

Housing and Society: Some Thoughts on the Role of Housing in Social Reproduction

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Two major questions are explored in this paper the relationship between housing and social structure, and the role of housing in the reproduction of social structure. It will be argued that all aspects of housing are inextricably related to social structure, and that housing forms and human settlement patterns play a determining role in reproducing the social and cultural forces which define their physical and social forms and conditions. The first question will be discussed in a general context, the second in the form of a case study; sociological and architectural implications are treated briefly in the final section of the paper.

Housing and Social Structure

In modern societies, housing forms and conditions are closely linked to that most salient feature of the social structure, the class structure. This correlation is especially pronounced in the Third World countries. In these countries the class structure is characterized by a very small upper class, consisting of the traditional and modern elites, and an equally small middle class which consists mostly of the trading class and the higher administrative and executive personnel in the private and public sectors. The largest class comprises the workers in the primary and secondary industries, either full-time farmers or unskilled/semi-skilled workers employed in the urban-based industrial or tertiary sectors of the economy. A characteristic feature of class structure is that most of the poor are concentrated in the rural areas, and the upper and middle classes in the urban centres.

The socioeconomic differences between the rural and urban populations are clearly evident in the form and structure of rural and urban housing stock. Much of rural housing is self-help, constructed with indigenous building materials; a great majority lack modern amenities such as clean water, drainage, electricity, etc. In contrast, most of the housing occupied by the upper and middle classes consists of large detached or semi-detached bungalows, terrace houses, rowhouses or private flats, usually situated in spacious, well planned

and well serviced urban and suburban areas. The urban lower classes typically reside in congested tenement housing in the city centre, in low cost public housing projects or in the peripheral squatter settlements. The last type of settlement, according to recent surveys by various international and national bodies, houses about one third of the total urban population. Such settlements are largely an extension of the rural society into the urban areas. Their village-like building structure and social organization play an important role in the increasing ruralization of Third World urban centres.

A recent report on urban growth in Jakarta reveals that there are about three million people living in kampongs. About twenty percent of these have family incomes of less than U.S. \$17 per month; another fifty percent have a monthly family income between \$17 and \$48. According to the same report,

Aside from the short-lived materials they use, the location of their houses does not take into consideration the need for open space, sewage disposal, or a supply of clean water. The unhealthy environment [in the kampongs] has led to frustration and indifference to their surroundings. Education and health care facilities are virtually nonexistent. Nevertheless, despite the shortcomings of their environment and their problems of adaptation to city life, the people of the kampongs relate well to each other and have developed a community spirit.

This description is representative of the nature and conditions of squatter settlements in other large urban centres of the Third World.

Housing Policies and Social Consequences

For most city administrators, politicians and planners, squatter settlements are anathemas. The structural conditions which produce them are rarely seen or understood. The settlements are conveniently labeled "unplanned" (which they are), "undesirable," "radical," "unhealthy," "unsafe," etc., it is this labeling process which affords legal and moral legitimacy to policies of squatter

resettlement or eradication. Such policies have failed in most countries, due to a lack of financial and technical resources. These failures have catalyzed a reexamination of the nature of squatter settlements and of the housing problem in general, in an attempt to find a more practical resolution of the problem.

This reassessment has led government to abandon or modify its conventional housing policy, which was predicated on the view that housing is a consumer good with access regulated by the market forces. It is this policy which is largely responsible for the present housing problem and the emergence of "housing classes." The new or modified policies view housing either as a socially desirable good, because it affects health, welfare and family functioning, or as an instrument of development. These new policies are characterized by public intervention in the housing problem, justified on economic grounds: provision of housing to the working class externalizes capital costs and facilitates the reproduction of private capital. Access to housing is indeed facilitated, but only to a certain type of domicile (low cost, high-rise flats). In general, access to a variety of housing types is largely a function of socioeconomic position in the labour market or in the process of social reproduction.

