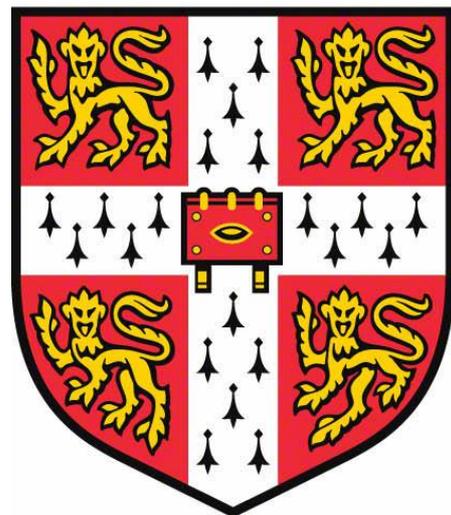
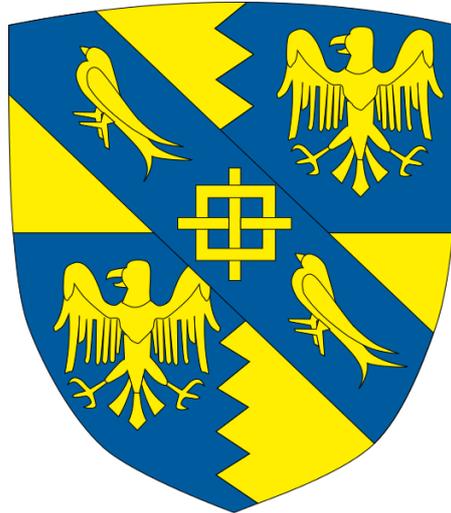


Slums, Squatters and Urban Redevelopment Schemes in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore, 1894-1960



Michael William Sugarman
Magdalene College

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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MICHAEL WILLIAM SUGARMAN

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

My research examines the interconnected histories of urbanism and urban development in port cities across South and Southeast Asia. Chapter one examines the effects of the third plague pandemic on the quotidian livelihoods and the built environments of the urban poor across Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Considering corporeal measures to inspect the bodies and homes of the urban poor and measures to introduce urban ‘improvement’ schemes, this chapter argues that plague sparked a sustained interest in the urban conditions of the poor across British South and Southeast Asia. Chapter two considers the works of the Bombay Improvement Trust, Rangoon Development Trust, and Singapore Improvement Trust through the early decades of the twentieth century and analyses how an imperial urbanism based on a ‘Bombay model’ translated to Singapore and other port cities across the Indian Ocean world. Chapter three considers the consequences of the second wave of ‘indirect’ attacks on urban slums on an evolving imperial urbanism in Bombay, Rangoon, and Singapore. While previous chapters examined the emergence of an imperial urbanism centred on Bombay’s example, chapter four considers the extent to which Bombay remained central to this urbanism during the late 1930s and Second World War. Analysing the divergent consequences of patterns of urban growth in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore throughout the late-1930s, this chapter considers late-colonial efforts to house the urban poor as well as the extent to which the war recast the post-war housing situation. Chapter five contextualises post-war rhetoric of economic and urban development in Hong Kong and Singapore within narratives of pre-war urban ‘improvement’. In connecting pre-war and post-war approaches to accommodating the urban poor, the final chapter considers the reorientation of earlier circulations of knowledge around urban poverty in port cities and its implications for emerging post-colonial regional, national and urban identities.

PREFACE

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the History Degree Committee, which is 80,000 words.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BDD – Bombay Development Department

BIT – Bombay City Improvement Trust

BL – British Library

IOR – India Office Records

BMA – British Military Administration

BMC – Bombay Municipal Corporation

CUL – Cambridge University Library

HDB – Housing Development Board, Singapore

HKHA – Hong Kong Housing Authority

HKPRO – Hong Kong Public Records Office

HKU, OHA – Hong Kong University, Special Collections, Oral History Archives

ICS – Indian Civil Service

MSA – Maharashtra State Archives

GD – General Department

JD – Judicial Department

PWD – Public Works Department

PWD DD – Public Works Department, Development Directorate

RD – Revenue Department

NAM – National Archives of Myanmar

NAS – National Archives of Singapore

CC – Coroner's Court

HDB – Housing Development Board

KKK – Kanzai-Ka, Konri-Kakari

OHI – Oral History Interviews

SWD – Social Welfare Department

NAUK – National Archives of the United Kingdom

CO – Colonial Office

PAP – People's Action Party, Singapore

RDT – Rangoon Development Trust

SIT – Singapore Improvement Trust

GLOSSARY

Attap – A term from Malay-speaking Southeast Asia; a thatch material derived from the fronds of the Nipah palm traditionally used in construction.

Chawl – A term from Marathi; a tenement building, usually for the poor and working classes.

Chowk – A term from South Asia; an open area at the junction of two or more roads.

Hajj – A term from Arabic; the greater pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca.

Kampong – A term from Malay-speaking Southeast Asia; a village or hamlet.

Purdah – A term from South Asia; the practice of separating women from men or strangers by Hindus and Muslims.

Sinkeh – A term from Southeast Asia; a recent emigrant from China often employed through performing manual labour.

Swaraj – A term from South Asia; self-rule in either a political or personal sense.

Zenana – A term from South Asia; the domestic space reserved exclusively for women.

INTRODUCTION

In late November 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi led an official visit by the Indian Government to Singapore. The purpose of Modi's visit, to celebrate fifty years of joint diplomatic ties and to sign an agreement creating a new strategic partnership between India and Singapore, was described from the Singaporean perspective as a move to 'broaden and deepen ties across various sectors including defence relations, economic and cultural cooperation, skills development and capacity building'.¹ While many commentators, journalists, and pundits across international and more local media outlets tended to focus on the defence-related aspects of the partnership, they also noted Singapore's growing role in advising urban planning and development efforts across India.² Discussing the new strategic partnership and Singapore's role in urban planning, *The Indian Express* explored the possibility of 'importing numerous concepts in urban planning to Indian cities' and of adapting a 'Singapore script for an India story'. Emphasising the importance of public housing in urban development, the article described Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB) as 'instrumental' to the city's story of urban success.³ But though the article raised the post-1960 success of the HDB in Singapore as something that needed to be 'imported' to India, its key insight was unintentionally ironic. After all, the HDB was a reorganization of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) which itself had evolved as an adaptation of the Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT). While Singapore's contemporary example certainly offers urban planners in India new opportunities to envision urban development, Singapore's example owes its own debts to the pre-1960 planning and development of Indian cities. This dissertation, disrupting linear narratives of urban and economic development across East, South and Southeast Asia, explores the connected antecedents for the development of Asian metropolises.

To do so, this dissertation focuses on Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore, and, to a lesser extent, Rangoon, from the 1890s through the 1950s. While this dissertation focuses urban development across these urban sites and landscapes, it concentrates on the development of

¹ 'Official Visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi', Prime Minister's Office Singapore, November 2015, <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/photos/official-visit-indian-prime-minister-narendra-modi-nov-2015> (Accessed 23 November 2017).

² 'Singapore, India elevate ties to 'strategic partnership' with signing of key agreements', *The Straits Times*, 24 November 2015, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-india-elevate-ties-to-strategic-partnership-with-signing-of-key-agreements> (Accessed 23 November 2017).

³ 'Housing in Cities: Adapting the Singapore script for an India story', *The Indian Express*, 14 November 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/business/business-others/housing-in-cities-adapting-the-singapore-script-for-an-india-story/> (Accessed 23 November 2017).

housing for the urban poor as a means to understand the connections between the evolutions of the built environment across each city. Beyond demonstrating the deep ties of interconnection between the planning of housing, particularly housing for the urban poor, across these cities, this dissertation also examines an emerging urbanism and urban form resulting from the contestations and interpretations of such interconnected housing plans and schemes. In showing these often neglected connections between the structure and form of urban poverty in these port cities across South and Southeast Asia, this dissertation constructs an intermediate historical framework that allows both for the rooted understanding of local circumstances while also revealing and analysing broader historical phenomenon.

Asia's Port Cities and Connected Urban Development from the Plague to the Post-war Period: Conceptualisations and Historiographies

This emphasis on connected development across Bombay, Hong Kong, Rangoon, and Singapore, while unique in its scope and sites of study, evolves out of recent historiographical developments emphasizing connectivity. Over the last decade, historians have increasingly turned towards oceans as a productive means to reconceptualise geographic regions and understand unconsidered connections.⁴ Beyond constructing broad crisscrossing networks, more recent scholarship has honed in on more specific sets of connections. Amrith examines migrants and migration patterns across South and Southeast Asia to demonstrate the many connections through the Bay of Bengal.⁵ Green discusses the emergence of a 'religious economy' – a connected marketplace for competing ideas of Islam – in nineteenth-century Bombay as a result of the steam ship's transformation of pilgrimages and the *hajj* across South and Southeast Asia.⁶ Lewis traces cosmopolitan connections between Southeast Asian port cities, considering the cultural convergences of urban life during the late-colonial period.⁷ All three examine what

⁴ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); David Armitage and Alison Bashford, 'Introduction', in *Pacific Histories: Ocean, Land, People*, ed. David Armitage and Alison Bashford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁵ Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁶ Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁷ Su Lin Lewis, 'Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl: A Cross-Cultural Discourse in 1930s Penang', *Modern Asian Studies* 43:06 (2009); Su Lin Lewis, 'Print and Colonial Port Cultures of the Indian Ocean Littoral: Penang and Rangoon', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 82:2 (297) (2009); Su Lin Lewis, 'Asian Urbanites and Cosmopolitan Cultures in Bangkok, Penang and Rangoon, 1910-1940' (University of Cambridge, 2011); Su Lin Lewis, 'Rotary International's 'Acid Test': Multi-Ethnic Associational Life in 1930s Southeast Asia', *Journal of Global*

Amrith and Harper termed 'sites of inter-Asian interaction'.⁸ Taken together, these intertwined imperial and inter-Asian connections are recasting the divide of previous research based on a separation of South and Southeast Asia. In examining the connections between the development of the built environment across Bombay, Hong Kong, Rangoon and Singapore – particularly as they relate to housing and urban poverty – this dissertation explores these new connective geographies through a unique and distinctly urban lens. And though Lewis examines urban cosmopolitanism and Green locates his religious marketplace in urban Bombay, this dissertation focuses on the physical and structural elements of the urban experience. In this way, this dissertation expands existing studies connecting South and Southeast Asia, as well as, more broadly, the Indian Ocean world.⁹

While a few historians have managed to connect regions and peoples across Asia by way of their isolation from the sea, most connective histories have emphasized the urban port as a critical means to facilitating interactions and the flow of people and ideas.¹⁰ It is no coincidence then that this dissertation examines specifically port cities. During the period examined by this dissertation, these four cities exhibited a distinctive separation from their respective hinterlands as well as a series of inter-connected histories. In comparing the trajectories of Singapore and Calcutta from colonial port cities to a global city-state and a regional city within a state respectively, Tan argues that port cities are not only urban environments characterised by their hybridity but more fundamentally by their relationships within the social and economic milieus of their hinterlands. For Tan then, port cities, which often maintain a distinctive element through their relationship with their hinterland, are marked by their connected networks of peoples, goods, and cultures.¹¹

A number of historians have connected the peoples across the port cities which are a part of this dissertation. Markovits has examined communities of Sindhi merchants across the cities of

History 7:02 (2012); Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁸ Sunil S. Amrith and Tim Harper, 'Introduction', in *Sites of Asian Interaction: Ideas, Networks and Mobility*, ed. Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith (Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁹ It is worth noting here the frequent bifurcation of the Indian Ocean world historiography, which tends to focus either on the Bay of Bengal to the east or the Arabian sea and African coast to the west. This dissertation, in emphasizing the importance of Bombay on the wider Bay of Bengal region helps bridge this gap.

¹⁰ Willem van Schendel, 'Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20:6 (2002); James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Tai-Yong Tan, 'Port Cities and Hinterlands: A Comparative Study of Singapore and Calcutta', *Political Geography* 26:7 (2007).

Southeast Asia and the globe.¹² Ho has traced the mobility of Hadrami Arabs across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean while recent studies of Jewish communities across South and Southeast Asia have explored urban connections in addition to an older set of case specific studies.¹³ Amrith's aforementioned monograph also connects the migrations of South Indian labourers across the Bay of Bengal.¹⁴ While the Parsis of Bombay and western India lack a wide-ranging chronicler examining their migrations across the port cities of South and Southeast Asia, they nonetheless form another bridge between the people inhabiting these Indian Ocean port cities.¹⁵

Beyond the networks connecting the people of these port cities, the port city has also been viewed as a site facilitating the propagation of disease. In his examination of the third plague pandemic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Echenberg specifically uses port cities as windows into understanding the global impact and spread of the disease.¹⁶ Harrison, in his recent exploration of contagion, explicitly links the spread of disease with the spread of commerce and discusses the role of the port city in global quarantine schemes arising during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁷ In viewing the port city as a place of hybridity and exchange – not only between people, cultures, and diseases, but also urban forms – this dissertation broadens the discussions of the connections between port cities across South and Southeast Asia and begins to weave these somewhat disparate connective threads together through discussions of urbanism.

In addition to examining new paths of the connectedness between these four cities, this dissertation also brings new insight to the rich but separate historiographies that characterise historical research on each city. In the case of Bombay, adding to a large body of existing work often means extending studies of poverty and urban housing past their emphasis on the period

¹² Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Claude Markovits, 'Indian Merchant Networks Outside India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Preliminary Survey', *Modern Asian Studies* 33:4 (1999).

¹³ Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Jonathan Goldstein, *Jewish Identities in East and Southeast Asia: Singapore, Manila, Taipei, Harbin, Shanghai, Rangoon and Surabaya* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015); Sarah Abrevaya Stein, 'Protected Persons? The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, the British State, and the Persistence of Empire', *The American Historical Review* 116:1 (2011); Eze Nathan, *The History of the Jews in Singapore, 1830-1945* (Singapore: HERBILU Editorial & Marketing Services, 1986); Ruth Fredman Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007); Raimy Ché-Ross, 'A Penang Kaddish: The Jewish Cemetary in Georgetown', *The Penang Story - International Conference*, Penang, Malaysia, 2002.

¹⁴ Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*.

¹⁵ For a discussion of Parsis in Hong Kong, see Henry Lethbridge, *Hong Kong: Stability and Change* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 177-9.

¹⁶ Myron Echenberg, *Plague Ports: The Global Urban Impact of Bubonic Plague, 1894-1901* (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Mark Harrison, *Contagion: How Commerce Has Spread Disease* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

spanning the 1890s through the 1920s. While Kidambi and Hazareesingh discuss urban sanitation and ‘improvement’ projects involving housing and poverty in Bombay, their analysis follows this pattern of periodization and covers the first two decades of the twentieth century, leaving the late colonial period almost entirely unexamined.¹⁸ Though the first two chapters of this dissertation focus on the importance of this well-trodden period, chapters three and four begin to answer the call of Haynes and Rao to move beyond the 1920s in the study of an urban South Asia.¹⁹ Although Rao’s recent monograph on apartment living in Bombay reflects his calls to shift historical focus towards the middle decades of the twentieth century, covering a period from 1898-1964, his focus is largely on the development of lower middle-class and middle-class housing along with a middle-class identity rather than on the development of housing for the urban poor or on the lives of the urban poor.²⁰ Rao’s most recent piece focuses on the suburbs, slums, and villages that characterise urban poverty along the urban periphery, but this piece focuses again on the 1910s and then on the 1970s, skipping over a vast period of urban change and development.²¹ Caru’s recent French-language monograph gets closer to engaging with issues of urban poverty over a broader periodisation, but her focus on specifically worker’s housing and social movements precludes a more general analysis of the conditions of the urban poor –whether or not they worked in one of Bombay’s many mills.²² Caru’s emphasis on Bombay’s mill workers fits well within the broader set of research on Bombay during the early twentieth century, which has been engaged with questions of labour and the working classes for over a century.²³ In focusing on issues of urban housing, poverty, and sanitation over a period

¹⁸ Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 49-114; Prashant Kidambi, 'Housing the Poor in a Colonial City: The Bombay Improvement Trust, 1898-1918', *Studies in History* 17:1 (2001); Prashant Kidambi, 'An Infection of Locality': Plague, Pythogenesis and the Poor in Bombay, C. 1896-1905', *Urban History* 31:2 (2004); Sandip Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity: Urban Hegemonies and Civic Contestations in Bombay City, 1900-1925* (Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman, 2007), p. 12-25.

¹⁹ Douglas Haynes and Nikhil Rao, 'Beyond the Colonial City: Re-Evaluating the Urban History of India, Ca. 1920-1970', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 36:3 (2013).

²⁰ Nikhil Rao, *House, but No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay's Suburbs, 1898-1964* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

²¹ Nikhil Rao, 'Bombay's Urban Edge: Villages, Suburbs, Slums and the Expanding City', in *What's in a Name: Talking About Urban Peripheries*, ed. Richard Harris and Charolette Vorms (London: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

²² Vanessa Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève: Le Logement Des Travailleurs Et La Question Sociale À Bombay, 1850-1950* (Paris: Arman Colin, 2013).

²³ A.R. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay* (Westminster: P.S. King and Son LTD, 1925); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, 'Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay between the Wars', *Modern Asian Studies* 15:3 (1981); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, 'The Making of the Working Class: E. P. Thompson and Indian History', *History Workshop Journal* 1997:43 (1997); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, C.1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

from the 1890s through to Indian independence, this dissertation both adds to and shifts existing narratives on Bombay. In making comparisons and connections between Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Rangoon, the Bombay sections of this dissertation also distil down what characterises a distinctly Bombay approach to issues of housing and urban poverty – a question that the Bombay centred literature does not consider and has not addressed.

While a Bombay-centric historiography on housing and urban poverty has been focused on the early decades of the twentieth century, work on Hong Kong tends to focus on the early decades of the post-war period. The Shek Kip Mei fire on Christmas Day of 1953, along with the subsequent creation of the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HKHA), has been a particular focus for historians. Though the fire has often been credited with jumpstarting Hong Kong's large post-war public housing programme, both in the public memory and in some historical accounts, Smart argued about a decade ago that the roots of Hong Kong's approach extended back to 1950, predating the fire.²⁴ While chapters four and five of this dissertation challenge Smart's chronology and argue that Hong Kong's public housing programme can trace its roots to the pre-war efforts at urban 'improvement' in cities across South and Southeast Asia, this dissertation agrees with his sentiments – that while the Shek Kip Mei fire was an inflection point and perhaps sped up housing development, it did not substantially change Hong Kong's approach to housing its urban poor. Beyond discussions of Hong Kong's post-war housing situation, however, Hong Kong's historiography does not discuss much pre-war urban 'improvement' efforts, except for one examination of the role of tuberculosis in bringing attention to the housing conditions for the urban poor.²⁵ In extending discussions of slum clearance, squatter resettlement, and housing construction for the urban poor not only into the period immediately before the war, shown in chapter four, but also into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as shown in chapter one, this dissertation significantly extends the historiographical chronologies of housing for the urban poor and urban development in Hong Kong. By extending these chronologies about 'improvement' and housing, this dissertation also brings together histories of sanitation, science, and medicine that dominate the historiography of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Hong Kong.²⁶ In discussing the interventions of the

²⁴ For an example of historical work assuming the importance of the Shek Kip Mei fire, see Manuel Castells, Lee Goh, and R. Y. W. Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore*, vol. 4 (London: Pion, 1990). For the pushback, see Alan Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth: Squatters, Fires and Colonial Rule in Hong Kong, 1950-1963* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Margaret Jones, 'Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State: Hong Kong, 1900-1950', *Modern Asian Studies* 37:3 (2003).

²⁶ Robert Peckham, 'Matshed Laboratory: Colonies, Cultures and Bacteriology', in *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene and Cultures of Planning in Asia*, ed. Robert Peckham and David M. Pomfret (Hong Kong: Hong Kong

colonial government into the built environment, this dissertation more broadly intervenes in discussions about the nature of the colonial state in Hong Kong. While a narrative about the *laissez-faire* nature of the state in Hong Kong is strong in the historiography about the city, some historians have more recently challenged this notion while others had encouraged historians to explore these historical ‘tensions’ for decades.²⁷ By examining the interventions of the colonial state into Hong Kong’s built environment over the decades, this dissertation not only extends chronologies about urban poverty and housing but also demonstrates the long tenure of a more interventionist state in Hong Kong.

Though a few scholars have made direct comparisons and connections between housing and urban poverty in Hong Kong and Singapore, the historiography of housing, urban poverty and the built environment of Singapore has largely remained separate, if somewhat similar, to Hong Kong.²⁸ As with Hong Kong, the focus of most historical work on housing in Singapore is the post-war period.²⁹ While this work addresses important themes, particularly of the emergence of a welfare state in modern Singapore, its fixation on the post-war period often comes at the expense of addressing continuity with Singapore’s pre-war history.³⁰ And though the post-war period then has a robust historiography examining the relationship between housing, urban poverty, emergencies and the Cold War, the pre-war histories of Singapore’s approaches to housing and urban poverty remain less examined.³¹ That is not to say that they have been ignored. Warren’s examination of the lives of rickshaw pullers from 1880 to 1940 brought much attention to the conditions of urban poverty in pre-war Singapore. Though in focusing on the

University Press, 2013); Cecilia Chu, 'Combating Nuisance: Sanitation, Regulation, and the Politics of Property in Colonial Hong Kong', *ibid.*; Mary P. Sutphen, 'Not What, but Where: Bubonic Plague and the Reception of Germ Theories in Hong Kong and Calcutta, 1894–1897', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 52:1 (1997); Daniel Ham, 'The Management of Malaria and Leprosy in Hong Kong and the International Settlement of Shanghai, 1880s-1940s' (PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2012).

²⁷ John M. Carroll, *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 16-36; Tak-Wing Ngo, 'Colonialism in Hong Kong Revisited', in *Hong Kong's History: State and Society under Colonial Rule*, ed. Tak-Wing Ngo (London: Routledge, 1999); Lethbridge, *Hong Kong: Stability and Change*.

²⁸ D.W. Drakakis-Smith and Yeu-man Yeung, 'Occasional Paper No. 8: Public Housing in the City-States of Hong Kong and Singapore,' (Canberra: Development Studies Centre, The Australian National University, 1977).

²⁹ Some examples include Gregory Clancey, 'Toward a Spatial History of Emergency: Notes from Singapore', ARI Working Paper:8 (2003); Loh Kah Seng, 'Black Areas: Urban Kampongs and Power Relations in Post-War Singapore Historiography', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in SE Asia* 22:1 (2007); Loh Kah Seng, 'Kampong, Fire, Nation: Towards a Social History of Postwar Singapore', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40:03 (2009); Loh Kah Seng, 'Emergencies', *Asian Journal of Social Science* 44:6 (2016).

³⁰ For more on the emergence of the welfare state in Singapore, see Ho Chi Tim and Ann Wee, *Social Services, Singapore Chronicles* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2016).

³¹ Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013); Nancy Kwak, 'Selling the City-State: Planning and Housing in Singapore, 1945-1990', in *Another Global City: Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment, 1850-2000*, ed. Pierre-Yves Saunier and Shane Ewen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Nancy Kwak, *A World of Homeowners: American Power and the Politics of Housing Aid* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

poor themselves, Warren has less to say on the efforts to ‘improve’ their living conditions.³² Yeoh’s monograph, now about twenty years old, is a masterful account of colonial interventions in and local contestations of Singapore’s built environment from the 1880s through the 1920s.³³ But while Yeoh conducts a thorough examination of municipal sanitation measures as a means through which Singapore’s built environment was contested, her work leaves the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) largely unexamined. This is due, at least in part, to the timeline of her examination – the SIT was founded in 1927 and Yeoh concludes at 1930. And despite Yeoh’s discussions of the distinctiveness of the colonial city early in her monograph – she begins by theoretically linking colonial built environments to one another – she makes little to no effort to link Singapore to other colonial cities through archival sources. So while Yeoh’s framework of contestation in the colonial city has been foundational to how this dissertation approaches Singapore and other case studies, this dissertation’s periodization and focus on the pre-war SIT provide new insight into the evolution of Singapore’s built environment. In addition to this dissertation, one other historian of Singapore has recently taken an interest in the pre-war work of the SIT. Chang, in his recent monograph on the genealogy of tropical architecture, has begun to bring discussions of the pre-war SIT to the forefront, though in the context of other architectural projects of the colonial regime.³⁴ In stressing the connectedness of Singapore’s urban development, as well as in stretching the chronology of such development between the pre- and post-war periods, this dissertation offers a new perspective on Singapore’s built environment as it relates to urban poverty and housing.

Compared with Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the sparse literature on the urban poverty, housing, and the built environment of Rangoon demonstrates a ‘lumpiness’ in the historiography of South and Southeast Asian port cities.³⁵ At first, the lack of historical research on Rangoon is perhaps surprising, given that Rangoon was the most popular destination port for immigrants around the world during the 1930s, overtaking New York.³⁶ But the realities of

³² James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³³ Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power Relations in the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³⁴ Jiat-Hwee Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture: Colonial Networks, Nature and Technoscience* (London: Routledge, 2016); Jiat-Hwee Chang and Anthony King, 'Towards a Genealogy of Tropical Architecture: Historical Fragments of Power-Knowledge, Built Environment and Climate in the British Colonial Territories', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 32:3 (2011); Jiat-Hwee Chang, 'Tropicalizing' Planning: Sanitation, Housing, and Technologies of Improvement in Colonial Singapore', in *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene and Cultures of Planning in Asia*, ed. Robert Peckham and David M. Pomfret (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013).

³⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (London: University of California Press, 2005), p. 91-2.

³⁶ E. J. L. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 5; Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*.

conducting research in Burma during the period between the post-1962 coup d'état and the mid-2000s have meant that few, if any, studies have focused on the housing conditions of these immigrants.³⁷ While the consequences of the RDT have recently been considered in the context of the city's racial tensions during the 1930s, the housing of the poor in Rangoon has otherwise been of little consequence to historians.³⁸ Despite this relative paucity of historical examination, research on Rangoon more generally has recently experienced an upsurge.³⁹ Examining Chinese Rangoon, Roberts argues that the city was crucial to the formation of a distinct Sino-Burmese identity.⁴⁰ Edwards traces the history of social protest in Rangoon through contestations over the famous Shwedagon Pagoda during the colonial and post-colonial periods.⁴¹ Frasch compares the development of tramway systems in Rangoon and Singapore and demonstrates another sense through which the urban experience of Southeast Asian port cities could be connected.⁴² Parts of chapters two and three from this dissertation form a part of a forthcoming publication on Rangoon's built environment in *Modern Asian Studies*.⁴³ While the full article, rather than the material in this dissertation, focuses broadly on post-colonial Rangoon and addresses the city's transition between South and Southeast Asia – a question recently raised by Saha – the material in this dissertation then contributes to addressing a lacuna of research on housing and urban poverty in late-colonial Rangoon.⁴⁴

Though this dissertation addresses and engages in the often separate historiographies of each of Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Rangoon, it challenges historical approaches informed prominently by the borders of nation-states. This study also calls into question the historiographical divisions of area-studies. These four cities span three regions as they are

³⁷ For an example of research during this period, see Sarah Maxim, 'The Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon' (PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1992). Maxim notes her difficulties in securing a visa to conduct fieldwork in Burma. She was ultimately unable to consult archives in Burma as a result of the difficult conditions. One of the first works marking an end to this period of academic embargo was Christopher Bayly, 'Occasional Paper No. 3, Rangoon (Yangon) 1939-49: The Death of a Colonial Metropolis,' (Cambridge: Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, 2003).

³⁸ Noriyuki Osada, 'Housing the Rangoon Poor: Indians, Burmese, and Town Planning in Colonial Burma', *Sites of Modernity: Asian cities and their evolution through trade, colonialism and nationalism*, Chulalongkorn University, 2011.

³⁹ For a fuller historiographical account of recent research on Rangoon and Burma, see Michael Sugarman, 'Building Burma: Constructing Rangoon's Urban Influence on Citizenship and Nationhood', *History Compass* 14:10 (2016); Andrew Selth, 'Modern Burma Studies: A Survey of the Field', *Modern Asian Studies* 44:02 (2010).

⁴⁰ Jayde Lin Roberts, *Mapping Chinese Rangoon: Place and Nation among the Sino-Burmese* (London: University of Washington Press, 2016).

⁴¹ Penny Edwards, 'Grounds for Protest: Placing Shwedagon Pagoda in Colonial and Postcolonial History', *Postcolonial Studies* 9:2 (2006).

⁴² Tilman Frasch, 'Tracks in the City: Technology, Mobility and Society in Colonial Rangoon and Singapore', *Modern Asian Studies* 46:1 (2012).

⁴³ Michael Sugarman, 'Reclaiming Rangoon: (Post-)Imperial Urbanism and Poverty, 1920-1962', *ibid.* (forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Jonathan Saha, 'Is It India? Colonial Burma as a 'Problem' in South Asian History', *South Asian History and Culture* 7:1 (2016).

currently ‘imagined’ – East, South, and Southeast Asia – with Rangoon sometimes considered South Asia and, at other times, Southeast Asia.⁴⁵ As Saha raises questions about area-studies classifications and the assumptions that come with this sorting process in relation to colonial Burma and van Schendel raises the four separate regional classifications of Zomia, chapter five similarly raises questions about Hong Kong, pointing out the deep municipal-level connections with Singapore and other cities across post-war Southeast Asia.⁴⁶ In eschewing contemporary national and regional boundaries, this dissertation instead focuses on ‘trans-municipal connections’ or connections focused on the municipal level.⁴⁷ While this dissertation emphasises these trans-municipal connections, disentangling the municipal from the imperial – particularly within the small jurisdictions of Hong Kong and Singapore – is sometimes neither practical nor meaningful. Imperial connections, and post-imperial connections, overlap with many of the trans-municipal connections brought out in this dissertation.

That imperialism played such a prominent role in facilitating connections at the municipal level is reflective of the extent to which the British Empire dominated this region geo-politically for the better part of the period covered by this dissertation. And though many of the connections brought forth by this dissertation relating to urban planning demonstrate the importance of imperialism in shaping an urbanism and urban form in the region – as has been studied more prominently in the French colonial context – the frequent lack of action on these plans highlights the real limits of imperial power in an urban setting.⁴⁸ This dissertation is then not only a story of urban governmentalities, but one of local adaptation, contestation, and negotiation of such imperial governance.⁴⁹ And while Legg’s Foucauldian theoretical framework informs this dissertation at certain points, it does so most meaningfully in thinking about how governance was transmitted and transmuted across imperial urban spaces. Legg specifically raises the ways that Delhi’s ‘interlinked landscapes of ordering’ suggest a way through which urban

⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 3 ed. (New York: Verso, 2006); Saha, 'Is It India? Colonial Burma as a 'Problem' in South Asian History'.

⁴⁶ van Schendel, 'Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance'.

⁴⁷ Pierre-Yves Saunier and Shane Ewen, *Another Global City: Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment, 1850-2000*, 1st ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Pierre-Yves Saunier, 'Introduction: Global City, Take 2: A View from Urban History', in *Another Global City: Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment, 1850-2000*, ed. Pierre-Yves Saunier and Shane Ewen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴⁸ Zeynep Çelik, 'Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism', *Assemblage* 17 (1992); Zeynep Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Zeynep Çelik, *Empire, Architecture, and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters, 1830-1914* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008).

⁴⁹ Stephen Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-78* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

spaces around the British Empire could be connected.⁵⁰ Legg is not the first to note the similarities between schemes to reorder the urban environment in the context of a single case study, Kidambi repeatedly raises the similarities between Bombay and Singapore in citing Yeoh's monograph.⁵¹ Chang's discussion of the urban governmentalities of colonial Singapore similarly leads him to briefly raise imperial urban connections though there are certainly more connections to be made.⁵² Although historians have previously considered issues of urbanism and imperialism, they tend to be global in scale and miss out on local contexts.⁵³ They also tend to centre discussions along an antiquated model of a metropole-colony axis, which tends to dismiss the kinds of connections in between colonies or along the edges of empire that this dissertation brings to light. In emphasising connections between South and Southeast Asian cities, this dissertation explicitly challenges these older metropole-centric modes of imperial history and argues that the story of imperialism, at least as it relates to urban governance, also involves the ways in which it connected places and ideas to one another – and not just through London. In other words, this dissertation thinks of Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Rangoon not only as laboratories of imperial governance developed in London, but, more importantly, as sites generative of urban knowledge that subsequently spread through imperial networks for urban planning that did not necessarily run through Britain. This approach, though not entirely 'inverting our customary point of reference' on empire and the Commonwealth from the outside in, comes along the lines of a recent examination of 'camps' in the British imperial context.⁵⁴ Tracing the genealogy of the twentieth-century concentration camp, Forth demonstrates how the form of the camp evolved contextually over time and space from Victorian England, through South Asia's plague camps, and to South Africa's Boer War camps.⁵⁵ While this dissertation is not a genealogy of the large public housing programmes that characterise modern Hong Kong and Singapore, it does contextualise the development of these

⁵⁰ Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism*, p. 216-8.

⁵¹ For one such citation, see Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 37.

⁵² Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, p.10-3. For some more examples of imperial urban development in Calcutta, Delhi and Shanghai see Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny* (London: Routledge, 2005); Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2005); Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵³ Anthony D. King, *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World-Economy: Cultural and Spatial Foundations of the World Urban System*, International Library of Sociology (London: Routledge, 1990); Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities* (London: E & FN Spon, 1997).

⁵⁴ Saul Dubow, 'The Commonwealth and South Africa: From Smuts to Mandela', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45:2 (2017).

⁵⁵ Aidan Forth, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1903* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

programmes by tracing how the notion of public housing moved through various urban spaces along pathways informed by the experience of imperialism in the region.

In following this story of housing for the urban poor and the development of the built environment, this dissertation then sets out to make a number of city-specific historiographical interventions in addition to recasting some larger bodies of historical work. While the city-specific interventions often involve re-periodisations that bring to light new emphases in each urban story, the historiographical contributions made to these larger bodies are more specific. While much recent literature has focused on connectivity across port cities in South and Southeast Asia, this dissertation adds another dimension to these connections in examining how the built environment of poverty engendered an urbanism connecting these cities to one another. And though there is much literature focusing on pre-war connections or post-war connections, few studies manage to bridge the divide of the Second World War in Asia. This dissertation, in utilising the lens of urban history, also begins to break down the often high barriers between the various area-studies compartmentalisations – namely South, Southeast and East Asia. In doing so, it brings attention to Asian urban histories at a time when urban historians are increasingly moving beyond studies of just European and North American examples.⁵⁶ But perhaps the most important contribution this dissertation makes is that of the medium-range, multi-city framework of reference. In closely examining these four case studies, this dissertation is both able to firmly root its analysis in archival work as well as analyse broader regional and trans-regional trends. At a time when studies of the ‘global’ are increasingly of interest, this dissertation provides a well-founded means to jump scale. This medium-range set of cities also allows for a setting in which historians can more meaningfully discuss ‘the limits of interconnection’.⁵⁷ While this dissertation is fundamentally one interested in the connection between urban spaces and stories, it at times takes a more comparative approach. By limiting the scope of the dissertation to a set of interrelated urban environments, these comparisons can be utilised to discuss interconnection rather than serve as their own separate unconnected approach.

Sources and Methodological Approaches

⁵⁶ For example, see the ‘Global Urban History’ blog, <https://globalurbanhistory.com/> (Accessed on 29 November 2017).

⁵⁷ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, p. 91-2.

In order to construct this medium-range framework that allows for both connections and comparisons – between more in-depth, city-specific investigations and broad, sweeping studies – this dissertation leans heavily on material from a series of site-specific archives in addition to archival material from more broadly focused collections. While a majority of these site-specific repositories are various incarnations of government archives – the Maharashtra State Archives in Mumbai, the National Archives of Myanmar in Yangon, the National Archives of Singapore, and the Public Records Office in Hong Kong – the Hong Kong Oral History Archives at the University of Hong Kong hold interview material conducted for an academic sociology study. The more broadly focused archival collections at the British Library in London, the University Library in Cambridge, the National Archives of India in Delhi, and the National Archives of the United Kingdom in Kew are similarly focused on government records.

Despite the preponderance of government perspectives in the archival material used for this dissertation, this study has sought to read against the archival grain to provide new perspectives beyond the content from a series of government reports. Part of this approach has been to conceptualise the archives not only as a source of information but also as subjects in and of themselves.⁵⁸ By doing so, this dissertation, while certainly mining archival sources for information, also examines what Stoler has described as the ‘peculiar placement and *form*’ of colonial archives.⁵⁹ In fact, much of the insight this dissertation provides is through a unique juxtaposition of colonial sources, revealing the peculiarities and commonalities of site-specific materials.

In addition to questioning the assumed ‘logic’ of the government archives, largely from the colonial-era, this study has also sought to utilise archival material that demonstrates a quotidian perspective on urban life. While some of these materials, like local petitions to urban authorities, have been raised in previous historical studies of Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore, materials from the Coroner’s Court in Singapore and from oral history interviews – previously conducted by the National Archives in Singapore and by the Centre for Asian Studies and Sociology Department of the University of Hong Kong – which document perspectives on life in the city, have been comparatively under-utilised. These quotidian perspectives not only provide a unique window into the processes of governing and shaping urban spaces but also lend a stronger voice to those in the city without much traditional archival representation. Given this dissertation’s interest in urban poverty and the urban poor, these quotidian perspectives are essential to understanding how the built environment of urban poverty was inhabited and interpreted.

⁵⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, *Archival Science* 2 (2002).

⁵⁹ Emphasis from the article, see *ibid.*

Beyond giving voice to those under-represented by the archives, this dissertation also utilises the perspective of the Anglophone press as another lens through which to understand the city outside of the archives. While the voices of those in the press can hardly be described as the voices of the urban poor, the Anglophone press nonetheless offers perspectives that sometimes cut across the racial lines of these port cities. Both Frost and Lewis have noted the importance of the Anglophone press not only within European communities but also within the English-speaking multi-ethnic communities of urban Southeast Asia.⁶⁰

It is worth noting here that my linguistic limitations have, somewhat arbitrarily, restricted the range of quotidian perspectives utilised by this dissertation. While I was able to use some oral histories written in Chinese, with friends helping to confirm translations, I was unable to utilise a wider-range of interview material that was either entirely verbal in a language other than English or written in a language other than Chinese, English, French, Hindi, or Urdu. Though most of this dissertation's sources are subsequently English-language sources, some of the colonial-era documents do include non-English-language material. For example, a report on rental conditions in Rangoon, cited in chapter two, included testimony from Burmese-speaking residents that was translated into English. A project with looser temporal and financial constraints could expand this examination of quotidian perspectives beyond English-language sources on urban life, though this dissertation does, partially, utilise this lens of analysis.

