ALTERNATIVE ACCOMMODATION

Floating dormitories?

Offshore housing for foreign workers is one alternative

WITH rising construction costs and a space crunch in Singapore, local researchers are exploring cheaper alternatives to land reclamation. One option is to have very large floating structures that can literally support cities on water. One company is even exploring the idea of floating dormitories for foreign workers.

Professor Wang Chien Ming, director of the engineering science programme at the National University of Singapore, said: “People have been talking about ultra-large floating platforms being situated near the equatorial belt where there are no typhoons and no hurricanes. The floating structures could be placed in a very calm sea environment and then you can tap on the energy from the sun ... It can be self-contained.”

Such structures would come with a mooring system, a breakwater and an access bridge or a berth. And although the structures could be made of steel and concrete, they can still float.

The advantages of using floating structures include a relatively short construction period of four to five months. Such expandable structures are immune to the effects of rising sea levels and, compared to land reclamation, mega floating structures could cost about a third less.

The concept of using floating structures is not new. In Singapore, there is already the Marina Bay Floating Platform. And one company that develops and manages foreign worker accommodation is thinking of floating dormitories for, say, 4,000 to 5,000 people.

Mr A Mohamed Ali, director of business development at Mini Environment Service, said: “Theoretically speaking, there’s no limit to how many people you can hold. You can have a country built on a sea.

“And because it’s modular, you can literally add on (facilities) ... We’re looking at facilities such as malls, post offices, remittance centres, anything that’ll serve the foreign-worker community.”

He does not see offshore housing as segregation between foreign workers and Singaporeans. “If the design and the facilities are good, it won’t be stigmatised that way, and the motivation is not really to ship anyone out; it’s to find an alternative.”

If the idea takes off, the dormitory would be the first of its kind in the world to house such a huge community on water.

Another company that is exploring the use of mega floating structures is JTC Corporation. It is thinking of using such structures to store petrochemical and oil products. Prof Wang said the cost of building such a structure could be about $200 million. CHANNEL NEWSASIA