The preceding account argues that a society's class structure is spatially expressed in the form of physically distinguishable social areas (housing classes). Such physical expression of the class structure has important sociological implications. It tends to reinforce social inequalities by institutionalizing differential access to public services and social amenities. The high status areas usually have the best schools, best health and sanitation facilities, etc. Lower income housing areas receive correspondingly poorer public services and social amenities. This is largely due to a middle class bias on the part of public bureaucracies which dictates the distribution of social and public services in modern societies. Studies show that due to an inherent evaluative mechanism and economic rationality, service and welfare bureaucracies tend to discriminate most

against the poor, who need their services most. They therefore play an important role in maintaining the status quo. The following case study of Singapore recapitulates some of these arguments, and will highlight the role of housing form and human settlement patterns in the reproduction of social and cultural patterns.

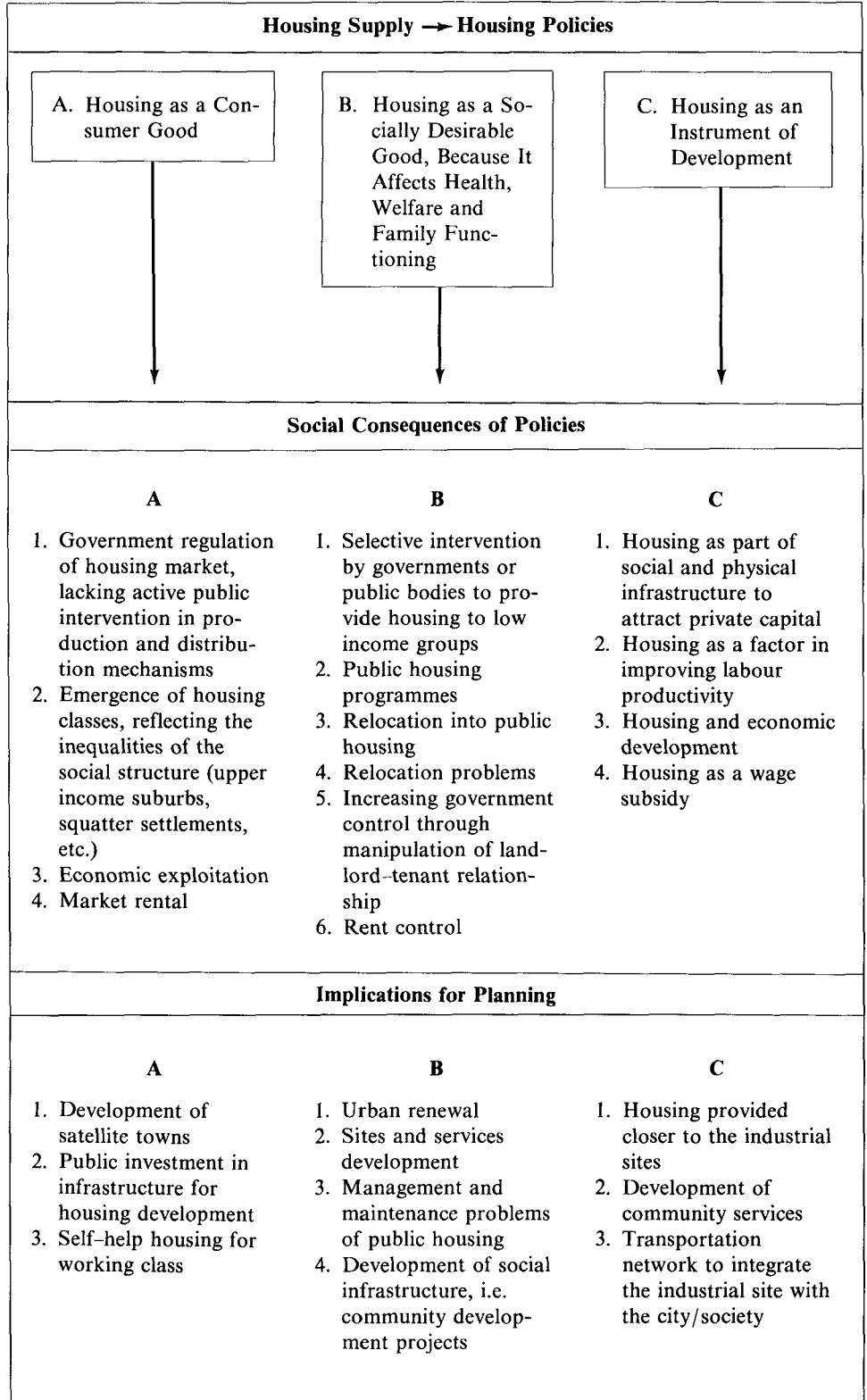
HOUSING FORM, SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN SINGAPORE: A CASE STUDY

