



# Master Planning Singapore:

## From Bo Beh Kang to Queenstown

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In October 1956, J. M. Fraser, Chairman of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), officiated the opening of the Forfar House. This was a zigzag-shaped slab of a housing block, with 106 3-room flats comprising modern kitchens, bathrooms and latrines, served by lifts. At 14 storeys high, Forfar House was then the tallest residential building in Singapore. Having taken 19 months to build, it now formed 'the apex of the architectural massing of Princess Estate', the path-breaking first neighbourhood of the SIT's maiden new town project in Queenstown.<sup>1</sup> Fraser spoke grandly of how '[t]his is an important day for the Singapore Improvement Trust ... [w]e are celebrating the completion of the first phase of the largest development which has yet been undertaken by the Trust'.<sup>2</sup>

But as historic as the project was, Queenstown was not simply Singapore's first new town, developing in a self-contained and detached fashion from the original city. Rather, Queenstown ought to be considered the city's first planned suburb and a primary site in the transformation of the urban face of postwar Singapore. The flats of Queenstown accommodated the residents of the city's informal wooden housing and congested shophouse dwellings through a campaign of emergency rehousing in the late 1950s and 1960s. The new town not only transformed the locality itself but was deeply instrumental in remaking the entire city. Its birth and emergence in the late colonial era and its full maturity in the People's Action Party (PAP) years signalled the creation of what James Scott has called a 'high modernist' state in Singapore, based

on the robust 'self-confidence about scientific and technical progress ... [and] the mastery of nature (including human nature)'. The role of the Queenstown flats as a form of emergency housing was to reduce the complexity of urban life in the informal settlements and shophouses, as Scott has noted, to a visual and administrative legibility.<sup>3</sup> Queenstown was part of the ambitious social project of postwar Singapore, where the Bauhaus-inspired architecture found its robustly-engineered expression, implementation and realisation in modernising the city and society.

At the same time, the social history of its original residents reveals a second and equally important side to postwar Queenstown. The farmers, semi-urban and urban residents who dwelt in the area lived in state of tension with modernity in the 1950s and 1960s. They were partially integrated into the political structures and the entrepot economy of postwar Singapore. But with their local norms and values of social and economic life based in the settlement, they also remained a semi-autonomous community. They desired the progress in the form of a modern housing flat with improved sanitation and social amenities. But they also expressed an acute anxiety towards the social and economic costs and repercussions of high modernist living. They frequently became resistant to resettlement in both spontaneous and organised ways. The social history of Queenstown provides an insightful window into the contestation between the state and the dwellers which arose over the making of modern Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s.

## The Genesis of Dispersal

The idea of building a new town in Singapore emerged in 1947 after World War Two. The British colonial regime, having returned, set about shaping Singapore into a stable and prosperous state which would appropriately safeguard imperial interests when the island was granted independence in due course. Rehousing the people was an important plank in this policy. The Singapore Housing Committee was tasked by the British colonial government to investigate the 'housing shortage' in the postwar period and make suitable recommendations to the authorities. The shophouse dwellings in the inner city, also called the Central Area, where the Chinese majority population traditionally lived, had become severely congested. In addition, over 50 autonomous settlements of unauthorised wooden housing with attap ['thatched'] or zinc roofs, located at the fringes of the urban area, were steadily proliferating, as numerous young, low-income, nuclear and semi-extended Chinese families arrived from the Central Area and from Malaya and China. The Housing Committee identified the underlying reason for the 'housing crisis' to be the absence of regulated development. It likened such housing development to a dangerously spreading contagion: 'The disease from which Singapore is suffering is Gigantism', out of which '[a] chaotic and unwieldy megalopolis has been created' by 'haphazard and unplanned growth'. The report lamented that '[n]o provision is made for road improvement, open spaces or public buildings or amenities' and warned that such autonomous building was 'detrimental to health and morals'.<sup>4</sup> The Committee reserved its harshest criticism for the informal settlements in the city, which it called 'the 'insanitary kampongs' ['villages']', warning that they possessed 'living conditions which are not fit for animals to live in'. The solution to the problem of the informal settlements, the report concluded, was 'demolition and re-housing'.<sup>5</sup>

However, the real solution to the 'housing crisis', as the Committee emphasised, was to adopt and implement a long-term development plan for Singapore over the next 20 years. The way to do this was to shift the Central Area population into new homes outside

the historical town of Singapore – into 'new towns'. C. W. A. Sennett, the Committee's chairman, wanted the Trust to be vested with 'proper zoning powers and powers to plan ahead of development, and to disperse population by planning housing estates, "dormitory towns" [for urban workers], industrial estates, satellite towns, light and heavy industry centres, recreational and other facilities'.<sup>6</sup> In this programme of dispersal, the Committee envisaged moving some 400,000 people outside the municipal limits within the next 10 years. It was necessary, then, for Singapore's urban planners and architects to draw up a 'Master Development Plan'.<sup>7</sup> To accomplish these aims, the Committee called on the SIT, a colonial agency established in 1927 originally to carry out improvement works in the city, to take on greater planning and building responsibilities and for the state to provide adequate funds for housing.