Methodologically speaking, this dissertation then combines a few different approaches to understanding its archival materials. The first is that it closely reads these extensive materials, grounding its historical arguments firmly with archival research. This study also brings to the forefront marginalised materials that offer quotidian perspectives on housing and urban poverty. Lastly, this dissertation seeks to break new ground by juxtaposing the distinct and separate archival materials from each site within a new framework that both enables comparison and highlights connections between the materials and cities. In doing so, it seeks to offer a historically grounded analysis informed by its case studies that nonetheless draws wider conclusions for the development of the built environment of Asian cities as well as for the development of an imperial and post-imperial urbanism across South and Southeast Asia.

Terminology

⁶⁰ Mark Ravinder Frost, 'Asia's Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 6:2 (2004); Lewis, 'Print and Colonial Port Cultures of the Indian Ocean Littoral'.

To ensure that arguments chapter-by-chapter are made in a clear and concise manner, this dissertation raises here, in the introduction, some issues relating to terminology. While this dissertation adapts and critically utilises the terms ‘squatters’, ‘slums’, and ‘improvement’ from colonial sources across its five chapters, it also puts forth its own phrase – ‘imperial urbanism’. This section traces the origins of these colonial terms, demonstrating their evolution and uneven application across the time and space relevant to this dissertation, as well as explains their usage in this dissertation. It concludes with a discussion of what this dissertation terms ‘imperial urbanism’, a distinctive social and urban form arising across Asia’s port cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The term ‘squatter’ is used herein in the most straightforward manner. Simply put, this dissertation uses this term as a means to describe urban dwellers residing on otherwise vacant lands in which the ownership or tenancy is in dispute. However, this dissertation’s usage of the term ‘squatter’ somewhat differs from that of its archival sources. While the term ‘squatter’ was often used in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries across Bombay, Hong Kong, Rangoon, and Singapore to refer to people living on vacant and/or disputed land – see discussions of the Hong Kong Squatter Ordinance in chapter one – the term was also sometimes used to refer to people living in huts or temporary structures, regardless of their legal status – see discussions of squatter leases in Rangoon in chapter two. As is inevitably the case for a dissertation covering a period spanning across seven decades, the usage of the term ‘squatter’ in colonial sources shifted during the 1930s and 1940s, becoming more ubiquitous and less precise. While chapters four and five discuss these protean categorizations of ‘squatters’ within archival materials, the word increasingly became associated with poor people residing in huts or semi-permanent structures rather than with legal delineations of land ownership or formal tenancy.

While the definition and utilisation of the term ‘squatter’ evolved to be less precise, the usage of the term ‘slum’ was and remained widely varied across the cities and decades examined in this dissertation. For example, a 1917 report on town planning in Rangoon discussed in chapter two defined slums relatively simply as ‘an area overcrowded with irregularly disposed buildings and not laid out in streets’.⁶¹ In a more complex manner a 1953 building surveyor in Hong Kong, discussed in chapter five, argued that a slum was not just ‘a dirty back street or court or alley in city’ as defined then by a dictionary, but rather ‘a group of buildings owned by and occupied by persons who are lacking in civic consciousness to such an extent as to permit the buildings to become dilapidated, dangerous or detrimental to the health of the occupants’.⁶² In the broadest

⁶¹ BL, IOR, 1917, V/27/780/12, ‘Report of the Departmental Committee on Town Planning, Burma’, p. 93.

⁶² HKPRO, HKRS337-4-287, ‘J.H. Bottomley, Chief Building Surveyor’, #8, 12 March, 1953.

sense, 'slum' was used as a label to describe an area of poor sanitary conditions. However, notions of sanitation and sanitary standards varied widely with local context and evolved across all of these cities considerably from the late-nineteenth century through the 1950s. It is worth noting as well that the evolution of the conceptualisation of 'slums' did not and does not have an underlying linear teleology. That is to say that the 'slums' of 1920s Bombay captured in pictures by A.R. Burnett-Hurst do, in some cases, appear to be a more comfortable place to live than, for example, the contemporary Mumbai slums as depicted on the cover of Katherine Boo's recent *Beyond the Beautiful Forever*.⁶³ Because 'slum' was used more often as a label to target an area for redevelopment than as a precise descriptor in this dissertation's archival material, the dissertation itself does not apply the term with a singular definition in mind. Rather it describes in more detail 'slum' conditions, when possible, and uses the term as a means to consider the analytical categorisations made about the built environment of urban poverty.

In part because of the imprecision and difficulty in defining a 'slum', this dissertation almost entirely refers to 'improvement' schemes of such conditions in inverted commas. On the face of it, defining 'improvement' as it related to the housing of the urban poor is rather simple. Referring to a betterment of living conditions resulting from the work of various construction schemes, urban 'improvement' was seen as a progressive process that could only lift living conditions. But without a consistent set of benchmarks, the term 'improvement' could and did refer to markedly different outcomes. That is to say that 'improvement' is and was utilised as a flexible term that was importantly meant to convey a sense of progress rather than a concrete set of outcomes. The trickiness with this conveyance of progress, which assumes that one goes from somewhere or something to a better somewhere or something else, is the way in which one measures progress. In this respect, the term 'improvement' is analogous to the more contemporary term 'development' – in fact, chapter five demonstrates in part the evolution of a post-war lexicon from discussions of urban 'improvement' to those of economic 'development'. Amartya Sen, in his path-breaking work conceptualising development, argues that freedoms constitute both an ends of development and also their best means of measurement.⁶⁴ Reflecting on Sen's insights in defining and measuring development, this dissertation often calls into question the measurements of progress involved in the processes of urban 'improvement'. While colonial administrators were often quick to tout physical improvements to the infrastructure of housing – using metrics like the amount of floor space per person, the presence of running

⁶³ Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay*; Katherine Boo, *Beyond the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁶⁴ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

water, the presence of light and air, as well as the presence of toilets – this dissertation demonstrates repeatedly across its chapters that quotidian perspectives on a more broadly conceived ‘improvement’ often reveal a starkly different picture on the progress made. As a result, this dissertation refers to ‘improvement’ in inverted commas far beyond discussing the term in the course of the introduction. It does so to remind the reader of three things: first, to repeatedly question the narrow conceptualisations of progress made in the course of urban ‘improvement’ schemes, second to bring into focus the protean applications of the term ‘improvement’ to refer to widely varying projects across these built environments, and third to highlight, particularly in later chapters when urban ‘improvement’ schemes had been implemented for decades, how little fundamentally changed with respect to the quotidian lived realities of urban poverty.

The final term to discuss in this section of definitions and explanations is one that does not appear in this dissertation’s archival sources, but is rather an invention of its own making – that is ‘imperial urbanism’. While the term ‘urbanism’ has traditionally been used to describe a distinctive pattern of urban planning – for example le Corbusier’s urbanism or a French urbanism – recent scholarship has begun to recognize the role that urban experiences play in defining urbanism.⁶⁵ In a recent examination of urban theory and global urbanisms, Robinson and Roy describe urbanism as ‘a proliferation of imaginative projects inspired by and productive of the great diversity of urban experiences’.⁶⁶ This dissertation, along the lines of Robinson and Roy, deploys ‘urbanism’ to describe the interactions between quotidian urban life and the built environment of the city. In this sense, ‘urbanism’ in this study is a term describing patterns of urban actions – from the actions of urban planning to actions of contesting, inhabiting, petitioning and living – which is then utilised to try to understand and identify the distinctiveness of urban conditions. By describing this urbanism as imperial, or, in chapter five as post-imperial, this dissertation refers to the role that Britain’s Asian empire had in shaping the built environments of Bombay, Hong Kong, Rangoon, and Singapore. In referring to the emergence and evolution of an ‘imperial urbanism’, this dissertation is then describing the interlinked patterns of planning and living in cities across British South and Southeast Asia.

Framework of the Dissertation

⁶⁵ Çelik, ‘Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism’; Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations*.

⁶⁶ Jennifer Robinson and Ananya Roy, ‘Global Urbanisms and the Nature of Urban Theory’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2015).

To demonstrate the emergence of imperial urbanism across British South and Southeast Asia, this dissertation is separated into five chapters that individually focus on a set of cities and events that link thematically and chronologically. Though each city is discussed across multiple chapters, no city is examined across all five chapters.

Chapter one examines the effects of the third plague pandemic on the quotidian livelihood and the built environments of the urban poor across Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Considering both corporeal measures to inspect the bodies and homes of the urban poor and also measures to introduce urban 'improvement' schemes, this chapter argues that plague sparked a sustained interest in the urban conditions of the poor across British South and Southeast Asia. Beginning with a discussion of Bombay, the chapter explores the creation of a series of inspection regimes and camps around the city for sanitary purposes as well as how these sanitary measures fell most heavily upon the poor. Additionally discussing the creation of the Bombay Improvement Trust and wholesale attempts to remake the built environment of urban poverty in addition to these corporeal anti-plague measures, the chapter then goes on to compare anti-plague measures in Hong Kong. Noting the similarities between the sanitary measures adopted in Bombay and Hong Kong, this chapter also explores similarities between Asian interpretations of and responses to these more corporeal anti-plague measures. Subsequently examining 'resumption' efforts to remake Tai Ping Shan and other neighbourhoods of the urban poor in Hong Kong, this chapter draws contrasts between efforts to remake the built environments of the urban poor in Bombay and Hong Kong. After considering how the epidemics of the bubonic plague shaped an interest in the housing of the urban poor in Bombay and Hong Kong, the chapter then analyses the ways in which the plague prefigured efforts to 'improve' the houses of the urban poor in Singapore. In examining the case of Singapore, a city which did not experience its own epidemic of bubonic plague, this chapter concludes by raising the importance of interconnection in attempts to remake built environments – setting the stage for subsequent discussions of the development of an imperial urbanism across South and Southeast Asia.

Chapter two traces the emergence of an imperial urbanism centred on the BIT's example in Bombay, Rangoon, and Singapore. Examining both the creation of analogous Trusts in Rangoon and Singapore as well as the work of the Trusts to remake the built environments of urban poverty across all three cities, this chapter argues that an imperial urbanism – encompassing Asian interactions with their built environments – began to emerge during the early decades of the twentieth century. Opening with a discussion of the emergence of a Bombay model, this chapter first examines the early works of the BIT to reorder the built environment. Unpacking

the types of schemes the Trust utilised to remake Bombay, chapter two also considers interventions into the built environment that did not become part of the Bombay model transmitted to municipalities across the Indian Ocean world. Going on to analyse the application of a Bombay model, this chapter considers the case of early-twentieth-century Rangoon. Focusing on how a Bombay model pre-figured debates about urban ‘improvement’, the Rangoon material also examines protestations about the built environment, revealing urban connections beyond colonial initiatives to remake the city. Shifting focus to Singapore, the chapter considers the extent to which Singapore adopted and adapted a Bombay model of urban redevelopment, despite W.J. Simpson’s report advocating a Hong Kong-like ‘improvement’ regime. Analysing Singapore’s case continues to illustrate how Bombay’s example, central to discussions of urban redevelopment across South and Southeast Asia, was translated to fit local circumstances. Considering the ways the Trusts were central to the transmission of an imperial urbanism across British Asia, this chapter examines how a first wave of ‘improvement’ schemes washed over port cities along littoral Asia.

Chapter three considers the consequences of a second wave of ‘indirect’ attacks on urban slums on an evolving imperial urbanism in Bombay, Rangoon, and Singapore. Analysing how the development of housing estates along the edge of the urban area came to reshape efforts to ‘improve’ the built environments of the urban poor, this chapter examines the works of the Bombay Development Department, Singapore Improvement Trust and Rangoon Development Trust. Beginning with a discussion of the evolution of the BIT and the creation of the BDD, chapter three examines the extent to which Bombay remained a nexus for the propagation of this second wave of urban ‘improvement’. Focusing on the works of the BDD from 1920 to 1935, this chapter begins to analyse how the wholesale construction of housing estates along the urban edge remade an imperial urbanism as well as highlighting continuing themes relating to domestic life and corruption that became intertwined with the spread of an imperial urbanism across cities in South and Southeast Asia. After considering the works of the BDD, chapter three focuses on the extent to which the pre-war SIT housing schemes, like those at Tiong Bahru, mirrored efforts in Bombay. Concluding with a brief examination of Rangoon, this chapter challenges the existing historiography on urban South Asia that argues that the ‘colonial city’ increasingly gave way to an ‘Indian city’ during the decades leading up to the Second World War. Analysing Bombay’s role as a nexus to imperial ‘improvement’ efforts around the Indian Ocean world, this chapter demonstrates the continuing importance of a Bombay model in the transmission of an imperial urbanism beyond South Asia.

While chapters one, two, and three examined the emergence of an imperial urbanism centred on Bombay's example, chapter four examines the extent to which Bombay remained central to this urbanism during the late 1930s and Second World War. Arguing that poorly understood patterns of urban growth in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore throughout the late-1930s had divergent consequences for Bombay on the one hand, and Hong Kong and Singapore on the other, this chapter considers late-colonial efforts to house the urban poor as well as the extent to which the Second World War recast the post-war housing situation. Using a discussion of a growing 'squatter' problem as means to understanding urban growth during the late 1930s in Singapore, the chapter considers colonial responses to this urban growth, particularly of the urban poor. Moving onto discussions of and responses to urban growth in Hong Kong, the chapter reveals similarities between a new urbanism emerging in Southeast Asia. Subsequently considering the case of Bombay in the years leading up to Indian independence in 1947, chapter four examines the divergent consequences of urban growth for Bombay during the 1930s and 1940s. Arguing that an excess of housing, created in part by the intervention of the BDD during the 1920s, coupled with a much less severe wartime disruption meant that Bombay's example was increasingly less relevant to cities beyond South Asia, this chapter also considers the ways in which the Second World War reshaped efforts to 'improve' urban conditions in Hong Kong and Singapore. Arguing that the War led to the emergence of Asian voices in municipal government, particularly related to the development of housing, chapter four lays the groundwork for an examination of a post-war urbanism and urban poverty in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Moving onto the post-war period, chapter five contextualises the 1940s and 1950s rhetoric of economic and urban development in Hong Kong and Singapore within pre-war narratives of urban 'improvement'. Arguing that a combination of a recentred imperial urbanism and urban discontent drove the development of a post-imperial urbanism, this chapter uproots the assumptions of previous studies, which frame the housing of the urban poor firmly within the geo-political context of the early Cold War in East Asia. Beginning with an examination of the ways in which urban 'improvement' became translated into a post-war lexicon of social welfare and economic development across Southeast Asia, this chapter considers the ways in which Singapore became central to the transmission of a post-war (post-)imperial urbanism as well as the extent to which post-war schemes were related to pre-war 'improvement' plans. Moving on to consider the case of Hong Kong again, this chapter demonstrates both the centrality of Singapore in pre-figuring post-war housing plans as well as the extent to which pre- and post-war schemes were also interconnected in Hong Kong. Examining the creation of resettlement areas in post-war Hong Kong, this chapter also demonstrates how nineteenth-century colonial

'camps' continued to resonate across the urban built environment into the post-war period. Analysing the connections between the works of the Hong Kong Housing Authority and works completed by the SIT, chapter five considers how a post-imperial urbanism emerged through a renewed sense of shared urban concerns. Concluding with a discussion about how the exchange of information relating to housing for the urban poor demonstrates both a broader and distinct network of inter-Asian and post-imperial connections, chapter five argues that these municipal connections challenge existing didactic geo-political narratives about the early Cold War in East and Southeast Asia.

While each of these individual chapters is rooted in specific cities as well as in specific urban circumstances, together they reveal a long and interconnected story about the development of cities and urban housing as it relates to poverty across South and Southeast Asia. In addition to providing new insight into a number contextual historiographical debates, these chapters as a whole bring a new urban dimension to connective histories of South and Southeast Asia. By firmly rooting its perspective both in the archives and in an understanding of local context, the chapters that follow seek to contribute to their own approach to practising world history.

PLAGUE, PLANNING, AND POVERTY IN BOMBAY, HONG KONG, AND SINGAPORE, 1894-1910

CHAPTER 1

‘In this time when people flee from Bombay, Chubb’s Safes are most reliable, being fire-proof and thief-resisting’ read one advertisement on page four of *The Bombay Gazette* in January of 1897.¹ Another advertisement in the same newspaper a few weeks later practically shouted, ‘Protect yourselves from BUBONIC PLAGUE, CHOLERA, DYSENTERY, TYPHOID and ENTERIC FEVERS by being ABSOLUTELY certain that your DRINKING WATER is GERMLESS and STERILIZED’.² Exposing Anglophone anxieties about urban life during the outbreak of the bubonic plague in late-nineteenth-century Bombay, these advertisements bespeak both the physical tumult of the migrations of people out of the city as well as attempts amongst remaining urban dwellers to harness developing discourses in science and medicine as a means of protection. *Yersinia pestis*, the bacillus responsible for the outbreak of the third plague pandemic which radiated around the globe from Canton, Hong Kong, and Southern China beginning in 1894, had reached Bombay in the autumn of 1896, causing an outbreak that killed a reported 7,759 people during its first four months.³ In Hong Kong, where the plague had broken out two years earlier, 3,792 deaths were attributed to the disease by reports covering 1896.⁴

While existing histories of the third plague pandemic have both examined the implications of the outbreak in port cities across the globe as well as noted the anxiety that the plague wrought on colonial societies, this chapter considers the implications of the plague pandemic amongst a smaller sub-set of Asian port cities – Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore.⁵ That Singapore, a city that did not experience an epidemic of plague cases, is juxtaposed with these two cities at the epicentre of the global pandemic, speaks to the wider focus of this chapter – an examination of

¹ ‘Chubb’s Safes Advertisement’, *The Bombay Gazette*, p. 4, 7 January 1897.

² ‘Bertie-Smith & Co. Advertisement’, *The Bombay Gazette*, p. 2, 26 January 1897, emphasis from source.

³ Report of the Bombay Plague Committee, Appointed by Government Resolution No. 1204/720P on the Plague in Bombay (Bombay: The Times Press, 1898), p. 100.

⁴ Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, ‘Sanitary Superintendent’s Report for the Year 1894, Mortality Statistics’, p. 390-1, 31 March 1895; Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, ‘Sanitary Superintendent’s Report for the Year 1895, Mortality Statistics’, p. 322-3, 352, 15 May 1896.

⁵ Sutphen, ‘Not What, but Where: Bubonic Plague and the Reception of Germ Theories in Hong Kong and Calcutta, 1894–1897’; Echenberg, *Plague Ports*; Robert Peckham, ‘Critical Mass: Colonial Crowds and Contagious Panics in 1890s Hong Kong and Bombay’, in *Anxieties, Fear and Panic in Colonial Settings: Empires on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).

how the plague sparked efforts to reorder the built environments of urban poverty in cities across British Asia. Demonstrating that an interest in urban (re)development in Singapore was inextricably connected to the post-plague processes of urban ‘improvement’ unfolding in Hong Kong and, to a lesser extent, Bombay, this chapter highlights its largest historiographical contribution – that of a comparative framework to analyse trans-regional and trans-municipal connection.⁶ While pieces of this story of plague-driven urban ‘improvement’ have been contextualised within the history and environment of a single city, this chapter’s comparative juxtaposition of Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore reveals the extent to which these pieces fit together to form a broader history of post-plague urban environments. In comparing histories rooted in local context with one another, this chapter helps sharpen understandings both of the uniqueness of city-specific developments and of broader patterns of urban development across South and Southeast Asia. While Echenberg connected urban responses to the third plague pandemic around the globe and Forth recently connected the development of plague ‘camps’ with similar developments in South Africa and around the British imperial world, this chapter connects colonial responses to plague and disease, particularly as they relate to housing, across urban centres in South and Southeast Asia as well as Asian contestations and adaptations of those responses.⁷

The third plague pandemic traces its roots to reoccurring outbreaks of the disease in Yunnan, China beginning in the 1850s that spread to neighbouring provinces in southern China – Guangxi and subsequently Guangdong – during the late nineteenth century. During the early 1890s, the plague reached the Pearl River Delta with epidemics breaking out in Canton and Hong Kong in 1894. While cases of the plague had been confined to China, an outbreak of the plague in Bombay during 1896 marked the global transition from epidemic to pandemic. After reaching Bombay – where it stuck more virulently than it would anywhere else – the plague spread around the world, with documented outbreaks on every inhabited continent including cities such as Alexandria, Astrakhan, Cape Town, Porto, Honolulu, San Francisco, and Sydney, among others.⁸ While there are no well-founded estimates of global mortality from the third plague pandemic – in part because of poor record keeping, the poor accuracy of diagnoses, and a lack of consensus about the precise beginning and end of the pandemic – it is clear that the

⁶ Saunier, 'Introduction: Global City, Take 2: A View from Urban History'.

⁷ Echenberg, *Plague Ports*; Forth, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*.

⁸ Harrison, *Contagion*, p. 174-210; Echenberg, *Plague Ports*, p. xi-xiv; W. J. Simpson, *A Treatise on Plague: Dealing with the Historical, Epidemiological, Clinical, Therapeutic and Preventive Aspects of the Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), p. 48-75.

figure is in the millions during the first two decades of the pandemic, 1894-1914.⁹ Fatality rates among those afflicted by the disease were regularly higher than fifty per cent.¹⁰ While the global mortality figures from this plague pandemic were lower than those resulting from the subsequent 1918 pandemic of 'Spanish' influenza, Bombay and Hong Kong saw more plague mortalities than deaths from influenza.¹¹ Bombay and Hong Kong were however outliers – Singapore and Southeast Asia more broadly, which saw comparatively few plague mortalities, witnessed far more deaths from influenza than plague.¹²

In part because of the epidemiology of the disease – which affected Bombay so extraordinarily – historians of Bombay have focused on the effects of the plague on the built environment of urban poverty for the last fifteen years.¹³ In contrast, the historiography on the built environment of urban poverty in Hong Kong, rather than focus on the shorter-term implications of the plague, has focused on the longer-term consequences of tuberculosis while histories of Singapore's built environment are similarly concerned with other contagious diseases.¹⁴ And despite the fact that more general concerns about contagion and so-called tropical diseases did eventually subsume specific fears about the plague in the minds of sanitary officials and planners across South and Southeast Asia, the plague nonetheless played an important role in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore in attempts to remake and reorder the built environment. In understanding the urban consequences of the plague, this chapter broadly considers two intertwined transformations – corporeal transformations of the relationship between the body of Asian urban dwellers and urban authorities as well as spatial transformations of the built environment of the city.¹⁵ Despite the historiographical emphasis on the former in all three cities, this chapter illustrates that these processes were two sides of the

⁹ Multiple researchers cite a figure of more than ten million deaths globally, but the article cited does not provide supporting evidence for such a figure, see Iqbal Akhtar Khan, 'Plague: The Dreadful Visitation Occupying the Human Mind for Centuries', *Transactions of The Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 98:5 (2004), p. 272.

¹⁰ Echenberg, *Plague Ports*, p. 313-4.

¹¹ Siddharth Chandra and Eva Kassens-Noor, 'The Evolution of Pandemic Influenza: Evidence from India, 1918-19', *BMC Infectious Diseases* 14:1 (2014); Pak - Leung Ho and Kin - Hung Chow, 'Mortality Burden of the 1918-1920 Influenza Pandemic in Hong Kong', *Influenza and Other Respiratory Viruses* 3:6 (2009); Niall P. A. S. Johnson and Juergen Mueller, 'Updating the Accounts: Global Mortality of the 1918-1920 "Spanish" Influenza Pandemic', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76:1 (2002).

¹² Vernon J. Lee, Mark I. Chen, Siew Pang Chan, Chia Siong Wong, Jeffery Cutter, Kee Tai Goh, and Paul Anath Tambyah, 'Influenza Pandemics in Singapore, a Tropical, Globally Connected City', *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 13:7 (2007); Kirsty Walker, 'The Influenza Pandemic of 1918 in Southeast Asia', in *Histories of Health in Southeast Asia: Perspectives on the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Sunil Amrith and Tim Harper (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

¹³ Kidambi, 'Housing the Poor in a Colonial City'; Kidambi, 'An Infection of Locality'; Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*.

¹⁴ E.G. Pryor, *Housing in Hong Kong*, 2 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Jones, 'Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State'; Yeoh, *Contesting Space*; Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*.

¹⁵ Kidambi, 'An Infection of Locality'.

same urban ‘improvement’ coin – mutually dependent evolutions to reorder the city along ‘sanitary’ lines.¹⁶

Histories of the plague and Bombay’s urban environment are extensive, the most prolific of these three cities, and initially focused on how the plague remade imperial relationships – between the Western medical establishment, the colonial state and the bodies of Indian subjects.¹⁷ As the historiography of plague moved beyond Bombay and became more interested in the histories of medicine and science, these histories continued to emphasise the corporeal aspects of anti-plague measures, particularly regimes of vaccination across South Asia and the imperial world.¹⁸ While Klein had noted the importance of plague for the urban development of Bombay in 1986, it was not until the late 1990s that historical focus returned to issues of plague and built environment.¹⁹ Noting the centrality of Bombay’s landscape to the transformations of post-plague politics in India, Chandavarkar argued that fears of *the* plague helped drive colonial responses to the epidemic.²⁰ Masselos, examining these colonial responses, specifically regarding household searches, argued that post-plague measures were both familial and spatial intrusions into the late-nineteenth century Marathi household.²¹ The spatial aspects of the post-plague urban transformation were further raised by Kidambi, who argued that these aspects of the anti-plague measures were less understood than the corporeal countermeasures and that plague was seen a disease of poverty and of locality.²² Most recently, Caru has contextualised the period of the plague in a history relating the development of housing to social developments amongst a working class in her French-language monograph.²³

Housing and the consequences of the plague on the built environment of Hong Kong have received considerably less historiographical attention, despite the prominence of histories of

¹⁶ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*; Chu, 'Combating Nuisance'; Carol Benedict, *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*.

¹⁷ Ian Catanach, 'Plague and the Tensions of Empire', in *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies*, ed. David Arnold (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Ira Klein, 'Plague, Policy and Popular Unrest in British India', *Modern Asian Studies* 22:4 (1988); David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); David Arnold, 'Touching the Body: Perspectives on the Indian Plague, 1896-1900', in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Ranajit Guha, Edward W. Said (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Mark Harrison, *Public Health in British India: Anglo-Indian Preventive Medicine, 1859-1914*, Cambridge History of Medicine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Ira Klein, 'Urban Development and Death: Bombay City, 1870-1914', *Modern Asian Studies* 20:4 (1986).

²⁰ Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*, p. 234-65, 63.

²¹ Jim Masselos, 'The Outside Inside: Incursions into the Marathi Household at the End of the Nineteenth Century', in *Home, Family and Kinship in Maharashtra*, ed. Irina Glushkova and Rajendra Vora (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²² Kidambi, 'Housing the Poor in a Colonial City'; Kidambi, 'An Infection of Locality'; Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*.

²³ Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*.

hygiene, disease, and urban development in a broader Chinese historiography.²⁴ While the ramifications of the plague on the development of colonial medicine in Hong Kong, particularly as it relates to the race between the bacteriologists Yersin and Shibasaburo to identify the plague bacillus, have been of repeated interest in the histories of Hong Kong, only very recent historiography has begun to consider the ways in which the plague had consequences for Hong Kong's urban environment.²⁵ Despite some historical interest in the development of housing for the urban poor in Hong Kong, the existing historiography examines these developments as they relate to tuberculosis, leprosy, and malaria, missing important post-plague developments.²⁶ This chapter, taking into consideration Kidambi's emphasis on the spatial consequences of plague in Bombay, raises similar and inter-related consequences of the plague on Hong Kong's post-plague built environment.²⁷

Despite the fact that the built environment of Singapore during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries has been more frequently examined by historians than the built environment in Hong Kong, the impacts of the plague hardly feature in the historiography of the city.²⁸ While the epidemic of plague did not affect Singapore on the same scale as it did Bombay or Hong Kong, this chapter's comparative and connective framework helps illustrate the ways in which plague pre-figured later narratives about the housing of the urban poor in Singapore.

Arguing that the outbreak of the plague epidemic, which officials in all three cities saw as a disease of locality, sparked interest in the remaking and reordering of urban built environments, this chapter also traces how other diseases came to subsume plague in continuing efforts to remake the conditions of the urban poor.²⁹ In examining the conditions of the urban poor during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, colonial responses to the plague as well as Asian adaptations of those responses, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the

²⁴ Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Benedict, *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China*.

²⁵ Sutphen, 'Not What, but Where: Bubonic Plague and the Reception of Germ Theories in Hong Kong and Calcutta, 1894–1897'; Peckham, 'Matshed Laboratory: Colonies, Cultures and Bacteriology'; *Plague, Sars, and the Story of Medicine in Hong Kong*, ed. A. E. Starling and Society Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006); Chu, 'Combating Nuisance'.

²⁶ Jones, 'Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State'; Pryor, *Housing in Hong Kong*; Daniel Ham, 'Malarial Hygiene and Colonial Society in Hong Kong, C.1880- C.1910' (MPhil Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2009); Ham, 'The Management of Malaria and Leprosy in Hong Kong and the International Settlement of Shanghai, 1880s-1940s'; Ka-che Yip, 'Colonialism, Disease, and Public Health: Malaria in the History of Hong Kong', in *Disease, Colonialism, and the State: Malaria in Modern East Asian History*, ed. Ka-che Yip (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

²⁷ Kidambi, 'An Infection of Locality'.

²⁸ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*; Brenda S.A. Yeoh, 'Urban Sanitation, Health and Water Supply in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Colonial Singapore', *South East Asia Research* 1:2 (1993); Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*; Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

²⁹ Kidambi, 'An Infection of Locality'.

subsequent emergence of an imperial urbanism across South and Southeast Asian port cities over the twentieth century.

Epidemiology and ‘improvement’ in Bombay, 1896-1899

While this chapter began by illustrating the panic with which Anglophone audiences met the initial outbreak of the plague in Bombay during 1896-1897, this section will explore how this panic shaped attempts to remake and reorder urban space and the extent to which these measures were felt across the city, particularly by the urban poor. After an examination of the more corporeal anti-plague measures adopted immediately after the epidemic began, this section considers the creation of the Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT) both as a response to the outbreak of the plague, but also as a model through which outbreaks of plague, as well as other diseases, could be prevented from taking hold. In contextualising the creation of the Trust as a model, this section lays the groundwork for the analysis of subsequent sections and chapters.

The plague arrived in Bombay during the autumn of 1896 by first taking hold in Mandvi, a neighbourhood located near to the port along the eastern coastline of Bombay Island and close to the central urban area.³⁰ From Mandvi, where sanitary officials noted that the outbreak of plague ‘occurred chiefly in large-well built houses, too few of which on the score either want of light or air could objection be taken’, the disease spread across the city, hitting some areas and neighbourhoods more virulently than others.³¹ Madanpura, Bycullah, and the areas along the northern edge of the urban area, about two to four kilometres north of Mandvi, faced particularly severe outbreaks of the plague.³²

As part of a first set of measures taken to prevent the spread of the outbreak, under the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897, Bombay’s colonial government both created a series of search parties – to detect infected persons and remove them to hospitals – as well as created a system of ‘public segregation camps’ in and around the neighbourhoods hit hardest by the epidemic.³³ While those expressing symptoms of the plague were removed to hospitals, those living in or around those cases of plague, ‘contacts’, were also sequestered – removed from their homes and

³⁰ 'Report of the Bombay Plague Committee Appointed by Government Resolution No. 1204/720p on the Plague in Bombay for the Period Extending from the 1 July 1897 to the 30 April 1898', (Bombay: Times of India Steam Press, 1898), p. 6-11.

³¹ Ibid., p. 6.

³² Ibid., p. 2-3.

³³ Ibid., p. 12-3.

placed in these camps.³⁴ During their time at these ‘contact camps’, the homes vacated by these ‘contacts’ were sprayed with ‘disinfectant’, a ‘discolouring’ combination of mercury chloride, ammonia chloride, glycerine, alcohol and water.³⁵ In addition to having their homes disinfected, ‘contacts’ at the Wari Bunder camp, located along the northern edge of Mandvi, also faced a process of personal disinfection. Being directed to gender-separated bathing places, ‘where they washed and clad in camp clothes while their own clothes and other kit were being sterilised’, their clothes were treated, first ‘by washing and sunning, and later, when a stove was available, by passing them through the steam steriliser’.³⁶

The Wari Bunder Camp, a camp ‘set apart for contacts’ was one in a system of camps constructed for the plague response – ‘detention camps’ for traders and travellers, ‘contact camps’ for those exposed to the disease, ‘health camps’ for people fleeing particularly hard hit neighbourhoods, and ‘private camps’ for those who wanted to leave the city on their own terms.³⁷ While the camps were designed to separate those with exposure to the plague from those yet unexposed, sanitary authorities had a hard time sealing those exposed off inside the camps. In addition to allowing the ‘bread-winner’ of a family outside of camps during the daytime, in order that these bread-winners continue to work, sanitary authorities noted instances of escape at a camp in Naralwadi in Byculla, ‘the chief difficulty lay in the wealth of the inmates, which, before arrangements were in order, led to the occasional corruption of the subordinate staff of the camps’.³⁸ Constituting one aspect of the anti-plague measures, these camps both had similarities with the ‘disinfection stations’ utilised in Hong Kong as well as connections between ‘camps’ around the nineteenth century imperial world – a connection recently examined in the cases of South Africa and India.³⁹

Another aspect of the corporeal anti-plague measures were attempts to impose varying degrees of quarantine over Bombay’s population. These measures were aimed particularly at preventing the movement of the urban poor. An 1898 report on plague measures noted that while passengers on trains arriving and departing were inspected either on the platform or in their cabins depending on the second or third-class delineation of their ticket, those with first class tickets were excused entirely from inspections aiming to identify those expressing

³⁴ Ibid., p. 11-2.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 197; National Archives of India, Delhi, Home Department, Sanitary Branch, March 1902, Progs. No. 116-7, W.M. Haffkine, p. 7, 23 December 1901.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 12-3.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 12-4, 73-96.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 12, 75.

³⁹ Forth, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*, Aidan Forth, ‘Britain’s Archipelago of Camps: Labor and Detention in a Liberal Empire, 1871-1903’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16:3 (2015).

symptoms of the disease.⁴⁰ A February 1901 despatch demonstrated even more drastic measures. Defining a category of ‘destitute persons’ as those not being able to demonstrate that they had secured a means of ‘proper lodging or accommodation’, the despatch subsequently banned such people from entering Bombay, stating that they would not ‘be permitted to enter the City by any causeway nor shall any such person, who shall hereafter be brought to the City by rail or sea be permitted to leave any railways station Bandar or place of land in the City’.⁴¹ While an August 1901 despatch noted the creation of ‘a pauper camp or poor-house’ that was ‘under Municipal supervision control’, it also noted that:

They are kept in the camp a few days to see if their relations or belongings will turn up for them and arrange to take them away or look after them and prevent them from begging. If no enquiries are made about them or if after enquiry they are found to be up-country vagrants liable to deportation, they are handed over to the Police for dispatch to their registered homes and addresses by train or steamer as the case may be.⁴²

Demonstrating a wilful targeting of the urban poor, these partial quarantine measures illustrate the degree to which poverty became associated with the spread of the plague – with the poor not only more rigorously inspected, but also segregated into camps upon the assumption that their presence would endanger the health and safety of the city.

From the corporeal to urban ‘improvement’

While the camps and controls on the migration flows into and out of the city represented the ways in which Bombay’s anti-plague measures attempted to control the bodies of Indian urban dwellers, the Government’s anti-plague measures also took on an increasingly interest in the built environment. Though ‘contacts’ of those infected with the plague were removed to camp, they were identified by search parties consisting of ‘a qualified medical man, either European or Native, a lady doctor or nurse, a sub-inspector, a locksmith, two lampmen, two or more police or military sepoy, and a hand-lotion carrier’.⁴³ These search parties were not only responsible for identifying infected persons, but also investigating their surroundings. Though infected houses were washed and sprayed, as previously noted, these and other inspected homes were also

⁴⁰ 'Report of the Bombay Plague Committee Appointed by Government Resolution No. 1204/720p on the Plague in Bombay for the Period Extending from the 1 July 1897 to the 30 April 1898', p. 34-5.

⁴¹ MSA, GD, 1901, 93, 767, No. 962-P, J.K. Codon to General Department (Plague), p. M-S 309, 27 February 1901.

⁴² MSA, GD, 1901, 93, 767, No. 3521-P, J.K. Codon to General Department (Plague), p. M-S 319, 24 August 1901.

⁴³ 'Report of the Bombay Plague Committee Appointed by Government Resolution No. 1204/720p on the Plague in Bombay for the Period Extending from the 1 July 1897 to the 30 April 1898', p. 62.

evaluated for their sanitary state – a state usually linked to an ill-defined coefficient of exposure, particularly of the innards of a structure, to light and air.⁴⁴ When ‘unwholesome houses’ were identified, sanitary officials advised landlords that they should be ‘removing partitions, cutting lateral and vertical openings’ to better allow light and air into their buildings. Despite sanitary officials recommending the completion of works on the inside of homes, measures taken to allow light and air in from the outside of homes were more common and less delicate, ‘one measure for letting light and air into unwholesome houses has been carried out on a large scale – the untiling of roofs’.⁴⁵ These measures, described in an 1898 report on plague measures adopted in Bombay demonstrate that, from the outset of the plague epidemic, Municipal and Government officials took an interest in reordering the built environment of poverty, with these search parties and modifications taking place amongst the city’s poorest areas.

While the next chapter will examine the continuation of these inspection and modification regimes in Bombay into the twentieth century, the remainder of this section explores this increasing Government intervention into the built environment of Bombay, particularly the built environments of poverty. Though the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 had begun a process through which domestic spaces were inspected and modified on an as-need basis, Bombay’s government simultaneously ‘considered the question of a comprehensive scheme for the improvement of the City of Bombay’. Conceived to conduct further measures to reorder the built environment, the BIT was expected specifically to promote ‘the better ventilation of the densely inhabited parts [of the city], the removal of insanitary dwellings, and the prevention of overcrowding’.⁴⁶ The Glasgow Improvement Trust, ‘which was constituted for similar purposes’, served as the model for Bombay’s administrators, who tasked the Trust with ‘the work of making new streets, opening out crowded localities, reclaiming lands from the sea to provide room for the expansion of the City, and the construction of sanitary dwellings for the poor’.⁴⁷ As a result, the Trust had a different set of goals than did the inspection and modification regimes under the Epidemic Diseases Act, namely to take into consideration wholesale schemes to address the ‘improvement’ of the city.