Social and cultural patterns clearly influence the form and conditions of human settlements, but of even greater significance is the role of human settlements in reproducing those social and cultural patterns which define their form and conditions. The comments presented in the following study are based on my research into the relationship between the built environment and human behaviour. This research is structured in several sections: the main features of settlement patterns and social ecology of Singapore until 1960; the changes in settlement patterns after 1960, and implications of these changes for the reproduction of social structure and ideology.¹

Urbanization and Settlement Patterns Until 1960

The foundations of modern Singapore were laid when the British acquired the island in 1819. Their objective was to establish a colonial base to promote and protect British commercial and military interests in the region. The settlement was an immediate and remarkable success. The location, the free trade policy of the British and the absence of restrictions attracted merchants and labourers from all over Asia, particularly from China and India. Singapore grew very rapidly as a result of this continuous immigration.

Urban growth in the country's formative years was unplanned and haphazard until, with an eye toward future urbanization, the British colonial administration appointed a



committee to plan the growth of Singapore City. This committee drew up a settlement plan which stipulated the segregation of Singapore's various ethnic groups: special areas in the city were allocated for Europeans, Chinese, Indians and Malays. The European quarter was situated on an extensive, well-drained site near the government offices. The Chinese, a majority of whom were merchants or in allied occupations, were adjacent to the mercantile establishments. The Indians were also allocated areas close to the mercantile zone, while the Malays, mainly fishermen, were expected to settle along the coasts and creeks beyond the city perimeter.

In subsequent years a rapid increase in population greatly accelerated urban growth. By the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of Singapore's population was concentrated within six square miles of the modern "central city," despite the fact that the total land area of Singapore is 225 square miles. Within this area Singapore's business and commercial centres, its *godowns* (warehouses), government offices and main shopping centres were located; commerce formed the city's economic base. The majority of the houses in the city were two or three-storied multifunctional shop-houses that went through many stages of subdivision to accommodate the influx of migrants. Most immigrants chose to settle in the already highly populated city areas, for reasons of personal preference and convenience. Housing conditions in the city have always been marked by high internal and external densities, and usually by a lack of environmental hygiene, public and communal facilities.

By the mid-twentieth century, the spatial organization of Singapore was characterized by a parallel network of streets. These streets are about one-eighth of a mile long, and usually bounded at both ends by busy main roads. This feature has often resulted in individual street isolation, with each street comprising a separate neighbourhood or social area. Main entries into houses invariably faced the street, contributing to this sense of community, furthermore, streets were commonly named after some characteristic of their residents. In the late

1950s, the British sociologist Barrington Kaye studied one of these streets and reported that "there is a great deal of activity most of the day: people coming from and going to work, itinerant hawkers selling cooked foods and other commodities; the activity stemming from the shops, some of which in fact are workshops, or small factories; children playing on the stairs and on the pavements; people gossiping; and so forth."

While the city area of Singapore was becoming more urbanized, the remaining parts of the island, originally covered by jungle or swamps, were cleared for plantations and agriculture. But in general the British authorities showed little interest in the countryside. In the years immediately following the establishment of Singapore as a colony, a few Chinese immigrants cleared some land outside the city and started agricultural farming. By the end of the nineteenth century more than half of the island consisted of arable land, but nearly 40,000 of these acres were used for non-agricultural purposes (mostly for the British armed forces).

