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Toward a Spatial History of Emergency: Notes from Singapore

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Toward a Spatial History of Emergency: Notes from Singapore¹

Gregory Clancey

I want to trace a relationship, as yet little examined, between architecture and the condition of emergency. I'll do so mainly from Singapore, where the nexus seems particularly compelling. It does not occur here uniquely, however, nor did it arise here originally. This essay will thus work its way back toward the city-state from distant but related places. My concerns are chiefly historical, because *emergency* bespeaks an event, and events are the peculiar province of history. *Emergency* cuts across *process* and *design* – or *the design process* – and shifts readily between the 'natural' and the 'man-made', the political and the personal, conditions subject to description and those which approach the sublime. It suggests the possibility of deception through the manipulation of speed. In these and other senses it seems very much a keyword for the modern condition.

The Emergency and The Plan

Architecture, at first glance, seems far from the set of actions, emotions, and representations which cluster around *emergency*. In fact the two are rarely encountered in close proximity, at least in English sentences. The exceptions are *emergency shelter* and *emergency exit* and the set of catastrophes they anticipate. Accidents, moreover, are commonly located at the opposite pole – etymologically, spatially, and chronologically – from constructive acts. Architecture has had a more self-conscious relationship with monumentality, a condition that seeks to transcend the sudden and the temporary, and, more mundanely, requires long cycles of design and execution. But not even anti-monumental architecture has resorted to emergency as a semantic or theoretical inspiration. Modern architecture has been temporary, collapsible, transparent, and metabolic.² But it's rarely been framed as arising, unexpectedly and disturbingly, outside of a normalized order of hierarchal relationships. In fact architecture normally constructs that order. Emergency calls it into question.

Architectural Modernism was a form of historical determinism which borrowed freely (yet selectively) from the language of Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. A central concept was *The Plan*. In socialist discourse, History itself was a plan, segmented into world-changing events by *Five Year Plans* beginning with the original Soviet one of 1928. Long before socialism, however, *the plan* had existed as the most mundane of architectural objects – a drawing on paper – and this may be one reason so many young architects were instinctively drawn to Marxist-Leninist discourse, which is famously resplendent with architectural metaphors. Architectural

¹ I'd like to express my gratitude to Jordan Sand, Chua Beng-Huat, Paul Kratoska, Tim Barnard, and Ryan Bishop for commenting on earlier drafts of this chapter. I'd also like to thank Jim Warren and Tony Reid for allowing me to present some of these ideas in a seminar at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

² The Japanese Metabolism movement, arising as it did from a post-catastrophic urban landscape, may have come closest to displacing a 'normalized order of hierarchal relationships' with its reference to cell biology. The over-all character of Metabolism, however, was still hopeful, life-affirming, and post-emergency.

Modernism might be seen, in fact, as the expansion of the ‘normal’ architectural practice of planning buildings into an enlarged political space opened by the plan-laden language of 20th-century socialism.

The Plan (as *Five-Year Plan*, *Master Plan*, *Urban Plan*, etc.) was constructed as a rational, deliberate, and responsible answer to the chaos sprung from the self-interest that was capitalism. Given the current normalization of *planning* across corporations and bureaucracies of all types, it is hard to recapture the excitement which the concept of *the plan* still had as late as the 1960s, let alone its revolutionary, take-no-prisoners flavor in the 1920s and 1930s. One delegate to a 1968 housing conference in Singapore spoke of the need for *planification*, which, had it migrated from French to English, might have served as a descriptor for that era as *globalization* does ours.³

The plan, however, was the artifact of a global imaginary distinctly bi-polar. While *the plan* had strong identification with the Left, the language of *emergency* and *crisis* was identified for most of the 20th century with the Right. Indeed a common descriptor for the Right, among those of the Left, was *reaction*: a set of instinctive, if not panicked responses to the Left’s deliberate emergence. Along a continuum ranging from politics to architecture to social science, *the plan* and *the emergency* were thus framed as antithetical in nature.⁴ The one was destiny, the other desperation. The *productiveness* of emergency, or its incorporation into the plan – as in *emergency planning* – was a possibility (or condition in practice) long masked given their dichotomous political meanings.⁵

“The time of destruction is at an end” declared the De Stijl *Manifesto V* of 1923, “a new age is dawning: the age of construction”.⁶ How wrong they were. De Stijl can be forgiven for failing to predict the next war, but less so for masking the essential relationship between architectural design and demolition. It is architecture’s problem that, alone among the arts, it needs to physically destroy in order to create. Paintings, sculpture, and music can be infinitely produced without disturbing existing objects. Buildings have to smother something, if only a patch of ground (but usually something more). Le Corbusier may have been the first to actively anticipate and expose the act of destruction which design presaged. His *Plan Viosin* of 1922-25, which illustrated the obliteration of central Paris from aerial perspective, is only the most famous of many subsequent collages and drawings which unflinchingly dropped planned objects on already densely-built urban sites. Planning for some people was destined to be emergency for others.

³ Saba George Shiber, “Era Ahead for Planning and Housing”, *Proceedings of the Second Afro-Asian Housing Congress* (Singapore, 1967) v. 2, p.92

⁴ This seeming duality of images helps explain why references to haste, speed, and spontaneity are so rare in Modernist architectural manifestos, excepting those of the Futurists. Even in Futurist writing, however, a premium is placed on control, or as Rowe & Koetter describe it, “the celebration of force” Colin Rowe & Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), p. 30.

⁵ The geographers Zelinsky & Kosinski, writing in the context of their work on emergency evacuations, note that “social scientists tend to be wary of unique events, the traditional domain of historians, who, as we have seen, have somehow overlooked emergency evacuations. . . Thus one will search in vain for even the barest mention of emergency evacuations in geography or demography textbooks.” Zelinsky, Wilbur, & Leszek A. Kosinski, *The Emergency Evacuation of Cities: A Cross-National Historical and Geographical Study* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991) p. 13.

⁶ De Stijl, *Manifesto V* in Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 66.

Housing as a Crisis

Inordinately influenced by monumentality, the professional culture of architecture entered the twentieth century initially ill-prepared to face the condition of emergency. This is yet another way it differed from engineering, which was conceived and long nurtured under wartime conditions. It was architecture's 20th century encounter with *housing*, more than any other object-type, which brought that discipline into closer dialogue with the speed of *crisis*. *The housing crisis* (the quickened manifestation of *the housing problem*) was a something already out of control that required accelerated action to set right. *Housing* was also ubiquitous, and unbounded: a potential *tabula rasa* extending in an immense arc around the pinpoint monumental sites to which academic architecture had previously been restricted. It proved a wider target for an *avant-garde* with increased spatial ambitions.

An historic explanation for *the housing crisis* is that industrial capitalism created abysmal housing conditions for the poor which had to be mediated in the interests of social justice and stability. While the condition of injustice is beyond question, sensitive chroniclers of housing reform have recognized other controlling agendas.⁷ It is perhaps futile to decide whether it was concern for the poor or fear of them which most fueled *housing reform*. It was clearly both. The act of demolishing a neighborhood and building a new one was often aggression and philanthropy as a continuous act. In any case, *the housing crisis* was an apt descriptor of both instincts.

The continuing ubiquity of obviously terrible living conditions in many parts of the world into the 21st century suggests we move cautiously in interpreting *the housing crisis* as something other than “real”, and desperate. It is not to deny the reality of desperation, however, to be precise about the history of description, and particularly of those descriptions crafted by people who were not themselves desperate. Within the very substantial literature of the 19th and 20th century *housing crisis*, it is surprisingly difficult to find the voices of its victims. Those in crisis emerge mainly as numbers: as quantities of the badly housed and properly re-housed. This is somewhat different from the literature on medical crises, in which people are not only diagnosed and handled (cordoned, disinfected, etc.), but suffer, die, flock to hospitals, and line up for inoculations; in which the subject of the victim is so very much *in action*. The housing crisis is more closely related in this sense to *the population crisis* – with which it was often explicitly linked, particularly in Asia⁸ – than the crisis of an epidemic or an earthquake or war, each of which summons up (indeed often requires) full-blooded popular texts. As we'll subsequently see, however, *housing crisis* sometimes achieved an enhanced illustrative reality by co-opting other types of crisis narratives. The one original ‘popular’ text of housing crisis may be the ‘before & after’ set of photographs, in which the people in the ‘before’ image often seem unaware that they exist in that chronological condition, and ‘after’ is too often a shining kitchen with no one in it.

⁷ A landmark article in this regard is Peter Marcuse, “Housing Policy and the Myth of the Benevolent State”, which originally appeared in *Social Policy*, Jan./Feb. 1978, and was reprinted in Rachel Bratt, Chester Hartman, and Ann Meyerson, eds. *Critical Perspectives on Housing* (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press) 1986, pp. 248-263.

⁸ For example J.M. Fraser, the head of Singapore's colonial-period re-housing agency, The Singapore Improvement Trust, presented his work in the British journal *Town and Country Planning* under the title “Singapore, a Problem in Population” (*Town and Country Planning*, 139 (Nov, 1955).

The commonly-told lesson in official histories of nations, municipalities, political parties, and housing boards that “people *demand*ed better housing” is too rarely documented by the historical record which *the housing crisis* itself produced. In labor history accounts of poor people rallying together in the 19th and 20th centuries to demand change, a need for different housing is not something that commonly receives articulation (as opposed to a reduction in rents, or the ability to keep the house one had).⁹ In some of the bloodiest labor actions in the United States – and America has one of the bloodiest strike histories in the developed world – the discontented marched out of “model” industrial villages like Pullman, Illinois, filled with comparatively well-built houses.¹⁰ The same was apparently true in the Welsh coalfields.¹¹ Exceptions exist: Peter Marcuse has described mass rallies around housing issues in interwar Vienna.¹² But overall, radical protest by the poor or working class has too rarely coincided with the poor condition of their housing - as poor as that often was – in a way that would give *the housing crisis* a believable subaltern voice.

Why then, when so few poor people articulated a demand for “better housing”, was housing so often provided by 20th century political parties and bureaucracies when so many other articulated wants – especially higher wages and increased degrees of control over self and community- were withheld? The question suggests its own answer. Housing was a “good” (as in both “goods” and a moral good) whose provision may have been safely offered precisely because it was not clearly demanded. It was a compromise between the demand for social and economic justice on the part of the poor, and the demand of governments that they decide which *concrete forms* justice take. As both a metaphor and a technology, *concrete* was the agreed-upon compromise solution across many 20th century jurisdictions. It had the virtues of being material, of creating value, of creating monuments, and of allowing one to keep track of others through the payment of rents and mortgages. This by no means exhausts the list, and clearly philanthropy was mixed in (sometimes), as was, less often, an element of self-help.

An ambiguous politics was one of the major strengths of *the housing crisis*: its ability to bridge otherwise contradictory political programs and instincts. Marx wrote little about housing, but *housing reform* became a favorite of social democratic

⁹ Stieber makes this point in discussing turn-of-the-century housing reform in The Netherlands (Nancy Stieber, *Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam: Reconfiguring Urban Order and Identity, 1900-1920* [Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1998], p. 33). Karolak, referring to the U.S, writes of “the long-standing consensus among large sections of the industrial working class that homeownership diminished labor’s independence” (Eric J. Karolak, “‘No Idea of Doing Anything Wonderful’: The Labor-Crisis Origins of National Housing Policy and the Reconstruction of the Working-Class Community, 1917-1919” in John F. Bauman, Roger Biles, & Kristin M. Szylvian, ed. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth Century America* [Univ. Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000] p. 71).

