

# **Home Building Quality (including Design and Buildability)**

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## **Quality : the Aim**

Quality is something which we all aspire to, but which means something different to each person in the room here. The perception of quality in a housing development is different to the client, the contractor, the building manager, the user, the passer-by and even its architect.

Once one recognises that there are many different aspirations towards quality on the part of those involved in building housing projects – relating to financing, design, construction, livability and so on – one can ask what should be the focus of these desires for quality. The answer, surely, must be the user and that often disregarded person – the passer-by.

Our aim must be to produce homes and neighbourhoods of sufficient quality and value for money to satisfy the needs and – we hope the aspirations – of the users and which provide delight to both user and passer-by.

The passer-by is you and me – and all six million of us – who do not live in that particular development, but who have to experience it in the public realm as an intrusion on the skyline, an over-whelming presence on the streets of our neighbourhood or as the view from our bedroom window.

## **Quality : the Cloud**

As far as the user is concerned, there is a fundamental problem in satisfying his desire for quality – which is that for 50 years the property market in Hong Kong has been a seller's market. Apart from brief periods – one of which we are in now – Hong Kong has had a fundamental imbalance between supply and demand for housing.

This has meant that those involved in the provision of housing in Hong Kong have not had to give too much attention to the quality of what they build. Yes, it is true that the quality of the outer trappings – the marbled bathrooms, German kitchens, grand lobbies and palatial clubhouses – have changed dramatically, but has the quality of planning or the quality of workmanship changed nearly so much? Perhaps today's housing estates are like the finned Cadillacs of the 1950s – amazing to behold, but unreliable and difficult to drive.

Despite general expectations that the property market will become less 'exciting' in the coming years, relatively high levels of population growth due to immigration from the mainland mean that the imbalance in the supply and demand of public and private housing is likely to continue for some time.

## **Quality : Some Silver-linings**

However, there are some factors which should be indicating to the far-sighted that it is time to change our

attitudes to the users of our developments and those who pass by :

- first and foremost – the users are becoming much more demanding – both on public and private developments as readers of local newspapers will know;
- second, the passers-by are also starting to become a force to be reckoned with – whether as NGO pressure groups or ad-hoc neighbourhood groupings as we have found out on some of our projects;
- third, it is difficult to see that many of the residential developments built over the last twenty years ever being redeveloped on the ‘normal’ Hong Kong cycle of twenty to thirty years as they are developed already to the maximum permissible extent and are in multiple private ownership. They’ll be with us for the next 50 or 100 years whether in Mei Fu or elsewhere;
- fourth, the supply and demand for property may reach equilibrium in the medium to long-term – in which case providing quality for the user will become a major selling point for those who continue to develop housing.

### **Quality : How to Continue and Start**

Of course, one must recognise that quality of development in Hong Kong is not poor – on the whole the standard of construction is good by standards in many parts of the world and there have been welcome innovations in procurement, design and construction in the last few years. However, improving quality has a ratchet effect – yesterday’s good quality becomes today’s average and tomorrow’s sub-standard.

In aspiring to tomorrow’s high-quality and value for money housing which meets the needs and aspirations of the user and passer-by we need to start at the top, the middle and the bottom.

### **Quality : from the Top**

It is a truism that ‘good buildings require good clients’ and the leadership for providing better homes and better neighbourhoods must come from the top.

In this regard, it is depressing to see clients with policies which positively militate against improving quality by taking price as the only significant criterion. This can be seen in tendering systems for consultants which drive down not only their fees, but the quality of their service. It can also be seen when sometimes ten or fifteen many contractors are asked to tender for projects – with the effect that quality of workmanship is the last thing on the contractors’ minds as they prepare their tenders.

The results of this cost driven approach can all too sadly be seen in developments around Hong Kong. Despite the laudable aims of some of these projects, are these the homes and neighbourhoods what we want our grandchildren to remember us by?

Many of the factors and policies which work against achieving quality in housing development emanate ultimately from the government – sometimes for the best of motives and worst of results. There needs to be an assessment of the government’s policies, not only in terms of process but in terms of whether the end results really are good for Hong Kong as a whole.

### **Quality : from the Middle**

It is here that the professionals must take the lead – that is professionals who may be working for the developer, government, the consultants and the contractor. The aim must be to raise the quality of design – not just ‘architectural’ design, but design as it affects livability, buildability, the public realm, cost, value for money and a host of other factors.

The starting point should be the needs and aspirations of users. Here there does not appear to be a lot of easily obtainable information. Developers tend to regard their market research as a commercial secret while consultancy firms and local universities do not have enough resources to carry out this sort of work on a comprehensive scale their own.