The Chinese and Malays were the segments of the population engaged in agriculture. The rural population lived in kampongs consisting mostly of a half dozen Chinese and Indian shops strung along the road. These were reached by small wooden bridges across the ubiquitous roadside rainwater trenches, which also doubled as drains. The shops constituted a sort of social centre for the kampong. Economic and social conditions in the rural areas were characterized by poverty, poor housing and a lack of social amenities and public utilities. The houses served by the shops were scattered, and the typical kampong house was built of wood or wood and brick, with an attap or zinc roof. The internal subdivisions were usually flexible, reflecting the family needs: there were spaces for sleep and for socializing, a small veranda, and a separate kitchen and outside toilet and bath enclosures.

A striking feature of kampong life is the fact that activities such as working, eating, bathing, washing, ironing and child-caring occur in open areas. It is not uncommon to carry on a conversation while bathing in the

small bath enclosure. Such close proximity and maximum use of open spaces in daily life has resulted in an emphasis on outdoor activities. Very few of the daily activities are conducted within the confines of individual houses. Children in the kampongs freely use both the private and public spaces for their play activities, and parents show very little anxiety about this because the public spaces are perceived to be safe. The pace of life in a kampong is in general more relaxed than life in the city areas.

The residential areas for the rich and middle classes consist mainly of detached modern bungalows, semi-detached and terrace houses. These houses are located in well planned and well serviced areas. Less than ten percent of the housing stock in 1970 was of this type. Patterns of social life in these areas are very similar to suburban life in European and North American cities.

From Shop-Housing and Kampong Housing to Public Housing

Shortly after assuming power in 1960, the People's Action Party (PAP) Government embarked on a programme of rapid industrialization and development of communication, financial, management and tourist services. Implementation of these programmes involved a radical restructuring of Singapore's social ecology. Much of the central city was earmarked for redevelopment, mainly for business and commercial activities. A considerable amount of land outside the central city was needed for new industrial estates, for building "new towns" and for highways and other infrastructure. More than half of this very necessary land was privately owned, which meant that a massive relocation (rehousing) of the existing population would be required.

To make this possible, the Government established the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1960; it was charged with building public housing and undertaking urban redevelopment. The Board embarked almost immediately upon its public housing programme, and subsequently began urban renewal efforts. The acquisition of the

essential privately-owned land surrounding Singapore City was made possible through legislation: the Land Acquisition Act of 1966 empowered the Government to compulsorily acquire private land if it was "of public benefit, of public utility or in the public interest."

To date the HDB has built over 200,000 residential units of various sizes; each year it adds 25,000 new units to the existing stock. At present over sixty percent of the population resides in HDB flats, and it is estimated that by 1980 some sixty-five percent of the population will live in such flats. Thus about 300,000 households of an estimated total of 500,000 will be residing in HDB housing.

Public housing has been transformed into a national symbol due to the achievements of the Housing Development Board. The most common public housing design is high-rise buildings located within housing estates which are planned as "viable spatial

structures"; they are designed to be convenient and comprehensive new towns, self-sufficient except for employment. Allocation is generally based on ability to pay rent, and rental rates vary according to the number of rooms. These housing estates are economically homogeneous and ethnically heterogeneous. This is a marked contrast with the former settlement pattern, which was likely to be ethnically homogeneous and economically heterogeneous. The older pattern was more conducive to the development of the neighbourhood than are the new housing estates.

Sociological Implications of the New Housing Settlement Patterns

In the past sixteen years, 200,000 families have been resettled in public housing.

Rehousing in a new environment has involved changes in spatial and social organization. Between 1969 and 1976, I and my students in the Department of Sociology at the University of Singapore carried out a series of studies on the sociological consequences of rehousing, especially on the low income families. A particular focus of our studies was the impact of relocation on the family unit. The major findings of our investigations are summarized here.

