

Bryn Mawr College

Making Room for Outsiders: Examining Race within Social
or Public Housing in Paris and Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to compare the differential development of public or social housing—housing targeted toward low- and middle-income individuals in which prices are artificially lowered through government ownership, subsidies, intensive regulation, or a combination of the three in order to make the price of said housing more affordable in relation to a renter or buyer’s income—in Paris and Hong Kong and its impact on contemporary structures of race, identity, and citizenship by providing a comprehensive narrative of public or social housing development in either city and thereby identifying key socioeconomic conditions and government policies that produced these structures.

Beginning with the origins of public or social housing systems in both cities, I catalogue the inciting events that led to the formation of a comprehensive government housing policy. Both Paris and Hong Kong, facing shortages of housing in the wake of World War II, built their first housing estates as a solution to squatter settlements that threatened the social stability of the area. I argue that the identities of those providing housing as well as those housed is where the two cities diverge: while new housing in and around Paris was built by private developers and primarily sold to middle-class native French citizens out of a concern for rent payment, resettlement estates in Hong Kong were constructed by the city’s government for squatter settlements composed mainly of former residents returning to the city as well as new arrivals from mainland China. In Paris, the massive and isolating *grands ensembles* were quickly discarded by their original residents and left to immigrants and the working class. Government involvement in Paris social housing was steadily maintained from this point onward in terms of maintenance, though new construction shifted to smaller-scale buildings—however, the

increasing pathologization of housing estates and social housing-dense neighborhoods on the periphery of the city as underdeveloped and dangerous has provoked targeted development and policing initiatives by a succession of municipal and national administrations. Hong Kong government intervention, on the other hand, continued to intensify, with Public Rental Housing (PRH) and subsidized-sale housing becoming a key government function and persisting into the late 90s, though a decade-long reversal of housing policy at the turn of the millennium and the Housing Authority's recent return to the market has left the long-term future of the city's public housing up in the air. I then turn to the current state of public and social housing in both cities. Parisian social housing appears to be a success story compared to many contemporaries from what information is available, though lack of consistency in available data raises concerns about accuracy. Public perception, however, is discordant with promising statistics. Discourse around social housing in and around Paris, the demographics of which have become increasingly poor, immigrant, and nonwhite, is extremely tied up in French ideas of race and citizenship, producing a narrative in the media and politics that paints these spaces, particularly those on the fringes of the city, and their residents as violent, self-segregating outsiders unwilling to integrate physically or socially into larger French society. Hong Kong public housing is generally well-received by residents, though it faces criticism by observers for its minimal standards for resident quality of life. By virtue of its prevalence, it is also generally accepted by the public; though estate constructions face occasional pushback, it is almost always colored by concerns about social class rather than race, ethnicity, or citizenship. The nature of this discourse is also likely an effect of the city's extremely homogeneous demographic makeup—most Hong Kongers are ethnically Chinese—though events since the handover may be changing popular attitudes toward immigrants from the mainland for the worse.

I utilize two separate frameworks of development to explain the cities' trajectories toward radically different ideas about race and citizenship surrounding public or social housing. Though starting from similar time periods and conditions, Paris has historically utilized public housing to contain and quarantine "unwanted" demographics of immigrants and the working class, while the Hong Kong government has used public housing to prop up a rapidly-growing economy by settling and integrating a fairly homogeneous population of immigrants and working class families into the city.

PARIS

An extreme housing shortage prevailed in Europe in the wake of World War II, with France suffering loss of or damage to 8% of its pre-war housing stock: 2.7 million dwellings were totally destroyed, 2.9 million were partially destroyed, and 8.9 million were slightly damaged (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 3). Those returning or newly arrived to the metropole lived on the streets or in shantytowns: "As one Marseille squatter remembered, "Families, children, and the elderly lived where they could, in bombed houses, in caves, in public washhouses . . . and in infectious slums"" (Nasiali, 434). Others crowded into what dwellings were available (FRANCE 24 English). Combined with the post-war population boom, the housing crisis spiraled into a shortage that the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe estimated "that the total number of dwellings necessary to replace those destroyed by war and inadequate houses and to relieve overcrowding corresponded on the average to almost 22% of the pre-war housing stock" (3). North African immigrants, particularly Algerians, crowded in slums called *bidonvilles* as an alternative to the male-only dormitories offered by

employers, where privacy was nonexistent and overseer surveillance of residents constant (Lyons, 116-120). Though activists and policymakers had been trying to address the problem of slums and homelessness in previous decades, two world wars had halted any significant progress (Nasiali, 439). However, the post-WWII crisis and official anxieties about squatting had become so severe that government attention turned towards constructing new housing instead of focusing on evictions (*Ibid.*, 448). Public support for new housing was catalyzed by the highly publicized death of a homeless woman who froze while sleeping outside (FRANCE 24 English). Initial constructions consisted of temporary emergency housing while the French government concentrated on economic rebuilding measures (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 4) (Nasiali, 450). Families were living in such “temporary” setups into the 1970s (*Ibid.*, 457). A variety of groups occupied the camps, though not all were equally received, as described by Nasiali (455-456):

Government officials... understood “asocials” to be distinctly foreign. As an engineer for the city of Marseille described them, “These [Camp Grand Arenas] residents have many different nationalities . . . and they don’t make use of the eight garbage dumpsters.” Authorities thus associated foreignness with un-French and therefore socially unfit behavior. According to the director of sanitary services, “It is important to note that the behavior of many of the camp residents conforms to habits imported from their countries of origin.”

Historians of France have shown how the meaning of the term “foreigner” shifted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whereas it had once been synonymous with “outsider,” it came to mean “immigrant.” Such work has been important in demonstrating how assumptions about social class and “strangeness” shaped nascent immigration bureaucracies and welfare institutions in the interwar period.

