Flexibility
A study on open-ended housing

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Abstract

The Housing Development Board’s programme of providing public housing since
the 1960s has not considered the value of our different cultures. With Singapore
impatient for economic prowess, having just gained independence, the HDB deftly
provided efficient slab block typology housing lifted off their western counterparts.
Flat design was repetitive and the individual needs of homeowners were not
addressed. They have not looked back since, shelving away our indigenous living
cultures¹. Critics of the HDB and the Singapore Government have often pointed
out this grave mistake as the cause for the effects seen today.

¹ Chua, Beng Huat, Political legitimacy and housing: stakeholding in Singapore (New
York: Routledge, 1997)
"Pushed by stress, pulled by autonomy, people in the new high density, high rise public housing communities tend to withdraw into a private world, thereby creating a special environment which is characterised by inward looking dwelling, impersonality, individualism, apathy, and a sense of general insecurity."

-Hassan Riaz (1975)

Hassan’s² prophetic words were proven as the government and HDB’s activities of late has been geared towards solving such social ills.

Living in the city however involves high rise and high-density situations. It has become increasingly difficult to house and yet satisfy the needs of diverse groups of people. Open-ended design in housing appears to solve this problem. It allows the user to change the unit to fit his personal desires. The autonomy that it allows has been found to be healthy to the growth of cities.

This paper studies the effects of flexible housing. It appropriates the lessons learnt in foreign projects to local conditions and identifies possibilities of development of this new mode of living. The hypothesis taken here is that open-ended housing is the new way of living in the next lap.

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²Hassan Riaz, Social and psychological Implications of high density in Hong Kong and Singapore.(Ekistics, Vol 39, No 235, 1975)