

Chapter 2

Modernism Coming to Town— Government Low-Cost Housing and Public Buildings

The word “modern”, according to the Oxford Dictionary of English, means primarily “relating to the present or recent times as opposed to the remote past, characterized by or using the most up-to-date techniques, ideas, or equipment... denoting a current or recent style or trend in art, architecture, or other cultural activity marked by a significant departure from traditional styles and values.”¹ In *Architecture and Modernity*, Hilde Heynen pointed out that “modernity is what gives the present the specific quality that makes it different from the past and points the way towards the future. Modernity is also described as being a break with tradition, and as typifying everything that rejects the inheritance of the past (Heynen 1999, p. 9).” She further discerned the modernity and modernism. “Modernity, then, constitutes the element that mediates between a process of socioeconomic development known as modernization and subjective responses to it in the form of modernist discourses and movements. In other words, modernity is a phenomenon with at least two different aspects: an objective aspect that is linked to socioeconomic processes, and a subjective one that is connected with personal experiences, artistic activities, or theoretical reflections... Architecture operates in both realms: it is unquestionably a cultural activity, but it is one that can be realized only within the world of power and money (Heynen 1999, pp. 10–11).”

Reflected in architecture, “modernity” transits to “modern architecture.” There are many description and definitions of “modern architecture”. Duanfang Lu concisely summarized this social and architectural phenomenon, “Originating in interwar Europe, modernist architecture—as a way of building, a knowledge product, a style of life consumer item, and above all—a symbol of modernity, has traversed national boundaries throughout the world (Lu 2011, p. 1).” Lu further observed that although modernist architecture was extensively adopted in the third world, history books only focus on its development in the West (Lu 2011). During Hong Kong’s course of post-war reconstruction, economic condition was weak and

¹Oxford Dictionaries Language Matters, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/modern>. Accessed 26 May 2015.

construction workload was massive. Therefore, principles of modernist architecture were consciously or unconsciously adopted in a natural way. This chapter examines government subsidized low-cost housing and public building, and see how the modernist design method was applied to these building types.

2.1 Welfare Housing and Modernist Architectural Ideal

Hong Kong returned to the British rule after the war in 1945, while the two opposite forces in China, Chiang and Mao, did not claim the territories.² The reconstruction of Hong Kong was parallel with that of the UK and other colonies. According to the analysis of historian David Faure, “there were many indications that even in the 1950s, the watchful eye of London over Hong Kong was being relaxed”. After the Suez Crisis of 1956 the taste of native British people for colonies was over. The number of people the Colonial Secretary was responsible decreased sharply in the 1960s, and the Colonial Office itself was merged into the Foreign Office. The British troops were being withdrawn from the Middle and Far East. “The devaluation of the pound sterling in 1967, left no illusion about Britain being able to serve the colonies as their governments’ banker. Hong Kong continued to draw selected inspiration from Britain, but the late 1960s was the time when Hong Kong came into its own (Fauer 2003, pp. 73–74).”

After the initial stage of post-war construction, the light- and manufacturing industry, mainly family-based and “cottage type” workshop, led the economy in Hong Kong. The products of shoes, watch, toys and textile were sold to American and European countries. The industrial towns Kwun Tong and Tsuen Wan emerged with preliminary shape to accommodate factories and warehouses. Because of the endless “class struggles” and socialist movements in the Chinese mainland, people escaped the country and penetrated the Hong Kong borders intermittently. In 1962, a new wave of illegal immigrants poured to the territories, partly because of the natural and artificial disasters in the Chinese mainland.³ In 1961, the median age of three million Hong Kong population was 19 years old.⁴ A young and energetic society provided ample labor for industry and its assembly line.

To catch up the opportunity of industrial wave, help the industrialists and settle the citizens, the Hong Kong government opted to build large scale public housing

²After WWII, both political and military forces Chiang and Mao wanted to collaborate with the US, and hence its alliance UK. When the two sides of Taiwan Strait were in hostile state, Hong Kong acted a neutral place. See Spence (1990).

³About the natural and artificial disasters in China mainly caused by Communist Party’s wrong policy from 1958 onward, see Dikotter (2010).

⁴The median age of 1961 was from Fauer (2003). Compared with 2012, 50 years later, the median age was 43, people over 65 years old accounted for 13 % of all population. From Hong Kong Government, *Economic Report* (2013).

for the low-income workers. Resettlement housing mentioned in Chap. 1 was the first step. Large scale public housing was being planned since 1956. As analyzed by Castells et al. “the mechanism concerning the relationship between the state, economic development, and public policy (exemplified by public housing) may indicate a positive interaction between economic development and public housing, and more broadly, between the role of the state in housing, urban amenities and social services (what we called collective consumption) (Castells et al. 1991, p. 2).”

Further, Castell et al. found that “although there are very important elements of intervention in the production and accumulation processes, particularly in the 1980s, the main form of intervention takes place in the realm of collective consumption, with the center of such intervention being located in the public housing program. Government supported housing, health, education, transportation, and subsidies of foodstuffs and basic daily consumption items, have been crucial elements in ensuring a proper production and reproduction of labor, in making labor cheaper without lowering its quality, in providing a safety net that has enabled an entrepreneurial population to take risks by investing and creating businesses, and in providing the basis for social stability since the early 1970s, that has made possible steady growth and economic improvement in an otherwise highly volatile situation (Castells et al. 1991, p. 4).” This comment echoed Le Corbusier’s warning suggestion in the 1920s, “housing or revolution?”⁵

From 1964 to 1970, the public sector on housing completed and delivered more than 25,000 housing units each year, which was 60 % more than the private sector during the same period.⁶ In the 1964–65 fiscal year only, the total number of completed housing units from both public and private sectors reached 61,600 when population in the territories was 3,507,900. For every 1,000 people, there were 17 units newly completed.⁷ This number is much higher than the annual housing production of Hong Kong in the 21st century.⁸

To build housing in such large scale on small island and peninsula lands, modernist architectural ideas and method found their application. The modernist architecture took place in European countries mainly between WWI and WWII, that is the 1920s and 30s. The pioneers advocated social responsibility, form following function, rationality, technology expression, building economy, no extra-decoration and machine aesthetics. After WWII, the modernist ideals were partly revised and

⁵“Housing or revolution” was a proposal for the government in the 1920s, see Corbusier (1925).

⁶The housing units number of the 1960s is from Hong Kong Government, *Report of Housing Board* (1972).

⁷Source same as above. The figures in the 1960s are about two times higher than the housing units completed in the years of 21st century. Also see Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 2001–2014.

⁸In the 21st century, both private and public housing production are lower than 20,000 units a year, because of the economic downturn and difficulties of finding suitable land. See *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 2001–2014.

adopted all over the world, and for good and bad, developed to “internationalism” in somewhere.⁹

From Gropius’ workers’ houses in Dessau in 1925, Weissenhof settlement in Stuttgart in 1927 to Unité d’Habitation Marseille designed by Le Corbusier in 1947, mass housing was always an experimental field for modernist architects, including in European and American towns. The Netherlands, Austria, Britain, France, Denmark, Sweden, East Germany and the Soviet Union each experienced large-scale social housing construction. Although these countries have different policies, percentage of rental (or ownership) and outcomes in social housing, their huge dimensions, immense scales and societal atmosphere contrasted sharply with those of traditional towns.¹⁰ Le Corbusier’s ideas of “city of tomorrow”, “modular” and “L’ Unité” had an opportunity to experiment in such large scale construction of workers’ housing. In the 1950s, the Chinese government also built workers’ residential areas in Beijing, Shanghai and other provincial cities to achieve its lofty communist ideals. The low-standard apartment buildings were largely funded by socialist companies and supplied to their employees.¹¹

Public housing in Hong Kong was firstly designed as temporary resettlement shelter, but soon elaborated in a more appropriate and beautiful form, as evidenced by the first group of low-middle class housing estates. The building examples in this chapter are unfolded in this background.

2.2 Mass Production of Public Housing

In 1954, the government established Resettlement Department and building section in Urban Council, whose aim was to resettle the squatters, release the land for more intensive construction and to provide housing at a minimum standard of 35 ft² (3.2 m²) per person and with rentals that could be afforded by families of the monthly income at HK\$ 300–900 (US\$60–180).¹² Finance was provided from the Colony’s Development Loan Fund with low interest rates and sites were allocated at one third the assessed market value of the land.

The first low-cost estate project was North Point Estate completed in 1957, designed by Eric Cumine, FRIBA (1905–2002). Cumine had designed luxury apartment buildings in Shanghai in the 1920s and in Hong Kong in the 1950s and

⁹For the definition of architectural modernism, I follow the books of Frampton, Curtis and other classical books. For example Frampton (1992), Curtis (1987).

¹⁰For the social housing in European countries, see Scanlon et al. (2014). The book mainly discusses the policies enacted by the various countries. For the design of European housing, see Dijk (1999) and Scoffham (1984).

¹¹Housing in China is mainly a social and policy problem instead of design. For the design part, see Lu et al. (2001) and Xue (2006, Chap. 6).

¹²In the 1950s, a university graduate of engineering could earn around HK\$400 a month, see Wang (2010).

made his name known in designing for upper class (see Chap. 3). His design for the low-income residents demonstrated same high quality. The North Point Estate is located on a site of 2.6 ha, three street blocks facing the harbor, with a waterfront length of around 400 m. The designer divided the building to three blocks, with three big courtyards facing the harbor. In the two side courtyards, point buildings are inserted to increase the land efficiency. The central court serves as bus terminals and front plaza for cross-harbor ferry pier. The buildings occupy 26 % of the site area, with a plot ratio of 3.5. The gross density is around 4,800 people per ha. The indent of building mass not only creates ample public space for families and children, but break through the feeling of monotony caused by too long elevation (Fig. 2.1).

