

From 'Ghetto to Condo': The Architecture & Politics of Mass Public Housing 'Upgrading' in Late-20th Century Singapore



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Upgrading Project, c.1995. *HDB Annual Report
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From 'Ghetto to Condo': The Architecture and Politics of Mass Public Housing 'Upgrading' in Late-20th Century Singapore

Abstract

The early history of Singapore's public housing programme is well-chronicled. By the mid-1980s, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), established by the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1960, housed over 80% of the country's population in 500,000 flats. This paper foregrounds a second, under-studied chapter in Singapore's public housing history: the mass 'upgrading' programme, which from the 1980s to early-2000s, added new rooms to existing flats, remodelled façades with postmodern embellishments, and transformed barren public spaces into landscaped parks and squares.

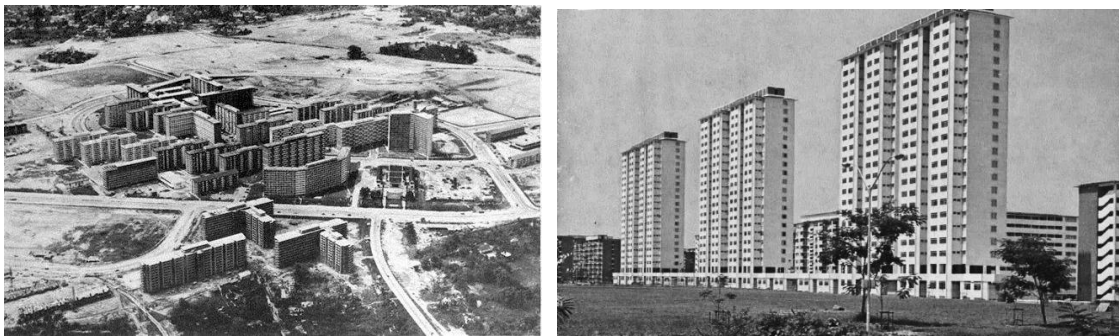
This paper analyses Singapore's public housing upgrading programme through two intersecting lenses. First, it understands mass housing, its architecture, and by extension its transformation, as *apparatuses* to realise multifaceted goals. Second, it situates upgrading within an established political economy of housing in Singapore, as constructing *legitimacy* and reinforcing *control* for the PAP in Singapore's 'illiberal' democracy.

Drawing on archival materials and secondary sources, the paper argues that the upgrading programme performed in three key 'spheres'. Politically, the upgrading programme deployed architectural participation to widen the scope of democracy in public housing, while being wielded as a tool of voter coercion. Socio-culturally, design strategies of enclosure, ornamentation, and representation mediated and reinforced class distinctions between public housing and private condominiums. Economically, flat extensions served to redistributively increase home values and consolidate economic control under the PAP.

The paper concludes by advocating for critical engagement with architectural transformation. Contesting the popular conception of retrofit as a panacea—for gentrification, alienation, and carbon emissions—it calls for recognition of its contingencies and susceptibility to co-option.

Introduction

The history of Singapore's mass public housing programme is a story well chronicled. Following Singapore's acquisition of internal self-government from the British in 1959, the newly elected People's Action Party (PAP) established the Housing and Development Board (HDB) to address the urgent housing needs of an emergent nation.¹ As colonial rule had consigned many Singaporeans to overcrowded urban 'shophouses' and informal *kampong* squatter villages, the HDB embarked on an ambitious programme to provide improved living conditions for the masses, by radically reshaping Singapore's physical landscape. Through interrelated processes of compulsory land acquisition, forced resettlement, and large-scale new construction, Singaporeans were transplanted *en masse* into modernist, high-rise apartment blocks in centrally planned 'new towns'. By 1985, only two and a half decades after the HDB's establishment, it had rehoused upwards of 80% of the country's population in over 500,000 newly constructed flats, making up nearly 90% of the country's housing stock.² **(Fig. 1-2)**



(Fig. 1) Aerial view of Toa Payoh New Town, 1967. Ministry of Culture Collection, National Archives of Singapore.
(Fig. 2) HDB blocks at Lorong 4 Toa Payoh, 1971. *HDB Annual Report 1971* (Housing & Development Board, 1971). Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

Largely absent from established histories, however, is the later programme of large-scale 'upgrading' that transformed this existing housing stock from the late-1980s to early-2000s. As a key pillar of the state's vision for "the next lap" of Singapore's post-independence development, the HDB's 'Main Upgrading Programme' (MUP) formed a second, but far less well known, chapter in the radical reshaping of Singapore's physical landscape: new rooms and balconies were grafted onto existing high-rise

¹ Singapore, which had been governed under various forms of British rule from 1819, attained partial self-government in 1955, full internal self-government in 1959, independence as a state of Malaysia in 1963, and full independence as a sovereign country in 1965.

² Aline K Wong and Stephen H K Yeh, *Housing A Nation: 25 Years of Public Housing in Singapore* (Maruzen Asia for Housing & Development Board, 1985), 17.

flats; austere modernist facades were rendered colourful and embellished with postmodern ornamentation; and barren surroundings of grass and surface carparks were turned into lush parks and landscaped squares.³ **(Fig. 3)** The HDB's upgrading programme intended, in the words of the National Development Minister, to "bring about a complete change in perception of public housing", by transforming upwards of 500,000 homes.⁴



(Fig. 3) Kim Keat Court Demonstration Phase upgrading project, c.1995. *HDB Annual Report 1994-95* (Housing & Development Board, 1995). Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

³ Government of Singapore, *Singapore: The Next Lap* (Times Editions, 1991), 83; 'Govt unveils its vision of a future S'pore', *The Straits Times*, 23 February 1991.

⁴ 'HDB to transform old housing estates into quality precincts', *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989; 'Housing Board to transform its estates', *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989; 'HDB flats to be upgraded in move to create middle-class precincts', *The Business Times*, 12 July 1989.

This paper seeks to foreground the overlooked history of mass housing 'upgrading' by situating it within the evolving political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts of late-20th century Singapore. Specifically, this paper builds on scholarship that recognises mass housing and its architecture as *apparatuses* leveraged by the state toward multifaceted ends. Peter Marcuse, for example, has argued that benevolent housing policy is a "myth", better understood as serving historically contingent political and economic goals.⁵ Similarly, architectural historian Miles Glendinning notes that the history of 20th-century mass housing landscapes is inextricably linked to the state power that produced them.⁶ This paper extends this framework to state-led mass housing *transformation*, by asking, as primary research questions: *what roles were performed by the HDB's upgrading programme, and how was architecture used to enact these roles?*

Additionally, this paper seeks to contextualise the upgrading programme within existing scholarship addressing the political economy of public housing in Singapore. In a seminal 1990 study, Manuel Castells established the dialectic framework of *legitimacy* and *control* to analyse the Singaporean government's political uses of the public housing programme.⁷ Expanding on Castells, sociologist Chua Beng Huat has argued that public housing functioned as a means to both secure enduring political legitimacy for the PAP, while entrenching its single-party, authoritarian, and paternalistic rule within Singapore's 'illiberal' parliamentary democracy.⁸ This paper extends this dialectic framework to public housing upgrading specifically, by asking, as a secondary research question: *how did the upgrading programme serve to strengthen political legitimacy and enact control?*

Three 'spheres' are thus identified within which it is argued the upgrading programme performed by deploying specific architectural strategies. First, in an explicitly political sphere, architectural strategies of participation were used to expand the scope of democracy in relation to public housing, while paradoxically being wielded as tools of voter coercion. Second, in the socio-cultural sphere of class distinction, strategies of enclosure, ornamentation, and media representation

⁵ Peter Marcuse, "Housing Policy and the Myth of the Benevolent State", *Social Policy* 8, no. 4 (1978): 21-6. See also: Peter Marcuse and David Madden, *In Defense of Housing* (Verso, 2016), 119-44.

⁶ Miles Glendinning, *Mass Housing: Modern Architecture & State Power* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 1-8.

⁷ Manuel Castells, Lee Goh, and R Yin-Wang Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development & Public Housing in Hong Kong & Singapore* (Pion, 1990), 303-22.

⁸ Having remained in power for 66 years (1959 to the present day), the PAP is currently the longest governing political party in the world. The Singapore Government is therefore synonymous with PAP single-party rule. Chua Beng Huat, *Political Legitimacy & Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (Routledge, 1997), 124-51. See also: Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (Macmillan Press, 1994), 45-73; Siew Eng Teo & Lily Kong, 'Public Housing in Singapore: Interpreting 'Quality' in the 1990s', *Urban Studies* 34, no. 3 (March 1997): 441-452.

were used to simultaneously remediate and entrench disparities between public and private housing. Third, in an economic sphere, an architectural strategy of high-rise flat extensions served to 'redistributively' increase home values, while also increasing dependence on state-backed assets and architectural agency as a form of economic control.

