

project

Life in Mono

Cambridge Road Housing

Architect: CESMA International Pte Ltd

by Chee Li Lian

“For all that passes, passes by the stairs, and all that comes, comes by the stairs; letters, announcements of births, marriages, and deaths, furniture brought in or taken out by removers, the doctor called in an emergency, the traveller returning from a long voyage. It’s because of that that the staircase remains an anonymous, cold and almost hostile place.”

Georges Perec in Life A User’s Manual

Social Housing at Cambridge Road

Public housing has always been a matter that is never really as cut and dried as it appears. For a long time, it has been a Byzantine task of efficiently managing valuable resources: land, money and time. In Singapore, the stunning success of public housing is laudable. With over eighty-percent of its population housed in these contraptions, the state has indeed outdone itself in providing “decent housing” for the masses. Had it not been governed so strictly (and rightly so) by state laws, this enterprise would have long-ago turned into a lucrative lottery. Demand for public housing continues to escalate as first-time buyers now queue for six long years before being handed their keys and almost ninety percent of the classifieds cover transactions for public housing. The Housing and Development Board¹, the state’s only authority for public housing, looks forward to occupying larger premises at the end of this millennium to cope with crowds that seem unlikely to ease in volume, unfazed even by the recent economic downturn.

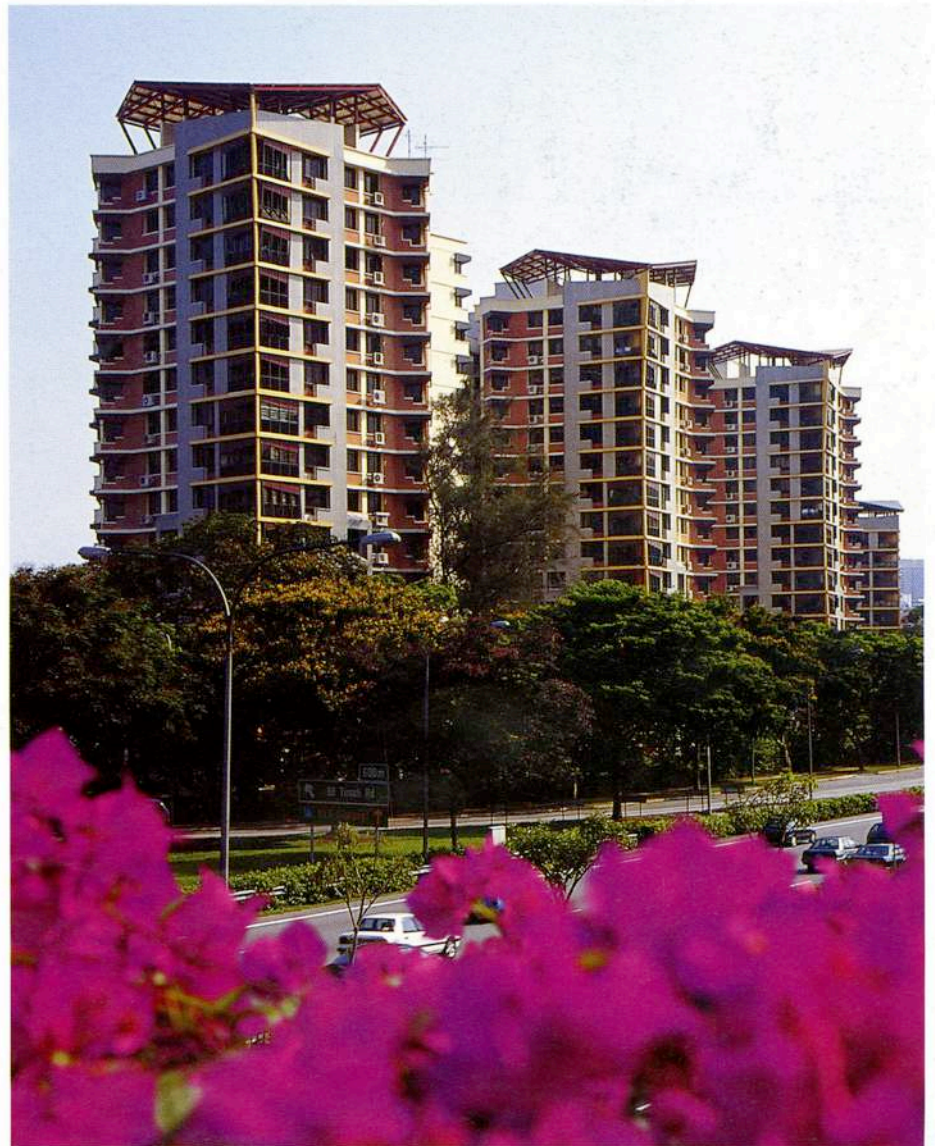
While the euphoria of mass demand and mass supply are thriving, questions of the extent to which the great housing experiment has matured must resurface. In no inexact terms, the initial manifesto was simply stated, though by no means easy to do: it was to comfortably accommodate the teeming masses within the most economic means, and, to bring about improved social connections especially among the different race and income groups. A tall order, no doubt. But surely as the Housing Development Board celebrates its thirty-eighth year, and, as social demands, lifestyles and technological means have changed, such values must have shifted in their priorities. Newer issues evolve and take the spotlight while the original concepts continue to apply, albeit fashioned by today’s diversified demands. With these objectives in mind, this essay wishes to re-look at the issues confronting contemporary public housing and to examine the need to re-invent the status quo.