Housing buildings are 11-storey high. Every two families form a group, such groups are connected in a central corridor like a long spine. The units on two sides of corridor are staggered. Light and cross-ventilation are attracted through the side windows of corridor, so that people would not feel boring in the long corridor. Every unit has self-contained kitchen, toilet, hall, two bedrooms and balcony. The headroom is 8 ft 1 in. (2.4 m), lower than the private housing. The building was constructed with simple reinforced concrete frame, brick infill walls, concrete floor, steel windows, hardboard doors and brick partitions. The yellow-painted balcony slabs cantilever out and lively decorated the white external wall. North Point Estate contained 1,955 living units and housed over 10,000 residents. The construction of North Point Estate cost \$33 million, its standard is two to three times more expensive than the later construction.¹³ The high cost was reviewed and criticized within the Housing Authority. However, Cumine's design let people see in the 1950s, that low-income housing buildings could be designed in such a decent, comfortable and beautiful way—which could parallel with the private apartment. However, this very first work of Housing Authority was completely demolished 45 years later in 2003. The land was sold to private developer, and a group of luxury high-rise apartments with harbor view are soaring up.

North Point Estate was in the Hong Kong Island, the area was considered as “satellite town” of Victoria City in the 1950s. After the success of North Point Estate, Eric Cumine was further commissioned by the Housing Authority to design So Uk Estate in the “New” Kowloon area in the late 1950s. So Uk, a triangle site is located on the foot of mountain, the edge of Kowloon. Cumine planned the site into two parts: lower and mountain. In the lower part, long slab buildings line the periphery and form courtyards, while in the mountain part pointed trident towers stand on the hilltop. The plot, which is around 7.8 ha in size, comprises 5,152 living units and 33,345 people, about the population of Salisbury, England at the time (Will 1978, p. 115). It also includes open and covered public spaces, a community hall, two primary schools of 24 classes, post-office, clinic, kerosene service store and more than 30 shops. The standard of units was by and large the same, however the housing blocks of 8-12-16 stories high present different shape and form. They were designed by various famous architects at the time, Wai Szeto, Luke Him Sau,

¹³Construction data from *Hong Kong Annual Report 1957*, Hong Kong Government.

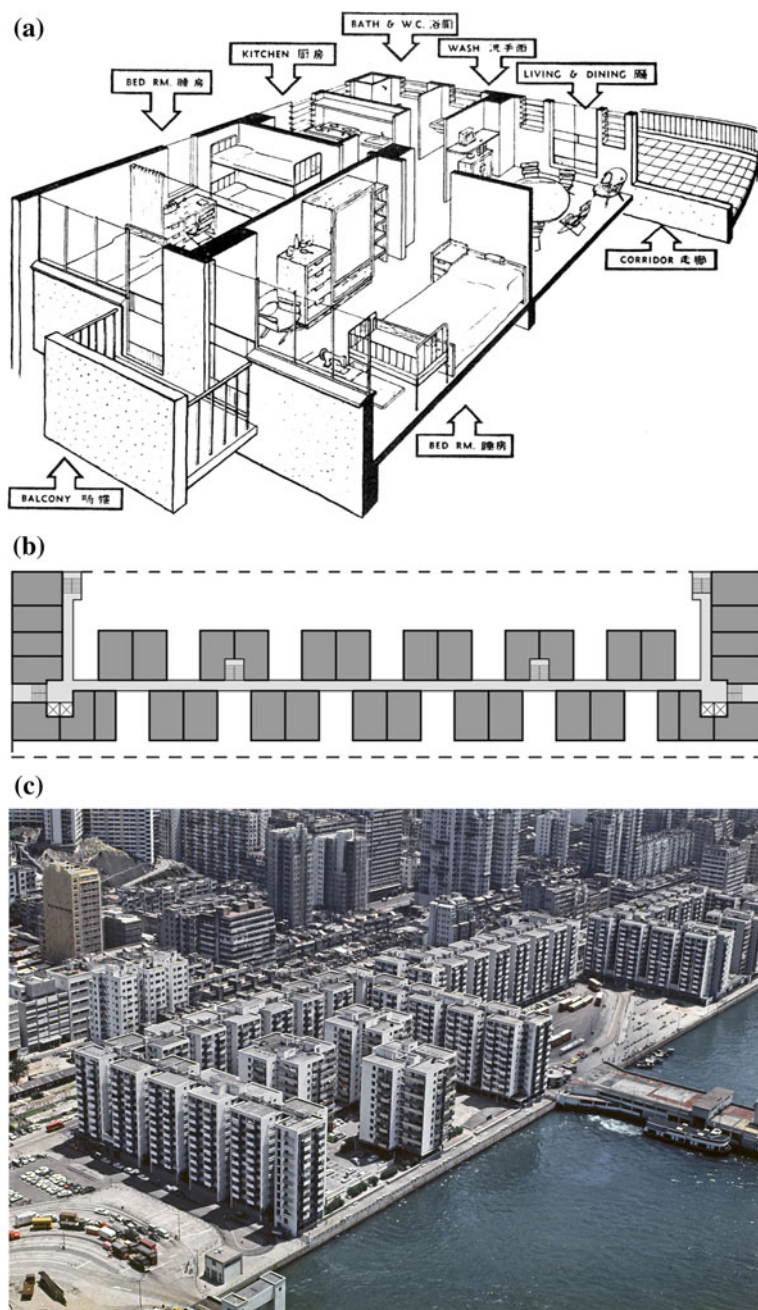


Fig. 2.1 North Point Estate—the first project of Housing Authority, 1957. **a** Interior of unit. **b** Plan. **c** The building blocks are arranged around three courts facing the harbor. (a) and (c) from HK Government archive. (b) Drawn by Xiao Yingbo



Fig. 2.2 So Uk Estate in Kowloon, 1962 **a** Master plan. **b** Housing blocks in the lower part. **c** Housing blocks in the mountain part

Chau & Lee and Leigh & Orange (also see Chap. 3). The participation of private architects made the design diversified (Fig. 2.2).

So Uk was once the largest housing projects in the Far East. Residents moved into So Uk in 1962. After years struggling in the squatter areas and cramp environment, the low-income residents felt being peacefully and happily sheltered. Many children grew up in So Uk and became lawyer, teacher, politician and medical doctor later (Lau 2010). Such an estate, which embodied blood and sweat of so many designers, workers and collective memory, no longer exists today. In the 21st century, Housing Authority reviewed estates of over 40 years and gradually demolished them to yield land for higher and denser construction.

Apart from Cumine, the other firms in frontier participated in the public housing design, for example, Palmer & Turner (P & T). Before the war, P & T was active both in Shanghai and Hong Kong and designed the most notable building—Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation headquarters in Central in 1936. P & T's design Choi Hung Estate, four hectares in size, was completed in 1964. Eight blocks of slab building of 21 storeys high extend horizontally and perpendicularly. Additional seven-storey blocks thread through the tall buildings. The ground floors of the low-rise buildings offer daily shops for residents. Two primary and secondary schools are located in the center. These residential blocks consist of 7,448 units. The floor areas range from 21.4 to 69.2 m and house 19,700 people. This kind of clear—edge slab building had never appeared in the portfolio of P & T. Bank of China designed by the company was completed in 1951, it is basically a recycled version of

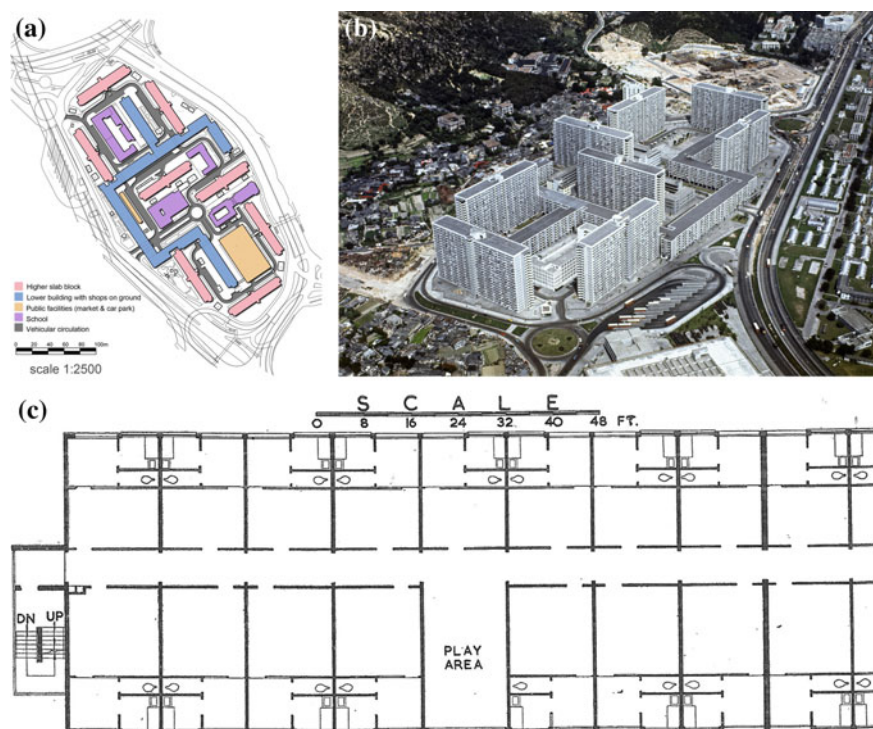


Fig. 2.3 Choi Hung Estate, 1964 **a** Master plan. **b** The estate comprises high and low blocks and schools. **c** Drawing adapted by Chan Chiu Kwan. **(b)** from HK Government archive

its Shanghai predecessor. Prince Building in Central was completed in 1965. Both buildings followed the line of commercial eclecticism. Serving the low-income residents, P & T resolutely explored new method of design. The layout of Choi Hung with many long slab building reminds people of the similar large scale housing developments in Europe, especially in Amsterdam and Rotterdam in the 1950s. In Europe, such scale housing complex is usually four to five stories; however in Hong Kong, it is 20 stories. Providing housing for mass residents, the Hong Kong government adopted a more resolute way (Fig. 2.3).¹⁴

Choi Hung Estate was a milestone of the first decade of Housing Authority. After 10 years, the in-house architects started to design by themselves. One of the first batch projects designed by Housing Authority is Wah Fu Estate located in the southwest corner of Hong Kong Island. Completed between 1967 and 1969, Wah Fu Estate is a slab building with a broken line and L-shaped residential blocks arranged along its contour lines. High-rise buildings are located in the back. This

¹⁴For the housing design in the Netherlands, see Dijk (1999), especially cases from pp. 125 to 128 and the chapter on post war reconstruction.