One feature of housing, namely crowding, was of special interest to us. Studies have found crowding to have a serious impact on certain aspects of family functioning and organization. Data collected from 121 families residing in a twelve-story, one-room block of flats revealed that children who came from larger families (more than six members) tended to play outside more frequently than children who came from smaller families (fewer than five



Singapore: view of a public housing estate

Photo H-U Khan/Aga Khan Awards

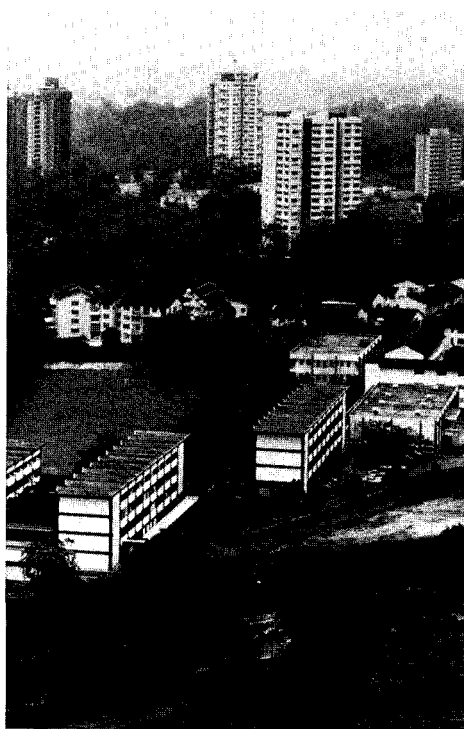
members). In general, however, the majority of children from both large and small families played inside their homes. This was true for all children between the ages of one and ten. In the sampling of children between the ages of six and ten, only fifty-seven percent played inside the flat, whereas of the younger children between the ages of one and five years, sixty-four percent played inside.

The parents of larger families with children of six years and older were asked where their children were playing outside, and in what activities they were engaged. They usually had some idea, but most were not absolutely sure; given a choice, they would have liked their children to play inside the flat, as the outside was "full of bad elements" who might teach their children undesirable things. Studies carried out elsewhere suggest that under conditions of higher internal density (crowding), parental surveillance and control over children decline.

Let us assume that the tendency to play outside in the case of children who came from larger families did indeed result in reduced parental control. One should then expect children coming from larger families to exhibit a greater tendency toward socially deviant behaviour, such as juvenile delinquency. We attempted to ascertain, in the context of Singapore, whether or not such a correlation existed. This was done by comparing the floor area per person for ninety juvenile delinquents who were reared in public flats with the overall floor area per person for all public housing flats.

The comparison showed that the juvenile delinquent cases usually came from flats which have considerably smaller floor area per person than most public housing flats. The smaller floor areas were found to be related to poverty. Though it is possible that poverty could have a potentially compounding influence, it is reasonable to conclude that overcrowding is a contributing factor in juvenile delinquency, because of the attendant decline in parental supervision and control.

These findings are supported by a case study of fifteen large and fifteen small families residing in one-room public flats. Again,



Public housing estate, Singapore

Photo: H-U Khan

one of the objectives of this study was to ascertain the sociological effects of internal density. Density is perceived as the factor which forces children out of their flats to play. Children from eleven of the fifteen large families played outside most of the time, whereas children from only three of the fifteen small families generally played outside. All mothers (respondents in the study) whose children played outside preferred that their children play inside; the interior was considered safer and more secure because it ensured that the children would not get involved in fights or mix with bad company. The outside environment was perceived as undesirable and dangerous for children. However, a lack of play space inside the flats left little choice for the mothers, except to allow their children to play outside.

Of the respondents whose children played outside, nine knew what their children were doing; since the study block consisted of

only three stories, mothers could keep an eye on their children. They pointed out, however, that if they lived in a high-rise block of flats this supervision would not be possible. Five respondents reported that they had only a very vague idea of the activities of the children when they were playing outside. For safety reasons only those children over ten years of age were allowed to play downstairs in the playground. Younger children were instructed to play in the corridor where their mothers could supervise them.

The children from the smaller families usually played inside the flat. Some parents had even erected barriers at the doorstep to prevent their children from going out. The practice of confining the children inside could have serious sociological and psychological consequences. Confining a child indoors deprives him of experience in the physical world, and this could hinder the child's sensory development.

