

**Chartered Institute of Housing Asian Pacific Branch  
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**‘Home within a Community’ –  
The goal of Quality Housing Management**

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Let me first of all thank the Chartered Institute of Housing Asian Pacific Branch for inviting me to this very special event on the occasion of its 40th anniversary. I remember five years ago I was invited to a similar conference to celebrate the Institute’s 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Time really flies, but the Institute continues to be a vibrant body whose local and international influence in the area of housing management keeps on expanding. As we Chinese say, our essential needs are clothing, food, housing and mobility (衣、食、住、行). So your Institute occupies a very important role in enhancing the quality of living of our population. Your conference theme today is “Contemporary Housing Management: Beyond the Boundaries, Building the Future”. This is a very eloquent way of putting the challenge to modern-day housing managers, that of going beyond sectoral and disciplinary boundaries, and the public-private divide.

Towards ‘Total Quality Housing’

Five years ago, I said in my speech that housing management in both the private and public sectors was undergoing tremendous transformation because of the changing expectations of the community and new political and economic challenges. While public housing emphasizes the welfare and social

policy aspects, and private housing plays more to the law of the market, the private/public distinction is increasingly blurred. There is growing awareness that irrespective of the public-private divide, housing managers across sectors should all subscribe to a similar set of core professional values.

In my Department at the City University of Hong Kong, where I am a professor, our BA(Hons) in Housing Studies degree programme sets a mission to train housing professionals to become “socially responsible, culturally aware, intellectually agile, technically innovative and linguistically competent”, with the goal of achieving “Total Quality Housing” (TQH). To us professionalism is not just about acquiring some special knowledge, skills and techniques; it entails a whole range of social, cultural and intellectual enhancement that transcends the syllabus of professional examinations. It is ultimately about values, attitudes, and professional ethos. Housing quality ultimately should contribute towards realizing the full sense of a *“Home within a Community”*, whereby management, quality, care and people-based integrated living can be brought into one.

Transformation of housing sector

I was a member of the Housing Authority (HA) for eight years from 1992 to 2000, and last year, I rejoined the Authority. So I have been able to witness the significant changes taking place within the Authority towards a customer-oriented service culture since the 1990s.

The Housing Authority is the largest property owner and developer in Hong Kong. About 47.5% of Hong Kong households live in public permanent housing, of which 60% are rental units; the rest are home-owner units under various assisted purchase schemes, notably under the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) which was terminated in November 2002.

Table 1: Stock of Permanent Residential Flats

As at end March	1995	2000	2005
	Thousands	Thousands	Thousands
<b>Overall</b>	1,884	2,115	2,408
<b>Public Housing</b>	881	1,016	1,096
- HA PRH Flats	657	651	669
- HA Interim Housing Flats	-	4	8
- HS Rental Flats	32	33	33
- HA Subsidized Sale Flats	188	310	352
- HS Subsidized Sale Flats	4	19	16
- HA Completed Surplus Flats	-	-	16
- HS Completed Surplus Flats	-	-	3
<b>Private Housing</b>	1,003	1,099	1,312

*Notes:* HA = Housing Authority; PRH = Public rental housing; HS = Housing Society

*Source:* Housing Authority website:

<http://www.housingauthority.gov.hk/en/aboutus/resources/figure/0..3-0-13894-2005.00.html>

In the past, public housing used to be at the centre of social conflict and political agitation. Housing issues boomed in district council and legislative debates. During the 1990s onwards, both the government and the HA began to depoliticize public housing issues in favour of new customer-based policy and managerial orientations. This took place within the wider context of the government's public sector reform programme geared towards the managerialization and contracting out of public services.

The customerization strategy in public housing management is manifested in reforms to redefine tenant relationships and housing management

arrangements - through an internal “management enhancement programme” (implemented in 1997) and other corporate reforms within the Housing Authority; the adoption of performance pledges to various stakeholders including public housing applicants, tenants, and HOS homeowners; and the implementation of a tenant participation scheme known as EMAC (Estate Management Advisory Committee) (which was first pilot-experimented in 1995 and extended to all estates the next year). Starting from 2000, phased “private sector involvement” (PSI) was introduced to estate management and maintenance services, with a New Management Model launched in those estates managed by Property Services Companies.