¹⁰ One of the reasons for the Pullman Strike of 1894 was the cutting of wages without a reduction in rents. It was the high cost of good (*model*) housing, and the coercion this allowed the company during wage disputes, rather than the condition of *slum housing*, which caused worker anger to boil over, eventually leading to a national railroad strike and one of the earliest invocations of emergency powers by an American president. See Peter Marcuse, “Housing Policy and City Planning: the Puzzling Split in the United States, 1893-1931” in Gordon E. Cherry, *Shaping an Urban World* (London: Mansell, 1980).

¹¹ Peter Saunders, *A Nation of Home Owners* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 34

¹² Peter Marcuse, “A Useful Installment of Socialist Work: Housing in Red Vienna in the 1920s” in Bratt, Hartman, & Meyerson, p. 569.

parties because it appealed to the middle-class attachment to property and stability. It could be sold to more monied classes as a way of ameliorating the condition of the poor without disrupting the regular functioning of industrial capitalism.¹³ It could be done, so to speak, ‘off to the side’ of the capitalist economy, and, if correctly managed, deliver it direct benefits. It demanded only the sacrifice of urban landlords, the lowest and weakest rung of the capitalist ladder (and the one arguably most despised by the poor).¹⁴ Industrial capitalists, on the other hand, were among the major inventors of reform housing models. “Industrial housing” adjacent to plants – a common feature of modern factory landscapes from the early 19th century – is an object-type whose historical relationship to political housing reform has too often been obscured.

For many poor people around the world over the last century and a half, *the housing crisis* actually became most real through the ceremony of eviction or demolition, sometimes as part of a larger campaign of compulsory re-housing. The experience of eviction/demolition and relocation better fits the sense of the word *crisis* – a sudden, unexpected, and powerful event which threatens one’s well-being or survival. And here the voice of the subaltern has often spoken, in the body language of his/her resistance to moving. By this definition, *housing crisis* is one of the most persistent trans-national experiences of the twentieth century, but one greatly under-chronicled by the century’s historians.¹⁵

For one thing, the ceremony of eviction produces relatively few records. Both in spite of and because of its shocking reality, there are shockingly few images, either graphic or narrative, of even the largest and most sustained of the world’s many modern clearance campaigns.¹⁶ This absence of image-making seems often to have had an element of planning. Photographs of destroyed buildings are dwarfed in the historical economy of images by photographs of newly-finished ones, which literally cover and render invisible sites of often forced removal.

Housing Crisis and War Emergency

I’ve suggested that the discipline of architecture first encountered – and helped perpetuate - the modern condition of emergency in its targeting of *housing*. But there were related vectors. One was war. In the course of the twentieth century, *the housing crisis* developed an affinity with *the war emergency*, and both with architecture, which has gone largely un-remarked.¹⁷ Housing reform indeed became

¹³ As Stieber writes in her detailed study of social housing in Amsterdam, “housing offered the option of reform without structural social or economic changes” (Stieber, p. 33). Peter Rowe agrees, writing that “contrary to some interpretations of the modern period, the interest in housing aimed more at achieving social stability than at radical reform.” (Peter Rowe, *Modernity and Housing* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995], p. 159)

¹⁴ As Marcuse puts it “in a crisis, real estate interests are expendable” (“A Useful Installment of Socialist Work: Housing in Red Vienna in the 1920s . . .” in Bratt, Hartman, & Meyerson, p. 583)

¹⁵ Examples of recent attempts to catch up include Raymond A. Mohl, “Planned Destruction: The Interstates and Central City Housing” in Bauman, Biles, & Szylvian; Roger Biles, “Public Housing and the Postwar Urban Renaissance, 1949-1973” in Bauman, Biles, & Szylvian;

¹⁶ Jordan Sand has pointed out (private correspondence) that the archetypical visual medium of clearance may be the map, among the most bloodless of all graphic forms.

¹⁷ One historian who has remarked on this omission is Karolak; Marcuse makes a link between American housing reform and riot (Marcuse, “Housing Policy and City Planning: The Puzzling Split in the United States, 1893-1931” in Cherry, pp. 23-58)

most visible in the twentieth century in the context of armed conflict, and in what Paul Virilio has called, in another context, “the passage from wartime to the war of peacetime”.¹⁸

When Le Corbusier wrote polemics against war, he was still writing positively about a distinctively wartime condition: *mobilization*. In that he was a man of his time. Twentieth century city planning, which almost by necessity meant city-destruction and city-rebuilding on an unprecedented scale helped to bring the languages of architectural and military action into close convergence:

*The mobilization of the land, the people, and the means of production in order to realize the plan . . . Equipment: the word of command, armaments, machines, and circulation, discipline? EXACTLY THE SAME AS FOR THE WAGING OF WAR*¹⁹

Kenneth Frampton refers to this as a *pacifist mobilization*.²⁰ In modern war, civilian populations were mobilized to fight, produce, escape, or be killed. In modern architecture, the same populations were mobilized to vacate or occupy. Architecture indeed developed many of its new forms and patronages in war- and post-war zones.²¹ Total war production required huge displacements of civilians and thus intensely accelerated evacuations and occupations. Almost half of the American population is estimated to have changed locations during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath (and there was no actual fighting in America).²² In the wake of twentieth century wars, returning soldiers had also earned a warrior right to be re-housed (or such a right was suggested to them by new political programs).

To continue with the American case, the first re-housing of citizens by the state occurred congruently with First World War mobilization. Colonial-style brick towns, complete with church and central square, were produced under the heading *war emergency housing* by the Emergency Fleet and U.S. Housing Corporations. *War worker* was the original category of person to be housed by government policy. This was also the case in wartime Britain.²³ The second and more extensive

¹⁸ Paul Virilio, “The State of Emergency” in James van der Derian, ed., *The Virilio Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 50.

¹⁹ Quoted in Kenneth Frampton, *Le Corbusier: Architect and Visionary* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 119.

²⁰ *Ibid*; On the politics of Le Corbusier, see also Charles Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution in Architecture* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000).

²¹ To take just a single high-art example, Le Corbusier’s *Unite d’Habitation* project began with plans for temporary housing in Vichy France in 1944. Its most famous realization, commissioned in Marseilles by the Ministry for Reconstruction in 1946-52, housed over 1,600 of the *displaced* (the war-related homeless).

²² Rowe (p. 175) citing figures from Mel Scott.

²³ The First World War is usually dealt with in passing in social histories of housing, but even passing comments by scholars of housing, architecture, and urban planning suggest a more fundamental relationship. See for example Steve Schifferes, “The Dilemmas of British Housing Policy” in Bratt, Hartman, & Meyerson, p. 51. Saunders agrees that rent controls, the cornerstone of modern British housing policy, began as “a stop-gap, emergency measure”, a “response to the exigencies of running a semi-controlled war economy” (Saunders, p. 22). In the case of the Netherlands, Stieber finds that the “emergency measure” of a “limited wartime socialism” helped clear political ground for that country’s famous state housing efforts (Stieber, p. 25). Waswo finds, in the case of Japan, that “the first urban rent disputes” accompanied the First World War boom (Ann Waswo, *Housing in Postwar Japan: A Social History* [New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002, p. 43]) Marcuse writes that in

mobilization of residents by the American state occurred through The Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works during the inter-war depression. Now the categories eligible for re-housing expanded from war-related labor to armies of the unemployed, although it was the need to employ, more than the will to re-house, which actually drove the program. Through state incentives to suburbanization in the Cold War period, such as the Defense Highway Act and the G.I. Bill, re-housing was eventually extended to a middle class newly reconceived as *war veterans*. The same Defense Highway Act obliterated acres of poor and minority neighborhoods, resulting in large-scale compulsory re-housing in segregated conditions.²⁴ The point of this thumbnail sketch (which admittedly leaves out the economics as econometric accounts edit out the martial) is that declarations of emergency by the State (whether military, or economic, or both) came to be consistent preludes to new mobilizations of designers, builders, writers, photographers, and populations newly eligible for (or subject to) re-housing. By the Second World War, and into the Cold War, the process had been institutionalized, and thus regularized, and eventually rendered a part of everyday life.²⁵

It's true that many architects who worked inside *emergency housing* regimes, whether in the U.S., Britain, the U.S.S.R., Japan, Finland, or Singapore, were never fully comfortable there despite the massively-increased opportunities for employment. Tension often arose because of architects' continuing loyalty to *The Plan*. For studio-trained architects, *The Plan* meant thought and creativity, which required care, resources, and above-all time. But the logic of emergency, which had made States suddenly interested in *planning* (and in employing large numbers of architects) often increased speed and scale to the point where other values in architect culture were alienated and threatened. Architects (at least famous ones) regularly stormed away from re-housing regimes. Yet not before providing many of the necessary prototypes. .

If we organize *the history of housing* by form, as is typical, then it seems so multifarious as to defy description. If we organize it as a series of social and political thrusts and parries (and by people who were themselves already well-housed) then it begins to have a more fundamental relationship with historical events. There is a social category especially close to the word *housing* which remains under-defined and under-noticed: poor people who have been coercively de-housed, and/or re-housed at some point in their lives (or at many). This category of person, though existing throughout time, has a special relationship with the 20th century, where violence targeted and smashed though the previous safety of homes on scales unimaginable to previous eras. If *the history of housing* shifts its attention from forms, often bereft of people, to the drama of mass-scale de-housings and re-housings (and the prefixes are

Vienna, "the war accentuated the housing crisis and changed its political character entirely" (Marcuse in Bratt, Harman, and Meyerson, p. 559). For additional details on Austria see Eve Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

²⁴ See especially Mohl, who documents that "at least 330,000 urban housing units were destroyed as a direct result of Federal highway building between 1957 and 1968" (p. 227).

²⁵ The Second World War as a context for housing policy is as understudied as the First, although the post-war planning regimes in many countries were themselves products of war. See for example Cherry, *Town Planning in Britain Since 1900* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Even in pacifist Sweden, Appelbaum notes that one root of its noted public re-housing program lay in cessation of private building brought on by wartime (Richard P. Appelbaum, "Swedish Housing in the Postwar Period: Some Lessons for American Housing Policy" in Bratt, Hartman, & Meyerson)

important because everyone is housed somewhere originally) then it necessarily becomes something violent and anxious as well as hopeful and consuming, something to do with justice and injustice and the often hurried assembly of one's possessions.

Housing Crisis and Natural Disaster

A last understudied link I want to make, before turning to Singapore, is that between *housing crisis* and *natural disaster*. From nearly its beginning, housing reform had a close relationship with fire (combustibility) and epidemics (contagion), but actually with a whole flexible list of susceptibilities to pathological events strategically located in nature. Thus originally it was the expertise of the doctor – that arch-responder to emergency, and a direct mediator between society and nature – rather than that of the architect, which was most often called upon in the event of *housing crisis*.²⁶ Indeed it was public health officials, who, well into the 20th century in Britain and elsewhere, normally performed the ritual of condemning inhabited houses and neighborhoods to demolition.

