

All clear for high-rise slums

WITH no fanfare, without any acknowledgement, Hongkong has rid itself of what was once among our more shameful social problems. Nobody seems to have noticed.



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Yet the way in which the blight of roof-top squatters has been solved is something in which our community can take great pride. With compassion, efficiency and planning, tens-of-thousands of people were moved over two short decades from squalid, unhealthy and dangerous roof-tops into public housing.

Today, there are virtually no roof-top squatters left. Twenty years ago, their shanty homes were an obvious cancer on our society.

What happened to them? One of the few people left in government who knows is Ko Bing-cheung, Senior Housing Manager at the Housing Authority. When he began his career in 1957, there was virtually no roof unoccupied in many districts of Hongkong.

The absence of crammed roof-top shacks is like a nagging toothache. When the tooth throbs, it's a constant irritant. When it stops hurting, you forget about it.

So has Hongkong forgotten about an issue which was once a pressing concern? Social workers, town planners, politicians, Government administrators, nobody to whom I spoke over recent weeks could tell me when roof-top squatting had stopped being a problem.

That wasn't always the case.

A couple of months ago, I was in the Mongkok office of Legislative Council Member Frederick Fung Kin-kee - a forceful activist whose years of effort showed many thousands of people, and the Government itself, ways to improve the conditions in which many lived. Waiting for the lift on the 20th floor, I peered idly out the window, looking north towards

Cheung Sha Wan and Shamshuipo, where the modern Hongkong public housing story began.

It was on Christmas Eve, 1953, that flames roared through make-shift squatter communities crowded on the crumbling hillsides.

When Christmas dawned, 55,000 people had lost their homes. Governor Sir Alexander Grantham ordered full emergency action to rehouse the homeless, who were among the million refugees who had swarmed over the border to escape the new regime in China.

In charge of later efforts to find a solution was a pub-

they could. Often, it was under a tin and cardboard roof amid the festering squatter cities that sprang up on every hillside.

When the open urban spaces were filled, the more fortunate, to stay close to work and shops, paid greedy landlords for patches of space on roof-tops.

Exposed, threatened by typhoons and downpours, without water, power or toilets, uncomfortable, unhygienic, the roof-tops of Hongkong were sanctuary for many thousands of families. A generation grew up high above the streets. Today, many of them are the middle-class backbone of Hongkong.

In the 60s, you could scarcely find a tenement from Western to Causeway Bay, from Yau Ma Tei to Shamshuipo, that did not have illegal structures perched crazily on the roofs.

A 1960 survey registered 78,000 people living in slums on the tops of buildings. In some cases, illegal huts were built on the flimsy roofs of other illegal structures. It was an appalling situation caused by desperation; how Hongkong escaped a major human tragedy is a great mystery.

By 1970, the number had dropped to 46,600 and by 1981 to 30,000.

Today, there are so few that the Housing Authority doesn't keep track of them.

Ko Bing-cheung recalled when the high-rise slums were a major concern. In 1956, there were grave worries in the old Resettlement Department about public safety. In addition to conges-

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lic servant named David Trench. During his later lengthy Governorship (1964-1971) he was to spark many of the moves that led to today's vast housing programmes which provide homes for 52 per cent of our people.

As refugees crammed into Hongkong in those harsh and desperate years, they found shelter wherever

tion and the threat of fires from kerosene stoves in unstable structures, there were constant complaints from those living underneath of noise and pollution; with no roof-top toilets, sanitary conditions can be imagined.

But there was little the administration could do. There were simply not enough places to house the tens of thousands of roof-top squatters and the hundreds of thousands of people living in illegal hillside shanty towns. It's hard to remember today that in the 60s, poverty was alive and thriving in Hongkong. Try telling this to a teenager today at an electronic games parlour in a luxury shopping mall.

Gradually, as our prosperity spread and the public housing programmes began

to bite, those on the public housing queue got places to live. Slowly, the immense squatter towns above Causeway Bay and Sau Mau Ping dwindled. The rooftops emptied.

Proud landlords of gleaming new commercial and domestic blocks took care that illegal tenants didn't move in. The Building Ordinance Office of the old Public Works Department moved with the ponderous slowness of the law to issue summonses against landlords who permitted roof-top squatting.

A combination of these social and economic trends has meant the disappearance of high-rise squatting. It's an era, thankfully, forgotten. It's an achievement in which we can take pride.