Irrespective of the multifarious motivations behind, this new strategy has certainly given rise to a more resident/customer-friendly mission, as reproduced below:

- To provide affordable quality housing, management, maintenance and other housing related services to meet the needs of our customers in a proactive and caring manner;
- To ensure cost-effective and rational use of public resources in service delivery and allocation of housing assistance in an open and equitable manner;
- To maintain a competent, dedicated and performance-oriented team.

The core values of the Housing Authority are now captured by the **4Cs**: Caring; Customer-focused; Creative; and Committed. They constitute the new ethos of public housing managers.

In the private sector, a similar sea change is occurring. The distinction between public and private housing management practice on the ground is fastly diminishing, even though the operational context may still see some fundamental differences - a major difference being that public housing

continues to be driven by government policy objectives and private housing by market demands. However, as customerization and marketization become the new dominant trends in the public sector, even their contexts of operation are overlapping.

Hong Kong is not unique in this change. In the United Kingdom, the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed the steady erosion of boundaries which traditionally separated and characterized professional working practices. The result, according to one academic, has been

“the blurring of demarcation lines between the public and private sectors and across tenures, creating a bridge between different professions and the professional/non-professional divide”<sup>1</sup>.

As the private/public dichotomy increasingly gives way to private-public partnership, the change is not a one-way surrender of public sector values to the might of so-called private values of the market shaped by such notions as profit and business turnover. Instead, the global change, as represented by the Third Way, has pointed to some form of convergence, with public managers also caring about resource management efficiency and effectiveness, while private managers increasingly paying attention to their corporate social responsibility. In the process, a new hybrid of an integrated and holistic form of management may likely emerge.

Throughout government, “management” has substituted “administration” and citizens are no longer subjects of administration or clients of departments, but rather consumers and customers of public goods and services. Similarly, in the private sector, managers increasingly talk about service and responsiveness to the community. As the HA contracts out estate

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<sup>1</sup> M. Pearl (1997) *Social Housing Management*, London: Macmillan, p. 19.

management and maintenance work to private service companies, private managers managing 'public' or social housing are facing challenges of a different kind. They have to learn how to cope with the expectations and needs of social housing tenants.

Furthermore, over the past two decades, there has been a steady shift towards home ownership, both in the public and private sectors. The motivations and expectations of an "owner public" are obviously different from those of a "tenant public". House owners care not just about estate management and maintenance in the narrow sense, but also wider issues of housing quality - the physical quality and asset-retention and enhancing capacity of their property, as well as the amenities and living environment of the community in which they are located. These various qualities are determined by the physical, ecological and human aspects of the neighbourhood, as well as the quality of local governance.

All these dimensions of "housing management" in the holistic sense would mean that professional housing managers now have a more challenging role to fulfill – they have to be knowledgeable and skillful not only in the more mundane tasks of estate management as understood in the conventional sense; at the same time they have to become a good planner, a competent social worker, an active cultural promoter, a caring environmentalist, and even an outreaching community advocate. They also need to become socially aware and politically sensitive. Both the cultural and nature of the organizational context for housing management are up for transformation.

5 core values of housing management: Property, People, Professionalism, Participation and Partnership

Housing is no longer about bricks and mortar. The notion of “Home” should replace that of “Housing”. Professional housing managers should move away from the traditional concept of property management. They should base their professional values upon **5 Ps** – they are Property, People, Professionalism, Participation and Partnership. Housing quality ultimately should contribute towards the full sense of a **Home**, generating intra-housing and extra-housing utilities to the occupiers. Let me explore the 5 Ps one by one.

To achieve the **Property** value, housing managers should pay full attention to the physical accommodation, sanitation and utilities, safety, access to amenities and community services, landscaping, transport and infrastructural facilities. To achieve the **People** value, housing managers should care about promoting the residents’ quality of life within the local community context, catering not just to the property aspects but also to maintaining social, cultural and environmental harmony. To achieve the **Professionalism** value, housing managers should attain some core competencies – like being able to communicate effectively with tenants, owners and the local communities; be competent in identifying and evaluating their needs, and in responding to them professionally; and be able to manage resources efficiently and effectively to bring about the best results. In tandem with the growing recognition of the importance of professionalism, many jurisdictions have enacted legislation to “professionalize” housing managers (even China, whose property market is relatively new, has promulgated last November a set of *Provisional Regulations on Property Managers System*, for the purpose of better regulating property management activities).