The link between *housing reform* and *emergency medicine* is well-documented. Less so is the convergence between housing and the more heroic (and theatrical) realm of *emergency rescue*. The first state re-housing agency in Japan, the *Dojunkai*, was established in the aftermath of the Tokyo earthquake and fire of 1923. *Fire victim* was thus the first category of person susceptible to state re-housing in Japan. This linkage between the housing crisis and crises of nature soon converged with that of war. 20th century war would not only create many *fire victims*, but the language and forms of *civil emergency* and *war emergency* would increasingly become interchangeable, so that natural and human causes would form continuous sets of explanations.²⁷ As the geographers of emergency Zelinsky and Kosinski have put it: “during the course of the (20th) century, the universe of disasters has increasingly come to form a single interactive system.”²⁸

Singapore In a State of Re-housing

Having introduced a set of working theoretical concerns – really generalizations drawn from a myriad of empirical studies – I want to turn to Singapore as one place where *the housing crisis* played out in time. The *local* story of Singapore's re-housing might be productively set, I'll argue, in a wider historical and spatial context of emergency conditions characteristic of the last century. And by the same token, a wider spatial history of emergency, if such is narratable, must inevitably chart Singapore as an important, perhaps crucial, site.

Singapore is one of few nations in the world to have re-housed virtually its entire population in one sustained if lengthy campaign. In 1960, one year after the

²⁶ The medicalized language of housing reform was more specifically the language of *emergency medicine*. The condition is never stable but is always *spreading* or *festering* and the whole body is threatened with infection. This is the epidemic-centered language of public health, and not that of general practice or even hospitalization. The Housing Crisis is never about *sickness* but immanent *fatality*.

²⁷ Tokyo Municipal Government, *Tokyo's Housing Problem* (Tokyo: TMG, 1972), pp. 134-135. The *Dojunkai*, established to re-house earthquake victims, would eventually be folded into the *Jutaku Eidan* (Japan Housing Corporation) established in 1941 to house war workers.

²⁸ Zelinsky & Kosinski, p. 301.

start of self-rule, the government began relocating its poorer citizens from squatter camps, rural villages (called *kampungs*) and inner-city slums with unusual speed and single-mindedness. By 1965, almost 25% of the island's population was living in government-built high-rise housing estates, a figure unparalleled in Asia. By 1974 the proportion was 43%, exceeding rates of state-managed re-housing anywhere in the world (the only comparative figures being from the nearby colony of Hong Kong). At this moment in time (the mid-1970s), when mass public re-housing policies began to be questioned or abandoned elsewhere, Singapore's program not only survived but accelerated. By 1989, 87% of the nation's citizens lived in housing estates built and in most cases administered by the state.²⁹

There is a very large literature on what this most total of national re-housings means, the tone of its discussion ranging from the cautiously celebratory to the Machiavellian. None of it, however, is dismissive. There is wide recognition that HDB (Housing Development Board) housing was the foundational infrastructure on which the rest of modern Singapore was subsequently built. Its close identification with the PAP (People's Action Party) state – monumentally and instrumentally – gives Singapore's housing a political significance, for many commentators, comparable to that of the *wohnhofe* of Red Vienna or the *projects* of New Deal America. It has an inescapable attraction, to many, as a metaphor for control (although the widespread individual ownership of units through 99-year leases raises issues of clientage as much as coercion).³⁰ Singapore's re-housing also holds deep fascination, given its near-totality and longevity, for students of social process, model-builders, and statisticians. HDB personnel have themselves presented Singapore's infrastructure to overseas audiences as “an urban laboratory unique in the world . . . [because] people are housed on a massive scale in a high-rise, high-density environment”.³¹ To Rem Koolhaas, the program of this laboratory represents, “the ideological production of the past three decades in its pure form uncontaminated by surviving contextual remnants”. But as Koolhaas concedes elsewhere in his sparkling text, Singapore's HDB is deeply grounded in a mid-twentieth century planning ideology, a “contextual remnant” which has little stake in revealing its own historicity.³²

Treating HDB housing as a ‘process’ can too easily obscure its identity as a series of events. My purpose in this section and those which follow is to re-excavate its *event-ness*, not only to provide ‘context’, but to write it into other, more event-laden narratives. When Singapore's re-housing took wing in the 1960s, it was one act of a complex and highly spatial political drama which included street riots, detentions, the city's merger with Malaya, the city's ‘eviction’ from Malaysia, and the eventual consolidation of Singapore as a tightly demarcated one-party state. All of this occurred in just a single decade, and most of it before the completion of the

²⁹ About 95% of Singaporean households were technically eligible for public flats by the early 1980s. Liu Thai Ker, Lau Who Cheong, & Loh Choon Tong, “New Towns in Singapore” in Yeong, Y.M., ed. *A Place to Live: More Effective Low-Cost Housing in Asia* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre of Canada. Report No 209e, 1983) p. 36.

³⁰ For a sophisticated discussion of this issue, see Chua Beng-Huat, *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1997) and, more succinctly, Chua, “Public Housing Residents as Clients of the State”, *Housing Studies*, v. 15, n. 1 (2000), pp. 45-60.

³¹ Liu, Lau, & Loh, p. 27

³² Rem Koolhaas, “Singapore: Portrait of a Potempkin Metropolis”/“Songlines: Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa” in Jennifer Sigler, ed., *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large* (Rotterdam: O10 Publishers, 1995)

HDB's original Five-Year Plan. But the re-housing of that decade had a history as well as a future, one widely understood at the time but forgotten in many contemporary accounts. In Singapore, as elsewhere, *the plan* and *the emergency* had a more than intimate relationship.

The first Five-Year Plan (1960-65) saw the socialist leadership of the PAP government fighting for its life against the party's communist faction, whose major strength lay in the slums of the center city (Chinatown), and the rural *kampungs* and squatter communities that ringed it. "Radical left-wing organizations" pointed out one contemporary observer, were "firmly woven into the fabric of slum life".³³ Such was the urban fabric targeted for early clearance and resettlement.³⁴ In the course of the 1960s the ruling People's Action Party split, the dominant Lee Kwan Yew faction taking full and permanent control of the state, and the communists forming a separate party (the *Barisan Socialis*) which was run to ground by the end of the decade. Throughout this period of struggle, and well into the 1970s when politics had all but ceased, the poorer areas of the island were systematically cleared (or 'decanted', to use a contemporary descriptor) and their residents relocated to high-rise HDB housing estates.

It would be far too simplistic to portray the HDB as a winnowing tool designed to cut down political opponents. For one thing, the PAP government clearly took a political risk in dislocating people who had the ability not only to resist (as some did), but to vote. Indeed over the long run, the government would tie its fate quite closely to its ability to provide an ever-increasing standard of living, a 'standard' largely set by the infrastructure of HDB housing.³⁵ The 'risk' of mobilization was in that and other senses carefully calculated. Dramatic and overwhelming acts of re-housing have always had the potential to at least divide, perhaps neutralize, and at best co-opt. Given the socialist credentials of *housing reform*, re-housing could not be effectively opposed by the PAP's communist opponents except in matters of detail (particularly it turns out, in the uprooting of farmers). Communism as an ideology lacked arguments against the movement of people from slums, villages, and squatter camps to high-rise (high-tech) housing, especially when presented as a planned *developmental process* transcending the immediate logic of capitalism.

In Singapore, the Cold War term "hearts and minds" is commonly used, even today, to describe the parts of the citizen which the government feels compelled to capture and hold. But the act of re-housing was so very bodily - the physical movement and re-containment of hundreds of thousands of bodies whose hearts and minds, at least initially, lay unrevealed. These bodies were with some risk set in motion - "a population movement on the scale of an exodus" in the words of one academic who chronicled the phenomenon in 1965.³⁶ But the motion had already received its direction, and at least some of its momentum, before the coming to power

³³ Iain Buchanan, *Singapore in Southeast Asia*, (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1972) p. 239.

³⁴ Linda Lim writes that "particularly in the early days, compulsory urban resettlement provided the PAP with the opportunity of breaking up established and potential opposition electoral communities". (Lim, "Social Welfare" in Kernial Singh Sandhu & Paul Wheatley, *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).

³⁵ See Chua Beng-Huat, *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1997)

³⁶ Anne E. Wee, Forward in Seow Peck Leng, *Report on New Life in New Homes* (Singapore: Persatuan Wanita Singapura, 1965), p. 1. Wee was a lecturer in Social Studies at the University of Singapore.

of the PAP. This citizen mobilization originated not in the policies of Singapore's post-colonial government, but in British policies enacted under a late-colonial *state of emergency*.

The Malayan Emergency and Singapore's Improvement

Emergency has, of course, an explicitly political meaning: i.e. the suspension of civil liberties during a government crack-down on internal dissent. *States of emergency* are popularly associated with Third World dictatorships, but they are in fact equally British. In the British Empire which re-emerged stumbling and vulnerable from the Second World War, *emergencies* had soon to be declared from Palestine, to India, to Kenya, to Nyasaland, the internal equivalents of international *crises*. The counter-insurgency campaigns which they signaled had been pioneered in pre-war Ireland, and before that, South Africa, although the use of the term *emergency* – rather than *war* or *rebellion* – only became general in the self-consciously ‘back to normal’ conditions following WWII.³⁷ *Emergency* indeed constructs *normality* the way *war* constructs *peace*. While war and peace are mutually exclusive, however, and thus chronological, the strategy (or hope) behind colonial emergencies seems to have been that they would be *synchronic* with normality, in the manner of policing. The longest and most contested of these synchronic states – referred to in much of the literature as simply as *The Emergency* – happened in Malaya (including Singapore) between 1948 and 1960.

Being campaigns against popular insurgencies, emergencies necessarily developed an intimate relationship with houses – as structures in which hostile populations lived and insurgents found shelter. In full-scale war houses are treated, symbolically and semantically at least, as objects to be incidentally swept around or through by invading armies intent on taking more monumental sites. In truth of course, large numbers of houses have been deliberately targeted for destruction by aerial bombing for as long as that strategy has existed. In politico-military *emergencies*, however, houses have played a more public or self-consciously strategic role, because the unit of concern is a *population* conceived of as *households*. Thus did the British army in colonized Ireland begin targeting and blowing up specific houses at one point as a retaliation for the killing of soldiers, and the IRA in turn blew up two houses owned by Loyalists for every one dynamited by the British. So did there begin a series of ceremonial retaliations against houses in the British Empire that continues to this day in places like Israel/Palestine, at least partly conditioned by colonial-period emergency strategies.³⁸ The *architectural* character of political

³⁷ The term “emergency” actually has too complex an etymology to be fully treated here, but according to my search through a number of major library catalogs, its historical usage was relatively sporadic or episodic prior to the twentieth century. A major event in the history of its popularization was surely the First World War, when the numbers of laws, enactments, reports, and administrative rules with the word “emergency” in their titles increases exponentially. “Emergency” was used in the same period to describe natural disasters and accidents, but not, it seems, as commonly as it is used for such purposes today. The references to “emergency medicine” are particularly sparse before mid-century. While the First (and Second) World Wars begat many “emergency” regulations and rules, which sometimes referred to these armed conflicts as “war emergencies”, the use of the term “emergency” as a substitute for the word “war” (rather than to supplement or modify it) only became common following World War II.

³⁸ See Colin Campbell, *Emergency Law in Ireland, 1918-1925* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

emergencies, one might argue, came to be defined by the house. Its most dramatic manifestation was the *forced re-housing* of entire civilian populations.

The Malayan Emergency involved one of the greatest forced re-housings in the history of modern colonialism, or for that matter in the history of East and Southeast Asia. In the twelve years of The Emergency, close to a million people, most of them Chinese “squatters”, were resettled under military supervision in over 600 *new villages* in all parts of the peninsula (though not in Singapore itself). The motto of the campaign, according to one of its historians, was “speed at any cost”, and its character was “the wholesale and occasionally forcible resettlement of a frightened, largely alien populace into hastily-contrived barbed-wire enclosures”. In one year alone, 1951, close to 400,000 people were re-housed in 350 new containments.³⁹ An additional 600,000 were ultimately ‘regrouped’ [re-housed in new, defensible areas] on rubber estates and mining camps.⁴⁰ This emergency re-housing campaign came to be known, after its military author General Harold Briggs, as *The Briggs Plan*.