Often new apartment blocks sprout in a facsimile manner and the ones that do not are visually unmistakable. Nos. 37-40 Cambridge Road is of this genre. Accommodating 291 units of apartments, these newly completed HDB flats are sited on a trapezoidal plot bordered by Norfolk Road/Central Expressway (the CTE runs parallel to Norfolk Road), Owen Road and Cambridge Road on three of its sides and, by Cambridge Primary School on the fourth edge. The architects, CESMA International Pte Ltd, are a subsidiary of the HDB and specialise predominantly in overseas projects for the Southeast and East Asian regions. That the units catch the eye of one plying the Central Expressway

Below
Cambridge Road Housing viewed from the Central Expressway travelling towards the city.

Opposite
The apartments were conceived as slim vertical markers.

is no coincidence. Conceived as slim vertical markers, the architects were thoroughly conscious of the flats’ visibility from this major traffic artery. Nos. 37-39 hence, are the double-headed arrow shaped point blocks of fifteen storeys that one initially glimpses. Aligned to Cambridge Primary School is No.40, a truncated “L”-shaped slab block with ten storeys on its longer side and eight on its shorter end facing Cambridge Road. Access to the site is via Cambridge Road, through a triple volume entry carved out from part of No. 40’s shorter side. Having visually surprised many through its fresh vocabulary of architectural language, Nos. 37-40 qualifies, on the surface, as suitable subject matter for this article’s investigation into the social housing experiment.





Great Expectations: Living the Singapore Dream

Outwardly, the scheme manages to express an individuality that goes unrivaled in the suburban cocktail that forms its site. Here, social housing from an earlier period and private terrace houses reside with the stuff that breathes life into Singapore's typical suburban sprawl: the community centre, the wet market with its infamous hawker centre attachment and, the school where the *status quo* is first introduced to young minds. At first glance, you will be forgiven for thinking that this is a private condominium. And there are many reasons for this misconception. Even without a fence around, the massing reads of exclusivity with only four blocks sharing the plot. Also, the highly articulated blocks digress from the HDB norm of simple pre-cast construction. Credit must be given to the architects for re-thinking this formal strategy. The result is a series of energetic forms dressed in a lively ensemble of colours and materials.

Care has been taken to accentuate the corners of each block pointing towards the expressway. These read as tenuous insertions into the main mass that is actually standard HDB fair faced brickwork. The corner insertions interlock the brickwork on both ends through two wall planes that are rendered gun-metal gray and interspersed with groove lines to resemble metal cladding. Budget constraints restricted material variation and makeshift measures as this was necessary to preserve the original



Top
The massing reads of exclusivity with only four blocks sharing the plot.

