

## **Afterword**

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In a passionate statement made in this symposium, William Lim warned the audience that treating public housing as a commodity is not an acceptable solution to the housing problem because it tends to exacerbate social inequality and class divisions. He also pointed out that governing authorities, in particular those in China, must make greater efforts in creating a more equitable society by providing better living environments for all citizens. He argued that steps must be taken to move toward these larger goals even if some of the processes involved, such as imposing higher taxes and cooling down the housing market, may not please everyone.

Lim's statement resonates with those of many housing activists, who have long been calling attention to issues of social equity in housing provision. But bringing up these issues in a housing conference centering on architectural design is useful in raising several questions that demand further consideration.

The first is about the extents and limits of architects' power in enabling environmental and social change. What kinds of engagement are required to address the multifaceted processes that shape today's housing economy and to bring about improvement to people's lives? In his opening remark for the symposium, Chris Webster argued that design has always been a key component of urbanism in history. But it can never provide complete solutions to social problems by itself. Webster underscores the intrinsic relationship between the design of institutions and design of the built environment, pointing to the need for architects to step out of their comfort zone and to actively acquire knowledge from other fields and disciplines. This is not to say that they should become all-rounded experts. But rather than assuming that there are always someone to take care of housing policies and social policies, design professionals could develop more informed, critical perspectives and situate their works within the larger economic and political system in which they operate.

A related question here is about the nature of housing itself. In one of the panels, an audience made a comment on the synopsis of the symposium. He pointed out that the ways in which its objectives are framed; that is, to address China's housing problems through architectural projects is perhaps too ambitious. Although there were no follow-up debates on this comment, it serves as a reminder that housing is fundamentally a social production defined by a set of complex relationships embodied in physical forms. As several presentations have made it clear, housing today has been increasingly perceived as a commodity and form of investment. It is also an industry, an economic indicator, and a marker of social status. Furthermore, housing is a form of governance

in that that it organizes everyday social and spatial relations in specific ways. Lastly, it is a set of social rights that different groups of people fight over with and thus is entangled with the notions of community, citizenship, state intervention and national security.

Consideration of these multiple associations point back to Webster's emphasis on the relationship between the design of institutions and of the built environment. They invite us to question how particular assumptions, standards, and prescriptions about housing, households, and forms of development have first been formulated and adopted in specific contexts. There is a need to ask how certain ideas have been institutionalized and become commonsensical "truths" endorsed by society over time. An awareness of the historicity and constructed nature of housing policies and housing design, I suggest, is the first step that allows us to rethink the agency of architecture and its potentials in enabling social betterment. In this symposium, we have a glimpse of some truly interesting projects that offer alternative and innovative solutions to existing housing problems. These proposals share a similar conviction that design should not be seen merely as a problem-solving exercise but essentially a problem-setting exercise, which carries the potentials of reshaping institutional practices and producing new knowledge through committed interdisciplinary research and careful analysis.

Finally, any discussion of housing design must address the question of human aspirations and visions of "good life", which are shaped as much by specific individual and collective experiences as by emerging notions of universal progress. One key point of debate in the symposium is how to assess the appropriateness of adopting particular models derived from one place in another, such as the high-density housing typologies developed in Hong Kong. The question can only be fully addressed by taking into consideration the multiple values ascribed to existing built environments by different stakeholders, whilst keeping in mind that the meaning of homeownership and desire for a "good life" have necessarily been reshaped by new patterns of consumption and shifting roles of the state in social provisions. What is clear is that the success of a particular model or policy always depends on the extent to which it resonates with the values and assumptions of those involved.

It is certainly not easy to answer all of these questions. But it is time for architects and indeed all built environment professionals to begin having a conversation about them given the growing urgency to address our housing problems and to create a more sustainable and equitable urban future, in Hong Kong, China and beyond.

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*(Edited from original response text presented at the symposium)*