These arguments will be advanced through a two-fold methodology. First, primary resources – including government annual reports, newspapers, transcripts of political speeches, and historical photographs – will be analysed as both *records* of the upgrading programme, as well as *active agents* within it, recognised as the media through which the transformation of built form was publicised and legitimated.⁹ Additionally, secondary resources will be employed to situate the upgrading programme in the broader context of intersecting political, economic, and socio-cultural shifts in late-20th century Singapore.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this paper was conceived in the context of ongoing debates about the future of Singapore's public housing stock.¹⁰ As an invited representative of conservation non-profit Docomomo Singapore at a government roundtable discussion on heritage planning in 2024, I put to the HDB's current Chief Planner that possible futures for Singapore's existing housing stock should be envisioned with a critical understanding of the radical history of upgrading which is today dismissed as prosaic. This paper is therefore, above all, an attempt to establish that critical history.

⁹ For mass media's role in the production of architecture, see: Kester Rattenbury ed., *This is Not Architecture* (Routledge, 2002), xxi-xxiv. Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy & Publicity: Modern Architecture & Mass Media* (MIT Press, 1994).

¹⁰ See for example: Ng Keng Gene, 'Public housing should be protected as heritage for future generations: DP Architects CEO', *The Straits Times*, 24 January 2022. Ng Keng Gene, 'Retention of Siglap HDB block shows everyday, ordinary buildings matter', *The Straits Times*, 12 October 2024.

Political Sphere: Between Participation and Coercion

The first sphere in which the HDB's upgrading programme performed was the explicitly political. Specifically, upgrading was a cornerstone of efforts by a 'new guard' of PAP leadership to introduce a more 'consultative' style of government, in an effort to move away from authoritarian approaches increasingly resisted by a maturing voter base.¹¹ Within this context, architectural strategies of participation, mediated by new forms of local government, served to expand the scope of democracy in relation to public housing. However, these same instruments of participation were subsequently co-opted by the state as instruments of political coercion, serving to reinforce the PAP's single-party control.

Devolved Local Governance of Public Housing

From the establishment of the HDB in 1960, public housing in Singapore was a product of top-down, technocratic imposition of rationalised environments upon a largely informally housed population. While the HDB's use of sweeping powers of eminent domain and forced resettlement thus met resistance in the early years of its building drive, its provision of vast, affordable improvements to standards of living for a chronically underhoused population subsequently saw this resistance translated into broad-based support.¹²

However, the HDB's tendencies toward top-down rule extended beyond building to include the management of public housing stock, and it is in this realm that it began to foster increasing resentment among an effectively captive populace.¹³ As Castells et al have argued, by the mid-1980s the HDB had "amassed great ill feeling among the population due to its authoritarian tendencies," including evictions for rent arrears, blasé rejection of requests to repair poor workmanship, and debarring applicants for applying for public housing for minor offenses such as littering.¹⁴ The egregiousness of the HDB's authoritarian management was exacerbated by the fact that it had, by this point, become Singapore's effective monopoly housing provider, governing the day-to-day lives of 90% of Singaporeans.¹⁵ Having evolved into a "quasi-autonomous entity with its own system of legitimation", the HDB was even indicted, in unprecedented fashion, by members of the ruling PAP itself, who

¹¹ Jon S T Quah, 'Public Administration: Change in Style & Continuity in Policy', in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*, ed. Bridget Welsh, James Chin, Arun Mahizhnan, and Tan Tarn How (NUS Press, 2009), 50-3.

¹² Chua, *Political Legitimacy & Housing*, 134.

¹³ Chua Beng Huat, 'Not Depoliticised by Ideologically Successful: The Public Housing Programme in Singapore', in *Understanding Singapore Society*, ed. Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ser Ern (Times Academic Press, 1997), 307-27.

¹⁴ Castells, Goh, and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 290-302.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 297.

criticised the agency as a “feudalistic landlord” and accused its CEO of acting as the unelected “Chief Minister of Singapore”.¹⁶

In response to growing criticisms of the consolidated power wielded by the HDB, as well as part of a broader, concerted ‘consultative’ shift in governing style, the newly-elected PAP Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong thus devolved management of public housing estates in 1990 to new institutions of local government known as Town Councils.¹⁷ Chaired by locally elected political representatives alongside ‘grassroots’ resident members, Town Councils took over the day-to-day running of housing estates from the HDB. Ideologically, this new form of local government was legitimated as a way “to give Singaporeans the chance to decide for themselves the kind of environment they prefer”, through principles such “self-help”, “community participation”, and “flexibility”.¹⁸

Participatory Mass Upgrading Between the Symbolic and Substantive

The consultative principles introduced to the *management* of public housing estates through Town Councils were subsequently extended to their *physical transformation*, through opportunities for resident participation in the upgrading programme. From the upgrading programme’s announcement in 1989, participation was emphasised as key processual feature, a “concrete translation of the Government’s philosophy of giving residents [...] more say in how they want to live their lives.”¹⁹ As a direct attempt to shed the PAP’s paternalistic reputation, Prime Minister Goh stressed that “the key element here is choice. [Upgrading] is the choice of the people. We won’t force it on them.”²⁰

These participatory rhetorics were translated into specific architectural strategies of co-design, public exhibitions, and voting. As a central goal of upgrading was to differentiate the “faceless” landscape of standardised mass housing, the first step in this process was the delineation of “precincts” of four to seven housing blocks, within which co-design processes could foster a sense of “ownership”, “community”, and “identity”.²¹ Subsequently, a working committee – comprising the HDB, who managed and oversaw upgrading projects; architects, either from the HDB or private practice; and Town Councillors, who acted as intermediaries – conducted surveys,

¹⁶ Ludicrous piece of legislation – Dr Toh’, *The Straits Times*, 1 August 1986. ‘BG Lee – chance for opposition’ *The Business Times*, 30 March 1987.

¹⁷ Ooi Giok Ling, ‘Reshaping Urban Space: From a Tropical to Global City’, in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*, ed. Bridget Welsh, James Chin, Arun Mahizhnan, and Tan Tarn How (NUS Press, 2009), 281.

¹⁸ ‘My kind of town’, *The Straits Times*, 7 April 1987.

¹⁹ ‘Housing Board to transform its estates’, *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989.

²⁰ ‘Old flats to be demolished, not upgraded’, *The Straits Times*, 19 August 1991.

²¹ ‘HDB to transform old housing estates into quality precincts’, *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989.

hosted town hall meetings, and organised design briefing and feedback sessions with residents, while communicating structural, cost, and technical limitations.²² The scope of these design deliberations included the style of new facades, the type and size of extensions to individual flats, landscaping and public amenities, as well as estate 'theming'. Based on these discussions, architects would then produce a set of final design options that "reflect[ed] the collective views of the residents".²³

These claims, however, belied criticisms regarding the extent to which upgrading was truly participatory. Residents complained, for example, that working committees tried to "bulldoze projects", nominally offering a variety of design options but unilaterally deciding on features that many residents did not want.²⁴ More structurally, architect and activist Tay Kheng Soon has noted that "the governing condition in the dialogue process was price control within strictly defined budget categories", creating conditions within which "uniformity prevailed" and outcomes were "to the complete liking of neither the participating architects nor the communities".²⁵ Given these limitations, the nature of 'participation' offered in the upgrading programme may be better understood as efforts to build consensus around schemes that remained ultimately authored by the state.



(Fig. 4-5) Opening of the upgrading exhibition for the Kim Keat Court Demonstration Phase project, 13 March 1992. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore.

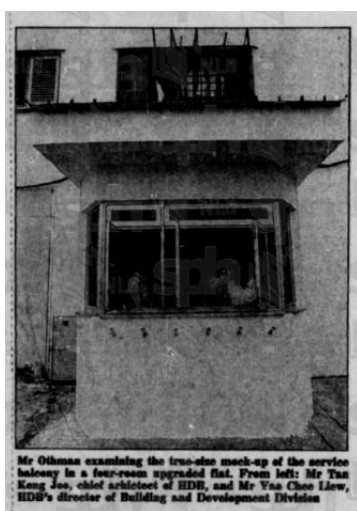
²² 'Upgrade yes, but give us more say', *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1992; 'Precincts 'will create stronger ties', *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989.

²³ 'HDB residents must give clear signal on flat upgrading: Goh', *The Business Times*, 7 March 1992.

²⁴ 'Upgrading politics', *The Straits Times*, 17 April 1992.

²⁵ Tay Kheng Soon, 'Missed Opportunities for a Humane Style: Singapore Architecture', in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*, ed. Bridget Welsh, James Chin, Arun Mahizhnan, and Tan Tarn How (NUS Press, 2009), 506-7.

Within this context of 'limited participation', multiple forms of architectural media were deployed to persuade residents to endorse the state's designs, as well as politically legitimate the success of 'co-design' processes.²⁶ The cornerstone of these media strategies were high-profile 'upgrading exhibitions' (**Fig. 4-5**), which showcased final design options with models, both of individual flats and whole precincts; renders, depicting idyllic scenes of life in the upgraded neighbourhood; floor plans, representing improvements in technical terms; and full-sized mock-up flats (**Fig. 6-7**), allowing residents to experience first-hand the tangible changes upgrading would bring to their homes.²⁷ In presenting varied types of architectural media that demonstrated the benefits of upgrading in multiple curated forms, exhibitions functioned as highly effective persuasive platforms – both to build residents' support for the state's design options, as well as to convince residents to undertake the financial costs and practical inconveniences upgrading entailed.