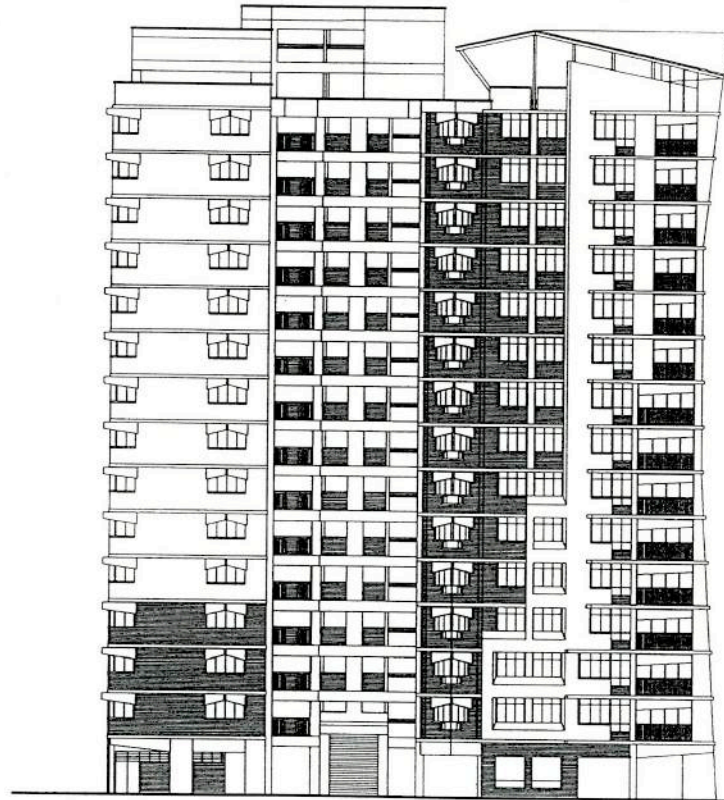
Above
Care has been taken to accentuate the corners.

Opposite
The highly articulated blocks digress from the HDB norm of pre-cast construction.

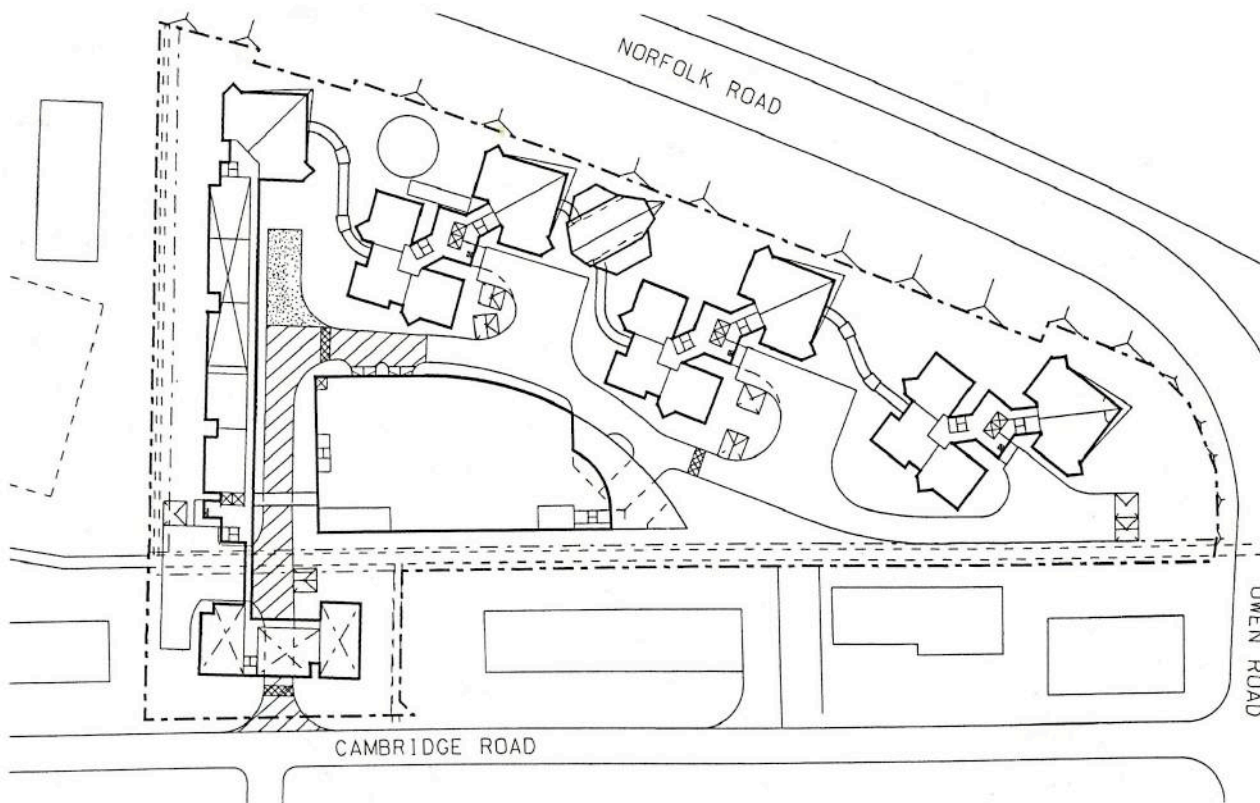
intentions of the scheme. The decision to somewhat dematerialise the various elements at these junctions seems justifiable perhaps, as a response to the transient ebb and flow of traffic patterns on the expressway. A frontal layer of lattice-like balconies are vertically mediated by a defiant dividing wall and sliced horizontally by rhythmically placed fins, both painted a brilliant mustard yellow. As if challenging one's visual perception of its structural stability, this vertical yellow wall tapers to a slit as it rises from a flared base and then returns unexpectedly, to its broadened dimension at the very top, questioning conventional perceptions of "who supports who". Crowning this display is a robust metal roof that folds contrapuntally on either side of the corner. Highly imageable, the "flying" roof makes a confident statement, projecting boldness uncommon amongst social housing forms here. In an effort to add "pizzazz" to the facade, aluminium sunbreakers in maroon and verdian green appear at every floor of the other five corners that make up the double headed arrow form. It is debatable whether these were added to spice up the composition or to baldly serve their purpose, since at least one facade of every point block is west facing. Nevertheless, the orientation problem has been adequately addressed by the oblique placement of the blocks and this further defends the chosen arrow form.



