

Home Ownership for the People

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By Gretchen Liu

Ephemera have played an increasingly important role in narrating history, bringing the past to life in fascinating and unexpected ways. The National Museum of Singapore's History Gallery has incorporated many captivating examples into its displays, including five photo news posters from the 1960s in the *New Nation* area of the gallery. The poster *Home Ownership for the People* appears alongside four others – *The Need to Build National Defence*, *Emphasis on Science and Technology*, *Singapore Goes Gay for Malaysia Day* and *The Assessment and Reformation of Education*.

During the 1960s, when television was in its infancy, such posters produced by the Ministry of Culture were an effective way of keeping citizens informed of new directions, new policies and of the changing landscape. Captioned in the four official languages, the posters were displayed in gathering places such as community centres. They were printed on inexpensive paper and not meant to last: the very definition of ephemera is 'transitory written or printed matter not meant to be retained or preserved'.

The public housing programme was one of the most important undertakings of the decade. By the time of self-government in 1959, the housing shortage, with its problems of overcrowded slums and squalid squatter areas, had reached alarming proportions – exacerbated first by the Pacific War in the 1940s and then by the fast-growing population in the 1950s. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) was established on 1 February 1960. It replaced the colonial Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT). During almost 40 years of existence, the SIT built various housing projects (Tiong Bahru dates from the mid-1930s), but barely scratched the surface of the problem.

The HDB quickly set priorities. The first five-year plan (1960-1965) focused on rental units for low-income families. In 1964 the Home Ownership Scheme was introduced so that flats could be purchased. Another turning point came four

years later when the government allowed the use of Central Provident Fund savings as down-payments for units.

Queenstown was the first satellite town, its development started by the SIT in the 1950s and continued by the HDB. Toa Payoh, the second satellite town, was the HDB's first complete effort where the high-rise, high-density New Town concept – with several neighbourhoods grouped around a lively town centre with entertainment and shopping – was first implemented. Although the buildings shown in this 1966 poster seem primitive by today's standards, they were positively luxurious compared to living conditions for many at the time since they came equipped with services we now consider basic: electricity, flush toilets and piped water.

Once a dream, home ownership for the people was soon a reality. By 1965, the HDB had completed 54,430 units. By 1976, more than 50 percent of the population was living in HDB flats. Today, there are more than 20 new towns and over 80 percent of Singaporeans claim HDB homes.

Gretchen Liu is a historian and author. Her published works include *Pastel Portraits*, *One Hundred Years of the National Museum*, *Raffles Hotel and Singapore: A Pictorial History 1819 – 2000*.

Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board



Before television, posters like these provided Singapore's people with news and information