The study found that internal crowding was a constant hindrance to children's studying. Lack of privacy, frequent movement by other family members, demands by the mother for their help and noise from the surrounding area were some of the distractions which prevented children from concentrating on their schoolwork. As a result, most of the children from large families (eleven of the fifteen) fared very badly in school. Some of them have been retained once or twice and, in cases where they did well in the first year of schooling, their performance declined in later years.

Another revealing aspect of this study was the manner in which mothers justified their children's poor school results. Mothers, especially from the larger families, tended to perceive their children as stupid, and comments like "my children cannot speak intelligently" were frequently made in front of the children. The mothers were found to be ashamed of their children's poor scholastic achievements and had very low aspirations for their future. They felt that since their children were stupid there was little that could be done. They expected their children to leave school and go to work in order to help supplement the family income, or else earn enough to look after themselves independently. The mothers had no con-



Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: middle income housing scheme

Photo: H-U Khan/Aga Khan Awards

ception of the influence of social factors (poverty, malnutrition, etc.), ecological factors or physical features of housing upon the children's achievements.

A mother's perception that her offspring are stupid is internalized by the children, who then come to regard themselves as "backward." It is not surprising that there tends to be a high dropout rate among such children. The most obvious consequence is that their chances of social mobility are effectively blocked, and they become early recruits to the working class.

The 1968 HDB Survey also suggests that children from one-room flats, which have a higher internal density, have lower school attendance rates than those from larger flats. According to the survey findings, the average number of children per household is three, one from each age group (under six years, seven to twelve years and thirteen to seventeen years). Thus each HDB household averages two children of primary or secondary school age. For one-room flats, the ratio of secondary school students to primary school students is one to three. In larger flats, more room reduces the ratio to one to one. Seventy percent of children age thirteen to seventeen who come from the poorer and more crowded one-room flats do not continue their schooling beyond primary level six.

The above findings show that conditions of high internal density in flats occupied by lower socioeconomic groups tend to weaken parental surveillance over children, and adversely affect the children's academic achievement. These related ill effects of crowding could be minimized by the availability of modern medical and social welfare services, and through the development of social infrastructure such as urban community development programmes. The adaptation of children and families to their environment could thereby be facilitated. These findings, notwithstanding their limitations, also indicate the need for alternative housing design for low income groups. These designs must be more congruent with their lifestyles and more directed toward reducing some of the problematic aspects of living in a high-density environment.

Housing Environment as Learning Environment

The field work for the above case study revealed that the new environment is also a very significant learning environment. It shapes certain patterns of social interaction and attitudes and reinforces others. A thorough examination of this problem is beyond the scope of this paper, but certain observations, though speculative in nature, are worthy of reflection.

During casual conversation in the study areas with children between the ages of six and fourteen, I noticed that they were very conscious of the hugeness of the buildings which surrounded them. Building size and form appeared to have an intimidating effect on the children. Parents frequently told them to be careful, for a fall from the building would mean serious and even fatal injuries. Such exhortations about danger, combined with the overwhelming size of the buildings, evoked a fear of the environment; this perhaps constituted some of the children's earliest learning experiences about the meaning of danger and fear.

The new settlement pattern served as a learning environment in other important respects. It exposed children to the impersonality and superficiality of social contacts among neighbours and friends; extreme routinization of social life; social transactions in which material wealth played an important role; the housing bureaucracy; and family environments characterized by a highly materialistic orientation.

Interaction among neighbours was marked by an ideology of non-involvement and avoidance of meaningful social contacts. Social interaction among the residents tends to be superficial, impersonal and instrumental; children are discouraged from having close associations with other children in the block. Parents, remarking on the problems of raising children, very often implied that the neighbourhood was full of bad elements; if only they could prevent their children from associating with bad company, they would have no problems with them. However, who constituted "bad company" was never explicitly defined, and instructions to the children were usually very

vague and general, such as "avoid playing with other children." Although children did play with other children, a considerable amount of their play contacts tended to be restricted to their own siblings and to children who attended school with them or were their immediate neighbours. Thus, children accepted impersonal and superficial social interaction as a form of normative behaviour, because it was valued by their parents. One could therefore argue that learning a "norm of impersonality" began at a very early age, and was reinforced both by parents and by the environment of the new public housing.