Queenstown was gazetted to be the site of the pioneer new town to which a large proportion of the urban population could be 'dispersed' under the Master Plan. It was a large settlement of wooden housing of about a thousand acres in size west of Singapore City, bounded by Alexandra Road, the Malayan Railway and Buona Vista. Before the war, part of the area had been occupied by the British army at Buller Camp. Large parts of Queenstown were hilly or filled with graves or swamps. The area was inhabited by wooden house dwellers, some of whom grew fruit trees, cultivated vegetables and reared pigs, who had moved into the place during the Japanese Occupation.<sup>8</sup> The Chinese called Queenstown *bo beh kang* ['no tail river'], for they were unable to locate the source of the river which ran through two dominant hills in the locality.<sup>9</sup>

## The Economics of Clearance and Resettlement

Redeveloping Queenstown from an informal settlement into a modern new town dwarfed the scale of the British government's early building work after the war. In 1947, upon the Housing Committee's recommendation to launch a short-term building programme, the SIT began to construct what was called

'low-cost' housing within four miles of the city. The following year, the SIT received a \$5 million loan from the government to fund the programme. The programme aimed to build over the informal settlements located at the urban margins. In the western half of the city, the SIT began to build small housing estates at Tiong Bahru, Henderson, Havelock Road, and Bukit Merah between the late 1940s and mid-1950s, all of which were the former sites of wooden housing. The clearance and resettlement of a large population of wooden house dwellers was underway.

The great price for the government, however, was Queenstown. In 1952, the SIT began preliminary work to transform about 500 acres – half the total size of the area – into a 'modern, efficient and complete town'.<sup>10</sup> This referred to how new towns would possess, in the characteristically modernist language of the SIT, 'a corporate life of their own, separate from that of the parent city'.<sup>11</sup> However, an academic study suggested that the Queenstown housing might more appropriately be called a 'suburb', since it was only 5 miles from the Central Area and was in no way truly self-contained or autonomous of social and economic life in the inner city.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the earliest SIT files spoke of Queenstown as a 'suburb'.

Before the Master Plan could be prepared, and as the Housing Committee had recommended, it was necessary to first collect information on where people lived. Between 1952 and 1954, SIT officials and student volunteers carried out a Diagnostic Survey, undertaking a dwelling-to-dwelling investigation of the most densely-populated informal settlements in the city, the use and location of each house, and the number of occupants. The planners recommended building a new town on 'the Western side of the Island', then still partially outside city limits. This massive town would 'relieve the congestion in the City Area and at the same time make the best use of land in the Colony'.<sup>13</sup> The new town was to house 65,000 people in rental flats clustered into 5 neighbourhoods, each served by shops, markets, schools, health centres, a community centre, cinemas, and other community services.<sup>14</sup> Socially, the township would have a 'self-contained and balanced community', with the application of '[c]ontemporary building methods [which]

aim to build up a society of people from various social strata'.<sup>15</sup> In 1953, the British government established a Working Party to oversee the planning and development of Queenstown.

As soon as this plan translated into action, the difficulty of clearance surfaced for three groups of informal dwellers. For farmers, the chief problem was that most agricultural land in Singapore was already under cultivation and what land remained for settlement was usually located in the rural area.<sup>16</sup> In effect, many evicted farmers had to face the reality of moving into SIT housing in the city and converting to an urban lifestyle. As two evicted farming families, when offered alternative accommodation by the Trust, declared, such a relocation and conversion of life were tantamount to 'let[ting] the vegetables grow on rocks'.<sup>17</sup> But resettlement was fraught with even greater difficulty for the urban and semi-urban dwellers. While the SIT claimed to build inexpensive housing for the low-income population, the rentals were frequently unaffordable. The Trust conveniently blamed the people for their 'choosiness', because they allegedly 'h[e]ld superstitious beliefs concerning the citing of a flat; generally they prefer[red] mid-floor flats to top or ground floor; they expect[ed] a bus service to take them from door of house to office, and generally have a horror of isolation and quietness'.<sup>18</sup> But even the SIT recognised 'a fundamental objection amongst the local population, particularly the lower paid classes, to paying rent at all, and most of them would rather pay \$5 a month for space in an overcrowded shophouse or an attap hut than pay a reasonable proportion, say up to 20% of their income, for good accommodation'.<sup>19</sup>

Particularly difficult to rehouse were the poor semi-urban dwellers, who were 'not farmers but the household budget [was] aided a great deal by the vegetables, fruit, eggs and poultry obtained from the land surrounding their house'. The authorities acknowledged that '[t]he higher rent and service charges coupled with the loss of produce from their garden often [made] it impossible for them to accept such accommodation'.<sup>20</sup> The economics of clearance and resettlement sprang from the tension between modernity and autonomy experienced by most informal dwellers of

urban Singapore. The population of Queenstown comprised farmers, semi-urban and urban dwellers, and it is not surprising that clearing the area was deeply contested.

### Spontaneous and Organised Resistance

Eviction naturally led to an unwillingness, or even refusal, to relocate. Pek Cheng Siew, a trishaw rider supporting a family of ten, lived in an attap house at Geylang Lorong 41.<sup>21</sup> When he was told to move to an SIT flat because the land had been earmarked for a children's playground in 1955, he protested,

I am a poor man with a large family to support and am paying rent for land at \$4 per month only and the assessment at \$10.20 per half annum ... With my meagre income, I could not afford to stay in SIT premises which is very expensive ... I have not applied for SIT premises nor have any intention of removing from my present abode.<sup>22</sup>

As a semi-autonomous population, wooden house dwellers resisted clearance in various ways. The SIT found that most had either 'political backing or the backing of hooligans or gangsters'.<sup>23</sup> Secret societies, based in the settlements, protected their turfs against hostile intruders and physically challenged demolition squads on the spot, while City Councillors, Legislative Assembly members and rural activists sought to block demolition orders through administrative channels and political means.<sup>24</sup> In 1958, despite the presence of two constables, gangsters at Henderson Road successfully foiled a demolition attempt, while SIT officials were assaulted in other informal settlements.<sup>25</sup> On other occasions, the entire village community turned out in full force to challenge the eviction. In July 1953, a demolition team with a police escort at Geylang Lorong 27 was confronted by 'a hostile crowd of about forty people', many of whom 'adopted a threatening attitude'. The demolition of the unauthorised houses could only proceed when a full riot squad descended upon the scene and brought the situation under control.<sup>26</sup>