However, there are problem areas in Hong Kong housing developments that should be apparent to everyone and which should be improved to produce quality homes. A major example would be deep, dark ‘lightwells’ and their associated problems :

- transmission of cooking smells from flat to flat
- little actual natural lighting or ventilation for bathrooms
- drying racks one above each other
- labyrinths of pipes
- the euphemistically named ‘store rooms’ or maids rooms (remember that maids are users of our buildings too)

These lightwells are always unpleasant and are produced by a combination of pressures generated by gross floor area, building regulations, efficient planning, structure and so forth. Why do we as Hong Kong citizens have to put up with them? Are the alternatives so horrific?

There have already been improvements in recent years with new layouts and Buildings Department’s relaxation of an natural lighting and ventilation to bathrooms – but so much more needs to be done.

Surely all sides should come together – developers, government, academics, architects and, yes, even users – to work a holistic basis on how to get rid of, or at least improve these and other blots?

In passing, it should be noted that the ‘quality’ systems which consultants, contractors and – some – clients have all implemented over the last few years do almost nothing to encourage improvement in the quality of design in this manner. In the modern way, ISO 9000 and its siblings seem to be almost entirely concerned with process and appear to take no real interest in the end product. To the enthusiasts for these systems this may be tantamount to modernday heresy, but in the cold light of the real world I think that most of us will acknowledge that there is a good deal of truth in this observation.

### **Quality : from the Bottom**

The user and – to some degree – the passer-by have to experience everyday the quality (or otherwise) of the

built product of our housing developments – the plastering, the woodwork, the kitchen cabinets, the door handles, the external tiling. It is this which most often affects people's impressions of the development and elicits most complaints from users.

Here the problem becomes one of size. A typical development might contain perhaps 1,000 flats, 2,500 bedrooms, 8,000 doors and God knows how many acres of tiling. How do you control the quality of the plastering, the woodwork and the tiling and – even better – spur on the client and contractor to achieve higher standards of quality?

More supervision, more dry construction, more prefabrication and almost inevitably more paperwork are partial answers which tend to address symptoms rather spurring everybody to better achievement.

### **Quality : the Spur**

In this case it may be worthwhile looking at another activity where supply has long exceeded demand and where quality has become an important selling point.

In America, the structural growth in car ownership is low and the growth in the capacity of the car factories has been high. Spoiled for choice, the American car buyer can pick and choose. In this he is aided by the J&D Power reliability ratings for all car models. J&D Power obtain examples of each car model and assess how well they are put together, how well they work and how reliably they work. Car manufacturers compete to get high J&D Power ratings as an aid to marketing their cars.

This approach seems very applicable to Hong Kong. Developers complete thousands of flats each year and the buyer or tenant has an active interest in knowing how well they are put together, how well they work and how reliably they will continue to work in the future.

It would not seem difficult to set up a reputable independent body, establish a set of criteria, inspect randomly chosen sample flats ready for handover to buyers and tenants and publish a quality rating for the development. Will people buy Lexus quality, or – dare one still say it under BMW ownership – Rover quality? At least they could have an informed choice.

Obviously, the rating system will seem rough and ready at times and will overlook some points but surely it could actively spur everyone in a development into improving their ratings and obtaining a competitive advantage in disposing of their flats? It would even help developments sold 'off the plan' as the developer's or contractor's ratings from previous developments could be included in advertising. The exact amount of the contractor's final contract sum might even vary depending upon whether certain rating levels were achieved.

Who would pay for the inspections? A number of options present themselves. They could be paid for by the developer, charged as a levy on the flats to be sold, charged as a levy on all flats or other means – though whatever means are chosen they should tend to re-inforce the independence and integrity of the checking organisation. In any event, this really could provide value for money.

The system could be extended later to the quality of the layout and design of the flats (with attendant possible effects on the level of the consultants' remuneration!). In due course the development as a whole and even its effect on the public realm could also be assessed – though it may be difficult to achieve enough objectivity in such a subjective arena.

## **Quality : into the Future**

In conclusion, we must recognise that the many different participants who work together to provide the homes and neighbourhoods of Hong Kong bring many different perceptions of ‘quality’ to the process. If we are to focus these different perceptions onto one point – it surely must be the user and – after him or her – the general public and the passer-by.

Users and the general public are expecting – and getting upset if they do not receive – higher standards of quality. This process is unlikely to reverse itself. Therefore we must all be looking to raising standards whether in the overall procurement of buildings, their design or their construction and there are concrete and productive steps which we can all take quite easily to do just that.

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