Although “the actual process of moving was unpleasant and distressing”, in the words of an historian not unsympathetic to the project, the re-housed were given “title” (10 to 99-year leases) on their new land, and provided with schools, medical clinics, and even electricity tapped from generators whose principal purpose was to power searchlights.⁴¹ Most of the re-housed were also re-categorized in the course of their move from “agriculturalists” to “wage-laborers”, an identity which stuck because the re-housing coincided with a rubber & tin boom linked to the Korean War⁴². Thus, although military strategy drove the project throughout, it could also be presented as *developmental*. Gen. Sir Gerald Templar’s coining of the term *new villages* (to replace *resettlement camps*) in 1952 semantically linked the containments to the physically very different *new towns* then being erected throughout Britain..⁴³

The same year that Emergency was declared in Malaya (1948), an accelerated campaign of slum clearance and attendant re-housing began in Singapore, then Malaya’s principle port, and the largest concentration of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.⁴⁴ Action in Singapore (a separately-administered colony) was not carried out under the new banner of *emergency*, however, but a pre-existing one of *improvement*.⁴⁵ The Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT)⁴⁶ promised that the initial

³⁹ John Weldon Humphrey, “Emergency Resettlement and the Chinese in Malaya”, unpublished manuscript, Singapore-Malay Collection, National University of Singapore (ca. 1973), pp. 1, 12.

⁴⁰ Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds, 1948-1958* (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2002), p. 94

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 12; Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 102-103; Humphrey, “Emergency Resettlement and the Chinese in Malaya”, p. 12; Ibid, “Population Resettlement in Malaya” (Ph.D. Thesis, Northwestern University, 1971), p. 226.

⁴² Stubbs, pp. 103, 108-110, 262.

⁴³ Ramakrishna, p.126; Humphrey, “Population Resettlement in Malaya”, p. 127.

⁴⁴ Colonial Singapore had been shaped in a contestive environment from its beginnings, a story told a length by Brenda S.A.Yeoh in *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). See particularly her fourth chapter for a discussion of housing regulations and urban planning prior to the period I consider (Yeoh’s account ends in 1930).

⁴⁵ The Emergency-period re-housing campaign had some local antecedents, but was based most directly on a report by the 1947 Singapore Housing Committee. The declaration of Emergency in 1948, just as the Committee’s report was circulating, seems to have rapidly moved its recommendations forward on the list of colonial priorities (*SIT Annual Report, 1957*, p. 2-3).

demolition of 102 dwellings and shops was “only the first installment of a program for dealing with all such slum properties”.⁴⁷ In 1949, 1,207 families were evicted from Upper Nankin Street, one of the most crowded areas of Chinatown, and the SIT announced the following year that Chinatown itself was “scheduled for demolition”.⁴⁸ Chinatown was not the only site to be targeted; one British report estimated that as much as a third of the total population of Singapore were “squatters” requiring eventual relocation.⁴⁹ In 1951, the year the British governor of Malaya was assassinated by communist guerillas, and the most intensive year of resettlement on the Malayan peninsula, the Improvement Trust began building 9-story slab-blocks, prototypes for what would become Singapore’s dominant house-form.⁵⁰ In 1952, the Trust partitioned to become a “development authority”, anticipating the post-independence HDB.⁵¹

As its improvement campaign accelerated, however, the SIT began to face stubborn resistance from squatters, some of them organized into an “Attap Dweller’s Association” (*attap* being the large palm leaves traditionally used to roof farmhouses, as thatch was used in Britain). The showpiece of the British program, the *new town* of Queenstown with its 14-story tower blocks (the blocks increased in height on an almost yearly basis), had “come to a standstill” by 1954 “because of the difficulty of removing attap dwellings.” Work at the site was “immobilized” according to the SIT, by “the reluctance of 266 families to accept the very reasonable conditions of resettlement”, which involved removal to a relatively remote part of the island.⁵² By the following year, 1955, “it was practically impossible to find sites for public buildings that were not encumbered with clusters of attap dwellings or agricultural settlers” and the entire island-wide re-housing program began to critically slow.⁵³ One senses from this and related passages that it was not just a problem of ‘clearing’ existing settlements, but stemming a vigorous movement that was continuing to occupy vacant land. “There is a constant threat of new structures” reported the SIT in 1959, “it is only with extreme vigilance that the inspectorate assisted by the watchmen are able to detect and demolish new structures”⁵⁴ The ‘squatters’, in other

⁴⁶ The Singapore Improvement Trust had been founded as a quasi-governmental organization in the 1920s and began building housing before the war, mostly for civil servants and others members of the non-British middle class. In 1948 however, it began receiving substantial loans from the British colonial government (a total of \$140 million between 1948 and 1957) and turned its attention toward low-income housing (SIT, *Annual Report*, 1957, p. 2). Thus did the SIT become the de facto housing and planning ministry of the colonial government in Singapore. For a discussion of the SIT’s origins, see Yeoh, pp. 164-67.

⁴⁷ Singapore Improvement Trust (hereafter SIT), *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust* (Singapore, 1948). Pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸ Ibid, (1950), p. 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid, (1954), p. 14.

⁵⁰ Ibid, (1951), p. 14. Its worth noting that the first 10-story tower blocks in London had appeared only three years before, in 1948 (Glendenning and Muthesius, p. 53). Judging from the plans and illustrations in its annual reports, the SIT’s architects stayed in close touch with design developments in the metropole.

⁵¹ SIT, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust* (1952)

⁵² Ibid, (1954), p. 14.

⁵³ SIT, *Annual Report*, 1957, p. 28. Although statistics show that the SIT re-housing program did not seriously slow until 1955-56, planning began to be effected much earlier. T.P.F. McNeice, Chairman of the SIT, wrote as early as 1953 that “improvement schemes which involved the wholesale demolition of insanitary and overcrowded property are not possible in present circumstances” (SIT, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust* [1953], preface).

⁵⁴ SIT, *Annual Report*, 1959, p. 27.

words, were in the midst of their own *housing reform movement*, which involved building or expanding single-family houses on land the British had slated for high-rises. And all of this was occurring, at least from 1954, against a larger backdrop of anti-colonial protests, strikes, and riots, which the authorities were attempting to contain through a gradually-expanding electoral process.

By the mid-1950s the British had been forced to change tactics, paying compensation and establishing a new Resettlement Department within the SIT, partly staffed by “resettlement inspectors” from Malaya.⁵⁵ The model of the Malayan Emergency’s *new villages* (which had themselves begun as *resettlement camps*) was now to be tried more directly to Singapore as an alternative to high-rise *new towns*. The matter was so politically sensitive that in 1958 the Resettlement Department, alone among the seven departments of the SIT, was made an agency of the colonial government, in order to subject each clearance action to political vetting. Yet squatter resistance still arises continually in the SIT’s late-colonial reports as “an extremely difficult problem”, with inspectors “intimidated in the execution of their duties and enforcement of instructions becom[ing] a dangerous process.” Even the attendance of police constables at the serving of demolition orders was sometimes “insufficient in the first instance to prevent a disturbance of the peace”.⁵⁶ This willingness to resist offered one major contrast to the campaign in Malaya, where resettlement had been conducted as an overtly military action backed by the threat of overwhelming force and the possibility of deportation. In Singapore, the presence of associations, landowners, politicians (communist and non-communist) and the growing anti-Colonial street actions encouraged squatter communities to sometimes stand up to the police.⁵⁷

The British stopped the process altogether in advance of the landmark 1959 elections to, in the SIT’s own words “prevent disturbance and maintain good public relations”.⁵⁸ With the election of the PAP government, however, and the beginning of the end of colonial rule, the English-language *Straits Times* was certain that the squatter problem was finally on the verge of being solved:

Squatters and other resistance to site-clearing has been a serious brake on at least two years of SIT endeavor . . . this [PAP] government is strong enough to take obstacles of this nature in its stride.⁵⁹

Indeed it would prove to be.

Links between the various “emergency” re-housings in Southeast Asia (and one might include the subsequent one in South Vietnam, which was based partly on the example of Malaya) have rarely been drawn. It may be that the resulting building forms seem so various (*new towns* of high-rise flats in Singapore vs. *new villages* of simple wooden houses in Malaya), or that the overtly military and colonial identity of the Malayan project seems dissimilar to the political (and partly post-colonial)

⁵⁵ Ibid, (1957), pp. 28-29.

⁵⁶ Ibid, (1958), p. 35

⁵⁷ Indeed, the squatters gained friends in high places as the colonial period ratcheted to a finish. A *Straits Times* editorial of Sept. 12, 1958 complained that “So little do some of Singapore’s legislators understand the problem [of clearance] that in the Assembly debate there were complaints once again of the disturbance of squatters”.

⁵⁸ SIT, *Annual Report*, 1959, p. 27

⁵⁹ “A Colossal Effort” [Editorial], *The Straits Times*, Sept. 19, 1959.

character of the Singaporean one.⁶⁰ Many details indeed differed, as did outcomes. Yet the rolling emergency re-housing on the Malayan peninsula shared a common context – the Cold War - as well as a common subject or target - Chinese ‘squatters’ (and slum-dwellers in the Singaporean case) whose natural sympathies were believed to lie with the militant left.

In fact the geography of re-housing campaigns in East and Southeast Asia is largely the geography of the post-war British Empire in crisis - perhaps a set of local crises each with their own peculiarities, but commonly conceived by policy-makers as generated by events in China. The massive re-housing of the Malayan Chinese population in The Emergency can be taken as the first example. The second is the Emergency-period work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, from which the HDB directly evolved. The third is the re-housing program in Hong Kong, which came to rival the efforts of Singapore, and was directly responsive to the crisis of war refugees and the delicate diplomatic relationship with the mainland.⁶¹ All of these projects began in earnest in the late 1940s or early 1950s. In the rest of East and Southeast Asia, with the exception of wartime Vietnam, government re-housing was pursued much less insistently, or affected far fewer people. Japan, which was never colonized, likewise remained ambivalent about bureaucratic schemes to directly re-house large segments of its population. Communist (and Nationalist) China had other priorities. When “squatters” were re-housed elsewhere in Asia – the Philippines, Thailand, Korea, and Indonesia – it was normally to move them out of the way of development projects (which became a key component of the Singaporean re-housing as well, but was not its original motive).⁶² Mass re-housing was thus not a ceremony indigenous to East and Southeast Asia, despite its present association with the region. It was a European one, first deployed in Asia at a specific time, in specific circumstances, and among a particular category of British subject.

The 1950s was also a decade when the British metropole, under both Labour and Conservative governments, was re-housing its own population to a degree unprecedented in the West or even the communist world, under a planning regime inherited from the Second World War. What was happening on the Malayan peninsula, the site of Britain’s “dollar arsenal”, thus ‘made sense’ from the standpoint of contemporary British domestic politics. When Harold Wilson tried to convince other Labour leaders to delay the British military pullout from Singapore in 1966, he cited Lee Kwan Yew’s credentials as a houser, saying “his social record, in his housing programme for example, defies challenge in anything that has been done in the most advanced social democratic communities”.⁶³ Indeed, in the matter of housing, Lee would surpass the Europeans.

Yet this project of challenging if not surpassing European re-housing goals began in Singapore under British governors-general. By the time Singapore achieved

⁶⁰ One of the few to make this linkage (among many other useful ones) is Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994) p.45.