Such resistance to clearance naturally occurred in Queenstown. When the SIT first began work on

Princess Estate, the neighbourhood closest to the Central Area, the project was repeatedly delayed by the clearance of 372 families living on Crown lands under Temporary Occupation Licences. A minority were non-agricultural families who were mostly urban workers like labourers, hawkers and clerks. They were only earning \$150-300 per month, well under the low-income ceiling of \$400 in the 1950s.<sup>27</sup> The Trust offered them low-rental housing at Hock San Brickworks Estate nearby, but only 6 families accepted, with the rest opting to find their own accommodation.<sup>28</sup> The majority of the residents, the farming families, were each offered an ex-gratia payment, a house lot and a farming lot in rural resettlement areas like Chua Chu Kang in the northwest of Singapore, and Jurong, 11 miles west of the Central Area. Many of the agricultural and non-agricultural families simply did not respond to the SIT's rehousing offers.<sup>29</sup> In October, the Trust finally obtained eviction warrants to demolish the houses of the remaining families who had refused the terms of rehousing.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, over four-fifths of the farming families were removed to the rural resettlement areas.

It was not until 1956 that Princess Estate's 1,793 dwellings and flats were completed. At his speech at the opening of Forfar House, the Chairman of the SIT admitted that 'the Trust has not had a clear field here for development at any time, and it has been necessary for the development to follow evacuation'. He also warned: 'There are still many attap dwellers to be resettled before the whole of Queenstown can be fully developed'.<sup>31</sup> Local resistance similarly delayed the building of Duchess Estate, the second neighbourhood west of Princess Estate, and it was not until 1958 that it was completed. The neighbourhood added a further 752 SIT dwellings to the area.<sup>32</sup>

To some extent, the resistance in Queenstown was politically organised. As the British progressively moved Singapore towards self-government in the 1950s, politicians and rural activists realised the importance of mobilising the wooden house population as their mass base. In Queenstown, the mobilisation was due to the efforts of the Singapore Attap Dwellers' Association (SADA), founded in 1952. The association was closely linked to the fairly conservative

Labour Front government which was in power between 1955 and 1959; its President, Mak Pak Shee, was the party's Assemblyman for Geylang. In October 1953, the association had an estimated 2,000 members, representing 10,000 persons. The SADA was generally a moderate organisation, unlike the leftwing rural associations affiliated to the PAP which later superseded the SADA. While assuring the colonial government that it would 'never be its policy to hold up development in this Colony', the SADA sought to protect attap dwellers from eviction by 'unscrupulous landlords or land speculators' desiring to develop land without due compensation or the provision of alternative housing.<sup>33</sup> The SIT and SADA met on a number of occasions to facilitate the clearance of Queenstown, with the association operating on the basis that 'the squatters were morally entitled to certain rights' and attempted to negotiate fair rehousing terms.<sup>34</sup> In 1954, the SIT asked the SADA to sound out the views of farmers in Queenstown about moving to the Jurong resettlement area.<sup>35</sup> However, the long delay in redeveloping the first two neighbourhoods shows that many of the residents did not find the improved terms of rehousing obtained by the SADA adequate for their livelihood.

Even after the first two neighbourhoods were completed, the new modern housing initially found few applicants. In 1954, the SIT had gauged the public response to the flats of Princess and Duchess estates to be lukewarm, because of the following economic and social reasons: 'lack of school facilities', 'absence of cinemas', 'long travelling distances to work', 'all charges are considered part of the "rent" by applicants and the total is considered by them to be beyond their ability to pay', 'preference for the town area', 'dislike for flats', and 'dislike of tall buildings or ground floor flats'.<sup>36</sup> The rentals for the 2-storey terrace houses and 3-room flats in Queenstown were \$50 per month respectively, while that for a 2-room flat was \$40. The reluctance to move into the new town illustrated the underlying tension between modernity and autonomy on the part of the residents and was to change only gradually.

The social complications of the clearance policy, particularly at Queenstown, led the government to

appoint a Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party in 1955 to study the intractable 'squatter problem'. It focussed its deliberations on semi-urban dwellers who, unlike the other two groups, could not readily move to a rural resettlement area or into an SIT flat.<sup>37</sup> The Working Party understood that rehousing a semi-urban dweller in a flat mandated a transformation of life and brought to the fore their ambivalence towards modern housing and a semi-autonomous lifestyle:

Most of these families are rural type dwellers, i.e. they have always lived in plank and attap houses, they have always depended on wells or standpipes for their supply of water, and they have never experienced water borne sewerage. On the other hand, they have always experienced a form of freedom which is absent in permanent thickly populated urban districts in that an increase in the family can be accommodated by extending the house, and when they are out of work, they can spend more time on the land and produce food. Their rent to the land owner is small and they have a feeling of independence and ownership ... Whatever move they make their former sense of security is destroyed.<sup>38</sup>

The Working Party proposed four rehousing schemes for evicted dwellers to 1) find their own accommodation (these had to satisfy building and planning laws); 2) accept SIT accommodation; 3) accept wooden housing in planned 'semi-urban settlements'; and 4) join existing farming settlements. It was also felt that '[s]ettlers living in Semi-urban and Farming Settlements would become land owners and form a more stable community than tenants or shack-dwellers' – indicating the official desire to integrate wooden house dwellers into the formal structures of the state, so foreshadowing the policy of the PAP government.<sup>39</sup>

