

Designing Housing for the Elderly in Hong Kong

Chris Gabriel

Chief Architect/Design & Standards, Housing Department
Hong Kong

Introduction

Public Housing in Hong Kong has progressed from single rooms in low-rise blocks without lifts and with shared washroom and toilet facilities, to the current range of sophisticated multi-storey buildings with self-contained one, two and three bed-roomed flats. Support facilities for special needs have similarly grown in sophistication.

Circumstances are now very different from those early days where the main priorities were for emergency housing and the relief of homelessness, over-crowding in private tenements, control of squatter settlements and the huge influx of refugees and immigrants to Hong Kong.

A substantial proportion of the current housing production is through the redevelopment of older Estates where there is an increasing demand for flats for purchase alongside the demand for rental accommodation. There have also been considerable demands to improve the overall quality of Housing Estate design and construction since in recent years the general standards of new building in Hong Kong have improved dramatically.

The Need for Housing for Single People

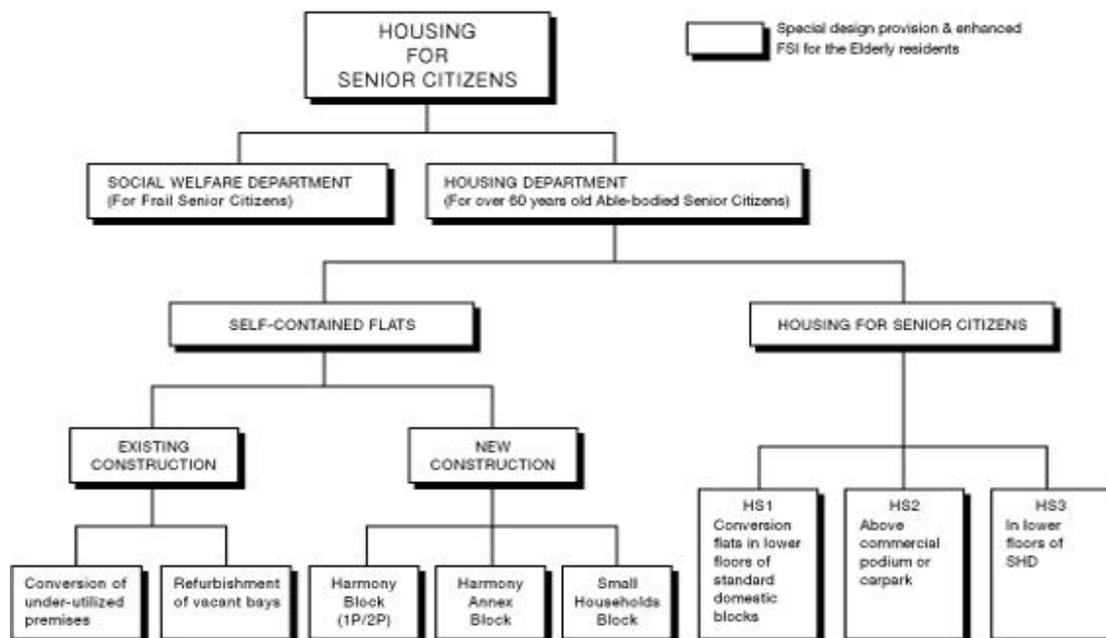
Elderly and single persons were initially given low priority in the housing programme, as it focused primarily on the needs of families. Families were traditionally acknowledged as the primary source of care for the needy but there has been a growing number of inadequately housed single elderly people which has become a pressing problem and one which is increasingly difficult to solve in a cost effective manner.

The problem has become more acute with the progress of the redevelopment programme since the elderly are a significant group in the older estates. There is now a growing awareness of the housing needs of the elderly and of the responsibility of the community to provide them with a better and more secure living environment. When planning and designing housing for the elderly emphasis is given to the following:

- Design Standards in recognition of the special needs of the elderly. A Model Client Brief for elderly housing projects has been developed. And guidelines are in place on common facilities in housing estates and landscaping and external works
- Social Contact by schemes giving priority to the elderly living with friends, relatives or families to avoid the common problem of isolation of the elderly. Families can offer immediate support to senior citizens especially in case of an emergency.
- Integrated estate planning by close coordination with the Government during the design process. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) is closely involved in identification of special needs for a district and in the final provision of care services within the estates.

Overview of Housing for the Elderly

The Housing Authority (HKHA) provides and manages residential accommodation for the able-bodied elderly i.e. those who do not need care services. For the more frail elderly, SWD and Non Government Organisations (NGOs) provide and manage more specialised facilities. Much of the specialist housing for the frail elderly is provided in Public Housing Estates (PHE) and is managed by NGOs.