However, scholarship has downplayed how perceptions of racial differences also inform understandings about belonging. While Marseille officials' descriptions of "asocials" reflected older perceptions of social class and anxieties about the floating urban poor, they also explicitly reflected assumptions about racial and ethnic difference. More specifically, when identifying Marseille's "asocial" residents, officials tended to describe this local "foreign" population in ethnic terms, as "North Africans" or "gypsies".

From 1950-60, construction intensified as the French government began to grow the housing stock in an effort to revitalize the national economy. As noted by the United Nations Economic Development Commission for Europe (5), "since there was a lack of both an adequate labor force and most building materials, repairs, maintenance and modernization of the dwelling stock were neglected in most countries in this period, the available resources being devoted predominantly to new constructions. Further dilapidation of older houses therefore occurred and the differences between standards of new and older dwellings widened." Between 1953 and 1962, 500,000 units for low- and moderate-income families were constructed, primarily in massive multi-family housing estates on the cheap land located on the periphery of urban centers: the *grands ensembles* (United Nations Economic Development Commission for Europe, 6; see Fig. 1). Many of these estates were HLM (habitation à loyer modéré) housing, or social housing, the French model for publicly-subsidized housing that brings together both government and private entities in its construction and management (Lyons, 126). The newest residents of these estates, however, were mostly middle-class households attracted by the apartments' size and modern amenities such as piped water and showers. They found the new apartments vastly preferable to an aging housing stock that was among the oldest in Europe, with 60% of dwellings having been constructed before 1919 (United Nations Economic Development Commission for

Europe, 6). Landlords were much happier to accept middle-class applicants than low-income ones, hoping that tenants with higher and more stable incomes would be more able to pay rent on time (Lyons, 126-130).

However, life in the *grands ensembles* quickly began to lose its charm. Residents complained of problems with both the environment itself and the psychological effects of living in the estates. Cheap and quick construction in developers' haste to build as much housing in as little time as possible— indeed, the number of dwellings in the country almost doubled between 1946 and 1975— meant the buildings were already starting to decay only a few years after first being built. The isolation and repetitive, monotonous design of the estates led to boredom and dissatisfaction among those who lived there (FRANCE 24 English). The conditions of the *grands ensembles* became increasingly pathologized: “the housing projects were seen by some as soulless ‘*cité-dortoirs*’ (dormitory neighborhoods) or ‘*HLM couchés*’ (sleeping housing projects), where people live their lived in a standardized *métro-boulot-dodo-rhythm*” (Slooter, 35). Critics pointed to the inhuman scale and modernist style of the architecture as the culprit for perceived spikes in criminality and mental illness in the estates. The Ministry of Housing responded with a number of measures attempting to crack down on these issues, most notably Olivier Guichard's 1973 limit on the construction of new *grands ensembles* and the 1977 Barre Law, which emphasized government's step away from physical construction and shift to direct financial aid to households (Vie publique, 2022). These measures coincided with the easing of previous government policy that had restricted immigrant family reunification as well as policies that attempted to clear *bidonvilles* in the metropole by opening up social housing access to immigrants (Verdugo, 176; Fourcaut). This period marked a point of demographic transition in HLMs, particularly housing estates: as a number of middle-class households, assisted by

government funds, moved into the private market, the dwellings they didn't want were taken up by the working class and immigrants (Lyons, 129-130). This pauperization of French social housing has only intensified over time, with 50% of HLM residents coming from the poorest quarter of the French population (L'Union sociale pour l'habitat, 12). Scanlon (8) remarks that “despite its universalist origins, and the recent emphasis on building housing for higher-income groups, the social sector now increasingly houses poorer families. Social tenants have lower incomes than tenants as a whole, and much lower than owner-occupiers [of social housing]”.

Since the demographic shift of the *grands ensembles* in the 1970s, the public image of social housing has increasingly been one defined by race. However, Dikeç (10) notes that these perceptions are not customarily voiced in racial terms, though they nonetheless have a profound impact on the conceptualization of othered groups and these spaces:

The French conception of the republic emphasizes a common culture and identity, fragmentation of which is seen as a threat to the social and political integrity of France. The republican tradition is based on the presupposition that ‘without a common culture and a sense of common identity, the political as well as physical integrity of France would be “threatened”’ (Jennings, 2000: 586). There is, therefore, little or no room for claims rising from ‘differences’. The French citizen is a universal individual-citizen, directly linked to the nation-state, and national-political membership requires the acceptance of French cultural values (Feldblum, 1999; Safran, 1990). There is no official recognition of ethnicity, race or religion as intermediary means for obtaining particular rights, and the very notion of minority is strongly rejected (de Rudder and Poiret, 1999). Such a conception, in the context of fascinating diversity, generates a firm suspicion towards all kinds of particularisms...

In the French universalist tradition, the “particularisms” of these spaces and the socioeconomic situations, origins, and cultures of their residents have faced a roundabout scrutiny from non-residents. A variety of terms to describe neighborhoods of social housing projects, often previously neutral, have gained negative or even pejorative connotations over time. *Banlieue*, the most common term to describe such a space, is frequently translated as “suburb”, but in discussions of urban policy has come to refer to very particular places: the large housing estates on the outskirts of French cities, evoking “an image of a peripheral area with concentrations of large-scale, mostly high-rise social housing projects... no longer [serving] merely as a geographical reference or an administrative concept, but [for] alterity, insecurity and deprivation” (Dikeç, 7-8). The populations of concern in the popular imagination is the *jeunes des banlieues* (“suburban youth”), which is not used to refer to all young people from the suburbs, but a “much more dominant detailed and delineated profile: migrant (‘Black’, ‘Arab’, ‘Muslim’), male, poorly educated, dangerous, coming from a lower socioeconomic working class family and living in a social housing project” (Slooter, 10). In French popular discourse, particular neighborhoods of some *banlieues*— the *cités*, *quartiers sensibles* (“sensitive neighborhoods”), *quartiers pauvres* (“poor neighborhoods”), *quartiers défavorisés* (“disadvantaged neighborhoods”), *quartiers populaires* (“working-class neighborhoods”), or *quartiers prioritaires* (“priority neighborhoods”)— have become the epicenters of *la crise des banlieues*, or the “suburban crisis”— a crisis of violence among the youth of the *banlieues* that threatens the stability and “integrity” of the Republic (Slooter, 12-14; Dikeç, 14).