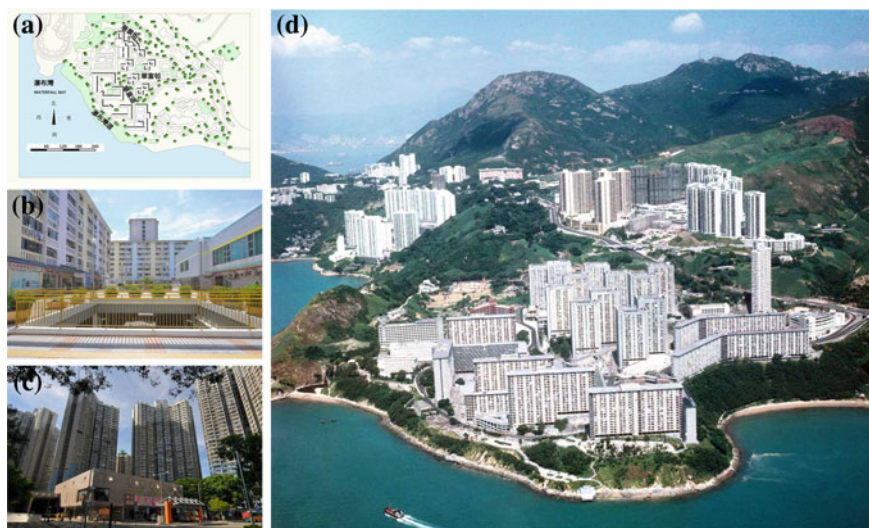


Fig. 2.4 Wah Fu Estate, 1969–1972. **a** Master plan. **b** Pedestrians and daily activities are in the podium level. **c** Shops are close to the bus stations. **d** The estate is in the corner of Hong Kong Island. From HK Government archive. Drawing by Zang Peng

design allows more units to face the sea. The plot of 10 ha accommodates 4,800 units, which are home to 16,000 people. A library and a market are located in the center. The southwest side of the estate is a waterfront park with a promenade more than 600 m in length. Residents often stroll and exercise in the park. As it was far away from the city area, it was planned like a new town, with more public facilities. People were reluctant to move in because of its remote location (Fig. 2.4).

In 1973, the government restructured and established Housing Authority to direct the public housing construction. The prominent project of the new Housing Authority was Oi Man Estate, which was built on the highland of Ho Man Tin, Kowloon in 1973–1975. Slab buildings are located in the center and double-wing twin towers are located at the periphery. The center is also home to a shopping arcade, “mushroom” hawk stalls and a kindergarten. The 10-ha hilly plot accommodates 6,300 units and houses 19,600 people.¹⁵ “Oi Man”, in Chinese, means “loving the people”. The estate was conceived and erected under the new policy of Governor MacLehose in the early 1970s, which was regarded as a thriving and healthy period in Hong Kong’s modern history. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II visited the estate when it was completed in 1975. Chinese President-designate Xi Jinping visited in 2009, as it was considered a representative grass-roots residential estate (Fig. 2.5).

¹⁵The public housing figures come from the website of the Hong Kong Housing Authority, <http://www.housingauthority.gov.hk/tc/index.html>, Accessed on 21 April 2014. The plot size of the public housing estate is read from Google maps.



Fig. 2.5 Oi Man Estate, Ho Man Tin, 1975 **a** Main road linking the estate to the city. **b** Shops in the center. **c** Master plan. **d** Scene in home. From HK Government archive

Table 2.1 Summary of early prominent public housing projects

	North point Estate	So Uk Estate	Choi Hung	Wah Fu Estate	Oi Man Chuen
Completion year	1957	1962	1963	1972	1975
Designer	Eric Cumine & Partners	Planned by Cumine and designed by various architects	Palmer & Turner	Housing authority	Housing authority
Site area (ha)	6	7.8	11	10	10
Living units	1,955	5,152	7,488	4,800	6,300
Habitants	Over 10,000	33,345	19,700	12,800	19,600
Density (units/ha)	325	660	680	480	630

Living units range from 19 to 55 m²

A summary of the five early Housing Authority projects is listed in Table 2.1 for an easy comparison. From the 1960s, the density was controlled between 480 and 680 units per ha, triple the density Abercrombie planned in 1948. Developing upward and rational planning made this possible.

2.3 Living Machine with Human Touch

According to a statistics in the early 1970s, 33 % people living in the resettlement housing, government low-cost housing and Housing Authority/Housing Society housing were full-time employed, which was higher than the Hong Kong average of 30.8 %, although the household income was lower than the groups in the private housing.¹⁶ It is obvious that government low-cost housing positively encouraged residents' active life and supported the burgeoning industry.

The provision of public housing saved money for the lower class. After more than 10 years, some public housing residents accumulated considerable wealth. In 1978, the government put forward its "home ownership" plan. Lower-middle-class residents were able to buy residential units, which were of a higher standard and bigger size than those of public housing and at an affordable price. These "ownership" buildings were located near the public housing, allowing residents to enhance their living standards and remain in the communities they considered familiar. When these "rich" residents moved up, the vacant public housing units were allocated to needy people in the pipeline. Home ownership buildings presented a new form of design (Fig. 2.6).¹⁷

In the 1980s, home ownership building plans were designed in trident or cruciform shapes and had six to eight units per floor. In the 1990s, the government put forward "harmony" type public housing, a cross plan involving four wings with four units in each wing. Sixteen units shared the central core, which had six lifts. The typical floors were stacked up higher than 30 storeys. A "concord" type was designed for the home ownership buildings. It was also a cross plan, with eight units per floor. The floor areas of the units ranged from 500 to 900 ft² in size. The central core could support more than eight units. The wings and gaps in the cross plan allowed for more ventilation and daylight for the kitchens and toilets. Therefore, they provided better conditions than the earlier public housing.

¹⁶The statistic data is from *Hong Kong population and housing census, 1971 main report*, Hong Kong Government, 1971; Luke S.K. Wong's article analyzed the phenomenon, see chap. 6. Socio-economic characteristics of public housing provision, in Wong (1978).

¹⁷The allocation of public housing was made by the Housing Authority according to the accumulated points of applicants. The basic requirements are the applicants' income and asset. The threshold standard is adjusted according to the income and inflation index every year. In 2015, the median level monthly income of Hong Kong is \$18,000 (US\$2322). The ceiling of income and asset for applying public housing is as follows: for 1 person family, income below \$10,100 a month, asset below \$236,000; 2 people family, \$16,140, asset \$320,000; 3 people family, \$21,050, asset \$417,000; 4 people family, \$21,050, asset \$487,000; 5 people family, \$29,050, asset \$541,000; 6 people family, \$32,540, asset \$585,000; 7 people family, \$36,130, asset \$ 626,000; 8 people family, \$ 38,580, asset \$ 656,000; 9 people family, \$43,330, asset \$ 724,000; 10 people and above family, \$45,450, asset \$780,000. To apply for government subsidized homeownership house, the family's monthly income should be below \$46,000. In 2013, more than 170,000 people were in the pipeline to wait for unit of public housing. For the income, see *Statistic Report 2014*, Hong Kong Government. For the qualification of public housing, see *Tai Kung Pao*, 27 February 2015.

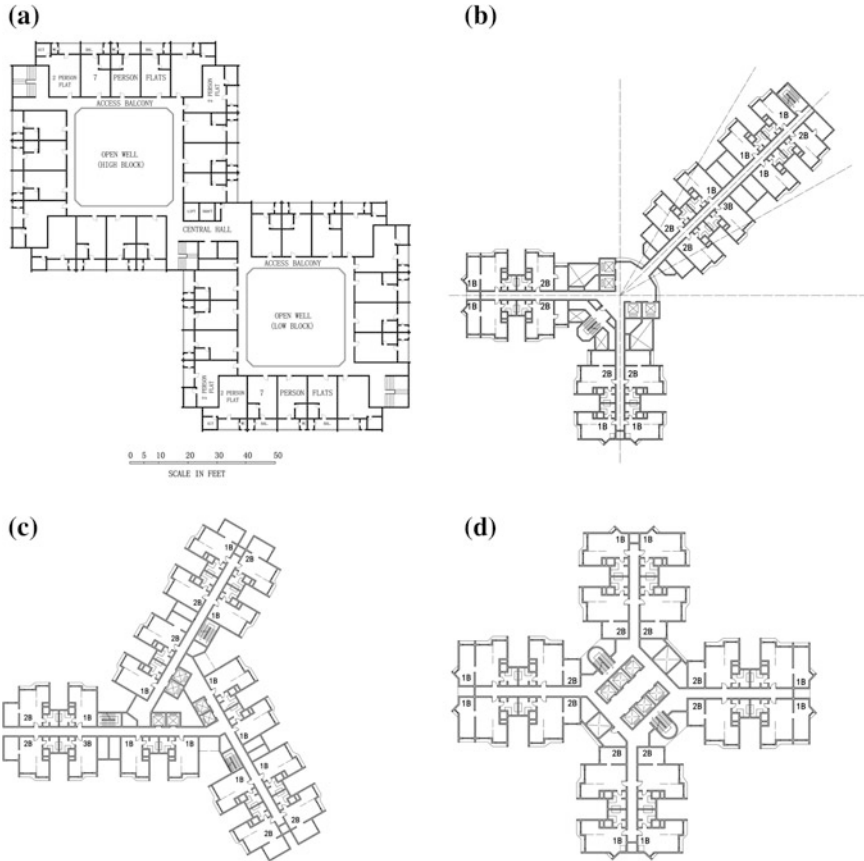


Fig. 2.6 Block plans used during the 1970s through 1990s. Drawn by Zang Peng. **a** In the double court plan, the lift is in the connection part. It is efficient, but the court and open corridors bring annoyance for residents. **b** One of the plans in Harmony Type. **c** Harmony type: trident plan. **d** Harmony type: cruciform

The standard of home ownership house was enacted by government, but mainly developed by Housing Society, a not-profit making organization run from 1948 (see Chap. 1). Because the standard of home ownership housing is higher than the public rental housing, the design has more room to display and this produces many excellent works.