Types of Accommodation

The HKHA provides accommodation with some shared facilities, described as “hostel-type” and small completely self-contained flats.

Hostel-type accommodation

This type of accommodation has been provided in PHE for some time and has relied on the use of shared facilities and the NGOs to provide the management services. Groups of two to three residents share bathrooms and kitchens and there is a simple emergency alarm for each room and a Warden service. Common rooms are provided and outings are organised by the management or social clubs. Hostels have traditionally been provided through the conversion of family flats.

There are full-time wardens to provide round the clock support when required. The first Hostel for Elderly was constructed at Wah Fu Estate in 1968 and provided accommodation for 116 single elderly people. There are now 36 such hostels operating in PHE.

In 1988, the Housing Department began to provide the management services for this type of building through the programme of Sheltered Housing for the Elderly (SHE) which was a development of the hostel approach. The first SHE was established in Heng On Estate in Ma On Shan in 1988 with accommodation for 131 people. There are now 16 SHE in operation providing housing for 2,150 people.

New approaches in the 1990s

In early 1994 the Housing Authority began a review of its programme for elderly housing. Hostel-type accommodation was still the most effective way of dealing with the increasing demand. It was also a form commonly used by many NGOs in Hong Kong at that time. It was recognised however that there was a growing demand for higher standards and for more privacy. The HKHA accordingly embarked on a programme of designing and building more self-contained small flats. This had been tried in the mid-1980's but again by the conversion of family flats in standard residential blocks. This approach was later expanded from 1989 with purpose-designed small flats in the Harmony Blocks, the main rental housing block.

Housing for Senior Citizens (HSC)

SHE was renamed as Housing for Senior Citizens (HSC) in June 1994 and steps were taken to improve standards and to boost production. Though new designs continued to make use of shared facilities with warden service, they were no longer provided by the conversion of family flats and consequently more flexible for estate planning.

There are now two main types of HSC being built, in low-rise buildings above a podium or car-park to maximize the use of land resources and as part of new composite buildings known as Small Household Developments (SHD). The buildings make use of modular flats and allow the designer to fine-tune the design to suit site constraints. Common rooms and kitchens are shared but bathroom facilities may be ensuite depending upon the type provided. Individual bedrooms vary from 8m² to 12.5m². There are a total of 13 completed projects providing 2,094 places and 17 other projects at planning and construction stage providing a total of 2,647 places.

Small self-contained flats

The commencement of the Comprehensive Redevelopment Programme (CRP) in 1987 identified further demand for small flats. Self-contained small flats have now become the most common form of housing for elderly, provided through new construction or by refurbishment of vacant flats in existing estates. There are a number of different flat types provided in a variety of block types. Most are provided in blocks with family flats.

Harmony block single person flats

The Harmony Blocks are the main Public Rental Housing (PRH) block and have been designed to provide a variety of flat mixes to suit project needs. The demand for small flats in the late 1980s led to 1P/2P flats being included as a standard option in these Blocks. The area of the flats is 17m² and they are for general allocation to 1 person and 2 person families.

Annex blocks

Annex Blocks are small blocks of self-contained flats linked to Harmony Blocks to increase production and share the lift, water and electricity services of the main block. Different configurations of block have been developed with 1P/2P flats and 2P/3P standard modular flats. Though intended for general allocation the flats have been specifically designed to meet the needs of the elderly and to provide wheelchair access with the minimum of conversion.

Small Households Developments (SHD)

These are purpose-designed buildings for in-fill sites that may comprise of HSC at the lower floors and self-contained small flats and family flats above. Both the HSC and the small flats have been designed specifically for the elderly with special provisions and enhanced Fire Services Installations. Family flats and wheelchair units are integrated into these schemes and some welfare premises may be located on the ground floor to offer services for the elderly.

Attention to Detail

All new small flats have been designed to suit the particular needs of the elderly and attention has been paid to the detailed fitting out and finishes to ensure the maximum convenience and safety for residents who may at some time suffer from minor disabilities. In this way a resident is able to remain in the flat even if they have developed a mobility difficulty.

The concept of "lifetime homes" is becoming more popular in many housing organisations and is central to the idea of the elderly enjoying the security that they need so that they only move to a more care oriented service when absolutely necessary.

Estate Support Services for the Elderly

For any development for special needs to be successful, it is essential the full range of elderly housing services be provided. Premises are therefore made available for Social Centres for the Elderly, Day Care Centres, Multi-Service Centres, Health Centres and Residential Care Home for the Elderly (RCHE) which are run by voluntary agencies (NGOs).