⁶¹ The political nature of the Hong Kong program is most forcefully stated by Alan Smart, “Hong Kong’s Slums and Squatter Areas: A Developmental Perspective” in Brian Aldrich & Ranvinder S. Sandhu, *Housing the Urban Poor: Policy & Practice in Developing Countries* (London: Zed Books, 1995). See especially his discussion on p. 106.

⁶² Brian Aldrich, “Habitat Defense in Southeast Asian Cities”, *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, v. 13, n. 2 (1985)

⁶³ Quoted in Lee Kwan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2000), p. 50.

self-rule, in 1959, almost 10% of its population had already been re-housed by the colonial administration, a figure then uniquely large either in Asia or the colonized world.⁶⁴ In fact, only in select municipalities of Europe itself had such figures been achieved before the late 1950s. Frankfurt's famous housing program under the Weimar Republic affected only 11% of that city's population.⁶⁵ The government of 'Red Vienna' managed to house the same percentage. This achievement of British colonial re-housing has been largely underrated because the post-colonial HDB took the project so much further, numerically speaking. The colonial project also came to be ritualistically denigrated by its post-colonial successor for 'failing to meet its targets', etc., and for demonstrating the 'neglectful' attitude of the British compared to the caring attitude of their successors.⁶⁶ In truth, however, the British were hampered from driving harder by opposition from below.

What most unifies the *new villages* of the Malayan Emergency and Singapore's *new towns* is the identity of the re-housed and the act of their mobilization. The dramatic difference in the forms of the Malayan villages and the Singaporean housing estates mask what were actually great similarities in the forms of the pre-existing settler communities cleared in the two places. Indeed they were hardly 'two places' except in the strictest of political senses. Some of the most intensive and extensive resettlement of squatters into *new villages* occurred in the Malayan province of Johor, just across the causeway from Singapore.⁶⁷

The coercive nature of much of the re-housing, the extension of "title" (99-year leases) to the relocated, the emphasis on getting the population 'inside the wire' (the element of speed) in order to 'drain the communist swamp', the near totality of the program, and the re-categorization of the re-housed from subsistence farmers to wage laborers were all elements of the Malayan Emergency which would find some degree of reflection in Singapore's improvement campaign, which entered its final form (the first Five-Year Plan of the post-colonial government) the year that the official emergency was declared at an end.

"Squatting" as *Emergency Response*

The term "squatter" evokes (and designedly so) the image of someone inert, and thus needful of being set in motion. An official account of Singaporean squatters from 1968 paints "the far too familiar picture of an inert community who would not think of moving from their unpleasant and dangerous surroundings until a disaster makes the decision for them".⁶⁸ There is much circumstantial evidence, however, that squatter communities in what the British termed the "Black Belt" around the central city, were actually the result of a spontaneous (yet fully conscious, and not irrational) movement from the 'unpleasant and dangerous surroundings' of Chinatown in the

⁶⁴ *The Straits Times*, Feb. 2, 1960. The same article points out that the housing of 150,000 Singaporeans by the SIT had "no parallel elsewhere in Asia".

⁶⁵ Peter Rowe, p. 12

⁶⁶ Hassan is one of few commentators to stress continuity between the two planning regimes, noting the "fairly entrenched public housing bureaucracy, which the present [post-colonial] government inherited in 1959" Riaz Hassan, *Families in Flats: A Study of Low Income Families in Public Housing* (Singapore: Singapore U. Press, 1977), p. 12.

⁶⁷ Humphrey, "Population Resettlement in Malaya", pp. 77-78. Humphrey notes that Johor and Perak were the two Malayan states with the largest squatter populations, and that the first large-scale resettlement occurred in the former state, just north of Johor Bahru.

⁶⁸ HDB, *The Bukit Ho Swee Estate* (Singapore: HDB, 1967), p. 39.

brief period between the Japanese collapse and the re-imposition of authority by the British.⁶⁹ They were themselves an *emergency response*, in other words, and perhaps an opportunistic one as well; a seizure of more space and slightly better living conditions by occupying and erecting shelter on vacant land temporarily unguarded.⁷⁰

The same text which describes squatters as an “inert community” elsewhere admits that most such settlements “sprung up after the Japanese occupation”.⁷¹ Historian Paul Kratoska’s research on Malaya during the war and immediate post-years suggests that the Japanese colonizers indeed gave squatting an impetus, indirectly through their draconian control over food supplies (yet *laissez-faire* attitude toward property rights), and more directly through the forced resettlement of some urban-dwellers in new agricultural villages. People took (or were taken) to the countryside on the city’s fringes, or even well beyond, in order to grow their own food. Others actually came into the city from the countryside in order to join the rationing system (from which the countryside was excluded), presumably joining urban squatter settlements.⁷² The labeling of squatter communities in subsequent accounts as relics of the Japanese occupation, however, was meant to construct their abnormal nature, and thus suggest post-war *resettlement* as a natural response.

Squatting in the 20th century often converged with warfare, and both with political re-housing campaigns. Besides post-WWII Singapore, another site where this convergence was particularly marked was post-WWI Vienna. Recent scholarship on the famous re-housing campaign in ‘Red Vienna’ stresses its beginnings in the out-migration of hungry people in the aftermath of military collapse. Viennese constructed ‘wild settlements’ (*wilde* being the ironically opposite-sounding Austro-German synonym for the English *squat*) around the activity of survival gardening.⁷³ The fate of the squatters under the two postwar governments differed, however. In Vienna, many were allowed to stay on the land they’d occupied, and worked alongside local politicians and progressive architects to make a *fait accompli* into a *status quo*. The political identity of the squatter communities was always contestable – were they ‘wild’ radicals (because of their squatting) or petit-bourgeois (because of the little houses they built)? - but the city nonetheless distributed building materials.⁷⁴ In British and post-British Singapore, the premium was on clearing squatter communities entirely, as they were cast by the authorities as illegitimate (and thus monstrous) products of war. Another difference was that in Vienna the subsequent urban re-housing program was made with the intention of lowering working-class

⁶⁹ The SIT *Annual Report* of 1958, discussing “the early post-war years”, describes how “much of the Trust land prepared before the war was requisitioned by the War Department, and a great deal of what remained was covered by unauthorized attap huts – a legacy of the Japanese occupation” (p. 2).

⁷⁰ Smart discovers a similar history in Hong Kong. “Squatting in the prewar period” he writes, “was not a serious problem, but difficulties of making land available for development [after the war] were blamed on the illegal occupation of vacant land in the disorder following the [Japanese] occupation” (p. 102). Cho & Park trace the squatter phenomenon in Korea to a similar dynamic occurring in same (post-war) period, which merged with the refugee crisis of the Korean War (Cho Jaesoon & Park Jeonghee, “Slums and Squatter Settlements in South Korea” in Aldrich & Sandhu p. 113).

⁷¹ HDB, *The Bukit Ho Swee Estate*, p. 5.

⁷² Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1998), chapters 9 and 11.

⁷³ Marcuse, “A Useful Installment of Socialist Work: Housing in Red Vienna in the 1920s” in Bratt, Hartman, and Meyerson, pp. 558-585; Blau, especially chapters 2 and 3.

⁷⁴ Marcuse, *ibid*, pp. 568-69; Blau notes that by 1921 some squatter settlements had “stabilized into more permanent communities with their own systems of cooperative self-government” (p. 95).

rents, often drastically.⁷⁵ In Singapore, rents were almost always increased, the intention being to reconstruct ‘underemployed’ squatters as a rent-paying working class.⁷⁶

The war-time squatter settlements in both Vienna and Singapore, far from being pathological, were a rational response to crisis through ‘self-help’. Marcuse calls Vienna’s wild settlements “probably the most widespread example of physical self-help in the twentieth century in an industrialized nation”.⁷⁷ In “developing” nations, of course, self-help of this sort is a standard developmental strategy of the poor. Because we cannot know the full set of feelings people experienced in becoming squatters, we cannot impose upon them, at least without evidence gleaned from them, a sense of tragedy or despair. We do not have a squatter discourse which is as coherent or powerful as that of the legally-housed classes who defined and managed the ‘squatter’ identity. The fragmental evidence we do have suggests, in Singapore and elsewhere (though not everywhere) a strong community sense, determination, and an active marshalling of resources in the midst of emergency conditions.⁷⁸

Squatter settlements were also vernacular architecture.⁷⁹ They cannot be defined merely by what they lack or lacked (the familiar litany of ‘toilets, electricity, tap-water’ etc.). That they lacked these things was partly the result of their being construed as ‘temporary’ (and alien) by those who controlled technological systems and determined where and on what terms these would be extended. Spontaneous settlements (a term increasingly used in preference to ‘squatter settlements’ from the 1970s onward) were sites in which people, however poor, became architects of at least their immediate surroundings, and were not under compulsion to explain or justify their own architecture to anyone in particular. It was this, as much as anything, which made them ‘wild’.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ See Blau

⁷⁶ Alan Choe, head of the Urban Renewal Dept. of the HDB, made this policy explicit in a speech before an international housing conference in 1968. “Underemployment thrives in the central area slums” he said “because of the presence of cheap poor accommodations, affording negligible overhead.” [Choe, “Slum Clearance and Urban Renewal in Singapore”, *Proceedings of the Second Afro-Asian Housing Congress, Singapore* (1968), p. 5]

⁷⁷ Marcuse, “A Useful Installment of Socialist Work . . .” p. 565

⁷⁸ Social scientists of the 1960s-70s left us more descriptions of life in Singapore’s high-rise flats than in the *kampung*s and squatter camps they replaced. At least part of the reason is suggested by geographer Iain Buchanan, who recognized that *kampung*-dwellers were better-placed to avoid participation in social science surveys than those living in government-managed flats (especially door-to-door surveys administered with the cooperation of estate managers) [see Buchanan, below]. Our most vivid accounts of *kampung* life in this period are by sociologist Chua Beng-Huat, based partly on his own experience of growing up in the urban village of Bukit Ho Swee [See Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, chapter 8; Ibid, “The Business of Living in Singapore” in Sandhu & Wheatley; and Ibid, “That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for *Kampung*s” in Brenda Saw Ai Yeoh & Lilly Kong, *Portraits of Places: History, Community, and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995)]. See also field-work-based accounts in Robert E. Gamer, *The Politics of Urban Development in Singapore* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), and in Iain Buchanan, *Singapore in Southeast Asia* (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd., 1972).

⁷⁹ On squatter settlements as vernacular architecture, see Amos Rapoport, “Spontaneous Settlements as Vernacular Design” in Carl V. Patton, *Spontaneous Shelter: International Perspectives and Prospects* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); See also Aldrich and Sandhu (1995).

⁸⁰ For the history and justification of the term “spontaneous settlement”, see Elizabeth Kubale Palmer and Carl V. Patton, “Evolution of Third World Shelter Policies” in Patton.