I use Slooter’s framework to catalogue the history of the constructed *crise des banlieues*. This framework argues that the development of the *banlieues* can be divided into distinct phases marked by instances of explosive violence at key moments in time. These moments were

identified by the French government as symptoms of problems with the banlieues that needed to be treated by policy. Slooter designates the period of *grand ensemble* construction and demographic transition of the social housing projects from the 1950s to 1970s as the first phase of this history.

Phase two was incited by the “hot summer of 1981”, in which *rodéos* (street races involving stolen cars which are typically later set on fire) in Les Minguettes and other *banlieues* faced clashes with police. Though such events had happened before, these had happened at a particularly opportune moment. The French, having recently witnessed the Brixton riots in the UK, feared similar racial violence closer to home. Additionally, the *rodéos* provided the perfect for critics of the recently-elected Mitterand administration, which had been pushing for more open immigration policies in the country. With these combined factors, a variety of voices in both politics and the media quickly seized upon these events, widely publicizing what had previously been fairly unremarkable, and the national government stepped in to designate and treat the issues of at-risk “urban policy neighborhoods”, which they deemed to include “boredom, unemployment and poverty, and the deplorable physical state of the housing projects” (Slooter, 39). This period saw urban policy shift from the municipal to the national level with initiatives to combat violence primarily organized by the state.

Phase three, sparked by days of protests in the urban policy neighborhood of Vaulx-en-Velin in October 1990 after a driver in a motorbike accident in which a friend riding with him died claimed on national television that a police car had deliberately cut his motorbike’s path off, was deemed “the awakening of the banlieues” by press and only intensified after more violent and publicized incidents in other *banlieues* occurred in March, May, and June of 1991. This phase saw a change in the framing of incidents in the press and politics: debates

around integration, a rise in nationalism (especially among the right), and a shift in ideas about causes from macro-scale issues such as unemployment to individual behavior began to prevail. It was also the period where terms describing spaces of focus began to narrow from “localities” and “towns” to “*banlieue*” and “*cité-ghetto*”, signifying the spatialization of violence to particular areas and neighborhoods. Government priorities also began to shift: while issues of structural inequality and discrimination were increasingly pointed out in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, policy itself saw a rising focus on security initiatives and physical renovations targeted toward urban policy neighborhoods rather than social ones.

The fourth and most recent phase erupted in the wake of two events in Clichy-sous-Bois: the death of two teenagers who were electrocuted while hiding from a police car in a power station and the explosion of a police tear gas canister in the entrance of a mosque. Though protests had occurred previously in the *banlieues*, nothing before or since reached the scale of the ones that followed the Clichy-sous-Bois triggers: 300 neighborhoods were affected, 10,000 vehicles and 300 buildings were burned, and President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency nationwide. Slooter proposes that a spectrum of framing was utilized in depicting the events and coloring the government responses that followed. One end of this spectrum depicted those involved and the neighborhoods they were from as apolitical and criminal and called for a restoration of security and order to *banlieue* spaces that existed outside of the republic, while the other end argued that the neighborhoods involved were neglected spaces inside of the Republic and victim to social conditions that could be addressed with social programs and increased political representation. The government drew its responses from across this spectrum, with its most significant being President Hollande’s creation of a Ministry of Equality of Territories and

of Housing that utilized a “new urban policy” focusing on social investment in areas designated primarily by income (Slooter, 23-62).

Though ideas about the *banlieues* have stagnated over the past five decades, the physical reality of modern social housing has continued to develop. As the national government stepped out of the direct construction and management of HLMs in the 1970s, new providers moved into the market: as of 2020, 46% of social housing in France was provided by “regional and/or municipal authorities or public agencies”, 53% by “non- or limited-profit providers and/or cooperatives”, and 1% by “for-profit and individual providers” (OECD Affordable Housing Database, table PH4.2.2). Housing types have also shifted radically toward smaller-scale constructions closer to the centers of urban areas, with the average number of units in a modern HLM construction being 17 as of 2021 (L’Union sociale pour l’habitat, 8). As noted by Brimbal (550), Paris in particular has also seen a rise in intermediate housing, possibly “explained by the presence of eligible requests or opportunities resulting from specific local policies or regional aid granted to particular communes having between 20 and 40% of social housing” (see Fig. 2).

The 17% of the modern French housing stock made up by social housing is governed by an extremely decentralized system (Housing Europe). HLM residents typically pay rents that are 30% lower than those outside of social housing (L’Union sociale pour l’habitat, 5). Additionally, towns and cities of a certain population are required by the national government to devote 20% of their housing stock to social housing (Law on Solidarity and Urban Renewal; Lefebvre). While provision of social housing is overseen by a variety of different public, private, and semi-private entities, construction and maintenance costs are artificially lowered in order to meet these goals. Costs are lowered through subsidies and tax assistance or exemptions, discounted sale of public land to HLM developers, and loans for building construction and renovation by the

national government as well as local authorities. Additional assistance is also provided to households who still struggle with costs. As of 2009, HLM projects were financed from a wide range of different sources, with 76.5% of funding coming from public Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (CDC) loans from Livret A savings accounts, 10% from equity capital, 8% from subsidies granted by local governments, 3% from subsidies granted by the national government, and 2.5% from employers' grants (Housing Europe; Vie publique). Local authorities have the final say in how friendly an area is to social housing. For example, many towns and cities, typically richer and/or conservative areas, prefer to take penalties instead of meeting the 20% social housing requirement, as building permits for developers are the purview of mayors (Jaupart; Lebefvre). The city of Paris in particular is very open to social housing and "has become a [center] for social design innovations in the past two decades, with an additional 110,000 new social housing units built since 2001", two-thirds being brand-new constructions (Maaoui). The current Socialist administration of mayor Anne Hidalgo, who was elected in 2014, has continued to pursue social housing expansion, announcing targets of 25% of the housing stock being composed of public housing by 2025 and 30% by 2030 (Kinniburgh).