‘Improvement’, as was discussed in the introduction, is in inverted commas here and in subsequent chapters in part to denote the narrow conceptualisations of progress it represented. While the BIT was tasked with operating schemes to remake and reorder the city, it did not

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 69-71.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁶ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, ‘Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1899’, p. 1.

⁴⁷ National Archives of India, Delhi, Home Department Files, May 1898, Progs No. 29-67, J. Atkins to BMC, p. 132, 28 September 1897; MSA, GD, 1899, 32, 36, ‘Administration Report of the City of Bombay Improvement Trust for the year ending on the 31st March 1899’, p. M-S 227-8.

consider in much detail who the new streets, open localities, reclaimed lands, and sanitary dwellings were for – let alone the consequences of redevelopment for those inhabiting those scheduled spaces. In this way, ‘improvement’ here, and in the chapters to follow, was an inherently fraught process – one that located disease and contagion in the homes of the urban poor but spent little time or effort ensuring that the quotidian realities of urban poverty meaningfully changed. While this chapter has argued that ‘improvement’ efforts represented a more wholesale approach to sanitising the city, subsequent chapters will demonstrate how this sweeping approach also removed these efforts from understanding the lives of those it was meant to ‘improve’.

Members of the Board of the Trust also reflected a departure from the approach of the municipal government-led inspection regimes. Led by a Chairman, the Board comprised *ex-officio* members representing the offices of the General Commanding Officer of Bombay district, the Collector of Bombay and the Municipal Commissioner for the city. In addition to these Trustees, the BMC also elected four representatives to the Board of the Trust along with elected members representing the Chamber of Commerce, the Bombay Port Trust, and the Millowner’s association. The Government of Bombay appointed three further Trustees to the Board, making the fourteen-person Board a joint, but distinctly separate venture between the BMC, the Government of Bombay as well as some of the city’s philanthropic and civic associations.⁴⁸ While the Board was predominately comprised of British imperial officials, other Bombay constituencies also had some representation on the Board - the BMC often elected representatives from Goan-Portuguese communities, Parsi communities, Muslim communities, and Hindu communities, while the Millowner’s Association was represented by Jacob Hai David Sassoon, a prominent member of Bombay’s Baghdadi Jewish community.⁴⁹ It is worth noting that these communities represented on the Board of the Trust – for example, the Baghdadi Jews and Parsis – often had their own philanthropic networks connecting port cities along littoral Asia.⁵⁰ In cutting across Bombay’s communal lines as well as lines drawn between the various levels of the city’s layered colonial government, the Trust was designated to be a separate institution intended to complement the work of the BMC.

Both in the constitution of the Board and in its mandate to carry out a series of larger

⁴⁸ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, ‘Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1899’, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Taken from an examination of the lists of the Board of Trustees from 1899-1908, see Annual Reports on the Bombay Improvement Trust, BL, IOR, V/24/279. For more on the prominence of Baghdadi Jewish communities in Bombay and across Britain’s Asian empire, see chapter two and Stein, ‘Protected Persons?’.

⁵⁰ For example, for more about Parsi contributions to the early development of Hong Kong, see Simon Shen, *Hong Kong in the World: Implications to Geopolitics and Competitiveness* (London: Imperial College Press, 2016), p. 256-8. For more on Jewish identity in port cities around East and Southeast Asia, see Goldstein, *Jewish Identities in East and Southeast Asia: Singapore, Manila, Taipei, Harbin, Shanghai, Rangoon and Surabaya*.

schemes, the BIT represented a new avenue through which the built environment of Bombay could be remade and reordered. While subsequent sections and chapters will examine how this new approach represented an evolution of anti-plague measures unique to Bombay, this section has considered the ways in which the outbreak of the plague epidemic in Bombay in 1896 sparked a newfound interest in urban renewal projects. While these efforts were felt in a corporeal manner through the imposition of various quarantine regimes to control both movement within the city and movement beyond Bombay, physical measures to control the outbreak took increasing interest in the housing conditions of the city's urban poor. Though the urban poor were also targets for the more corporeal anti-plagues measures, notions that the plague inhabited homes and spaces with too little access to light and air meant that the homes of the urban poor were disproportionately targeted both in house-by-house inspection and modification regimes, but also in proposed 'improvement' schemes of the newly created BIT. In considering the ways that 'improvement' efforts in Bombay resulted from the plague epidemic, this chapter now considers how the plague remade and reordered other built environments around Southeast Asia and the ways in which these efforts engendered an imperial urbanism which began to connect the experience of urban poverty across these cities.

Disease and Housing in Hong Kong, 1894-1910

As was the case in Bombay, the epidemic of *yersinia pestis* in Hong Kong brought with it an unprecedented examination of the relationship between the city's built environment, poverty, and contagion. While Chinese ownership of tenement buildings and other urban properties had attracted some attention from colonial officials concerned about sanitation during the 1860s and 1870s and a report on the sanitary condition of the city was written in 1882 by the civil engineer Osbert Chadwick, the months and years following the initial outbreak of the plague in early 1894 brought with them an aggressive and intrusive regime of inspections.⁵¹ The Sanitary Board, an institution created in 1883 following Chadwick's report consisting of both Government-appointed members and members elected by a limited public franchise, oversaw a vast

⁵¹ Osbert Chadwick was the son of Sir Edwin Chadwick, a prominent nineteenth century English social reformer focusing on improving urban sanitation and public health, amongst other topics. Chu, 'Combating Nuisance'; Kerrie L. MacPherson, 'Invisible Borders: Hong Kong, China and the Imperatives of Public Health', in *Public Health in Asia and the Pacific: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Milton J. Lewis and Kerrie L. MacPherson (London: Routledge, 2008); Osbert Chadwick, 'Report on the Sanitary Condition of Hong Kong: With Appendices and Plans', Eastern No. 38 (London: Colonial Office, 1882).

inspection programme meant both to detect cases of plague as well modify homes in ways thought to inhibit the transmission of the disease.⁵² The inspections and building modifications, strikingly similar to anti-plague measures adopted in Bombay described earlier in this chapter, formed only part of the initial response. In addition to the inspection regime, the neighbourhood at the epicentre of the outbreak, Tai Ping Shan, was ‘resumed’ by the colonial government.⁵³ While ‘resumption’ was a term unique to the lexicon of Hong Kong’s built environment, its implications – demolishing existing structures, laying out a series of new streets along lines drawn up by sanitary officials and selling off plots of land to those willing to construct new structures based on a set of new building codes – were again strikingly similar to the early schemes of the BIT. That these inspection regimes and resumption schemes in Hong Kong predated the arrival of the plague in Bombay and the founding of the BIT illustrates the ways in which the disease connected the urban environments of stricken cities. That Hong Kong, a city that had adopted these anti-plague measures a full two years before Bombay, was discussing the creation of its own Trust in 1903 described as ‘practically a crib of the Bombay Trust’, also illustrates the ways in which Bombay had quickly assumed a centrality in imperial efforts to ‘reorder’ urban spaces along sanitary lines.⁵⁴

In considering the post-plague emergence of an imperial urbanism in cities across British South and Southeast Asia as related to housing and urban poverty, this section examines the anti-plague measures adopted in Hong Kong as a result of the 1894 outbreak as well as connections between these measures and urban poverty in Hong Kong and Bombay. And while the Hong Kong thread of this urban story will re-emerge again only in chapters four and five, the evolution of Hong Kong’s initial post-plague urbanism as it relates to poverty is indicative of the degree to which the plague sparked the emergence of a distinct Asian urban form. Mindful of the limits of the interconnection, this section will nonetheless examine the ‘lumpy’ contingencies with which this form developed in Hong Kong on its way through Asia’s port cities.⁵⁵ Despite arguing that differences on the ground between ‘improvement’ in Bombay and ‘resumption’ in Hong Kong ultimately characterised a separate Hong Kong approach to urban poverty, this section will also examine commonalities amongst the Asian interpretations of these redevelopment schemes in Hong Kong. By understanding both the connections and the limits of

⁵² Y.W. Lau, *A History of the Municipal Councils of Hong Kong, 1883-1999: From the Sanitary Board to the Urban Council and the Regional Council* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Service Department, 2002).

⁵³ Often spelled as Taipingshan in the colonial records, the neighbourhood was around what is now south of Hollywood Road, near the Man Mo Temple and Blake Gardens.

⁵⁴ Hong Kong Publics Records Office, Hong Kong, China (henceforth HKPRO), HKRS58-1-22-32, F.M.H. to Governor of Hong Kong, 4 September 1903; Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 71-114.

⁵⁵ Frederick Cooper, 'What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian's Perspective', *African Affairs* 100:399 (2001), p. 190.

these connections between the urbanisms of post-plague Bombay and Hong Kong, this section sharpens our understanding of later transmissions and transmutations of imperial urbanism to cities along littoral Asia.

While Chadwick's 1882 report on Hong Kong was indeed one facet of increasing colonial interest in the conditions of the urban poor over the course of the nineteenth century, the outbreak of the plague in Hong Kong very radically changed the attitudes of medical and sanitary officials towards the urban poor. This shift can be seen in legislation concerning the urban poor adopted in 1890, before the beginning of the epidemic. Designated the 'Squatter's Ordinance, 1890', the Ordinance aimed to establish a system whereby 'squatters', those living upon Crown Lands without any documentation, could receive leases and become legal occupiers of certain lands. Though the Ordinance lays out a Board to adjudicate and issue leases, it is notable that the Act does not mention any steadfast requirements in relation to issuing leases; for example, following certain sanitary or building codes. In fact, while the Ordinance mentions that the Board could order 'the inspection of property', it contextualises these inspections in empaneling the Board to adjudicate disputes between claimants.⁵⁶ That the Ordinance does not impose any sanitary standards on new tenants, poor squatters, illustrates the extent to which the colonial government did not foresee or envision any wholesale sanitary reordering upon the city before the plague epidemic.

The arrival of the disease in Hong Kong during the first months of 1894 quickly changed attitudes towards the sanitary state of the city. By June of 1894, a month in which over 1,600 deaths were attributed to the plague, the colonial government had declared the city an infected port, established a permanent committee of the Sanitary Board, established three plague hospitals and begun 'house to house visitations' led by 'Military and Naval authorities'.⁵⁷ Though the similarity of these measures with those adopted two years later in Bombay suggests a certain sanitary standardisation across British Asia, the responses to these anti-plague efforts by local residents had parallels as well. In examining the relationships between public and private spaces and plague in Bombay and Poona, Masselos notes the outrage with which Indian communities met plague measures affecting women's spaces.⁵⁸ Though notions of *purdah*, gender separation, and the creation of *zenana*, women's spaces, were distinct to India, perceived slights to male pride – 'how can a husband be expected to tolerate the sight of his wife's hand being in the hand of

⁵⁶ HKPRO, HKRS266-21-7, 'Ordinance No. 27 of 1890', 19 December 1890.

⁵⁷ Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, 'Sanitary Superintendent's Report for the Year 1894, Mortality Statistics', p. 413, 31 March 1895; Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, 'Governor's Despatch to the Secretary of State with Reference to the Plague', 20 June 1894.

⁵⁸ Masselos, 'The Outside Inside', p. 137-40.

another man?’ – seemingly crossed cultural divides.⁵⁹ Dismissing complaints by Chinese communities as ‘much exaggerated’, the Governor of Hong Kong nonetheless describes that ‘complaints were made that the privacy of women’s apartments was being invaded, that women and children were being “frightened out of their wits” by the daily visits of Military and Police, and then it began to be rumoured that the “Foreigners” had sinister and unspeakable designs on the women and children’.⁶⁰ At least in terms of gendered responses to plague measures, affected communities responded with some notable similarities. Another parallel amongst immediate local responses to anti-plague measures comes in the rejection of Western-style hospitalisation of those afflicted by the disease. Masselos describes a disdain for ‘Western practices of sending the sick to hospital’ in Bombay as part of objections to the plague’s sanitary regimes.⁶¹ Describing requests to ‘take their sick away from the *Hygeia* and Kennedy Town hospital altogether’, Hong Kong’s Governor illustrates a similar disdain in Hong Kong for Western-style hospitalisation. While the Chinese doctors of the Tung Wah Hospital Committee were leading measures at the Government Hospital, the two hospitals run along Western medical lines, the boat-hospital *Hygeia* and the Kennedy Town hospital, were the two hospitals specifically protested by Chinese petitioners.⁶² A parallel set of interactions with the post-plague urban environment then engendered a parallel set of responses from local affected populations, at least from perspective of Anglophone reports on these measures.

Forming part of the anti-plague urban response in both Hong Kong and Bombay, house-to-house visitations and forced hospitalisations were supplemented by a ‘resumption’ scheme of the neighbourhood hit hardest by the plague outbreak in Hong Kong, Tai Ping Shan. A densely populated, predominately Chinese neighbourhood located to the western end of the city of Victoria, the buildings in Tai Ping Shan were described by a medical report as ‘damp and badly ventilated, with drains of a most primitive and insanitary description. Earthen floors or floors laid with chunk of stones were the general rule while in most houses light seemed to be look upon as an enemy to be carefully shut out’.⁶³ With the living conditions of those in Tai Ping Shan being linked by medical officials to the outbreak of plague, the ‘resumption’ of Tai Ping Shan

⁵⁹ This line comes from a speech protesting plague measures in Bombay made by Qazi Ismail Meheri in Bombay as reported by the *Times of India*. See, ‘The Mohomadeans and Compulsory Segregation’, *The Times of India*, p. 5, 16 March 1897; Masselos, ‘The Outside Inside’, p. 139.

⁶⁰ Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, ‘Governor’s Despatch to the Secretary of State with Reference to the Plague’, paragraph 8, 20 June 1894.

⁶¹ Masselos, ‘The Outside Inside’, p. 138.

⁶² Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, ‘Governor’s Despatch to the Secretary of State with Reference to the Plague’, paragraph 8, 20 June 1894.

⁶³ Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, ‘Medical Report on the Epidemic of Bubonic Plague in 1894’, p. 182, 2 March 1895.

began in 1894. Taking five years to complete, the scheme consisted of a series of evictions followed by a wholesale demolition of buildings in the neighbourhood. Once these demolitions had been carried out, a series of retention walls were constructed to fully utilise the mountainous terrain along with sewers, streets, and storm drains. Tai Ping Shan was thus 'laid out afresh in building lots with streets and lanes suitably arranged'. Despite earning income from the sale of the earthen materials created as a result of the construction of retaining walls – these materials were subsequently used in the second Praya Reclamation scheme – the property resumption and construction costs totalled nearly \$925,000 dollars. With only about \$170,000 raised in revenue resulting from land sales post-resumption, the scheme cost Hong Kong's government approximately \$755,000. And despite some of the resumed land being used to create public gardens, such as Blake Garden, the scheme nonetheless operated at a significant financial loss.⁶⁴

With the significant costs of the Tai Ping Shan resumption scheme and plague-related mortality rates widely varying year-on-year, the appetite for schemes on the scale of Tai Ping Shan decreased dramatically.⁶⁵ An 1898 report from a commission examining insanitary properties illustrates this shift in policy in its conclusions, 'it is unnecessary for the Government to resume insanitary properties generally, and improve them and re-sell them'.⁶⁶ So within a few months of the creation of the Improvement Trust in Bombay in 1898, Hong Kong's government was winding down its only improvement scheme and a Government commission was recommending that further schemes would be unnecessary. Although the two cities' initial responses to the plague were quite similar, the two approaches began to diverge with the onset of the twentieth century. In part explicable by Hong Kong's significantly lower plague-related mortality figures after the initial outbreak of the plague, Bombay's mortality rates consistently matched Hong Kong's worst years and by comparison did not drop off until 1907, Hong Kong's

⁶⁴ HKPRO, HKRS337-4-287, 'Hongkong. Insanitary Properties Resumptions. Correspondence.', W. Chatham, #44.

⁶⁵ While 2,552 deaths were attributed to plague in 1894, plague-related mortality decreased dramatically in 1895 with just 36 cases reported. Though cases rose again to 1,204 in 1896 amongst a population estimated to be 245,000 people, plague killed just 26 in 1897. Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, 'Sanitary Superintendent's Report for the Year 1894, Mortality Statistics', p. 390-1, 31 March 1895; Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, 'Sanitary Superintendent's Report for the Year 1895, Mortality Statistics', p. 322-3, 352, 15 May 1896; Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, 'Report of the Secretary, Sanitary Board, for 1896', p. 358-63, 15 June 1897; Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, 'Reports of the Medical Officer of Health, the Sanitary Surveyor, and the Colonial Veterinary Surgeon for the Year 1897', p. 276-7, 17 March 1898.

⁶⁶ 'Hong Kong. Report of the Commission Appointed by His Excellency Sir William Robinson, K.C.M.G., to Inquire into the Existence of Insanitary Properties in the Colony', (Hong Kong: Noronha & Co., Government Press, 1898), paragraph 15.

approach to urban poverty nonetheless remained somewhat connected to Bombay through the first decade of the new century.⁶⁷

Similarities between living under the Sanitary Board and the BMC

Manifestations of this connection were illustrated by the continuing anti-plague measures in which medical and sanitary officials, entered, inspected and ‘disinfected’ domestic spaces thought to be propagating the disease. While military officers had been removed from the inspection teams, by 1900 these teams were being managed by the Sanitary Board and were often comprised of both European and Chinese officials. If a case of plague was discovered during the inspection, patients were admitted to Tung Wah Hospital where they were ‘examined by a Chinese Doctor trained in Western medicine’ while their home and those living in it were ‘disinfected’. This process, whereby a residence was cleared, involved both a cleaning of the premises – the spraying of a perchloride solution over the walls and a scrubbing of the floors with Jeyes’ fluid – as well as the removal of residents to a ‘disinfection station’ for five to six hours during which they had the ‘liberty to make use of the Board’s matshed shelters’ and wait for any ‘clothing, bedding curtains, and carpets’ that was dipped in Jeyes’ fluid to be returned.⁶⁸ In addition to the spraying and scrubbing of homes, regulations adopted in 1902 confirmed that officials could ‘remove or destroy any mezzanine floor, cockloft, partition screen, ceiling or similar structure or fitting...[that] prevents the free access of light or air to the said premises’.⁶⁹ Though the ‘disinfection stations’ did not involve internment for more than a few hours, their camp-like qualities, in tandem with intrusions into and alterations of domestic spaces mirror regimes operated by the BMC well into the twentieth century.⁷⁰

These chronic anti-plague regimes continued to galvanize Asian communities in Hong Kong through petitions to medical and sanitary officials. A 1901 petition by the residents of Ma Tau Wai and Ma Tau Chung, villages located on the Kowloon Peninsula just south of the Kowloon Walled City, demonstrate frustration with the application of inspection and building modification measures. Writing that the villages ‘had never been troubled in any way’ since the British

⁶⁷ ‘India: Bombay. Plague, Cholera, and Smallpox in 1909’, *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)* 25:47 (1910), p. 1731.

⁶⁸ HKPRO, HKRS202-1-1-11, ‘Method of Dealing with Outbreaks of Bubonic Fever (Plague)’, Francis W. Clark, p. 92-3, June 1900.

⁶⁹ HKPRO, HKRS202-1-7-23, ‘Bye-Laws made by the Sanitary Board under Section 13 of the Public Health Ordinance, No. 13 of 1901’, G.A. Woodcock, R.F. Johnston, 18 February 1902.

⁷⁰ The regimes operated under the Epidemic Diseases Act into the twentieth century in Bombay will be discussed in the next chapter. For similarities between plague camps in Bombay and those around the British Empire, see Forth, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*.

occupation of the area in 1860, the petitioners also pointed out ‘that although Plague has been in existence for the past years no deaths have occurred in the villages from this disease’. Describing the modifications requested by the sanitary authorities as ‘a very great hardship to obey’ the petitioners attributed the existing structure of the buildings – which, from the perspective of sanitary officials, did not adequately provide light and air – to systematic ‘poverty’ which also limited their ability to modify the buildings.⁷¹ Requesting a respite from notices to remove partitions demarcating family altars and non-standard second storeys, the villagers’ petition both highlighted the emergence of formalised displeasure with anti-plagues measures on the part of some Chinese communities as well as important questions around the financing of these ‘improvements’.⁷² While the petition was received unsympathetically, ‘it would be well to cause the petitioners to learn at once that opposition to Sanitary reform is useless’ wrote one official, the anti-plague measures nonetheless continued to raise concerns from Asian communities.⁷³ A 1903 letter to the Sanitary Board from Chinese petitioners illustrated the continuing hostile reception of anti-plague measures amongst Chinese communities, ‘the more drastic they [the measures] are to evade, the more the Chinese inhabitants are horrified and consequently they would even risk their lives to evade them’. Arguing that such drastic measures would ‘thereby defeat the detection of all the infected rooms’, the petitioners noted that the discovery of a case of plague caused a ‘state of alarm much greater than a case of a murder’ amongst building’s residents. Suggesting that the rules and regulations governing mandatory time spent in disinfection stations be narrowed to focus more directly on those living with infected individuals rather than involving entire floors and buildings of those around the infected, the petitioners also argued that fewer items needed to be removed and disinfected from the premises.⁷⁴ While the outcome for the petitioners in this case was more successful – the Sanitary Board did narrow the target of anti-plague measures – the two petitions in 1901 and 1903 demonstrate the ways in which Asians were interacting with a built environment evolving as a result of the plague.⁷⁵ And though this chapter and the next discuss similar plague regimes imposed in Bombay, it is also worth noting the similarity of responses of those living under such regimes. As a result of interacting with a shifting built environment of poverty, local residents from across the socio-

⁷¹ HKPRO, HKRS203-1-22-35, Tae Foe Shaung, Chan Kai Foe, Chan Hom Tai, Chan You Fook, Lan Tsai Yan, Lok Shek Food and the villagers of Ma To Wai and Ma To Chung, p. 300-1, 12 April 1901.

⁷² For a critical description of the notices and homes in question, see HKPRO, HKRS203-1-22-35, Registrar General, p. 293-99, 3 April 1901.

⁷³ HKPRO, HKRS203-1-22-35, I.S.S. to Governor, p. 286, 9 April 1901.

⁷⁴ HKPRO, HKRS202-1-8-62, Lum Ching and petitioners to Sanitary Board, p. 481-3, 23 June 1903.

⁷⁵ HKPRO, HKRS202-1-8-62, J.M. Atkinson, Fung Wa Chun, H.E. Pollock, Lau Chu Pak, and W.W. Pearse, p. 479, 27 June 1903.

economic spectrum of both cities increasingly sought to register their voices as part of a new post-plague urbanism.

Reports, a Resumption Trust, and Bombay's example

As the intrusive plague measures continued, as they did under the Epidemic Diseases Act in Bombay, Hong Kong's government was continuing to grapple with other means through which it could not only decrease mortality from plague, but also from an array of other deadly diseases including tuberculosis, malaria, and cholera that affected the city's poor disproportionately. Noting that pulmonary diseases, like tuberculosis, had been 'intimately associated with *overcrowded and insanitary dwellings*', the 1901 reports of the medical health officer and sanitary surveyor emphasised the need to address specifically questions of housing.⁷⁶ And so while Hong Kong's government had stopped 'resumption' projects following its financial losses at Tai Ping Shan, in 1902 it sponsored two interwoven reports to examine the sanitary condition of the city as well as what to do about the city's poorest housing conditions. To write the first report linking conditions of the city to the continuing occurrences of plague, the Colonial Office in London sent a doctor, W.J. Simpson, who had previously been a health officer in Calcutta.⁷⁷ To write the second report on what could be done about the poor housing conditions of Hong Kong, the Colonial Office turned to a combination of Simpson and the author of the 1882 report on Hong Kong's sanitary conditions, Chadwick.⁷⁸

When read alongside one another, the reports illustrate the evolution of the justification for sanitary schemes to reorder the city. While the first report, ostensibly focused on ways to combat and prevent future outbreaks of the plague, identified housing repeatedly as essential to any measures, the second report, published separately but also as an appendix of the plague report, hardly mentioned plague at all.⁷⁹ In fact, Chadwick and Simpson specifically describe their recommendations as securing 'a great improvement' in Hong Kong's 'general sanitary condition' and that these measures would 'lead to the suppression of those diseases which are dependent

⁷⁶ Emphasis conveyed in the document, see Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Legislative Council Sessional Papers*, 'Reports of the Medical Officer of Health, the Sanitary Surveyor, and the Colonial Veterinary Surgeon, for the Year 1901', p. 528, 17 March 1902.

⁷⁷ Simpson, *A Treatise on Plague: Dealing with the Historical, Epidemiological, Clinical, Therapeutic and Preventive Aspects of the Disease*, see title page. For more on the Simpson's work in Calcutta, see Sutphen, 'Not What, but Where: Bubonic Plague and the Reception of Germ Theories in Hong Kong and Calcutta, 1894–1897'.

⁷⁸ W. J. Simpson, 'Report on the Causes and Continuance of Plague in Hong Kong and Suggestions as to Remedial Measures', (London: Waterlow and Sons Limited, 1903); O. Chadwick and W. J. Simpson, 'Report on the Question of the Housing of the Population of Hongkong', (Hong Kong: 1902).

⁷⁹ 'Plague' is mentioned five times in the report, three of which describe a figure attached along with the report, see Chadwick and Simpson, 'Report on the Question of the Housing of the Population of Hongkong', p. 8, 14, 6.

upon overcrowding and insanitary conditions for their propagation'.⁸⁰ Noting that 'diseases' plural, rather than singularly plague, could be combatted with appropriate measures, Chadwick and Simpson illustrate the ways in which concerns about urban sanitation raised by plague in Asia during the late nineteenth century came to be subsumed into more general concerns about disease and sanitation of Asian cities during the early twentieth century. While fear of *the* plague had driven an intense renewed interest in the urban conditions, particularly of the urban poor, of Asian metropolises, as cases of the plague began to subside, the interest in remaking and reordering urban space continued. Supported by more general notions of disease prevention, these efforts then evolved into a regular feature of colonial urban governance rather than series of exceptional reactive measures.

This subtle, but meaningful evolution in the justification for these schemes to remake the city had immediate consequences for the built environment in Hong Kong. While new resumption efforts following the 1899 completion of scheme at Tai Ping Shan had lain dormant, a smaller scheme at Lower Lascar Row, an area northeastwardly adjacent to Tai Ping Shan, began in 1902. Led by Chadwick and Simpson during the time they spent in Hong Kong gathering material for their reports, the scheme involved the resumption and clearing of a path between the backs of houses opening out onto Queen's Road and Circular Pathway. While a large portion of the proposed scheme was left uncompleted, resulting in the scheme's small cost, \$38,000 dollars, and scope, another scheme at Kau U Fong, about 250 metres northeast of the Lower Lascar Row scheme, began in 1903. Bounded into a trapezoidal shape by Aberdeen Street, Welling Street, Gough Street and On Wo Lane, the scheme involved the resumption of twenty-four houses, the demolition of those houses, the construction of a 30-foot wide street running in the middle of the area and the sale of land plots to builders.⁸¹

While the schemes at Lower Lascar Row and Kau U Fong were jumpstarted by the efforts and reports of Chadwick and Simpson, these schemes themselves sparked interest in the pursuit of longer-term schemes along the lines of a Trust. Writing to the Colonial Secretary, T.H. Whitehead, a prominent banker at the Chartered Bank of India, Australia, and China as well as a member of Hong Kong's Executive Council, inquired about 'the condition on which house properties sanitary and insanitary and land have recently been resumed in Bombay and elsewhere in India'.⁸² Specifically asking 'the basis on which the values of house property and land were

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

⁸¹ HKPRO, HKRS337-4-287, 'Hongkong. Insanitary Properties Resumptions. Correspondence.', W. Chatham, #44.

⁸² A brief biography of Whitehead can be found in an obituary, see 'China's Finance Fifty Years Ago', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Adviser*, p. 3, 30 May 1933.

arrived at, and the basis on which the compensation paid for resumed properties and land has been arrived at', Whitehead communicated that the information would be used in the development of a similar institution in Hong Kong.⁸³ Though Whitehead left Hong Kong for London in 1902, Hong Kong's government nonetheless drew up a proposal the following year for creation of a Resumption Trust to conduct resumption schemes around the city.⁸⁴ Described as 'practically a crib of the Bombay Trust', the proposal was to create a board made up of various local officials – the Colonial Secretary, the Director of Public Works, the Treasurer, the Senior member of the Legislative Council, the Chinese member of the Legislative Council, the President of the Sanitary Board, and the Chinese member of the Sanitary Board – to arrange a series of resumption schemes funded by a two per cent property tax based on annual assessments and half of the annual proceeds resulting from the sale of Crown Land.⁸⁵

That Hong Kong's government turned to the BIT specifically as a model on which to build up its own resumption efforts illustrates the centrality of Bombay to an imperial urbanism in Asia emerging from 'improvement' efforts. But while the next chapter will discuss the ways in which Bombay's centrality affected an emerging urbanism around the Indian Ocean world, Hong Kong's case demonstrates rather the uneven application of such an urbanism. Because while Bombay's case was indeed central to the proposal of a Resumption Trust in Hong Kong, the Governor, Matthew Nathan, put an end to the proposal in 1904, raising objections to the scale and cost of such an undertaking. Arguing that a water supply scheme, the erection of important public buildings, and other sanitary works all took financial precedence to the proposed schemes of a Trust, Nathan suggested that the existing sanitary authorities were already adequately equipped to meet Chadwick and Simpson's proposals on housing from 1902. And while he foresaw the possibility of large schemes being undertaken in the future, Nathan only went as far as to order a one-time report on the resumption works so that they could be understood should that contingent future arrive.⁸⁶

While Nathan's objections ultimately foreclosed discussions of creating a Trust in Hong Kong until the 1930s, the resumptions at Tai Ping Shan, Lower Lascar Row, and Kau U Fong, as well as the proposal for a Trust, nonetheless help demonstrate the ways in which Hong Kong's approaches to planning and urban poverty ultimately differed from that of Bombay. Despite

⁸³ HKPRO, HKRS203-1-23-25, T.H. Whitehead to Colonial Secretary, p. 132, 30 April 1902.

⁸⁴ HKPRO, HKRS58-1-22-32, R.J.F., 3 September 1903; HKPRO, HKRS58-1-22-32, Henry Arthur Blake (H.A.B.), 18 August 1903.

⁸⁵ HKPRO, HKPRO, HKRS58-1-22-32, Francis Henry May (F.H.M.), 4 September 1903; HKPRO, HKRS58-1-22-32, R.J.F., 3 September 1903.

⁸⁶ HKPRO, HKRS337-4-287, 'Hongkong. Insanitary Properties Resumptions. Correspondence.', M. Nathan to Lyttleton, #44, 26 September 1904.

some similarities between many of the measures initially taken to stem outbreaks of the plague – including inspections and modifications of domestic spaces, detentions of those residing there, as well as the undertaking of improvement or resumption schemes in dense urban areas – Hong Kong’s government ultimately did not undertake multiple large schemes to remake or reorder the city in a holistic sense. By 1903, only three such schemes had been undertaken and the schemes at Lower Lascar Row and Kau U Fong were both small in scale and ambition – involving at most two dozen structures at a time. Rather than undertaking schemes, Hong Kong’s sanitary establishment instead pursued a programme of securing a sanitary order to the city one building at a time. While the pursuit of this home-by-home ‘improvement’ largely followed along the lines of Chadwick and Simpson’s recommendations, which focused virtually exclusively on an architecture of sanitation rather than city-wide schemes to reorder the city, it represented a fundamentally different approach to questions about improving the living conditions of the urban poor to those approaches taken in Bombay. As a result, Hong Kong’s post-plague interest in the houses of the urban poor both illustrates the emergence of a Bombay model of urban improvement – through the BIT’s example in influencing debates and proposals in Hong Kong – while also highlighting the differences between both approaches. And though some of the overlapping anti-plague measures drove the emergence of similar urbanisms – illustrated in this section by an emerging culture of English-language petitioning of the colonial government – these urbanisms remained distinct in the kinds of relationships they engendered between the urban poor and the urban elite. In demonstrating connections and highlighting differences between plague, planning and poverty in Bombay and Hong Kong, this chapter will now examine connections and differences with a third Asian port city – Singapore.

Life, Death, Poverty, and Sanitation in Singapore, 1900-1909

While the bubonic plague had killed thousands in Hong Kong and tens of thousands in Bombay by 1901, the third plague pandemic spread unevenly amongst Asia’s port cities. Despite Singapore experiencing no such epidemic of *Yersinia pestis*, individual cases attracted the attention of colonial administrators. On 15 January 1901 at about four in the afternoon, a ten-year-old boy residing at 89 Market Street, located about two hundred metres away from the docks along the Singapore River, was removed from his home by a municipal health officer for showing ‘suspicious’ symptoms of disease. Taken to the quarantine camp on St. John’s Island, an installation about seven kilometres south, the boy succumbed to his illness about five hours later – a disease that was identified as plague after a post-mortem bacteriological examination. The

boy's family, along with those who lived in houses adjacent to 89 Market Street were simultaneously removed to St. John's Island while their houses were 'thoroughly cleaned and disinfected'. Describing those afflicted in this case as 'Chitties', members of a long-settled community of Indians migrating from the Coromandel Coast, Walter Egerton, the Acting Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements, illustrated colonial fascination with cases of plague.⁸⁷ When another case of plague appeared in 'a coolie named Permal' employed at 89 Market Street three weeks later, Egerton quickly broadcast the news to Hong Kong.⁸⁸ Though these two cases together formed about one-third of the seven documented cases of plague in Singapore during January and February of 1901, they nonetheless warranted frequent, detailed dispatches to health authorities in port cities along littoral Asia.⁸⁹

While this extensive documentation for a disease that killed seven people during a two month period, in a city with a census-estimated population of over 207,000 in 1901, bespeaks the seemingly unparalleled anxiety wrought by *the* plague from the point of the colonial administration across urban spaces, it also offers an opportunity to understand the lives of Singapore's urban poor during this period.⁹⁰ This section will discuss efforts in Singapore to study the conditions of the city, specifically examining a 1907 report on the sanitary conditions of the city as well as files from the city's Coroner's Court to examine the livelihoods of the urban poor in early twentieth century Singapore. While this chapter is not the first to utilise the micro-histories of the urban poor found in Singapore's archives, it analyses these stories through a different lens – to understand the quotidian living conditions of the city's poorest residents.⁹¹ Establishing an illustration of quotidian life for a poor person in early twentieth century Singapore, this section then continues on to thread connections between a post-plague emerging urbanism in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Arguing that the evolution of Singapore's built environment of poverty during the first years of the twentieth century followed more the example of Hong Kong, this section nonetheless notes how the Bombay approach came to be considered in Singapore, leaving for discussion until the next chapter the ways in which a Bombay model came to increasingly characterise an imperial urbanism in Singapore.

⁸⁷ HKPRO, HKRS203-1-22-32, W. Egerton, p. 44, 16 January 1901.

⁸⁸ HKPRO, HKRS203-1-22-32, W. Egerton, p. 54, 2 February 1901.

⁸⁹ HKPRO, HKRS203-1-22-32, A.W.G. Sullivan, p. 271, 7 March 1901.

⁹⁰ W. J. Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1907), p. 5; Peckham, 'Critical Mass'.

⁹¹ Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*.

Stories of Poverty in Singapore

Though the case of the death of the ten-year-old boy from Market Street in 1901 offered a detailed account of the geography of the plague in Singapore – the case was first reported in a dense urban neighbourhood very close to the docks along the Singapore River, a gateway through which people came to and departed from Singapore, and moved from the city centre to the quarantine station located on St. John’s Island – the dispatch offers very little data with which to understand relationships between plague, poverty and living conditions. Apart from noting the presence of the Chitty community, the report leaves unanswered questions about the livelihoods of those residing there, about the size and state of the house, and about the relationships between those inside 89 Market street as well as their relationships to those in adjacent residences, among others. These questions, amongst other data points, help render an understanding of urban poverty in Singapore and are, in part, able to be viewed through the eyes of Singapore’s Coroner’s Court.

Reporting and investigating deaths in colonial Singapore through the means of a coroner had begun during the 1820s.⁹² And despite contestations between coroners and the police in demarcating the responsibilities of investigating deaths during the nineteenth century, by the early twentieth century, the forensic work of the coroner was interwoven with police investigations of fatalities through the work of the Coroner’s Court – a court designed to investigate and try cases of murder in and around the Singapore municipality. As a result, the Coroner’s Court files, to varying degrees, contain extensive police interviews of witnesses to deaths as well as interviews of those close to the accused and the deceased.

One such example is of the case of the death of a thirty-two-year-old Hokkien man named Chua Ua, a sawmill worker who died in January 1905 from injuries resulting from blows to the head with an iron axe in December 1904.⁹³ Residing in a lodging house at 60 Shaik Medarsah Lane, Chua worked for a sawmill, Chop Sin Tek Hin, located in Rochor, the same area in which he resided for more than three years.⁹⁴ While Chua was assaulted by a man with whom he had quarrelled over money at his home, five of his fellow lodgers at 60 Shaik Medarsah Lane helped restrain the assailant shortly after the attack began.⁹⁵ One of those fellow lodgers who had restrained the assailant was Ong Sam, a *sinkeh* who had only recently emigrated and lived in the lodging house for about a month prior to the assault. Despite residing in the house for about a

⁹² Y.K. Lee, 'A Short Account of the Coroner in Early Singapore (1819-1869)', *Singapore Med J* 46:10 (2005).

⁹³ National Archives of Singapore, Singapore, Coroner’s Court Files (henceforth NAS, CC), AD007, January 1905-January 1906, No. 3, 'Finding', Alex Gentle, 5 January 1905.

⁹⁴ NAS, CC, AD007, January 1905-January 1906, No. 3, Chew Koon, 5 January 1905.