Such settlements also constructed for many of their vulnerable inhabitants a sense of security lacking in other environments. In his study of Hong Kong's spontaneous settlements in the 1960s, anthropologist Otto Golger found crime rates to be lower there than in the rest of the city, and mortality rates virtually the same (but much lower than in "resettlement areas" the government provided). "Low living standards and bad housing can be coped with" Golger noted "as long as the individual or group is an integral part of [settlement] society". There was also considerable variety in building types. While some dwellings were badly-built huts, others had porches, and some "the appearance of weekend houses, solidly built and cleanly kept". The greatest bane of Hong Kong's squatters was not their own existence, but the threat of the government bringing it to an end. "No fear is more widespread" he wrote "than finding oneself forced out of a condemned building"⁸¹

Clearance

At least through the end of its first Five-Year Plan, the PAP government faced squatter resistance seemingly indistinguishable in scope and character to that faced by the British. In Singapore newspaper accounts of the great post-colonial clearances of the 1960s, this resistance was quite prominently reported as constituting "a major obstacle" to redevelopment plans.⁸² Compensation had to be increased in 1964. "Under the new plan" wrote the *Straits Times* "there will be no room left for pro-Communist elements to instigate the farmers and the squatters against the government", echoing words the British had themselves used after beginning the compensation program seven years before.⁸³ Work on the huge Tao Payoh satellite town, one of the largest in the world, had "been blocked because of organized resistance and obstruction instigated by pro-Communist elements" according to a press report of 1965, but "this organized obstruction" the paper went on to say, "has now disappeared".⁸⁴ Indeed, reported acts of resistance become more fragmented and less frequent under the second Five-Year Plan, although the scale of the resettlement had vastly increased. The HDB was becoming a well-oiled re-housing machine.

Resisting squatters were never assumed in written accounts to be acting in their own interests, but generally as dupes of "agitators", "people out for mischief", "pro-Communist elements", or in one colorful phrase, "evil-wishers".⁸⁵ Indeed, the

⁸¹ Otto Golger, *Squatter and Resettlement, Symptoms of an Urban Crisis*, (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972). Golger conducted his fieldwork in 1966-67. Chua and Buchanan make similar points regarding Singapore's *kampung*s. Both point out the variety of housing types (and associated levels of status, income, and material comfort), and the lack of crime. Chua's accounts are careful, however, to foreground the dark (and merely mundane and repetitive) aspects of squatter life which Golger, in his enthusiasm to correct stereotypes, tends to downplay. Nonetheless, Chinese squatter life turns out, in these and the few other accounts we have of it by academics, to have been not only more complex than its parodied portrayals, but more 'settled' and routinized than the label 'temporary' would allow.

⁸² "Squatters, Illegal Houses Set a Problem", *Straits Times* June 10, 1962

⁸³ "New Deal for Squatters", *Straits Times*, January 7, 1964

⁸⁴ "50,000 Homes to Go Up", *ibid*, January 2, 1965

⁸⁵ "Stay-put Squatters: Agitators Blamed", *The Straits Times*, July 9, 1962; "The Squatters", *ibid*, July 11, 1962; "50,000 Homes Go Up", *ibid*, Jan. 2, 1965. The phrase "evil-wishers" appears in Seow, *Report on New Life in New Homes*, p. 59, who speaks of the need to protect "illiterate women" from such people.

re-housed's small and ineffectual acts of resistance were seen almost exclusively in party political terms – as the clash of two incommensurable ideologies backed by trained and committed cadres – and never as the legitimate concerns of powerless people faced with the emergency of displacement.

In the West, Modernist multi-story housing was generally associated by both its proponents and detractors with communalism. The prototype slab-blocks were developed, after all, by Left-leaning architects in the spirit of “world war against the domination of the individual”, to return again to the language of De Stijl. In the United States, whose powerful real estate interests felt deeply threatened by New Deal public housing, the equation of multi-family blocks with ‘communism’ was perhaps most persistent, and ultimately effective in limiting their ‘spread’ (and crippling their design and management). That the earliest housing estates in Europe were sponsored by socialist parties added to the sense that the slab block was the physical expression of communal ideals, while the single-family house was its opposite – the natural container of individualist, bourgeois values.

Given the popularity of this perception, the relative absence of expressions of social collectivism in Modernist architectural manifestos, compared to their enthusiastic discussions of *the dwelling* and its biologically-constituted inhabitant, can come as startling. Modern Architecture shared with many governments a deep aversion to *the street*, on which crowds gathered. Beaux-Arts architecture, ironically, may have been the true architecture of revolution, with its large squares and broad avenues which channeled crowds directly toward palaces. Modernist slab blocks with green spaces between them eliminated all focal points that a crowd might gravitate toward – all possibility of identifying an architectural target for the redress of grievance. Had they been designed by capitalists or colonels, Gropius' slab-blocks and Le Corbusier's towers in a park could not have more strongly symbolized the curtailment of revolution. Socialism had been born in crowded conditions – the street, the tenement, and the dormitory – and in order to continually recreate itself, it needed to architecturally reproduce community. In that it largely failed. In making *the housing cell* the *nucleus of town planning*, CIAM's Charter of Athens of 1933 forgot that the street and the square, not the house, was the natural environment for the politics of progressive reform. The *cell* was also the nucleus of the prison. By the time The Left ‘took to the streets’ of Singapore in a last bid for power in the mid and late 1960s, ‘the street’ was in the process of disappearing.

Singapore's multi-story housing of the 1960s was purposely anti-communal. Although there were many ritualistic references to ‘building new communities’ in early HDB literature, the far more urgent problem was the breaking up an existing communalism seen to be identical with slums, *kampung*s, and squatter camps (all composed of single-family dwellings). The HDB's policy of purposely mixing ‘races’ in housing estates and even individual buildings has been well-documented and well-discussed.⁸⁶ But this policy of mixing extended also to pre-existing communities of the same ‘race’. In an article entitled “The Problem of Tenants in Flats”, HDB head Lim Phai Sam wrote in 1966 of the need “to avoid large concentrations of a particular community in any one estate such as happened in Bukit Ho Swee for the fire victims” (who were almost exclusively Chinese). The HDB system would in effect atomize pre-existing sub-racial communities “even though the policy *may eventually slow*

⁸⁶ See, for example, Chua Beng-Huat, “Race Relations and Public Housing Policy in Singapore”, *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, v. 8 (1991), pp. 343-354.

down clearance” (italics mine).⁸⁷ This was virtually the only reported policy consideration which slowed the HDB of the 1960s down.

Fire Emergency

The origin stories of state re-housing in Singapore and Hong Kong, like the much less determined effort made in Japan, include dramatic fires. Public housing in Hong Kong is said to have started after conflagration in the squatter camp of Shek Kip Mei in 1953. In Singapore, a very large fire in the squatter village of Bukit Ho Swee occurred in 1961, one year into the first Five-Year Plan.⁸⁸ Re-housing narratives in both Singapore and Hong Kong have used the emergency of fire to help explain either the origin of the re-housing, the determination with which it was carried through, or at least its overwhelming necessity. In this sense the fires compete as an explanatory device with ‘before and after’ pictures of squatter settlements and high-rise flats. The fires gave a crucial *non-political* substance to the discursive link between housing and emergency.

As sociologist Chua Beng-Huat has pointed out, the conjuncture of the great fire with the building of the PAP-government’s first large housing estate on the same site, “imparted to Bukit Ho Swee a symbolic place in the history of Singapore, as the quintessential urban slum and squalor in official terms”⁸⁹. In fact the HDB wrote “The Bukit Ho Swee Story” in 1967 as the introduction to a pictorial book describing the new *Bukit Ho Swee Estate*. The estate “was literally born out of fire” the history begins, consuming a site from which, it later tells us, “the outbreak of infectious diseases . . . could quickly spread throughout the island.” The fire was also accorded a pedagogical function in this and other accounts, dispensing “a lesson for all those living in such dangerous and appalling conditions to co-operate with the government”.⁹⁰ A similar narrative structures *The Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation to Progress*, produced cooperatively with the HDB in 1983, and whose cover-shot is a crowd of homeless people milling before a towering cloud of black smoke.⁹¹

The crowd on the cover of *The Emergence* looks helpless, even indifferent. But sociologist Chua, who also once lived in Bukit Ho Swee, has provided a contrasting picture of squatter settlement response to the emergency of fire.

At the slightest indication of a fire breaking out, the village men would be there attempting to put it out rather than rushing home to help their own families prepare for evacuation . . . in both policing and fire prevention, the unemployed men of the village were indispensable.⁹²

⁸⁷ Lim Phai Sam, “The Problem of Tenants in Flats”, *The Straits Times*, Oct. 4, 1966

⁸⁸ This fire/rehousing was actually preceded by an earlier one, which happened soon after the start of self-rule in 1959, at Kampong Tiong Bahru. The “emergency arrangements” made by the outgoing SIT for the several thousand people displaced by this fire may have served as a dress rehearsal of sorts for the HDB’s later performance at Bukit Ho Swee (SIT, *Annual Report*, 1959, p. 42)

⁸⁹ Chua Beng-Huat, “The Business of Living in Singapore”, pp. 1009-10.

⁹⁰ HDB, *The Bukit Ho Swee Estate*, pp. 1, 4, 39.

⁹¹ Archives and Oral History Dept., Kim Seng Citizen’s Consultative Committee, & Bukit Ho Swee Area Office (HDB), *The Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation to Progress* (Singapore: News and Publications Ltd., 1983)

⁹² Chua, “The Business of Living in Singapore”, p. 1008.

At Bukit Ho Swee in 1961, this emergency-response system somehow broke down.⁹³ The village burned and 6,000 of the homeless were, within the year, resettled into the HDB flats that soon covered (quite literally) the fire site. A rump portion of the village which survived the fire itself burned down in 1968.

In the story of Bukit Ho Swee, *the housing crisis* develops victims who are more clearly drawn than the merely badly housed. One result is that fire and bulldozer would thereafter be unevenly balanced in narratives of squatter clearance. Although a comparatively small percentage of Singaporeans were ultimately rehoused because of conflagration, the prominence of the Bukit Ho Swee Fire in histories of the HDB could make self-conflagration seem, to the casual student of the event, the principle agent of slum-clearance.⁹⁴ “Special demolition squads” which were actually just as prominent in period newspaper accounts, are rarely given form in retrospective narratives.⁹⁵

An example of how meanings could subtly shift between crises natural and political is the *emergency flat* in which most of the inhabitants of Bukit Ho Swee were re-housed. When HDB flats were introduced in 1960, *emergency* and *standard* were the names given their two variants. The nomenclature suggested, perhaps, that unsettled conditions might be normalized at a higher level of quality; that one might migrate to a better and more secure (standard) place after passing through the space of emergency. Exactly what the emergency was, however, had not been clearly articulated when the government began building *emergency flats* on a site adjacent to Bukit Ho Swee village in 1960. The fire of the following year, and the well-publicized re-housing of the *fire victims*, gave *the emergency flat* a new and clearer meaning. In some subsequent narratives, official and popular, the chronology of the *emergency flat* and the fire would be reversed, so that the vaguely political descriptor would appear to have been specifically generated by the circumstance of natural disaster.

Monumentalizing Emergency

Singapore has emerged internationally as a metaphor for total planning, of which HDB housing is often taken to be exhibit A. To its most vocal critics in the 1960s and 1970s, however, Singapore’s HDB represented the opposite of planning – the institutionalization of the ad hoc in an atmosphere of crisis. Many of these critics were from the first generation of native-born Singaporean architects, or at least those among them who were working outside the HDB system. *The Plan* which was then fully believed in by many of Singapore’s young designers, as by young architects around the world, was to be the best product of their own creative energies, backed by data provided by a whole range of like-minded specialists. It was to unfold, in the words of young architect E.J. Seow, in an atmosphere of “love, hope, and a spirit of

⁹³ In one official narrative of the fire, village men rush to help, but “the eagerness of the people hampered the work of the experienced firemen” [HDB, *The Bukit Ho Swee Estate*, p. 8].