To achieve the **Participation** value, housing managers should take active steps towards developing a suitable institutional platform (or infrastructure) to encourage residents and owners alike to get involved in the co-

management of housing affairs. This can be a tricky thing. The traditional notion of professionalism tends to play up professionals as having identifiable traits of expert knowledge, and tenant participation would pose a threat to the monopoly of such expertise in housing management. An additional dimension of professionalism in the public sector is that public service professionals also act as caretakers to guarantee the social rights of the clients-citizens. Such care-taking role had in the past induced a largely paternalist-bureaucratic structure in most delivery systems of public service, which could take tenant participation as interfering with the professionally-defined public good. Despite such perceptions of professional unease with tenant participation, empirical findings in Britain and Hong Kong<sup>2</sup> showed no significant conflict between housing managers and tenants, nor any overwhelming disapproval by housing managers of tenant participation arrangements. Instead, housing managers seem to view the participation of tenants as facilitating their own work and enhancing the satisfaction of tenants themselves. Manager-tenant collaboration and rivalry are the two extremes of a fluid spectrum of relationships. The exact model of manager-tenant interaction is as much contingent upon the managers' sense of values and professionalism as the resident community's degree of pro-activism.

Finally, to achieve the **Partnership** value, housing managers should engage in collaboration, or partnership, with local community stakeholders and other professional operators who play a role in shaping and determining the ultimate TQH. Hence they should develop frameworks of dialogue and cooperation with government policymakers and regulators, local politicians, property developers, and other professions such as architects, surveyors, engineers, social workers, transport managers and law enforcement

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony B. L. Cheung and N. M. Yip (2003) "Customizing the Tenants, Empowering the Managers: Impact of Public Housing Governance Reform in Hong Kong", *Housing, Theory and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2, June, pp.98-109.

personnel. A multi-disciplinary and inter-professional interface needs to be developed and institutionalized if TQH is to be sustainable.

### **Advocate of better living**

It can be seen that a modern-day housing manager has to respond to a wide range of expectations and to acquire various competencies. He or she has also to strike a critical balance among a set of values. No matter where such balance lies, there is little doubt that both the culture and nature of housing management has changed both in the public and private sector.

What justifies the label “professional”? What makes a *housing professional* different from just a housing manager? One of the major features of any profession is that it is recognized by the society to possess a body of systemic expert knowledge in solving a particular area of problems facing society and/or bringing about community well-being and social progress. The mission and ethos of professions to achieve social contribution (and responsibility) thus overrides all other concerns. The professions’ primary value orientation is towards the community interest rather than individual self-interest. Their professional rationality dominates not only the content of their practice, but also collegiate and client relationships and the way their work is organized. In exchange for autonomy, monopoly, authority and rewards, professions are expected by society to exercise self-control or self-regulation, to uphold high standards of professional practice, to maintain integrity in operation and to serve community purpose in their value orientation.

For example, for medical doctors, saving life at all costs and putting patients' interest first is their primary professional value. For lawyers, upholding justice and fundamental human rights is their core value. For us academics, promoting knowledge, and undeterred in searching for and speaking the

“truth”, overrides everything else. For housing managers, your professional mission lies in the promotion and up-keeping of residents’ TQH. TQH should be the outcome of professional housing managers discharging their social responsibility, with due participation of various stakeholders concerned.

TQH entails collaboration between housing managers and the resident/trading communities, government and developers, various professions that play a role in the physical, social and human environment, and so on. Hence housing managers cannot simply operate within their own narrow “professional” domain but have to reach out in order to excel in their professional practice. This is not just about making sure that professional self-interest is not jeopardized by political actions and decisions in the public policy arena, but more fundamentally to enable housing managers who believe in TQH to have their voice, as the **advocate of better housing**, and to gain heard by the rest of society – especially by government officials and legislators, by planners and developers.

Similar to other professionals such as medical doctors, accountants, architects and planners, housing managers as a profession are there to help define what a better-living world should be. Their mission is to set the societal benchmarks and best practices for better housing, to make housing in effect a “home within a community”. They should champion this cause both in their professional activities and in their interaction with policymakers.

Thank you very much.

24 November 2006