On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the architecture constitutes no more than mere cosmetic treatment in elevational terms, probably executed with the expressed aim to reconcile them with the more "prestigious" condominiums. Disturbingly, there are no apparent signs of probing further into the fundamentals of shared living, no radical departure in the site layout nor the planning of the apartment units themselves. These units ranging from 100 sq m to 120 sq m, are essentially conventional, in size and in outlook. Internally, the nimbleness inherent outside seems lost. That one has still to enter the kitchen to use the second washroom is just a minor point to gripe about in the entire scheme of things. The rehashed internal layout disappoints and reflects the overriding complacency by which the entire idea of "urban living" and the meaning of a "family unit" is viewed. This project held promise with its enticing exterior but that is about as far as it gets. It is unfortunate that this is yet another lost opportunity to explore the very core of social housing. What kept the architects back from redefining the household unit is foreseeable. Perhaps it was the demands of speed on such apartments. This one took three years from inception to completion. Perhaps it was the cost of changing what was already a proven formula. Whatever the reasons for this inertia, the results hint at some questions that are in need of urgent re-evaluation.



Elevation



0 10 50
Site Plan



Top
 Why strip social housing of its heterogeneity and of its unmatched pairs of shoes in the corridor?

Centre
 For all that passes, passes by the stairs, and all that comes, comes by the stairs: the staircase remains an anonymous, a cold and hostile place.

Bottom
 Could the children's playground have been treated as a social magnet?