In 1980, Palmer & Turner designed Sui Wo Court in Shatin, a Housing Society project. Three groups of towers in high and low land surround a shopping arcade. The roof of shopping arcade is car parking. Under the roof is wet market. Each group consists of three residential towers. Inside the tower, the designer set the lift stopping in every three floors. In this way, more common space is created. The method of three floors sharing a lift was seen in I.M. Pei's design of student dormitory at University of Hawaii at Manoa in 1960. This design creates compact

plan and efficiency of using the lift. Similar design was adopted again in the Clague Garden Estate in Tsuen Wan in 1988. Lift stops on floors 3, 6, 9 and so on to make the plan more compact. “Sky gardens” were designed for placement on floors 3, 12, 21, 30 and 39. All of the housing units in Clague Garden Estate were sold to residents at affordable prices. Both projects were designed by James Kinoshita the director of Palmer & Turner, who was keen to learn from the other Modernist masters at the time. Public and subsidized housing design gave an opportunity for architects to realize their modernist dream. Although sharing lift by several floors represents an innovation in design, the building is not necessarily convenient for the disabled. Such a method was never used when the building regulations were amended for barrier-free purpose (Fig. 2.7).

The low-cost Prosperous Garden Estate is a typical Housing Society project. Its four buildings comprise 896 units that range from 500 to 800 ft² in size. The units were sold to “sandwich class” (lower-middle class) buyers, who typically dwelled in units that size. Another building comprising 668 units ranging from 100 to 500 ft² in size was rented according to standards similar to the government’s public housing regulations. Prosperous Garden is located on the old streets of Yau Ma Tei, where the land was collected from the owners piece by piece. Ng Chun Man Architect and Associates conducted the planning and design. The buildings were completed in 1995. The garden pavement extends from inside to outside. The garden faces a shopping arcade that houses the elderly habitation center of the Housing Society. The historic Yau Ma Tei police station is also located nearby. Residents also have access to the Broadway Film Center, a theater that screens experimental films and cooperates well with the estate. When people walk from the old district to this area, they experience a nice pedestrian environment and a lively atmosphere. Prosperous Garden sets an example for the urban renewal of Yau Ma Tei (Fig. 2.8).¹⁸

In the 21st century, the government has defined buildings more than 30 years old as “old buildings.” Much of the old public housing of the 1950s–1970s has been demolished to make way for taller buildings and denser planning that offers better amenities and environments. The Lower and Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estates are examples of this wave. The Ngau Tau Kok estate was built in 1969 to accommodate workers in the Kwun Tong industrial area. The plan to rebuild was initiated in the 1990s and began in 1998. It was conceived as “rebuilding and resettling locally.” Phase I of three buildings was completed in 2002 and affected residents were invited to move in. All nine of the 40-storey towers in the Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estate were completed in 2009. The residents of the Lower Estate moved in and the vacant Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate was demolished. The construction of the Lower Estate was completed in 2016 to house more residents (Fig. 2.9).

The designers and consultants studied the wind direction and microclimate of the estates during the planning stage. The building blocks are arranged so that

¹⁸The description of the Housing Society was found on the website of the Hong Kong Housing Society, <http://www.hkhs.com/chi/about/index.asp>. Accessed on 10 January 2015.



Fig. 2.7 Housing Society's projects designed by Palmer & Turner. **a, b** Sui Wo Court, 1980. Under the car park is the wet market and shopping arcade. **c** Clague Garden Estate, 1988. Courtesy of Hong Kong Housing Society

ventilation can go through the site and permeate the gardens and homes. From the mass transit railway (MTR) station in Kowloon Bay, residents walk over a pedestrian bridge to the estate. Pedestrians and vehicles are kept completely



Fig. 2.8 Prosperous Garden Estate, 1995. **a** Master plan. **b** Typical floor plan. **c** The estate mixes rental and home-ownership blocks. Drawn by Zang Peng

separate. People move around on the lawn and through the flowers and shrubs on the upper deck and vehicles run in the streets. The covered pedestrian path is 1,000 m long and crosses over several streets in addition to central and peripheral gardens. The path is enriched by various treatments such as a semi-circular entrance, *pai-lou* (Chinese styled gate), wide steps, escalators, ramps and tensile structures. Old furniture, iron decoration and shop brands occasionally appear as reminders of the estate's history. The space close to the residential buildings is rendered with a more delicate landscape and hard pavement. The degree of privacy increases from the street toward the homes. The Upper and Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estates are no doubt representative examples of public housing in the 21st century (Fig. 2.10).



Fig. 2.9 Ngau Tau Kok Estate, 1969—the first public housing project using prefabrication. The buildings were demolished in 2009 for higher density new development



Fig. 2.10 Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estate, 2012. **a** Housing blocks of 50 stories. **b** More delicate landscape design closing to the housing entrance. **c** Market in the estate

The preceding examples are all high-rise and high-density buildings. Although the living units are small (no bigger than 50 m² in floor area), the public spaces, whether open or covered, are amply suited for residents' activities and play. Wet markets, supermarkets and daily shops are located within a radius of 200 m. The public housing offers a picture of peaceful, busy and warm life. The government

controls the building density through plot ratio and coverage. From the 1960s until now, public housing has created very high, if not the highest, record of living density in the world.

In the social housing built in the U.S. and U.K. during the 1950s, long corridors link many housing units. Over the years, these corridors have become hotspots for crime. In Hong Kong, the early public housing adopted long and L-shaped plans that partly blocked ventilation. When a cross-plan is used, more gaps, ventilation and daylight are generated between blocks. A cross-plan also shortens corridor length and better protects the safety of residents.

Public housing is built by the taxpayers' money and the investment has to be accountable. From the outset of public housing, the planning tended to be high density. The sample estates described in this chapter usually have a density of 400–600 living units a hectare. This scale of mass housing was never seen in the private sector in the 1950s and 60s. Building components are reduced to the simplest form and repeat in large amount so that the limited resources can serve more people. Extra decoration is almost none, except for some brick laid hollow wall in staircase, which is economical, ventilated and delightful. The public housing estates, with rows of slab blocks dotted with pointed blocks, present the machine aesthetics—repeat, rhythm, clustered buildings surrounded by garden. They are surprisingly similar with Le Corbusier's precedent designs.

Along this direction, public housing first adopted prefabricated components early in 1969 to save on construction costs and time. These prefabricated components have included external wall slabs, staircases and parts of floor slabs. The modular system and standard units encourage mass housing production and decrease the wet work in construction sites. In the late 1990s, prefabricated components accounted for 60 % of public housing production. Prefabrication factories can be found in Shenzhen, Dongguan and other Pearl River Delta towns. Prefabricated external walls clad with tiles and installed with window panes (no glass) are shipped to the sites, ready for installation (Fig. 2.11).

The machine is a bit austere for human life. The planning of public housing in Hong Kong focuses on community infrastructure such as public transportation, hospitals and parks. Most public housing estates provide convenient access to buses, mini-buses, MTR and shuttle bus transport to MTR stations. Private companies run the buses and mini-buses in Hong Kong. The Housing Authority and Department of Transportation, MTRC and private bus operators coordinate the public transportation. Moreover, public housing estates surround many parks such as Chai Wan Park, Lok Fu Park, Kowloon Walled City Park, Ngau Chi Wan Park, Po Kong Village Road Park, Shek Kip Mei Park, Tin Shui Wai Park, Tsing Yi Northeast Park, North District Park and Central Kwai Chung Park. These parks provide nice leisure and amenity spaces for grassroots residents.