Mr Othman examining the true-size mock-up of the service balcony in a four-room upgraded flat. From left: Mr Tan Keng Joo, chief architect of HDB, and Mr Yeo Choo Liew, HDB's director of Building and Development Division



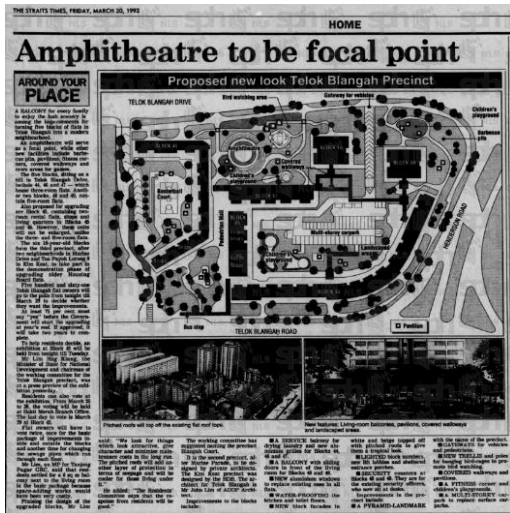
(Fig. 6) Mock-up flat extension at the Marine Drive Demonstration Phase upgrading exhibition, 5 March 1992. 'Voting tonight on new-look Marine Parade', *The Straits Times*, 6 March 1992. Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

(Fig. 7) Guests inside the mock-up upgraded flat at the Marine Drive Demonstration Phase upgrading exhibition, 5 March 1992. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore.

²⁶ Notably, the strategic use of the media in the upgrading programme was informed by American public relations consultancy Burson-Marsteller, who was hired by the HDB in 1990 to organise a "creative and strategic [...] media blitz", spanning print media, videos, in-person dialogue sessions, and a public enquiry hotline. 'Upgrading exercise: Flats in six areas will be the showpiece', *The Straits Times*, 4 August 1990; 'HDB hires PR firm to 'sell' upgrading plan', *The Straits Times*, 23 August 1990.

²⁷ See for example: 'Exhibitions to help residents decide', *The Business Times*, 27 February 1992; 'Voting tonight on new-look Marine Parade', *The Straits Times*, 6 March 1992; 'Kim Keat residents to vote on upgrading from tonight', *The Straits Times*, 13 March 1992.

Notably, the audience for this persuasive media was conceived beyond the confines of the physical exhibition. As an opportunity to generate support for the upgrading programme from the wider population, exhibition materials were also reproduced in the mass media, with the national broadsheet, *The Straits Times* running dedicated weekly columns featuring upgrading proposals throughout 1992. (Fig. 8-9)



(Fig. 8) Newspaper article illustrating Telok Blangah Demonstration Phase upgrading project. 'Amphitheatre to be focal point', *The Straits Times*, 20 March 1992. Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

(Fig. 9) Newspaper article illustrating Ang Mo Kio Demonstration Phase upgrading project. 'Bigger bedrooms, better landscaping', *The Straits Times*, 26 March 1992. Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

Moreover, these exhibitions served as political publicity opportunities, allowing the PAP to legitimate the success of new participatory processes. The opening ceremonies of upgrading exhibitions were thus accompanied by statements from politicians that framed the design schemes presented as reflecting the "needs and aspirations of residents", and products of "dialogues and consultations".²⁸ Here, architectural representations, accompanied with 'participatory' rhetoric, thus functioned as a medium through which the PAP could testify to the success of its consultative governance as *demonstrably embodied in architectural forms*, the reality of limited participation notwithstanding.

²⁸ 'HDB residents must give clear signal on flat upgrading: Goh', *The Business Times*, 7 March 1992.



(Fig. 10) The voting process at the Kim Keat Court Demonstration Phase upgrading project, 13 March 1992. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore.

The final, and perhaps most substantively democratic stage of this process was the voting by which upgrading schemes were decided upon. Each upgrading proposal required 75% support to proceed, with an additional 75% vote required for 'optional extras' such as flat extensions.²⁹ Significantly, the voting process resembled a curated reenactment of political elections, with residents casting confidential ballots in public polling boxes – an analogy strengthened by media reporting on residents 'going to the polls'.³⁰ (Fig. 10) Imbued with moral rhetoric by statements such as "the majority wins as that is democracy", voting thus functioned alongside co-design processes and upgrading exhibitions as both symbolic and, to varying extents, substantive markers of expanded citizen participation in the realm of public housing.

Conditional Participation and Political Coercion

The sincerity of this participatory turn in public housing was, however, called into question in 1991, when both Town Councils and the upgrading programme were co-opted by the PAP as instruments of political coercion.³¹

²⁹ 'Residents will get to see flat mock-ups', *The Straits Times*, 8 October 1991.

³⁰ See for example: 'Flat upgrading: 65% of Marine Parade votes in', *The Straits Times*, 10 March 1992; 'More than 90% of residents say yes', *The Straits Times*, 21 March 1992.

³¹ The timing of this coercive shift was significant, as it followed the 1991 General Election in which the PAP saw its lowest ever level of popular support and the loss of several parliamentary seats to opposition parties. Hussin Mutalib, 'Singapore's 1991 General Election', *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1992): 299-309.

From their inception in the mid-1980s, Town Councils were intended to function as so-called “stabilisers to [the] democratic political system.”³² The need to ensure ‘stability’ referred to a belief held by the PAP that public housing residents were excessively willing to vote for opposition parties because of an absence of ‘material consequences’, as housing services were provided centrally by the HDB as a national agency.³³ In devolving the provision of housing services to local government, the PAP thus sought to cultivate “voter accountability for the Members of Parliament [residents] would vote into political office”.³⁴ By coercively suggesting opposition-voting constituencies would “pay the price of a badly run Town Council” – jeopardizing the management, maintenance, and by extension, value of homes – the PAP effectively “politicise[d] the standards and costs of running [the] public housing estates in which some 90 percent of Singaporeans live.”³⁵

In April 1992, a similar logic was extended to the upgrading programme. In what came to be popularly known as the ‘Votes for Upgrading’ saga, Prime Minister Goh announced that precincts for upgrading would not only be identified based on the age and condition of housing stock (i.e. need), but on constituencies’ level of support for the PAP.³⁶ Claiming that “there must be a nexus between your vote and the people who deliver your programmes for you”, the PAP effectively instrumentalised public housing upgrading – a national programme funded by taxpayers – for party-political gains.³⁷ This coercive logic was made explicit in threats to opposition-voting wards, who were offered a “second chance” to be upgraded by voting for the ruling party, or otherwise become “slums”.³⁸ By turning architectural improvements into a political vessel, upgrading became a means to enact “state discrimination”, consolidate “identification of social and economic progress with the PAP”, and thus, in paradoxical contrast to espoused participatory values, a coercive instrument to generate political acquiescence to the PAP.³⁹

³² Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control*, 64.

³³ *Ibid*, 64.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 62-65.

³⁵ Ooi, ‘Reshaping Urban Space’, 281-2.

³⁶ ‘Vote will decide upgrading priority’, *The Straits Times*, 13 April 1992.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ ‘Vote will decide upgrading priority’, *The Straits Times*, 13 April 1992; Garry Rodan, ‘Goh’s Consensus Politics of Authoritarian Rule’, in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*, ed. Bridget Welsh, James Chin, Arun Mahizhnan, and Tan Tarn How (NUS Press, 2009), 68.

³⁹ Rodan, ‘Goh’s Consensus Politics of Authoritarian Rule’, 62.

Socio-Cultural Sphere: Between Egalitarian Luxury and 'Aspirational' Distinction

In addition to the explicitly political role played by upgrading programme in the realm of participatory processes, the transformation of public housing stock was also deeply enmeshed with evolving cultural politics of class in late-20th century Singapore. Specifically, architectural strategies of enclosure, ornamentation and media representation served as mechanisms to 'manage' an emerging class stratification, embodied by a growing gap between public housing and exclusive private condominiums. However, the extent to which this 'condominium-isation' of public housing could remediate disparities between housing classes was circumscribed by a contradictory ideological commitment to private property as a competition-motivating 'aspirational good'.

*"Keeping up with the Tans": Private Condominiums and Social Stratification*⁴⁰

Sociologists Chua Beng Huat and Tan Joo Ean have argued that, by the 1990s, thirty years of rapid economic growth had transformed Singaporean society from one that was "homogeneously poor [...] to one where social stratification by income [was] becoming increasingly apparent."⁴¹ Despite the seeming "homogenisation of everyday life" produced by Singapore's statist model of capitalist development – wherein collective goods such as public housing, education, transportation, and healthcare were provided centrally by the state – Chua and Tan identified growing inequities in the emergence of "new middle class", which distinguished itself through the conspicuous consumption of "positional goods".⁴² Central among the goods which underpinned Singaporeans' 'new middle class' imaginaries was the private condominium.⁴³

Private condominiums emerged in Singapore in the 1970s as a new form of housing positioned as "more exclusive, prestigious, and desirable than HDB flats", and were thus differentiated from public housing in various ways.⁴⁴ Architecturally,

⁴⁰ Tan' is a common Chinese surname in Singapore. This quote is therefore a localised adaptation of the idiom 'keeping up with the Joneses', referring to comparisons of social class, particularly in the realm of material accumulation. 'Why condos when HDB flats can be very good value?', *The Straits Times*, 12 June 1992.