⁹⁵ Ibid.; NAS, CC, AD007, January 1905-January 1906, No. 3, Ong Sam, 5 January 1905.

month, Ong recalled that he did not know any of the names of the men who helped restrain the assailant.⁹⁶

In assessing the testimony of the Chew Koon, the keeper of the property, as well as fellow lodger Ong Sam, it becomes possible to glean a sense of quotidian life for those in the property. Ong's description of himself as a *sinkeh*, a recently emigrated Chinese person often employed as a manual labourer, who had recently arrived in Singapore along with the employment of Chua as a sawmill worker – as opposed to a more skilled carpenter – give a sense that the occupants of 60 Shaik Medarsah Lane performed relatively low-skill manual labour for a living. Furthermore, Ong's description of social isolation, despite residing in the house for about a month, bespeaks a lack of ties between the recently emigrated Ong and the others residing in the house. That the house, despite its location on a road named for a nearby madrasa, was occupied and looked after seemingly exclusively by Chinese men illustrates both the gender imbalance amongst the population of the urban poor in Singapore as well as the degree to which urban neighbourhoods were characterised by an ethnocultural diversity along rather blurrier lines than J.S. Furnivall's segmented Southeast Asian 'plural society' or contemporary Singapore.⁹⁷

Another case, involving murder, attempted murder and attempted rape in November of 1909, helps render an understanding of the quotidian lives of the urban poor in early-twentieth-century Singapore.⁹⁸ While the location of the case, which unfolded along the edge of Kampong Glam at 130 Beach Road, relative to participants and witnesses of the case, who were all ethnically Chinese, again illustrates the diversity of urban neighbourhoods in early-twentieth-century Singapore, the case also gives a sense of rental costs for so-called cubicles in lodging houses. While the landlord notes that the assailant, Toh Piah, was in arrears of two-month's rent, about five dollars, the assaulted Ong Kim noted that she paid the landlord about \$2.60 per month to rent a cubicle she shared with her four-year-old son and husband.⁹⁹ Assuming rent was about \$2.50 per month, this would mean rent ranged from about sixteen to twenty-seven per cent of incomes – working every day and taking daily wages to be between thirty and fifty

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Simpson reports a male-to-female ratio of 4:1 amongst Chinese and Indian communities when discussing the 1901 census, see Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 5. Furnivall's construction of a 'plural society' across Southeast Asia has been the subject of recent debate, see J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948); Yi Li, 'Revisiting the Nineteenth-Century Marketplace, and the Chinese Community in Moulmein', *Journal of Burma Studies* 20:1 (2016). For more on the diversity of Singapore's pre-WWII neighbourhoods, see chapter 4.

⁹⁸ NAS, CC, AD001, December 1905-December 1909, No. 227, 25 November 1909.

⁹⁹ NAS, CC, AD001, December 1905-December 1909, No. 227, Ban Tee Boo, 25 November 1909; NAS, CC, AD001, December 1905-December 1909, No. 227, Ong Kim, 10 December 1909.

cents.¹⁰⁰ A more realistic scenario, accounting for the irregular nature and payment of casual labour, would quickly estimate rent at one third or more of earned incomes. Apart from offering insight into the financial realities of urban poverty in early twentieth century Singapore, this case offers more insight into nature of social interactions between tenants. While the Market Street case demonstrated some social isolation of lodging house living, the tenants at Beach Road contrastingly know each another's names, recognize one another's voices, and know relationships between extended family members.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Ong notes that her husband, 'a twakow man' working as part of Singapore's maritime industry, resided at Beach Road with their family twice a month for one week at a time.¹⁰² Along with testimony from Swee Bin, who mentioned his wife, it is clear that families not only shared the lodging house with single males but also lived together in single-rooms.¹⁰³

While these cases offer grizzly details about crime in in early-twentieth century Singapore, it is also clear that the Coroner's Court files can illustrate the living situations of the urban poor in an intimate fashion. Rendering a portrait of a diverse urban environment, these cases also provide data to understand the finances of housing from the prospective of the urban poor. This financial aspect, estimating rents of between two and three dollars a month per cubicle, is also borne out in another study of rental conditions from 1906. Focusing on properties owned by Ezra Nathan, a prominent member of Singapore's Baghdadi Jewish community, at 18 Sago Lane and 20-23 Sago Street, the study was included as part of W.J. Simpson's *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of Singapore*.¹⁰⁴ Including tenant details like name and occupation as well as details about the floor size and rental costs of the cubicles, the Sago Street and Sago Lane report also offer insights into the livelihoods of those at the centre of renewed colonial interest in 'improvement'. In terms of size, most of the cubicles rented ranged from fifty-five to seventy-five square feet, with some as small as twenty-eight square feet and some as large as 104 square feet. Rent varied, without a direct relationship to size, from \$2.00 per month up to \$4.50 per month. The rooms were most commonly shared between two males, though a few rooms did contain families with children or a single man or woman. Common occupations of the tenants included food hawkers,

¹⁰⁰ The thirty cent figure comes from the details of a strike in 1910 and the fifty cent figure from Warren, see 'Coolies on Strike', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 10, 5 May 1910; Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*, p. 45.

¹⁰¹ NAS, CC, AD001, December 1905-December 1909, No. 227, Swee Bin, 27 November 1909; NAS, CC, AD001, December 1905-December 1909, No. 227, Ban Kim Tiap, 27 November 1909; NAS, CC, AD001, December 1905-December 1909, No. 227, Ban Tee Boo, 25 November 1909.

¹⁰² NAS, CC, AD001, December 1905-December 1909, No. 227, Ong Kim, 10 December 1909.

¹⁰³ NAS, CC, AD001, December 1905-December 1909, No. 227, Swee Bin, 27 November 1909.

¹⁰⁴ Nathan, *The History of the Jews in Singapore, 1830-1945*.

tailors, seamstresses, and haberdashers, carpenters, fitters, and painters, while the report also noted a gambler, a prostitute and a few people looking for work.¹⁰⁵

Taken in consideration with the cases from the Coroner's Court files, these small studies illustrate the physical, social and financial conditions that characterised the life of the urban poor in Singapore during this first decade of the twentieth century. During this period, these types of conditions and livelihoods were increasingly of interest to colonial planners and sanitary officials looking to reorder the city along sanitary lines. And while these particular stories have offered insight into the lives of the urban poor at the beginning of this attempted remaking of urban conditions, this dissertation will go on in subsequent chapters to highlight the shallow nature of urban 'improvement' on quotidian livelihoods. By analysing these stories of death, disease and poverty, this section can then better understand an existing urbanism of Asian port cities as well as the consequences for an emerging urbanism resulting from future schemes and interventions into the built environment.

Connecting Singapore to Bombay and Hong Kong

While these snapshots of everyday life in early-twentieth-century Singapore render patterns resulting from interactions between the urban poor and their built environment, the remainder of this chapter examines how colonial concerns over these patterns of interactions and over disease developed in parallel to efforts in Bombay and Hong Kong. Analysing a confluence of imperial sanitary and planning knowledge, this section examines how colonial understandings of disease and urban poverty in Singapore became intertwined with understandings and approaches developed in Bombay and Hong Kong.

Colonial interest in the sanitary conditions of Singapore had been slowly growing over the course of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.¹⁰⁶ First manifested by calls, during 1892-1893, to more systematically record the causes of death in Singapore, this first wave of concern over sanitising the city remained more interested in recording death and disease rather than reordering the built environment.¹⁰⁷ Much like in Hong Kong before the outbreak of the bubonic plague, the application of the recommendations of sanitary scientists in Singapore was partial and uneven. And while Singapore was not faced with an epidemic of the bubonic plague during the course of the third plague pandemic, and thus did not exhibit the same kinds of urban

¹⁰⁵ Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 17-24.

¹⁰⁶ Yeoh, 'Urban Sanitation, Health and Water Supply in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Colonial Singapore'; Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, p. 85-135.

¹⁰⁷ C.E. Dumbleton, 'The Need of Reform in the Present System of Registration of Deaths in the Straits Settlements', *Journal of the Straits Medical Association* 4 (1892-3).

intrusions and transformations that were simultaneously applied to Bombay and Hong Kong during the 1890s, the city nonetheless attracted the attention of imperial officials and sanitary scientists as their anxieties over *the* plague transmuted into more general concerns about tuberculosis, malaria and other ‘tropical’ diseases. These shifting sanitary goal posts, in part driven by medical discoveries about the transmission of tuberculosis, malaria and plague but also by the foundation of institutes of hygiene and tropical medicine, gave rise to a newfound interest in applying sanitary science to Singapore. Embodied in Singapore by a request from the Governor to understand the reasons for the city’s high death rates, W.J. Simpson, the same doctor who had written in 1902 on the causes of plague and suggested housing reforms in Hong Kong, came to Singapore in 1906 to study the sanitary conditions of the city.¹⁰⁸ In between his postings to Hong Kong and Singapore, Simpson had built up a reputation as a plague and hygiene specialist, publishing a treatise on plague in 1905 and becoming Professor of Hygiene at King’s College London and a Lecturer on Tropical Hygiene at the London School of Tropical Medicine.¹⁰⁹ While Yeoh has traced Simpson’s focus on the housing conditions of Singapore’s urban poor to discourses in Singapore about tuberculosis, the nature of Simpson’s work in Hong Kong as well as his focus in his treatise on the role that poverty and housing played in the propagation of the plague, would suggest that it was also unsurprising that Simpson quickly honed in on the housing conditions of Singapore’s urban poor in his study of the causes of the city’s high mortality rate.¹¹⁰ Apart from the precise delineation of the focus of Simpson’s report, the report represented the first attempt to reorder Singapore’s built environment along sanitary lines. Diagnosing Singapore’s elevated mortality rates as primarily a function of respiratory diseases resulting from poor access to light and fresh air inside buildings and secondarily to bowel diseases stemming from poor access to clean water, Simpson focused his report around recommendations to ‘improve’ housing conditions and construct sewage systems to separate waste from water.¹¹¹

The report itself, while rooted in the details of Singapore’s urban environment, focused its recommendations more narrowly on the architectural underpinnings of sanitation, proposing a set of building designs (Figure 1) and building laws in a remarkably similar manner to the report on Hong Kong that Chadwick and Simpson had co-authored four years prior. As the Hong Kong report had focused on the back portion of buildings and recommended that resumption

¹⁰⁸ Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Simpson, *A Treatise on Plague: Dealing with the Historical, Epidemiological, Clinical, Therapeutic and Preventive Aspects of the Disease*.

¹¹⁰ Simpson characterised the plague as ‘a disease of the poor’ in his treatise, *ibid.*, p. 176-93.

¹¹¹ Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 11, 43.

schemes focus on the clearance of back lanes, the Singapore report also focused on poor lighting and ventilation in the back of buildings, prioritising the clearance of back lanes through existing back-to-back houses.¹¹² Specifically, the report called for the ‘the abolition of insanitary and congested areas’ through clearing back lanes ‘necessary to secure efficient scavenging and a proper system of drainage’ by means of ‘opening up of the dark and ill-ventilated rears of back-to-back houses, and the demolition, partial or complete, of unhealthy and obstructive buildings would improve the ventilation of the houses and the bloc or area in which they are located’.¹¹³

The 1902 Hong Kong report diagnosed a similar problem and utilised almost identical language:

The insanitary areas in Hongkong have been formed first, by the crowding together of too many houses in too small a space...the crowding together of too many houses on too small a space has been effected by the construction of narrow streets and lanes and by the omission to provide adequate open space in the rear of houses in the shape of back-yards and of back-lanes.¹¹⁴

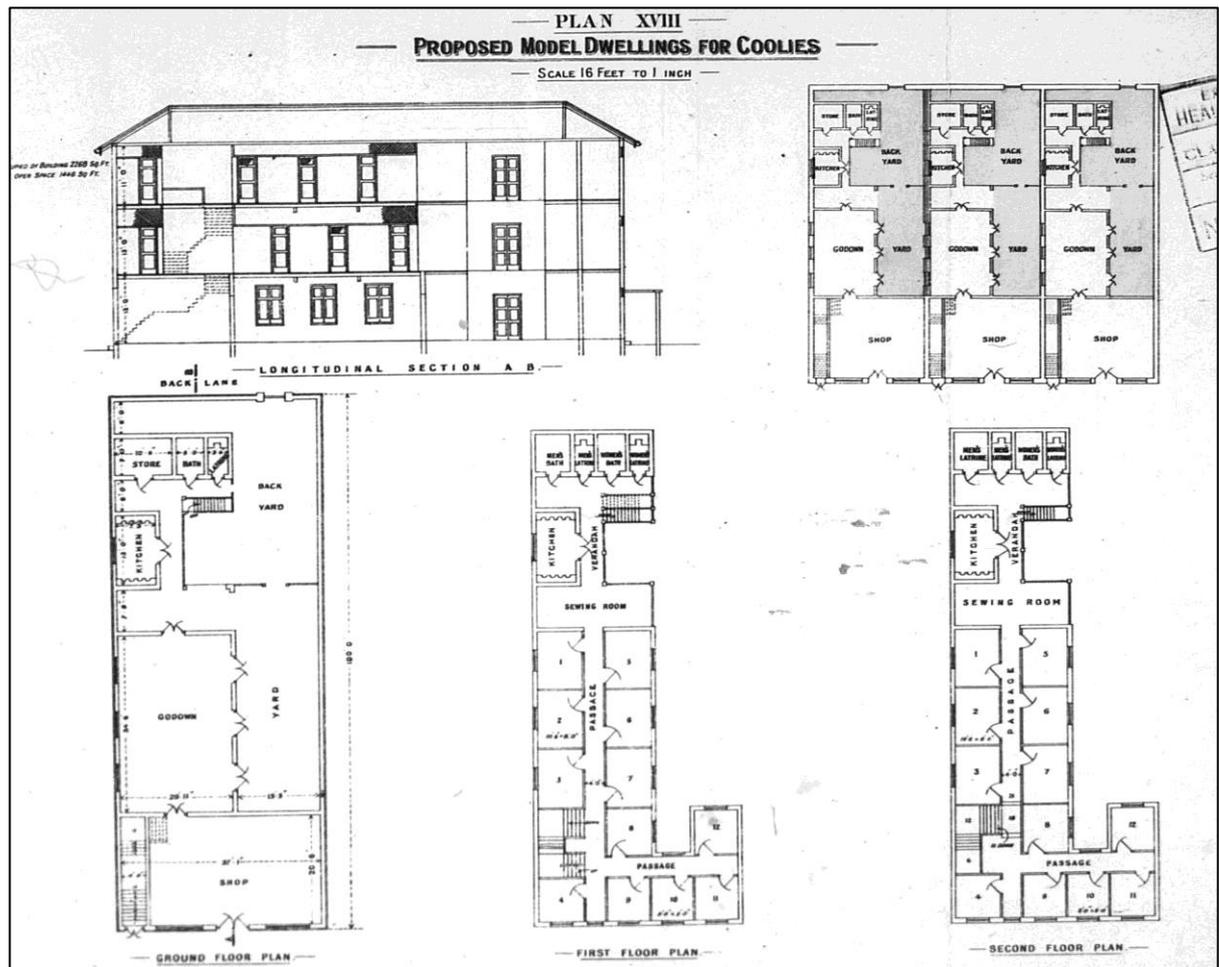
In addition to utilising a nearly identical lexicon to describe the sanitary problems, Simpson proposed the creation of a ‘Sanitary Board’ and the creation of a Principal Civil Medical Officer (PCMO), both positions and institutions existing in Hong Kong. These recommendations, taken together, illustrate the important role of Hong Kong in shaping Simpson’s recommendations for Singapore.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 42.

¹¹⁴ Chadwick and Simpson, 'Report on the Question of the Housing of the Population of Hongkong', p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p.37.



*Figure 1. An example of a proposed plan from Simpson's report for the housing of Singapore's urban poor. Note the technical specifications of the proposals, indicating the intention for repeated reproduction. © The British Library Board, MFR/1436 *1590*, Report on the Sanitary Conditions of Singapore. Reprinted with permission.*

While Simpson's experiences in Hong Kong prefigured his recommendations for Singapore, Bombay's approaches to urban improvement were also repeatedly raised in his report. Despite initially mentioning the success with which the BIT had adopted laws regulating the size of buildings relative to the size of their plots of land, allowing the flow of light and air in between buildings, Simpson clearly disdains Bombay's example.¹¹⁶ In the recapitulation of his proposals for Singapore, Simpson raises the work of BIT, mentioning both that he had toured some of Trusts *chawls* that 'hardly come under the category of sanitary buildings' and that he felt that 'a conspicuous defect in the constitution of the Trust is the absence on it of expert medical and sanitary members'.¹¹⁷ He specifically utilises the example of the BIT in contrast to his proposals for a 'Sanitary Board', arguing that a link between improvement schemes and the Singapore

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

Municipality were crucial to their success.¹¹⁸ Despite his criticisms, Simpson's repeated mentioning of the BIT point to an acknowledgement that Bombay's experiences in matters of 'improving' the built environment were influential in port cities like Singapore across British Asia.

While the next chapter will examine the implications of Simpson's reports and the spread of a Bombay model to Singapore, it is clear from Simpson's report that Hong Kong's approach to urban 'improvement', rather than Bombay's, was ultimately influential in framing a diagnosis of the 'question' of housing in Singapore. An architecture of sanitation advocated by Simpson – clearing back lanes through crowded neighbourhoods, one building at a time, and reforming codes governing future construction – differed from a more ambitious schedule of plans undertaken with the formation of the BIT. As a result, an imperial urbanism based around a Bombay model did not evolve in Singapore up to 1907, though a Bombay approach did become a reference point in Simpson's Singapore report. The next chapter, considering the evolution of Singapore's built environment after 1907 will examine how a Bombay model came to influence an emerging imperial urbanism in Singapore.

Competing models of 'improvement' across Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore

In examining how officials in Bombay and Hong Kong responded to initial outbreaks of the bubonic plague as well as the ways in which the plague sparked a series of other urban improvement, resumption, and sanitation projects, this chapter has delineated a difference between approaches developed in Bombay on the one hand, and between approaches developed in Hong Kong and Singapore on the other. While Bombay and Hong Kong shared similar initial responses to the third plague pandemic, namely a series of continuing inspection and building modification regimes involving medical and sanitary officials, Bombay's government developed in parallel longer-term and wider-reaching redevelopment schemes through the creation of the BIT. This Bombay approach, creating an Improvement Trust and pursuing an array of schemes to remake and reorder the city, while an important point of reference for officials devising responses in Hong Kong and Singapore, was not adapted to these other urban contexts during the first decade of the twentieth century.

More relevant, at least to the context of Singapore, was the example of Hong Kong. While the Trust in Bombay devised about a dozen schemes of varying types during the first decade of

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

its operation, Hong Kong's government ran only three 'resumption' schemes, with the Lower Lascar Row scheme never completed to plan. Rather than undertake these large-scale schemes, Hong Kong officials completed some smaller back lane schemes, explicitly designed to provide better access to light and air at the back of long and narrow buildings. In addition to these schemes, officials directing sanitary policy in Hong Kong promoted a series of ready-made building plans, meant both to serve as a model from which future buildings could be constructed along sanitary lines, but also to more specifically delineate those sanitary lines in a concrete fashion.

Despite demonstrating that Hong Kong's approach was more influential in prefiguring interest in urban 'improvement' in the case of Singapore, this chapter has also illustrated the extent to which Bombay assumed a certain centrality in issues of urban 'improvement' and sanitary reform in Asia, becoming an important point of inquiry and reference in developing approaches in Hong Kong and Singapore. In addition to laying out these competing models of urban development, this chapter has argued that contingent factors, like the fact that W.J. Simpson wrote both a report on housing in Hong Kong and in Singapore, helped shape urban responses to disease. While Simpson did try to ground his Singapore recommendations in response to local circumstances, it was unsurprising that he also tended to frame his analysis along the lines of his previous work. At least partially through Simpson's reports, the built environments of Hong Kong and Singapore became interconnected. While previous historians have noted these interconnections, few, if any histories of Hong Kong and Singapore have examined the similarities between Simpson's work in both cities.¹¹⁹

By constructing this comparative framework between urban development in these Asian port cities, this chapter has also illustrated the connected development of questions relating to the housing of the urban poor in Hong Kong and Singapore during the first decade of the twentieth century. Beyond connecting colonial responses to anxieties over plague and disease in the urban context of Asia, this chapter has also demonstrated connections through comparisons between responses to anti-plague measures in Hong Kong and Bombay.¹²⁰ That similar lines of complaint – revolving around conceptions of domestic space, gender, and masculinity – surfaced across these different urban contexts during the course of petitioning and protesting suggests the emergence of an Asian urbanism resulting from interactions between colonial attempts to

¹¹⁹ In their works on Singapore, Yeoh and Chang make note of Simpson's movements around the British imperial world, but do not reference his body of work that preceded his 1906 report on Singapore, see Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, p. 94, 127; Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, p. 132-6.

¹²⁰ Peckham, 'Critical Mass'.

reorder the built environment and contestations by Asian residents to exert influence in their own right over urban conditions.¹²¹

These contestations, while local in nature, often had consequences beyond the immediate urban sphere. Anti-plague measures in Bombay helped both to drive a wedge between the 'moderate' and 'radical' factions of the Indian National Congress as well as embolden the radical faction to call for *swaraj*, or self-rule. The 1898 sedition trial of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the leader of the radical faction, itself a response to the 1897 assassination of a plague officer in nearby Poona, helped forge Tilak's calls for *swaraj*. The rise of Tilak, a response to the ineffectualness of the moderate faction in the face of the anti-plague measures, helped sew the political demise of the reformist-minded moderates led by Gopal Krishna Gokhale.¹²² In Hong Kong, petitions about the plague measures and political awareness on the part of Chinese communities coincided with analogous debates about nationalism and independence in China. Historian John Carroll, in his monograph *Edge of Empire* on Hong Kong, has considered the role of the plague measures in the context of the emergence of moderate and radical factions of the nationalist movement in Hong Kong and China through his examination of the life of Ho Kai.¹²³ Though plague measures play a comparatively small role in the politics of independence in Hong Kong and China – which were dominated by the 1911 revolution in China and subsequent migration flows into Hong Kong – the implications of the plague in Bombay and Hong Kong illustrate the wider transnational political reach of urban contestations.¹²⁴

This chapter has then built upon a vast existing literature on the outbreak of the third plague pandemic globally, as well as literature on the plague in Bombay and Hong Kong more specifically, to begin to construct an urban story of comparison and interconnection between the developing of housing for the urban poor in port cities across British South and Southeast Asia.¹²⁵ While the Bombay portion of this story of a 'municipal imperialism' is perhaps the best understood, subsequent chapters will continue to relate the evolutions in approaching the housing of urban poverty in the cases of Bombay, Hong Kong, Rangoon, and Singapore to one

¹²¹ Masselos, 'The Outside Inside'.

¹²² Stanley Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1962); R. Gopal, *Lokmanya Tilak* (New York, NY: Asia Publishing House, 1965); D. B. Mathur, *Gokhale, a Political Biography: A Study of His Services and Political Ideas* (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966); Michael Sugarman, 'The Plague, Global Networks, Politics and Government in the Bombay Presidency, 1896-1916' (MPhil Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2013).

¹²³ Carroll, *Edge of Empire*, p. 121, 08-30.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113-4.

¹²⁵ Echenberg, *Plague Ports*; Arnold, 'Touching the Body'; Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*; Catanach, 'Plague and the Tensions of Empire'; Klein, 'Plague, Policy and Popular Unrest in British India'; Harrison, *Public Health in British India*; Benedict, *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China*; Sutphen, 'Not What, but Where: Bubonic Plague and the Reception of Germ Theories in Hong Kong and Calcutta, 1894-1897'; Kidambi, 'An Infection of Locality'.

another – revealing, as this chapter has, an interconnected story of urban development and of an imperial urbanism that continued to shape these cities into the post-war era.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ John F. Laffey, 'Municipal Imperialism in Nineteenth Century France', *Historical Reflections* 1:1 (1974).

IMPERIAL URBANISM AND THE TRUSTS IN BOMBAY, RANGOON, AND SINGAPORE, 1898-1927

CHAPTER 2

The initial tumult of the third plague pandemic, examined in the last chapter, eventually gave way to a series of longer-term measures that attempted to remake urban spaces. While these attempts were firmly rooted in the sanitary reports and tactics developed in response to the outbreak of *yersinia pestis*, these ‘improvement’ measures – as discussed in the introduction – also became the basis from which public officials came to combat other diseases like malaria, cholera, and tuberculosis. W.J. Simpson’s *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of Singapore* is illustrative of this transition. Though Singapore had not experienced an outbreak of the plague, Simpson’s Singapore report nonetheless recommended many of the same measures to fight insanitary conditions resulting in cases of tuberculosis and malaria as it had recommended measures in Hong Kong to fight similar conditions resulting in cases of plague. This repackaging of ‘improvement’ measures in urban centres across Asia, initially adopted as a means to disrupt and prevent specific contagion, into a means through which poorly-defined insanitary conditions themselves were to be corrected, gave urban ‘improvement’ measures a long-term lease on informing imperial approaches to governing and controlling urban spaces.

Bombay, which adopted a model of the Glasgow Improvement Trust, became the first city in Asia to create its own Bombay Improvement Trust in 1898. With the creation of the Trust – the term ‘Trust’ denoting a distinct legal ownership mechanism that conveys a sense of temporary, though patronizing, control – Bombay quickly began to deploy as well as experiment with a number of schemes designed to ‘improve’ the city. In being the first institution to apply its interpretation of ‘improvement’ upon an Asian city, the BIT quickly became a point of reference for urban officials across South and Southeast Asia looking to combat insanitary conditions through ‘improvement’ measures. This chapter, while examining the transmission of these institutional structures and urban (re)development schemes, argues that an imperial urbanism began to emerge around this Bombay example in South and Southeast Asia. Encompassing a wider convergence of urban phenomenon related to the way the urban poor experienced the city, this imperial urbanism would have consequences for the future development of cities beyond their built environment. To analyse this nascent imperial urbanism, this chapter focuses on three cases – Bombay, Rangoon and Singapore – to illustrate the transmission and

transmutation of urban ‘improvement’ across British Asia. Beginning with an examination of how ‘improvement’ was evaluated and interpreted in Bombay, the chapter goes on to consider the extent to which Bombay’s example, a Bombay model, informed parallel efforts during subsequent decades in Rangoon and Singapore.

A historical understanding of the evolution of Rangoon’s urban environment is only just attracting the attention of Burmese historians and urban studies scholars. This examination relies on more established works not only connecting the cities of South and Southeast Asia but also on works understanding the implications of ‘improvement’ in Bombay and Singapore.¹ In terms of the conceptualising the ways these cities are connected, this chapter rests on an inter-Asian approach articulated by Amrith and Harper emphasising what they coined as ‘Asian sites of interaction’.² Influencing Amrith and Harper’s insights is a more extensive body of literature comparing and connecting urban spaces and communities across Asia, from Tan’s comparative examination of Calcutta and Singapore to Ho’s analysis of diasporic Hadrami communities and Markovits’ study of Sindhi merchant networks.³ In parallel and interwoven with these examinations of Asian connections, is another body of literature utilising empire to varying degrees as a heuristic device of connectivity.⁴ While these connective Asian histories tended to focus on urban communities and interactions, until recently the city was itself less a focus of connective historical attention. Though comparative studies of urban conditions, particularly of patterns of urban racial segregation across British Asia, have attracted historiographical interest, Lewis’ work reflects a more connective emphasis.⁵ Lewis’ recent emphasis on the importance of the city in the emergence of an Asian cosmopolitanism, and indeed a form of Asian urbanism, has helped shape an emerging field of Global Urban History from an Asianist’s perspective.⁶

¹ For more on the evolution of Rangoon’s urban environment, see Diana Huynh, ‘Yangon University, students and the state of national affairs, once again’, *Tea Circle: An Oxford Forum for New Perspectives on Burma/Myanmar*, 8 May 2017, <https://teacircleoxford.com/2017/05/08/yangon-university-students-and-the-state-of-national-affairs-once-again/> (Accessed 31 October 2017); Roberts, *Mapping Chinese Rangoon*; Osada, ‘Housing the Rangoon Poor: Indians, Burmese, and Town Planning in Colonial Burma’; Sugarman, ‘Reclaiming Rangoon’.

² Amrith and Harper, ‘Introduction’.

³ Tan, ‘Port Cities and Hinterlands’; Engseong Ho, ‘Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46:02 (2004); Markovits, ‘Indian Merchant Networks Outside India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’; Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947*.

⁴ Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*; Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*; Frost, ‘Asia’s Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920’; Mark Ravinder Frost, ‘Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1914’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36:1 (2005).

⁵ Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Robert Lewis and Richard Harris, ‘Segregation and the Social Relations of Place, Bombay, 1890–1910’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 36:4 (2013).

⁶ For more on Global Urban History see, <https://globalurbanhistory.com/> (Accessed on 31 October 2017); Lewis, *Cities in Motion*; Lewis, ‘Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl’; Lewis, ‘Print and Colonial Port Cultures of the Indian Ocean Littoral’; Lewis, ‘Rotary International’s ‘Acid Test’.

Though this chapter emphasises the connective aspect of urban ‘improvement’ around South and Southeast Asia, its analysis remains rooted in city-specific understandings of urban development, on which exists a more much extensive historiography. This period of urban transformation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Bombay has for decades caught the attention of the city’s chroniclers. While some research raised questions about the interrelated processes of industrialisation, housing, and urbanisation during the 1980s, the literature on Bombay from the 1990s began more conspicuously to focus on the dynamics between imperial and local projections of power.⁷ As a part of this emphasis towards examining Indian understandings of the city, housing – both from an individual’s perspective and from the perspective of colonial planning officials – became an important site of analysis.⁸ Housing, in the context of Bombay’s historiography, became an important part of understanding Indian contestations of urban modernity of the early twentieth century and of revealing the tactics of colonial urban governance.⁹ More recently, Bombay’s housing has provided a lens into understanding the formation of Indian middle-class identities and understanding social histories of the poor and working classes.¹⁰ Taking into account these most recent historiographical contributions, this chapter considers how housing’s broader implications informed a Bombay and an imperial urbanism, in this instance the resulting social interactions from the perceived and actual transformations of the built environment.

The historiography of urban development and housing in Singapore, while not as extensive as the literature dealing with Bombay, is nonetheless crucial to this chapter’s understanding of how a Bombay model was transmitted and transmuted across urban centres along littoral Asia. While Warren examined issues of poverty and the urban environment, including those relating to housing, in his people’s history of Singapore first published in the 1980s, it is Yeoh’s examination of contestations of urban space that has most influenced this chapter’s study of Singapore.¹¹ Yeoh’s analysis of Singapore’s urban environment as a site of contestation between

⁷ Frank Conlon, 'Industrialization and the Housing Problem in Bombay, 1850-1940', in *Changing South Asia: Economy and Society*, ed. Kenneth Ballhatchet and David Taylor (Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1984); Jim Masselos, 'Appropriating Urban Space: Social Constructs of Bombay in the Time of the Raj', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14:1 (1991); Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*.

⁸ Masselos, 'The Outside Inside'; Kidambi, 'Housing the Poor in a Colonial City'.

⁹ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*; Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity*.

¹⁰ Prashant Kidambi, 'Consumption, Domestic Economy, and the Idea of the "Middle Class" in Late Colonial Bombay', in *The Middle Class in Colonial India*, ed. Sanjay Joshi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Nikhil Rao, 'Community, Urban Citizenship and Housing in Bombay, Ca. 1919–1980', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 36:3 (2013); Rao, *House, but No Garden*; Caroline Arnold, 'The Bombay Improvement Trust, Bombay Millowners and the Debate over Housing Bombay's Millworkers, 1896-1918', *Essays in Economic and Business History* 30 (2012); Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*.

¹¹ Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*.

Asian and colonial understandings of the city has helped sharpen this chapter's understanding of what an imperial urbanism entailed beyond its implications for the built environment.¹² Her joint study on Singapore's street names has also helped inform the spatial contextualisation of this chapter's arguments time and time again.¹³ Though Yeoh's work on Singapore has been critical to this chapter's understanding of the colonial development of the city and its built environment, its temporal focus – ending in about 1930 – has meant that this chapter's analysis of the SIT has, to some extent, moved beyond Yeoh's work. Despite the age of Yeoh's work, few historians of Singapore have since focused on the urban development of the city during the late colonial period. In this regard, Chang, who has focused on Singapore's role in developing an archetypal tropical architecture and Dobbs, who considered urban development along Singapore's riverine shores have been useful guides.¹⁴

Taking into account then both a historiography focused on comparison and connection in addition to the rich sets of literature concerned with city-specific developments, this chapter argues that an imperial urbanism, in part illustrated by similar transformations of institutional approaches to the urban built environment, but also in part illustrated by Asian responses to 'improvement', emerged in a set of port cities across British South and Southeast Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this imperial urbanism would have consequences for the future interconnected urban development of these cities before and after the Second World War, in the early decades of the twentieth century, this imperial urbanism connected the quotidian experiences, particularly of the urban poor, across these urban spaces.

Building a Bombay Model, 1898-1914

The previous chapter introduced the creation and formation of the BIT in 1898 and began to examine its consequences beyond Bombay. This section will focus on the processes through which the works of the BIT formed a somewhat modular set of Bombay experiences for other cities to refer to across British South and Southeast Asia during the first two decades of the twentieth century. As part of understanding this formation of a Bombay model, this section will analyse the works of the Trust in Bombay as well as debates about the future of the BIT, in part to demonstrate the ways in which these debates continued to reverberate across urban space along

¹² Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.

¹³ Victor R. Savage and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Toponymics: A Study of Singapore Street Names* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Chang, 'Tropicalizing' Planning'; Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*; Dobbs, *The Singapore River*.

littoral Asia during the late-colonial period and into the post-war period. These changes to and debates about the urban environment of poverty, along with the quotidian lived realities of the urban poor, illustrate the imperial urbanism that emerged as a consequence of urban ‘improvement’ work in cities around colonial Asia. Not seen just in one city, but emerging as a pattern between a comparison of urban perspectives, this imperial urbanism encompassed not just colonial planning regimes, but also Asian interpretations of those regimes. While later sections of this chapter and this dissertation will feature those Asian interpretations more prominently, this section will begin by laying out the outlines of *the* point of reference for those various ‘improvement’ regimes: the Bombay Improvement Trust.

Before setting out this examination of Bombay and of its influence across South and Southeast Asia, it is worth noting the centrality of Bombay within the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century urban experience of South Asia. A recent monograph on the rise of Delhi in the twenty-first century summed up Bombay’s centrality this way, ‘it is said of Indian cities that Calcutta, the former British capital, owned the nineteenth century, Bombay, centre of films and corporations, possessed the twentieth, while Delhi, seat of politics, has the twenty-first’.¹⁵ Dasgupta is not the first to note Bombay’s importance to India’s urban story during the twentieth century. Historians have discussed this ‘rise of Bombay’ to the status of *urbs prima in Indis* over the course of nineteenth century for more than one hundred years.¹⁶ Indeed, the shift away from Calcutta and towards Bombay – as a financial and cultural production hub – and Delhi – as a political capital – in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was a significant transition. Along with discussions of Bombay’s importance in the urban story of South Asia, historians have also noted South Asia’s increasing centrality to the Indian Ocean world in the late-nineteenth century.¹⁷ Taken together, these two sets of work point toward the increasing centrality of Bombay’s urban conditions, and its Trust, not only to South Asia, but also to a wider Indian Ocean world.

Coming together in 1898, the Trust enumerated four major tasks for future years:

- (1) The laying out of certain of the properties vesting in the Trust with a view to develop to the fullest extent and as rapidly as possible their revenue-producing powers.
- (2) The preparation of a preliminary project for reclamation at Colaba with a view to its being carried out in sections, that being the next important item in the resources of the Board.

¹⁵ Rana Dasgupta, *Capital: The Eruption of Delhi* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2014), p. 29.

¹⁶ S. M. Edwardes, *The Rise of Bombay: A Retrospect* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1902); Meera Kosambi, ‘Commerce, Conquest and the Colonial City: Role of Locational Factors in Rise of Bombay’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20:1 (1985); Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 17-49.

¹⁷ Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*; Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

(3) Surveys, etc. for providing better housing for the working classes, that being a matter of great urgency, second only in importance to the measure to be taken to develop the revenue resources.

(4) The preparation of one large improvement scheme (Nagpada) and street schemes for new thoroughfares leading direct from Back Bay to the Docks and from Queen's Road to the Market, and a further street scheme for the district extending from Chaupati to the Gowlia Tank Road.¹⁸

Though these broad outlines fit well within 'the work of making new streets, opening out crowded localities, reclaiming lands from the sea to provide room for the expansion of the City, and the construction of sanitary dwellings for the poor', they also highlight the financial fragility of the Trust.¹⁹ That the pursuit of proprietary cash cows came before the actual work of 'improvement' illustrates the financial resources, or lack thereof, with which the Trust had been endowed. While an annual property tax, fixed at two per cent of the property value, was used to help fund the Trust's activities, the Trust suffered from a lack of cash flow, as evidenced by applications for loans through the Government of Bombay in 1899.²⁰ Loans for fifty lakhs, offered to the public at a rate of four per cent per annum paid over a sixty-year period, proved difficult to secure. Only with the help of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank (HSBC), who made the loan at a higher rate of six per cent per annum, was the Trust able to jumpstart its finances.²¹ While the particulars of the Trust's finances were somewhat complicated, the broad outlines of its financial structure were important both to the kinds of works it pursued and to its adaptability in other urban contexts. In short, the Trust sold itself as an effective manager of various redevelopment schemes that required little to no upfront or continuing public investment – just a series of loans to solve cash flow restraints and an annual grant from the municipality raised by the relatively small tax on property values. Without a significant down payment by Government or the guarantee of particularly large revenue streams, the Trust was expected to be, in large part, financially self-sustaining. It earned money through land sales of 'improved' land and renting out 'improved' accommodation to the urban poor. The Trust's financial resources were meant to snowball for a time and eventually, when it earned more money than it could spend, the annual profits would be sub-divided between the BMC and Government of Bombay. The statute of

¹⁸ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1899', p. 4; 'Chaupati' is an anachronistic spelling of 'Chowpatty' – this chapter will utilise the latter spelling.

¹⁹ MSA, GD, 1899, 32, 36, 'Administration Report of the City of Bombay Improvement Trust for the year ending on the 31st March 1899', p. M-S 227-8.

²⁰ MSA, GD, 1899, 61, 156, Under Secretary to the Government of India, p. M-S 29, 19 July 1899; J.P Orr, *Note on the Finances of the Bombay City Improvement Trust* (Bombay: Times Press, 1919), p. 2-3.

²¹ As will be noted later in the chapter, the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank (now HSBC) played an important role in jumpstarting the finances of the SIT as well, see BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1900', p. 13.

splitting the revenues was removed in 1913 when it became clear that the Trust's profits would be needed to expand the reach of its works. Subsequently, the Trust became an attractive idea to municipal officials outside of Bombay looking to extoll the virtues of urban improvement without adding much expenditure to the municipal accounts and books.²²

In alignment with the goal to become profitable, the Trust outlined four proposals for improvement schemes in 1899: the first in Nagpada meant to rehouse some 11,000 people, the second being the formation of a new street towards the southern end of the city running East-West from the Back Bay to the dockyards meant to clear poorly ventilated back alleyways and buildings, the third being another street plan running East-West from the Back Bay to the dockyards in the centre of the city, and the fourth an attempt to provide a framework of roads and infrastructure to provide for the expansion of the city near Chowpatty (Figure 2).²³ While the fourth scheme, laying out an area for the expansion of the city was meant to bring in revenue from land sales, the other three schemes were not expected to bring in revenue for the Trust.