### The Master Plan: A Coordinated Attack

The sister project to the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party's report in planning the orderly development of Singapore, and of Queenstown in particular, was the Master Plan. A major emphasis of the Plan was its recognition of the need for a coordinated policy attack on 'squatters', unauthorised

housing and unstable urban spaces. In an urgent memorandum on the government's housing policy to Governor John Nicoll in mid-1954, S. C. Woolmer, Chief Architect of the SIT, and D. H. Komlosy, the Planning Adviser of the SIT and Chief Planning Officer of the Diagnostic Survey Team, declared that housing in Singapore had been a 'very hand to mouth affair' and called for 'efforts that must be made NOW' and 'steps that must be taken AT THIS MOMENT' to lay down a 'firm coordinated policy' and enable the SIT to expand the housing programme.<sup>40</sup> The Master Plan, published in 1955 and officially adopted in 1958, became the cornerstone of colonial and to a large extent PAP housing policy. It utilised the characteristically high modernist framework of zoning land use according to residential, industrial, recreational, and other functions.

The dispersal of the urban population was also integral to the Plan. This was to proceed hand-in-glove with the containment, contraction and clearance of informal housing in the urban area. The Plan stated that '[t]he Attap Dwelling will not be appropriate within the built-up precincts of a modern City',<sup>41</sup> and identified 154,900 dwellers who would be cleared due to the development of land.<sup>42</sup> It accepted only 148,000 persons to reside in wooden housing in the City, nearly 100,000 less than the prevailing figure.<sup>43</sup> The Plan sought to resettle, over 20 years, 161,000 out of 246,000 wooden house dwellers in either permanent housing or resettlement areas.<sup>44</sup> The remaining 85,000 dwellers were allowed to remain in 16 informal settlements designated as 'tolerated attap areas', which would possess proper sanitation and fire-breaks.<sup>45</sup> Finally, the vast majority of the settlements were categorised as 'insanitary kampongs' where, as the Master Plan indicated, '[l]iving conditions in these areas are very bad' and could 'only be rendered healthy by a planned programme of clearance and rebuilding'.<sup>46</sup> Built over the wooden houses of these 'clearance areas' would be the permanent housing, schools, public open spaces, and community buildings of the SIT's modern estates and new towns.<sup>47</sup>

The Master Plan had immense implications for Queenstown, even though the area had already been partially cleared and was in the midst of redevelop-

ment. Queenstown was one of the designated clearance areas, where 210 families, all farming households, were to be removed. By 1972, nearly all of its 9,400 residents living in temporary (informal) housing in 1953 would be relocated in permanent housing. There would be a total of nearly 78,000 people living in modern homes in the new town by then, eight times the original number in the early 1950s. Under the Plan, Queenstown's population density would be 122 persons per acre. Most of the housing were intended to cater to the low-income population, with 30-40% being 2-room flats, 40-55% 3-room flats and a smaller percentage of larger flats.<sup>48</sup> The Master Plan also stipulated that the new town would have schools for the residents (106.1 acres in 1972), public open spaces (84.2 acres) and community buildings (10.1 acres). In 1959, a list of possible sites for public housing prepared by the SIT shows that foremost among them, the sites for Queenstown's last three neighbourhoods were ready for building development, comprising a total of 256 residential acres. Compared to the other informal settlements, the preparatory work to redevelop Queenstown was well underway at the end of the 1950s, when the PAP government would be elected into power.

The governing principles of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party report and the Master Plan had barely been put into practice before they were overtaken by political developments. In the 1959 general elections for a self-governing state, the PAP won 43 out of 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly. An important part of the party's election platform was to build public housing for the low-income population on a much larger scale than the SIT had done. However, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the fully empowered housing agency under the PAP government's control, found the actual resettlement of wooden house dwellers to be as deeply problematic as it had been for the Trust. Under the PAP's State Development Plan of 1961-1965, the HDB aimed to redevelop 1,300 acres of land within five miles of the Central Area. Much of the building work would be concentrated in Queenstown and Toa Payoh in the northern part of the sector, which would become Singapore's second new town with 50,000

flats and a population of 300,000.<sup>49</sup> In 1960, the HDB continued to remove wooden house dwellers from Queenstown and established a committee to coordinate the clearance of Toa Payoh.<sup>50</sup> But the residents quickly began to make representations to the government in protest.<sup>51</sup>

### Queenstown and the Emergency Rehousing of the City

In the context of this contested remaking of the urban margins of postwar Singapore, two pivotal events in the early PAP years were crucial in determining the outcome. The first was the outbreak of the biggest fire in the island's history in May 1961 in an informal settlement at Bukit Ho Swee, where nearly 16,000 people were rendered homeless. Within a year, the HDB, under the government's direct orders, had rehoused the fire victims in emergency flats built over the fire site. Whilst permanently replacing the unauthorised wooden housing with modern flats, the Bukit Ho Swee project also imbued the HDB with a strong conviction in its housing work and served as a launching pad to transform informal housing nearby into public housing estates. The second major event was the government's proscription of two powerful leftwing rural associations which were mobilising wooden house dwellers in Toa Payoh and elsewhere against clearance. In November 1963, the rural associations were charged with communist activities and deregistered. The clearance of Toa Payoh, in particular, became increasingly unhindered thereafter.