Public housing estates are usually close to traffic interchange hubs used by tens of thousands of residents. In the 21st century, the Housing Authority began setting up large-scale shopping malls in the estates. For example, there are decades-old public residential towers located near Yau Tong MTR station. The station podium connects to a five-storey shopping mall known as “Domain,” the floors of which are

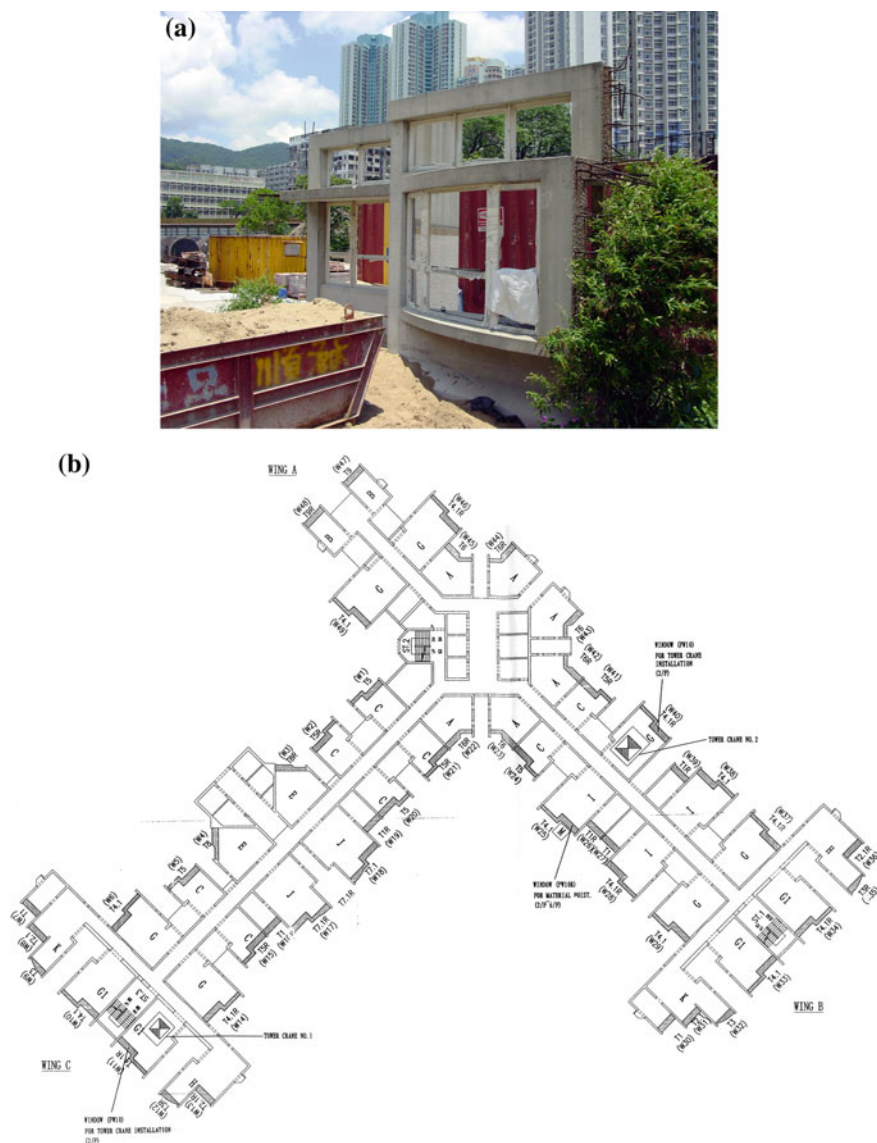


Fig. 2.11 Pre-fabrication of public housing. **a** Components are shipped to the site. **b** Prefabricated components are mainly used in the external wall. Courtesy of Housing Authority

connected to roof gardens of various levels, opposite streets and neighboring estates. In Choi Tak Estate of Kowloon Bay, a shopping mall was built on the mountain and served residents located on the mountain and plain. Some residents enter the shopping mall from the ground floor and others living on the higher levels enter from the fifth floor. The high and low levels cooperate seamlessly. From the

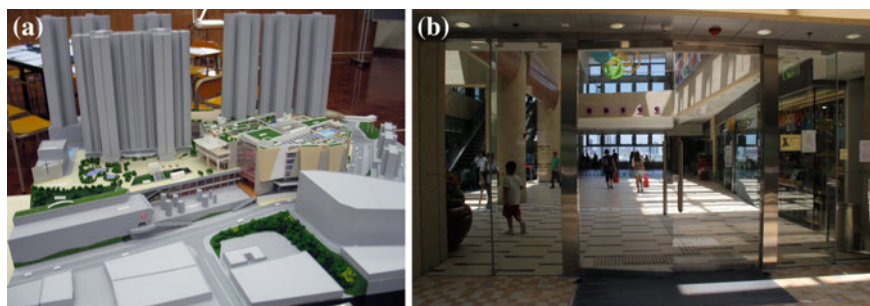


Fig. 2.12 Shopping mall in the public housing area, developed by Housing Authority. **a** Domain shopping mall is between the Yau Tong MTR station and public housing, 2012; **b** the atrium of shopping mall on the top of hill, Choi Tak, Kowloon, 2010

high level, shoppers can overlook Kowloon Bay and the harbor (Fig. 2.12). The public housing estates built in the 21st century enjoy the similar or even better natural and man-made environment than the private housing. In districts like Kowloon Bay and Tseng Kwan O, private and public housing estates share public space, shopping mall, community service and public transportation. This practice no doubt enhances the convenience and status of public housing, hence residents' sense of belonging.

Social housing practices demonstrated the determination of the government to improve the living conditions of grassroots residents. Since the early 20th century, the planning and building of social housing for the urban poor have been significant concerns for radical intellectuals and social activists. The construction of social housing after the war partly realized the dream of a social utopia. In terms of living conditions and standards, public housing in Hong Kong is far behind its Western counterparts. However, its modernist ideas and pragmatism echo practices in the U.K. and Europe and explore its own suitable path.

2.4 Public Building—Social Consciences

Public housing gives people home. Our homes embody our individual tastes and the public buildings in a city express our collective values. In a capitalist society, public buildings are essential social assets that balance private and civic interests while providing convenience and comfort to the entire community. Good or bad, the performance of public buildings affects most people rather than a handful of users/owners in the private sector. During the post-war construction in the UK and Europe, public buildings like performance and cultural centers greatly boosted citizens' morale and sense of belongings.

Dattner offers several suggestions for the goals of civil architecture. First, it must present a modest monumentality and not be excessive or insufficient in scale.

Second, it must have the noble aspiration to preserve and enhance public life. Third, it must be sustainable, exhibit an economy of means, do more with less and conserve material, human and natural resources. Public architecture must set a special example by being efficient, long lasting and energy conserving. Fourth, it must have contextuality, in that it should respect and express the natural topography. Fifth, it must offer inclusiveness and accessibility. A public building should include necessary functional parts to serve the people well, be convenient to access and offer a space in which all are included, valued and welcomed. Sixth, it must accept the contradictions raised by a multicultural society's multiple interpretations of civic structure appropriateness. Seventh, it must educate. Winston Churchill recognized the didactic dimension of architecture in his statement that "we shape our buildings, and then they shape us (Dattner 1995)." Although postulated in an American context, these criteria cover the basic tasks of a public building, including its social service functions and its roles as a collective symbol and a reflection of citizens' desires, expectations and dignities.

Bainiassad states that Hong Kong architecture is inherently public and that its "publicness" is an integral part of local culture. Public institution architecture has always occupied a central, subtle and decisive role in the quality and state of civility in a city. Ng attempts to explain the social reasons for the unique features of Hong Kong's public architecture. He explains that people living within this compact city need and aspire to a more acute use of public space. In a local context, common spaces and buildings naturally form an extension to city living.¹⁹ This also significantly improves spatial efficiency in city planning and building design. Consequently, public buildings are becoming multi-use, multi-value and multi-level. Mixed-use environments offer enhanced spatial efficiency and flexibility, which optimizes their usability at different times of the day and year.

Until the pre-war period, Hong Kong was mainly developed to satisfy the interests of British merchants and the ruling class. In the 100 years spanning 1841–1941, the colony was busy coping with the problems of early settlement, an influx of refugees, hygiene in the dense city areas, exports and productivity, and internal and external pressures. The government had little attention, energy and budget to spend on public facilities.

It was also very difficult for early colonial officials to finance and report to London about large-scale public investments on the barren Hong Kong Island, as the initial colonial policies of Hong Kong were principally biased to encourage short-term profit garnered from Chinese trade. Construction of public architecture was thus scarce. Some notable typologies of public architecture were Catholic and Christian churches, Buddhist and Taoist temples and tycoons' clubhouses, which served a small group of people. The government did not invest in any of these buildings. Other government buildings such as government houses and magistrate

¹⁹Both Bainiassad and Ng's words are from Architectural Services Department, HKSARG, *Post 97 public architecture in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Architectural Services Department, HKSARG (2006).

buildings predominantly followed colonial standards along with slight Victorian or Edwardian decoration. It was not until the 1970s when the economy was booming and society became stabilized after a period of social unrest and international warfare that the Hong Kong government had the financial ability to begin building the colony into a citizen-friendly city with an enormous investment in community building.

In 1967, a severe riot took place in Hong Kong and homemade bombs were thrown in the streets.²⁰ The newly arrived governor and his cabinet thought that a good supply of public housing and facilities would be the best way to soothe the social unrest. The administration adopted a people-oriented policy and started numerous massive civil infrastructure projects. Public architecture, including resettlement estates, city halls, libraries, sport complexes, hospitals and schools, eventually came to form the urban landscape of the Hong Kong territory. The local youths adopted healthy lifestyles in the midst of extremist anti-social behavior.

In 2014, the average gross domestic product per capita in Hong Kong is close to US\$40,000 (World Bank 2015). Half of the population is still living in flats less than 50 m² in size.²¹ Public facilities and space have become indispensable parts of people's lives. People go to city halls to see performances and participate in amateur arts activities. Children and the elderly go to the library to do homework and enjoy the air conditioning. The public spaces are frequently very busy.

The majority of public buildings in Hong Kong were designed and had their construction supervised by government architects from the former Public Works Department (PWD). Most of Hong Kong's architects and planners came from Britain and the Commonwealth nations during the early colonial years. During the 1950s, the staff members at the PWD were mainly young professionals and eager to display their talents in the territory. Modernism was widespread in Europe and America, and the designers of public buildings in Hong Kong generally adopted modernist principles. From an economic standpoint, the modernist attitude and method solved the functional problems and requirements of mass production. From an aesthetic standpoint, it conformed to the prevailing world trends in the 1950s–1970s.²²

The works of these designers formed part of Hong Kong architectural history after the war, when big projects were seldom launched by private sector and eclectic method was mainly used in commercial buildings. In the late 1950s, government architects designed Elizabeth Hospital in Kowloon, which housed 1,300 beds.