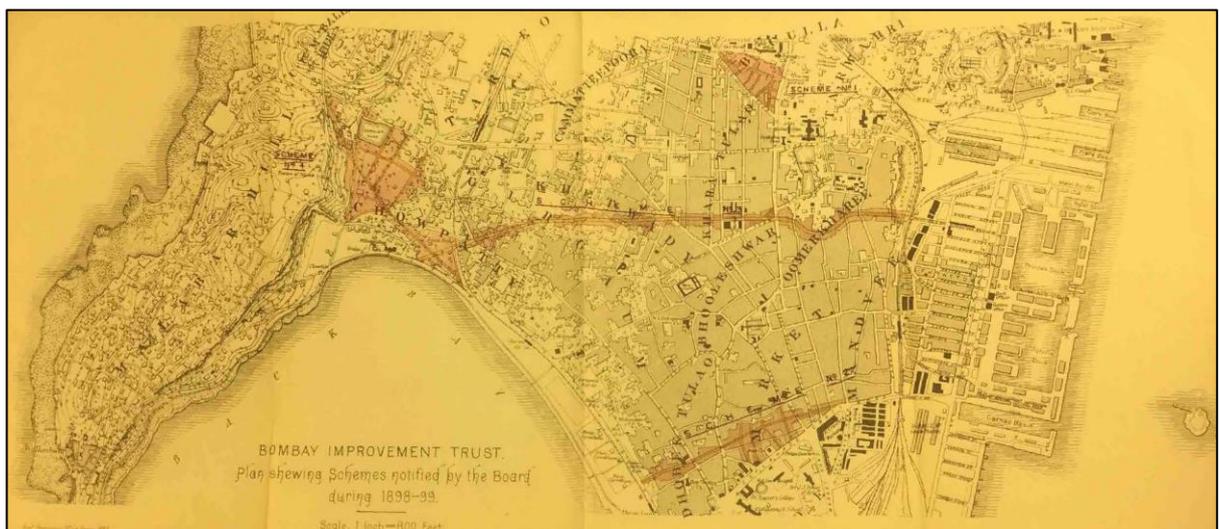


Figure 2. A map showing the four schemes of the Bombay Improvement Trust from 1899. The schemes are highlighted in pink. © The British Library Board, India Office Records, V/24/2791, Administration Report of the Bombay Improvement Trust for the year ending in 31st March 1899. Reprinted with permission.

Apart from their financial implications, these schemes were also important to shaping the kinds of ‘improvement’ undertaken in Bombay and beyond. The first scheme at Nagpada was meant to construct ‘new sanitary dwellings for the poorer and working classes’ and involved evictions, temporary housing and the reconstruction of *chawls*, or tenement buildings, at Nagpada and neighbouring Agripada. Representing attempts to redevelop relatively small areas,

²² Orr, *Note on the Finances of the Bombay City Improvement Trust*, p. 15-6.

²³ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, ‘Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1899’, p. 5-6.

particularly about housing the urban poor, these redevelopment schemes later came to influence the work of the Bombay Development Department as well as various Trusts and debates about Trusts in Hong Kong, Rangoon, and Singapore. The second and third schemes, meant to drive new thoroughfares through areas deemed to be insanitary and unhealthy represent another tool repeatedly utilised by Trusts across South and Southeast Asia. These linear improvement schemes often entailed smaller-scale actions, like reconstructing the back portions of buildings, and tended to focus less on tackling head-on housing for the urban poor. The fourth scheme, near Chowpatty beach, entailed another type of ‘improvement’ again; the laying out of infrastructure – roads, water mains, electricity, etc. – to encourage future development. While these schemes often required developers to construct certain types of buildings within specific timescales, particularly those meeting current sanitary and building codes, these schemes left the construction of buildings up to private developers and resulted in raising revenue for the Trusts, in the form of selling ‘improved’ plots of land. This final class of schemes, though the Trusts were often thought of primarily as institutions providing ‘improvement’ by raising the living standards for the urban poor, were not designed for that purpose at all. Instead, as was the case with this BIT scheme near the turn of the twentieth century, plots were sold to wealthier landowners and developers with profits used to continue to fund the expensive first and second types of schemes. By establishing these archetypal improvement schemes, the BIT helped shape the urban environments of other South and Southeast Asian cities looking to emulate Bombay. And while this confluence of development as it relates to the urban environment was one aspect of the emergence of an imperial urbanism, so too were a series discussions and debates around appropriate actions to take in a each city and at a particular time.

While the work of the BIT began with all three archetypal improvement schemes in 1898, the debate about the balance and funding of them emerged early in Bombay. Plans along the lines of Nagpada and Agripada, providing housing for the urban poor, proved particularly controversial in Bombay as early as 1902. Launching an attack on the scheme at Nagpada as it had been undertaken, the second Chairman of the BIT, S. Rebsch, argued that the development of future *chawls* should be along different lines. Lamenting ‘a disinclination to the utilization of capitalists’ to accommodate the urban poor, Rebsch hoped that the Trust could demonstrate to private landlords that housing for the urban poor could be profitable. Highlighting tensions between financial self-sufficiency and the realities of constructing new accommodation to meet both modern sanitary standards and budget constraints of the urban poor, Rebsch argued that rooms in the early buildings were too large, the *nabhini* and water-closets for the disposal of liquids awkwardly arranged, and the verandahs ‘useless as constructed’. While making his own

proposals to lower costs, Rebsch noted ‘that if the Trust can put forward no better method of housing the people in a sanitary manner, the problem of improving Bombay is financially impracticable’.²⁴ For Rebsch then, the Trust was first and foremost still an institution that needed to be financially self-sustaining, regardless of its more general responsibilities and mandates to facilitate urban ‘improvement’.

On the other side of the discussion were individuals who felt that the construction of sanitary accommodation for the urban poor, rented at rates they could afford, was itself a financial impossibility. For them, the situation required a financial investment, if the broader mandates and goals of the Trust were to be fulfilled. With Rebsch advocating less Trust money be spent on redevelopment schemes involving housing, a 1903 petition of the Bombay Ratepayers’ Association, an association of the city’s landowners and landlords, urged precisely the opposite. Accusing the Trust of ‘unpardonable apathy’ in its failure to provide accommodation to those who had been evicted or had had their home demolished, Jamietram Nanabha, Adesir Dadabhay Mody and Joseph Baptista argued that the Trust ‘may be required to direct its attention more particularly to the abatement of the evils of overcrowding’ and suggested the Trust provide more accommodation. Though the Ratepayers’ Association had a complicated relationship with the Trust – landlords expressed concern over the Trust’s ability to secure loans on more favourable terms – they advocated for an increased focus on the expensive business of rehousing.²⁵

This debate over the priorities of the Trust that emerged as early as 1903, whether it would prioritise financial self-sustainability over a mandate to conduct unprofitable improvement, would continue to reverberate across urban spaces in Asia beyond Bombay. As will be shown in later sections and chapters of this dissertation, discussed about ‘economic’ and ‘uneconomic’ improvement came to characterise approaches debated and adopted in pre and post-Second World War Rangoon, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The work of the Trust in Bombay, as well as similar institutions across British Asia, inspired a comparable series of debates about the nature of state intervention into the urban environment. These debates illustrate the extent of how transmission of urban ‘improvement’ not only sparked common changes in the physical development of urban spaces but also in ways that urbanites contested those changes. In other words, these debates about details of pursuing ‘improvement’ itself became a common characteristic of urban life in and an urbanism of South and Southeast Asia.

²⁴ MSA, GD, 1903, 31, 525, ‘Housing the Poorer and Working Classes through Agency of Capitalists’, S. Rebsch p. M-S 17-24, 6 March 1902.

²⁵ MSA, GD, 1905, 29, 522, ‘Bombay Ratepayers’ Association Petition to Governor in Council’, p. M-S 347, 368-9, 13 May 1903; Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 81-5.

Becoming a characteristic of improvement efforts, these debates continued to play out in Bombay through the work of the Trust. Rebsch, before his departure from the Trust in 1904, ended further construction of accommodation at Nagpada and sold off vacant land plots to developers instead. Nevertheless, the Trust did continue, to some extent, to build *chawls* for the urban poor.²⁶ One estimate from the Trust's 1908 annual report stated that the BIT housed about 8,000 people in *chawls* at Agripada, Chandanwady, Nagpada and Charney Road.²⁷ Though for a city estimated to have a population of nearly one million people in 1911, the housing provided by the Trust's *chawls* did not reach most of the intended poorer classes.²⁸ Estimates from 1913 suggest that Trust housed about 18,000 of the 800,000 people living in one-room tenements in its model *chawls*. This indicates both that the Trust continued to construct *chawls*, but also that the rate of construction failed to have much impact on the overall housing situation for the urban poor in Bombay.²⁹ Despite the slower pace of construction of accommodation, the Trust remained active through various small street schemes as well as schemes to expand the city along its urban edge. The 1914 map of BIT works, below, demonstrates both the extent to which previous Trust activities had been confined to the more dense, central urban areas and that future schemes projected a northward expansion of the urban area (Figure 3). Of particular note are the schemes towards the north of the map at Sion and Matunga. These large-scale schemes reflected efforts to expand the urban area outwards in a manner characterised by Rao as an Indian process of 'suburbanization'.³⁰

²⁶ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1903', p. iv-vi.

²⁷ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1908', p. iv.

²⁸ J.P Orr, *Density of Population in Bombay: A Lecture Delivered to the Bombay Cooperative Housing Association* (Bombay: British India Press, 1914), p. 1.

²⁹ MSA, GD, 1918-1919, 1142, G.A. Thomas, p. S-M 20, 30 September 1919.

³⁰ Rao, *House, but No Garden*, p. 21-4.

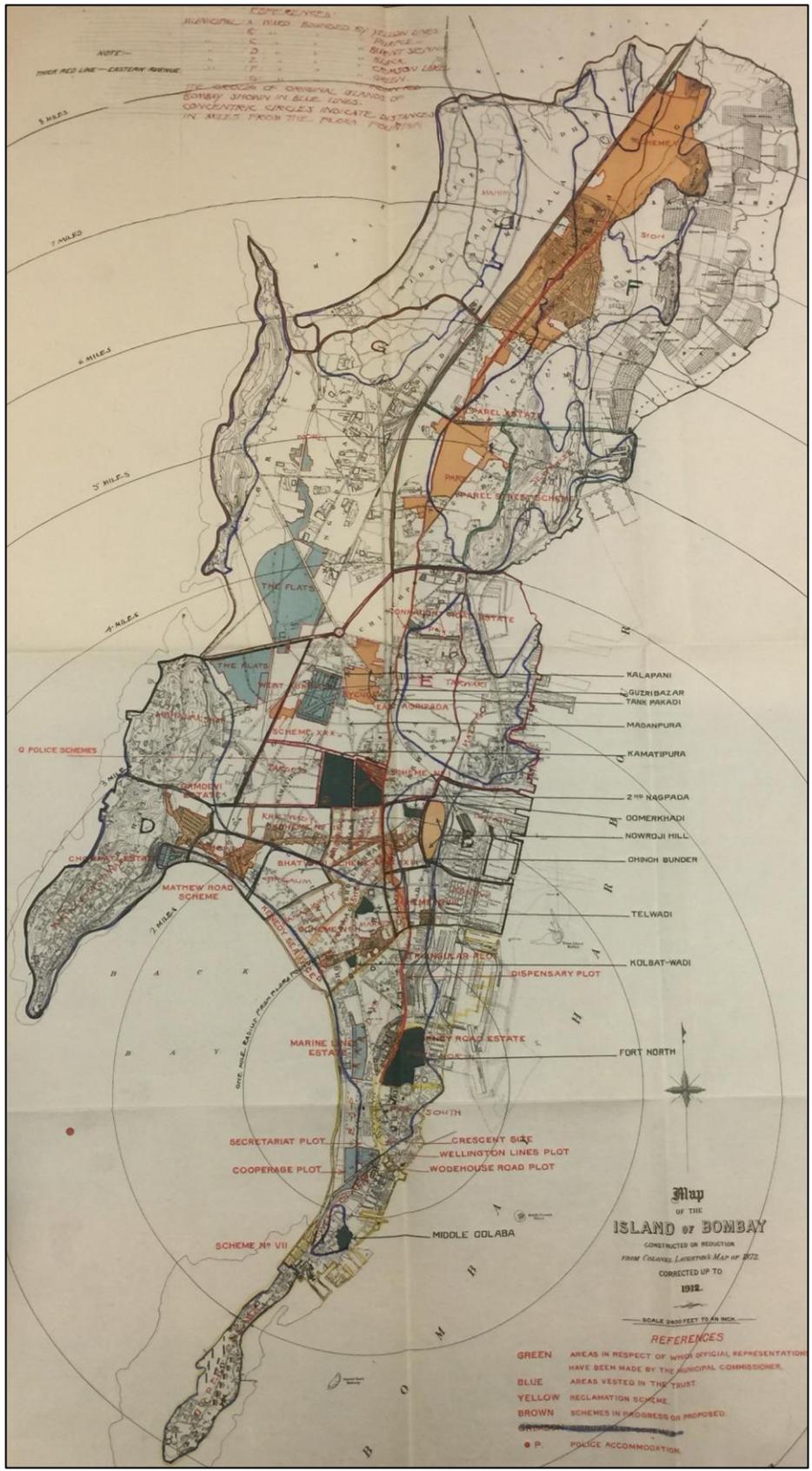


Figure 3. A 1914 map of Bombay detailing the various schemes of the Trust. Areas in black represented completed schemes like Nagpada; areas in blue represented vested in the Trust; and areas in brown represented Trust schemes in progress or proposed. © The British Library Board, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, W 5281, Density of Population in Bombay. Reprinted with permission.

Speculation and resistance to 'improvement'

During the intervening years, in which the shortage of housing for the urban poor in Bombay continued to balloon, the Trust ran into increasingly intense and expensive opposition to their redevelopment schemes. Groups like the Ratepayers' Association voiced their displeasure about what the workings of the Trust emphasised for the urban poor. Opposition amongst private landowners in the middle of on-going and proposed schemes as well as opposition amongst various communities constituencies – often, though not exclusively religious – affected by urban redevelopment, proved meaningful and long-lasting. For these groups, urban 'improvement' jeopardised their quotidian lives, be it in evicting them from their homes or in threatening their community livelihoods and places of worship.

By far the most widespread opposition to the work of the Trust came from individual landowners who found themselves amidst the BII's various schemes. While the Trust announced its proposals to the public, these proposals were subject to contestation by individual landowners through the legal system and the BMC, which could withhold the sanctioning of a scheme.³¹ These negotiations over land sales and acquisitions associated with various schemes significantly impacted the execution of these schemes. Two years into the scheme at Nagpada, the Trust reported that 29 of the planned 107 cases of property acquisition remained unresolved.³² And while a significant number of acquisition cases were prearranged through mutual private agreements, the Trust spent about two-thirds of its total land acquisition costs at Nagpada litigating cases through means of the Court.³³ The scheme at Queen's Road reported an even larger percentage of overall costs from litigation land acquisitions – nearly three-quarters of the land acquisition costs were spent through the Court rather than through private agreements.³⁴ Though the costs of land acquisition through the legal system relative to those made via private agreements tended to vary scheme to scheme and year to year, the negotiations also took time, dragging out for years at a time. Before moving on to other forms of opposition to the Trust's 'improvement' schemes, it is also worth noting here the uncertain nature of the opposition to the Trust's land acquisition. Although the proposed schemes were located in areas of the city deemed to be insanitary slums, the poorest residents of these neighbourhoods likely did not own these properties. And in any case, it seems unlikely that the poorest residents would

³¹ Orr, *Note on the Finances of the Bombay City Improvement Trust*, p. 1.

³² BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1901', p. 4.

³³ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1902', p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

have the financial resources to litigate land acquisition proposals made by the Trust. Rather, those pursuing litigation were more likely to be characterised amongst two groups: those who lived amongst these neighbourhoods, renting out nearby properties and those who owned the properties as investments, absentee landlords of sorts. Given reports of rampant speculation over the two decades of the Trust's work – both in undeveloped land markets as well in property markets within the heart of the city – it is likely that this form of opposition to the Trust came less from the urban poor, but from the propertied classes.³⁵

Though litigating the Trust over land acquisition was likely to be primarily an avenue along which wealthier people expressed opposition to the BIT, some amongst the urban poor voiced their opposition to the land acquisition of the Trust as well. Expressing his opposition to the acquisition of his land to the Chairman of the BIT, a Koli fisherman requested 'the Trustees spare my property and that of my fellow castemen – the fisherman of Koliwada – who have from time immemorial lived together in these quarters'.³⁶ Caught up in the Mandvi-Koliwada scheme first proposed by the Trust in 1902, a scheme designed for the 'removal of a grossly insanitary mass of buildings', the Koli fisherman expressed hope that Trust could accommodate himself and his community in or around the seaside of Koliwada.³⁷ Asking that his 'fellow castemen and fellow sufferers' be treated 'exceptionally and liberally' given the poor state of the fishing business in Koliwada, the fisherman's case illustrates that opposition to land acquisition did involve those beyond the wealthier classes. While securing assurances from Rebsch, the Chairman of Trust, that the Koliwada fishermen would be well compensated for their land and kept together during and after completion of the scheme, the Trust later backtracked on that assurance, arguing that all they could do was try to keep the community together at another location.³⁸

In addition to the litigation and petitioning on the part of individual and communal landowners, religious communities also exerted resistance to the Trust regimes. While historians of Bombay who have examined the Trust's work have covered some of the religious and communal opposition to its redevelopment, it is clear that the Trust's 'reordering' of the city had an affect upon a wider cross-section of the city's religious communities.³⁹ As early as 1898-1899 the Trusts had run into questions surrounding the redevelopment of religious sites, first seen in

³⁵ For more on speculation, see MSA, GD 1918-1919, 379, 'Discussion of the Bombay Co-operative Housing Association (Leaflet No. 33) - The Housing Problem: How it is being tackled in England by Mr. JP Orr', p. S-M 9-14; Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 88-9; Rao, *House, but No Garden*, p. 9, 32-5.

³⁶ MSA, GD, 1905, 29, 194 p. I, Koliwada Fisherman, p. M-S 59-60, 19 February 1902.

³⁷ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1902', p. 8; MSA, GD, 1905, 29, 194 Part I, Koliwada Fisherman, p. M-S 59-60, 19 February 1902.

³⁸ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 80-1.

³⁹ Ibid.

the course of the Queen's Road scheme. Taking measures to 'to make it unnecessary to acquire any portion of the Hormusjee Wadia Fire Temple or compound', the Queen's Road scheme reflected some Parsi pushback to the initial proposals. While the first annual report of the Trust then laid out as a general principle to ensure that 'neither synagogue, temple, mosque nor burial-ground is interfered with', the Trusts confronted this problem again just one year later in the course of the Gowalia Tank Scheme unfolding near Chowpatty beach.⁴⁰ Unsure of what precisely to do with properties belonging to the Parsi Panchayat, the Trust suggested that the religious buildings be left undisturbed – though technically the lands would be acquired and relet to the Parsis on a long-term lease.⁴¹ Beyond disrupting the Parsi community, the Trust again ignored its earlier pledge to avoid interfering with places of worship in 1907. Redeveloping four separate Hindu temples – the Temple of Vithoba Rakhmai, the Lingayet Temple, the Temple of Maruti, and the Temple of Mahadeo – the Trust displayed little respect for temple goers. Caught up in Scheme III, the scheme meant to connect the Back Bay to Elphinstone Bridge, the Lingayet Temple was moved to a nearby neighbourhood while the sacred ling of the temple remained *in situ* in the middle of a new road. The Temple of Vithoba Rakhmai, also in Scheme III, was likewise moved to a nearby neighbourhood while the Temple of Maruti was shifted elsewhere within the scheme. The Temple of Mahadeo, part of Scheme VIII, was partially demolished to make way for a wider Jamli Stret.⁴² Undoubtedly fuelling religious resentment, pushback on the Trust to alter proposals remaking the sacred spaces of the city represents one way in which the religious communities of the city also resisted Trust 'improvement'.

Opposition to the Trust's version of 'improvement' was then actively contested by a wide range of Asian social interests across Bombay. While many of those opposed were sympathetic to the general goals and mandates of the Trust, they contested the particular ways in which the Trust executed its 'improvements'. Despite protests from the poor and the rich, wealthier and better-connected classes and communities remained better equipped both to push back against the Trust and secure their adaptations of 'improvement' than poorer communities, like the Koli fishermen of Mandvi. These acts of adaptation and resistance to a Trust-imposed 'improvement' would become another component of an imperial urbanism that spread around the Indian Ocean world along with the institution of the Trust.

⁴⁰ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1899', p. 6-7.

⁴¹ BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1900', p. 8.

⁴² BL, IOR, V/24/2791, 'Administration Report for the year ending in 31st March 1907', p. iv-v.

'Improvement' outside of the Trust

While this section on Bombay has so far covered how the techniques deployed in the city came to influence urbanisms beyond Bombay, this section will examine one of the means of 'improvement' deployed by the BMC that was not adopted or adapted to other urban contexts. In doing so, this section hopes to illustrate the 'limits of interconnection' as well as emphasize that Bombay's example was adapted to other contexts rather than adopted in a wholesale fashion.⁴³

The creation of the Trust in 1898, itself both a reflection of and channel for burgeoning urban reform sentiments, did not itself much change the realities of 'improvement' utilised during the first months and years of the panic associated with the plague outbreak. While the previous chapter noted the sanitary and medical regimes which made their presence known in the residential spaces of the urban poor via the execution of 'improvements' – knocking through walls, removing roofs, etc. – variations of these regimes remained an important part of 'improvement' efforts in Bombay outside of the Trust's activities. That these regimes continued is demonstrated by debates over the cost of such schemes, regulated under the Epidemic Diseases Act and managed by the BMC. Writing the Government of Bombay in 1900, the BMC expressed the financial impossibility of asking homeowners in poor neighbourhoods to foot the bill for a prescriptive twenty-six-item list of compliance measures needed in the process of 'improving insanitary homes'.⁴⁴ Regulations addressed the height of ceilings, the size of rooms, the materials used to construct walls and floors, the presence of windows and ventilation grates, the dimensions of internal courtyards or *chowks* and the presence of water via *nabani* or sinks as well as water closets among other things. The BMC suggested that loans be made available to homeowners unable to afford the extensive retrofitting of their accommodation.⁴⁵ Agreeing with the consensus of the BMC and the BIT, the Government of Bombay aided the continuation of this 'improvement' programme by providing loans to poorer homeowners.⁴⁶

But despite those loans and a financial cost of approximately Rs. 27,000 during just the 1905-1906 year, few homes were signed off as completing the demanded improvements, as seen below (Table 1). While nearly 14,000 houses were 'inspected' by the BMC and nearly 10,000

⁴³ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*.

⁴⁴ MSA, GD, 1901, 73, 229, 'Report of the Committee appointed to draw up a representation to Government regarding improvements of insanitary houses under the Epidemic Diseases Act, 2 August 1900', p. M-S 88-9.

⁴⁵ MSA, GD, 1901, 73, 229, 'Memo of Instructions for the guidance of Officers of the Municipal Executive Engineer's Department, appointed to examine buildings in Bombay with regard to their fitness for human habitation', M.C. Murzban, p. M-S 101-4.

⁴⁶ MSA, GD, 1901, 73, 229, 'Opinion of the Honourable the Advocate General, No. 16, 7 March 1901', p. M-S 125.

‘improvement notices’ issued during the roughly ten years of the programme, just 2,881 certifications were made acknowledging that the improvements demanded had been completed. Acknowledging the nearly 10,000 notices still outstanding, the BMC argued that roughly two-thirds had ‘practically complied’ with the notices while one-third of the notices still required further action. The BMC also noted that nearly 1,000 structures were demolished as a result of the inspections.⁴⁷ While the numbers compiled over the decade appear impressive, it is clear from the data presented that ‘improvement’ efforts, at least through this avenue, were fizzling out by 1902. It appears that house inspections dropped off markedly that year and while certificates of completion were granted in larger numbers after 1902, less than 3,000 were issued over a decade-long time frame.⁴⁸

Year	Houses Inspected	Improvement Notices Served	Certificate Granted After Completion of Improvement Demanded
1897-1898	4886	738	0
1898-1899	2633	2086	18
1899-1900	2023	2819	98
1900-1901	1809	1769	490
1901-1902	1433	926	286
1902-1903	469	307	457
1903-1904	405	284	399
1904-1905	159	157	582
1905-1906	39	87	510
From 1st April up to date	11	8	41

Table 1. A table showing the number the number of homes completing demanded improvements. Source: Maharashtra State Archives, General Department, 1908, Volume 95, File 525, p. M-S 277-8.

⁴⁷ MSA, GD, 1908, 95, 525, Municipal Commissioner, p. M-S 277-81, 28 September 1906.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. M-S 277-81.

Though these cases perhaps represent the inevitable ebb in the continuation of plague-era policies after the initial panic subsided, they are important to note for two reasons. The first is perhaps the most obvious, in that this scheme met apparent resistance from Asians supposedly benefitting from ‘improvement’. While there were no riots protesting these measures, as there had been for anti-plague measures during the initial outbreak, the failure of so many to complete these ‘improvements’ in their homes speaks to a disconnect between the perspective of colonial officers and the perspective of quotidian residents of the city’s poorest neighbourhoods.⁴⁹ In addition to this theme of Asian interpretation and adaptation of ‘improvement’, the second reason these schemes are notable is that they were not part of a Bombay model packaged and displayed to inquiring officials representing municipalities across South and Southeast Asia. While the remainder of this chapter will examine the steps taken to ‘improve’ Rangoon and Singapore, neither city pursued house inspections and compulsory modifications outside of designated improvement schemes. That these sorts of schemes were not part of a common pattern of urban development moving between these cities bespeaks not only the intrusiveness of these particular measures but also the variation with which each city adapted measures to address local circumstances. As a legacy of the Epidemic Diseases Act, this method of ‘improvement’ was very much a legacy of the anti-plague response, a huge effort in the case of Bombay but less so in Rangoon and Singapore. And so while there were certainly many connections between the approaches and institutions of urban ‘improvement’ in British Asia, the techniques and mechanisms utilised to (re)develop particular urban spaces were not identical.

Bombay and beyond

And while this particular form of non-Trust ‘improvement’, directly inspecting and modifying individual homes without the contextualisation or pursuit of some wider improvement scheme, did not come to characterise the manifestations of a Bombay model that spread to cities around the Indian Ocean world, Bombay’s more general case study remained central to the transmission of an imperial urbanism. Writing to Bombay in 1902, the Resident of Mysore, Donald Robertson, described plans for an improvement scheme for Bangalore. Articulating two main objectives of the scheme – one, to acquire and clear the most congested urban areas and two, provide those evicted with new accommodation along the edge of the city

⁴⁹ For more on riots resulting from anti-plague measures in Bombay, see MSA, JD, 1898, 217, 669 part I & II, ‘Riots: Bombay on account of attempted removal of plague patients to hospital’; *Report of the Bombay Plague Committee, Appointed by Government Resolution No. 1204, 720P* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1898), p. 23-4; Klein, ‘Plague, Policy and Popular Unrest in British India’.

– Robertson inquired if there were any reports or notes from which the example of Bombay could be studied.⁵⁰ Provided with notes and proceedings by W.C. Hughes, the first Chairman of the BIT, shortly thereafter, Robertson’s inquiry illustrates the centrality with which Bombay’s example came to prefigure ‘improvement’ in other cities across South Asia.⁵¹ This centrality was further demonstrated by another example, when the Government of Bengal, considering creating a Trust of its own in Calcutta, wrote to the BMC in 1910. Describing that an Indian Civil Service Officer, Mr C.H. Bompas, had been put in charge of efforts to write a Bill creating the Trust, the Government of Bengal asked that Bompas be allowed to ‘have the advantage of studying locally the work of the Bombay Improvement Trust, the experience of which cannot fail to be of the greatest utility in decided upon the course of action to be adopted in Calcutta’.⁵² Demonstrating cogently that the case of Bombay was preeminent to those at the heart of adapting a Trust to the context of Calcutta, this correspondence reveals the centrality of Bombay in transmitting a Trust, and with it, a set of debates and patterns of urban life representing an imperial urbanism.

While the remainder of this chapter will cover the transmission and transmutation of the institutions of the Trusts as well as an imperial urbanism across South and Southeast Asia, including a similar petition by Rangoon’s municipal government to study the BIT’s example, it is worth recapping here the outlines of the Bombay model that became so influential to urban development in cities across British Asia. First was the creation of an Improvement Trust with a Board of Trustees, predominately European, representing a range of urban interests beyond just those of the municipality or government. Second was the financing of such a Trust – an institution that was expected to be financially self-sustaining except for an annual property tax based on the value of lands within the municipal borders and access to Government loans with terms more favourable than the private market. Third, was the adoption of a series of archetypal improvement schemes; briefly those designed to redesign single streets or small areas, those designed to provide Trust owned accommodation to the urban poor, those designed to expand the city via the extension of infrastructure like water, roads, electricity, etc. and, to a lesser extent, those designed to reclaim land for urban use. Along with this Bombay model of urban ‘improvement’ came a series of interrelated urban realities, namely the exposition of differences between Asian and colonial interpretations of ‘improvement’ as well as debates about the role of Government in providing housing for the urban poor. Though this section has covered well-

⁵⁰ MAS, GD, 1902, 81, 214, Donald Robertson, p. M-S 61-2, 5 June 1902.

⁵¹ MAS, GD, 1902, 81, 214, W.C. Hughes, p. M-S 69-70, 3 July 1902.

⁵² MSA, GD, 1910, 51, 452, H. Wheeler, p. M-S 12-3, 12 November 1910.

tread historiographical ground in understanding the processes of urban improvement in early twentieth century Bombay, it has begun to construct a comparative framework within which Bombay's influence on other urban contexts can begin to be understood.

Adapting a Bombay Model in Rangoon

This section argues that a Bombay model, centred around the BIT, was the primary influence on urban development as it related to public housing and an urban environment of poverty in Rangoon during the first three decades of the twentieth century. It begins by analysing debates in the 1910s about creating an improvement or development trust in Rangoon and goes on to demonstrate Bombay's continuing influence on Rangoon's discourses. It then goes on to examine the works of Rangoon's Trust, the Rangoon Development Trust (RDT), to understand the extent to which an imperial urbanism shaped the city's urban environment. In doing so, this analysis expands a fairly extensive historical literature on the BIT to consider these institutions' wider role in promoting a model that was adapted in cities across South and Southeast Asia during the first half of the twentieth century. As the following sections of this chapter argue, it was this Bombay model that served as the foundation from which an imperial urbanism spread across cities in British Asia.

Bombay's experiences creating an improvement trust to clear slums, resettle squatters and reclaim land can be seen as influencing the debate over taking similar measures in Rangoon from the outset. A 1917 report on town planning in Rangoon that ultimately justified creating the RDT noted that 'as long ago as 1899, the Government of India suggested a separate trust to perform the work of Land Reclamation in Rangoon'.⁵³ While the Government of Burma made inquiries into Bombay's reclamation projects and a land reclamation fund began operating in the 1910s, it did not have the kind of financial mechanisms of an improvement trust in place to keep it monetarily solvent.⁵⁴ Aside from its financial failings, the land reclamation fund carried out some schemes that would have fallen under the responsibilities of an improvement trust had one existed in Rangoon at the time. A report of a 1917 suburban development committee pointed out 'that improvement of slum areas upon the Government estate will no doubt be an early duty

⁵³ BL, IOR, V/27/780/12, 1917, 'Report of the Departmental Committee on Town Planning, Burma, Rangoon', p. 78.

⁵⁴ MSA, GD, 1910, 50, 460, p. M-S 21, 'Information required by the Government of Burma concerning the conduct of Improvement projects in Bombay City', 4 June 1910; BL, IOR, V/26/780/12, 1917, 'Report of the Suburban Development Committee, Rangoon', p. 12-3.

of the Reclamation Fund when its finances revive'.⁵⁵ Though a trust did not materialize until 1920 in Rangoon, Bombay's experiments played a role in influencing debates in cities around Asia littoral. In addition to setting the stage for the land reclamation projects and the creation of new trusts, the BIT also served as a model which municipal authorities from other cities, like Rangoon, could study. Gavin Scott, the then President of Rangoon's Municipal Committee, specifically visited Bombay and enquired into the city's municipal system and 'studied the working of the Bombay Improvement Trust'.⁵⁶ For those authorities working to set up the RDT, Bombay's example clearly influenced how urban redevelopment could be conceived in Rangoon.

At the same time developments in Bombay were influencing debates about the built environment of urban poverty in Rangoon, an imperial urbanism was being constructed around poverty in the city. Though Rangoon's development projects and improvement schemes were not built to the same scale as they were in Bombay, these projects and schemes represent both an adaptation of a Bombay model that was also exported to other cities like Calcutta and Singapore. Further, these projects represent an application of practices and techniques that constituted an imperial urbanism in Rangoon and beyond.

Demography of Poverty: A comparison

To begin to understand how Rangoon's planning authorities adapted a Bombay model, this sub-section briefly describes the city as well as the demography of urban poverty in Rangoon during the late colonial period. Though J. S. Furnivall, an Indian Civil Service officer and sociologist who founded the Burma Research Society, coined the term 'plural society' to describe Rangoon's diverse but segmented communities, Rangoon was often described as an 'Indian city'.⁵⁷ Characterized as more racially diverse than other port cities in the British Raj – like Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras – Rangoon's residents were counted as roughly half immigrants from British India's other provinces in a 1931 census.⁵⁸ In testimony for a 1927 report on public health, Gavin Scott, the Municipal Commissioner Rangoon, estimated there were 250,000

⁵⁵ BL, IOR, V/26/780/12, 1917, 'Report of the Suburban Development Committee, Rangoon', p. 12-3.

⁵⁶ *Report of the Rangoon Development Trust Enquiry Committee, 1941* (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationary, 1941), p. 9-10; BL, IOR, V/27/780/12, 1917, 'Report of the Departmental Committee on Town Planning, Burma', p. 77.

⁵⁷ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*; Bayly, 'Occasional Paper No. 3, Rangoon (Yangon) 1939-49: The Death of a Colonial Metropolis,' p. 1; Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 373-4.

⁵⁸ J. J. Bennison, *Census of India 1931*, vol. XI, Part II - Tables (Rangoon: Government Print and Stationary, 1933), p. 65-6.

'coolies' in the city most of the year making up 'more than half the population.'⁵⁹ Though some of these informal and unskilled workers had ancestral ties to Burma, census figures suggest that Indian immigrants constituted more than eighty-five per cent of Rangoon's 'unskilled and semi-skilled' labour market.⁶⁰ In terms of understanding then the demography of urban poverty in Rangoon, Indians born outside of Burma constituted the largest share of the city's poor.

Comprising the most populous segment of the urban poor in Rangoon before the Second World War, Indian immigrants attracted much attention from planning authorities looking to improve their living conditions. A map of Rangoon in 1915 both illustrates this focus on a specifically Indian poor from the outset of urban improvement in Rangoon as well as speaks to the application of Dirks' 'ethnographic state' to areas along South Asia's periphery (Figure 4).⁶¹ As part of the report that called for the creation of the RDT to clear 'slums' around the city, this map identified in solid orange 'the poorer classes, largely Indian, in large or small tenements and huts & houses without compounds.'⁶² Conflating Indians with Rangoon's poor, the map confirms that the areas scheduled first to be cleared by the RDT are those inhabited by Indians in the east of the city, towards Pazundaung Creek. Fifteen years later, after a decade of similar RDT schemes, a statement of objects and reasons for a Rangoon Labour Housing Bill argued that 'a large number of Indian workpeople would be thrown on the streets' unless 'the strict enforcement of the Municipal bye-laws governing lodging houses...were coupled with the provision of additional accommodation'.⁶³ Along with the statement of objects and reasons, the Commissioner of the Irrawaddy Division further illustrates this conflation, having written about the Rangoon Labour Housing Bill that 'in the first place the origin of this problem of deficiency housing in Rangoon is ex hypothesi an Indian cooly problem'. Continuing that 'without them [the Indian coolies] the problem would be nothing like so serious, and would probably not require the intervention of the Provincial Government at all', the Commissioner further demonstrated the emphasis authorities placed on improving Rangoon's urban environment of poverty vis-à-vis improving the conditions facing Indian immigrants working as temporary and unskilled labourers.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ NAM, 4758, 4/1(21), 1927, 'Report on the Public Health of Rangoon Vol. II', p. 9.

⁶⁰ Bennison, *Census of India 1931*, XI, Part II - Tables, p. 301.

⁶¹ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Saha, 'Is It India? Colonial Burma as a 'Problem' in South Asian History'.

⁶² The report defined slums in 'the accurate sense of an area overcrowded with irregularly disposed buildings and not laid out in streets'. BL, IOR, 1917, V/27/780/12, 'Report of the Departmental Committee on Town Planning, Burma', p. 93.

⁶³ NAM, 16665, 1/15e, 1931, J.A. Maung Gyi 'Statement of Objects and Reasons', 'The Rangoon Labour Housing Bill', p. 6, 19 August 1931.

⁶⁴ NAM, 16665, 1/15e, 1931, Lieut-Col. E. Butterfield to the Sec. to the Gov't of Burma, 'The Rangoon Labour Housing Bill', p. 18, 21.

