On-line Article: Twentieth Century Society Building of the Month, July 2011: Wah Fu Estate, Hong Kong.

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This month’s Building (or Estate) of the Month, the Wah Fu Estate (comprising 9,100 flats and built in 1965-70), occupies a pivotal point in the history of that programme, both in organisational and architectural terms. Although its blocks of only 21 storeys have now firmly established as ‘heritage’ and stylistically revived in the ‘neo-modernism’ of the 1990s and 2000s. Excepting the megastructure centre.

In a succession of projects (notably North Point, 1955-7, So Uk, completed 1960, and Choi Hung, opened 1962), the HKHA’s executive arm, the Housing Department (HD), applied the open-planning principles of modernism to the unique, engineering-led patterns toward more sophisticated architectural and planning solutions, prominently featuring tall tower blocks.

Large-scale public housing in Hong Kong had begun in 1954 with the so-called ‘Resettlement’ programme, an emergency response to the flood of refugees from communist China and the consequent mushrooming of insanitary, combustible shanty-towns. The vast output of rudimentary 7-storey balcony-access slab blocks, directed by military engineers and designated (like tanks or bombers) as ‘MK 1’ and ‘MK 2’ (etc.), contained basic shelter only, in the form of unsevered single rooms and communal sanitary facilities. Although far preferable to sleeping rough or in crowd-dense tenement cubicles, the density of the blocks was fantastic by Western standards, their architecture barrack-like and housing management non-existent. In reaction, a new ‘Hong Kong Housing Authority’ was formed, dedicated to building architect-designed projects of self-contained flats.

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At Wah Fu, he applied and modified a number of key European (especially English) design principles for Hong Kong conditions. The first of these was the use of varied block heights and site design. Where Mk 1 Resettlement slabs were simply planted in rigid rows, Wah Fu, sited on a dramatic headland on the west coast of Hong Kong Island, was planned to exploit rather than overwhelm its site contours: in a high-density version of the Allston Estate, the building mix combined a new type of tall (21-storey) tower of Liao’s own design, the ‘Tri Tower Block,’ like Scottish ‘Z-plan’ castles, these each comprised two juxtaposed towers of a hollow, internally galleried plan. The second design innovation was an adaptation of the comprehensive land-use planning of the English New Towns. Here, dense, Brutalist megastructure ideal.

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A pivotal shift in design principles established by Liao’s team are still very much alive and kicking. Although some early HKHA estates of the mid-50s are also now targeted for redevelopment, Wah Fu and several others have been rerieved for 15 years or more. Maybe this breathing-space will allow Hong Kong’s burgeoning modernist heritage movement to catch up and secure their long-term future – but what is arguably more important is the continuing vitality of the housing drive itself. It is one of the great paradoxes of Modern Movement history that hyper-capitalist Hong Kong should now be carrying for the legacy of welfare-state modernism into the 21st century – not as some Park Hill-style ‘heritage icon’, but as a living modern ‘vernacular’, directly and straightforwardly continuing the modernist ethos of social provision for all.
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