

27 Aug. 1988

A burning question of public safety

ARE high-rise buildings more than 20 years old such as Chungking Mansions and Mirador Mansion safe places to live?

This question has been asked time and again without a satisfactory answer.

Over the years fatal incidents, such as the fires at Mirador Mansion this month and Chungking Mansions six months ago, have been followed by renewed public debate on the risk these buildings represent.

District boards and community groups complain that efforts to remedy the problems have been little more than piecemeal. Few disagree the buildings are fire traps.

Various elements, including illegal structures, dense population, bad security, unauthorised electrical wiring, dirty environments, lift breakdowns, blocked fire escapes and old safety installations, have contributed to the danger.

Many owner-occupiers don't care about the value of their properties. The poor participation of owners in building management has resulted in a widening gap between them and the management committee, housing experts said.

Taking Chungking Mansions as an example, there are about 178 cheap-price guest houses, 10 licensed and two unlicensed food premises and 74 workshops.

These establishments take up almost half of the 18-storey, five-block, 28-year-old building's 555 residential flats.

Two blocks north along Nathan Road is the 29-year-old Mirador Mansion.

About 19 guest houses, 313 workshops, two licensed and three unlicensed food premises operate seven days a week.

Such a mix has resulted in serious management deficiencies, poor hygiene, bad security, and health and fire hazards.

Why is it allowed to go on?

A Buildings and Lands Department official earlier said lease arrangements stipulated Chungking Mansions could be used for any purpose other than industrial. This means the commercial establishments including guest houses are permitted.

"They are allowed to do business there," the official said.

"All they have to do is comply with requirements laid down by other Government departments concerning fire safety, hygiene and structural safety."

So nothing can be done to remove the commercial elements from these buildings.

But the existence of the workshops is the result of Government tolerance.

Government policy allows workshops established before 1976 to carry on, conditionally, under a programme which plans to eventually phase them out.

But many are still there. This, together with the loophole in land leases, has created a major obstacle to improving conditions in the buildings.

The extent of the problem is unknown as the Fire Services Department has yet to survey

Timetable of tragedy

Below is a partial list of the fatal and near-fatal fires that have raged through Hongkong residential blocks in the past five years.

- February 28, 1983: Four killed and 50 injured in a Tsim Sha Tsui blaze.
- September 26, 1983: An eight-year-old girl killed in a Sham Shui Po apartment block fire.
- December Eight, 1983: Four killed and 13 injured in a blaze in an eight-storey Mong Kok apartment block.
- September 23, 1984: One person killed and two injured in a Sham Shui Po apartment block fire.
- November 23, 1984: Two killed in a Yau Ma Tei apartment block fire.
- January 14, 1985: Two killed in an Kuntong apartment block fire.
- February One, 1986: Sixty people rescued from a blaze in Chungking Mansions.
- August 22, 1987: Nine-year-old boy killed in a Kowloon apartment block fire.
- February 21, 1988: One killed as a fire again rips through Chungking Mansions.
- June One, 1988: Two killed in a Yau Ma Tei apartment block fire.
- July Two, 1988: One killed in a Mong Kok guest house fire.
- August seven, 1988: Two killed in a fire in Mirador Mansions.

Hongkong's 300 pre- and post-war buildings.

Chief fire officer Mr Li Kwok-choi said: "We don't know how many buildings of this type are in the territory. We hope through this survey we will be able to gauge the extent of the problem."

Various departments are responsible for different aspects.

The police fight crime, the Urban Services Department maintains environmental hygiene and the Fire Services Department monitors safety in-

The Government might argue

the building management co-ordination team under the district office had already been doing the job. But it acted on a complaint basis which made the team's role passive, he said.

The only way to resolve the long-standing problem would be for the Government to take over the management of Mirador Mansion and Chungking Mansions and set up a high-powered task force to oversee the implementation of remedial measures, Mr Ahuja said.

But deputy chief fire officer Mr Chow Wing-cheong reportedly told an inquest into the death of a Danish tourist killed trying to escape a fire in Chungking Mansions in February that more could be done to improve conditions.

He said the relevant authorities had the power to draw up regulations for boarding and guest houses, but it had not been done.

The Government appears to be strengthening its efforts to resolve, or at least contain the problem.

An inter-departmental task force set up after the Chungking Mansions fire has compiled a report on preventative measures in sub-standard hostels. The report is believed to include proposals for tighter legislation and a compulsory licensing system for more than 1,500 sub-standard hostels in Hongkong.

Principal assistant secretary for security Mr J MacKinley said the task force had also examined the fire hazard problems in

Chungking Mansions and similar buildings.

"The report is being considered within the Government," he said.

The BOO has also taken action in the wake of the 24-hour fire at Mirador Mansion, one of about 30 buildings in Tsim Sha Tsui and Yau Ma Tei identified as having illegal structures.

The BOO has served demolition orders on the building requiring owners of illegal structures to pull them down by the end of this year.

The Buildings and Lands Department said it simply did not have the manpower to remove all unauthorised structures. There are an estimated million illegal structures in 60,000 private buildings in Hongkong.

The BOO can only concentrate on those posing an immediate danger. Those at Mirador Mansion were not considered high priority.

Some suggested the best way to deal with Chungking Mansions-type buildings was to ask the Land Development Corporation (LDC) to redevelop them.

The LDC believes its redevelopment proposals would make land use more compatible by removing residential buildings from predominately commercial areas.

It is preparing schemes on 16 proposed urban slum projects, covering about 50,000 square metres of land, located mainly in old districts such as Mong Kok, Wan Chat and Sheung Wan.