²⁰The riot in Hong Kong in May 1967 was triggered by a confrontation between the factory owners and workers. It was soon developed to a movement of “anti-British colonial rule” by the leftists in Hong Kong, influenced by the Cultural Revolution in the Chinese mainland (1966–1976). The riot lasted for seven months and included workers and schools' strikes, paralysis of public transportation and a toll of 52 lives. See Cheung (2009).

²¹These figures are from the *World Development Report*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015 and *Hong Kong Yearbook*, HKSAR Government, 2014.

²²In talking about modernist architecture, the authors follow the discussion and definition of classical writings like William Curtis and Kenneth Frampton. See Curtis (1987), Frampton (1992).

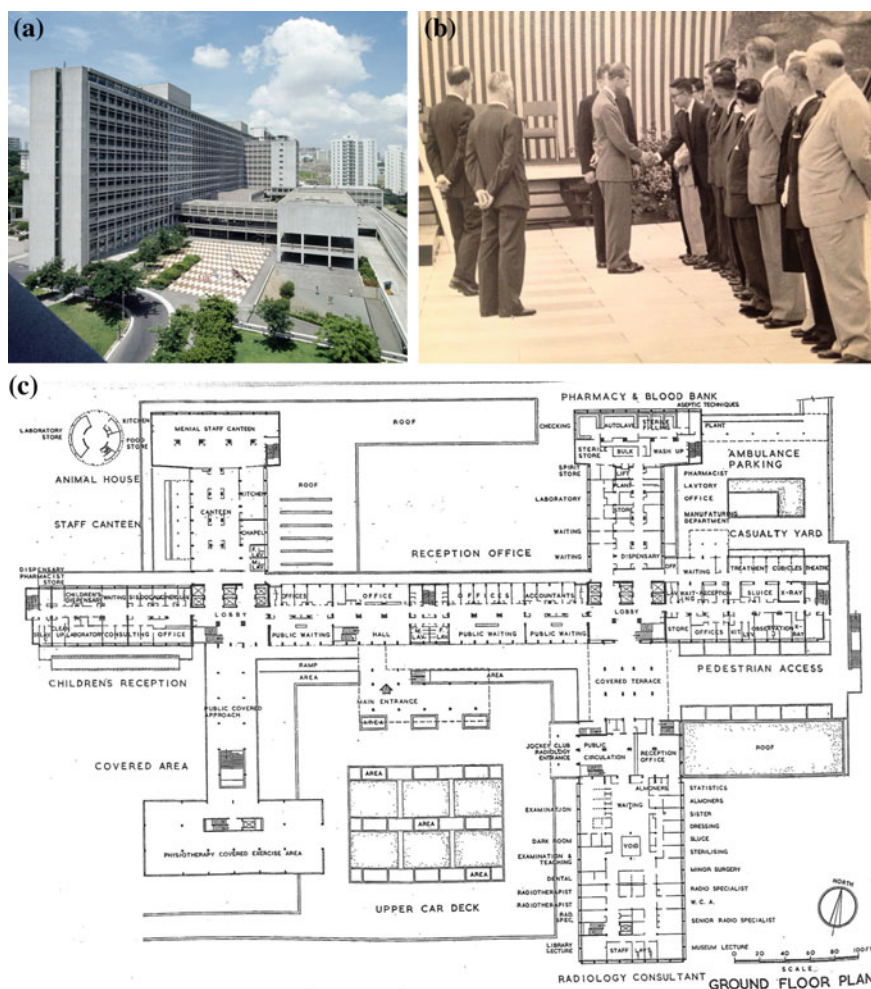


Fig. 2.13 Elizabeth Hospital in Kowloon, 1963. **a** The hospital was the largest of its kind in the Commonwealth when it was completed. From HK Government archive. **b** The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh meeting the design team of PWD, 1962. **c** Ground floor plan. Courtesy of Dr. H.K. Cheng, J.P

The sheer wall concrete structure had a clear edge and was tidily expressed in the elevation. When it was completed in 1963, Elizabeth was the largest hospital in the Commonwealth. That same year, it was awarded the Bronze Medal by the Royal Institute of British Architects (Fig. 2.13).²³

²³For details of the design of Elizabeth Hospital, see *The Hong Kong Society of Architects Year Book 1965*.

The PWD was dissolved in 1982. A new department known as the Architectural Services Department (ASD) was established in 1986 as the architectural services provider to government institutions and departments. Other functions of the PWD included checking private-sector drawings and enforcing building control. These functions were transferred to the Buildings Department. Since the 1980s, local architects have dominated the agency and the British influence has faded. Local government architects are currently shaping public buildings based on their understanding of indigenous culture and Western ideas.

173 public building projects built from 1955 to 2011 are considered in this chapter to gain an overview of contemporary Hong Kong public architecture. The building projects are classified according to their typologies and completion periods. Essential facilities such as hospitals, government offices and municipal services buildings constitute 70 % of the typologies. Cultural centers, museums, libraries and sport facilities account for 22 %. In terms of construction periods, the 1950–1960s comprises 10 %, the 1970s comprises 8 %, the 1980s comprises 30 %, the 1990s comprises 28 % and the 21st century comprises 24 %.

Among the public buildings built in the post-war construction, **City Hall** is a most prominent case. A city hall is a type of public building commonly found in continental European and British cities since the end of the 19th century. It usually embodies the pride, and serves the needs, of citizens. However, during the first 100 years of colonial rule, Hong Kong did not have a decent city hall. The proposal to build one arose during the post-war reconstruction of the early 1950s. A city hall council was formed in 1950 to represent voices from 55 civic organizations. In 1954, the government completed reclamation of the sea in front of Statue Square. The land was designated for the construction of a ferry pier and a city hall, and architects were recruited from Britain (Fig. 2.14).

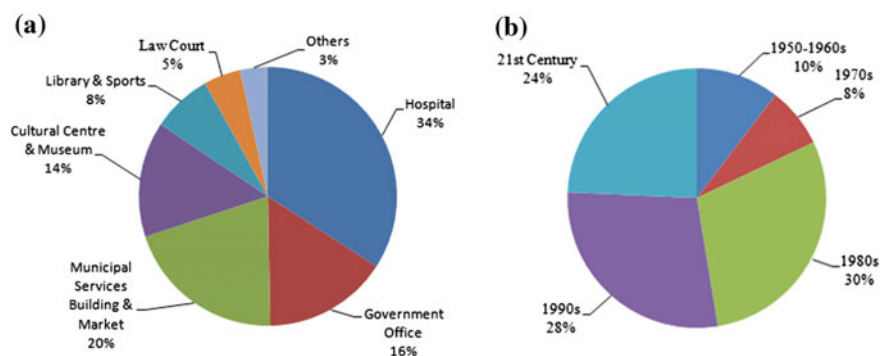


Fig. 2.14 Statistics of the public building. Drawn by Hui Ka Chun. **a** The distribution of typologies for 173 selected public building projects built from 1955 to 2011. **b** The distribution of construction periods for 173 selected public building projects

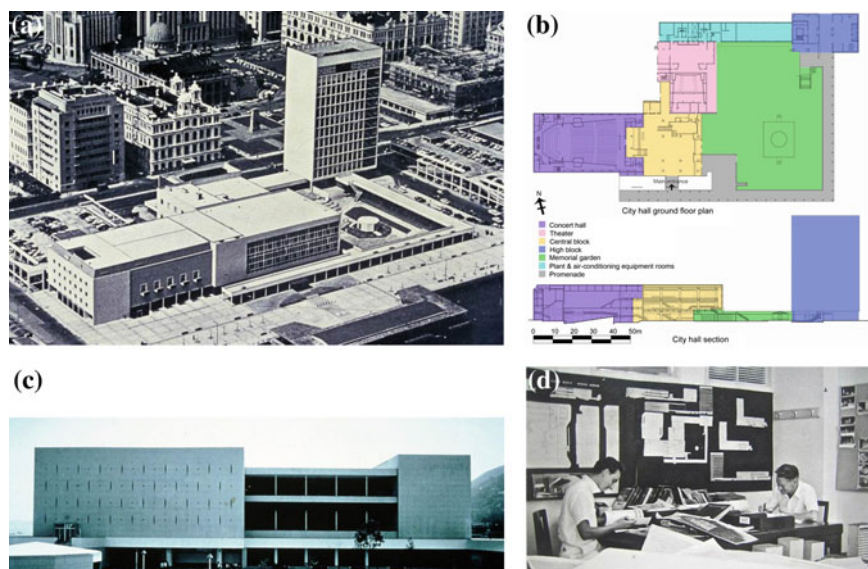


Fig. 2.15 City Hall, 1962. **a** A model of modernist architecture in Hong Kong. **b** Plan. **c** Elevation facing the courtyard. **d** Designers Alan Fitch (*right*) and Ronald Philips. Courtesy of Mr. Ronald Philips

Designed by government architects at the PWD and completed in 1962, Hong Kong City Hall is located in Central on Hong Kong Island.²⁴ Its style embodies the minimal elegance of modernism. It was the territory's first-ever entirely local-oriented center for culture, comprising facilities such as a concert hall, a library, a theatre and a marriage registry.

The low block of Hong Kong City Hall houses a 1,434-capacity concert hall, a 463-capacity theatre and 3 restaurants. The high block houses the marriage registry and a public library. The memorial garden and shrine located in the center were built to honor those who died in World War II. The low block of the concert hall is located on one side and the high block of the library is located on the other. The two are skillfully linked by the small theatre and courtyard colonnade around the memorial garden. A crisp and simple design language was used in the construction of the building, which exhibits a well-balanced horizontal and vertical composition. Hong Kong City Hall is an example of a Bauhaus building (Fig. 2.15).