Half of all French citizens have lived or currently live in social housing, though not all due to poverty. Income ceilings on applications allow for a range of income levels in order to ensure social diversity in HLMs (though residents that are found to exceed these ceilings by too much can have their rents raised or even be evicted), making roughly 65% of the French population eligible to apply for social housing (L'Union sociale pour l'habitat, 2; FRANCE 24 English; Housing Europe; Scanlon, 8). The length and nature of the application process itself can vary widely. When an applicant is approved for social housing, they are given a registration number and wait to be extended an offer by a housing allocation committee managed by its

respective social landlord. Social landlords have significant discretionary power in choosing applicants and vary widely in the methods they apply to choosing potential tenants (Réfugiés.Info; Action Logement; Bourgeois). The wait time is 2.5 years on average nationally and rises to 7 in Paris, though priority access is available for those in several different categories of insecure or unsafe housing situations (Réfugiés.Info; Housing Europe). Both residents and non-residents also have the option to purchase social housing (L'Union sociale pour l'habitat, 19). As of 2020, the average number of rooms per household member in French subsidized-rent dwellings was 1.8, making French social housing fairly spacious compared to that of other countries surveyed by the OECD in 2020 and putting the average subsidized-rent dwelling in France well above the 1 room-per-person EU threshold for overcrowding. However, this number is likely skewed by the large number of standing HLM dwellings that were built before 1975, in an era when social housing was targeted almost entirely toward families. As a result, it likely does not accurately reflect the future of a social housing market that is increasingly building housing with fewer units (OECD Affordable Housing Database, table HC2.1.A1; Eurostat; L'Union sociale pour l'habitat; Maaoui). Data on resident satisfaction ranges. For example, 85% of respondents to a 2021 survey by L'Union sociale pour l'habitat (2), the national association of social landlords in France, reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their dwelling. However, among respondents to a 2020 survey by the Ministry of Ecological Transition, which currently oversees social housing nationally, only 53.7% of those living in multi-family social housing and 67.1% of those living in single-family social housing reported “considering their housing conditions satisfactory or very satisfactory”. Additionally, on a more general note, only 47% of French respondents to a survey by the OECD reported feeling satisfied “with the availability of good, affordable housing in their city or area where they live” from 2020-2021

(OECD Affordable Housing Database, table HC1.4.1). The variation present in surveys presents an obstacle to adequately assessing how those currently in or seeking social housing perceive its quality, and highlights the need for further exploration. Owing to the lack of detail made available by social housing providers about residences and the lack of public discussion by residents regarding housing quality, the latter likely in part due to fear of retaliation by landlords and shame about their living situations, it is difficult to properly contextualize what *is* known about French social housing within its physical spaces.

Though modern social housing development has tried to escape the image of the *banlieue*, stark inequality in the system persists. Despite the best efforts of advocates and sympathetic administrations, housing also remains highly ethnically segregated across France (McAvay, 333). Immigrants, who accounted for 9.5% of the population but 22% of French social rental housing units in 2002 and are documented to be “more likely to accept the first housing offer they receive”, in particular tend to receive initial offers by housing allocation committees for “low-quality units in low-demand [neighborhoods] where immigrants are already living”, possibly bolstered by “public housing agents, aware that immigrants are less selective, [who] may in turn [be] more likely to propose low-demand housing” (Scanlon, 8; McAvay, 348). Immigrant “households from Turkey, the Maghreb, and black Africa” are particularly overrepresented in public housing: “44%, 48%, and 38% [of such households] respectively (Levy-Vroelant. and Tutin, 2007)” lived in French social housing as of 2007 (Levy-Vroelant and Tutin, as cited in Scanlon, 8). In Paris, where “roughly 50 [percent] of the social housing stock was concentrated in only 4 (out of 20) districts” in 2010, the uneven distribution of social housing is even more keenly felt (“Social and Housing Tenure Mix”, Gorczynska, 385).

Contemporary responses within the *banlieues* themselves by residents vary. However, Slooter designates three categories of social identification strategies used. The first is dissociating strategies, in which people try to leave a category and move into another. For example, residents who move to a new area entirely or downplay their own status as a part of a stigmatized neighborhood, thereby attempting to shed the negative associations of being a current or former *banlieue* resident and take up a different, more accepted and/or powerful identity. The second is transforming strategies, which seek to “alter, engage, and criticize the dominant negative categorizations” (Slooter, 172) and include blurring, adding, and transvaluation. Blurring strategies insist that other categories (for example, residents of wealthier white neighborhoods) share similar negative qualities. Adding strategies emphasize that other categories (for example, even poorer neighborhoods) are worse off. Transvaluation strategies, subdivided into normative inversion (negative markers of a stigmatized category are turned into positive ones), conversion of points of comparison (positive qualities of a category are emphasized over negative ones), and equalization (calls for equal treatment regardless of category), attempt to alter ideas of worth associated with the category. The third category is associating strategies, predominantly engaged in by young men and boys in the *banlieues*, respond to stigmatization of a category assigned to an individual by doubling down: these include inscribing victimhood, in which an individual essentially gives in and accepts that nothing will change and there’s no way out of the negative situation imposed by the powers that be on the category, and inscribing street life, which takes the criminal associations of the *banlieuesard* (literally “suburbanite”) and creates internal norms enforced by peer pressure to stake out an individual’s identity and autonomy within the neighborhood (for example, the construction of a hierarchy of higher-status older boys and lower-status younger ones on the

street). Residents use combinations of these social identification strategies, differentiating which ones to use based on the social context and which will earn them respect or gain them acceptance from their peers (Slooter, 167-195).

