

Chapter 2: Lim Kim San - Housing Honcho

It was February 1st, 1960.

Lim Kim San was just made that morn,
Chairman of the spanking new HDB.
After rejecting Goh many times, torn,
Lim gave in finally, sincerely serving
The nation for almost next to nothing
A mere dollar was his minute pay
Revolutionary in his day.
Politics was something he had found wanting
It wasn't power that he sought
But t'was an incident that provoked much thought
After the meeting on that day, something
In him (compassion perhaps) was switched on
And ushered him into his calling full on.

One mid-afternoon, quite sweltering,
Lim parked along the five foot way
at Upper Nanking, slowly climbing
up a musty stairwell that hot day.
T'was a dingy shophouse, dark and damp.
Over there 40 men had set up camp
Overcrowded, unhygienic,
One wouldn't be there if one could help it.
It spoke of their abject poverty.
These men from China came prepared
To be coolies, tough work, no effort spared
So each could provide for one's family.
Now on the second floor, Lim then saw
A curtain substituting for a door.

Pushing it aside, he entered a room.
At the corner spotting a man lying,
covered with a dirty blanket as a tomb
Lim went over, gently asking
if the blanketed man was sick.
"No," came the reply with a tic
"My brother borrowed my pants, bid adieu.
So I am covered out of respect for you."
"Oh I see," Lim replied, quite speechless,
and his guide quickly guided him along
the rest of the shophouse, quite oblong.
"That man I talked to, though nameless,
is so poor, he'd only an article of clothing?
God, they need help. I must do something!"

At the office, Lim sat, began musing
His thoughts flickering back to the
Impoverished man he had seen lying
back in that dingy shophouse earlier.
Shaking his head, he gave a huge sigh,
picked up what Goh left when he came by;
it was a report on the country
Lim put on his glasses, started to see,
Singapore was in quite a sorry state
The population, a staggering
one point six million and still expanding.
What's more worrying is that to date,
hundreds of thousands lived like that man
Squeezed tight like sardines stuck in a can.

The situation was dire;
Things had got to get going fast.
After spending a day on fire
talking with senior staff, at long last,
Lim got a firm grasp on problems they faced.
They had to get contractors replaced.
The suppliers were forming a cartel
HDB, he decided, would raise hell,
and open up their own quarries
to get their own granite and sand.
They also opened up no man's land:
No more exclusive contractors. Worries
abounded; no longer unflappable
This was quite inevitable.

Howe Yoon Chong, CEO appointee
with Teh Cheang Wan, Chief Architect
Brainstorming solutions between them three;
They were a godsend in retrospect.
Based on what the Prime Minister wanted,
they had to get some flats constructed
pronto - within the next eighteen months
they'd be given the necessary funds.
Teh identified a potential site -
Queenstown it was - their first project.
The Brit's Singapore Improvement Trust had built
Some houses and blocks to the very hilt.
Lim then quipped, since they were on the subject,
"Their record is tardy, I am quite sure
that we can do better, won't y'all concur?"

Maximising land usage wasn't a game of chance,
Building upwards of 12 storeys, perhaps more.
As the land was bare, they got started at once.
They scouted the land to decide amenities galore
A market, and religious sites zoned
For churches, temples, mosques known
To appease Christians, Buddhists and Muslims all
In a time before there was even the first mall
Things were new to the kampong folks and slum dwellers
From oil lamps to electrical ones,
From charcoal fires to piped gas ones.
Modern sanitation also made things much better.
The facilities were to serve the needs of the residents
Fit for the layman and also the future Presidents.

Two main types of flats were decided upon
One room flats with a total area of
200 square feet was sine qua non
Tiny it may seem, but a luxury no one'd heard of.
Then there were two to three room flats
With kitchens, bathrooms that HDB let
For no one could afford to buy their own pad
This flat was something of which they were glad
At a steep but still affordable \$10 for one room
Families of four would take up residence
Nothing had ever taken precedence
Of \$20 for two and \$30 for three rooms.
This all was quite an impressive feat
Housing Singapore was almost complete.

A comprehensive housing programme
With estates having schools, clinics, playgrounds and more
12 building schemes! A dozen? Yes ma'am!
From Queenstown to Toa Payoh at the fore
Rebuilding Kampong Tiong Bahru from the ashes
Exhuming the dead, anticipating clashes.
From St Michael's to Selegie, Tanjong Rhu to
Kallang; from MacPherson to Eunos too
Rounding off with Alexandra Hill,
and adding Kampong Koo Chye to the list
It was quite a lot to assist
And added up to quite a huge bill
Thank goodness Lim had Goh the Finance Minister
as a partner to this task he'd administer.

Bibliography

1. Annual Report of the Housing and Development Board 1960-63.