Hong Kong City Hall was built to communicate a modest monumentality for important ceremonial occasions such as governor inaugurations and the welcoming

²⁴The City Hall was designed by the Public Works Department, mainly through the pens of Alan Fitch (1921–1986) and R.J. Phillips (1926–), who graduated from the Universities of Durham and Essex. *Far East Architect & Builder*, Hong Kong, April 1959; Nov., 1965. For details on the initiation and site selection of City Hall, see *Hong Kong Annual Report, 1951; 1953. Far East Architect & Builder*, Hong Kong, April 1959; Nov. 1965.

of British Royal family members. Its performance venue, library, marriage registry and garden have enhanced and enriched public life. The building was also constructed according to a minimalist philosophy. Its functional provisions did not consume more materials than needed. “Less is more” was a sustainable notion in the 1960s, when the economic situation was stringent. City Hall is located in the heart of Central. Originally aligned with the Queen’s Pier and Edinburgh Place Ferry Pier, it was easily accessible to visitors from across Victoria Harbor. It is multifunctional and welcomes all age groups for any purpose. It educates the public in music, culture and literature, creating a diversified civic life for citizens inside and outside the building.

When City Hall was conceived in the mid-1950s, the surrounding buildings in Central were mainly classical (including the Supreme Court, completed in 1905; and the Hong Kong Club, completed in 1897) and Art Deco (including the Hong Kong Bank headquarters, completed in 1936, and the Bank of China, completed in 1951). The other commercial offices were designed according to an obscured and cliché language. City Hall served as a venue for royal rituals, such as inaugural ceremonies of new governors sent by Her Majesty and to welcome the Queen, princes and princesses. The design did not adopt the current model of royal family buildings, but embraced an asymmetrical, open and light-hearted aesthetic. The young designers from the U.K. bravely followed new examples from their home country, such as the Team X, Brutalism and “tropical modernism” movements of the 1950s. They sought to make the building plain and intimate for its citizens.²⁵ City Hall provoked a modernist movement in Hong Kong.

During its preparation, the same group of architects designed a government office building known as “Government Hill” that exhibited a plain box form, long central corridors and rooms on two sides. After 50 years, City Hall was listed as a Class I heritage building and part of “Government Hill” faced the threat of the bulldozer.²⁶ The north of City Hall is currently undergoing a reclamation and the Queen’s Pier has been relocated. The convenient connection to water and the collective memory of the last colony have thus been lost forever (Fig. 2.16).²⁷

The design of City Hall led to a modernist trend in Hong Kong. The government architects who conceived grand public buildings in the 1950s worked out of a

²⁵The design intention of City Hall was reported in *Ming Pao Daily News*, 10 May 2007. For an explanation of “tropical modernism,” see Uduku (2006).

²⁶In 2011, the departments in the “Government Hill” moved to the new government headquarters in Admiralty. The west wing of “Government Hill” was proposed to be demolished to give way to high-rise office buildings. The proposal met severe protest in society. The protesters thought that no matter how dull it was, the “Government Hill” had witnessed a piece of Hong Kong history after the war and should be preserved totally. See *South China Morning Post*, 20 June 2012.

²⁷In the 21st century, the reclamation project was carried out in Central to build a traffic bypass to alleviate the traffic pressure and pave a new waterfront park. The Star Ferry wharf and Queen’s Pier had to be removed or demolished. The demolition of the two piers triggered several protests from Hong Kong society, especially young people. The occupation of Queen’s Pier and confrontation with the police and construction workers lasted for several days and attracted media attention. See *South China Morning Post*, 1 Aug 2007.



Fig. 2.16 Statue Square. **a** Stature Square after renovation in the 1979. **b** Design sketch by Alan Fitch. **c** Pavilion and pond in the Square. Courtesy of Mr. Chung W.N

two-storey shelter in Central.²⁸ The design of City Hall was first committed to Professor Brown Gordon in the early 1950s. It was later handed over to the Architectural Office in the PWD and was mainly designed by Alan Fitch (1921–1986) and Ronald Phillips (1926–). Alan Fitch went on to design Statue Square (1963). The lawn and pond were organized in rectangular shapes and flanked by long concrete pavilions. They symphonized with City Hall in front. Ronald Phillips went on to design Murray Building on Garden Road for the office of government

²⁸In 2011, the government headquarters were moved to the Admiralty new building. There was a plan to demolish the west wing of “Government Hill” built in the 1950s and provide land for office towers. This was protested in society as the building witnessed the post-war history of Hong Kong. See *South China Morning Post*, 20 June, 5 December 2012.

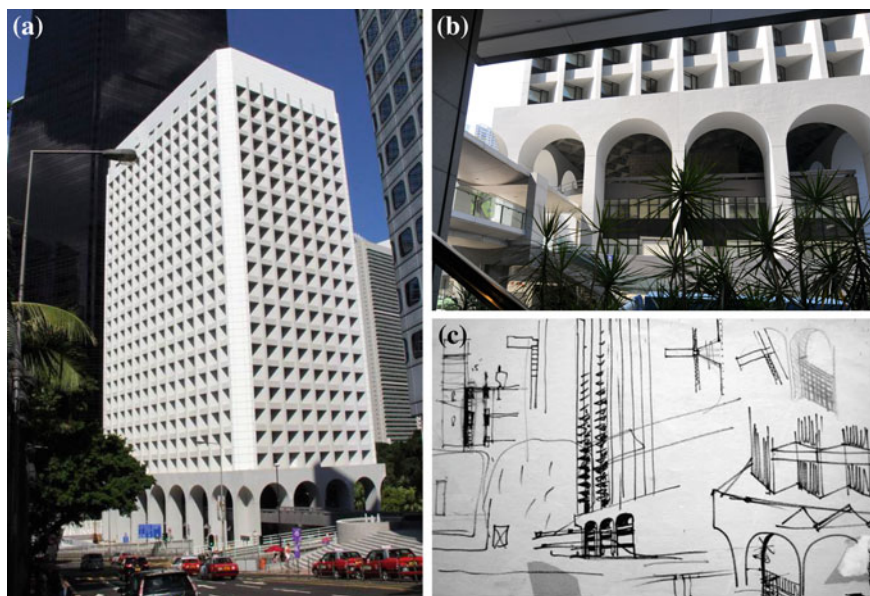


Fig. 2.17 Murray Building, Central, 1970. **a, b** The building serves for governmental department. **c** Design sketch by Ronald Philips in the 1960s. Courtesy of Mr. Ronald Philips

departments, mainly Public Work Department. The old two-storey high colonial building was dismantled and re-erected in Stanley. The new Murray Building of 27 floors was completed in 1970 and another excellent example of modern architecture in Hong Kong. In 2014, plans were made to convert the Murray Building into a hotel designed by Foster & Partners, who basically respected the original design (Fig. 2.17).

In the relatively backward early 1960s, the completion of City Hall brought fresh air to the city center of Hong Kong. After its opening in 1963, some other cultural facilities were built in new towns like Shatin, Tsuen Wan and Tun Men in the 1980s. Before 1997, all public buildings were designed by government architects and the qualities varied. The Cultural Center of 1989 and Central Library of 1997 were severely criticized in Hong Kong society for their mediocre design.²⁹ The dreary situation of public building design was broken through in 2000 when the **Museum of Coastal Defense** was standing on the hilltop of east Hong Kong Island.

The shortest distance between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula is located at the 400-m channel in Lei Yue Mun. As early as 1844, the British built barracks at Saiwan to the south of the channel. By 1885, facing possible attacks from France and Russia, the British decided to construct batteries on the headland

²⁹See Xue et al. (2013). The paper discusses the importance of public space in the East Asian environment.

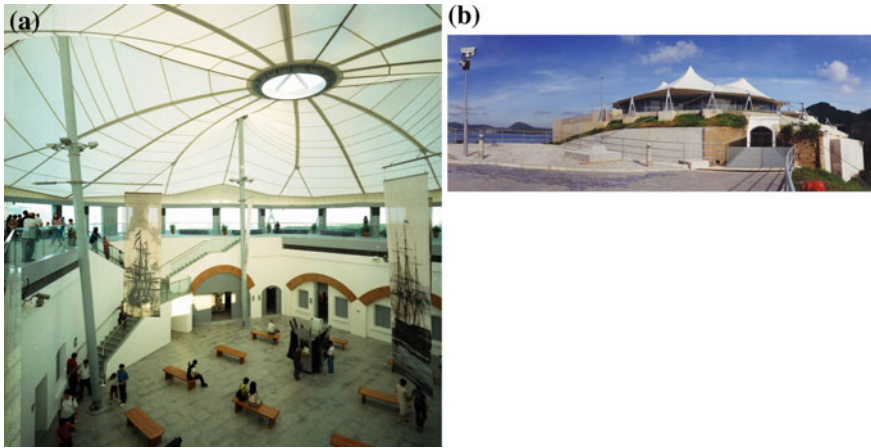


Fig. 2.18 Coastal Defense Museum, 2000. **a** The tensile structure covers the main sunken space. **b** New buildings crouching on the hill. Courtesy of Architectural Services Department (ASD), Hong Kong Government

to the south of the Lei Yue Mun Channel. Designed and built by the Royal Engineers, the redoubt was the core of the Lei Yue Mun fortifications. An area of 7,000 m² was dug up from the summit of the Lei Yue Mun headland. Eighteen casemates were then constructed to function as barrack rooms, magazines and shell and coal stores. The structures were concealed by earth. The construction was largely completed by 1887. The guns installed at Lei Yue Mun could be fired at different ranges to completely cover any approach to the Lei Yue Mun Channel (Fig. 2.18).

In December 1941, the Japanese launched their attacks on Hong Kong. Although the defense forces managed to repel several Japanese raids, they were eventually overwhelmed and the fort finally fell into enemy hands. The fort ceased to serve as a defense post in the post-war period and became a training ground for the British Forces until 1987, when it was finally vacated.