On the Stairs: of shoes, laundry and other communal stuff

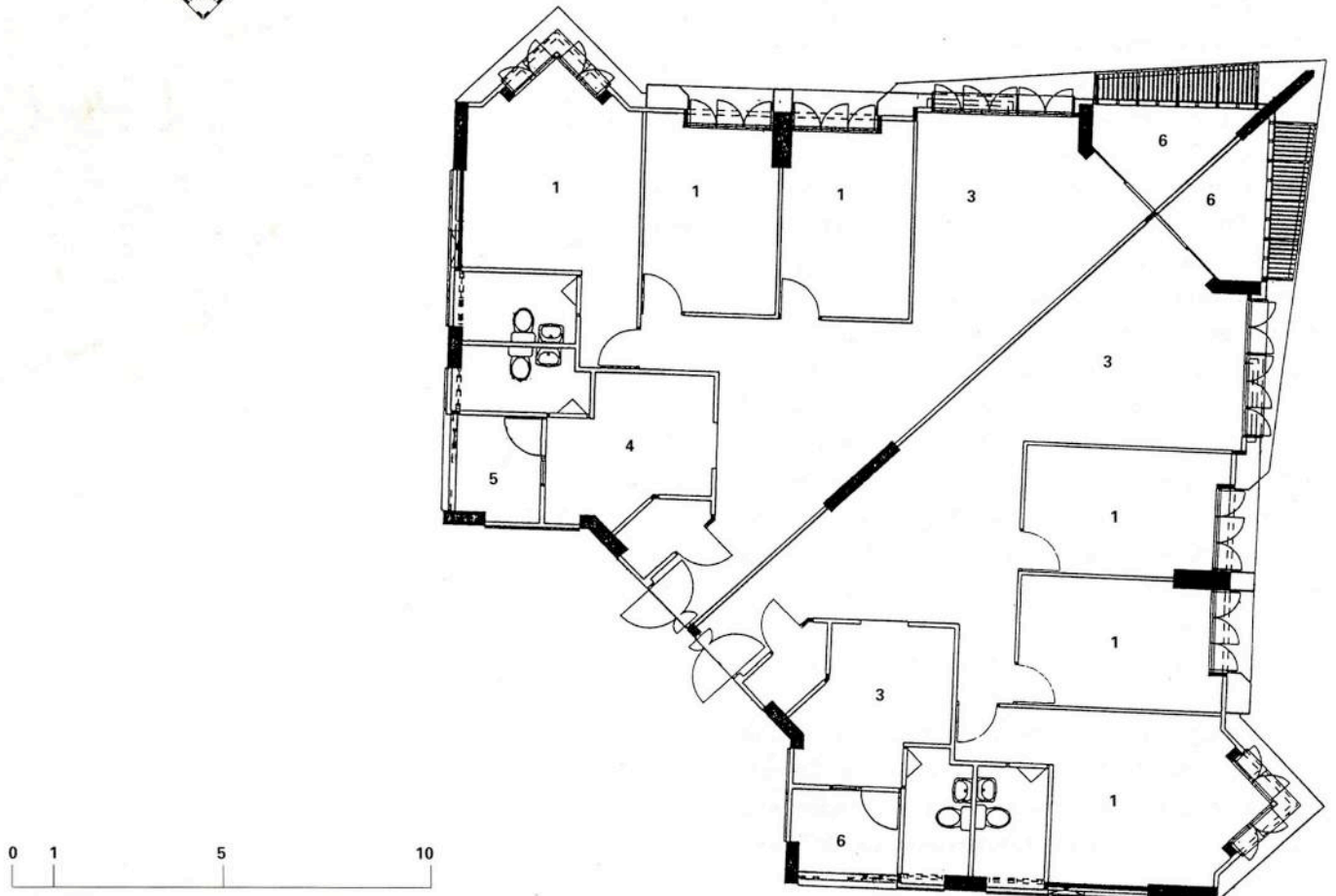
Having met the basic physical requirements of public housing i.e. high-density living at affordable unit prices supplied in quick-time, the apartments at Cambridge Road are at least commendable in that they have achieved these exacting criteria without sacrificing individuality. Yet, bold form-making to create an armature for daily life is not enough. By turning its back on its common brick-faced predecessor, these units raise some interesting issues for mulling over.

The first of these is the question of appropriateness in public housing aspiring towards private condominium living. Here, one is not denying the fact that it is desirable to live luxuriously. On the contrary with higher incomes, many of us demand more in return. But is the condominium model or that of the private house the ultimate goal of social housing? This essay cannot readily answer that query. It merely proposes that perhaps alternative goals must be sought. This observation is a mere reiteration of what was already recognised years ago when the first social "machine for living in", Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation*² in Marseilles was introduced to the world. Through his revolutionary vision, Corbusier had defined social housing as a "different animal" with habits and anatomy that would be distinct from that of the common private house. Despite the shortcomings of his grand vision, there are lessons to be learned from the *unités d'habitation*. Labelled "la Maison du Fada" or the Madhouse when it first opened, it is a physical manifestation of how architecture may be engineered to shape a new *status quo*, and to repair a fractured urban realm. Its unconventionality remains unconventional for public housing even to this day: the third-floor shops, hotel and restaurant, its magnificent roof terrace, the double-height rooms and double aspect of the majority of its units and, the flexibility of Corbusier's 23 variations of the basic apartment model that have survived changing lifestyles and family patterns spanning three generations, all attest to this far-sighted vision. Parents living here believe that their children are more spirited and independent because they "see the world through their own eyes". Children are free to roam the apartment building alone, call on friends on different floors, ride the lifts and play in the gardens without adults in tow because the neighbours will look out for them. Somehow, it is the enclosure, the apartment and how it is all laid out, that makes the inhabitants feel this pride and territorial protectiveness.