⁹⁴ Hassan found that “The majority of the households, 61%, were relocated as a result of urban renewal, and 21% moved because of better housing environment provided by the HDB flats.” Only three percent were rehoused because of “natural disaster”, meaning mainly the fires. (Riaz Hassan, *Families in Flats*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1977, p. 39).

⁹⁵ See for example *Straits Times*, June 10, 1962; *Ibid*, June 1, 1964.

analysis, history, and imagination”.⁹⁶ The HDB’s emergency planning campaign caught them unprepared.

In the accounts of period policy-makers, the language of *housing crisis* merges almost seamlessly with the language of crisis politics. HDB Chief Howe Yoon Chong, speaking to delegates of an international housing conference in Singapore in 1967, rejected “ideal solutions” to housing design, because “urgent problems need immediate attention before they get completely out of hand.” Housing programs, he said, should thus be “action-oriented”, a phrase contributed to local planning discourse by U.N. advisors, but not coincidentally evocative of the People’s Action Party.⁹⁷ Writing five years later in 1972 in an official HDB history, *Homes for the People*, Howe was somewhat more reflective on the consequences of speed. The HDB of the 1960s “was well aware” he wrote “that there would arise immense social, cultural, and psychological upheaval among the families re-housed or re-settled. However, time and urgency of the problems did not permit detailed and sophisticated socio-economic surveys and studies into the likely emotional and mental effects which such mass resettlement could cause”⁹⁸

The mobilized – even the reluctantly mobilized – were sometimes memorialized in the midst of their journey. Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Toh Chia Chye told Singapore Polytechnic students in 1966 that the HDB system “shows the readiness with which the people of Singapore can adapt themselves to changing conditions”. He went on:

. . . these flats would not have sprung up if the people who were evicted from the slums and the attap hut settlements had not understood that eviction from their familiar surroundings was not a punishment but was a preparation for a better life.⁹⁹

But just as the presence of both *eviction* and *better life* create tension in this passage, so *the plan* and *the emergency* were always more difficult to resolve discursively than in practice.. As the HDB’s chief architect described his own reality in a radio address of 1969:

. . . the factors on which the design is based are constantly changing . . . We cannot adopt the approach of preparing a Master Plan to base our future designs. Therefore, we have to evolve a comprehensive design and planning technique which is flexible and adaptable and able to accommodate itself to the fast changing situation

Although the condition of design was to be *fast-changing*, the results were to be monumental. “The buildings constructed will last for a hundred years” he added in

⁹⁶ E.J. Seow, writing in *Rumah: Journal of the Society of Malaysian Architects*, v. 3 (Nov. 1960), p. 21.

⁹⁷ *Proceedings of the Afro-Asian Housing Congress* (Singapore, 1967) v. 1, p. 3.

⁹⁸ Stephen H.K. Yeh and the Statistics & Research Department (HDB), *Homes for the People: A Study of Tenants’ Views on Public Housing in Singapore* (Singapore: HDB and Economic Research Centre, N.U.S., 1972), p. i.

⁹⁹ Toh Chia Chye, Forward, *Architecture 1 17’ N” : Journal of the School of Architecture of the Singapore Polytechnic Institute*, v. 1 (1966/67), p. 5.

the same radio address.¹⁰⁰ Here was a logic which drove the HDB's architect-critics almost wild: The proposed *monumentalization of emergency*; the refusal to organize *crisis response* as a temporary project phase.

The government's theme of emergency was seized upon, in the midst of the first Five-Year Plan, by one young architect-critic in a student-edited Singapore Polytechnic journal. The state should "search, analyze, synthesize, and plan" wrote Tan Cheng Siong in 1962, rather than "rave about a superficial phenomenon of an emergency". Tan's equation of *superficial* with *emergency* (and both with "political parties which deal in the *awesome* and the *spectacular*" [italics mine]) illustrate the difficulty, in 1962, of recognizing *emergency* as a condition of *productive power*. This was to be a fatal oversight in the Left's critique of the new planning regime. "If it is an emergency" continued Tan, "temporary means would suffice and not building up neighborhood after neighborhood of regimented, inhuman blocks of one-room cells!"¹⁰¹ CIAM's *housing cell*, the product of idealist architects of the interwar period, was now poised to lock out their idealist successors on the other side of the world under the slogan *action plan*.

Architects were destined to remain among Singapore's most critical voices, despite (or perhaps because of) the ever-increasing strength and spatial powers of the HDB. Planning should be based on "national wants" said young architect Edward Wong to students at Singapore Polytechnic, rather than "the assumption that people should be given what they ought to want".¹⁰² William Lim would caution in 1968 that "the displacement of large numbers of the underprivileged members of the community is unlikely to be an acceptable solution for the more progressive social oriented governments"¹⁰³ And always *speed* was the factor which Singapore's architect-critics most consistently associated with the strategy of their marginalization. "The Architecture of Rapid Transformation" is the name of an article describing – and critiquing – the dynamic then constructing his cityscape by Singaporean architect Tay Kheng Soon.¹⁰⁴

But the HDB system was not just a monument to its own efficiency and fleet-footedness, as Tay also recognized. *Speed* was its instrumentality, but not its goal. If the housing estates monumentalized anything by the end of the 1960s it was the government's successful *emergency response* to an historically-specific political crisis. In the slums and kampungs of the early 1960s "criminal elements bred and thrived; Communism found new adherents" remembered the HDB in its memorial publication *First Decade of Public Housing, 1960-69*. "The final measure of Singapore's low-cost housing success" wrote the Board "is the total failure of Communist and communalist appeals in the Board's estates".¹⁰⁵ Translated into a more de-politicized and de-historicized language in the 1990s, this would be rendered, in a commemorative article in Singapore's *Straits Times* as:

¹⁰⁰ Teh Cheang Wan, "Public Housing – The Next Efforts" in J.F. Conceicao ed., *A New Environment for Singapore* (Singapore: Joint Committee for Radio Courses, ca. 1969) p. 17.

¹⁰¹ Tan Cheng Siong, "The Housing Problem" in *Dimension: Annual Journal of the Singapore Polytechnic Architectural Society*, 1962, p. 12.

¹⁰² Edward Wong, "Talk to Singapore Polytechnic Architectural Students" in *SPUR*, 65/7, preface.

¹⁰³ William Lim, "Rehabilitation: A Possible Solution to Urban Slums in Developing Countries", *Proceedings of the Second Afro-Asian Housing Congress, Singapore* (Singapore: 1967), p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ Tay Kheng Soon, "The Architecture of Rapid Transformation" in Kernial Singh Sandhu & Paul Wheatley, *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).

¹⁰⁵ HDB, *First Decade of Public Housing in Singapore: 1960-1969* (Singapore: HDB, 1970)

Built nationalism has been the medium of nation-building. The Housing Board is therefore more than a board, and is more than housing: its blocks are the nation made concrete, Singapore made home.¹⁰⁶

The Emergency of Women

Women have been crucially effected by policies aimed at *homes*, and in the history of *housing crisis/reform*, women of the middle and upper classes, at least, have played key roles as both proponents and critics. Housing has been an arena in which it is often “safe” for women to speak politically, taking advantage of their centrality to the *family life* which *home* ideally contains. On the other hand, “breaking the back of the housing problem”, a British phrase commonly used in Singapore as well, was overwhelmingly an opportunity for male display.¹⁰⁷

The book *Report on New Life in New Homes* of 1964 is a statement by a committee of politically-active, English-educated Singaporean Chinese woman of how they expected the re-housing program to affect impoverished Chinese women from the slums. The social gulf between the writers and their subjects was immense, and *New Life* can be read in that sense as a document of class assumptions irrespective of gender. But there also exists in *New Life* a critique of the Chinese family system absent in accounts authored by male re-housing proponents. While the break-up of the extended Chinese slum- and *kampung*-family -community is implicit in the HDB program, *New Life* makes it explicit, and gives it sanction.¹⁰⁸

New Life expects re-housing to alleviate the gender segregation “common among families of the oriental races”. Poor Chinese men, according to the writers, spend almost all their time together, “discussing such topics as business, sports, or girls”, and even taking their meals separately from the women. “The husband does not come home to his wife, he comes home to the menfolk in the household and usually discusses his problems with them.” There is much gender-segregated community in the slums, but not nuclear families, and that’s the problem. “Family units comprising father, mother, and children do not exist . . . the married couple does not share each others’ joys or sorrows, nor do they solve the family problems together.” *New Life*’s discussion of poor Chinese society revolves consistently around the issue of female marginalization and irrelevance.¹⁰⁹

The HDB slab-blocks, for the authors of *New Life*, will empower poor women by breaking the bonds of extended family and gender-segregated community. Alone with her newly-constituted nuclear family in the HDB unit, the woman finds herself consulted and respected, the only immediate community her husband and children have. But the re-housing, in this account, does not change the wife as much as the husband. “The new pattern of the HDB flats compels the husband to feel responsibility for his [nuclear] family”, where little or none was felt before. In

¹⁰⁶ “HDB as Nation-Building and Built Nationalism”, *Sunday Straits Times*, Sept. 28, 1997.

¹⁰⁷ Wrote Felix Frankfurter [Chairman of the U.S. War Labor Policies Board] in 1918: “the housing problem – even in its emergency aspects – is a family problem”. Quoted in Karolak, p. 71.

¹⁰⁸ Seow Peck Leng and Pan-Pacific South-East Asia Women’s Association, *Report on New Life in New Homes* (Singapore: Persauan Wanita Singapura, 1965). Seow was one of five women elected to Singapore’s legislative assembly in 1959. She was defeated in the 1963 election.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 38

Chinatown or the *kampung*, “there were always other members of the household [to rely on] whenever an emergency arose”.¹¹⁰

Emergency arises in this passage in the unexpected guise of opportunity for female empowerment. The absence of community means individual women will have to be relied upon in a crisis. The wife is now an integral, crucial member of a much smaller crisis-management team. While the HDB’s own literature celebrates its having “broken the backbone of the housing problem”, *New Life’s* HDB is “giving [young couples] a backbone, a sense of responsibility, freedom, and self-confidence.”¹¹¹ “The strong [extended] family ties among the Chinese”, lurk, in the *New Life* text, as an antiquated enclosure the HDB will puncture. Young people suffer “repression and frustration” living among parents and siblings. In one word picture which seems a testimony of the writer’s own experience, a young woman’s efforts to decorate “are destroyed in a few minutes by the innumerable nieces and nephews over whom one has no control”. “There is less friction and tension”, the writers are sure, when large families are re-distributed in smaller, spatially-distant units.¹¹²

In the ceremony of escape which *New Life* lays out, however, freedom does not play so constructive a role as a sense of danger. In a section of the book entitled “New Sense of Possession”, Chinatown is pathologized as a place where “the joy of possessing is unknown and the question of responsibility for *safeguarding one’s possessions* does not arise” (italics mine). The *New Life* of the title is presented as a new relationship with private things which others covet. “The need to *protect* one’s possessions becomes more real when one realizes one is now *surrounded by strangers instead of friends*. This is the beginning of house-pride.” (italics mine). Or later: “It seems paradoxical that in spite of the extra living room available and *the security of strong doors with reliable locks*, tenants, especially from Chinatown, feel a certain amount of confinement, insecurity, and loneliness in the Housing Estate Flat.” (italics mine). That this outcome was seen by the writer as “paradoxical” may strike us now as the greater paradox. It illustrates the perceptual gap not only between the English-speaking Chinese women who wrote *New Life* and their Chinese-speaking subjects (or at least their own perception of that gap), but between ourselves (or at any rate, most of us) and the extraordinary instinct for spatial containment – of oneself and others – more natural in a period of riot and emergency.¹¹³

