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Habitat, c.1976: Transnational Technologies, Modern Domesticities in Singapore and Hong Kong

Eunice Seng



The success stories of public housing in Singapore and Hong Kong have been well circulated by their proponents and scholars, to the extent that public discourses on housing in these cities overshadow any other imaginations of domesticity, configurations of habitation, and the participation of professional and private enterprise. This paper begins from the position that housing development in Singapore and Hong Kong are inextricably intertwined, and marked by the constraints and opportunities of a determinate historical situation. Focusing on the 1970s in which the narratives of success were consolidated at home and globally, this map recasts housing in a transnational network of knowledge, technologies and affiliations as a tentative and provisional model that departs from previous comparative analyses on housing in the two city-states.

On May 30, 1976, twenty-four international experts signed the Declaration of the Vancouver Symposium on the occasion of the Habitat: United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, demanding for government policy to focus on community and environmental planning. Of the 135 country participants, there was an overwhelming presence of representatives from developing nations. Singapore designated Toa Payoh, its first and largest new town, as a demonstration project for delegates passing through the city-state after the event. In contrast to the images of slums, “Habitat” in Singapore and Hong Kong began taking on very different aesthetics and meanings by 1976. Clean, planned and futuristic, the projects were instead advancing middle-class ideas on community and technology attributed to projects like Habitat’67 in Montreal.

Whereas the United Nation’s Habitat offered the technocratic framework to community planning and housing design, the other Habitat provided the formal and aesthetic sought by the state authorities in the next lap of their modernization. In interrogating the interconnectedness, this ongoing research hypothesizes that the production, representation and circulation of housing and its discourses vis-à-vis international and regional symposiums, exhibitions and trade publications, were integral in consolidating architecture’s role in the image and imagination of a modern Asia from the 1970s.

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