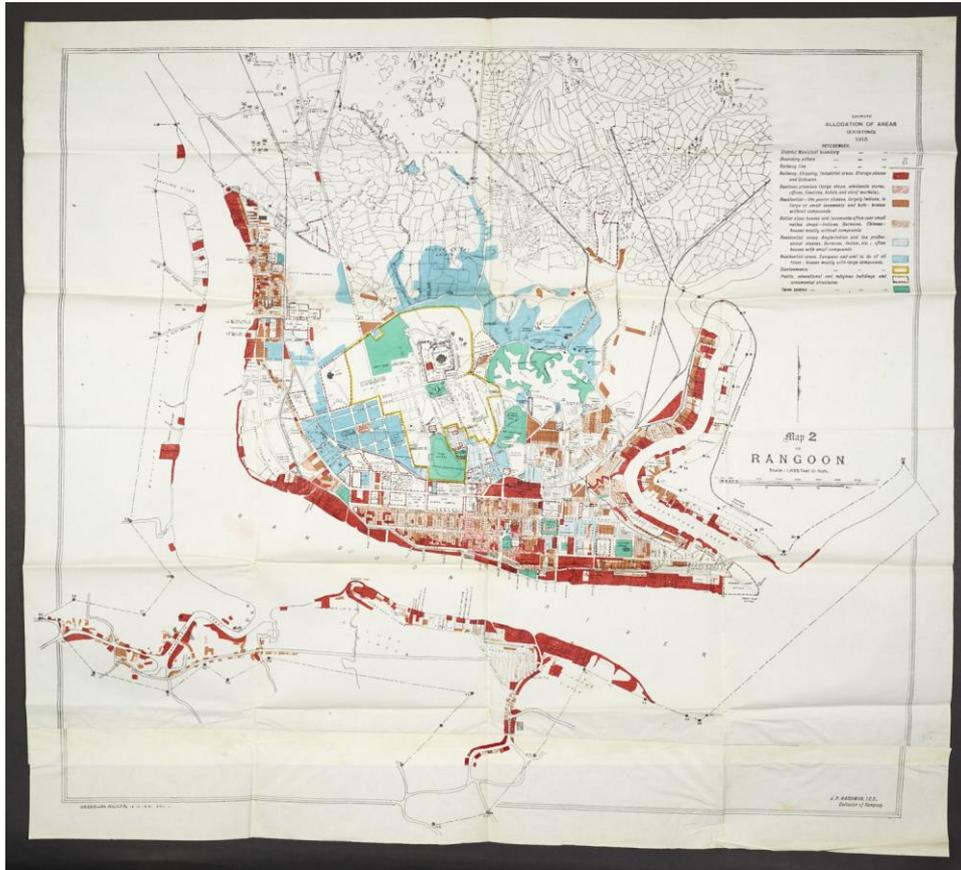


Figure 4. A 1915 map of Rangoon depicting the socio-economic divisions in the city. Source: © The British Library Board, IOR/V/26/780/12, Map 2. Reprinted with permission.

While unskilled and semi-skilled labourers born in India attracted attention from government and local planning officials, the duration and nature of these immigrants' stay in Rangoon posed a challenge to the city's planning authorities. Improvement schemes completed in Bombay were designed largely with workers from the city's mill industry in mind.⁶⁵ Though this kind of millwork would still have been classified as unskilled or semi-skilled labour in Bombay, the demography of poverty in Bombay then varied from Rangoon's urban poor. Rangoon's unskilled and semi-skilled Indian immigrants, overwhelmingly men, often came alone to the city and to Burma on short-term labour contracts.⁶⁶ In contrast, Bombay's urban poor tended to migrate

⁶⁵ For example, a marked drop in occupied rooms in a BDD properties at Sewri, Naigaum, DeLisle Road and Worli was noted as coinciding with a 'mill-strike'. See MSA, PWD DD, 1926, 26, 'Report on the working of the Development Directorate for the year ending 31 March 1926', p. 44-8. See also the attribution of a mill strike in driving a spike in renters in arrears in MSA, PWD DD, 1924, 3A, 'Bombay and Suburban Area. Circulars, Agenda minutes, etc., in connection with the meetings of the Advisory Committee', p. 116.

⁶⁶ An annual report on the working of Indian factories (India here including Burma) describes labour as temporary, 'since the labour in Burma is almost entirely imported and does not look on this country as its

back and forth from the countryside.⁶⁷ While many migrants did not bring their families to Bombay, some retained more conventional family structures, a point often discussed amongst housing and planning officials concerned about families overcrowding single room *chamls*.⁶⁸ The demography of Rangoon's poverty then necessitated adapting a Bombay model to a more transitory and less conventionally structured population.

Constructing an imperial urbanism in Rangoon

Adaptations of this model in Rangoon can be seen in efforts to focus on regulating 'lodging houses' meant for more temporary and transitory labour as well as enforcing mandatory requirements guaranteeing each person floor space in shared accommodation for the poor.⁶⁹ A report by members of the Rangoon Social Service League submitted as part of the 1927 public health report highlighted the problems of lodging houses, noting that on Godwin street 'the sleepers swarmed out from the rooms like bees from a hive'. Documenting cases of overcrowding, the report also stated that there were, 'for example, 25 where 11 were supposed to be; 31 where 11 were supposed to be, etc.'⁷⁰ It also describes the ventilation in these houses as 'non-existent' and continues that the 'general filth is indescribable'.⁷¹ Apart from the report by the Social Service League, the main body of the public health report concluded, 'the exhalations from overcrowded, sweating humanity lying actually on top of one another, and breathing the same foul atmosphere over and over again, must be sufficient to turn the strongest stomach'.⁷² While this emphasis on the housing conditions for more mobile labourers itself suggests an adaptation of the Bombay model, the report's conclusions represent another adaptation to Rangoon's environment, namely that constructing housing was largely left to private means while

permanent home', see NAM, 152, 2/1, 1897-1940, 'Annual Report on the working of the Indian Factories Act, 1911, in Burma for the year 1922', p. 2, 'Reports on the working of The India Factory Act, 1897-1940. Reports on the working of Municipalities 1876-77 to 1881-1882 (to the end of Rangoon Municipality)'. A 1927 report on rent control describes labourers in Rangoon and Burma, 'this class of people stay in Rangoon for a short time en route to districts and those returning from districts remain here for a short time on their way to India so that Rangoon is more or less a clearing house for the whole of Burma'. For more see NAM, 11865, 4/19(22), 1960, 'Report of the Committee appointed to enquire into the effects of the removal of rent control in Rangoon', p. 84-5; Census data points to the gender imbalance of Indian communities in Burma, see Bennison, *Census of India 1931*, XI, Part II - Tables, p. 6-7.

⁶⁷ Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*, p. 124-67.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 159-65; MSA, PWD DD, 1921, 702, H.S. Jevons to Sir Lawless Hepper, p. 17-29, 32-3.

⁶⁹ A 1927 Public Health Report on Rangoon defines lodging houses as 'one room in a row of similar rooms often no more than 12 ½ feet wide and, allowing for the space at the back of the lot for kitchen and latrine, probably 30 or 40 feet deep', see NAM, 4756, 4/6(21), 1927, 'Report on the Public Health of Rangoon Vol. I', p. 30.

⁷⁰ One inspection found 'over 50 coolies' where 'the number allowed by regulation was 9', see Ibid., p. 32.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 86.

⁷² Ibid., p. 32.

Trust monies were instead spent on developing communications (i.e., roads and thoroughfares) and preparing house sites.⁷³

The fact that this report was completed seven years after the foundation of the RDT and continues to describe these problems of housing the city's poor in ways reminiscent of the period before the work of the RDT is perhaps the strongest evidence of an adaptation of a pre-war Bombay model. Though a minority of the public health report's authors, represented by Narayana Rao, argued that 'providing cheap sanitary dwellings to the poor and working classes' was an integral part of 'the improvement and expansion of the City of Rangoon' with which the RDT was charged, the majority agreed that 'there never was any intention that the Trust should provide buildings'.⁷⁴ Arguing that preparing house sites and constructing communications constituted a means through which Rangoon was improved and expanded, the majority position largely informed the policy decisions of those on the RDT and in Rangoon's municipal government. Though Rao articulated that 'no one has come forward up to now to undertake the construction of dwellings for labour', his points ultimately did not push the RDT to take up its own housing schemes.⁷⁵

Even in this less direct method of tackling the problem of housing, the RDT faced calls to be more determinate. The Rangoon Social Services League strongly argued, along with Rao, that the RDT should take a more active role in constructing housing. They noted that even on an estate where the RDT had constructed roads and prepared housing sites, 'there remain many old houses whose construction is very faulty, the general sanitation for which can be described as hopeless'. Suggesting that 'something more comprehensive is needed which will have to include something like small model dwelling houses', the League advocated for a stronger role for the RDT in intervening in the living conditions of Rangoon's poor.⁷⁶ Rao and the Social Services League were not the only residents of Rangoon recognising that the RDT did not live up to its potential. In a letter translated from Burmese as evidence submitted as part of the public health report, Maung Ba Kyaing, a landowner in Rangoon, expressed that 'the poor classes are not benefitted by the work of the Rangoon Development Trust'.⁷⁷

The divide that developed in the 1920s over the work of the RDT continued to be a point of debate into the 1930s. A report on the effects of removing rent control measures in Rangoon, the controls themselves modelled off of measures adopted in Bombay, highlighted again the

⁷³ Ibid., p. 37-8.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 61, 37.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

views of a minority advocating for the construction of *chawls* for the poor in the city.⁷⁸ While the main text of the report noted that by December 1929 a local government committee ‘is in favour of the erection of *chawls* and recognizes that they could only be built and rented at a financial loss’, it went on to say that that the committee writing the report ‘is unable to favour this suggestion which amounts to subsidizing, at the expense of the general tax-payer of the municipality, certain classes of buildings’.⁷⁹ Though this argument represents an evolution of the position against adopting a Bombay model of constructing housing for the poor, it ultimately precluded the large-scale construction of *chawls* in Rangoon before the Second World War.

Despite the report on rent in Rangoon effectively blocking the RDT from adopting more aggressive anti-poverty measures, evidence submitted by residents of Rangoon as part of testimony for the report demonstrates a public displeasure with a lack of improvement in the city’s housing stock, particularly for the poor. Mr. S. N. Thakker, a resident at 93/151-155 Fraser Street gave testimony to the committee about his eviction from his unit and argued that ‘of all the hardships a poor man has to experience in Rangoon, the cruelty of the landlords is the worst’. Explaining the process of his eviction, Mr. Thakker, who had lived at the Fraser Street address for almost 15 years, noted that he was asked to leave ‘because he had made a complaint’ about the ‘considerable repairs’ that the house needed.⁸⁰ Dr. P. A. Nair, a resident at 207-209 Lewis Street, described ‘many cases where more than one family is sharing the same flat’ and that there was ‘more overcrowding since the removal of rent control’.⁸¹ Maung Kywin Gyan, a resident of the Tatmye Quarter in Pazundaung, testified that tenants paid double in his quarter for the only available leases, ‘squatter leases’. He described that the ‘sanitation is bad’ and the ‘water supply inadequate’ in his neighbourhood and continued that there was a lack of electric lighting and ‘very defective’ drainage.⁸²

Mr. S. A. A. Pillay, a pleader in Rangoon, testified about the systemic rent increases that hit the city’s tenants, documenting cases in the city’s iconic Sofaer’s building where rent increased forty per cent.⁸³ Mr. C. K. Tambe, another lawyer in Rangoon, charged that the RDT increased ground rents in East Rangoon ‘by as much as 300 per cent to 400 per cent’ and argued that

⁷⁸ NAM, 11865, 4/19(22), 1960, ‘Report of the Committee appointed to enquire into the effects of the removal of rent control in Rangoon’, p. 3-4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸³ Mr. Pillay also noted cases where landlords ‘have taken more than 100 per cent, 150 per cent and 200 per cent increases’, see *Ibid.*, p. 69.

increases in rent had caused overcrowding and ultimately a spike in cases of tuberculosis.⁸⁴ Mr. Tambe was not the only one linking disease and death to overcrowding, Mr. C. Thoy, the Secretary of Rangoon's Tenants Association outlined a similar argument in his deposition to the committee.⁸⁵ For those living in Rangoon's poorer neighbourhoods or for those representing them, the removal of rent control measures demonstrated the lack of improvement and lack of commitment to improving housing stock for the poor living in the city.

Their testimony stood in stark contrast to those like the Municipal Assessor, Mr. C. B. Rennick, who testified that limiting the number of people staying in lodging houses by putting 'coolies in sanitary buildings' would call into question if 'economic' or profitable 'rent will ever be obtained from them'.⁸⁶ Even the dissenters who advocated for a more expansive role of government in developing housing for Rangoon's poor noted that 'we do not see how it is possible in the near future to contemplate the erection of chawls' because of problems supplying enough water.⁸⁷ In this way then, the report on rent controls in Rangoon illustrates the obstacles facing the city in adapting a Bombay model of urban development around poverty to a Burmese context.

While *chawl*-like housing schemes were ultimately never constructed in colonial Rangoon, the RDT's works laying out roads and developing lands along the edges of the city constituted both the adaptation of a Bombay model of urban development built around poverty as well as the construction of an imperial urbanism in Rangoon. Despite the hurdles facing the development of tenement housing for working-class Rangoon, the RDT did engage in some more 'successful' endeavours. Two pictures taken from the 1926-27 annual report of the RDT are a testament to the kind of work carried out by the RDT (Figure 5).⁸⁸ The first image shows the Sangyaung settlement during 'road works' while the right picture shows the same settlement after the completion of the RDT's works. Though the captions mentioned only 'road works', it is clear the images are meant to convey more a sense of general improvement. The first image depicts thatched roof houses and a curved street winding down the middle of the image in contrast to the rightmost image. Capturing the tiled roof buildings, straight streets with signage, drainage channels and manicured vegetation pushed to the edges of the road; the second image exemplifies the RDT's reclamation works around the city and illustrates visions of a reclaimed Rangoon.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁸ BL, IOR, V/24/2963, 'Seventh Annual Report of the Trustees: For the Development of the City of Rangoon on the working of the Rangoon Development Trust, for the year 1926-27'.

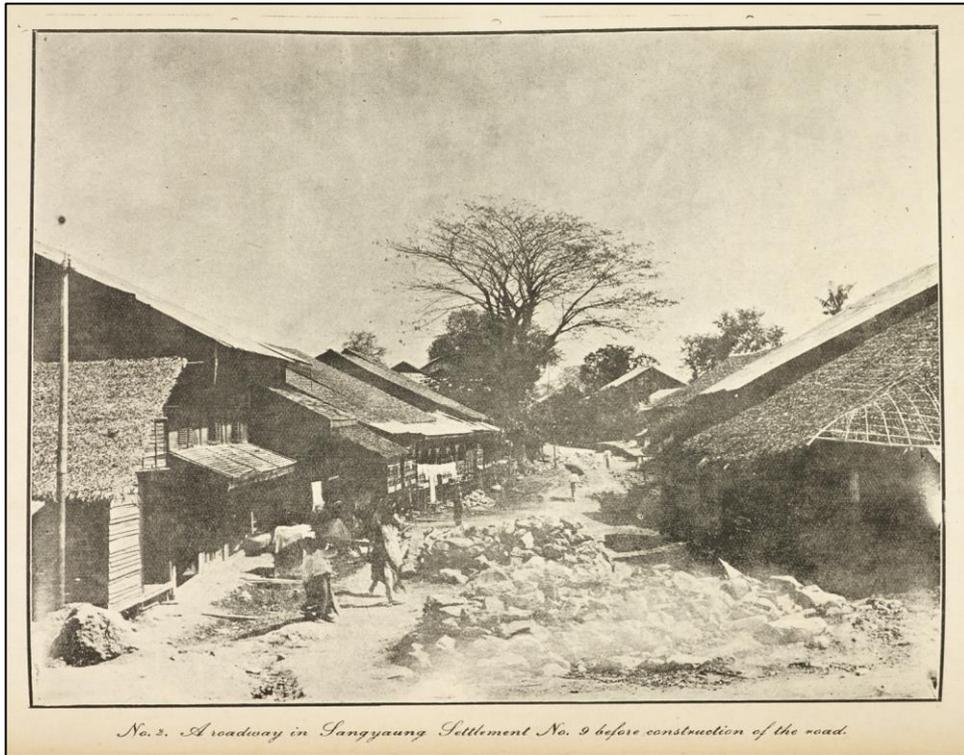


Figure 5. Pictures from before and after the completion of works around the Sangyaung settlement, Rangoon, carried out by the RDT from 1926-1927. Source: © The British Library Board, IOR/V/24/2963. Reprinted with permission.

This section has described how an imperial urbanism developing in Bombay around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to influence the development of Rangoon

through the mid-1920s. And while it revealed that little housing for the urban poor was constructed in Rangoon, it also demonstrated the litany of other ‘improvement’ projects nonetheless played an important part in shaping Rangoon’s urban environment. Having established Bombay’s role in developing an imperial urbanism and its spread to port cities like Rangoon, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the transmission and adoption of this urbanism in Singapore.

Developing a Trust in Singapore

While Rangoon’s officials expressed interest in and began adapting Bombay’s example of urban ‘improvement’ as early as the first decade of the twentieth century, Singaporean officials took longer to adapt and adopt more aggressive urban redevelopment measures. Though the previous chapter focused on the conditions of Singapore’s urban poor during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as the role of disease and sanitation science in influencing the emergence of urban ‘improvement’ discourses in the city, this section examines the extent to which Singapore’s urban environment transformed from roughly 1910 to 1930. Focusing on the evolution of the urban environment of poverty in Singapore, this section argues that Singapore increasingly took cues from the approach of Bombay and the Bombay Improvement Trust. In doing so, this section contextualises the role of various discourses and schemes within an imperial urbanism taking hold in cities across the Indian Ocean world as well as analyses the implications of the 1927 creation of the Singapore Improvement Trust on this emergent imperial urbanism.

Despite W.J. Simpson’s display of disdain for the BIT in his 1907 *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of Singapore*, Singapore’s municipal government adopted elements of the Bombay approach as early as 1910 to ‘improve’ Kampong Kapur towards the northwest of the urban area.⁸⁹ While Simpson had argued in his report that legal measures be adopted and enforced to ensure that buildings met certain standards with regards to the amount of light and ventilation afforded to each room, the number of square feet available per occupant as well as the maximum density of neighbourhoods, he stopped short of calling for wholesale schemes designed to radically change the architectural and quotidian character of scheduled neighbourhoods. Specifically, he called for, ‘the opening up of the dark and ill-ventilated rears of back-to-back

⁸⁹ Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 42-3.

houses, and the demolition, partial or complete, of unhealthy and obstructive buildings' that would 'improve the ventilation of the houses and the block or area in which they are located'.⁹⁰ That mandate, while more extensive than existing statutes in Singapore, was far less soaring than the mandate of the BIT, which was 'entrusted with the work of making new streets, opening out crowded localities...and the construction of sanitary dwellings for the poor'.⁹¹ The specificity with which Simpson constructed his recommendation suggests a reformation of the existing urban environment focused more on a building-by-building, architectural approach than on a neighbourhood-level approach common to Bombay's 'improvement' schemes. That the Singapore Municipality then undertook a wholesale scheme to 'improve' Kampong Kapur, the area 'bounded by Syed Alwie Road on the North, Jalan Besar on the East, Dunlop Street on the South and Serangoon Road on the West', demonstrates an interest in Bombay-style improvement schemes.⁹²

The scale of the scheme, encompassing about a dozen blocks or approximately an area of about one-quarter square kilometre, was not the only indication of the scheme's more involved undertaking. Approving the plan in April 1910, the Municipal Commissioners envisioned a scheme under which existing buildings deemed insanitary or which interfered with a strict schedule of streets and back lanes would be demolished entirely. These streets would then be raised and paved with concrete drains installed along either side. Once these tasks were completed, the plan called for the installation of water mains, gas mains and streetlamps along with the establishment of an expanded Conservatory Department to 'regularly scavenge' the area. Estimated to cost \$670,000 at the time, the plan hoped to raise cash and reduce costs to \$230,000 by reselling the significant number of demolished plots.⁹³ To put the scale of those costs into perspective, Singapore set aside ten million dollars in 1926 to establish an 'Improvement Fund' along with the SIT and that fund lasted approximately twenty years.⁹⁴ Taking that on average \$500,000 of that fund was spent annually, the costs of the Kampong Kapur scheme would have been one half to one whole year's funding; and that at a time when the Trust was building up its profile around Singapore. The financial outlay of the 1910 Kampong Kapur scheme, along with the kinds of works it planned to complete, was then

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁹¹ MSA, GD, 1899, 32, 36, 'Administration Report of the City of Bombay Improvement Trust for the year ending on the 31st March 1899', p. M-S 227-8.

⁹² NAS, HDB 1001, TS 1081/12, 'Singapore Municipality: Kampong Kapur Improvement Scheme 1910', p. 00072-3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ J.M. Fraser, 'Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947', (Singapore: G.H. Kiat & Co., Ltd., 1948), p. 4.

substantially different from the circumscribed, building-by-building approach advocated by Simpson just three years earlier. Subsequent progress reports on the scheme indicate the execution of the scheme largely mirrored the earlier proposals.⁹⁵

While the 1910 Kampong Kapur ‘improvement’ scheme demonstrates many of aspects of the preceding schemes of the BIT in Bombay, it is also worth noting that the single scheme itself does not note a wholesale adaptation of the Bombay model. Rather, the isolation of the scheme, when compared with the few dozen such schemes pursued in the initial years of the BIT, emphasizes the gradual process through which ideas of an imperial urbanism transmitted and transmuted across urban centres along Asia littoral. As was demonstrated earlier by the case of Rangoon earlier in the chapter, bits and pieces of a Bombay model were studied, debated and adapted to suit a series of local concerns and circumstances. While ‘reclamation’ projects were initially adapted to Rangoon more enthusiastically, more frequent clearance and planning efforts after the formation of the RDT eventually became parts of the Trusts’ work. Similarly, in Singapore, municipal authorities experimented with one such ‘improvement’ scheme, but, as seen in the pursuit of this single scheme, did not entirely adopt the approach of Bombay. Rather, Bombay provided an example for municipal officials in Singapore that they could adapt, along with Simpson’s advice, in the form of the Kampong Kapur scheme.

Though previous examinations of Singapore’s urban development by Yeoh and Chang have not specifically examined this Kampong Kapur scheme, this scheme sharpens our understanding of ‘improvement’ efforts in Singapore as it relates to transmission of an imperial urbanism around the Indian Ocean world.⁹⁶ While Yeoh begins her monograph contextualising Singapore within the milieu of the colonial city, she only notes that Simpson had spent time in Hong Kong, Calcutta and Cape Town in the footnotes.⁹⁷ Despite this contextualisation, Yeoh leaves open an examination of comparisons and connections between the implications of Simpson’s work in these imperial cities to future scholars. Understanding the connected histories of urban development can help contextualise the projects and schemes taken in any one city to understand and appreciate its implications and consequences more fully.⁹⁸ While Chang’s more recent monograph draws connections between Singapore and the Indian Improvement Trusts, he fails to draw distinctions between the varied methods of ‘improvement’ – slum clearance, redevelopment schemes, town-planning schemes and estate development – and institutional

⁹⁵ NAS, HSB 1001, IS 477/12, ‘Reports Progress on Kampong Kapur’; Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Puru Shotam, *Singapore's Little India: Past, Present, and Future* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

⁹⁶ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*; Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*.

⁹⁷ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, p. 94, 127.

⁹⁸ Sugarman, ‘Building Burma’.

relationships with the municipal government that characterised the varied approaches of each city.⁹⁹ Though Simpson's 1907 report on Singapore certainly called for an improvement of sorts, Simpson's primary focus on sanitation and health denote a different approach than was taken by the Improvement and Development Trusts. Simpson says as much in the section of the Report focused on recommendations, writing, 'a conspicuous defect in the constitution of the Trust [in Bombay] is the absence...of expert medical and sanitary members', before outlining how this mistake could be avoided in Singapore.¹⁰⁰ While the establishment of urban 'improvement' regimes, along with their implications of order and colonial control, was a common denominator of sorts for an imperial urbanism, this process was lumpy – uneven and set to a different pace in each city.¹⁰¹ The Kampong Kapur scheme is then important in this urban story as it relates to Singapore in that it represented a wholesale attempt to redevelop an existing neighbourhood. While the new buildings constructed as a result of the scheme may have met Simpson's proposed building codes, the Kampong Kapur scheme occurred despite his tepid evaluation of Bombay's methods.

The significance of the Kampong Kapur scheme is not so much a challenge to Simpson's approach developed in Hong Kong and Singapore as it is an acknowledgement of the growing influence of Bombay as a central reference point moving forward with urban 'improvement' schemes. After all, Bombay had featured more prominently than any other Asian city as a point of comparison in Simpson's report, featured roughly as prominently as the case of London – seen by a more traditional scholarship as the source of knowledge within a colony-metropole relationship.¹⁰² These references to urban development in Bombay continued during the 1910s in Singapore, particularly in the development and debate around a 1918 Housing Commission.

The 1918 commission, established by Governor of the Straits Settlements Arthur Young, was called to help tackle the continuing problems relating to the housing of the urban poor in Singapore. Utilising a similar set of data to Simpson's 1907 report, in some cases reproducing the images included as part of the Simpson Report, the Commission called for the creation of an Improvement Trust, within the purview of the municipal government, to lead and manage future

⁹⁹ Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, p. 142-6.

¹⁰⁰ Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 42-3.

¹⁰¹ Cooper, 'What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For?'; Kidambi, 'Housing the Poor in a Colonial City'; Richard Harris and Robert Lewis, 'Colonial Anxiety Counted: Plague and Census in Bombay and Calcutta, 1901', in *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene and Cultures of Planning in Asia*, ed. Robert Peckham and David M. Pomfret (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013).

¹⁰² Home, *Of Planting and Planning*.

urban development efforts.¹⁰³ While the name of such an institution, an improvement trust, was evocative of a connection between actions taken in Bombay and Calcutta in 1898 and 1911, as well as simultaneous efforts to establish a Trust in Rangoon, the financial structure of the subsequent SIT also demonstrates how the Trust was modelled along the lines of Bombay. Simpson had noted in 1907 that ‘a contribution of 2 per cent on the rateable value’ of property was made by the BMC to the BIT.¹⁰⁴ Discussing the workings of the SIT from 1927-1947, it was noted that an ‘improvement rate’, a taxed percentage of the value of all houses and lands within the municipal boundaries, was set at 2 per cent the year of the creation of the Trust.¹⁰⁵

But while the mechanisms to finance ‘improvement’ in Bombay and Singapore reflected a yet unrealised connection between the two institutions in 1918, Bombay’s example was also raised repeatedly in the process of creating and finalising the Housing Commission’s report. An article in *The Straits Times* from August 1918 noted that the President of the Municipal Commission of Singapore had called for ‘the desirability of removing all such matters as Improvement Schemes from the Municipal Ordinance, and having over the control of the matters to a Health Trust, as, it is understood, is done in some of the larger towns in India’, in 1916.¹⁰⁶ Specifically citing the BIT and Calcutta Improvement Trust as case studies, the article examined the benefits and drawbacks of both sets of Trusts as they applied to the case of Singapore. Ultimately calling for a Trust with power over both the creation of new housing as well as back lane clearance schemes, the article’s calls seemed to prefigure the legislation creating the SIT.¹⁰⁷ An article similar both in timing and in content carried by *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* called the current law ‘deficient’ and argued that housing for the low-paid 10,000 employees of the Government should come before any efforts to reconstruct insanitary housing.¹⁰⁸

Despite the interest, both from the Government and from the Anglophone press, in creating a Trust immediately, formal efforts to did not crystallise in Singapore until 1927. And while the rest of this section will examine the post-1925 efforts to ‘improve’ Singapore and tackle issues of housing for the urban poor, it is worth recapitulating how an imperial urbanism rooted in Bombay’s experiences was transmitted and transmuted to a Singaporean context from 1910-1925. As was the case with Rangoon before the creation of its Trust, Bombay’s Trust provided more of a point of reference in developing an approach for Singapore than it did directly provide

¹⁰³ *Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Cause of the Present Housing Difficulties in Singapore, and the Steps Which Should be Taken to Remedy Such Difficulties* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1918).

¹⁰⁴ Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁵ Fraser, ‘Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947’, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Singapore Housing’, *The Straits Times*, p. 12, 30 August 1918.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Singapore Housing’, *The Straits Times*, p. 12, 30 August 1918.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Housing Commission’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 116, 22 August 1918.

schematics, institutions or regulations. And while Bombay was the preeminent Asian point of comparison – for both Simpson and the 1918 Housing Commission – on the ground similarities, such as the improvement scheme at Kampong Kapur, provide evidence of an uneven adoption and adaptation of a Bombay model. While Yeoh and others have noted the gap between ‘paper schemes’ and the realities of change for the urban poor, it is also worth noting here the limits of an imperial urbanism in shaping and shifting the quotidian experiences of poverty in Singapore, Bombay, and Rangoon.¹⁰⁹

The limits of change and an imperial urbanism in Singapore

While the previous chapter utilised the records of Singapore’s Coroner’s report to offer insight into the quotidian lives of the urban poor before 1920, this section will examine these records as they relate to the period from 1920-1927 to more precisely illustrate the limits of change as they related to ‘improvement’ of housing for the poor in Singapore.¹¹⁰ In using these micro-histories not only as personal stories of poverty, but also as illustrations of the inherent inconsistencies of colonial paradigms about ‘improvement’, this section utilises these stories in a manner apart from Warren.¹¹¹

Falling to his death from the second-floor verandah of the building housing his shop during May of 1920, the case of Oh See Lim demonstrates how little ‘improvement’ had been felt amongst the urban poor. A thirty-two-year-old Hokkien shopkeeper, Oh worked at a building located at 41 Cecil Street, about a 750-metre or approximately 9 minute walk away from 20-3 Sago Street and 18 Sago Lane, the sites examined and reported on so meticulously in 1907 by Simpson.¹¹² The proximity to Sago Lane and Sago Street cases was not the only similarity; one tenant reported that ‘the house belonged to a Jew’, a small, tight-knit community in Singapore.¹¹³ Having gone upstairs to access the water pipe to wash his hands, Oh fell from the verandah as a result of its collapse, dying from his injuries a few days later despite spending a few days stay in the hospital.¹¹⁴ Despite Simpson’s report and subsequent legislation adopted along its recommendations, the poor condition of buildings for the urban poor, even a short walk away

¹⁰⁹ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, p. 148-60.

¹¹⁰ These examples have been picked amongst the many examples involving descriptions of housing conditions. For example, case No. 35 in February 1920 involved the death by scalding of a Javanese man in because of a poor fireplace construction, see National Archives of Singapore, Singapore, Coroner’s Court Files (henceforth NAS, CC), AD 011, No. 35, T Murray Robertson, 4 February 1920.

¹¹¹ Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*.

¹¹² Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 17-24.

¹¹³ Nathan, *The History of the Jews in Singapore, 1830-1945*.

¹¹⁴ NAS, CC, AD 011, No. 123, Lee Hung Neong, Oh See Nian, 24 May 1920.

from one of the foci of the study, continued unabated.

A few months later, in August 1920, a fourteen-year-old Hokkien boy, named Neo Liam, who was working as a coolie at 388 Kallang Road drowned while bathing along the Kallang River. This drowning occurred near the site of the famous businessman Tan Kah Kee's rubber godown, just over a kilometre northeast from the edge of the now 'improved' Kampong Kapur. Bathing in the river, indicative of the lack of access to safer water sources like those available in Kampong Kapur due to the installation of water mains, a self-described 'coolie' named Woo Sang Kim noted that Neo was not the first to die as a result of bathing in part of the Kallang River. Describing that he had 'occasionally seen deceased bathing at this place', Woo observed that many local inhabitants could not swim.¹¹⁵ That Neo drowned while bathing, despite the short walk to a neighbourhood 'improved' for the benefit of the urban poor was symptomatic of the uneven access to 'improvement' as well as the limits to which urban redevelopment tangibly touched the lives of the urban poor in Singapore. While the urban poor were certainly 'touched' by a colonial state intent on reporting deaths from diseases and otherwise, the records of their deaths are, after all, kept in colonial-era archives, the cases of Oh and Neo illustrate the extent to which many of Singapore's urban poor did not feel the 'touch' of an urban improvement driven by a medicalisation of the municipal government.¹¹⁶

'Improvement' for Singapore?

Though Oh and Neo's deaths illustrate the extent to which the narratives of urban 'improvement' had little bearing on the quotidian livelihoods of the urban poor in Singapore, this gap, between imagined and lived urban realities of poverty, was a fixture of an imperial urbanism in cities across South and Southeast Asia. The uneven nature of and access to urban 'improvement', considered in tandem with questions of its utility from the perspective of an Asian resident, highlights the extent to which an imperial urbanism in Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore and Rangoon was in fact characterised by a complex story of local adaptations to the realities of urban life.

In fact, as the pace of 'improvement' work picked up steam again in 1925 – the beginning of the period from 1925-1927 during which Singapore's Trust was formally legally constructed – adaptations to the adversities of urban life became increasingly common. While the upper-echelons of the Municipal Government, including the Assessor and incoming Deputy Chairman

¹¹⁵ NAS, CC, AD011, No. 233, T. Murray Robertson, Woo Sang Kim, Teo Tin Lye, 29 August 1920.

¹¹⁶ Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*; Arnold, 'Touching the Body'.

of the Trust, debated Municipal commitment to re-housing those evicted as part of new schemes at Lorong Brunei and Lorong Krian in 1925, Trust policy as demonstrated two years later at Kallang Road revealed a distinct indifference to the situation of those evicted.¹¹⁷ This indifference was only further exemplified by actions, or lack thereof, taken in the process of developing Tiong Bahru – a case examined in greater detail in the next chapter.¹¹⁸ Taken in context, these actions demonstrate what was, at best, the double-edged nature of ‘improvement’ during a period of expansion of the Trust’s footprint on colonial Singapore.

This expansion came as a result of the tying together of decades of loose ends to form the Singapore Improvement Trust in 1927. Tasked ‘to provide for the Improvement of the Town and Island of Singapore’ the Trust was endowed with a 10 million dollar ‘improvement fund’, operated through the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, with which to begin some of its initial schemes as well as a two per cent tax on properties within the municipal limits.¹¹⁹ An arm of the Singapore Municipal Government, the administrative structure of the Trust followed less the example of the BIT as it did the now active Bombay Development Department, an evolution of the Bombay model covered in the next chapter. Though the next chapter will also examine in more detail the improvement schemes of the Trust operated jointly with the Singapore Municipality to understand the evolution of an imperial urbanism over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, the remainder of this section will instead focus on the Trust’s early work clearing back lanes before drawing conclusions about an imperial urbanism emerging in cities across British Asia at the turn of the twentieth century.

While the expansion of the Trust’s improvement schemes, along the lines of earlier debates in 1907 and 1918, demonstrated the influence of Bombay’s experience on Singapore’s urban environment, the SIT’s aggressive pursuit of black lane clearance schemes during the early 1920s and into the 1930s represents a way the city’s planners adapted this example to fit local conditions. In calling for Singapore to become more sanitary, Simpson’s 1907 report had argued that the dark and poorly ventilated spaces towards the back of the city’s archetypal shop houses were particularly responsible for the spread and transmission of diseases like tuberculosis and malaria. His particular emphasis on the back of buildings continued to influence urban

¹¹⁷ NAS, HDB 1003, SIT 213/25, ‘Minutes’, p. 007119, 12 June 1925; NAS, HDB 1008, SIT 843/27, M.G.H., p. 000251, 4 October 1927; NAS, HDB 1008, SIT 843/27, R. Braddell, p. 000252, 28 October 1927.

¹¹⁸ NAS, HDB 1007, SIT 476/27, 23 undersigned persons, p. 000033, 15 May 1927; NAS, HDB 1007, SIT 476/27, Tiong Bahru Improvement Trust (with encls), p. 00028-32; NAS, HDB 1090, SIT 744/50, ‘Draft’, p. 001609-10, 2 July 1952.

¹¹⁹ NAS, HDB 1081, SIT 140/29, R.J. Farrer, p. 001260, 6 July 1927; Fraser, ‘Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947’, p. 1, 4-5.

redevelopment schemes in Singapore through the mid-1930s. Reports on the pre-war SIT indicate that approximately 1252 houses were reconstructed via the numerous back lane schemes up until 1935.¹²⁰ To contextualize that number – the Trust only constructed approximately 750 houses jointly with the Municipality during this period.¹²¹ While the back lane schemes were dropped in 1935 because the Trust deemed them counterproductive – a Trust report described them, ‘renewing the rear portions of old and dilapidated houses gives a new lease of life to property which is obsolete and overdue for demolition and rebuilding’ – the schemes nonetheless continued to characterise urban ‘improvement’ in Singapore well beyond their introduction to the city’s urban environment in 1907.¹²²

This section has illustrated the ways through which an imperial urbanism, informed primarily by the urban environment of turn-of-the-century Bombay, came to be adopted and adapted in Singapore. While the city did not formally create its Trust until 1927, Simpson used Bombay as his most prominent point of reference during his own 1907 investigation into the sanitary conditions of Singapore and the improvement schemes of the BIT influenced an early improvement scheme at Kampong Kapur as well as a number of joint schemes constructed with the Municipality post-1927. Though Bombay’s influence on Singapore’s urban environment was demonstrated most decisively in the realm of ‘paper schemes’, notable similarities in the gap between real and imaged ‘improvement’ came to inform the emerging imperial urbanism in Bombay, Rangoon, and Singapore.¹²³ And despite the differences in local adaptations of this imperial urbanism, Singapore’s urban environment, as was illustrated in the analysis of Rangoon’s case, demonstrated an awareness and connection most notably to the urban environment of Bombay throughout this period.

Interconnected ‘Improvement’

Illustrating the ways and the extent to which urban ‘improvement’ came to be transmitted and transmuted around the Indian Ocean world in Bombay, Rangoon, and Singapore, this chapter has demonstrated that an imperial urbanism – encompassing the interactions between urbanites and the built environment – emerged across British Asia. This imperial urbanism, while built around plans to ‘improve’ quotidian conditions of poverty, had consequences beyond those

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 57-8.

¹²² Ibid., p. 10.

¹²³ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, p. 148-60.

felt by the urban poor. These consequences, including the development of urban expansion schemes meant to raise money to fund schemes more directly involved in ‘improvement’, had wide reaching consequences for the development of urban identities across Asia. While this chapter has noted, along with historians of Bombay and Singapore, the failure of ‘improvement’ and the Trusts to manage urban transformations along the lines of their initial mandates, the resulting actions of these approaches nonetheless had consequences for this nascent urbanism as well.¹²⁴ As will be examined by subsequent chapters, this continued and continuing failure of ‘improvement’ would itself connect housing officials in the future.

In addition to the contributions this chapter makes to historical understandings of urban development in early twentieth century Bombay and Singapore, it significantly extends historical understandings of the evolution of Rangoon’s built environment as it relates to poverty. While juxtaposing these three cases, this chapter has also illustrated the connections between the histories of the Trusts in each city and begun to consider the broader urban implications of these interconnections. While highlighting the explicit interdependencies between these South and Southeast Asian metropolises, this chapter has demonstrated the importance of inter-Asian connections between these cities.¹²⁵ Previous studies of these cities have considered imperial connections through the lens of a more traditional flow of information from an imperial metropole to an Asian colony. This chapter has emphasised how colonial cities influenced one another, complicating flows of legal structures, expertise and urban governance. As this chapter has demonstrated, the flow of information had, at least, consequential impacts on the urban built environment.

In arguing that an imperial urbanism developed in cities across South and Southeast Asia after the third plague pandemic across the region, this chapter has demonstrated how initial plague responses, as well as responses to pervasive diseases like tuberculosis, malaria, and cholera, evolved into long-term strategies of colonial urban governance. Questioning the efficacy of these approaches to urban governance along the lines of previous historians, subsequent chapters continue on to examine the evolution of these ‘improvement’ techniques as they continued to circulate around British Asia.

