

From shelter to home

HOUSING DEPARTMENT

Hong Kong's public housing programme has a long and remarkable history. It all started when a tragic fire raged through the Shek Kip Mei squatter area on Christmas Eve in 1953, leaving 53,000 people homeless. As an emergency measure, the first resettlement estate was built on the site of the ashes to provide basic shelter for the victims, thus opened the first page of Hong Kong's ambitious public housing programme.

Since the 1950s, Hong Kong has pursued a vigorous public housing programme to meet the changing needs and aspirations of the community. As people became more prosperous, basic shelter in single rooms with shared toilets and bathrooms has given way to high-rise self-contained apartments with the full range of modern services in comprehensive housing estates.

Over the past decades, public housing has been modernised and significantly improved both in terms of design and provision of facilities, benefiting residents as a whole. To date, about one-third of Hong Kong's 6.8 million population lives in some 150 public rental housing estates spread across the territory.

International recognition

The Housing Department (HD) is committed to providing adequate and affordable housing to people who are in genuine need. As the executive arm of the Hong Kong Housing Authority, the department has been responsible for implementation of the public housing programme. It also provides policy support to the Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands who is responsible for the formulation of the overall housing policy.

As of December 2003, the HD provided 657,000 public rental housing and interim housing flats for about 2 million people; sold 405,000 flats through various subsidised home ownership schemes; granted 60,000 loans and subsidies to applicants for purchase of flats in the private sector or the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) secondary market; and provided 2.27 million square metres of commercial and non-domestic premises and 100,000 car parking spaces.

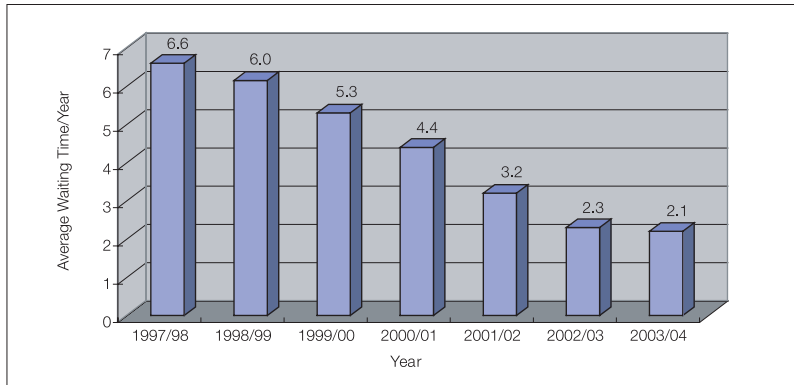
A disastrous fire fanned by the wind sent columns of smoke into the sky above the Shek Kip Mei squatter area in 1953.



View of Western Kowloon at dark from Beacon Hill, at the foot of the hill, where Shek Kip Mei squatter area was burnt down 50 years ago.

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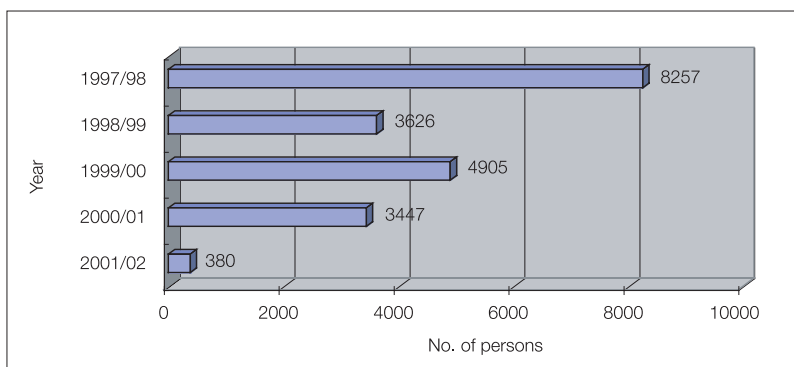
Over the past few years, the HD has managed to deliver a number of ambitious goals set in the 1990s. It has completed some 180,000 rental flats since 1997. The number of eligible families waiting to be housed in public rental housing has declined from 150,000 in 1997 to around 90,000 today. During the same period, the average waiting time for public rental housing has fallen from six years to just over two. With the clearance of all temporary housing areas and cottage areas in 2001, the number of people who live in substandard or overcrowded accommodation now stands at an all-time low.



Average waiting time for public rental housing.

Indeed, the strenuous efforts of the HD in overcoming the huge challenge of providing adequate accommodation for a rapidly growing population in a high-density area won the applause of the international community.

At the 2001 United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights meeting in Geneva, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights commended the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's efforts and achievements in providing adequate housing for Hong Kong citizens with special reference to the successful clearance of the old temporary housing areas and rehousing their occupants in interim housing, as well as improving the living conditions of the squatter communities.



