Upgrading in HDB estates
Reclaiming Lost Space

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Submitted to School of Architecture
On November 29, 2000 in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Architecture

Abstract

The upgrading programme was initiated by the Housing and Development
Board of Singapore in the continuous effort to meet new demands and improve
the living environment of HDB housing estates. Launched in July 1989, the move
also revealed the government’s commitment and support towards changing the
perception of public housing in Singapore. Besides improving the physical
environment of the housing estates, the attempt marks a concern to improve the
social environment as well. Underlying this concern is the growing awareness of
the social implications of public spaces in HDB estates and their relevance in
creating communities.¹

Targeted at housing estates of 18 years and above, which were primarily
functional in design but lacking in terms of the environmental and social
provisions, the programme hopes to bridge the gap of the standard of living
environment between that of these old estates and those in the new towns (e.g
Bukit Batok, Bishan and Serangoon). Subjected to constraints of high demand,
rapid pace of construction and lack of experience, these old estates were
developed adhering strictly to guidelines of minimum building spacings, lift ratios,
void spaces and a concept of “neighbourhood of convenience”.² Public spaces
were often overlooked in the design of the housing environment and were
created not as part of the living environment but as a necessity of function and
convenience. Despite so, there had been growing evidence to support the
function of these spaces as significant elements in the evolving community in
these housing estates. In this upgrading programme, public spaces are given
unprecedented significance and relevance in creating a “total living environment”.
With this ambitious programme, numerous housing estates have been
transformed and upgraded in just over a decade to create a living environment
said to be comparable with the estates in the new town.

² Ibid.
While there had been studies from other fields to trace and assess the development of the upgrading programme, there had been no study in the field of architecture on the significance and impact of this programme. This study attempts to investigate into two key areas of the reinforcement of “community” and “identity”, in the objectives of the upgrading programme and evaluate the results of the programme bearing in mind the objectives set out by the authorities. The focus of the study will be primarily on the upgrading of public spaces in the HDB estates and the effects of this programme in promoting the communal way of life.

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