Singapore’s re-housing campaign produced as a byproduct – and eventually as a systemic component - much sociological research on the condition of the re-housed. *Report on New Life in New Homes* was followed by extensive surveys conducted by the HDB itself, and parallel efforts by professors and students at Singapore’s two universities. The HDB-commissioned surveys found people were, on the whole, satisfied. The professors and students often found them not to be, documenting (and one senses, deliberately so) the social and individual costs of the re-housing. This was particularly evident in the work of Pakistani-born sociologist Riaz Hassan, whose *Families in Flats* (1977) although organized in the statistical, quantitative frame common to social science of that era, adds up to a narrative of displacement and confusion.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 38-40

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Ibid, pp. 40-41

¹¹³ Ibid, p.26

¹¹⁴ Riaz Hassan, *Families in Flats* (Singapore: Singapore U. Press, 1977)

Families' interviews agree with *New Life's* prediction that "in the case of emergency" the re-housed HDB tenants were thrown back largely on themselves. If a "sudden minor illness or injury" arose, only 8% of flat-dwellers would turn to neighbors, they said, as compared to 43% who said they would have relied on friends in their former neighborhood or *kampung*. Over a quarter of respondents told Hassan and his graduate students that they would turn to "former neighbors", spatially distant, as compared to those they currently lived among. In the slums and *kampungs*, only 6% said they relied on "immediate family only" in the event of emergencies. The number in HDB flats who claimed to have adopted this fall-back strategy was triple that amount.¹¹⁵ Concludes Hassan:

The perceived insecurity of the surroundings further reinforces the 'need' for personal privacy, which in fact is really the need for personal security in an impersonal and insecure environment . . . Their perception of the 'outside' environment is that of increasing constraints which are gradually narrowing the margins which they can manipulate in order to obtain a certain degree of freedom . . . a cognition of the environment which is ever restricting and over which they have little control. They seem to accept but still remain hopeful about the future.¹¹⁶

The HDB's own poll of residents in 1968 records, under the heading 'environmental conditions', that the largest 'unsatisfactory' response was in the category 'nearness to a police station' (35.7%) (Tan Tsu Haung in Chua). It is hard not to conclude that the growing sense of national security which the re-housing represented to its leadership, was mirrored by new forms of insecurity in many of its subjects. Everyone acknowledged this condition, at the time, even many in the leadership. But no one expected it to last.¹¹⁷

Housing as *Technology*

Housing in the 1950s and 1960s evoked *technology* in a sense now difficult to re-capture, given the intervening shift of that word away from the architectural, and toward the computational and informational. But in Singapore, Tokyo, Liverpool, and the suburbs of Long Island in those decades, the ceremony of being re-housed was portrayed as a transit not only to a more *secure* world (if one often mediated by locks), but a more *technologically advanced* one. It was an invitation to enter the Space Age in the form of advanced living space. The full discursive power of *high technology* was thus brought to bear as an explanation for why radical changes in personal environments were not only desirable, but inevitable. That slab blocks could be set down on any site at any time only helped to cement their relationship to other

¹¹⁵ Hassan, pp 68-69.

¹¹⁶ Hassan, p. 201.

¹¹⁷ Writing in 1983, HDB planners problematized elements of their estates which *Report on New Life in New Homes* had earlier celebrated: "The government's effort in curbing population growth emphasized the setting up of small nuclear families. The physical design and configuration of the HDB flat complement this type of family unit. As a result, the extended family system is slowly being eroded . . . (while) lack of social integration among the residents on various floors and within the estate itself [] results in a general lack of communal identity and attachment" (Lim et al, pp. 55-56).

forms of space technology. The status of the slab block as a type of transfiguring machine remained of deep relevance to those who promoted, designed, and built them long after Gropius and Le Corbusier had turned away from their early prototypes. This was especially true in places like Glasgow, St. Louis, and Singapore, fearful of being left behind in the Space Race, and determined to re-launch themselves with bold ceremonies of spatial reproduction. What was unique in the case of Singapore was perhaps only the numbers of people strapped to the rockets, and the mission's eventually stellar success.

Singapore could not, in the 1960s, create from whole cloth its own industrial revolution. The government realized that it needed foreign corporations in order to do that. But it could – and did – cover its landscape with tall buildings and begin re-locating its population inside, thus symbolizing the depth of its technological aspirations both to itself and off-shore investors. The clearances of the slums and *kampung*s also cleared space for land on which to build the city's present high-rise skyline (although Urban Renewal was a strategic late-comer, beginning half-way through the second Five-Year Plan). The econometric reasons for the re-housing have been well-discussed elsewhere. But business is also about marketing, and marketing about branding, and branding about signs. Slab blocks were never really as high-tech as their proponents would have wanted them to be. Prefabrication, for example, was initially tried in Singapore but rejected in favor of low-tech and labor-intensive concrete casting.¹¹⁸ But the buildings were, at the time, unmistakable aspirations to a condition which transcended mere nation-building. The growing popularity of the term *satellite town* in press reports of the late 1950s and 1960s (as opposed to the older *new town*) is one example of this cultural framing. Queenstown's description in one newspaper article of 1958 as a "down-to-earth satellite town" made the linkage explicit.¹¹⁹

If one accepts the results of sociologists' detailed interviews with HDB residents about their likes and dislikes, then it was precisely the *technologies* of the flats which most consistently symbolized anxiety to the first generation of their inhabitants/users. The two most objectionable features of their new living space, according to residents polled in social science surveys, were *the noise* and *the lifts*. *Noise* would seem a surprising objection coming from former slum and squatter camp inhabitants. Were not those places noisy? *Noise* in the HDB flats turns out to have described a new technologically-generated aural environment. It was the neighbor's television and radio which could be heard but not turned down because (presumably) one did not know one's neighbors, and the sound of strangers' children, beyond one's ability to discipline, playing in the echo chamber of the adjacent corridor. The new anti-communal privacy ironically generated 'the invasion of privacy' as more and more people turned to television and radio as a substitute for conversation – the alone irritating the alone through the manipulation of disembodied electronic voices. Sound-proofing had been sacrificed in the new emphasis on speed, as partitions were made lighter in order to increase their quantity and ease of erection.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Tan Tiang Beng, "The Experiment with the Industrialized Method of Construction of Multi-Story Flats in Singapore", *Proceedings of the 2nd Afro-Asian Housing Congress, Singapore*, v. 3

¹¹⁹ "Down to Earth Satellite Town of Queenstown" *Straits Times*, April 29, 1958

¹²⁰ Hassan, Table 4.15 shows that what residents "dislike most [about] living in flats" was "noise" (32%), p. 59; Tan in Chua Peng Chye, Table 5.2, p. 50, combines the results from two surveys undertaken by the HDB in 1968, which show that 25.2% of residents found "unsatisfactory" the

Lifts were the first pieces of complex machinery that many of the re-housed had ever found themselves dependent on. But their novelty and complexity made them a principle target of teenage vandalism. The result was that they often failed to work, trapping people on the upper or bottom floors.¹²¹ This problem of attacks on lifts had actually begun in the British SIT estates, and occurred, of course, almost everywhere in the world that tower blocks first sprung up.¹²² As late as 1973 the efficiency of lifts was judged by Singapore's planners "the most inadequate condition" in the housing estates, a view also held by the residents they surveyed. The HDB responded by establishing a *Lift Emergency Unit*.¹²³

The most widespread objection was to the cost of running water, which, among all the technologies of the flats, would seem to be most deserving of welcome. *Kampung* and slum dwellings were without household taps. In their nearly universal complaints about utilities charges, however, the residents seemingly turned on the sinks (and electrical outlets) as among their principle banes. In the *kampungs*, water had been distant (at pumps and taps) but virtually free, and distance was not necessarily an inconvenience to adults where fetching water was the task of children. Having one's water close at hand was thus not considered enough of an improvement, by many, to warrant the high mandatory charge. This charge was significant enough, to a poor family, that it often meant foregoing other things judged necessary.¹²⁴ Indeed, writing in 1972, Buchanan estimated that a quarter of HDB tenants were still living "either in poverty or close to poverty – despite physically sound housing conditions".¹²⁵

Certainly the residents learned to self-regulate technological noise, to prevent their children from short-circuiting the lifts, and to enjoy the convenience of running water. But their initial reactions to all these things call into question the universality of technological enthusiasm in 1960s/70s Singapore, especially among the poorest and least willingly re-housed.

Conclusion

With the problem of non-operating lifts this essay has arrived full-circle, back to the *emergency exit*. In some of the literature Singapore's re-housing has generated, there is a suggestion that historical dislocations matter little, because everything turned out to be all right in the end. Eviction is treated as incidental to the overall success of re-housing, a success measured by the numbers of the re-housed, or by subsequent social-science surveys which find populations 'on the whole satisfied' with what happened. The habitation of HDB flats was indeed a benchmark for national

"amount of noise" and 27.9 criticized the "efficiency of lifts". Only 6.6% found the lifts "satisfactory".

¹²¹ Teh Cheang Wan, "Public Housing – The Next Efforts" in J.F. Conceicao, ed., *A New Environment for Singapore* (Singapore: Joint Committee for Radio Courses, ca. 1969): p. 22 "The frequency of breakdowns of the lifts is still quite intolerable. It must be noted however that vandalism accounted for substantial part of the breakdown of the lifts"

¹²² *SIT Annual Report*, 1959, p. 39

¹²³ Tan in Chua Peng Chye, p. 49

¹²⁴ Hassan writes "They complained of the increase in rent and PUB bills, even though there was a great deal of convenience in the availability of water and electricity . . . hence they were forced to reduce the number of times they could go out and enjoy themselves because of budget constraints" (p. 207)

¹²⁵ Buchanan, *Singapore in Southeast Asia*, p. 195.

development, as their subsequent ownership became the concrete evidence for Singapore's arrival in the First World. The lifts of Singapore are now an unproblematic component of daily life, here as elsewhere. For some commentators and inhabitants, however, there is no clear exit from the condition of emergency which helped generate the flats, and which they in turn help generate. They embody for some a loss of public architect-ness to the ongoing demands of crisis-management.

From its first "Great War", the 20th century was characterized by a sense of constant crisis which the existing term "emergency" was increasingly pressed into service to describe, and in many cases direct. It directed policies, but it also directed masses of people about. The 20th century's concern with housing – most often discussed using words such as "process" or "provision" – is also capable of politico-military analysis. This is not to suggest that housing produced in the context of emergency forever encapsulates martial values. The trajectory of internet technology from ARPANET to Napster has taught us that artifacts are capable of remarkable and unpredictable transformations in the course of successive handlings. The state-built housing that Singaporeans, Americans, Scotsmen, and countless others were hurried into during the 20th century, sometimes consensually and sometimes not, has been the setting for millions of subsequent lives - lives too diverse and anonymous to be woven into any meta-narrative.

This essay has argued, more simply, for considering de-housing and re-housing as part of the larger history of mobilization, which taken in its broadest meaning – to render mobile - was among the most common state-citizen interactions of the twentieth century. It has suggested an underappreciated convergence between the politics of space and the politics of emergency around the act of habitation. The subject is too vast and multi-faceted, empirically and theoretically, to be adequately dealt with in a single essay. But moving toward a history of emergency may be moving toward a fuller understanding of our present condition, when emergency threatens to replace even the fiction of 'normality' as the officially-sanctioned texture of everyday life. In the normalization of emergency conditions, if that is indeed our trajectory, the seemingly mundane object of housing might be an underappreciated portal.

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