The history of social housing's development in Paris, as a microcosm of the larger situation nationally, is composed of two distinct elements: the concrete, which contains the construction, development, and daily life of social housing residents, and the social, which is governed by popular discourse and policy and has shaped highly stigmatized spaces marked by racialization and socioeconomic deprivation. Concrete spaces of social housing in France and Paris in particular, initially created for French citizens, have become "quarantine zones" for the racialized Other of the country: poor immigrants, typically from the formerly-colonized Maghreb. Isolated by government definition and popular conception, these spaces carry the legacy of decades of government efforts to assert control, and it is yet to be seen whether more recent efforts to spatially expand social housing and intersperse it with the rest of the city will begin to reverse such trends.

HONG KONG

After World War II, Hong Kong received an influx of migrants, composed primarily of those leaving mainland China and former residents who had fled Hong Kong during the war. Facing a shortage of available housing, new arrivals moved into shantytowns. General consensus points to the destruction of one of these shantytowns as the origin point of Hong Kong's public housing program (Castells et al.) (Smart) (Drakakis-Smith): in 1953, a fire broke out in the Shek Kip Mei squatter settlement, leaving 50,000 people homeless (Castells et al., 1; see Fig. 3). The

city government opted for a response cheaper than providing relief checks: building a resettlement estate. From the initial construction of the first resettlement estate, emergency action to address an imminent crisis of slums housing rapidly began to transform into a formal function of government. Castells et al. identify five stages (18-43) of this transformation up to the turn of the millennium.

From 1954 to 1964, initial resettlement efforts were undertaken and began to expand as the government set its eyes on similar squatter settlements throughout the city as a “clean-up” effort. As stated by the Commissioner for Resettlement in its 1955 annual report [as quoted by Drakakis Smith (1979)]:

Squatters are not resettled simply because they need... or deserve, hygienic and fireproof houses; they are resettled because the community can no longer afford to carry the fire risk, health risk, and threat to public order and prestige which the squatter areas represent and because the community needs the land of which they are in illegal occupation.

This momentum carried the Hong Kong government’s housing efforts into the next stage of their development from 1964 to 1973, where two key moments marked a transition to a concrete housing *program*: the release of the 1964 White Paper and the establishment of the Housing Board in 1964. The White Paper affirmed that squatters can be housed by the government and established new targets for the agencies in charge of housing, while the Housing Board was introduced in an advisory role (Castells et al., 22-23). The housing crisis— as of 1971, “nearly 50% of [Hong Kong] residents still lived in living quarters which were not self-contained”, and “32% of the population was in urgent need of housing, either because they were sharing overcrowded flats or were living in huts or boats” (24)— was persistent, and

necessitated continuing action. I argue that this period also marked the housing program's shift to an exercise of government control over economic development: if the population of immigrants was to keep growing, a comprehensive housing policy would be necessary in order for Hong Kong to successfully absorb them. By continuing to expand public housing opportunities, new arrivals would be provided a safety net that integrated them with the existing community and allow them to seek out work that would feed the expanding economy of the city.

The third stage, spanning from 1973 to 1983, consisted of the consolidation of previously disparate housing management entities within the government into a single coherent Housing Authority, which has survived into the present day. The main priority of these years was to continue addressing squatting, build new estates, and manage existing ones, all of which came at a cost of ten billion Hong Kong dollars. More than one billion additional dollars went toward new transportation infrastructure connecting the housing projects, necessitated by sheer scale to be placed on the fringes of Hong Kong, to the rest of the city. Keeping in mind the distance of these estates from the city core, they were designed with self-sufficiency in mind, but have “remained as predominantly peripheral residential dormitories (*Ibid.*, 28). In the flurry of new construction, efficiency was prioritized over resident comfort, but residents and grassroots groups interviewed at the time reported that they didn’t mind, instead pointing to issues relating to building facilities, transportation convenience, and government regulations surrounding residence as their main concerns. Such regulations were most strongly felt surrounding waiting lists and the time applicants spent on them, as described by Castell et al. (*Ibid.*, 31): “the length of the wait very much depended on the location and characteristics of the housing estate the residents were ready to accept: whereas a public housing unit in remote Tuen Mun New Town could be obtained (in 1983) by waiting about four years, a unit in Kowloon could require about

eight to ten years waiting, and the few Hong Kong vacancies would be allocated at an unpredictable date”.

A coinciding fourth stage ranging from 1972 to 1984 saw the housing program recognize the captive market presented by businesses that sprung up on or were moved to public housing estates and accessed another stream of income via their taxation (33) as well as a continued fight against squatting to the tune of 44,000 huts or extensions being destroyed in 1981 (34), a phenomenon prompted by the continued failure of the private sector to construct livable housing in adequate numbers in the midst of a city “aggravated by speculative development and the displacement of tenement dwellers” (35; see Fig. 4). In an attempt to free up housing space, the Housing Authority introduced the Home Ownership Scheme, a program which sought to free up rental flats by offering middle-class families as well as those participating in public rental housing a chance to buy homes at discounted rates (36-37; see Fig. 5).

The fifth and final stage identified by Castells et al. in 1990 which ranges from 1984 to 2001 is a predictive one by the authors, but notes the transitions planned by the government to a more privatized housing market, emphasizing the Housing Authority’s increasing focus on, among internal improvements and maintenance of estates, subsidizing the movement of public housing residents into private sector housing through home ownership schemes (37-41).