⁴¹ Chua Beng Huat and Tan Joo Ean, 'Singapore: Where the new middle class sets the standard', in *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia*, ed. Michael Pinches (Routledge, 1999), 138.

⁴² Chua and Tan, 'Singapore: Where the new middle class', 138-9.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 139.

⁴⁴ Choon Piew Pow, 'Public intervention, private aspiration: Gated communities and the condominiumisation of housing landscapes in Singapore', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 50, no. 2 (August 2009): 219. See also: Tai-Chee Wong and Adriel Yap, 'From universal public housing to meeting the increasing aspiration for private housing in Singapore', *Habitat International* 27 (2003): 361-380.

condominiums were distinguished by their gated enclosure, featuring boundary walls and private security guards; their provision of exclusive amenities, including swimming pools, tennis courts, and club houses; and in their ostentatious high-rise postmodern design.⁴⁵ Economically, condominiums were constructed by speculative private developers and thus cost as much as three times more than equivalent public housing flats.⁴⁶ Consequently, private condominiums formed highly exclusive enclaves, catering only to the upper-classes, constituting only 4.1% of households in 1994.⁴⁷

Geographer Choon Piew Pow, drawing from Bourdieu, has thus argued that private condominiums constituted a form of “symbolic capital”⁴⁸: a means by which residents could receive “recognition” for their wealth from others, and thereby accumulate societal “prestige”.⁴⁹ Notably, media representations were central to the construction of condominiums’ symbolic capital. For example, ubiquitous full-spread newspaper advertisements deployed architectural renderings and evocative copy, alluding to ‘luxurious’, ‘western’, and ‘resort’ forms of living, to visually and rhetorically construct condominiums as symbols of elevated class status. **(Fig. 11)**

⁴⁵ For an overview of the development of architectural postmodernism in Singapore, see: Robert Powell, ‘Fragments of a Postmodern Landscape’, in *Postmodern Singapore*, ed. William S.W. Lim (Select Publishing, 2002), 85-105; Jiat-Hwee Chang and Jason Ng, ‘Postmodernism’, *Docomomo Singapore*, 21 May 2021.

⁴⁶ Chua and Tan, ‘Singapore: Where the new middle class’, 138-9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 139.

⁴⁸ Choon Piew Pow, ‘Public intervention, private aspiration’, 219-20.

⁴⁹ Helena Webster, *Bourdieu for Architects* (Routledge, 2011), 30-31. See also: Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J Richardson (Greenwood, 1986), 241-58. Notably, ‘symbolic capital’ is inherently related to but distinct from material wealth. Chua Beng Huat, notes, for example, that Singaporean condominium owners often prioritised the outward projection of prestige conferred by their residences over economic security. See: Chua and Tan, ‘Singapore: Where the new middle class’, 147.

FREEHOLD

Easy Installments Available
NO RESTRICTION ON FOREIGNERS

SHOW APARTMENTS OPEN FOR VIEWING

Bullion Park
LUXURIOUS CONDOMINIUM
PHASE 1

Bullion Park offers Hawaiian-style landscaping, fountains, lagoon, footbridge, a magnificent gateway, country club facilities, breathtaking reservoir scenery and close proximity to Yio Chu Kang MRT Station.

Bullion Park luxurious condominium is strategically located at the junction of Yio Chu Kang Road, Lorong Areal, Lorong Road and is adjacent to Pudu Park. Only minutes away from the Central Expressway with access to Orchard Road and the City Centre and the Yio Chu Kang MRT Station is just around the corner. Schools, supermarkets, public library, food centres, cinemas, children's playground and leisure amenities can be found in the vicinity.

Bullion Park luxurious condominium is a masterpiece of a private and exclusive club. The facilities include large-scale indoor club house, a large swimming pool, tennis court, play fountain, lagoon, foot-bridge, BBQ / picnic area, 3 tennis courts with viewing gallery, 3 squash courts, games room, function room, gymnasium, billiard room, table-tennis room, children's playroom or child care centre, sauna, children's playground, jogging track, outdoor keep-fit equipment, fountain, multi-purpose court and 10 shelters for relaxation and chess-playing. A grand entrance with beautiful landscaping welcomes you when you arrive. There will be ample covered car parks.

Bullion Park luxurious condominium is equipped with internet installations to enhance the comprehensive security and will be professionally managed.

BULLION PROPERTIES PTE LTD
#06-00 6th Storey, Far East Plaza (Next to Hyatt Hotel) 14, Scotts Road,
Singapore 0922 TEL: 2352411 (24 lines) SITE SALES OFFICE TEL: 4556571/4556572
OPEN DAILY INCLUDING SUNDAYS & PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

(Fig. 11) Advertisement for 'Bullion Park' private condominium. *The Straits Times*, 1 April 1990. Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

Despite a general 'aspirational consensus' among Singaporeans in the late-20th century, the growing stratification visibly embodied in forms of 'symbolic capital' such as private condominiums began to create societal ruptures that the PAP saw the need to remedy. Broadly, visible disparities undermined myths of Singapore as an egalitarian, "homogeneously middle-class" society, that were central to political narratives of 'common upliftment'.⁵⁰ More specifically, the PAP's commitment that *all* Singaporeans' standards of living would be continuously improved through public housing provision threatened to be undermined when ageing public housing stock was compared to the ever-increasing luxury of new private condominiums. There

⁵⁰ Chua and Tan, 'Singapore: Where the new middle class', 155.

thus arose what Lily Kong and Siew Eng Teo termed a “politics of quality” in housing in the 1990s: a need to “manage Singaporeans’ aspirations to own private property”⁵¹, and, importantly, create “the impressions that public housing estates [were] not of inferior quality compared to private condominiums”.⁵²

Architectural Upgrading as Symbolic Capital Redistribution

The imperative to ‘manage’ the gap between public and private housing was therefore central to both the ideological and architectural conception of public housing upgrading. From the programme’s announcement in 1989, allusions to private condominiums were central in media and political narratives of upgrading: public housing estates would see “the dawn of a new lifestyle – a hybrid HDB-condo way of living”⁵³; be transformed from “ghettos” into “beautiful condominium estates”⁵⁴; and allow residents to “enjoy a sense of privacy and exclusivity as though they [were] living in a private condominium.”⁵⁵ (Fig. 12-13)



(Fig. 12) ‘Condo-style living for Marine Drive HDB Residents’, *Weekend East*, 9 January 1992. Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

(Fig. 13) ‘From ‘ghetto to condo’ – after demo upgrading of old flats’, *The Straits Times*, 4 October 1994. Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

The allusion to condominiums was not simply a rhetorical exercise, however. Rather, the HDB sought to *physically reshape* public housing estates in the image of condominiums through architectural strategies of enclosure, ornamentation, and media representation.

⁵¹ Ooi Giok Ling, ‘Understanding a society’s need for space’, *The Business Times*, 27 February 1993.

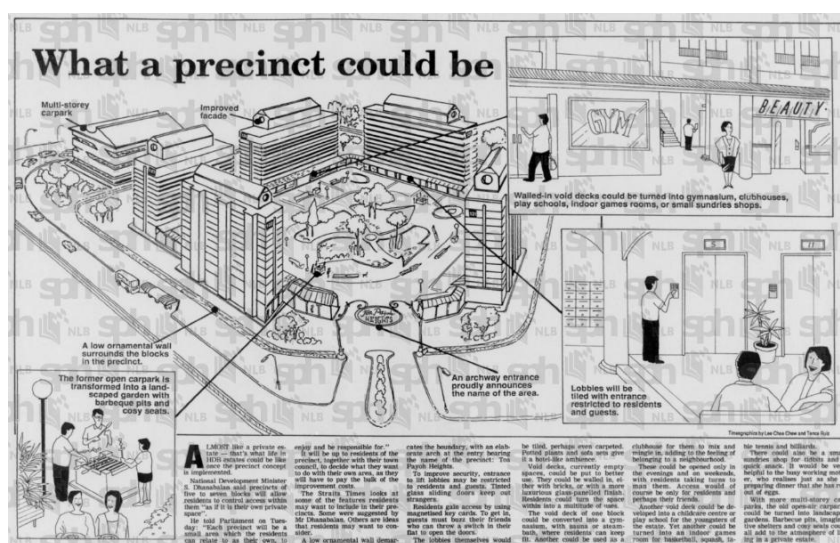
⁵² Teo and Kong, ‘Public Housing in Singapore’, 448.

⁵³ ‘Better living for tomorrow’, *The Straits Times*, 17 October 1989.

⁵⁴ ‘From ‘ghetto to condo’ – after demo upgrading of old flats’, *The Straits Times*, 4 October 1994; ‘A new chapter in HDB living’, *The Straits Times*, 7 March 1992.

⁵⁵ ‘Condo-style living for Marine Drive HDB residents’, *Weekend East*, 9 January 1992.