Local residents rehoused under the clearance of temporary housing areas.

As for the settlement of squatter communities, the HD strives to provide better accommodation for residents affected by the squatter clearance programme. Since 1997, about 8,400 and 6,200 people have been rehoused from squatter communities to public rental housing and interim housing respectively.

On another front, the HD continues to provide interim housing for the occupants of illegal rooftop structures. The number of rehoused occupants has increased from 33 in 1998/99 to 563 in 2002/03.

Distinguished service to society through creative design

Given limited land and the rapid population growth, it has been a real challenge for the HD to solve the problems of high-density overcrowding, infrastructure and quality-of-life deficiencies. It was for its achievements in addressing these issues that the department was awarded an Honourable Mention for the 1999 Sir Robert Matthew Prize.

Sir Robert Matthew Prize, an international competition organised by the International Union of Architects (UIA), is especially dedicated to the improvement in the quality of human settlements. The HD's submission on "From Shelter to Home – Meeting Hong Kong's Housing Challenge" summed up its persistent efforts to solve the housing problem in Hong Kong from 1954 to 1999 and its initiatives to improve the living standards while meeting the community's aspirations for better homes.



Honourable Mention for Sir Robert Matthew Prize.

One of the HD's senior architects responsible for the submission, Ms Rosa Ho, said: "The UIA Prizes, given out every three years, are regarded as a prestige equivalent to the Nobel Prize. We are very glad that our works were internationally recognised."

Early public housing estates with communal facilities such as cooking and washing areas on a common access balcony.

Creating better homes

The jury of the 1999 session of the UIA Prizes, comprised international experts of the field, especially noted the significant contribution of the HD in resolving high density living.

"The jurors noted that the 'first wave' had ended and encouraged progress toward improving the 'quality of life' issues in Hong Kong," Ms Ho said. "Having accommodated most of the people in need of public housing, we are now fully charged with the mission of improving the occupants' living standards."



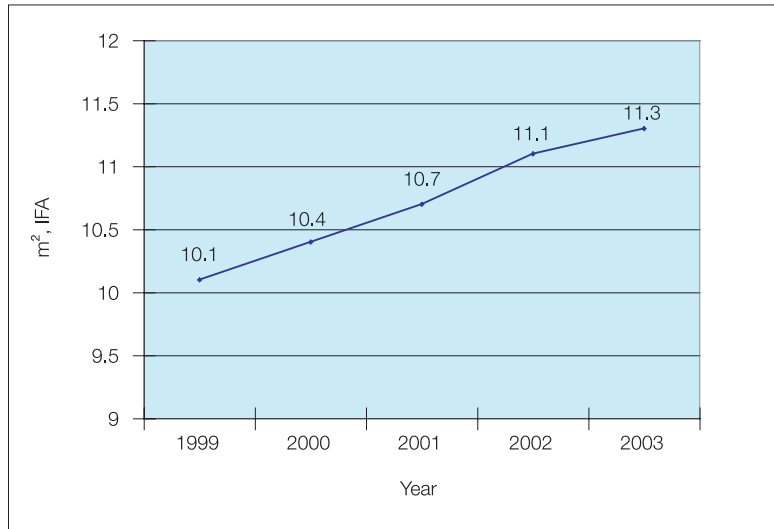
The HD has been striving to provide public housing tenants with adequate facilities and comfortable living environment. This can be seen from innovative architectural design in many of the public housing estates and shopping centres built in recent times.



Left: Public housing tenants enjoying comfortable living surroundings and modern facilities.

Right: Self-contained apartments in modern housing estates.

At the same time, the average living space per tenant has been improving with an increase from 10.1 square metres internal floor area (IFA) in 1999 to 11.3 square metres IFA in 2003.



Average living space per person for Housing Authority Public Rental Housing Flats.

Developing a people-oriented culture

The HD is now working towards establishing a new culture in managing public housing. Permanent Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands (Housing), Mr Leung Chin-man, said: “Our commitment must go beyond simply providing a living space for the people.”

He emphasised that HD staff are no longer dealing only with buildings. They have to consider, anticipate and to plan and cater for the needs of the people living in these buildings. They have to provide services and products that would help to build homes and communities from these housing blocks.

“We will have to help public housing tenants turn a cell into a home, to help develop housing blocks into a community, and to achieve and maintain a good living environment in public housing estates,” Mr Leung said.

The way ahead

In response to changing circumstances in an increasingly complex and diverse housing sector, the provision of assistance to those in genuine need continues to be at the heart of the government’s housing policy.

The Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands and Housing Authority Chairman, Mr Michael Suen Ming-yeung, said: “Public housing and Hong Kong may have experienced changes over these years but our mission to serve the community has always remained. We will continue to provide assistance to house low-income families in genuine need, and strive to maintain the average waiting time for public rental housing at around three years.”