Before addressing what was to come, it is important to understand the fragility of the Hong Kong housing situation present throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, despite the strengthening and steady improvement of government intervention in the market. The hurried response of early efforts immediately in the wake of the Shek Kip Mei fire were symptomatic of the general attitude of the colonial government to modern social services: Hong Kong was “forty years behind” other developed economies in terms of social services spending (Goodstadt,

11-13), and the government had been used to operating under a “siege mentality” in terms of development, accustomed to providing the bare minimum necessary for residents’ survival to the point that Goodstadt remarks that “the people of Hong Kong have been continuously conditioned since World War II to endure living conditions that were at the very margins of what could be considered fit for human habitation” (*Ibid.*, 96) in the government’s attempts to house a population that increased by roughly one million individuals per year from 1951 to 1987 (Castells et al., 15) This favoring of efficiency and cost-effectiveness over the living standards of residents in public housing existed alongside an even worse situation in the private sector. The average concrete multi-story building had a lifespan of fifty years that, for many buildings, was due to come to an end in the late 90s and early 2000s, compounded by a lack of maintenance and overcrowding in the name of profit that saw many privately-owned apartments degrade into slums within a matter of decades (Goodstadt, 13). Cheap building and the worsening conditions of many older buildings forced a twenty-year renovation program on the Housing Authority that ended just in time for new renovations to be due on other buildings that had aged out of their prime (*Ibid.*, 93), while buildings not subject to government maintenance deteriorated to the point that a 2006 UN report noted that the proportion of ‘slum dwellers’ was growing 150% faster in Hong Kong than in the average developed region. There simply were never enough public units to even house all the poor of the city, let alone expand it to other groups (*Ibid.*, 14). All of these issues were disguised by the constant upward trend of the Hong Kong economy; for as long as most people (including government officials) could remember, there had always been more than enough available jobs to cover the shortfall of social services. This understanding contributed to the prevalence of the “laissez-faire” attitude of the late 90s, and when the city was

handed over to China, the Basic Law that laid out how China was to manage Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region suffered from a significant lack of social provisions (*Ibid.*, 1-2).

The handover of Hong Kong coincided with the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, a hit to the economy that the region's first Chief Executive, Tung Chee Hwa, used his experience as a businessman to handle the city government like a business: cutting costs. Utilizing a strategy approved by the last colonial governor of Hong Kong, Christopher Patten, Tung decided to gut social programs, slashing their funding and laying off bureaucrats in an attempt to streamline government finances (*Ibid.*, 2-7) in spite of a budget that was “more than adequate” to continue running the government as normal (*Ibid.*, 10). Initially, Tung remained committed to the continuing improvement of public housing and made large improvements in terms of rehoming residents of inadequate dwellings, pledging to “achieve a home ownership rate of 70% in ten years” and “reduce the average waiting time for public rental housing to three years” (Hing Shing) when he first took office, but eventually folded under criticism blaming his team’s investment in public housing for rapidly falling home prices and attacking his plan to simultaneously expand the number of public housing units along with home ownership (Goodstadt, 94-96). The government stepped out of all aspects of the housing market other than its provisions for the poor by 2002, leaving private developers unregulated despite criticism from the Hong Kong Consumer Council and the International Monetary Fund (*Ibid.*, 94). Tung’s successor, Donald Tsang Yam Kuen, continued this policy: under his administration, the Housing Authority stopped setting yearly targets for new constructions of public housing blocks, teams of bureaucrats with decades of experience were disbanded, and land for potential building sites were sold off. This period did massive damage to the abilities of the Housing Authority and by

the time the government re-entered the market in the 2010s, valuable knowledge was lost and land was scarce.

The current public housing situation, while once again subject to active government intervention, is strained. Fewer than half of all Hong Kong residents own their homes, and as of March 2022, the average wait time for a Public Rental Housing (PRH) apartment was 6.1 years (Hing Shing). While waiting for public housing, residents are left to contend with the private market, where housing prices that have risen 350% in the last twenty years have forced hundreds of thousands of families into slum conditions (see Fig. 6). Hong Kong sports roughly “110,000 [subdivided housing] units at a median area of 124 square feet, smaller than a parking space”, with “floor rent[s] 70% higher than overall floor rent in the city” despite their miserable living conditions (Jim). Sky-high prices have pressured residents into enduring their living situation in silence, with 90% of respondents to a survey by the Hong Kong Society for Community Organization stating that they were afraid to ask for details about utilities charges and 80% stating that they wouldn’t report utilities abuses by landlords to the government (9). These subdivided units are also extremely vulnerable to the pressing impacts of climate change compared to others in the city, with temperatures inside rising 5-6 degrees Celsius hotter than those outdoors (Yeung). Upper-end housing prices, on the other hand, have remained fairly stable over the past decade. Wong (8-9) finds that the long period of government nonintervention in the public housing sector is likely the primary cause behind this phenomenon:

Hong Kong’s unusual housing affordability crisis was caused by unresponsive public sector rents that made low-end housing prices extraordinarily sensitive to inadequate housing supply. Because public-sector rent adjustment lagged behind rising market rents during 2004-2020, incumbent public renters became unwilling to move out to the private

sector. As public housing wait times soared, a large segment of the lowest-income households had to compete for a small pool of low-end private-sector housing. The increase in prices for low-end housing was consequently not only sharp, but also many times greater than that for higher-end housing.