Privacy and security, key characteristics of gated condominiums, therefore informed the planning of semi-enclosed 'precincts' comprising four to seven existing public housing blocks. Upgraded precincts would be demarcated by "low ornamental walls", feature main entrance gateways, and, in contrast to the hitherto public nature of HDB estates, include gated lobbies with security systems that restricted access to non-residents.⁵⁶ Similarly, the HDB sought to recreate condominiums' private recreational facilities by offering barbeque pits, landscaped gardens, pavilions, and games courts in upgraded public housing precincts.⁵⁷ In drawing directly from the spatial features through which privacy – both real and symbolic – was enacted in private condominiums, the HDB thus expressly sought to "instil condo-style territorial exclusiveness" in public housing estates.⁵⁸ (Fig. 14)



(Fig. 14) 'What a precinct could be', *The Straits Times*, 13 July 1989. Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

Perhaps the most significant allusion to private condominiums in the upgrading programme was, however, the architectural transformation of existing public housing façades. Framed in the seductive terms of before-and-after 'makeovers', façade transformations formed *the* emblematic image of the upgrading programme, symbolically rejecting the austere, standardised modernism of the 1960s-70s in favour of a highly variegated postmodernism.⁵⁹ (Fig. 15)

⁵⁶ 'What a precinct could be', *The Straits Times*, 13 July 1989.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ 'Better living for tomorrow', *The Straits Times*, 17 October 1989.

⁵⁹ Robbie BH Goh, 'Ideologies of 'Upgrading' in Singapore Public Housing: Post-modern Style, Globalisation and Class Construction in the Built Environment', *Urban Studies* 38, no. 9 (2001): 1589-1604.



(Fig. 15) Elevations of a Demonstration Phase upgrading project, published in *Singapore: The Next Lap*, a milestone PAP political manifesto and long-term development plan for Singapore, c.1991. Government of Singapore, *Singapore: The Next Lap* (Times Editions, 1991), 83.

Rectilinear elevations finished in fair-faced brickwork and plastered concrete were thus rendered pop-colourful and adorned with a wide variety of ornamental features, including tiled pitched roofs, pediments, mock-Tudor fascia, abstracted classical columns, 'vernacular'-inspired breeze blocks, and deconstructivist geometric steel armatures. (Fig. 16-17) In seeking to materialise a sense of "quality and distinctiveness", these transformations directly mimicked the ostentatious postmodern architecture of contemporary private condominiums.⁶⁰ Relatedly, private architects involved in upgrading projects with experience in condominium design became themselves markers of symbolic capital, receiving special media attention.⁶¹

⁶⁰ 'HDB to transform old housing estates into quality precincts', *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989.

⁶¹ For example, Prodecon and Deka Architects, to whom HDB upgrading projects were tendered, were also reported as having designed condominiums such as 'Chashew Heights', 'Flamingo Valley' and 'The Summit'. See for example: 'St Michael owners can choose private architect's design', *The Straits Times*, 8 October 1993; '3 old HDB towns first to upgrade using private architects' design', *The Straits Times*, 24 May 1993.



(Fig. 16) Decorative features at the Crescent View upgraded precinct, c.1998. *HDB Annual Report 1997-98* (Housing & Development Board, 1998). Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

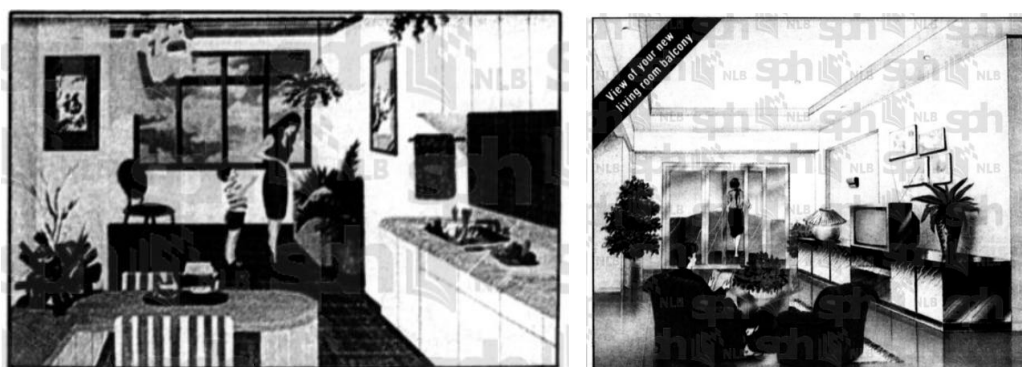
(Fig. 17) Commonwealth Avenue West Demonstration Phase upgrading precinct, c.1996. *HDB Annual Report 1995-96* (Housing & Development Board, 1996). Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

To legitimate these physical architectural transformations, the 'condominium-isation' of public housing was also enacted through specific forms of media representation. While public housing projects had historically been depicted in standardised 'type' plans, each upgrading project was accompanied by original coloured exterior and interior renders, widely published in the media and distributed to residents – signifying a shift toward highly differentiated and affective appeals to the 'good life'. **(Fig. 18-19)** These images drew directly from condominium advertisements and their visual constructions of leisure and prestige – exemplified by scenes of idyllic parks and domestic luxury, and strengthened by emotive copy that described "resort-style" living – to imbue public housing landscapes with upper-class associations.⁶²

⁶² 'Resort-style design for Lorong Lew Lian', *The Straits Times*, 9 April 1992.



(Fig. 18) Renderings of HDB Demonstration Phase upgrading projects at (clockwise from top-left) Kim Keat, Commonwealth Avenue West, Ang Mo Kio, Lorong Liew Lian, Marine Drive, and Telok Blangah. *HDB Annual Report 1991-92* (Housing & Development Board, 1992). Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore.



(Fig. 19) Renderings of upgraded flat interiors. 'Poling dates for Marine Drive Residents', *Weekend East*, 13 February 1992. Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore.

Together, these architectural strategies of enclosure, ornamentation, and representation, can thus be understood as attempts by the state to redistribute the symbolic capital associated with private condominiums, and thereby 'manage' class stratification in the realm of public housing.⁶³

Housing Disparities as a Competition-Motivating 'Prize'

Despite these real and rhetorical overtures toward egalitarian improvements to the quality of public housing, there remained a significant gap between upgraded public housing and private condominiums. Underlying this contradiction was a broader ideological tension between egalitarianism and capitalistic meritocracy in late-20th century Singapore. While the PAP was founded in the 1950s as an anti-colonial socialist party, the party progressively reoriented itself from the 1960s to principles of meritocracy and individual self-reliance, to compete in an increasingly globalised capitalist world economy.⁶⁴ On acceding the Prime Ministership in 1990, Goh Chok Tong thus stated:

*"For Singapore to thrive and grow, we must make our free-market system even more efficient. [...] It is right that the business-minded, the able, the skilled, and more hard working men and women end up better off than their less able colleagues [...] Do not grudge their higher earnings, or metaphorically, for getting bigger prizes in the free market."*⁶⁵

Within this framework of competitive meritocracy, private housing played an important role as a competition-motivating 'prize'. As Choon Piew Pow has argued, "the prestige and desirability of exclusive condominium estates [...] serve as a status enhancement target that spurs the work ethic of those hoping to reach the upper echelons of the housing market".⁶⁶ It follows that, improvements to public housing had to be restrained, lest they undermined the disparities between housing classes ideologically constructed as necessary to motivate a competitive workforce.

This tension materialised in enduring differences between upgraded public housing estates and private condominiums. For example, the HDB's initial vision of reterritorializing public housing estates as pseudo-private walled enclaves was

⁶³ 'HDB to transform old housing estates into quality precincts', *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1989

⁶⁴ See for example: Cedric Pugh, 'The Political Economy of Public Housing', in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, eds. Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 845-849; Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control*, 56-7; Chua and Tan, 'Singapore: Where the new middle class', 155.

⁶⁵ 'Speech delivered by Prime Minister Goh at the Housing and Development Board Staff Union 23rd Anniversary Celebrations', 29 December 1990, National Archives of Singapore.

⁶⁶ Choon Piew Pow, 'Public intervention, private aspiration', 223.

never widely realised, with precincts remaining largely open to public circulation. Similarly, it was unfeasible for the HDB to provide private amenities such as club houses, tennis courts, and swimming pools at a scale akin to condominiums. These facilities were instead provided collectively at large community centres and sports complexes, with a corresponding absence of exclusivity.



(Fig. 20) Redhill upgraded precinct, designed by private architectural practice Deka Architects, c.1998. *HDB Annual Report 1997-98* (Housing & Development Board, 1998). Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.



(Fig. 21) Ang Mo Kio demonstration phase upgrading precinct, c.1996. *HDB Annual Report 1995-96* (Housing & Development Board, 1996). Collection of the National Library Board Singapore.

