

CITIES WITHIN BUILDINGS: THE PRIVATE HOUSING COMPLEX AND THE CONTINGENT PUBLIC, C.1960S

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This paper is based on ongoing comparative research on the high-rise high-density composite building – a large private housing complex often the size of a city block – that emerged in Hong Kong and Singapore in the 1960s. The composite building is inextricably intertwined in the geopolitics of urban transformation and a vital component of a larger network of ideas and discourses. In mapping the impetus behind and agencies involved in the construction of the composite building, this paper contends that during the period of zoning and legal ambiguities, there exists maximum potential in the intermixing of multiple publics and entities, planned and unplanned. To what extent does it embody the paradox of a model for social integration within a development schema? An examination of the composite building in the two post-colonial cities reveals the contingent status of the occupants and of the citizenry at large, which comprised a predominantly Chinese diaspora.

The composite building in Hong Kong, with its numerous ownerships and ceaseless waves of tenant occupation, poses a challenge for any enterprise to claim the site as a single legal entity. From the enactment of the 1956 Building Ordinance based on volumetric control to the 1962 amendment on plot ratio control through the 1970s, over 1,500 composite buildings above fifteen stories were built in Hong Kong. At least twenty contain populations the size of a town. Each occupies an entire urban block. The largest of these contains almost 10,000 inhabitants excluding unregistered tenants and illegal squatters. Emerging amidst the economic, social and political exigencies of post-war Hong Kong, the composite building exemplifies the paradox of collective sociability within an individual privatized space. Intended as a co-operative building in which every tenant would own his shop or apartment, it was an agglomeration of shops, factories, temples, clinics, crèches, dormitories, hostels and flats, etc. The architecture and organization manifest the way its developers, architects and builders projected the notions of a consumerist society: each square foot of habitation is rationalized and quantified. Yet the varieties of programs, spatial adaptations and contestations within testify to the combination of pragmatist logic and human caprice that drives and defines the city.

In Singapore, the composite building was to a great degree complicit to the nation-building project. The State-sponsored and privately developed composite building is facing intense redevelopment pressure and the constant threat of demolition. Under the Urban Redevelopment Authority Sale of Sites program launched in 1967, the government consolidated small land plots in the downtown Central area and sold them to the private sector as part of its vision for a modern city-state based on a free market economy. Of the 143 projects, 14 are composite buildings with a residential component built between 1969 and 1979. This was a period when private and public interests in housing and its provisions were momentarily aligned. The private housing complex bore witness to how the various interests of the developer, the architect and the government-as-planner intersected to project the imaginings of the Chinese diaspora onto the podium-tower typology.