In its first 5-Year Building Programme in 1960-1965, the HDB removed a further 1,000 informal residents from Queenstown to the rural resettlement area in Chua Chu Kang. The Board was able to add 14,000 flats to the 3,000 units the SIT had constructed in Queenstown between 1953 and 1960. By 1965, the Board had completed its remaining three neighbourhoods: Commonwealth Estate, Tanglin Halt and Queen's Close. It then aimed to add two further neighbourhoods, Mei Ling and Buona Vista, to the new town, bringing the total number of flats and residents to 27,000 and 160,000 respectively.<sup>52</sup> The HDB adopted the British neighbourhood concept

but did not simply increase the pace and scale of development. Although the SIT had built 7-storey flats at Princess Street, the HDB went higher with 10- and 16-storey blocks to minimise building costs and economise on the use of land. Arguing that the need for privacy was an English concept which did not apply to the Asian people of Singapore, the Board also significantly raised the new town's population density. This would, it argued, blend the modernity of the housing with the communal lifestyle of the shophouse residents in the Central Area.<sup>53</sup> Alan Choe, the HDB's first architect-planner and closely involved in finishing the final two neighbourhoods of Queenstown, recalled that 'I nearly fell off my chair' when his superiors told him to plan for a density of 500 persons per acre.<sup>54</sup>

In this history of change and transformation, Queenstown was less significant in itself than in its role in remaking the city. As early as 1956, when the SIT began to redevelop Selegie Road in the Central Area, of the 289 families and 100 single persons affected, only two families were willing to move into Princess Estate because of the high rentals and transport costs travelling to work in the inner city.<sup>55</sup> The following year, when the Trust started an improvement scheme at Covent Garden, they planned to move the settlement's 650 families to flats in Queenstown.<sup>56</sup> But the wooden house owners of Covent Garden quickly organised their tenants against accepting the flats before obtaining a satisfactory rate of compensation.<sup>57</sup> The SIT's inspectors working in the area were frequently intimidated or even assaulted by the residents. By July 1958, the SIT conceded it 'had no effective control of the area'.<sup>58</sup> Even the HDB found the clearance of Covent Garden difficult. 'This is an extremely difficult area', the Board warned in 1960, 'and the personal safety of the inspectorate would be prejudiced in the event of departmental intervention'.<sup>59</sup>

Fires in the informal settlements in the late 1950s and early 1960s played a crucial role in the public housing development of Singapore. Queenstown was initially less than successful for housing the homeless victims of fires. This can be seen in September 1955, when a serious fire in Kampong Tiong Bahru ren-

dered 800 people homeless. As the authorities scrambled frantically to provide emergency shelter for them, some of the fire victims requested for the authorities to allow two families share an SIT flat, so that the \$50 rental, halved, would be affordable.<sup>60</sup> The Trust was agreeable to the idea but warned that accommodation in Queenstown was not likely to become available soon.<sup>61</sup> Here, as in the Covent Garden and Kampong Tiong Bahru cases, the clearance of informal dwellers was the decisive limiting factor, highlighting the deeply contested nature of the rehousing programme in the late colonial era.

Nevertheless, Queenstown's role in the emergency rehousing of fire victims was rather more successful in the Kampong Koo Chye inferno in the eastern part of the city in April 1958. By this time, the flats of the first two neighbourhoods of Queenstown had been completed. Many of the 2,000 fire victims stayed temporarily in a school that was converted into an emergency relief centre. They were offered short-term accommodation at Queenstown and Kallang Estate nearby. However, when the authorities began to move the fire victims, they found that, as a newspaper reported, 'a group of Kampong Koo Chye bachelors who lived in style at the expense of the Singapore Government at the Geylang Methodist English School, [had] turned "agitators" yesterday'. 17 families refused to leave the centre for two hours, repeatedly rejecting the offer of new housing at Queenstown and Kallang. They finally left at 8 pm, realising that they had no other choice but to accept the offer.<sup>62</sup> Despite the initial setback, the government was able to provide temporary housing for 70% of the fire victims (1,432 persons) in SIT flats at Queenstown and Kallang.<sup>63</sup> This rehousing allowed the SIT to acquire the fire site to build 192 3-room terrace houses for sale to the fire victims. The houses were completed by the end of 1960 and purchased by 196 families, or three-fifths of the fire victims, who were reportedly 'happy to return to their former neighbourhood'.<sup>64</sup>

In February 1959, the emergence of Queenstown new town was also closely tied to the outbreak of a second and far greater fire in Kampong Tiong Bahru, when over 5,000 people were made homeless. As the SIT's planners moved to acquire the fire site for emer-

gency public housing, they saw the importance of coordinating the redevelopment of Kampong Tiong Bahru within the larger framework of clearing the informal areas in the city, as instituted by the Master Plan:

The redevelopment of the fire area should be regarded as Phase I of the whole redevelopment ... [D]ecanting from other parts of the scheme area could be carried out, a) into the rebuilt fire area, b) into the transit camp at Queenstown Neighbourhood V, and c) into similar emergency development which could be provided on the old cemetery site at Tiong Bahru behind Boon Tiong Road, if funds could be provided for development immediately ... It will be noted that the redevelopment proposals provide for accommodating more occupants within the area than were there before, with a far higher standard of living, open space, community facilities etc.<sup>65</sup>

By early 1961, the government had built a combination of terrace houses and 5- and 9-storey emergency flats, totalling 1,015 flats and shops, at the Kampong Tiong Bahru fire site.<sup>66</sup> But many of the flats, especially the smallest 1-room emergency housing with communal toilets or kitchens, were unpopular with even the fire victims and remained vacant.