Whether the flats at Cambridge Road have this quality, will only be determined by time. However, it certainly lacks the audacity that Corbusier created in his *unités*. With families living a few inches from each other, separated by a mere partition wall, would it not be desirable to promote this village-like atmosphere where the attitude is more "your business is as much mine"? Yes, much has been said about communal spaces but not enough has been done. With so many unexploited bases like the common

Typical plan at second and third storey

- 1 Bedroom
- 2 Store
- 3 Living
- 4 Kitchen/Dining
- 5 Lift/lobby
- 6 Balcony
- 7 Bathroom



corridors, the common rubbish chutes, the common link ways and the common void decks, there is a whole lot to re-think in terms of what is already there. Could the common link ways now used by occupants to access the blocks from the car park be re-threaded through the development to embrace the option of chance encounters rather than just the shortest distance between two points? Could the path journeyed to throw one's refuse into the common chute be made a welcomed respite from the monotony of one's own unit? Could the children's playground, that now stands as a solitary entity in between blocks, be treated as a social magnet to draw both kids and parents alike? Similarly, despite the massive effort taken to make a most evocative structure like the covered foyer shared by the four blocks, the verve of its sleek articulation is lost to an anticipated "audience" from Norfolk Road. In the end, the playground and the covered foyer are passive leftover spaces in what are potentially valuable zones for interaction. Even the very fundamental way in which the blocks have been laid out is questionable. Fair to say that it responds to the expressway and its massing is sympathetic to the neighbouring buildings. Yet, the configuration contributes little to how a re-reading of community may eventuate³.

Not that these are prescriptive measures. But there should be such options for occupants to choose the way in which they might want to live. The key perhaps, lies in the delicate balance between home, semi-private and public space. Careful mediation between these realms may necessarily influence the way in which occupants behave in each territory, hence dictating their overall social character within a development.

Secondly, one is curious too about the programmatic concerns of social housing. Questions of flexibility and change remain a fundamental criterion in the evaluation of any social housing scheme. Generally, the present schemes trail behind in this aspect. The same applies for the Cambridge Road flats. We speak of the new age, the impact of technology and the probability of working from home. Do these not faintly hint of a re-invention of what "home" may now mean? Changes in lifestyles (including choices of food and clothing!), domestic habits, and family patterns should be observed as closely as commercial trends. These are indeed clues for re-thinking the elements that constitute a "home". Archigram's and Metabolists' ideas for future living may not be too far-fetched. Conventional understanding of what is living space and what is kitchen may be more fluid than what is perceived.⁴ The responsibility of social housing is no doubt heavier than other types of housing. By virtue of its accessibility to the masses, it becomes the most influential component for introducing and indeed testing, changes that the typology of the home unit may take on in the future.

Having an agenda to house 291 families on a plot size of 1.59ha at a ratio of 2.83 complete with parking lots for each family, is wonderful. But mathematics alone do little for social mix. The new housing schemes no longer provide for the "three-



Above
A frontal layer of lattice-like balconies are vertically mediated by a defiant dividing wall and sliced horizontally by rhythmically placed fins both painted yellow



room” types. These are now reserved for lower income groups. In fact everything is now neatly compartmentalised. Units for the elderly are separate from those for the more well-to-do families, who in turn are now separate from the families with lower wages. So much for social integration. Perhaps economies of scale do not support a more diverse mix of unit types in one block since variations in floor plates do not aid standardisation in construction, but in the case of social housing shouldn't social diversity be prioritised over economic gain? One of the roles of social housing is to raise the standards of living in a neighbourhood. Undoubtedly, this has been implemented very successfully by the HDB in the past. Shouldn't public housing continue aspiring for its architectural agenda to rise above the realm of the quotidian in those fractured neighbourhoods? While homogenisation may be efficient, it is definitely dull. And units with technicolour walls and gymnastics of form are still no substitutes for life in mono-chromatic terms: repetitive clockwork efficiency with little promise of surprise.

