48 years of housing a nation

By Jessica Cheung

UNLIKE many countries where public housing remains a core of the policy, some 40 per cent of Singapore's population live in a range of 400,000 public houses islandwide today. Of this 40 per cent, about 95 per cent own their homes, making Singapore a country with one of the highest home-ownership rates in the world.

It was a matter of time before the HDB's 40-year achievement in housing and providing quality living environment for Singaporeans caught international attention. In its 40th anniversary this year, it was the only Asian country to clinch the prestigious United Nations Prize for Housing.

Each decade has brought the HDB its own set of challenges. It set up in 1960 in the midst of the mid-1960s poverty and poor housing conditions. The HDB built about 3,000 flats in the first year of its operation.

In the 1970s, poverty and poor housing conditions prevailed. In his 1971 Budget speech, Finance Minister Lim Chong Eu called on the private sector to build more and cheaper flats. Residential schemes were then emphasised.

In the 1980s, the HDB was challenged when the oil price collapse of 1985-1986 hit Singapore's economy hard. The HDB's response was to build more flats to keep pace with the rising number of residents.

In the 1990s, the HDB had to face the housing crisis. Many were left without homes. The HDB responded with a series of initiatives to help those in need.

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From breaking the back of the housing problem in the 1960s, the HDB's new challenge is meeting aspirations of dwellers in the new millennium.

The Home Ownership Programme - a scheme that encouraged Singaporeans to buy their own homes - was launched in 1964, and became the cornerstone of Singapore's public housing policy.

HDB chief executive Tan Kean Seng said in a recent interview that the board believed that "in providing homes to our people instead of renting them to others, they have a stake in the country's economic growth."

In 2003, over 100,000 flats were completed, and almost 125,000 flats within the first decade.

The following decade was focused on creating new towns to meet booming demand.

The concept of a new town, complete with parks and commercial, industrial and recreational facilities was pioneered in Tampines, which was the first housing estate to be developed in the 1980s. This included 3,200 homes, retail space, and schools.

In the end of the decade, six more towns were developed: Yishun, Hougang, Tampines, Sengkang, Punggol, Tengah, and Jurong West.

A series of盘点 was developed, including planning the layout and completion of towns with offices, schools, and homes. The HDB also started a "home improvement" programme for tenants in the new towns.

In the 1990s, the HDB's emphasis started to shift from quantity to quality, with more housing problems solved. The HDB also launched the New Schematic Plan (NSP), which was a series of initiatives to help tenants in the new towns.

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