For marginalized groups who can't yet access public housing due to wait lists or minimum 7-year residency requirements, private housing conditions can be even poorer. Ethnic minorities, particularly those from South and Southeast Asia, as well as new arrivals from mainland China (who “constitute a quasi-ethnic group even though the great majority of the local populations are Chinese nationals” [Li and Du, 1]), are generally poorer than the average working-class Hong Konger household and face discriminatory practices from landlords on top of poor conditions and high prices (Yung and Lee, 10-14). To Kwa Wan real estate agent Hui Kwok-Sum reports that 60% of landlords he has spoken with will not rent to minorities, including those with high incomes, citing fears “that some ethnic minorities avoid paying rent, litter, and are difficult to communicate with” (*Hong Kong minorities*, South China Morning Post). Yung and Lee (14) also find resistance among landlords to rent to recent immigrants from the Mainland, with one expressing that “if there are two tenants to choose from... then I may not choose to rent to Mainland New Arrivals”. Issues can continue even after housing is acquired, with ethnic minorities and new arrivals from the Mainland reporting abuse from landlords as well as neighbors. Additionally, when abuse does occur, lack of knowledge and language barriers may prevent households from filing complaints (Yung and Lee, 11-15).

Public housing units, governed by a fairly streamlined process managed entirely by the city government, are so desired for their provision to low-income households of a higher standard of living and opportunity for upward mobility at a much more accessible price tag than

what applicants would otherwise get on the private market. Applicants who make it to the top of the waiting list are randomly assigned to a Public Rental Housing (PRH) unit on the basis of “their family size, the choice of district and PRH allocation standards, and, subject to the availability of resources when the applications are due for allocation”; they can decline three offers, though they must have an “acceptable reason” for doing so or they will subsequently be removed from the applicant pool and have to re-apply (*Application Guide for Public Rental Housing*, Hong Kong Housing Authority, 16). Those who accept the offer and complete the intake process will move into a system that houses nearly half of all Hong Kong Residents, primarily in New Territories estates located a sizeable distance from the center of the city (*Housing in Figures 2022*, Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2; *Application Guide for Public Rental Housing*, Hong Kong Housing Authority, 3). Hong Kong’s efficient public transportation system allows residents of public housing, who are less likely than those in private housing to live in the area where they work, to commute; however, job opportunities continue to move farther away from areas where public housing estates are concentrated and PRH residents tend to be less satisfied with their housing location compared to private housing residents (Lui and Suen, 15; Wang and Chan; Gou et al.). In a city with historically low crime rates compared to the rest of the world (Rooney, 3), public housing estates are also fairly safe, with respondents to a 2012 survey noting their biggest concerns in the neighborhood as “illegal gambling in public spaces”, “noisy [neighbors]”, “objects thrown from height” and “uncontrolled dogs” (Yau, 291). For those with low incomes, standards of living are also comparatively higher in public housing than in its private equivalent: the average living space per person of a PRH unit is more than three times larger than that of the typical sublet apartment (*Housing in Figures 2022*, Hong Kong Housing Authority, 5; Stevenson and Wu). From PRH, residents also have the option of moving into

subsidized-sale housing through the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS), a program introduced by the Housing Authority in the late 1970s to allow renters to purchase homes at a discounted rate as well as free up rental housing for those on wait lists (*Housing for All*, Hong Kong Housing Authority, 7-8; “Sale of Home Ownership Scheme Flats”, Hong Kong Housing Authority). These features of public housing cause it to “[assume] major significance in respect to saving and wealth accumulation over time, [especially for] younger households” (Li and Du, 19), making it essential for low-income households attempting to carve out a foothold in a city where the top 10% of wage earners earn forty times more than the bottom 10% (Sun).

While the Hong Kong government raised the targeted share of public and subsidized housing in the city housing market to 70% in 2018 under pressure from the public as well as Beijing, the shortfall of housing remains immense. The Housing Authority has turned to light housing units—low-cost, easy-to-build units made from modular parts—hoping to cover waiting times while construction is underway. Currently, light housing is planned to make up two-thirds of public housing construction in the coming decade, with most permanent housing expected to be completed after 2027 (Ng). Critics have attacked the plan as being a “band-aid solution”: though it costs about the same amount of money as permanent housing, light housing can only stand for a few years (Ng and Zhao). Those on wait lists for public housing are also reticent (Oxfam, as cited in Yeung):

Oxfam found that 98% of those [on waiting lists] it surveyed had not applied for transitional housing, with many fearing that the two or three years offered would not be long enough for them to be given public housing. And those fears appear justified: In September, nearly 100 households had to move out of Nam Cheong 220, the first transitional housing project in Hong Kong, due to the expiration of the land lease after

less than two years. Only 25% of the households were offered public housing units, and nearly 60% had to move to transitional housing far away.

The scale of government intervention in housing is more or less accepted, along with those who live in subsidized units. While Hong Kong public housing as a whole has historically faced backlash from private developers, criticism by city residents and media generally targets points of public housing's inadequacy, such as the remoteness of proposed estates or the constant shortage of available units (Goodstadt, 104-108; Hong Kong International Business Channel English News). Such attitudes have remained consistent over time. Rooney (6) points out that "at its peak, when public rental housing grew to the extent where it housed almost half the population, these homes were almost too ubiquitous, too ordinary and too typical to be remarked upon by local people"; this continues to be the case. Residence in public housing is simply too common to be marked, and with plans by the Housing Authority to expand even further, it seems poised to become the dominant mode of residence in the city. More than anything, residence in low-quality private housing, often the only option for young people and new immigrants, has come to signal lack of complete integration into the Hong Kong population.

Though begun in an effort to clear nuisance areas, the Hong Kong public housing program became a foundational policy in the city's management of its economy: as Smart (7) argues, its formation and growth constituted "a deliberate expansion of interventionist capacity to maintain the degree of control over the development process which the government already possessed". Castells et al. (4) emphasize the importance of intensive government presence in public welfare as a support beam for the working-class population:

Government-supported housing, health, education, transportation, and subsidies of foodstuffs and basic daily consumption items, have been crucial elements in ensuring a proper production and reproduction of labor, in making labor cheaper without lowering its quality, in providing a safety net that has enabled an entrepreneurial population to take risks by investing and creating businesses, and in providing the basis for social stability since the early 1970s, that has made possible steady growth and economic improvement in an otherwise highly volatile situation.