Additionally, while some upgrading projects were more successful in their façade 'makeovers' (**Fig. 20**), many others belied the standardised, budget-constrained, and 'clip-on' nature of improvements that did less to change the image of blocks as products of 1960s-70s austerity.⁶⁷ (**Fig. 21**) Finally, despite the depictions of domestic luxury in interior renders of upgraded flats, the programme only realised comparatively bare additions to floor area, replacement of some toilet and kitchen finishes, and installation of new windows.⁶⁸

Thus, while upgrading did succeed in reforming the image of existing public housing stock, it did not do so to the extent of that was constructed by early media and political narratives. Rather, headlines promising 'ghetto to condo' transformations, architectural representations of the 'good life', and forms of postmodern ornamentation, all belied the necessity to maintain a distinction between mass public housing and private condominiums. Only in maintaining this disparity could the PAP uphold the ideologically constructed role of exclusive private housing as a competition-motivating 'prize' within a capitalist meritocratic system.

⁶⁷ Disparities between promised 'condo-style' architecture and realised upgrading projects were widened when, as part of cost-cutting measures in 2000, emphasis on improving the external appearance of public housing blocks was significantly reduced. See: David Kim Hin Ho, Eddie Chi-man Hui and Muhammad Faishal Bin Ibrahim, 'Asset Value Enhancement of Singapore's Public Housing Main Upgrading Programme (MUP) Policy: A Real Option Analysis Approach', *Urban Studies* 46, no. 11 (October 2009): 2238.

⁶⁸ Teo and Kong, 'Public Housing in Singapore', 444.

Economic Sphere: Between Redistributive 'Shareholding' and Asset-Owning Dependence

The third and final sphere within which the upgrading programme performed was explicitly economic. Specifically, the state employed the architectural strategy of high-rise flat extensions to increase home values within Singapore's unique system of commoditised 'ownership' of public housing flats, ideologically legitimated within a redistributive framework of 'shareholding' in Singapore's success. However, upgrading also served to increase Singaporeans' dependence on state-backed assets and architectural agency, consolidating the PAP's basis for economic control.

The Commoditisation of Public Housing in Singapore

As Chua Beng Huat has argued, Singapore's public housing system, like many post-war housing systems globally, underwent progressive commoditisation in the latter-half of the 20th-century.⁶⁹ Following the HDB's establishment in 1960, public housing was provided on an exclusively subsidised rental-basis, catering to the lowest classes most in need of housing through the provision of "emergency flats".⁷⁰ Public housing in this era was a distinctly "people's issue", grounded in the PAP's early leftist politics.⁷¹



(Fig. 22) Poster for the HDB's 'Home Ownership for the People' scheme, 17 October 1966. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

⁶⁹ Chua Beng Huat, *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation: The Political Economy of Singapore's Public Housing* (NUS Press, 2024), 57-61.

⁷⁰ Chua, *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation*, 46.

⁷¹ Cedric Pugh, 'Housing and Development in Singapore', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 6, no. 4 (March 1985): 279.

This changed in 1964, with the launch of the 'Home Ownership for the People' programme, which allowed the purchase of 99-year leaseholds on state-built flats, and aimed to create a "nation of homeowners".⁷² (Fig. 22) In the view of PAP leaders, homeownership would help to incorporate a multiracial, largely immigrant population into the new nation, encourage a sense of custodianship over housing environments, and engender support for the prevailing political system.⁷³ While initially faltering, take-up of the homeownership programme increased significantly in 1968 with the provision that individuals' savings in their national retirement accounts could be used for public housing purchases.⁷⁴ The commoditisation of public housing was expanded significantly in 1971 with the creation of a 'resale' market for public housing flats. This market was progressively liberalised throughout the 1980s, leading to public housing's effective transformation from "accommodation with use value into a market commodity, a stored-value asset with an exchange value".⁷⁵ (Fig. 23-24)

Prices of resale HDB flats have surged 30-50pc in just 2 months. Sylvia Wong finds out why

Big jump in HDB resale prices

HOUSING and the Housing Board (HDB) flats, which house some 90 per cent of Singapore's population, have been outperforming the private property market over the past two months. Their prices have jumped between 30 and 50 per cent in the resale market in that period, far surpassing the price increases in the condominium and landed property sectors.

It is generally accepted that the surge in the prices of HDB resale flats is attributable to more liberal financing rules which have been in force since April.

In March this year, Minister of State for National Development Lim Hng Kiang announced that the government would raise the quantum of its mortgage loan for the purchase of resale HDB flats to help lower-income groups own homes.

Another reason, say property investors, is that the HDB now uses a larger panel of valuers for HDB flats, making it more difficult for the authorities to monitor their work.

The number of such appointed valuers now from nine to 20 last month. Some of these valuers inflate the value of the flats they appraise to please the sellers and get more business, sources said.

The result is a five-room flat in popular districts like Clementi, Bishan and Pagar which sold for about \$200,000 early this year is now commanding prices of about \$300,000.

Under the old system, the loan was capped at 80 per cent of the posted price — HDB's 1984 sale prices — which were much lower than prevailing market prices for resale flats.

But from April 1, buyers of resale flats were allowed to borrow from the HDB up to 90 per cent of the market value of the flat, or 80 per cent of the transacted sale price, whichever was lower.

Families with a monthly income of less than \$1,000 could borrow up to 95 per cent of the market value of a resale three-room or four-room "Simplified" flat, or 90 per cent of the transacted sale price, whichever was lower.

The HDB's good intentions, however, appear to have been frustrated by market forces. Sellers of HDB flats immediately sniffed out the chance to raise the prices of their flats. They found that buyers would be able to stomach higher prices now that they no longer have to put up a large cash payment upfront.

The size of the HDB resale market is one main consideration. Bankers estimate that there are more than 500,000 HDB flats which can be sold in the open market now, their owners having fulfilled the government criteria that they occupy their flats for at least five years. Another reason, they say, is that prices have risen high enough to make an entry into this market worthwhile.

Mr Poon Chan Kheong, a senior manager of property firm Knight Frank Cheong Hock Chee & Ballieus, noted that HDB resale flat prices were rising faster than that of private condominiums, which rose 0.7 per cent in the first quarter of this year.

Even so, less popular HDB estates like Paya Lebar Way, a five-room flat which sold for about \$150,000 before April now goes for about \$230,000.

Large property consultant firms which have previously snubbed the HDB resale market are jostling for a slice of it now. Among those which have jumped on the HDB bandwagon are Jones Lang Wootton and Knight Frank Cheong Hock Chee & Ballieus.

Another property consultant who did not want to be named said the rapid increase in HDB resale prices was a frightening trend. HDB flats were supposed to be affordable housing for the middle class. But at this rate, buyers of HDB flats in the open market would be back to square one — unaffordable flats.

HDB flat prices in the open market have been moving steadily upwards since the government priced its new HDB flats according to locational advantages in December 1987. For example, those commanding panoramic views or were located close to MRT stations cost more than those facing a dustbin compound or cul-de-sac.

The price increases picked up even faster in the past few years as the government relaxed some HDB ownership rules.

In August 1989, the government allowed owners of landed property and permanent residents to buy flats in the resale market. Two years later, Singaporeans married to non-citizens and who were more than 35 years old were allowed to buy one- to three-room flats outside the central area. Also in 1991, the government allowed singles above 35 years and widows above 21 years to buy resale flats subject to conditions of size and location.

Since then, the number of HDB flats sold in the resale market has been increasing. There were 13,990 such transactions in 1991 and 15,400 last year, or an average of 1,166 in 1991, and 1,281 transactions

Year	Flat Types (units)					Total
	3-room	4-room	5-room	Executive		
1991	7,620	3,895	1,980	650		13,990
1992	6,090	4,330	2,170	800		15,400
1993 (Jan-May)	3,790	2,290	970	375		7,430

Source: HDB

RESALE OF HDB FLATS

Profits of up to \$100,000 common in past 5 months

Gymnastics for all in secondary schools

HOUSING Board flatowners raked in as much as \$100,000 on a flat of the height of the property speculation fever over the last five months.

Statistics available from the HDB yesterday showed that between March and July, 664 owners sold their flats at profits of up to \$100,000.

The resale prices were three to five times the original price of the flats. Of a profit of \$20,000 on a flat in \$100,000 in March, the original price was \$80,000. In another case, a HDB five-room flat bought for \$17,000 was sold for \$100,000. The profit was \$83,000.

Another owner raked in a \$20,000 profit when he sold a flat for \$100,000. The original price was \$80,000.

The HDB resale market has been booming since the government relaxed its financing rules in April. The number of such appointed valuers now from nine to 20 last month. Some of these valuers inflate the value of the flats they appraise to please the sellers and get more business, sources said.

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Since then, the number of HDB flats sold in the resale market has been increasing. There were 13,990 such transactions in 1991 and 15,400 last year, or an average of 1,166 in 1991, and 1,281 transactions

per month in 1992.

By the first five months this year, the average number of transactions in the HDB resale market had increased to 1,480 per month, or a total of 7,430 transactions for the January-to-May period.

However, Jones Lang Wootton's executive director, Ho Tian Lam, said the increase in transactions and prices was a normal social reaction to a positive government policy.

The easier credit policy will reduce a lot of pent-up demand from those who could not afford to upgrade to a larger flat in the past, he said, and the easing of this demand would lead to a price rise in the short term.

In any case, he said, it was not possible for HDB resale flat prices to sustain their pace of price increase because of the cap formed by the cheapest private properties.