Which brings us back to the substance that invigorates the suburban sphere with welcomed unexpectedness: the wet markets, the kopi-tiam, the community centres, etc. The apartments at Cambridge Road benefit too from these attractions. Entry and exit point for both vehicles and pedestrians is through a single generous portal facing these public amenities on Cambridge Road. These amenities are chance meeting places, successful in their organically unplanned activities. In contrast to the organised units, they are a perfect counterfoil. It is a privilege reserved for those living in housing board flats to frequent them. And indeed, it is a joy for the common HDB dweller to know that he belongs to this little enclave just across the street. It is a “membership” not extended to those who live behind the sheltered walls of the condominium. So why strip social housing of its heterogeneity and of its unmatched pairs of shoes on the corridors? The beauty of commonality should not be overlooked. Who knows how far its exaltation will carry us to?

A User's Manual: Spaces for Living

The architects for Nos.37-40 Cambridge Road must be congratulated for their attempts to redefine the skin of public housing. That it is continually sought out for its striking appearance, is at least a good beginning. But somehow, more intense architectural thinking is needed to rejuvenate the soul of such social housing schemes. This is no easy task and will no doubt be met with resistance from various parties, not least the public who are still grappling with the second-rate label attached by them to public housing. Yet, architecture may just be the prescription for fabricating a community that places great pride in its origins. The home unit is in fact, an accessible and most basic component for nation building.

Social housing that elevates the everyday realm of suburban domesticity into a scheme that combines dramatic formal presence with intimacy and incident, is a difficult but potent balance. That architecture constitutes both space and form, in that order, is still, a point worth remembering. **S | a**

Opposite

The covered foyer is a passive left-over space the verve of its sleek articulation lost to an anticipated audience from Norfolk Road.

The author would like to thank Mr Chee Kok Weng and Ms Yvonne Lim from CESMA for their assistance.

Chee Li Lian graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1997 with the Degree of Bachelor of Architecture with Honours. She was awarded the Lee Kuan Yew Gold Medal, the Singapore Institute of Architects Medal and the Board of Architects Prize and Gold Medal. She worked for one year with DP Architects Pte Ltd. before joining the staff of the School of Architecture as a Senior Tutor.

- 1 In a bid to resolve the massive housing problems faced by a rapidly expanding population, the Housing & Development Board (HDB) was formed in 1960 as successor to its less-aggressive predecessor the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT). At an almost feverish pace, the HDB has done more for public housing than any one of its counterparts elsewhere. Its severe and rigorous organisation continues to serve as case studies and issues of debate for many urban planners and social geographers worldwide.
- 2 Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille was opened in 1952. Meant for housing the poor, it was derided as a slum and the low-income families it was built for, refused to move in. State employees were the first occupants of the building but the unconventional 337 apartment units have gradually won the hearts of many liberal professionals like doctors, journalists, teachers and scientists. According to reports in the 1997 June issue of *The Architectural Review*, the first *unité d'habitation* now commands above average rates in rentals and sales since becoming the urban village idyll that “burns in every Frenchman's heart”. See **Hussell L, “Le Corbu”, *The Architectural Review June 1997 No. 1204: pp.76-82.***
- 3 Experimental layouts for public housing should be encouraged. An award winning scheme by P&T Consultants for Tampines New Town Neighbourhood 4 shows a ring-block formation that provides double aspect for the units and pleasant central courtyards for the community. For review of the scheme, see **Ho Richard KF “Courtyards for the Community”, *Singapore Architect no. 189 1995: pp.6-13.***
- 4 Johnny Grey, an architect by training and now a renowned British designer of kitchens, claims that the kitchen will soon have less than twenty percent of its area devoted to cooking with the huge range of precooked food available. Instead, he sees the kitchen as a living room with food preparation functions attached. He observes that this dramatic shift does not depart far from the kitchen in history: a sociable space associated with more than the commonplace activity of cooking. Kitchens were meeting places of warmth and comfort, and, in the evenings they tended to be the only properly lit room in the house. See **Busch A, “Words of Wisdom from the Kitchen Philosopher”, *Metropolis June 1998: pp.94-95, 117.***

Project Data

Project	Housing and Development Board
Architect	CESMA International Pte Ltd
Structural/Civil Engineer	Housing and Development Board
Mechanical & Engineering	Housing and Development Board
Quantity Surveyor	Housing and Development Board
Consultant	
Landscape Design Consultant	CESMA International Pte Ltd
Main Contractor	Spandek Engineering (S) Pte Ltd
Site Area	1.59 ha
Gross Floor Area	4.5 ha
Plot Ratio	2.83