Since the 1980s, several types of residential care facilities have been constructed in Public Housing Estates such as Homes for the Aged, Home cum Care-and-Attention Units and Care-and-Attention Homes. These are managed by NGO's. Though the service provided may vary slightly they are all essentially Residential Care Homes and have also traditionally been provided through the conversion of family flats.

Promoting Community and Family Support

Various Priority Allocation Schemes are in place to facilitate the elderly to gain access to Public Rental Housing and for families who are willing to provide for elderly dependents. Schemes are already in place to speed up allocation of housing for new applicants and enhancement schemes for sitting tenants, by combining applications of families and elderly relatives and by selection of particular districts for elderly and their families to live closer together.

Supply of New Flats

There are currently 52 HSCs premises in operation providing accommodation for approximately 7,720 elderly people throughout the SAR. Because of the increasing demand for this type of accommodation, a further 19 premises are planned to provide spaces for a further 2,702 people up to 2003/04.

Flat supply targets have been set for the next five years and up to 2003/04 some 37,000 small flats will be built, ranging from HSC to refurbished flats in redevelopment areas as well as self-contained small flats in residential blocks. Of this total some 35,000 flats will be specifically designed for elderly people.

What We Have Learned and What We Need to Do Next

Housing for the elderly is an important part of our housing programme and the co-ordination of services for a growing population of elderly is essential for the longer term. We have to make sure that we are continually in touch with the needs of the elderly occupant. The only way that we can do this is by close management links, closer contact with NGO's and direct contact with residents and concern groups.

Management

There are particular problems that we face that may be beyond the experience of many other volume providers of special needs housing. There is a continuing very high demand for small flats. The current waiting list structure suggests that up to 40% of flats over the next 5 to 6 years must be small flats. These must cater for both the elderly and the non-elderly. We need to ensure that we build for the future so a small flat must be suitable for the elderly as well as the non-elderly.

The problems are however not only of design. The right management input is essential to successful housing. More sophisticated housing designs present more management challenges. More sophisticated residents, which we certainly have, present equal challenges. Certainly we can respond to this because we have the systems in place to do so and a strong past record.

Space standards

Space standards present particular difficulties. Public Housing in Hong Kong has a tradition of minimal space standards because of its beginnings as an emergency housing programme. We have formal space allocation standards which are part of the brief for designs and generally dictate how flats are allocated to applicants. Allocation standards are also an indirect influence on rent levels. There are very good administrative and financial reasons why we continue to build small flats but at the same time these present design, cost effectiveness and financial viability difficulties.

Small flats not only lead to inefficiencies in the buildings but also present very real problems of flat planning. Common problems are the perceived disproportionate space for service areas compared to living areas, designing for the use of mobility aids, ensuring that simple things like door swings make good use of the space and are safe, effective window arrangements in bathrooms and kitchens, neat and tidy building services installations.

Flexibility

A fundamental aspect and one which impacts directly on the user, is flexibility. Small flat layouts may often do not permit alternative furniture arrangements. There is also a global relevance here since greater flexibility will lead to more opportunities for future adaptation and conversion as needs change. Short term obsolescence may be designed out.

Cost effectiveness

Small flats lead to less efficient buildings and higher costs. Some of our Small Household Developments have costs per unit area which are 50% to 60% more than our main public housing flats. In order to address this problem we have to maximise the opportunities for economy of scale. This will affect both how we procure our housing, as much as the designs. We are considering design and build schemes for some sites.

Small flats in other communities are commonly provided with mechanical ventilation to bathrooms because this has building planning and land use benefits and thereby will affect costs. We must examine the opportunities for this in our buildings and embark upon a public consultation exercise to promote the acceptability amongst our residents.

High density and high rise designs

High rise buildings will improve cost effectiveness and naturally make the best use of the land available for development. We have embarked upon a programme of high rise buildings specifically for the elderly since 1995. These have been up to twenty-one storeys but we have to re-examine the approach to improve its cost effectiveness and this may mean going higher still.

High rise implies a greater concentration of elderly and brings with it some particular design and management difficulties. Our current design solutions have been developed in consultation with the appropriate authorities including the Fire Services Department, Buildings Department and Social Welfare Department. Management support is critical here to handle emergencies both for the individual and for the community and to avoid isolation of the elderly without appearing to interfere in daily routines.

Access to care

Our future developments will include a higher proportion of elderly, since this is defined by the waiting list demand. A higher number of elderly people in an estate will therefore have an impact upon the support services and the management input that is necessary. The provision of the appropriate services by the Government through the NGO's is being examined and this may in turn lead to changes in the form of the various support or care services and in the way that they are provided in estates.

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