

Summing Up Address

Tony Miller

Director of Housing, Housing Department

Hong Kong

Thank you Jennifer and thank you Dominic.

By the way, I am told that the unedited version of that video is available on subscription. This has been a wonderful couple of days and I have been impressed by how candid everybody has been; how open discussion of issues has been, both current and largely local problems, as well as issues which face all of us in the longer term. It has been refreshing to get away from work and hear presentations by people of different background and experiences. We heard about the economic context, globalization, cross-boarder adjustments. We heard about the scale and the pace of development in a variety of places - China, Singapore, Japan, Korea, Australia amongst others.

I cannot help pointing out that Queensland, Australia seems to have the most successful public rental housing programme because they have got their public rental housing down to only 6% of the population, all the rest are owners. Congratulations to Queensland!

We also heard about advances in technology, design, project management, and IT. We heard about the challenges of sustainable development, the importance of environmental protection and conservation. We heard about providing for those with special needs. At the end of it all, I have been asked to do a summary, and I confess that I find this quite difficult. It has been a rich feast which will take time to digest.

Frankly speaking, the only consensus that we have reached is that change is upon us: demographic change, change in aspirations, change in technology. All of us must plan to face that change. Other than that, we have not arrived at a particular conclusion, and I think it would be presumptuous for me to offer a prescriptive summation. So instead, I thought I would share with you some of the ideas which are running around in my own head after these two days, and offer them more as questions than as statements, questions that we can all ponder on until next we meet, which for not a few of us will be in Singapore in May next year.

I have four headings . These headings go in a circle. They are:

- Community and individuality
- Individuality and design
- Design and quality; and
- Quality of life and community care.

Community and Individuality

Under the first heading community and individuality, I was struck by a statement made by Dr Lim from Korea. He said that he thought “we had been obsessed with producing numbers of units instead of with designing places to dwell”. I think many of us here, share the legacy of post-war reconstruction and emergency housing that have driven most of the public social housing programmes around the world. Over the last few years, all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, have been managing the shift from rental dependency towards ownership. I think that shift in policy direction brings with it two particular challenges. On the one hand, how to provide a greater sense of individuality to the communities we serve. On the other hand, how to avoid the marginalization of those, who at the end of the process, are not able to buy.

I will deal with the first of these in a moment. The second seems to me to be more problematic. The danger in disposing of a large rental housing stock is that you arrive at residualization or marginalization of those at the bottom of the scale. The question which faces all of us is how do we avoid the poverty trap, how do we avoid creating concentrations of housing where the poorest of the poor live in the worst of the housing stock. All of us have been searching for solutions to this. My own particular preference is for a dispersal of tenancies rather than a concentration. I do not think it matters whether this dispersal is a dispersal within ex-public housing or within wholly private accommodation. The fact of dispersal itself will go a long way to relieving any form of ghetto-ization, and restoring individuality and self-respect.

Individuality and Design

As regards design, I think it is a truism that as people go up market, as they transform from tenants into owners, they want to be more individual. Public housing programmes always under pressure of numbers, tend towards standardization and modularization. And I think all of us have pushed these to the limits in our respective administrations. The challenge now, moving forward, is how do we preserve all of the benefits, cost-effectiveness and efficiency, we have gained from that experience and yet provide a greater sense of individual identity in the developments which we produce. Several speakers have suggested the answer lies in a closer public and private sector co-operation. Our own Business Director T.C. Yuen has considerably raised his media profile by offering an entirely personal account of possible options. The potential benefits of such co-operation are not to be under-valued. I do not think it is too naive to look forward to a time - in fact Singapore is already well on the way to it - when the very physical distinction between public and private housing in many communities can be eradicated. It is worth thinking about how we plan for that.

Design and Quality

As for quality, I am indebted to Chan Kam-ling for a really very frank expose of problems within the construction industry. And I promise K.L. that you will find us equally frank in confessing our own shortcomings. This is a dialogue which will continue over the next few months, as together in partnership we look for solutions. Indeed although no single solution has been suggested to the problems, all point in a particular direction, and that is partnership, a partnership of all of the stakeholders in the process of providing housing from the client through design and construction to the customers, and those who manage their properties at the end of the day.

There has also been a parallel suggestion which has come out of some of the other presentations, and that relates to the advances in IT. Clearly, there is value-added which can be gained at every step of the process, provided we can integrate the use of IT through the whole of the construction process, from design to construction and on through to life-time management and maintenance of the properties.

One other suggestion, with which I agree and which I would underline here, is that in our rush for numbers (Dr Lim's concern again!) we have to allow ourselves more lead time before we push projects through to conclusion.

Quality of Life and Community Care

Finally, quality of life and community care. Part of individuality is building to a human scale. When you focus purely on the numbers you tend to build large and massive, and in the process, you can build in a way which is not human. I am glad to see from Tan Guong-ching's paper that in Singapore they have come to a similar conclusion, that we should avoid building on too massive a scale, rather we should build communities in which people feel secure, in which the scale is such that it is reasonably intimate, and neighbours know one another. I note in passing that the figure 3,000 in the document from Singapore, is very close to the figure that we have been tossing around informally ourselves.

We also need to build for the full life-time of those who live in our estates. In this context, one of the problems which I detected in the discussion on the elderly, albeit indirectly, is that quite often it is institutional divisions of responsibility which dictate design. Thus, for example, it is assumed that the elderly will live in the estates only until they become disabled. I don't think that is right and I think none of you do either. The challenge we all face is how do we get the hardware right? How do we design an estate which really allows for aging in place? Once we have got the design right, then, we can go back and look at redesigning the institutional arrangements, the software.

From the elderly, I will go back to the young people whom you saw just now on the screen playing their cellos at the opening of the conference. When I was much younger, when I had more hair on my head and my beard was not grey, I was a District Officer in what was then a very disadvantaged part of Kowloon. Most of Wong Tai Sin district then was Mark I, II, III, IV, V housing estates and I remember going to a concert which was organized by a couple of roof-top schools. Around 100 or so young students were brought onto the stage, looking slightly awkward in costumes which their parents had obviously scrimped and saved to purchase, and then they sang, They sang very beautifully. And there were tears in my eyes within minutes. That memory came

back to me when I saw the children playing their cellos on stage at the beginning of this Conference. I think it is a wonderful reminder to us all: *that what we are building for is the next generation.*

Thank you ladies and gentlemen. Thank you to all who took part, speakers, questioners, and participants, all. Thank you.

© 1999 Hong Kong Housing Authority

All rights reserved. No part of this paper may be reproduced, distributed, published or transmitted without the prior permission from the copyright owner.