With that population fed by large influxes of immigrants, especially from mainland China, the housing program also became the mechanism by which Hong Kong absorbed and integrated outsiders. However, all of this was done in a very specific demographic context: Hong Kong is extremely homogeneous, with only 8.4% of the population as of 2021 *not* being ethnically Chinese. While a sizeable portion of the ethnically Chinese population are not native Hong Kongers—almost 30% of city residents as of 2021 were born in mainland China, Macao, or Taiwan—shared ethnic backgrounds may lead to less friction when attempting to integrate foreign populations (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, tables E2021A104e and E2021A106e). In light of recent conflicts with the Chinese government, however, immigrants from mainland China may potentially be marked as they are framed in contrast to native Hong Kongers.

CONCLUSION

Seeking to analyze the ways public or social housing has been used to affect and in turn been affected by ideas of race, citizenship, and belonging in the cities of Paris and Hong Kong, I

began by charting the progression of public or social housing policies in each city from their origins to the present day. Both cities' government-subsidized housing programs grew out of responses to resettle large populations of squatters and absorb a growing population after World War II. While Hong Kong squatters and subsequently other populations of urban poor composed of both city natives and immigrants continued to receive the benefits of resettlement programs, the housing developed at the peripheries of Paris and other French cities was initially taken up by the middle class before its population shifted to immigrants and the working class. The French social housing program subsequently split, with construction and management of housing shifting to municipal and semi-private authorities as security and urban renewal initiatives were increasingly taken up by the national government; using Slooter's framework, I mapped the increasing attempts of the French state to assert control over the *banlieues* as responses to highly publicized instances of violence. The development of Hong Kong public housing, meanwhile, remained fairly stable until a combination of economic downturn and policy reversal caused the government to step out of the housing market, creating a shortfall in housing that the city continues to reel from despite the return of previous policy. I provided end-points in each timeline by contextualizing attitudes of social housing residents with the current situation of social housing in France and summarizing the modern-day gaps in Hong Kong's public housing policy. Finally, I provide explanations for each city's respective public or social housing development and its interaction with concepts of race: while the government motives for either program started from similar places, social housing in Paris has ultimately come to serve as a stigmatized quarantine zone for those rendered undesirable for French society by their backgrounds, while Hong Kong public housing has become a mechanism by which a growing

population of workers from largely similar ethnic backgrounds to the rest of the city can be supported and integrated into Hong Kong society.

In surveying the body of literature on the topic in either city, it becomes noticeable the deep ties that concepts of race and ethnicity, which in turn impact concepts of who ought to be integrated into a society as a citizen, have with public or social housing. When looking at publicly-supported housing systems, it is important to ask about its valuation—whether or not it is something an individual stoops to or something that they are able to access or receive. In both cases, there will always be popular ideas about which groups ought to, or can't be, the individual in question. Race will always be present somewhere in the answer of why those ideas are present, and it is paramount to the mission of reflecting on the biases and priorities of our societies to explore how race came to fit into said answer; without this understanding, it will be impossible to fully unravel the mechanisms by which some people are unfairly left behind or put at a disadvantage to others. The implications of this particular comparison largely highlight the key role public or social housing plays as an integrator or isolator of outside populations, particularly working-class ones, newly entering a city or even country. Whether through the force of sheer ubiquity or even interspersion through a space, this housing makes residents familiar with and to their new environment while providing them a stable jumping-off point by which to pursue opportunities as part of their new society. While policies that govern the development of public or social housing in such ways are influenced by pre-existing ideas within a society about groups of people that are valuable and those that are not, they can also stop this loop through integration and familiarization with difference as opposed to the pathologization and isolation of spaces occupied by othered groups.

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APPENDIX



Fig. 1. Pages 56 and 57 of L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, Vol. 1, No. 6. Photograph, June 1935.

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Fig. 2. Ellena Mehl Architects. *Paris Housing Block* by Ellena Mehl Architects. Photograph,

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Fig. 3. Unknown author. *Aftermath of the 1953 Shek Kip Mei Fire in Hong Kong*. Photograph, 25 Dec. 1953,

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Fig. 4. Hong Kong Housing Authority. *Untitled Photograph of a Family in a Public Housing Apartment*. Photograph, 1993,

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Fig. 5. Wikipedia user Prosperity Horizons. *Siu Hong Court in Tuen Mun, Hong Kong.*

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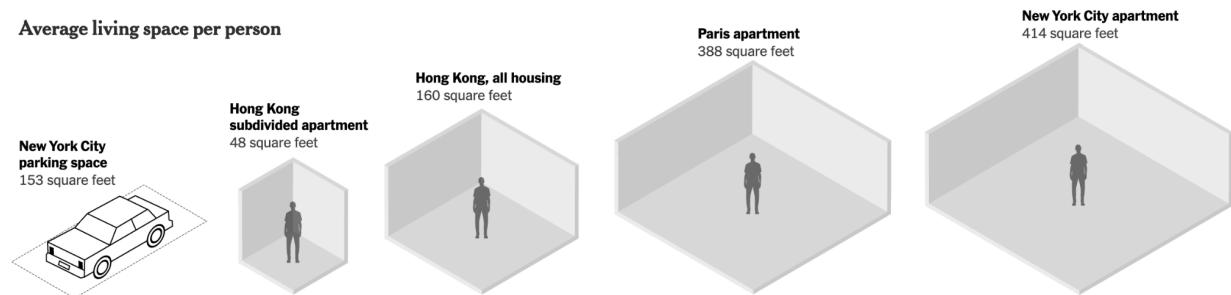


Fig. 6. *Average Living Space per Person in Different Cities Including Hong Kong.* Graphic, 22

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Roots of Hong Kong's Protests." By Alexandra Stevenson and Jin Wu. *The New York Times*, 22 July 2019,

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