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

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Building of the month

**Building of the month**

**June 2011**

**Wah Fu Estate, Hong Kong**

Hong Kong Housing Department architecture division (project architect, Donald P.H Liao) 1965-70, by Miles Glendinning

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 towards 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, ‘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 crowed 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 architects division of its own, led by Taiw an-born designer Donald P H Liao. Like Robert Matthew in the LCC, whose

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Miles Glendinning is Professor of Architectural Conservation and Director of the Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies at Edinburgh College of Art.