The Kampong Tiong Bahru emergency housing was, however, to prove crucial when the most severe fire broke out nearby in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee just over two years later on 25 May 1961. The political leadership was now the popularly elected PAP government, presiding over a self-governing state at the threshold of obtaining independence through a merger with Malaya. The PAP showed greater resolve in rehousing the fire victims and acquiring the fire site for emergency housing. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew promised the fire victims that '[i]n nine months' time a sufficient number of units will be completed by the Housing and Development Board to house every fire victim family'.<sup>67</sup> While Bukit Ho Swee was being transformed into a housing estate, 40% of the fire victims were immediately moved into 1,150 flats for short-term occupation, including 600 1- and 2-room flats in Queenstown.<sup>68</sup> The remaining fire victims were successively rehoused in HDB housing elsewhere, including a further 1,448 2- and 3-room flats to be completed in Queenstown in the near future.<sup>69</sup>

The fact that the Board could promptly make 600 flats available for the fire victims indicates their unpopularity at that point of time. But the PAP government's emergency response to the Bukit Ho Swee inferno was also more successful than the SIT's performance in the two earlier fires in Kampong Tiong Bahru.

As Queenstown played a progressively greater role in rehousing former wooden house dwellers and fire victims, so the ability of the residents to contest the frame and terms of relocation diminished. This was particularly the case for the victims of fire, which not only destroyed homes but also created an official state of emergency and mobilisation. The Bukit Ho Swee fire empowered the government with a strong moral and political mandate to act decisively on behalf of the victims, preventing them from rebuilding wooden houses on the fire site and moving them speedily into emergency public housing. To many fire victim families, moving into the allocated HDB housing was not a matter of personal choice. Wang Ah Tee, whose house was fortunately spared by the fire, put it succinctly, ' ' ['We had no other roads to walk'].<sup>70</sup> The fire victim family of Lee Ah Gar, totalling 8 persons, also accepted a 2-room flat at Margaret Drive in Queenstown. In explaining the decision, Ah Gar simply said, 'We had no choice at the time'. However, the family soon had to split up because the flat was too small, with Ah Gar and his father renting a room in an attap house in Bukit Ho Swee which had escaped the fire, while Soo Seong and the rest of the family lived in the Queenstown flat.<sup>71</sup>

For many victims of the Bukit Ho Swee calamity, a key issue in moving to emergency housing was the high cost of rent, which the government had subsidised for a three-month period. This was apparent in an exchange between Lee Kuan Yew and a fire victim at the relief centre, who earned only '\$100 plus' a month, had a family of four and had lost all his belongings in the fire except for some clothes. Lee had to address the victim's concern about the rent, the location of housing and his proximity to relatives:

- Man: In future, I think have to get housing, cheap housing. \$15-20.  
 Lee: \$25 OK?

- Man: \$20 lah. We are all poor people mah. \$20 is OK.  
 Lee: We will all try to help – is Queenstown or Redhill OK?  
 Man: Any in Tiong Bahru?  
 Lee: No. Queenstown or Redhill?  
 Man: Queenstown is OK. As long as close to work, it's OK.  
 Lee: Where do you work?  
 Man: Cross Street [in the Central Area].  
 Lee: From Queenstown to Cross Street is not too far, right?  
 Man: Not far.  
 Lee: Only 4 people in your family, right? I think we will definitely be able to give you a flat.  
 Man: 2 flats is OK too.  
 Lee: Oh, 2 flats, we will give to bigger families.  
 Man: But then my elder sister can also move in.  
 Lee: Did your elder sister stay with you last time?  
 Man: No.  
 Lee: Now we must take care of the fire victims, then the elder sister and relatives of the fire victims. Do you think this is fair?  
 Man: Fair. 72

In July, when Lee paid a surprise visit to fire victims rehoused in Queenstown and Tiong Bahru, he encountered numerous complaints about the rent subsidy and other issues.<sup>73</sup> Lee assured them that if new flats at \$20 rentals were not ready for occupation after 3 months, the government would provide further rental subsidies. Lee also heard other economic grievances: the added burden of having to pay for water and electricity and the difficulty of obtaining transport to school for the children. In addition, the new estates were still lacking adequate amenities like clinics and telephones, while the lifts were frequently out of order. Lee acknowledged that Queenstown, unlike Bukit Ho Swee, did not have a good bus service but promised the fire victims that he would get a bus service to run there.<sup>74</sup> He stated that the government would make further payouts from the relief fund but also urged the fire victims to be thrifty in using water and electricity.<sup>75</sup>

In November 1962, the first emergency flats to be built on the Bukit Ho Swee fire site were completed, enabling the fire victims to return to their former locality, now fully transformed into a modern housing estate. By the end of the following year, of the 2,600

families registered for rehousing, 2,166 families had been successfully accommodated.<sup>76</sup> By 1970, there were over 12,000 flats in the estate housing 45,066 persons, an increase of 25,000 over the number residing in the informal settlement in 1957.<sup>77</sup> Among them were not only the victims of the 1961 fire, but also those of another blaze in Bukit Ban Kee in 1963, families affected by development projects in nearby informal settlements and in the Central Area, when the urban renewal programme began in 1963. In 1964, Queenstown received the privilege of spearheading the government's efforts, which proved immensely successful, to create a stable community of home-owners. The HDB launched a Home Ownership Scheme to encourage lower middle-income families to purchase flats in Singapore's pioneer new town at prices of \$4,900 and \$6,200 for 2- and 3-room flats respectively, payable through monthly installments not much higher than the rentals.<sup>78</sup> By the end of 1970, over 9,000 HDB flats in Queenstown had been sold; in all of Singapore, over 31,000 flats.<sup>79</sup> Queenstown played an indirect but important role in transforming the semi-autonomous urban margins and core of postwar Singapore into high modernist living and working spaces.