It would take just another 30 per cent increase in the price of, say, an HDB executive mansion with a current market tag of \$385,000 to hit the price levels of a medium-sized private condominium costing about \$300,000.

The narrowing price differential between HDB resale flats and private property prices indicates that the prices of the former are either approaching or have already hit the threshold. Property consultants say the dramatic price increases of the past two months should stabilise by the end of the year.

French plane shot down

membership library from HIRES SPECIAL

(Fig. 23) 'Big jump in HDB resale prices', *The Straits Times*, 22 June 1993. Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore.

(Fig. 24) 'Profits of up to \$100,000 common in past 5 months', *The Straits Times*, 5 August 1981. Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore.

⁷² Chua, *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation*, 51.

⁷³ Chua, *Public Housing & Political Legitimacy*, 135.

⁷⁴ Chua, *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation*, 60.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 58. Here, Chua adopts the Marxist distinction between 'use values', the actual usefulness of a commodity, and 'exchange values', a commodity's comparative value to other commodities on the market. See also: Dasha Kuletskaya, 'Concepts of Use-Value and Exchange-Value in Housing Research', *Housing, Theory and Society* 40, no. 5 (2023): 589-606.

From Home to Asset: The Political Economy of Existing Housing Stock

This process of commodification fundamentally transformed the political economy of public housing in Singapore. First, as the majority of Singaporeans were already homeowners – 85% of public housing households owned their flat by 1985 – the PAP had a vested political interest in increasing home values, as potential capital gains for the electorate served as a strong basis for maintaining its popular legitimacy.⁷⁶ Second, because retirement savings were encouraged to be used for public housing purchases, the PAP had created an inadvertent “asset-based retirement system” and thus found itself “saddled with the responsibility of safeguarding the asset values of public housing flats”.⁷⁷ Falling flat values would thus not only be politically unpopular, but threaten the long-term retirement security of Singaporeans. Maintaining, if not increasing, the value of public housing flats therefore became a central concern for the PAP government.⁷⁸

Given that the HDB had already constructed nearly 90% of the country’s housing by the 1980s, existing housing stock was at the centre of this commoditised political economy of housing. While older public housing estates had numerous advantages that supported their asset values, including mature networks of amenities and central locations compared to increasingly far-flung new towns, they also faced numerous sources of downward price pressure.⁷⁹ For example, natural depreciation due to wear was exacerbated by ‘relative depreciation’ arising from the superior workmanship, architecture, and amenities provided by newer developments.⁸⁰ Furthermore, flats’ 99-year leaseholds resulted in depreciation by ‘lease decay’: the older a flat was, the shorter its remaining lease, leading to a commensurate reduction in value. While increases in flat values driven by wage increases, population growth, and market liberalisation had outstripped these forces in the 1980s, the PAP saw both the opportunity for political returns in continued price appreciation, as well as the need to pre-emptively address the corresponding risks of depreciation.

‘Space-Adding Items’ and the Materialisation of Increased Flat Values

The upgrading programme was therefore conceived as a way to increase public housing values, enacted through the architectural strategy of high-rise flat extensions. Residents were given the option to vote for flat extensions – or ‘Space-Adding Items’ (SAI) in HDB bureaucratic parlance – at an additional cost above ‘basic’

⁷⁶ Chua Beng Huat, ‘Public Housing Residents as Clients of the State’, *Housing Studies* 15 (2000): 49-50; Chua, *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation*, 75.

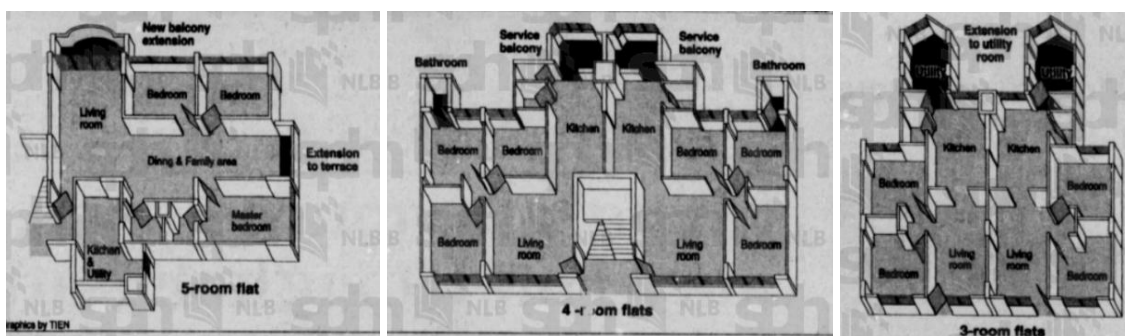
⁷⁷ Chua, *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation*, 76.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 65.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 78-80.

⁸⁰ Ho et al, ‘Asset Value Enhancement’, 2230.

upgrading packages. SAIs most commonly took the form of a new 'utility' room, and less often an additional bathroom or living room extension, with the type, size, and appearance of the SAI dependent on site, cost, and technical limitations, alongside residents' preferences during the co-design phase of development. For example, in the Marine Drive demonstration phase project, three-room flats (67m²) were offered a rectangular 6m² utility room, with the option for a larger, obliquely shaped 9 m² extension; four-room flats (92m²) were offered a 5.3m² chamfered service balcony; and five-room flats (135m²) a curved 6m² living room balcony.⁸¹ (Fig. 25)



(Fig. 25) 'Space-Adding Item' (SAI) options for Marine Drive demonstration phase upgrading project. 'Voting tonight on new look Marine Parade', *The Straits Times*, 6 March 1992. Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore.

Notably, the HDB undertook immense design and technical innovations to realise these high-rise flat extensions while allowing residents to remain living in-place. Using methods shaped by international knowledge transfer in the 1980s with France and Germany, the HDB developed a novel system of grafting new volumes onto existing housing blocks to create new rooms.⁸² Extensive use of pre-casting, dry fixing methods, and tightly coordinated site schedules allowed for minimal disruption, rapid construction times of 1-2 days per floor, and flexibility in customised extension types.⁸³ (Fig. 26)

⁸¹ 'Upgrade yes, but give us more say', *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1992.

⁸² Notably, France and Germany were both countries with large quantities of state-managed, post-war housing stock and experience in large-scale housing retrofit. In 1989, a 20-member delegation with representatives from the HDB and Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) were hosted by the French Ministry of Construction and Housing to study refurbishment projects. In 1991, the first experimental 'Pilot Phase' upgrading project in Singapore was tendered to French contractor GTM-Entropose, which had extensive experience with retrofit projects in France. 'Better living for tomorrow', *The Straits Times*, 17 October 1989; 'HDB flats to be upgraded in move to create middle-class precincts', *The Business Times*, 12 July 1989; 'HDB to sell flats after upgrading works', *The Business Times*, 1 March 1991.

⁸³ The process of SAI construction involved the following steps: first, precision V-piling or micro-piling would be used to construct a foundation alongside the existing building's façade. A cast in-situ



(Fig. 26) Trade journal article showing the process of fabricating and grafting new pre-cast volumes onto existing housing blocks. Housing and Development Board, 'Public Housing Upgrading: New Frontiers in Prefab Applications', *Structech News* 10 (December 1993): 1-4. Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore.

These technical innovations enabled architectural extensions to be used as an instrument to realise increased flat values through both quantitative and qualitative improvements. First, and most significantly, the addition of new floor area leveraged the 'cost per square meter' metric standard in market pricing of real estate: all other factors remaining equal, an enlarged flat would thus command a higher price commensurate to the enlarged floor area of the addition.⁸⁴ Second, these extensions often remedied spatial quality deficiencies in older housing stock. For example, new living room extensions allowed small, dark windows to be replaced with floor-to-ceiling glass openings, while enlarged bathrooms allowed for the separation of toilet and bathing spaces to meet evolved living standards.

transfer slab and beam system would then be constructed on the ground floor to support volumes that would be stacked above. Fully pre-cast concrete volumetrics were used to minimise on-site wet works, anchored to each other with grouted sleeve connections and to the existing structure with mechanical fixtures. Once the full stack of new volumes was erected on the existing building's façade, internal walls were demolished and new finishes installed. Housing and Development Board, 'Public Housing Upgrading: New Frontiers in Prefab Applications', *Structech News* 10 (December 1993): 1-4.

⁸⁴ Ho et al., 'Asset Value Enhancement': 2343.

Notably, the design of many SAI extensions revealed the predominance of an economic, rather than purely functional logic. For example, 'utility' rooms were often located at the back of kitchens, neither large enough to use as a full bedroom, nor located so as to meaningfully expand living spaces. (Fig. 27-28) These extensions can therefore be understood as the explicit use of architecture as an instrument to spatially materialise abstract exchange values through the creation of additional floor area – testified to by the fact the upgraded flats with SAIs commanded significantly higher prices than those without.⁸⁵



(Fig. 27) Diagrammatic plan showing position of new 'utility room' at rear of kitchen. 'Kim Keat residents to vote on upgrading from tonight', *The Straits Times*, 13 March 1992. Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore. (Fig. 28) Article detailing residents' uses of new 'utility' room. 'Toa Payoh families happy with new utility room', *The Straits Times*, 14 September 1993. Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore.