In 1993, the Urban Council decided to restore the site. The first move was to repair the fort and build a small information pavilion. After studying the site, the government architects suggested using tensile structure and covering the fortress. The indoor and outdoor heritages were adopted to form a new landscape and a new topography. These preserved and new buildings offer an interesting space in which to demonstrate the history of coastal defense over the past 600 years. The Museum of Coastal Defense was opened in 2000 to preserve the heritage of Hong Kong. It has a total area of 34,200 m² and cost \$300 million to build. The newly installed tensile structure looks like white sails on the sea. The original underground forts are preserved as exhibition rooms. The indoor and outdoor spaces integrate organically with plants. The museum serves as a good example of environmental improvement and cultural sustainability.

Another complaint on public building is about municipal services buildings. In the late 1970s, the government began construction on municipal services buildings in various districts. A typical service building stacks a wet market, a fast food court, an indoor sports hall and a library up to 10 storeys. Although such a model saves on land in a dense city, residents are forced to move around in a compact indoor environment. In 1996, when the Urban Council sought to construct a municipal services building in the famous tourist resort of Stanley, architects conceived a new way of doing so. They suggested eliminating the function of the food market and instead concentrating on the building's entertainment and sport facilities.

Completed in 2006, the **Stanley Municipal Service Building** has a total floor area of 6,000 m² and surrounds an elevated courtyard. The concrete framing, cantilevered box, stairs, roof garden, opening and solid wall express indoor and outdoor spaces. Sandy glass on the garden floor provides a source of daylight to the community hall below. In the evening, the lighting from the hall penetrates through the glass and lights the garden. The bamboo pergola on the roof garden extends the lower part through an open stairway. The building opened a new direction for the design of municipal service buildings (Fig. 2.19).

The same group of architects designed a community leisure building for Tin Shui Wai district and completed it in 2011. People can enter the community building directly from the West Rail station. Most of the design methods in Tin Shui Wai have involved extending the Stanley community building. Outdoor



Fig. 2.19 Stanley community building, 2005. **a** The skylight of indoor sport hall below glowing lighting for the upper deck. **b** Wall and opening form planes to define space. **c** Plain and authentic materials expressed in the elevation. **d** Roof garden. Courtesy of Architectural Services Department (ASD), Hong Kong government



Fig. 2.20 Tin Shui Wai community leisure building, 2011. **a** Elevation facing the main road. **b** Outside landscape penetrating to the interior. **c** Outdoor reading area in library. **d** Courtyard in library

reading spaces have been created. Materials and spatial compositions change by location. Whether residents are playing sports or reading, they are immersed in a natural and beautiful environment (Fig. 2.20).

To respond to the sustainable trend, the government paid attention on the wetland between Hong Kong and mainland China border. Surrounded by tower blocks and infrastructure development, the Wetland Park stretches into the fragile wetlands north of Tin Shui Wai, which are home to thousands of migratory birds. In 1998, a feasibility study led to the recommendation for an ecological mitigation area to protect the wetlands from rapid urbanization into the area. Thus, a wetland park meeting the multiple purposes of conservation, education and ecotourism was

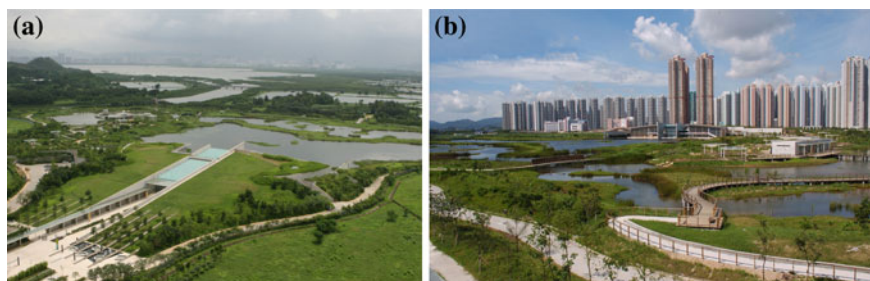


Fig. 2.21 Wetland Park, 2006. **a** Topography is used as part of building. **b** The public and private housing enjoy the view of Wetland Park. Courtesy of Hong Kong Wetland Park of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

suggested. The 61-hectare park is currently four times the size of Hong Kong's largest public open space at Victoria Park and can accommodate 500,000 visitors a year.

The Wetland Park is an ambitious project that strikes an equilibrium between architecture, landscape and ecology. Water is extensively interwoven into the development, creating harmony and integration with the natural environment (Fig. 2.21). The 10,000 m² visitor center contains three exhibition galleries, a swamp-themed fun area, an aquatic play space and many other amenities arranged in a semi-circular plan. The remainder of the park has been reinstated with man-made wetlands and reconstituted reserves for waterfowl. Ecological principles are the top priorities of the center's architecture and construction. For example, the visitor center is embedded in a slope and the roof is covered with lush green turf. From a bird's-eye view, the building blends imperceptibly and naturally with the wetlands, appearing to rise out of the water. The building appears part of the landscaped topography. Other green features, such as multiple shading, natural ventilation and a comprehensive geothermal system of 50-m-deep underground air ducts, have been implemented.

Unlike the other cases, the Hong Kong Wetland Park was not built for a monumental purpose. It was intended to be humble and show respect to nature. Its noble aspiration was to serve as an education-oriented building on a conservation wetland. It has enhanced and enriched public life by promoting hands-on environmental and wildlife knowledge.

2.5 Conclusion: “Public” for the Societal Betterment

After World War II, most nations and areas aspired to establish a peaceful and fair society, where citizens could have opportunity to live a decent life and display their talents. The enhanced life and ethical morale can in turn contribute to the society, create a positive cycle and bring both nation and individual people to new height

and prosperity. To achieve this goal, the government subsidized low-cost housing and public building effectively balanced the greedy of free capitalist market. Hong Kong's practice in the post-war reconstruction evidenced that public housing and "collective consumption" positively supported the economic taking off, and public buildings alleviated the narrowness of daily living space and enlivened people's otherwise monotonous life. This modernization is realized by what Hilde Heynen's said of "power and money" of a resolute people-oriented government.

To build public housing and public buildings, the limited taxpayers' money must generate high social return and benefit as many people as it could. The modernist principles highly satisfy this demand—functional, pragmatic, rational, economical, fast building and efficient. Walking to any public housing estate in Hong Kong, one can vividly feel the spirit of modern architecture advocated by Le Corbusier from the 1920s to 1940s.

Public buildings in Hong Kong emerged after 1950 when people were basically sheltered with a roof. When City Hall and the town halls were built, the economy was poor and many more spaces should have been provided to correspond to the limited budget. City Hall and other excellent public buildings were outcomes not only of the modernist principles but also the skills and boldness of government architects. These examples of free plan and cubic design method had particular significance in Greater China when other parts were dominated by ideology-oriented official buildings at the same period. The government architects in the 21st century inherited their predecessors' exploration and continuously brought new ideas to Hong Kong's design. This is evident by the new civic centers, library, coastal defense museum, wetland park and cemeteries.

Across the Shenzhen River border lies the vast land of China, where public buildings have become symbols of political propaganda and evidence of government achievement in the 21st century. Taxpayers' money has been endlessly squandered to build convention/exhibition centers, museums, grand theaters, sports structures for the Olympic Games, pavilions for the World Expo and other iconic "white elephant" projects. The extravagant "public" buildings stand in the city centers far away from ordinary residents, proudly showing off the ambitions and dictatorship of China's "wise" leadership. Most of these iconic buildings are rarely used and have few patrons. In contrast, the public building practices of Hong Kong set a thrifty, democratic and responsible example in the southern part of China.

I lived in Yau Yat Chuen when I returned to Hong Kong in 1995. Located close to the City University campus, this area was zoned as green belt in the 1930s. In the 1950s, the government built Tat Chee Avenue for the industrialists, who developed low-rise houses there. The Kowloon-Canton Railway divides Kowloon Tong and Yau Yat Chuen, both of which function as districts for low-rise residential buildings, shielded behind the exuberant trees. Another City University gate opens to the Nan Shan public housing estates, most of which were built in the 1960s and 1970s. In those buildings, all of the ground floors are used as community centers, elderly housing, students' learning rooms and shops. Above the ground floor level, every family has two elevated bay windows: a big window for the habitable room and a

narrow window for the kitchen. Staff guard the elderly housing, and you can see the elderly slowing moving about inside and sitting, chatting or playing chess in the public spaces. I sometimes went to the bank branches or strolled to the shops. Before construction on the Festival Walk shopping mall had finished, I walked to the shopping mall in Lok Fu, a public housing estate. Housing blocks currently stand up from the shopping mall. The mall’s courtyards are located near the MTR station. Shops, restaurants and a wet market form a pleasant maze. All of the bank branches gradually withdrew from the Nan Shan district. Many shops closed and never reopened. The area is aging and its purchasing power is declining.

In 1989, the Cultural Center opened in Tsim Sha Tsui, its curved mass embracing the harbor. In its focal center stands a bronze sculpture known as “Flying French,” which faces rows of palm trees in the waterfront promenade. The design of the Cultural Center has been criticized since its completion. However, its ground floor lobby and internal and external spaces demonstrate a high civic spirit. People can casually walk in and out, use the toilet, visit the exhibitions, drink at the coffee bar or enjoy free performances in the lobby on weekends. Famous architectural historian and Tsinghua University professor Chen Zhihua praised the Hong Kong Cultural Center for its public intimacy. On weekdays and weekends, the libraries in various districts are full of people. The elderly read books and newspapers, and students do their homework in the quiet rooms. Many students lack a desk at home and must do their work in the libraries. In Hung Hom, I would drop books off at the library on Floor Six and return to the ground-floor wet market, where I would pick up a live fish to take home.

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