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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 maximum have been far outstripped by the 41-storey towers of contemporary Hong Kong public housing, Wah Fu, rather like the Alton Estate in London fifteen years before, marked a crucial shift away from utilitarian 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 flow 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 unserviced single rooms and communal sanitary facilities. Although far preferable to sleeping rough or in crowded 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.

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, ultra-dense conditions of Hong Kong. These were all designed by local private architects and dominated by slab blocks of up to 20 storeys, but by the early 60s the HD, under Housing Commissioner J M Fraser, had begun building up an architecture division of its own, led by Tai w-an born designer Donald P H Liao. Like Robert Matthew in the LCC, whose projects he toured in the early 60s, Liao set out to establish architectural control of housing design through a new formula of contemporary Modernist housing that could also match the engineers' high output levels.

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, staked 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 Alton Estate, the building mix combined slab blocks (with a new type of tall (21-storey) tower of Liao's own design, the 'Twin Tower Block') like Scottish 'Z-plan' castles, each comprised two 6-storey towers. Even a new, unitary HD, architects were firmly in control of this expanded programme, upholding the primacy of design and landscaping even as block heights soared: although early New Towns such as Stevenage or Harlow into a few acres, a comprehensive, multi-level 'town centre' could immediately be provided, domesticating and routinising the Brutalist megastructure ideal.

These two key principles really came into their own in the mid-1970s, when a new, forceful Governor, Murray Roth, turned his attention to public housing. By this time, the HKHA's executive architecture division, the Housing Department (HD), applied the open-planning principles of modernism to the unique, ultra-dense conditions of Hong Kong. These were all designed by local private architects and dominated by slab blocks of up to 20 storeys, but by the early 60s the HD, under Housing Commissioner J M Fraser, had begun building up an architecture division of its own, led by Tai w-an born designer Donald P H Liao. Like Robert Matthew in the LCC, whose projects he toured in the early 60s, Liao set out to establish architectural control of housing design through a new formula of contemporary Modernist housing that could also match the engineers' high output levels.

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