¹²⁴ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*; Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, p. 148-60.

¹²⁵ Sunil S. Amrith and Tim Harper, eds., *Sites of Asian Interaction: Ideas, Networks and Mobility* (Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

ON THE URBAN EDGE: HOUSING, THE BOMBAY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT, THE SINGAPORE IMPROVEMENT TRUST AND AN EVOLVING IMPERIAL URBANISM, 1909-1941

CHAPTER 3

Deploying a well-trodden metaphor from revolutionary France, ‘we cannot have the improvement omelette without breaking the slum eggs,’ a *Times of India* writer reported the opening of BIT *chawls* in December 1920 and highlighted the continuing importance of ‘improvement’ in the city despite the recent announcement of Trust’s closure.¹ And while the improvement trusts in Bombay and Singapore developed and constructed an imperial urbanism through a broad set of urban redevelopment schemes during the first decades of the twentieth century, the housing of the urban poor continued to attract increasing interest from an array of medical, municipal, sanitary and urban planning officials across British Asia. Interested not only in the improvement of the city’s streets, alleyways, sewers and water systems, these officials saw the quotidian living conditions of the urban poor not only as threatening in that they contributed to renewed outbreaks of plague, malaria and other tropical diseases, but also as an impediment to an ‘improved’ urban modernity. As a result, officials from various municipal, sanitary and urban departments became increasingly involved in redeveloping urban housing stock, seeing it as crucial to protean notions of ‘improvement’. Meanwhile, local muckrakers and social reformers were becoming increasingly attentive to the plight of the poor.² Particularly drawn to the living conditions faced by the poor in the urban environment, these reformers – academics, journalists, and local politicians – sought to expose the quotidian indignities of poverty through a variety of public forums and media. With the attention of government officials and reformers, the housing of the urban poor became a lynchpin in both the development and propagation of an imperial urbanism around port cities in British Asia during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Though chapter two focused broadly on the urban redevelopment projects of the improvement trusts in Bombay and Singapore during the 1910s, 1920s and early 1930s, this chapter will examine more closely the housing schemes of the Singapore Improvement Trust

¹ ‘Towards the Light’, *Times of India*, p. 8, 17 December 1920.

² For more on manifestations of the muckrakers in colonial Bombay, see Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 87-94. For more on global manifestations of social reformers, see Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, p. 139-41; Lewis, *Cities in Motion*, p. 120; Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon*.

and the Bombay Development Department (BDD) as manifestations of an urban imperialism developing and spreading around South and Southeast Asia. As such, it discusses the founding, implementation, and controversies surrounding the BDD and relates them to the housing schemes of the SIT through a framework of an emerging imperial urbanism.

In doing so, this chapter builds upon an established – and after chapter two, a somewhat familiar – urban historiography of South and Southeast Asia on the early decades of the twentieth century. Along with subsequent chapters, chapter three begins to answer the calls of Haynes and Rao to extend the coverage of this historiography to address urban questions into the middle decades of the century.³ Furthering the analysis of existing site-specific histories of Bombay and Singapore, this chapter also sharpens histories of the Indian Ocean world by adding an urban dimension to existing trans-national and trans-regional analyses.⁴ While Lewis' previously mentioned study of Bangkok, Penang, and Rangoon demonstrates the utility of this trans-national lens in relation to histories of urban life, her focus on upper and middle-class urbanites of colonial Southeast Asia leaves open histories of poorer urban dwellers.⁵

Of course a rich tradition within the historiography of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Singapore has been to focus on the social histories of some of the city's poorest residents.⁶ And despite this continued interest in the lives of Singapore's urban poor, studies of housing for the poor during this period are few and far between. Yeoh's previously mentioned insightful analysis of contestations between the colonial government and residents over space within the city – including, though not exclusively focused, on living spaces of the urban poor – has gone largely unanswered in the two decades since its initial publication.⁷ And, as chapter two pointed out, more recent historiographical attention to the housing of the urban poor in Singapore has been raised in the context of the genealogy of tropical architecture.⁸ And while Chang's monograph, along with a recent contribution to an edited volume, cover the architectural evolution of some of the SIT's housing developments, they leave open the writing of histories on the geographies of developing urban land and connecting Singapore's approaches to other South and Southeast Asian port cities of British Asia and the Indian Ocean.⁹

³ Douglas Haynes, 'Rethinking the Twentieth-Century History of Mumbai', *Modern Asian Studies* 48:5 (2013); Haynes and Rao, 'Beyond the Colonial City'.

⁴ Sunil S. Amrith, *Decolonizing International Health: India and Southeast Asia, 1930-65* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*; Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*.

⁵ Lewis, *Cities in Motion*.

⁶ Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*; James Francis Warren, *Ab Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870- 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Dobbs, *The Singapore River*.

⁷ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.

⁸ Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*.

⁹ Chang, 'Tropicalizing' Planning'.

As discussed in chapters one and two, Bombay's historical tradition has been far more engaged with issues relating to the housing of the urban poor. Given the connection between the outbreak of the third plague pandemic in the city and concern with the living conditions of Bombay's poorest residents, it would seem that Chandavarkar's argument that an innate fascination with *the* plague that drove contemporaneous responses has also driven historiographical attention to the subject.¹⁰ Bombay's chroniclers have repeatedly returned to the issues of housing, labour and poverty over the decades, beginning with Burnett-Hurst during the 1920s and continuing through to Hazareesingh and Kidambi during the first decade of the twenty-first century.¹¹ More recent historians of Bombay have also taken up this mantle of speaking to issues of housing and urban poverty, though the most recent research on the historical development of Bombay has brought more focus to the BDD and decades beyond 1920. Caru's recent French-language monograph on social histories of worker's housing during the early twentieth century in Bombay centres on the BDD *chawls*.¹² Rao's analysis of the relationships between housing and urban identity in Bombay during the twentieth century focuses primarily on narratives about the middle-class in his monograph, though Rao notes the importance of other forms of housing in the book and in subsequent research.¹³ And while much has then been written about housing in Bombay during early decades of the twentieth century, this chapter's focus on the BDD, its emphasis on the interwar years and its comparative approach challenge and expand a crowded field of urban historiography on Bombay.

Before focusing on the BDD itself, this chapter contextualizes the creation of the new department and elucidates the evolution of imperial urbanism as it relates to housing and poverty in Bombay. In rooting the creation of the BDD in emerging discourses of 'indirect attacks' on Bombay's slums, this chapter then explores the consequences of those actions in Bombay before considering the case of Singapore.¹⁴ In examining Singapore's own efforts to construct housing for the urban poor, the chapter considers the ways in which an imperial urbanism left a footprint

¹⁰ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 71-114; Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*, p. 234-65; Arnold, 'The Bombay Improvement Trust, Bombay Millowners and the Debate over Housing Bombay's Millworkers, 1896-1918'.

¹¹ Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay*; Conlon, 'Industrialization and the Housing Problem in Bombay'; Chandavarkar, 'Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay between the Wars'; Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*; Jim Masselos, *The City in Action: Bombay Struggles for Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity*; Sandip Hazareesingh, 'Colonial Modernism and the Flawed Paradigms of Urban Renewal: Uneven Development in Bombay, 1900-25', *Urban History* 28:02 (2001); Kidambi, 'Housing the Poor in a Colonial City'; Kidambi, 'An Infection of Locality'; Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*.

¹² Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*.

¹³ Rao, 'Bombay's Urban Edge'; Rao, 'Community, Urban Citizenship and Housing in Bombay'; Rao, *House, but No Garden*.

¹⁴ J.P Orr, *Social Reform and Slum Reform, Part I - General* (Bombay: The Times Press, 1917); Rao, 'Bombay's Urban Edge', p. 135.

not only on the space and geography of port cities around British Asia but increasingly in their urban environments. That is to say that as large-scale housing estates on the edge of the city increasingly became the hallmark of ‘indirect attacks’ on slum housing for the urban poor in cities across South and Southeast Asia, imperial urbanism became more tangible; felt more broadly by more urbanites and more deeply through quotidian lives lived in such developments.

Advocating alternative approaches to the BIT, 1909-1919

While the BIT participated in various development and redevelopment schemes in Bombay’s poorest neighbourhoods and along the city’s edge during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the improvement trust became increasingly focused on a larger set of improvement schemes – which involved the development of suburban neighbourhoods like Sion, Dadar and Matunga – rather than redeveloping neighbourhoods for the housing of the poor and working classes.¹⁵ Though the BIT had constructed 8,861 one-room flats in permanent *chawls* and an additional 4,575 rooms in semi-permanent *chawls* by 1922, the pace of construction frustrated some municipal, sanitary and Trust officials who felt the city’s housing conditions demanded that more be done.¹⁶ Along with public discussions centred around a vocal set of officials intent on expanding efforts to clear Bombay’s slums, these frustrations drove the creation of the Bombay Development Directorate in 1920.

This section examines some of those public discussions during the decade leading up to the creation of the BDD and focuses particularly on the lectures and work of James Peter (J.P.) Orr, the then Chairman of the BIT. Orr, educated at Hurstpietpoint College and a graduate of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge arrived in Bombay in 1889 as an ICS officer, initially working as an assistant magistrate and collector as well as being a forest settlement officer. Working his way through the ranks of the Revenue Department in Bombay, as a second and then first assistant Collector, Orr became a Collector and Magistrate in 1898. In 1903, Orr helped develop laws shaping the creation of municipalities across the Bombay Presidency and Orr subsequently became an important figure in issues relating to municipal governance. He then became Chairman of the BIT in 1909 and embarked on a prolific set of public outreach

¹⁵ Rao, *House, but No Garden*, pp. 24-8; Rao, 'Bombay's Urban Edge'; Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 71-114.

¹⁶ Estimates for the number of *chawls* come from MSA, PWD DD, 1922, 12 II, p. 27, 22 July 1922.

events until his retirement in 1917.¹⁷ Arguing in favour of an increased focus on the housing conditions of the urban poor, Orr went on to elaborate a set of building specifications to promote sanitation and public health. To promote these building recommendations, Orr increasingly came to advocate an ‘indirect’ attack on Bombay’s slums – an approach characterised by creating estates from scratch that met new standards on the urban edge rather than a ‘direct’ attack on the slums in the dense urban areas.¹⁸

While the ‘success’ of the BIT during Orr’s tenure has rightly been viewed with scepticism, this section is less interested than the previous chapter in the works of the BIT during this period in favour of understanding this decade as a period of debate, experimentation, and transition in developing an ‘indirect’ approach.¹⁹ Marking a shift not only in how the conditions of urban poverty were addressed in Bombay, this ‘indirect’ approach also came to characterise contemporaneous responses to the housing of the urban poor in cities like Rangoon and Singapore as well as subsequent responses to similar concerns in post-war Hong Kong. This section is then interested in examining the role of this decade of debate in an unfolding imperial urbanism in British South and Southeast Asia.

This examination begins with an unpacking of the terminologies ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ as a means to better understand how this so-called ‘indirect’ approach came to be transmitted as part of an imperial urbanism around Asia littoral. Laying out a short summary of ‘best policy’ towards the end of his career in 1917, Orr contrasted measures to ‘check the spread of congestion’ such as ‘improving main roads, laying out new estates along them, building chawls for the poor just outside the congested area, closing rooms as U.H.H. [unfit for human habitation] and preventing overcrowding’ against a ‘direct attack on slums’. Suggesting that a ‘direct attack’, often involving a modest acquisition of urban slum land followed by a piecemeal redevelopment such as alley widening, was too expensive, Orr then extolled the benefits of an ‘indirect’ approach.²⁰

¹⁷ For more on the life of J.P. Orr, see ‘The India List and India Office List for 1905’, (London: Harrison and Sons, 1905), p. 581; Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*, p. 121. While Orr spent his career in the Bombay Presidency, the trajectories of his approach to governance and social background mirrored more broadly those of the ICS. While the ‘Punjab School’ is heavily emphasised in the historiography of the ICS, Orr seemed to have little in common with this school of thought. While Orr advocated for more government intervention into urban conditions, he regularly worked in concert with other officials and worked to reform legal structures rather than focus on flexible interpretations and applications of colonial law. For more on the Punjab School and the ICS, see Clive Dewey, *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* (London: Hambledon, 1993); Shalini Sharma, *Radical Politics in Colonial Punjab: Governance and Sedition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 14-9.

¹⁸ Orr, *Social Reform and Slum Reform*, p. 14; Rao, ‘Bombay’s Urban Edge’, p. 135.

¹⁹ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, p. 71-114; Arnold, ‘The Bombay Improvement Trust, Bombay Millowners and the Debate over Housing Bombay’s Millworkers, 1896-1918’.

²⁰ Orr, *Social Reform and Slum Reform*, p. 14.

Though Orr repeatedly suggested that a ‘direct attack’ was too costly and evoked an almost hopeless complexity to the slums in order to dismiss prospects of an efficient reform, his new approach laid out a similarly complex undertaking – in short building entire estates and neighbourhoods from the ground up. It is also worth noting here the radical transformation between prior decades of work completed by the BIT and Orr’s ‘indirect’ approach. Much of the prior work by the BIT, as well as the initial work of its analogous institutions such as the SIT and RDT, took a piecemeal approach to urban redevelopment. As a part of these early schemes, alleyways, back lanes, and roads were of particular interest for two primary reasons: one, so that light and ventilation could reach more easily into even the most congested urban areas, and two so that the spread of fires could be better prevented.²¹ While completing these schemes was costly, the schemes themselves were not particularly complex in their goals. Orr’s new approach, requiring complicated designs of wholesale new urban environments rather than just reformations and reconfigurations of existing urban spaces, is then as transformational to approaching urban planning and poverty as it is understated in its description as ‘indirect’.

The public lectures of J.P. Orr

Orr’s arrival at this markedly different approach to tackling poor housing conditions in 1917 was a result of the better part of a decade’s experience as Chairman of the BIT. Though he was appointed Chairman in 1909, Orr began a series of public lectures beginning in 1912 aimed at audiences active in Bombay’s civil society themed around urban ‘improvement’, namely the construction and planning of housing, slum clearance, and social reform. Orr diagnosed the housing ‘of the poorer classes’ as one of the two largest challenges contributing to the ‘insanitary condition of Bombay’ during a lecture on ‘Light and air in dwellings in Bombay’ made to the Bombay Sanitary Association in June 1912. There he called for a ‘campaign against ill-lighted and ill-ventilated living rooms’ after a ‘two year’s study of Bombay’s slums’.²²

While Orr presented the extinction of such conditions as the *raison d’être* for the BIT, his earliest lecture suggests his willingness to explore new options for rehousing slum dwellers. Explaining that while the Trust had ‘already done a great deal towards wiping insanitary rooms out of existence by wholesale demolition of houses in such insanitary areas as Nagapada,

²¹ For some examples on discussion of the importance of alleyways, back lanes and roads in the early work of urban improvement, see NAS, HDB 1001, TS 1081/12, ‘Singapore Municipality: Kampong Kapur Improvement Scheme 1910’, p. 00072-3; NAM, 4758, 4/1(21), 1927, ‘Gavin Scott answering question of C.H. Champagnac’, p. 21, 7 January 1927.

²² MAS, GD, 1912, 40, 651, p. M-S 307-8.

Mandvi, and the neighbourhoods through which the Princess Street and Sandhurst Roads have been driven', Orr argued that the works had been 'extremely expensive' and had actually encouraged overcrowding in neighbourhoods around the immediate vicinity. In illustrating the difficulties faced by the Trust in completing work in even 'small areas', Orr openly questioned the ability of the Trusts to carry out the larger-scale works needed to complete its stated goals.²³

Despite repeating his 1912 diagnosis of the problems facing the Trust's approach, Orr spent the next five years proposing an array of different elements to a new approach, many of which became incorporated into the structure of the BDD in 1920. In 1912, Orr proposed more cooperation between the municipal government of Bombay and the Trust. Specifically, Orr argued in favour of legislation to fine renters and landlords found to be occupying or renting rooms deemed unfit for human habitation.²⁴ While his proposal to inspect and close all rooms deemed unfit for human habitation did not come to fruition until 1916, his framing of the issue as fundamentally an issue of municipal governance came to mark some of the difference between institutional approaches by the BDD and the BIT.²⁵

Continuing on his lecture series at the 1914 third All-India Sanitary Conference, Orr laid out what he called a '63 ½ degree rule' which specified the angle at which buildings could be placed next to one another to allow an acceptable amount of light and air to make its way into rooms. Focusing primarily on how this rule could be applied within the Trust's estates – Orr left the application of this rule to existing buildings to the Municipality – Orr's lecture demonstrated the extent to which his attention had been focused on creating new urban environments via estate development rather than reconfiguration of existing urban spaces and neighbourhoods.²⁶ The second lecture in 1914, 'Density of Population in Bombay', delivered to the Bombay Cooperative Housing Association also shows evidence of this focus on the lands along the city's edge. Utilizing census data to illustrate that the heart of the city had become over-congested, Orr argued that even relatively open areas would become congested if steps to move the population towards the urban periphery weren't taken seriously.²⁷ Urging the Trust and other municipal planning authorities to build roads out towards the urban edge along with the development of new estates, Orr again argued for a different approach in 1915. This time specifically criticising schemes like those unfolding at Undria Street as too expensive, Orr painted a bleak picture of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. M-S 308, 310.

²⁵ Ibid., p. M-S 311.

²⁶ J.P Orr, 'How to Check the Growth of Insanitary Conditions in Bombay City', *The Proceedings of the Third All-India sanitary Conference Held at Lucknow, January 19th to 27th 1914 (Vol. IV)*, 1914.

²⁷ Orr, *Density of Population in Bombay*.

‘directly’ attacking the slums before the Bombay Co-operative Housing Association.²⁸

By the time Orr delivered his final lecture as Chairman before the Social Services League in 1917, he had called for an ‘indirect’ approach to take precedence to ‘direct attacks’ against the slums.²⁹ And while Orr was just one man making these arguments on a public lecture circuit over the course of about five years, his lectures had ramifications beyond his immediate audience. The Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) specifically appointed a committee in 1915 tasked with recommending legislative revisions to the City of Bombay Municipal Act with an eye on Orr’s lectures. Changes to the legal framework of the BMC, like adopting recommendations allowing rooms to be declared uninhabitable and the ‘63 ½ degree rule’ in 1916.³⁰

Though Orr’s influence was undoubtedly felt within the Trust, within the Revenue Department at which he spent most of his career, and within the Municipal Corporation he helped structure, his lectures also brought about debate within the societies at which he presented. One of Orr’s later lectures in 1918, comparing the problems of Bombay’s housing conditions with those in faced by England, inspired a spirited debate amongst the members of the Bombay Co-operative Housing Society. Criticising the Government of Bombay, one such member, Mr. Talmaki, characterised work done in India to raise living conditions of the poor as ‘a trifle compared to what was done or being done in England’ and called for increased provisions of land and materials to housing societies so that they were not as liable to market speculation. Mr. Muncherji Jishu, another member, similarly noted that land speculation had made it difficult for cooperative housing societies to operate. N.G. Chandavarkar, the Chairman of the Society, called for the Government of Bombay to spend more money as well as for the Society to ‘join hands with the Social Service League’ to carry out a campaign raising awareness about living conditions.³¹ That discussion about Orr’s lectures covered a perceived need for increasing government funding, particularly in buying up land, and about the need to build more, demonstrates the importance of these lectures in building the public case for the creation of the BDD. Founded within a year of this final public lecture, the BDD was created in part to address the concerns raised by both Orr and a widening and more engaged public.

²⁸ J.P Orr, *The Need of Co-Operation between the Neighbours in the Development of Building Estates* (Bombay: Premier Art Printing Works, 1915).

²⁹ Orr, *Social Reform and Slum Reform*, p. 14.

³⁰ MSA, GD, 1916, 933, p. S-M 83-7.

³¹ MSA, GD, 1919, 379, ‘Discussion’, p. S-M 9-14.

Bombay urbanism as a nexus for imperial and global urbanisms

That Orr's final lecture in his series compared the housing conditions of Bombay to those in England illustrates the imperial dimensions of a developing urbanism of housing and poverty in South and Southeast Asia. And while this dissertation often shines a light on the less understood inter-Asian dimensions of those imperial connections, this sub-section will examine the breadth of connections between Bombay and urbanisms around the imperial world and the globe to demonstrate that Bombay remained a nexus for urban ideas and evolving urbanisms around the Indian Ocean world.

While earlier chapters have illustrated ways in which Bombay pre-figured debates about urban improvement in cities like Calcutta and Rangoon in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, in large part because of its adaptation of the institution of the improvement trust from Glasgow in the late nineteenth century, Bombay officials continued to seek and adapt legal structures relevant to urban planning from around the globe.³² Travelling to a number of cities and towns in Germany in 1913, an I.C.S. officer, B.W. Kissan, aimed to study the *Lex Adickes* laws aimed at better structuring the joint governance of land along the urban periphery between municipal and regional governments. Meeting with local government officials, the German Town Planning Association and the English urban planner Raymond Unwin, Kissan subsequently put forth recommendations that were eventually adopted as part of the Bombay Town Planning Act in 1915.³³ Sponsoring trips abroad designed to understand and incorporate innovative elements of urban planning, Bombay's officials continued to experiment and adapt urban development ideas from around the empire and the globe.

Though Kissan's venture to Germany has been noted before, and even contextualised within transnational histories of Bombay's development, Kissan's trip was not the only excursion made to study other urban examples during this period.³⁴ Turning again to Glasgow, the city which had been Bombay's source of inspiration in forming the BIT in 1898, G.S. Curtis, a Revenue Department official, travelled in 1918 to study how the Glasgow Corporation had taken over the responsibilities of that city's improvement trust. Noting that a proposal to shift the

³² Hazareesingh, 'Colonial Modernism and the Flawed Paradigms of Urban Renewal'; Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity*; Kidambi, 'Housing the Poor in a Colonial City'; Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*.

³³ MSA, GD, 1913, 89, 208, B.W. Kissan, p. M-S 113, 21 January 1913; B.W. Kissan, *Report on Town-Planning Enactments in Germany* (Bombay: Times Press, 1913). For a fuller account of Kissan's work and German influences on urban planning in Bombay, see Nikhil Rao, 'Town Planning and Municipal Growth in Late Colonial Bombay: Towards a Transnational Perspective', in *Cities Beyond Borders: Comparative and Transnational Approaches to Urban History*, ed. Nicolas Kenny and Rebecca Madgin (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015).

³⁴ Rao, 'Cities Beyond Borders'; Hazareesingh, 'Colonial Modernism and the Flawed Paradigms of Urban Renewal'.

responsibilities of the BIT to the BMC was under consideration, Curtis' trip reinforces the notion that Bombay's planners and officials were interested in adapting other urbanisms and ideas to a Bombay context.³⁵ That the Development Directorate was established the following year as a department of the BMC reinforces the notion that Bombay's government was not just seeking information in an imperial or transnational context, but also applying it and developing its own distinctive urbanism.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, Bombay was not just developing its own distinct urbanism, but also transmitting an imperial urbanism to cities around the Indian Ocean world and beyond. In between Kissan and Curtis' journeys abroad in 1915, the American Consul in Bombay, Carl F. Deichman, wrote to the Bombay Government at the behest of American officials interested in the 'financing of municipal public improvements'. Submitting a detailed questionnaire beginning with, 'what steps have been taken to provide housing facilities for the working classes,' the Consul then inquired about public and private efforts, how money was raised for these projects, the character of the resulting rooms and the financial successes or failures of the plans.³⁶ While it remains unclear precisely how Deichman used the information at hand, the request on behalf of the American government illustrates the pathways through which Bombay did not just adapt ideas relating to poverty and urban housing, but also projected these experiences and ideas to other municipalities around the globe.

Writing in 1919 that Zanzibar was considering its own legislation to address 'the question of the amelioration of housing and sanitary conditions in congested areas', the Government of Zanzibar expressed that it 'would be well advised to be guided by experience gained in the latter city [Bombay].'³⁷ Requesting copies of reports and any other documents relating to 'housing improvement', Zanzibar's government specifically asked Bombay's officials to indicate any 'difficulties which arose and the manner in which they were overcome'.³⁷ In reaching out to Indian officials and specifically referencing Bombay's experiences to try and solve Zanzibar's own housing and urban congestion problems, the request of Zanzibari officials not only reinforces the breadth of these pathways transmitting Bombay's experiences and ideas, but also illustrates the depth to which these ideas were applied to port cities around the Indian Ocean during this decade of debate amongst the city's planning officials.

³⁵ MSA, GD, 1918, 284, G.S Curtis to India Office, p. S-M 3, 6 June 1918; MSA, GD, 1918, 284, W.J. Turner to G.S. Curtis, p. S-M 5, 10 June 1918.

³⁶ MSA, GD, 1917, 288, Carl F. Deichman to J.E.C. Dukes (Deputy Secretary to the Government of Bombay), p. S-M 7, 13 October 1915; p. S-M 23.

³⁷ MSA, GD, 1919-21, 755, Chief Secretary to Government of Zanzibar, p. S-M 1-2, 27 November 1919.

Transitioning towards the Development Directorate

As Bombay's officials were transmitting a developing urbanism aimed at raising living standards for the urban poor, they increasingly began to focus on applications of the legal codifications, institutional mechanisms, and planning techniques raised by Orr, Kissan and Curtis over the decade from 1909-1919. And though a proposal to absorb the work of the BIT into the municipality had been part of the justification for Curtis' 1918 trip to Glasgow, this proposal was not finalised until 1920. In the meantime, officials working on municipalities within the Bombay Government recommended the creation of a new institution to oversee the development of 'Greater Bombay' under the purview of the Government. Proposing that this new institution mediate between the BMC and other institutional stakeholders in urban development, such as the Port Trust, it was also proposed that it should be funded by a special import duty on cotton imported from elsewhere in India to Bombay.³⁸

Empowering this new institution with authority to oversee the development of 'Greater Bombay' was a nod to Orr's calls for 'indirect' attacks on Bombay's slums by focusing on developing estates on the lands around the urban periphery to the north of the established city. The proposed jurisdiction of this new institution, which was to be shared between municipal and provincial authorities, reflected in part Kissan's study of *Lex Adickes* statues in Germany. And calls for the new authority to bring the work of urban development more squarely under the purview of the BMC echoed Orr's calls as well as Curtis' study of Glasgow. For those officials considering the mandate of what would become the BDD, the decade of debate about new approaches to poverty and urban development from 1909-1919 shaped the contours of the institution's responsibilities. While these debates then clearly shaped an imperial urbanism developing in Bombay, the consequences of these debates were beginning to take hold across imperial Asia more generally.

The (un)making of the Bombay Development Directorate, 1920-1935

Before evaluating the transmission of an imperial urbanism from Bombay to cities around South and Southeast Asia like Singapore again, this section will examine the works and legacies of the BDD from its creation in 1920 and beyond its 1930 dissolution and absorption into the Government of Bombay's Revenue Department. Though the BDD constructed *chawls* faster

³⁸ MSA, GD, 1918-1919, 1142, 1918, G.A. Thomas to Government of India (Department of Education, Municipalities), p. S-M 20-2, 30 September 1919.

than had the BIT over the preceding decade, particularly from 1920-1924, it failed miserably at producing the kinds of housing needed to raise the living conditions of Bombay's poorest residents. This failure, one of lacking to understand the complexities of designing a wholesale urban environment coupled with a crippling corruption scandal that reached a crescendo in 1928, helped bring about the quick end to the new approach that took over a decade of debate to shape. And while the consequences of the BDD on Bombay's development continued to be felt and debated by contemporary politicians, journalists and urban planners, the failure of the BDD to achieve its goals would have lasting consequences on the development of an imperial urbanism of British Asia as well.³⁹

Created in November 1920, the Development Department's eight major initiatives reflected many of the major proposals arising from the previous decade of debate:

- (a) To carry out the Back Bay Reclamation Scheme and any other reclamation schemes which may be found necessary in or near Bombay City.
- (b) To undertake the industrial housing scheme of 50,000 one-roomed tenements for the working classes in Bombay.
- (c) To organise systematically the supply of building materials for its own work and for the works with which it is connected.
- (d) To take over all questions relating to the acquisition of land in Bombay City and all questions regarding the utilisation of Government land.
- (e) To carry out large schemes for the systematic development of Salsette-
 - (i) by town planning schemes to be carried out by local authorities, and
 - (ii) by the purchase of areas outright with a view to resale after development.
- (f) To secure an adequate water supply for the whole of Salsette when it is developed as an urban area.
- (g) To deal with the supply and distribution of electrical energy, both for domestic and industrial purposes in the area outside Bombay.
- (h) To take up the question of the improvement of communications to link up Bombay City with the areas to be developed in Salsette and Trombay.⁴⁰

Taking over the BIT's housing scheme of 3,520 one-roomed flats at Naigaum and inheriting BIT lands at De Lisle Road and Worli, the first annual report of the BDD expounded optimism that the industrial housing scheme of 50,000 new tenements, guided by Orr's vision of an 'indirect' attack on the slums, could be constructed reasonably quickly.⁴¹ The subsequent annual report of

³⁹ Nearly a century after the construction of the BDD *chawls*, the sites at Worli, Sewri, Naigon (formerly Naigaum) and NM Joshi Marg (formerly De Lisle Road) are being targeted for redevelopment by the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority. For more, see '2 Chinese firms bid for Rs10,700-crore revamp of BDD chawl in Mumbai's Worli', *Hindustan Times*, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/2-chinese-firms-bid-for-rs10-700-crore-revamp-of-bdd-chawl-in-mumbai-s-worli/story-z3fd6b8U0qjDWk2eOcwNLK.html>, 15 August 2017 (Accessed on 5 October 2017).

⁴⁰ British Library, India Office Collections, London (henceforth BL, IOR), V/24/820, 'Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1921', p. 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

the BDD summarized in a simple table how that goal would be met – with construction ramping up until 1925 at which point 80 *chawls* comprising 8,000 tenement rooms would be opened annually.⁴² Figure 6 illustrates the initial plans for constructing the 80-room *chawls*.

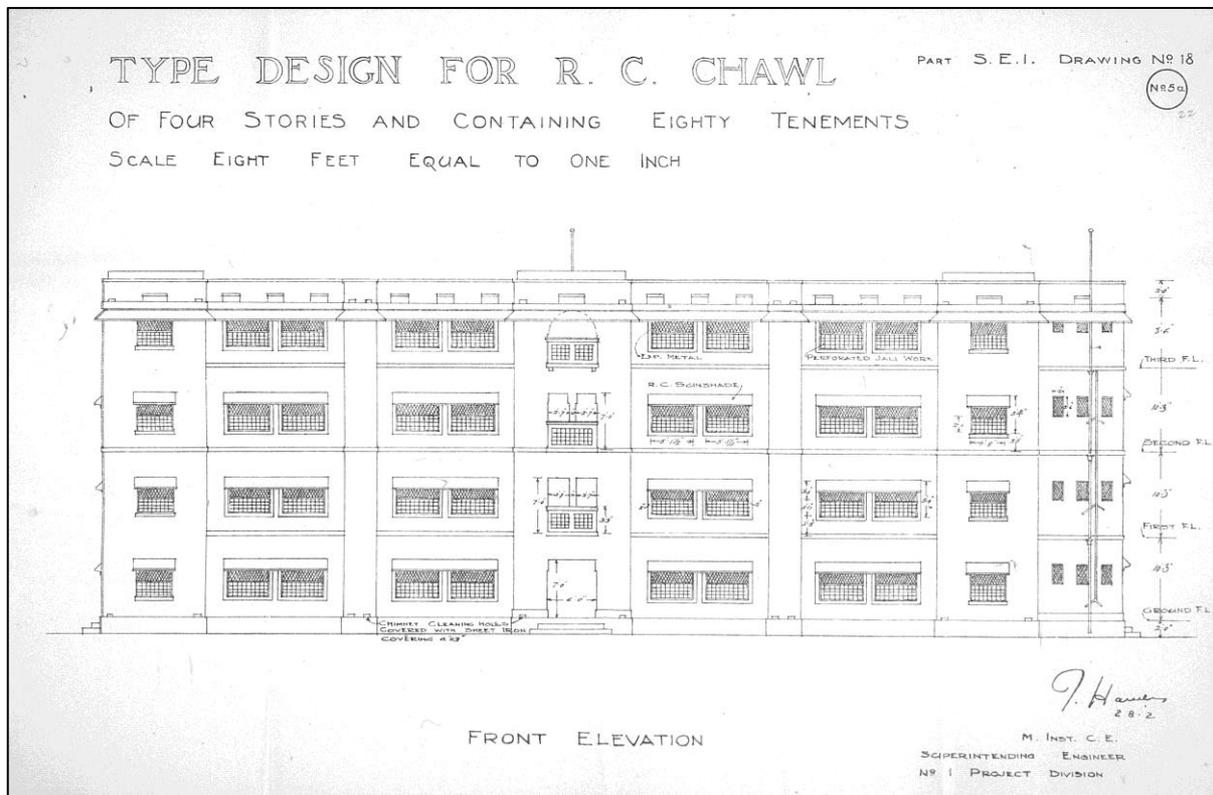


Figure 6. 1922 designs for an 80-room *chawl* typical of BDD construction at their various sites of development in Naigaum, Worli, Senri and De Lisle Road during the 1920s. © The British Library Board, India Office Records V/24/821, Type Design for R.C. Chawl. Reprinted with permission.

As with the BIT, though, the devil of constructing 50,000 tenements appeared to lie in the details. Even as early as 1921-1922, the BDD reported that land acquisition at De Lisle Road projected to house some 2,640 tenements was not ‘economically possible to pay’ at current rates of Rs. 21 per square yard.⁴³ And while the Department claimed in 1923 that it was roughly keeping pace with its stated targets, it also reported serious concerns emerging over the design of the *chawls* and the amount charged for rent.⁴⁴

Among the chief concerns was the lack of *nahani*, small sinks, in each room. Other tenants raised concerns about the amount of smoke present in the rooms during cooking – a given in

⁴² BL, IOR, V/24/821, ‘Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1922’, p. 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ BL, IOR, V/24/821, ‘Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1923’, p.7-11.

one room tenements without sufficient ventilation because they were not adequately equipped with chimneys. Despite raising ‘sanitary’ objections accusing the tenants of using the *nabani* as urinals as well as ‘customs’ dictating that tenants cooked anywhere on the building’s floor, the BDD chose to include a *nabani* and a better chimney apparatus in each room going forward in construction. While the direct complaints of the tenants posed some of the most meaningful concerns to the BDD, other serious flaws, like the lack of electricity or electric lighting were excused as only possible ‘if money were no object’.⁴⁵

Beyond the serious concerns about the poor design of the buildings, an example of which is pictured in Figure 7, further concerns about the affordability of *chawls* rent were laid bare. While the BDD estimated that those moving into the *chawls* paid about Rs. 4-5 per month, the Department estimated that it needed to charge Rs. 14-18 per month to break even financially, i.e. three to four times more than tenants currently paid. Even with the hastily arranged annual subsidy of Rs.54, which amounted somewhere between one-third and one-quarter of the ‘economic’ rate, rental rates were still Rs.10. That put rent for a tenement in the BDD *chawls* at about twice as much tenants were estimated to be paying previously.⁴⁶

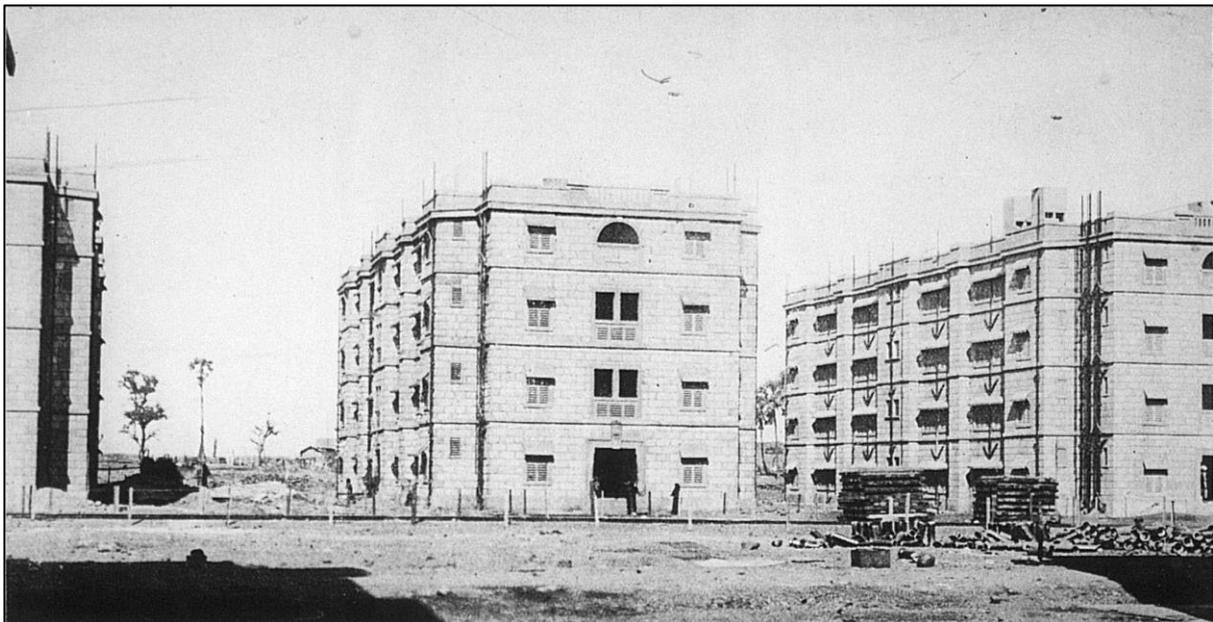


Figure 7. A picture from the *chawls* at Worli under construction in 1924 by the Bombay Development Department. © The British Library Board, India Office Records V/24/821, Directorate *chawls* at Worli showing the open space left between each block. Reprinted with permission.