Children were often involved in buying sundry goods for their families or for their own consumption. These transactions con-

stituted some of their very first exposures to market transactions and the use of money. Through these exchanges (as well as by observing their parents' market behaviour) the children began to develop a certain awareness toward commercial exchange and an orientation toward money and its proper handling. Money became a desired and valued object, its acquisition a highly desirable social goal.

Children learned very quickly from their parents that money was earned, and that to earn money one had to work. The condition of unemployment therefore meant no money. Parents made certain that children realized the importance of work by telling them repeatedly that when they grew up they must do something useful, i.e. work to earn money. Parents tried their best to send children to school, in order to equip them with marketable skills or a certificate of proficiency in some occupation; the children were told that they would learn something useful in school. Education thereby acquired purely an instrumental value. The school system reinforced this orientation through its emphasis on memory recall by frequent examination. The child learned the meaning and significance of money because it was such a critical aspect of socialization; he learned the means of getting it by seeing the way his parents earned it, i.e. through wages for work done outside the home and for someone else. He therefore learned the role of the wage labourer at a young and impressionable age.

Children also learned the significance and necessity of following rules and regulations of the outside world. This learning took place when they saw their parents and others paying the rent and other fees regularly at the local offices of the Housing Board. Children would be familiarized with these regulations when parents talked about not being able to make any alteration in the flat because of Housing Board restrictions, or through the maintenance services rendered periodically by the Housing Board employees. This exposure, combined with the children's experience that school rules must also be observed, constituted early experiences with bureaucratic organization. They learned that the best way to deal with these bureaucracies was to observe, mechan-



Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: middle income housing scheme

Photo: H-U Khan/Aga Khan Awards

ically and passively, their full complement of rules and regulations. At home too, submission to parents' wishes and observance of their expectations was the best policy.

Housing, Spatial Organization and the Islamic Social Structure

Our observations about the housing system and social structure of Singapore have important implications for sociopolitical movements in the modern Islamic world. These aim at restructuring society in accordance with Islamic values. An important aspect of such a restructuring will be the reduction of existing socioeconomic disparities between the rich and the poor. Since it reflects the inequalities of the existing social structure, the housing system will inevitably require public intervention—to ensure that the existing housing stock is equitably distributed, and to guarantee that all socioeconomic groups have equal access

to housing constructed in the future. This raises the practical problem of which strategy should be adopted to achieve the desired objective; this problem has not yet been given the attention it deserves. There is an urgent need to formulate a housing policy which reflects, as well as enshrines, that most fundamental Islamic social value: equality. I hope that the members of the seminar will apply their experience and knowledge to this problem. In view of its obvious urgency, I would encourage serious research on this problem under the auspices of the Aga Khan Foundation.

Another major implication of my studies in Singapore pertains to the design and planning of housing complexes. The existing design and architectural orientation toward settlement complexes have largely been influenced by the free market mechanism and by motor vehicles. This has resulted in an urban sprawl which is undesirable both from the economic and environmental viewpoint. In designing future housing complexes one needs to consider the dis-

tinctive character of the Islamic community. The social and cultural *de facto* tenets of Islam—the social division of labour, material austerity, social equality, equal accessibility to public services, mutual care, assistance to the needy, social cohesion and cultural values—are just some of the factors which merit consideration in the design of new residential complexes.

This is an area of immense potential, and opportunities for creative work in this field are unlimited. It is an exciting intellectual challenge for future social and physical planners in Islamic communities, one which requires both research and creative thinking. One can only hope it will receive the attention it deserves from those avowedly concerned with the expression of culturally—and regionally—specific Islamic values, and who are capable of improving the spatial organization of Islamic communities and society in general.

Reference Note

¹ This research was undertaken in Singapore between 1970 and 1975. Major findings have been published in *Families in Flats* (Singapore University Press, 1977).



Public housing estate, Singapore

Photo: H-U Khan