## Conclusion

In retrospect, Queenstown was not merely a flagship project for the urban planners of postwar Singapore. Far from being a self-contained new town in the British sense of the term, Queenstown was more accurately a social and political suburb of the postwar city. Its development, which was long delayed, was closely tied to the processes and outcome of the social contestation taking place at the margins of the city. Spanning the late colonial and postcolonial periods, the British regime and to a greater extent the PAP government were making considerable efforts to build public housing to transform both the periphery of the city and the historical town into high modernist settlements so that 'a planned new city will be built'.<sup>80</sup> For much of the 1950s and early 1960s, these endeavours were strongly contested by the semi-autonomous community of agricultural and non-agricultural resi-

dents of Queenstown, either on their own initiative or with the support of politicians and rural associations.

Yet, once the first flats were built, the potential of the modern housing to transform social and economic life in the city became apparent. From the mid-1950s, the first two neighbourhoods of Queenstown were to gradually play their role in housing the residents of informal settlements and inner city shophouses. After 1959, the greater political resolve of the PAP government to revamp the urban housing landscape succeeded in breaking down the social resistance by the mid-1960s. Of particular note was how victims of fire in wooden housing, made homeless by a swift disaster, were moved into the flats of Queenstown, as the authorities utilised the state of emergency occasioned by the infernos to act on their behalf and redevelop the fire sites. Singapore's pioneer new town contributed significantly to the informal settlement clearance and urban renewal programmes, particularly through the 1960s. What occurred was not merely a change in housing type but the integration of formerly semi-autonomous 'squatters' into socialised citizens of the modern city-state of Singapore. The historical tension between modernity and autonomy was decisively broken down and resolved through the determined efforts of the PAP state, building on the foundational work of the British government. In 1972, an official radio programme triumphantly announced that 'Singapore looks different, Singapore feels different, Singapore is different'.<sup>81</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> SIT 563/8/54, Notes on 14-Storey Block of Flats at Queenstown, undated, c. 1956.

<sup>2</sup> SIT 563/8/54, Chairman, SIT, Speech at the Opening of Forfar House, Queenstown, 24 October 1956.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee* (Singapore: Government Printing House, 1947), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, pp. 6, 11.

- <sup>6</sup> SIT 475/47, Notes for Discussion on Housing by Commissioner of Lands, 13 Jun 1947.
- <sup>7</sup> Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, pp. 9, 11-13.
- <sup>8</sup> SIT 563/8/54, Chairman, SIT, Speech at the Opening of Forfar House, Queenstown, 24 October 1956; SIT, *Final Report of the New Towns Working Party on the Plan for Queenstown* (Singapore: Singapore Improvement Trust, 1958), p. 9.
- <sup>9</sup> Calvin Low, *10-Stories: Queenstown Through the Years* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2007), p. 20.
- <sup>10</sup> SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, pp. 44-45.
- <sup>11</sup> HB 618/54, Minutes of a Meeting of a New Towns Working Party, 29 July 1954.
- <sup>12</sup> Ho Phui Mun, Housing in Singapore: A Major Aspect of Urban Planning (With Special Reference to Queenstown), unpublished academic exercise, Department of Geography, University of Singapore, 1962/1963, p. 61.
- <sup>13</sup> SIT 26/53, Memo from Chief Planning Officer, Diagnostic Survey Team, to Acting Secretary, SIT, 12 Jan 1953.
- <sup>14</sup> SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, pp. 44-45.
- <sup>15</sup> SIT, *Final Report of the New Towns Working Party*, pp. 9, 11.
- <sup>16</sup> SIT, *Annual Report 1957*, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>17</sup> SIT 183/52, Letter from Aung Peang & Teo Ah Beh to Lands Manager, SIT, 8 Oct 1954.
- <sup>18</sup> SIT, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 21; SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 53-55.
- <sup>19</sup> SIT 952/50, Comments on Memo by Commissioner of Lands on the Problem of Squatters on Crown Land by Manager, SIT, 13 Nov 1950.
- <sup>20</sup> Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party*, p. 5.
- <sup>21</sup> SIT 770/55, Letter from Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Laycock & Ong, 2 Dec 1955.
- <sup>22</sup> SIT 770/55, Letter from Pek Cheng Siew to Estates Manager, SIT, 25 Nov 1955.
- <sup>23</sup> HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Inspector to Acting Lands Officer, 28 May 1958.
- <sup>24</sup> *SFP*, 26 May 1958.
- <sup>25</sup> HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Inspector to Acting Lands Officer, 28 May 1958.
- <sup>26</sup> HB 659/53, Report on the Demolition of Three Timber and Attap Houses on Singapore Improvement Trust Land at Lorong 27, Geylang, on 17 Jul 1953 by Acting Lands Manager, 22 Jul 1953.
- <sup>27</sup> SIT 563/8/54, Speech by Chairman, SIT, at the Opening of Forfar House, Queenstown, 24 Oct 1956; Goh Keng Swee used \$400 as a low-income ceiling in *Urban Incomes and Housing: A Report on the Social Survey of Singapore, 1953-54* (Singapore: Department of Social Welfare, 1956), p. 1.
- <sup>28</sup> SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 15.
- <sup>29</sup> SIT 1018/12/50, Schedule of Position of Clearance Schemes as at 1 Aug 1954.
- <sup>30</sup> SIT, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 27.
- <sup>31</sup> SIT 563/8/54, Chairman, SIT, Speech at the Opening of Forfar House, Queenstown, 24 October 1956.
- <sup>32</sup> SIT 1018/1/50, Memo from Acting Civil Engineer, SIT, Acting Chief Architect, SIT, 9 Jun 1958; and SIT, *Annual Report 1956*, p. 15.
- <sup>33</sup> Petition by SADA to Governor John Nicoll, 12 Oct 1953, Appendix V, Horsley, Resettlement of a Community, p. 183.
- <sup>34</sup> HB 1018/12/50, Notes of a Meeting to Discuss the Clearance of Queenstown, 10 Jul 1954.
- <sup>35</sup> HB 1018/12/50, Letter from Acting Deputy Lands Manager to Mak Pak Shee, 8 Nov 1954.
- <sup>36</sup> HB 477/53, Memo from Acting Manager, SIT, to Chairman, SIT, 30 Dec 1954.
- <sup>37</sup> HB 722/55, Notes of a Meeting to Discuss the Squatter Problem in Singapore, 29 Aug 1955.
- <sup>38</sup> HB 722/55, Notes for Consideration of the 'Squatter Problem' Working Party, undated, c. 1955.
- <sup>39</sup> Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party*, pp. 2, 5, 9-12.
- <sup>40</sup> SIT 617/54, Memo titled 'Housing Programmes and Policy' by Chief Architect, SIT, and Planning Adviser, SIT, 5 Jul 1954.
- <sup>41</sup> SIT 808/50, Report by George Pepler titled 'Attap Dwellings on Land Likely to be Required for Permanent Forms of Development in the City Area During the Next Five Years', 26 Jul 1952.
- <sup>42</sup> HB 1013/50, Memo by the Chief Planning Officer, Diagnostic Survey Team, 17 Oct 1954.
- <sup>43</sup> Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey* (Singapore: Printed at Government Printing Office, 1955), pp.

