultural shift from *kampung* (Malay for 'village') life and the protective code offered by the community's *gotong-royong* (Malay for 'teamwork') spirit, to modern high-density living.

While the HDB initially focused on functional design to house a large

number of residents, it had to promptly deal with unintended consequences. Antisocial behaviour, like urinating in lifts and high-rise littering, became common then. Criminal elements were also apparent as some resettled slum dwellers with secret society affiliations committed snatch thefts, housebreaking, vandalism and molestation in lifts. These incidents, coupled with previously close-knit *kampung* communities now finding themselves living apart in high-rise blocks, heightened the citizens' sense of insecurity and distrust towards others.



Stewart Tan is a Senior Assistant Director at the Centre for Liveable Cities where he conducts research into topics such as housing, security design and planning for diverse communities.



Early HDB designs saw units laid out along dark, poorly ventilated, double-loaded central corridors, affecting residents' sense of security.





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The Solution

To address these concerns, Dr Liu Thai Ker, then Chief Executive Officer of HDB and Chief Planner of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), led a redesign of HDB estates in the early 1970s. The new design needed to enhance natural surveillance and build community and trust between neighbours.

Early HDB designs saw units laid out along dark, poorly ventilated double-loaded central corridors, affecting residents' moods and sense of security. This led to a design shift to open-concept long corridors along the facade of the blocks, which featured natural lighting and good ventilation.

However, some residents complained of strangers passing by their flat windows throughout the day. This prompted the HDB team to introduce segmented corridors with only six to eight units sharing a common stairway or lift. This redesign was scientifically supported by inputs from Dr Liu's sociologists that an individual would be comfortable living alongside and developing cordial relationships with at most seven neighbours. Residents could stop and interact at these "courtyards in the sky", building networks of trust.

When introduced in the mid-1960s, void decks on the ground floor of public housing blocks were largely underutilised and devoid of activity. To inject more vibrancy into these spaces, HDB introduced amenities such as senior activity centres, childcare centres, pre-schools, 24-hour minimarts, coffee shops and strategically-placed tables and benches near the lift lobbies.

These amenities provide a regular stream of activities and eyes on the ground to discourage would-be criminals. Residents, storekeepers, customers and teachers who frequent these spaces would be able to recognise their neighbours, and serve as familiar faces that the community can trust and turn to for help.

As Dr Liu put it: "When you have a sense of familiarity, there is a sense of comfort, of safety. Anytime you see a strange face, you get alarmed. That also increases the level of security."

To create safe but inviting spaces, the HDB team employed unobtrusive measures such as landscaping and trees to mark entrances, exits and out-of-bound areas, in place of walls and fences. Better signage for wayfinding, estate maps with emergency contact numbers, and brightly lit corners and paths helped residents feel more comfortable and trusting in their surroundings.

01 & 02 Corridor designs over the decades have evolved from long facade corridors (top left) to segmented corridors (top right).



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Additionally, carparks, playgrounds and recreational amenities were situated in spaces that provided a line of sight to surrounding flat windows. As such, residents on the ground and in flats could look out for one another. Covered walkways and staircase landings were also configured to improve their visibility in relation to neighbouring blocks.

A major source of concern in the early years of public housing was safety in lifts, as they were the scenes of robbery, molestation, urination and vandalism. Glass panels were introduced for new lifts and retrofitted to older lifts. The cost of the panels was outweighed by their benefit. Lift occupants now feel more secure, with passersby acting as deterrents to potential crimes.

Today, HDB continues to encourage relationship building and promote a sense of ownership at the town, neighbourhood and precinct levels through innovative designs and the provision of new community spaces and programmes that facilitate neighbourly interaction.

New community spaces introduced by HDB over the years include town squares, precinct pavilions, sky gardens, community living rooms in the void decks and 3Gen playgrounds, which foster inter-generational bonding by co-locating children's playgrounds with adult and elderly fitness stations. These are now important areas where neighbours build and strengthen their ties.

01 Residents in Clementi West relaxing at their void deck. These spaces help residents recognise their neighbours whom they can turn to for help.



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Residents who frequent these spaces would... serve as familiar faces that the community can trust and turn to for help.

In addition, HDB's community programmes such as the Friendly Faces, Lively Places Fund introduced in 2016 have been effective in promoting ground-up efforts by offering residents a maximum of S\$20,000 to organise

activities such as block parties or convert void deck spaces into community living rooms and workshop spaces.

All these efforts reduce the likelihood of a "Broken Windows" situation, where a neighbourhood in a state of disorder attracts would-be criminals, encouraging additional undesirable acts.

A void deck at Woodlands Drive 62 was converted into a community living room where dance and singing performances are held. Such ground-up efforts help to instil a sense of shared ownership over public spaces, while strengthening ties among residents.

“The best defence against theft and robbery is to create a sense of community.”



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The Outcome

Over the years, Singapore's HDB estates have been planned, built and activated to strengthen communities and engender trust. “The best defence against theft and robbery is to create a sense of community,” said Dr Liu. “You improve safety because the neighbours are looking after your apartment when you are away.”

The interventions, many of which are subtle, have enabled estates to remain fenceless and open, rather than gated and exclusionary, even in the face of heightened societal and security concerns posed by changing population demographics and terrorist threats.

The maintenance and upkeep of the estate, as well as community programmes, remain critical in giving residents a shared sense of pride and ownership over their neighbourhoods.

In 2011, HDB introduced its Roadmap to Better Living to develop a new generation of public housing, with even greater focus to develop towns that are community-centric. HDB continues to improve on its designs with many new initiatives accumulated over the decades, to improve liveability and security, and elicit greater social inclusiveness and trust among residents. ◎

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01 The Community Living Room is designed with seating areas for residents to mingle and chat. It is usually located near high-traffic areas such as letter boxes or lift lobbies.

02 Sky gardens and landscape decks provide additional green spaces for community activities such as gardening.

03 A void deck at Woodlands Drive 62 was converted into a community living room where dance and singing performances are held. Such ground-up efforts help to instil a sense of shared ownership over public spaces, while strengthening ties among residents.