Architectural Extensions as Redistributive "Shareholding"

The increase in flat values through architectural extensions was ideologically legitimated as an example of the PAP's provision of redistributive opportunities for "shareholding" in Singapore's success. As a central platform of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's new PAP administration, asset-based redistribution was meant to create

⁸⁵ David Kim Hin Ho et al have argued that the SAI contributed to price increases of between S\$161/m² and S\$278/m², while Sau Kim Lum et al found that flats with the SAI sold at an average premium over comparable non-upgraded flats of 5-8% after five years. See Ho et al., 'Asset Value Enhancement': 2342-3; Sau Kim Lum, Tilin Koh, Seow Eng Ong, 'Upgrading programme in public housing: an assessment of price and liquidity enhancements', *Journal of Property Research* 21, no. 2 (June 2004): 157.

both a literal and metaphorical “share owning society”.⁸⁶ Within this logic, individualised ownership of state-backed assets, key among which was public housing, was envisioned to foster in citizens both an emotional and financial stake in Singapore’s future.⁸⁷ Further, the concept of a state-backed ‘shareholder’ society allowed the PAP to adhere to its outwardly anti-welfare, meritocratic, and market-oriented principles, while providing a means for indirect redistribution through asset-value enhancement, thus strengthening its legitimacy among the masses.



(Fig. 29) Front page article of Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's 1990 National Day Rally Speech, where he presents the upgrading programme as an opportunity to “double your assets”. ‘Stay the course and double your assets’, *The Straits Times*, 27 August 1990. Collection of the National Library Board of Singapore.

⁸⁶ Other than upgraded public housing flats, the sale of HDB-owned shops and subsidised offers of shares in newly privatised state-owned enterprises formed the central pillars of Prime Minister Goh's ‘Shareholder Society’. ‘From home-owners to share-owners’, *The Business Times*, 9 March 1993; ‘CPF top-up scheme gives every citizen stake in S'pores success’, *The Straits Times*, 10 March 1993.

⁸⁷ ‘Govt wants each S'porean to own a piece of economy: PM’, *The Business Times*, 10 March 1993.

The upgrading programme formed a central pillar of this 'shareholding' shift. Building upon extensive homeownership and public housing market liberalisation, state-subsidised upgrading was intended to generate "redistributive" capital gains for homeowners.⁸⁸ Increases in home values were thus central to political and media narratives of upgrading, described as a "golden opportunity" for private gain⁸⁹; a "participation prize" for contributing to Singapore's growth⁹⁰; and a means of "sharing the economic wealth of the country with the people."⁹¹ **(Fig. 29)** These arguments extended to specific promises that "the value of [owners'] flats would double in the next 10 to 20 years"⁹² – levels of appreciation that were, notably, often met or significantly exceeded.⁹³

As a result of these real and rhetorical emphases on private capital gains, the upgrading programme can thus be understood as an extension of the PAP's well-established engagement with what Hussin Mutalib has called a "politics of material inducements".⁹⁴ Mediated by the architectural strategy of flat extensions and ideologically legitimated within the frame a 'shareholding society', the PAP was effectively able to reinforce its popular legitimacy by increasing asset values for a significant proportion of the home-owning population.

Consolidation of Architectural Agency and Economic Control

However, this approach to redistributive, asset-based 'shareholding' was not purely benevolent. Rather, as scholars such as Christopher Tremewan have argued, the focus on the appreciation of state-backed assets, such as commoditised public housing, were instrumental in producing a "risk averse working class" committed to the prevailing political order.⁹⁵ Exemplifying this logic, the upgrading programme

⁸⁸ Notably, the 'redistributive' intention of the upgrading programme was enacted through tiered subsidy levels according to flat sizes, which broadly corresponded to income levels. Thus, the level of state subsidy for an SAI ranged from 60% for smaller 1,2, and 3 room flats, to 20% for 'executive' 5 room flats. 'Govt wants each S'porean to own a piece of economy: PM', *The Business Times*, 10 March 1993; 'Flat-upgrading plan revised to suit owner's needs, income', *The Business Times*, 11 March 1993.

⁸⁹ 'Marine Parade upgrading to cost \$4,500 for each flat', *The Straits Times*, 11 January 1992.

⁹⁰ 'Towards the next stage of nation-building', *The Straits Times*, 11 January 1994.

⁹¹ 'CPF top-up scheme gives every citizen stake in S'pores success', *The Straits Times*, 10 March 1993.

⁹² 'Stay the course and double your assets', *The Straits Times*, 27 August 1990.

⁹³ For example, flat prices were reported to have doubled from S\$120,000 to S\$240,000 before upgrading works were even completed, with profits of upwards of S\$100,000 regularly reported thereafter. 'Buyers paying more for Marine Drive flats', *Weekend East*, 15 July 1993. See also: Chua Beng Huat, *Public Housing & Political Legitimacy*, 145.

⁹⁴ Hassan Mutalib, 'Constructing a "Constructive" Opposition', in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*, ed. Bridget Welsh, James Chin, Arun Mahizhnan, and Tan Tarn How (NUS Press, 2009), 86.

⁹⁵ Chua, *Political Legitimacy & Housing*, 132; Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control*, 58.

significantly increased the proportion of Singaporeans' wealth invested in state-backed assets, transforming the electorate into effective "clients of the state".⁹⁶ This afforded the PAP significant political leverage as custodians of Singaporeans' wealth, allowed political issues to be framed in technical-economic management terms, and individuated political risk on the basis of economic self-interest.

In the realm of public housing, this economic leverage was founded upon a near-total consolidation of architectural agency. As the HDB was an effective monopoly housing provider and modifications to public housing were strictly regulated under lessee agreements, public housing residents had little agency to realise architectural improvements that could increase home values independently. Demonstrating the use of architectural agency as a form of economic control, the state threatened opposition-voting wards by withholding upgrading, framed as "a loss of several thousand dollars to you and your family".⁹⁷ Voting against the PAP, and thus losing the means to enact architectural improvements, was therefore made "tantamount to voting against one's [economic] self-interest".⁹⁸

Thus, while the upgrading programme, through the architectural strategy of flat extensions, did successfully enact 'redistributive' increases in flat values for public housing residents, it also served to strengthen the economic control of the PAP. Through increases in the proportion of Singaporeans' wealth held in state-backed assets and consolidation of architectural agency within the HDB, the electorate were turned into effective 'clients of the state' – economically dependent, risk-averse, and therefore committed to upholding status-quo PAP rule.

⁹⁶ Chua, 'Public Housing Residents as Clients', 45-60.

⁹⁷ 'PM: Govt to press on with upgrading of HDB flats', *The Straits Times*, 11 April 1992.

⁹⁸ Chua, *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation*, 112.

Conclusion

In addressing the hitherto under-recognised history of the HDB's upgrading programme, this paper has illuminated two key dynamics in Singapore's history of mass housing transformation. First, that the upgrading programme functioned, through a range of architectural strategies, as an *apparatus* to perform specific political, socio-cultural, and economic roles. Second, that in performing these roles, the upgrading programme operated within an overarching logic of reinforcing the *legitimacy* and upholding the *control* of the PAP, in the context of its single-party, 'illiberal' democratic rule.

Thus, in the sphere of politics, architectural strategies of participation in the upgrading programme were used to enact a 'consultative' turn in governing style, while paradoxically being leveraged as a tool for voter coercion. Similarly, in the socio-cultural sphere of class distinction, architectural strategies of enclosure, postmodern ornamentation, and media representation were used to reenact the symbolic capital associated with private condominiums in public housing, while being circumscribed by an ideological commitment to housing disparities as a competition-motivating 'prize'. Finally, in an economic sphere, the architectural strategy of high-rise flat extensions was used to spatially materialise higher home values for owners, while increasing Singaporeans' dependence on state-backed assets and architectural agency as a form of economic control.

Beyond the narrow context of Singaporean architectural history, this analysis reveals opportunities latent within critical histories of architectural transformation. As a central focus of contemporary architectural discourse, housing retrofit is often seen as a panacea for issues as wide-ranging as social alienation, gentrification, and architecture's contribution to the climate crisis. However, as this paper has shown, the roles performed by architectural upgrading are inherently contingent, deeply enmeshed in power relations, and susceptible to co-option. Thus, as Peter Marcuse argued in relation to mass housing broadly, the "benevolence" of mass housing transformation must also be understood as a "myth".⁹⁹ Following architectural historian Adnan Morshed, we must recognise that "repair becomes tenable only when we dispel its romantic, ethical framing and the false promise that its unproblematic application would somehow return us to a golden age".¹⁰⁰ It is in this spirit, and with reference to Singapore's historical experience with mass housing upgrading, that this paper has attempted to demonstrate the importance of critical attitudes toward the *how*, *why*, and *for whom* architectural practices of

⁹⁹ Marcuse, "Housing Policy and the Myth", 21-26.

¹⁰⁰ Adnan Z. Morshed, 'Field Notes on Repair: 1', *Places Journal*, November 2024. <https://placesjournal.org/article/field-notes-on-repair-1/>

transformation are undertaken – both as we look back, but also and perhaps more urgently, look forward to new paradigms of repair and adaptation in architecture.

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