

Building Blocks: Singapore's Dawson development gears up for completion



Singapore's new Dawson development consists of three schemes, two of which, Skyville by WOHA (left) and Sky Terraces (right) are nearing completion

By Daven Wu

It is almost impossible to overemphasise just how important a role the Housing Development Board (HDB) has played in Singapore's runaway sprint as a regional and global economic powerhouse.

Set up in 1960, the public housing authority was a response to the then British colony's housing crisis, when most of the population lived in crowded, unhygienic slums and squatter tenements. Armed with new zoning laws, the HDB began razing entire quarters, building in their place the regimented rows of utilitarian tower blocks that would become a familiar part of Singapore's skyline. Within three years, it had built 21,000 brand new flats. By 1965, the year Singapore gained its independence, that number reached 54,000. By 1970, the housing problem was, in the HDB's own memorable parlance, 'licked'.

Today, over 80 percent of Singapore's 5.5m-strong population live in one million HDB flats. Remarkably, the clean, safe, meticulously maintained developments have avoided the negative social issues

that bedevil similar projects in other countries. Even more remarkable has been the HDB's own recent evolution in its design approach. 'When HDB first started, the immediate focus was to meet the severe housing shortage', says Dr Cheong Koon Hean, the HDB's CEO. 'To build our flats in the shortest possible time, we kept our flat designs simple and functional.'

Fast-forward to the new millennium and an increasingly well-travelled and cashed-up population has forced a rethink. With the per capita GDP at around \$55,000, 'what does the social housing compact mean in an affluent society?' asks Richard Hassell of local architectural firm WOHA. The answer, it seems, is a paradigm shift that has pushed the HDB model of functionalism towards a more human-scaled model of communal living in one-off projects that are injected with green swathes, greater privacy and a higher degree of residential interaction.

Case in point is the Dawson project, due to welcome its first families in July. Comprising two separate

but adjacent developments designed by WOHA and SCDA (a third development by Surbana is still in the works), Dawson represents a high-water mark in Singapore's ongoing experiment with public, high-density living.



'We have been refining our designs to keep pace with the changing demographic and lifestyles of Singaporeans,' Cheong says. 'They offer not just a "housing in a park" experience, but also flexibility in designing internal layouts, and flat designs that facilitate multi-generational living.' Within this broad brief to rejuvenate the HDB model, the Dawson architects have taken distinctly different approaches. SCDA's five-tower, 758-unit Sky Terrace bears the DNA profile of a private condominium. Its interlocking flats are housed within a chic grey and black modular façade, intersected by sky gardens, green terraces that fold upwards from the ground and even yoga pavilions. The studio flats are unique; their double height ceilings is a feature that has allowed the architects to insert a connecting single level studio for elderly parents that has its own entrance.

Across the road, WOHA's Skyville cleaves closer to a classical HDB façade, but its spatial configuration of the 960 units within three 47-storey diamond-shaped towers is remarkable. Here, the idea of interconnected villages in the sky is fully articulated by small clusters of flats that wrap around cross-ventilated voids, airy communal pavilions, sky gardens and a ravishing alfresco park on the top floor, offering multi-million



SCDA's five-tower, 758-unit Sky Terrace features interlocking flats housed within a chic grey and black modular façade, intersected by sky gardens



dollar views. Green initiatives abound, including solar panels on the roof-top park that generate all the power for the public spaces and a bio-moat on the ground level that recycles rain water.

Riffing off the idea of an English towpath, Dawson will, when it's complete, be linked by Alexandra Linear Park, a bucolic stretch of parkland, playgrounds and reflective pools that the HDB hopes will encourage residents to take part in more outdoor living, and reinforce the ideal of an interactive community.

As a template for mass urban housing, you would be hard pressed to find a better model than the HDB. Being the sole agency in charge of public housing, it can take on large-scale construction projects and achieve bewildering economies of scale - the cost of building Skyville is around S\$112m, a remarkable achievement by any standard. It also offers, quite possibly, a tantalising option for a solution to many of the world's most pressing housing problems.

Top left: Its studio flats are unique for their double height ceilings; This feature has allowed the architects to insert a connecting single level studio for elderly parents that has its own entrance

Bottom Left: Dawson will, when it's complete, be linked by the nearby leafy Alexandra Linear Park