26-28.

<sup>44</sup> Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> HB 477/53, Notes of a Discussion on a) Control of Unauthorised Buildings and b) Improvement of Kampongs, 14 Nov 1957.

<sup>46</sup> Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 26; HB 925/54, Memo from Chief Planning Officer, Diagnostic Survey Team, to Acting Chief Architect, SIT, 15 Nov 1954.

<sup>47</sup> *Singapore, The Better Future*, p. 7; Teo Siew Eng, 'Planning Principles in Pre- and Post-Planning Singapore', *The Town Planning Review*, 63 (2), 1992, p. 168.

<sup>48</sup> SIT, *Final Report of the New Towns Working Party*, p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> MOE, *State of Singapore Development Plan, 1961-1964*, p. 121-23.

<sup>50</sup> HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, pp. 26, 34-35.

<sup>51</sup> HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 31.

<sup>52</sup> HDB, *Annual Report 1965*, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> HDB, *50,000 Up: Homes for the People* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1966), pp. 39-40, 44.

<sup>54</sup> Oral History Centre, interview with Alan Choe Fook Cheong, 1 July 1997.

<sup>55</sup> HB 535/51, Memo from Estates Officer to Estates & Lands Manager, 6 Jun 1956.

<sup>56</sup> SIT, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 21; HB 1139/56, Memo from Assistant Architect, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 10 Sep 1957.

<sup>57</sup> HB 125/14/47, Notes of a Meeting to Discuss Proposed Action in Connection with Covent Garden Improvement Scheme, 9 Dec 1957; HB 125/16/47, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates & Lands Manager, SIT, 11 Jun 1956.

<sup>58</sup> HB 1139/56, Memo from Estates Manager, SIT, to Acting Manager, SIT, 16 Jul 1958.

<sup>59</sup> HB 125/54/47, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Assistant Secretary, HDB, 25 Feb 1960.

<sup>60</sup> SIT 813/55, Memo from PS, MLGLH, to Manger, SIT, 23 Nov 1955; and Letter from President, Blue Cross Charitable Institution, to Director, SWD, 8

Nov 1955.

<sup>61</sup> SIT 813/55, Memo from Estates Manager, SIT, to PS, MLGLH, 28 Nov 1955.

<sup>62</sup> *ST*, 1 May 1958.

<sup>63</sup> SWD 69/58 Vol. I, Memo from Superintendent, Settlements, to Director, SWD, 28 Apr 1958.

<sup>64</sup> HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo titled 'Tiong Bahru Fire' by the Acting Manager, SIT, 16 Feb 1959.

<sup>66</sup> HB 25/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Trust Meeting, 10 Mar 1959.

<sup>67</sup> *ST*, 30 May 1961.

<sup>68</sup> The HDB had planned to open up to the public the register for housing in Queenstown, for which demand had been poor, but some of these flats were subsequently occupied by the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims. HB 778/47 Vol. III, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 6 Oct 1961.

<sup>69</sup> *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1570.

<sup>70</sup> Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Author's interviews with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006, and Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

<sup>72</sup> RCS, audio programme titled *Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew Tours Tiong Bahru After Bukit Ho Swee Fire*, broadcast on 28 May 1961.

<sup>73</sup> *NYSP*, 2 Jul 1961.

<sup>74</sup> *NYSP*, 2 Jul 1961.

<sup>75</sup> *ST*, 1 Jul 1961.

<sup>76</sup> HB 147/51 Vol. V, Statement of Rehousing Scheme by Estates Department, Dec 1963.

<sup>77</sup> P. Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 238.

<sup>78</sup> HDB, *Annual Report 1964*, pp. 9-10; *ST*, 12 Feb 1964.

<sup>79</sup> HDB, *Annual Report 1970*, Appendix E.

<sup>80</sup> HB 141/52, Memo from Chief Executive Officer, HDB, to Permanent Secretary, Ministry of National Development, 11 Aug 1964.

<sup>81</sup> RCS, audio programme titled *Then and Now (No. 1): A Look At Housing*, broadcast on 16 Sep 1972.

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