While even the Department’s own estimates showed that rents in the buildings were about twice as much as comparable accommodation, the 1924 annual report instead blamed lacking

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 7-8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

demand on the collapse of a 'boom period' for labour conditions in Bombay. Announcing a halt to the construction of new *chawls* until the current 16,880 tenements could be filled, the Government essentially ended the BDD's Industrial Housing Scheme less than four years after it began.⁴⁷ Despite a decade of building consensus that 'indirect' attacks on the slums, like the BDD's housing scheme, would prove less expensive than 'direct' attacks like those conducted in the earlier schemes of the BIT, a 1925 report admitted that 'heavier expenditure on roads, sewers and storm-drains' as a result of being quite far away from the urban area drove up costs beyond the more centrally located BIT post-WWI *chawls*.⁴⁸ With the collapse one of the BDD's central responsibilities, directly constructing thousands upon thousands of flats for Bombay's poorer classes, the department continued on with a smaller staff working primarily on reclamation projects and developing town plans for the continued expansion of Bombay's urban periphery until December 1929 when it was dissolved into the Revenue Department of Government.⁴⁹

Understanding the inherent contradictions of the BDD

Apart from the obvious problems of high cost and poor design, the failure of the BDD *chawls* to alter or improve living conditions for the poor and working classes was inherent to its mandate to build 50,000 one-room tenements. While construction of one-room tenements was, by the 1920s, a largely abandoned practice in European and North American cities, municipal and BDD officials thought them appropriate in a Bombay context.⁵⁰

H.S. Jevons, a professor of economics at the University of Allahabad who had earned a reputation as a social reformer by spending 1911-1914 working on issues of housing for the poor in and around Cardiff and would later agitate for urban reform in Rangoon, wrote to the director of the Development Department, Sir Lawless Hepper, in 1921 out of concern over the BDD's goals of creating 50,000 new one-room tenements.⁵¹ Asking if the BDD truly aimed to build all

⁴⁷ BL, IOR, V/24/821, 'Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1924', p.7.

⁴⁸ BL, IOR, V/24/821, 'Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1925', p.7.

⁴⁹ MSA, PWD DD, 1930, 153, p. 174-6, 5 December 1929.

⁵⁰ Jevons writes, 'we also know that the greatest efforts of social reformers in Europe and America for the past fifty years have been directed to elimination of the one-room tenements', see MSA, PWD DD, 1921, 702, H. Stanley Jevons, p. 17-29, 28 March 1921; see also Robert W. De Forest and Lawrence Veiller, eds., *The Tenement House Problem: Including the Report of the New York State Tenement House Commission of 1900* (New York: The Macmillan Company 1903); Richard Rodger, *Housing in Urban Britain, 1780-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵¹ H.S. Jevons was a grandson of John Edward Taylor, the founder of *The Manchester Guardian* and son of the famous economist William Stanley Jevons. Though he had held appointments teaching Geology at the University of Cambridge and the University of Sydney, he became a lecturer in economics at the University of Cardiff in 1905.

50,000 units as single-room tenements, Jevons argued that the plan was not just ‘unwise’ but also ‘a highly immoral proceeding’. Reflecting an interest in engineering domestic spaces, a theme also raised in chapters one and five of this dissertation, Jevons outlined two hallmarks of immorality he found in the plans. The first, a question – if one-room tenements had been phased out in European and North American contexts, then why were they still being constructed for the urban poor in Bombay? And second, a statement – that ‘it is impossible for habits of decency to be maintained’ by a family residing in a single room. While moralistic overtones along the lines of the latter, a fear of corrupting children by exposing them to any intimacy or adult behaviour, were similarly expressed amongst social reformers around South and Southeast Asia, this fear helped animate demands for similar standards across imperial and racial boundaries.⁵²

Beyond moralistic characterisations, Jevons also argued that crowding a family into one room was ‘a mark of extreme poverty’ and that even ‘the poorest labourers in the rural areas build their mud huts with two or three rooms’. This comparison, between rural and urban conditions, seems more salient when contextualised within the patterns of migration of Bombay’s urban poor, who supplemented their urban livelihoods with frequent journeys to and from rural hinterlands.⁵³ Urging Sir Lawless to abandon ‘the idea of building one-room tenements’, Jevons reasoned that therefore, ‘the only course consistently [*sic*] with morality and good statesmanship is to realize that industrial workers should be given the opportunity of attaining a higher standard of life’. In writing to the director of the newly created Development Department, Jevons demonstrated the problems inherent to the BDD’s mandate. Highlighting the problems of building single-room units exclusively, Jevons exposed the fundamental contradiction of the logic behind BDD’s creation – that while the BDD could construct units faster than the BIT ever did, these units were not of a quality consistent with actually raising the standard of living for Bombay’s poor or working classes. In a terse reply to Jevons about the *chawls*, Sir Lawless expressed, ‘I am afraid we can’t avoid them [the single-roomed tenements],

Leaving his position as chair of the Economics Department at Cardiff in 1911 ‘to engage in agitation for housing reform’ in Galmorgan and Monmouthshire, he came to the University of Allahabad in 1914 – was founded in 1887 and had expanded in 1912 – as the Chair of the Economics Department. He stayed in his role in Allahabad until 1923 at which point he became the Chair of the Economics Department at the University of Rangoon, after the university expanded and was restructured in 1920, from 1923-1930. He remained interested in housing for the poor in England, Wales, Bombay and Rangoon. For more on Jevons, see ‘Obituary’, *The Manchester Guardian*, p. 3, 30 June 1955; ‘Prof. H.S. Jevons’, *The Manchester Guardian*, p. 5, 1 July 1955.

⁵² MSA, PWD DD, 1921, 702, H. Stanley Jevons to Sir Lawless Hepper, p. 17-29, 28 March 1921; For example, these moralised arguments are often seen in connection to discussions of housing for the urban poor in Rangoon. See NAM, 4756, 4/6(21), 1927, ‘Report on Housing Conditions in Rangoon Undertaken by the Members of the Rangoon Social Services League’, p. 84-90.

⁵³ Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*, p. 124-67.

much as I dislike the idea'.⁵⁴

Though the exclusive construction of single-room units unfit for accommodating the patterns of contemporary life was a fundamental flaw in the plans and work of the BDD, two subsequent flaws further hampered the efficacy of the BDD's efforts to radically improve living conditions. The first was a failure to recognize the importance of rehousing those who had lost their place of residence as a result of redevelopment. Expressing to the Legislative Council that a proposal to guarantee to rehouse those evicted in newly constructed BIT and BDD tenements would 'do more harm than good because it would...seriously interfere with private enterprise', the acting Chairman of the soon-to-be-dissolved BIT argued that only private enterprise could arrange to fulfil the desire of tenants to remain close by to their friends and family. In arguing against rehousing those forcibly evicted, R.H.A. Delves again exposed this fundamental contradiction of the BDD – how can living standards be raised if 'improvement' and 'development' often meant worse conditions for those scattered by the projects of the BDD?⁵⁵

Another flaw subsequently hindering the BDD was perhaps its most fundamental. In the same letter arguing against the rehousing of those removed from their residences, Delves pointedly remarked that the term 'working classes' lacks a legal definition.⁵⁶ That by 1922, two years into an extensive construction plan, the planning officials did not understand precisely whom the *chawls* were for suggests existential problems beyond poor construction quality and design. More generally, this lack of legal definition reflected somewhat conflicting, though not mutually exclusive, goals to build housing for 'the poorer classes' and the 'working classes'.⁵⁷ While the latter term in Bombay and South Asian historiography has been subject to extensive discussion and debate, it remains less clear to what extent the contemporaneous interchangeability of these terms reflected a muddled mission.⁵⁸ More recent historiography on the BDD and urban development of Bombay has stressed the middle-class element of the works completed, suggesting that complex and often conflicting notions of class characterised the

⁵⁴ MSA, PWD DD, 1921, 702, H. Stanley Jevons to Sir Lawless Hepper, p. 17-29, 28 March 1921; MSA, PWD DD, 1921, 702, Sir Lawless Hepper to H. Stanley Jevons, p. 32-3, 4 April 1921.

⁵⁵ MSA, PWD DD, 1922, 12A, R.H.A. Delves, p. 31-5, 17 July 1922.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁷ These terms are used somewhat interchangeably in the reports of the BDD, though official literature tends to prefer the term 'working classes'. For an example of utilizing 'poorer classes', see BL, IOR, V/24/821, 'Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1923', p.9; For an example of utilizing 'working classes', see BL, IOR, V/24/820, 'Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1921', p. 1.

⁵⁸ Rather than relitigate these discussions and debates, particularly amongst the early scholars of subaltern studies, see Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*; Chandavarkar, 'The Making of the Working Class'; Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*, p. 7; Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *History, Culture and the Indian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 236-50.

works of both the BIT and BDD.⁵⁹ While it seems that the terminology used to describe the aspirations of housing works shifted over time and depended heavily on whoever was directing the efforts, the lack of consistency does speak to a failure to understand those living in the BDD's housing *chawls*. This notion is supported by earlier discussions demonstrating that the BDD seems not to have considered more broadly what conditions the 'poorer classes' and the 'working classes' were leaving to move into their new single-room tenements. This failure to consider and address the larger question of raising living standards, rather than focusing on the construction of 50,000 new one-room tenements, exposes both the shallow success of the initial pace of construction as well as the deeper, underlying failures of the BDD to significantly improve living conditions for Bombay's poorer residents.

An explanation for the high cost of the construction of the chawls?

While the feasibility, judgment, and clarity with which the BDD pursued its goals contributed to failures, so too did a court case that exposed the Department to allegations of corruption at a time when demand for the *chawls* seemed to be evaporating. Raising corruption allegations relating to public housing construction as a running theme through the later chapters of this dissertation – including this sub-section, chapter four, and chapter five – this sub-section examines the Harvey-Nariman libel case. Litigated from 1927-1928, the case stands out for its formality and clarity in describing corruption. The case tried the BMC council member and future mayor Khurshed Framji (K.F.) Nariman for libel against the superintending engineer of the BDD in charge of overseeing the industrial housing scheme and materials acquisition, Thomas Harvey. Despite the widespread fame of the case amongst Indian nationalist politicians during the 1920s and 1930s, urban historians have focused on it as it relates to the BDD's Back Bay Reclamation Scheme and have largely left the impact of the case on efforts to develop housing for the urban poor in the Bombay a topic unexplored.⁶⁰

The antecedents of the case began early in Nariman's career when he expressed his scepticism and opposition to the plans of the BDD as it began work in the early 1920s.

⁵⁹ Kidambi, 'Consumption, Domestic Economy, and the Idea of the "Middle Class" in Late Colonial Bombay'; Rao, *House, but No Garden*; Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*; Rao, 'Bombay's Urban Edge'.

⁶⁰ A brief discussion of the case in relation to housing can be found in Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*, p. 211. For implications of the case relating the Back Bay Reclamation Scheme, see Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, p. 93-5. A discussion of the legal meanings of the case is found in a recent monograph on Parsi legal history, see Mitra Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 103. More broadly, South Asian historians have examined corruption during late-colonial and early independence years, see William Gould, *Bureaucracy, Community and Influence in India: Society and the State, 1930s-1960s* / by William Gould (London: Routledge, 2011).

Campaigning for and winning a seat representing the Bombay City South district on the city's Legislative Council from 1922-1923, Nariman repeatedly criticised the management and administration of the BDD alleging 'irregularities', 'shady transactions' and 'scandal' within the Department. Advocating for the abolition of the BDD once on the Legislative Council, Nariman earned a reputation as a 'muckraker' and a strong proponent of municipal reforms.⁶¹ Guiding the passage of legislation to investigate the BDD in 1924, Nariman's frustration with the Department's refusal to cooperate led to blistering public speeches from 1924-1926 where he accused the BDD of 'corruption, fraud and jobbery with every type of mal-administration' and specifically alleged the superfluous purchase of steel bars used in the Department's construction projects. Simultaneously filing civil cases, with Harvey filing a libel suit against Nariman and Nariman filing a defamation suit against Sir Lawless Hepper, the aforementioned Director of the BDD, the courts decided to proceed first with the case against Nariman.⁶² Thus, the Harvey-Nariman libel case proceeded over most of 1927.⁶³

As officials at the BDD were, for the first time, forced to testify about their work, it became clear that Nariman's accusations carried weight. While it initially seemed that Nariman's criticisms were levelled at the BDD's Back Bay Reclamation schemes, it came to light during the trial that the corruption scandal involved the Department's Industrial Housing Scheme. An incident involving the purchase and acquisition of incorrectly sized steel rods far in excess of that needed for the construction of the *chawls*, the purpose for which the rods were claimed to be used, cut through to the heart of the libel case.⁶⁴ Finding Nariman not guilty on the charges of libel and acquitting him, the judge of the case, H.P. Dastur, took the opportunity to criticise the sloppiness of Harvey and the BDD administration. While the judge did not feel that he could necessarily infer corrupt motives of Harvey and the other BDD engineers involved in the case, he did find their coordinated actions as more than a coincidental mistake. And though the judge confirmed that there were rumours present that Harvey and other BDD officials had privately profited from the incorrect orders of steel rods, he was unable to confirm their veracity.⁶⁵

Whether or not Harvey and the other engineers profited from this BDD scandal remains unclear, but the case did confirm that BDD money was improperly used in the course of this

⁶¹ Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, p. 93.

⁶² It should be noted here that Sir Lawless Hepper resigned his post as Director of the BDD on 30 November 1926 and quickly departed Bombay for England, leaving only instructions to solicitors on how to proceed on the cases. BL, IOR, V/24/821, 'Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1927', p.3; *Harvey-Nariman Libel Case*, ed. S.M. Surveyor (Bombay: Minerva Press, 1928), Part I, p.8.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Part I, p. 1-8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Part III, p. 6-13.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Part III, p. 59-60.

superfluous order as well as on other occasions. In addition to these improper expenses, other questionable financial decisions, like insisting on ordering steel for the *chawls* via England from producers who charged significantly more than did domestic Indian steel producers, helped contribute to the high overhead costs of the Industrial Housing Scheme.⁶⁶ Though Harvey extolled the superior quality of the steel produced in England compared to that in India, this steel undoubtedly also then subsequently inflated estimated costs per single-room tenement and ultimately skewed rental figures for the tenants higher. The Harvey-Nariman libel case then perhaps helps to explain how such a large-scale scheme resulted in notoriously poor construction that also remained so expensive to renting tenants.

But beyond the particulars of the BDD, the libel case seemed to have a chilling effect on future work of the Department. Following Sir Lawless Hepper's resignation and flight to England at the start of the trial in late 1926, the annual reports of the BDD demonstrated fewer new undertakings and instead spent much attention on vacancies in the BDD *chawls* as well as the number of tenants avoiding rental payments. With seemingly little relevance and the taint of scandal, the BDD was dissolved in 1929, its work subsumed by the Revenue Department of the Government of Bombay.⁶⁷

Voting with their feet: Tenant perspectives on the BDD chawls

While the BDD conducted less and less work following the halt of housing construction in 1924 and less still in the aftermath of the Harvey-Nariman case, the 16,880 single-room tenements remained a fixture of Bombay's housing stock. And despite Nariman's opposition and Jevon's warnings about the problems with single-room tenements, by 1924 the department had exclusively constructed its 16,880 units as single room tenements. Though the BDD reported that there had 'been little difficulty in letting rooms at Naigum and De Lisle Road', the vacancies were 'considerable' at the department's Worli site. Describing the area as 'difficult' to access and lacking 'proper roads and lighting' the BDD's annual report suggested that in only a matter of time there would be 'no difficulty in finding tenants.'⁶⁸ However, the department's subsequent annual report continued to describe the demand for rooms at Worli as 'still wanting'. By 1925 however, it had become clear that the vacancies were not just limited to the BDD's Worli development. An increase in the number of vacant rooms at the De Lisle Road and Naigum sites

⁶⁶ Ibid., Part II, p. 3-4.

⁶⁷ MSA, PWD DD, 1930, 153, p. 174-6, 5 December 1929.

⁶⁸ MSA, PWD DD, 1924, 26/II, p. 53-61.

was attributed to ‘efforts which were being made to make the tenants pay up’.⁶⁹ Noting that ‘that during the fair season many people sleep on the verandah of the chawls, and the pavements of roads, etc., thereby saving themselves the payment of rent’, the Development Department officials noted how difficult it was to actually get people to pay to live in the BDD *chawls*. In demonstrating the ways in which residents avoided paying rent, the 1925 report noted:

Some tenants abscond a few days before the notice [of eviction] matures, and others more wily get rid of their belongings by putting them in the rooms of their friends round [sic] them, and showing us a practically empty room, when the 20 days are up. The result is that the things seized are not worth much if anything at all, and they continue to live in the rooms till they are ejected. In some cases after a few days, thinking the coast is clear, they shift their things back, and in order to get them, Superintendents have orders to pay surprise visits to the rooms after a few days. Others still cuter dispose their property by placing it with their friends, so that the rooms are found empty when visited and marked “absconded.” They sleep either in the passages, or in the rooms for a few days, and then go to the superintendent and apply for either the same or another room, giving a false name.⁷⁰

In describing the lengths to which BDD inhabitants went to avoid paying rent, it becomes clear as early as 1925 that the *chawls* were not particularly effective at creating more affordable housing that raised living standards for the poor in Bombay or for creating well-utilized housing for the wealthier working or middle classes.

This pattern, of many tenants leaving their rent unpaid and of perpetually unfilled *chawls*, would remain a feature of the Industrial Housing Scheme through until the late 1930s.⁷¹ And while the construction of public housing in Bombay largely ended with the failure of the BDD’s Industrial Housing Scheme, the ‘indirect’ approach advocated by Orr during the 1910s and utilised by the BDD during the 1920s came to inform planning authorities in cities around British Asia, particularly in Singapore and Rangoon. Though the BDD’s schemes indeed failed to have much impact on the living standards of Bombay’s poor, the Development Department did build more tenements in four years than the BIT had built during the preceding decades. While planners and developers in Rangoon and Singapore proved less myopically focused on one-roomed tenements, their plans and schemes tended to reflect Bombay’s two decades of debate and experimentation with housing the city’s urban poor.

⁶⁹ MSA, PWD DD, 1925, 26, p. 50-6, 8 June 1925.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The 1927 BDD Annual Report suggests that 80-90 per cent of estimated rent was actually collected from 1923-1927, see BL, IOR, V/24/821, ‘Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1927’, p.27.

Housing schemes, Tiong Bahru and the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1941

This section begins to explore how an imperial urbanism was adopted and transmitted out of Bombay to cities across British Asia, focusing particularly on Singapore. And while the previous chapter discussed the antecedents to the SIT as well as its creation in 1927, this section will consider the extent to which the housing of the urban poor became increasingly important to the SIT. Arguing that the ways in which the SIT faced the challenges of tackling Singapore's poor housing conditions reflected, in part, a commonality with the BDD's approach, this section will examine the works of the SIT, tenant response to the projects as well as the institutional structure of the Trust from 1927-1935.

Before examining the SIT, this section will briefly contextualize urban developments during this period in Singapore with those more broadly in Malaya. The period from 1921 to 1931 was marked by uneven urban growth in Malaya in which the growth of smaller urban areas outpaced the urban growth of larger and more established cities. Though the percentage of urban dwellers in Malaya continued to increase, from about nineteen per cent in 1921 to twenty-two per cent in 1931, established urban areas around Penang, Malacca as well as Kuala Lumpur and Selangor saw about ten per cent growth in the share of their urban population. Less urbanized areas – like those around Kelantan, Kedah, and Pahang – contrastingly saw their share of urban dwelling populations increase drastically. The share of urban dwelling population of Pahang almost doubled from seven to thirteen per cent between 1921 and 1931, while the share of the urban population increased by about fifty per cent – from four to seven per cent – in Kelantan during a similar period. While the population of Singapore municipality grew by about twenty-one per cent over this period, the largest population growth was not inside the traditional municipal urban area, but rather along its edge. The share of Singapore's urban dwelling population fell from eighty-three to eighty per cent from 1921 to 1931.⁷²

One example of this growth along the urban edge was that of the creation of Kampong Melayu/Kampong Eunos to the northeast of the urban area. The settlement, the first reserved specifically for Malays, came about as a result of airport development at Kallang, which had evicted the predominately Malay residents of the area. Mohammed Eunos bin Abdullah, the first Malay representative on Singapore's Municipal Commission, lead the Commission in 1927 to grant lands northeast of the Geylang district, the edge of the municipality, to those evicted by the

⁷² M.V. Del Tufo, *A Report on the 1947 Census of Population: Malaya Comprising the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore* (Singapore: Government Publications Bureau, 1947), p. 43-5.

airport development.⁷³ The establishment of Kampong Eunus, which encouraged new growth along the edge of the urban area, illustrates then the broader trends of urban growth in Singapore around the time of the creation of the SIT.

While the 1918 Housing Commission Report helped build the case for an improvement trust in Singapore, by the time that the Singapore Improvement Ordinance was adopted in 1927, little attention was paid to the provisions of the Trust to provide housing.⁷⁴ Though this emphasis on constructing housing was initially missing from the Trust's mandate, the Trust was initially empowered to aid the 'improvement' of living conditions via Part V of the ordinance, a legal mechanism designed to allow the Trust to declare certain buildings unfit for human habitation.⁷⁵ In including this mechanism to condemn buildings found particularly problematic, the initial mandate of the SIT then reflected at least some of the expanded powers that J.P. Orr had pushed for in Bombay about a decade earlier.

While this initial mandate, granting power to condemn buildings while not providing any mechanism for replacement housing of evicted inhabitants, kept the costs of improvement schemes to a minimum, it created obvious contradictions. These contradictions were laid bare in 1928 when the Trust labelled a series of buildings along Bugis Street as unfit for human habitation. Providing no alternative accommodation, the residents of the buildings appealed to the Privy Council and won the 'Bugis Street Case' in 1933. As a result of the decision, the Trust's initial mandate was considerably circumscribed, and it was unable to declare buildings unfit for human habitation.⁷⁶

Even before the end of the Bugis Street Case, the Trust realised that it had to provide some housing, however limited in scope and scale, to those evicted in their various improvement schemes. Working together with the Singapore Municipality to build limited housing, the Trust tackled an initial list of projects with a burst of enthusiasm during the late 1920s. During this period it ran 'Improvement Schemes' including small provisions of low-cost housing along the urban periphery at Balestier Road, Lavender Road, Sago and Smith Streets, Dickenson Hill and Racecourse. Other schemes, like at Bugis Street, were abandoned as the difficult management and financial costs of these improvement schemes emerged.⁷⁷

Despite their cost and limited scope, these initial SIT housing projects proved relatively

⁷³ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009), p. 155.

⁷⁴ Fraser, 'Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947', p. 1, 6-7, 10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9-10, 45-6.

affordable and popular to a wide swath of lower-income residents of Singapore. Writing to the Trust in 1931 seeking accommodation in the Lavender Street scheme, Wahab bin Hitam, a 'straits born Malay' and self-described 'messenger at the American consulate' making thirty dollars per month expressed hope that he would qualify for the seven dollar per month rent.⁷⁸ Working as an 'Operator' for the Successors of Moine Comte & Co., a French merchant house based in Singapore, for thirty-two dollars per month, Koh Tuang Seah wrote the Trust hoping to rent a room at Balestier Road (Figure 8).⁷⁹ Explaining that he paid thirteen dollars per month in rent along nearby Serangoon Road and that his salary was 'insufficient' to support his family, Koh implored the Trust to allow him a room at seven dollars per month so that he could 'bear my financial position'.⁸⁰ Another interested party who had been living on Kim Keat Lane, within the new Balestier Road Estate, until the Municipality repossessed their property, sought a flat in Balestier Road so that he or she could move out of his or her friend's residence.⁸¹ While those evicted, along with bin Hitam and Koh, demonstrated an interest in the Trust's early housing schemes amongst the urban poor and dispossessed, the flats were also sought by some in a considerably better financial position. Describing himself as earning sixty dollars per month working at Singapore Cold Storage Co., J.K.K. Yong still expressed that he could 'scarcely... manage to make expenses meet with the heavy house rent I have to pay monthly'.⁸² Yong's petition to the Trust, despite his reported salary being nearly twice that of bin Hittam and Koh, suggests an acute shortage of affordable housing along the lines being offered by the SIT. After all, taking Koh's rent of thirteen dollars per month as an example of rent around Balestier Road, Yong would be spending nearly a quarter of his monthly income on rent.⁸³

⁷⁸ NAS, HDB 1027, SIT 579/31, p. 000970, Wahab bin Hitam, 28 July 1931; Dollars here and in this section refer to Straits Dollars.

⁷⁹ J. Sig D. Rawlins, 'French Enterprise in Malaya', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39:2 (210) (1966).

⁸⁰ NAS, HDB 1027, SIT 579/31, p. 000971, Koh Tuang Seah to SIT, 27 July 1931.

⁸¹ NAS, HDB 1027, SIT 579/31, p. 000972, No name 'X' to SIT, 4 July 1931.

⁸² NAS, HDB 1027, SIT 579/31, p. 000973, J.K.K. Yong to SIT, 28 May 1931.

⁸³ While ideas about the affordability of rent, as a percentage of income, vary widely according to time and place, J.M. Fraser, who spent most of his career working with the SIT suggested that maximum rent for the urban poor would be between 10 and 20 per cent of their family income. He expressed this in the context of designing Hong Kong's post-war approach to public housing. For more, see Chapter 5 and HKPRO, HKRS890-1-11, J.M. Fraser, #1A, p. 1-6, 19 May 1959.

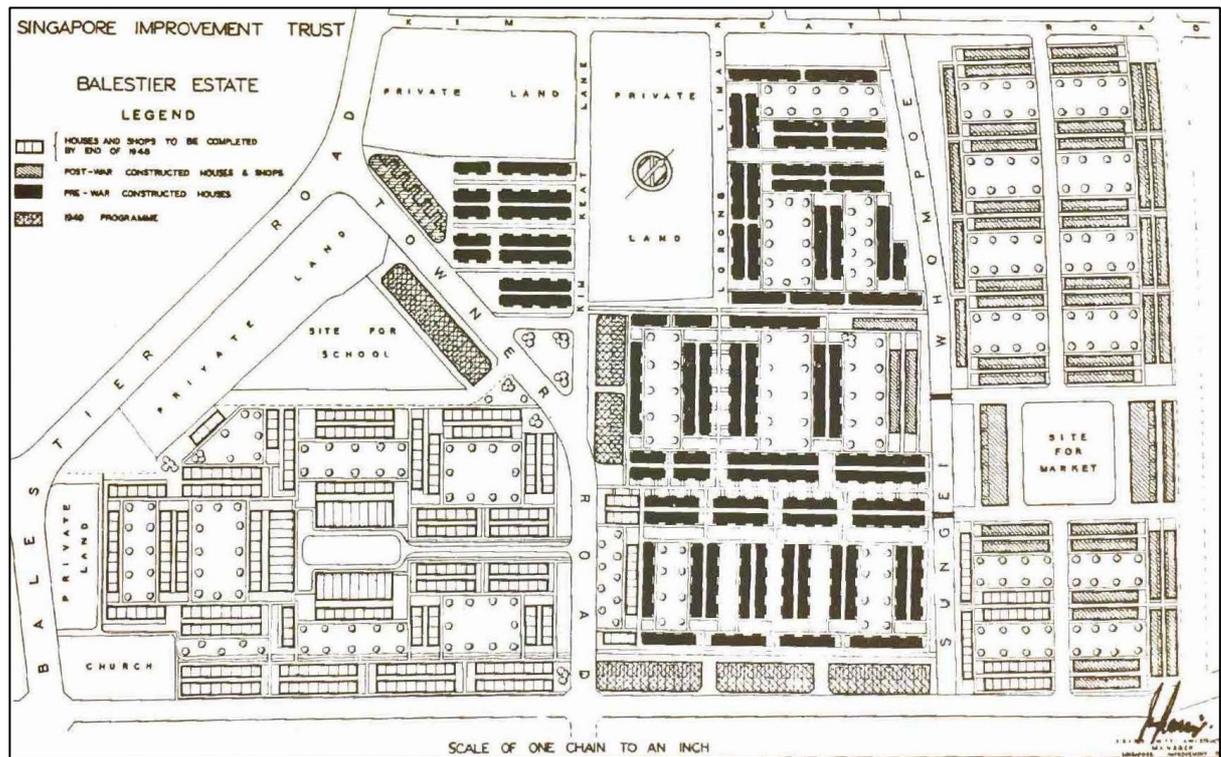


Figure 8. A map of housing constructed at Balestier Road by the Singapore Improvement Trust. The boxes in solid black represent buildings constructed before the Second World War, while the other boxes represent other buildings completed by the Trust after 1948. © The British Library Board, General Collections, C.S.B. 230/2, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947, Map of Balestier Estate*. Reprinted with permission.

When compared with the attitudes of tenants living in the BDD *chawls*, bin Hittam, Koh and Yong's petitions provide a stark contrast between the roughly simultaneous cases of the SIT and the BDD. But while the accommodation provided by these early SIT schemes provides contrast in its quality, it also provides contrast in its quantity. The Balestier Road scheme provided just 76 units while Lavender Street, Henderson Road and Kreta Ayer Road 118, 110 and 141 units, respectively. All in all, the Trust built about 500 units housing an estimated 3,500 people from 1928-1931.⁸⁴ Given the small size of these schemes, the early efforts of the SIT then compare more readily with the 'direct' attacks that had also characterized the earlier efforts of the BIT. And while perhaps more effectual in achieving colonial notions of urban improvement, these efforts, as they were in Bombay, were quickly labelled as too expensive to continue in a financially sustainable fashion.

A Municipal Health Officer, writing in 1931, around the time of these early SIT schemes, echoes what Orr said was true in Bombay more than a decade prior, 'it was early evident that a policy of declaring a block insanitary, acquiring it and demolishing all the buildings on it would soon exhaust the Trust finances'. Summarising the SIT's evolving approach to urban

⁸⁴ Fraser, 'Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947', p. 57.

improvement, the officer expresses scepticism to the Trust's new approach 'to leave the slums and to encourage new building by acquiring and developing the lands contiguous to the congested areas'.⁸⁵ And so while Singapore had taken longer to form an improvement trust, it seems to have moved, perhaps more quickly, in a similar direction as Bombay in developing land around the urban periphery after realizing that what Orr called 'direct' attacks on the slums were too slow and too costly.

Tiong Bahru and new urban environments

While this Singaporean interpretation of an imperial urbanism was applied to the city's slums during the late 1920s, Singapore's municipal health and planning officials also designing new urban environments along the urban periphery during the early 1930s. These new environments, large housing estates located along the urban edge, were quite similar to developments by the BDD a decade earlier in specific ways. Besides their geo-spatial similarity in relation to their urban core, both sets of schemes were intended to be estates – with shops and other amenities – rather than just residential settlements in addition to being much larger in terms of size; intended for thousands of residents rather than hundreds. Though the Trust continued to develop the Balestier Road site until 1939 and accommodated an additional 2,750 people from the original 450, the development of Tiong Bahru to the west of the city centre most exemplifies this attempt at engineering a new urban environment.

Acquiring the roughly 70 acres of land at Tiong Bahru from the Municipality in 1927, the SIT had also inherited an improvement plan for the area developed from 1925-1927. It quickly began clearing the area, close to the new General Hospital, of its current inhabitants. Describing the area as 'covered with plank and attap huts', municipal officials reported that, 'nowhere was there proper sanitation or drainage, whilst pigs and poultry roamed the area and in many cases shared the huts with the inhabitants'.⁸⁶ While the area was not considered an urban slum like some of the other 'improvement' schemes, health and planning officials were quick to paint the settlements of the Chinese people who lived there as similarly insanitary and unhygienic.

Despite their portrayal as insanitary squatters destined for 'improvement', those evicted during the initial clearance of Tiong Bahru raised important immediate questions about the redevelopment process. Petitioning the Trust for compensation for the evictions, 23 residents of the Outram Road district in Tiong Bahru described being left destitute:

⁸⁵ NAS, HDB 1027, SIT 662/31, Municipal Health Officer to SIT, p.001576-001580, 21 July 1931.

⁸⁶ NAS, HDB 1090, SIT 744/50, 'Draft', p. 001609-10, 2 July 1952.

[Now] that we have been compelled to quit we shall be obliged to pull down our houses, which had [cost] us poor folks our fortune, and which could only be used as fire wood. This loss would tell very seriously on us and that being so we most respectfully beg of [you] to be good enough to kindly see your way to help us by [giving] us some sort of a compensation.⁸⁷

Bringing attention to their plight, losing their home without monetary compensation or an offer to move elsewhere, the inhabitants of Outram Road also raised important questions about the process of improvement. As the Trust had faced questions about its mandate in 1928, being unable to construct new housing while being able to evict those living in buildings unfit for human habitation, the Trust was also forced to think about the meaning of ‘improvement’ in an immediate sense to those living near Outram Road.

While some in the Trust and Singapore’s municipal government argued that the compensations were only fair given both the nature of the eviction as well as the work the residents needed to complete to clear the area properly, those against compensating the evicted argued that setting a precedent of compensation would be too expensive.⁸⁸ In a rather ironic series of decisions, compensation for the living, evicted inhabitants, was refused while compensation for the dead, relating to claims around the exhumation of Chinese graves found at Tiong Bahru, was paid.⁸⁹ Perhaps reflecting the frugality of the Trust, the squabbling over compensation for evicted inhabitants more poignantly exposed the dislocation between the Trust and those living ‘improvement’; a trait seemingly shared by the BIT and BDD in Bombay.

Approving and expanding that initial plan at Tiong Bahru to include eighty-two acres by 1930, the Trust began major work on the site in 1931 and, after a failed attempt to attract private development, took up a plan to build its own accommodation.⁹⁰ Constructed over five years from 1936-1941, Tiong Bahru housed approximately 6,600 people in 784 flats, fifty-four shared units and thirty-three shops.⁹¹ The buildings themselves took on a modernist architecture – for an image, see chapter four, figure 4.2 – reflecting colonial projections to cultivate an urban modernity in Singapore. While considerably smaller than the BDD’s entire undertaking of 16,880 one-room tenements, Tiong Bahru was comparable in size to BDD’s smallest, north-eastern site,

⁸⁷ NAS, HDB 1007, SIT 476/27, 23 undersigned persons to President of Singapore Municipality, p. 000033, 15 May 1927.

⁸⁸ NAS, HDB 1007, SIT 476/27, ‘Minutes’, p. 00028-31; NAS, HDB 1007, SIT 476/27, ‘Assessor’s Memorandum’, p. 00032, 11 June 1927.

⁸⁹ NAS, HDB 1090, SIT 744/50, ‘Draft’, p. 001609-10, 2 July 1952.

⁹⁰ Ibid; Fraser, ‘Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947’, p. 11.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 57.

Sewri, which had about 950 rooms available for shops and accommodation.⁹²

And while Tiong Bahru was not comprised entirely of one-room units and did not face the same kind of tenant rejection as did the BDD estates during the 1920s and 1930s, the conception and construction of Tiong Bahru reflects Singapore's adaptations of an imperial urbanism shaped by Bombay. Beyond the obvious spatial, architectural and planning similarities with the BDD and an 'indirect' approach, the Trust also adopted some structural similarities to the BDD institutionally. While the BIT was officially separated from the work of the BMC in Bombay, the BDD had been much more expressly integrated with the BMC, with municipal officials and ultimately the Government of Bombay responsible for its actions. Beginning in this more hand-in-hand approach, the Trust had specifically worked with the Singapore Municipality both in developing housing for its various improvement schemes in the late 1920s as well as in acquiring and developing large-scale estates, like Tiong Bahru. Both Trusts sought, and controversially utilised, legislation designed to label buildings and neighbourhoods as unfit for human habitation and subsequently discarded this approach. And perhaps, most importantly, shifts in staffing these urban planning departments in sync. While the BIT was led by a somewhat diverse Board of Trustees coming from across communal lines from the upper-classes of colonial Bombay society, the BDD and SIT had a much more European dominated top brass. The Singapore Ratepayers' Association, a group of local landlords and landowners, complained specifically about the number of Europeans amongst the Board of the SIT, writing in 1934, 'no less than eight [of ten] are European and, of those eight, not many can seriously be said to have a stake in the country'.⁹³ Suggesting the appointment of a member of their Association to the SIT Board to diversify the Trust, their petition demonstrates these more rigid colonial hierarchies that were reinforced by an increasing number of Asian staff working for the European leadership of the BDD and SIT as surveyors, planners, and engineers.⁹⁴ And while there were then more Asian officials working on issues of planning, housing, and urban development, their voices were subsumed by a renewed surge of an *imperial* urbanism during the 1920s and 1930s. In the trends of staffing, the municipal friendly institutional structure, the legal framework of eviction and the wholesale construction of new urban environments along the urban edge, the

⁹² BL, IOR, V/24/821, 'Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1929', p.27.

⁹³ NAS, HDB 1008, SIT 146/34, Singapore Ratepayers' Association to Colonial Secretary of Singapore, p. 1898, 26 February 1934.

⁹⁴ For an example of the BIT Board of Trustees, see MSA, GD, 1904, 23, 36, p. M-S 353. For an example of the BDD, see BL, IOR, V/24/821, 'Report on the Working of the Development Department for the Period Ending 31st March 1924', p.35-9. For an example of the SIT, see NAS, Oral History Interviews, Soh Wah Seng, Interviewer: Low Lay Leng/ Tan Beng Luan, Special Project, 000311, Reel 12, 00:00:00-00:04:40, 00:08:25-00:10:30, 00:12:00-00:14:10; Fraser, 'Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947', p. 8.

development of the SIT and Tiong Bahru were a manifestation of an imperial urbanism spreading across British Asia influenced heavily by Bombay's experiences.

Beyond Bombay: The influence of an imperial urbanism around British Asia

While Singapore's adaptation of an imperial urbanism centred on Bombay can be seen in examining the comparative trajectories of urban development in both cities, the example of Rangoon more directly illustrates that the paths of an imperial urbanism went through Bombay. Beyond sparking and shaping the creation of the Rangoon Development Trust (RDT), Bombay and the BIT and BDD continued to influence discourses on slums, squatters and urban development projects in Rangoon into the 1920s and 1930s.

An informal manifestation of this influence was seen in the language used by municipal administrators in Rangoon in describing housing in the city. On multiple occasions from 1910-1941, administrators, politicians, and residents submitting depositions for committee reports and refer to the need for *chawls*.⁹⁵ Borrowed from Marathi, a language spoken in a region of Western India roughly corresponding to what is known today as Maharashtra, a *chawl* roughly describes a tenement block of housing. As the word is derived from Marathi, and Bombay was and is the premier urban centre for Marathi speakers, it is clear that it arose in the context of describing and building urban housing in specifically Bombay. Beyond the etymology of *chawl*, both contemporary and modern usage of the word refers specifically to the context of Bombay – that is to say that it is not used in other Indian cities like Calcutta or Delhi or in the contexts of Hong Kong or Singapore. Using the terminology *chawl* then denotes a certain awareness of and connection with Bombay's urban environment. While other cities, particularly Calcutta, provided slightly different models of creating public housing and developing an urban environment of poverty, the use of *chawl* suggests Bombay's pervasive and primary influence in Rangoon.

While a shared lexicon suggests a powerful connection, Bombay's policies themselves ultimately illustrated solutions to municipal policymakers in Rangoon. A report in the 1920s demonstrates Bombay's primacy within discourses on urban development in Rangoon. In the 1926 public health committee report evaluation of 'proposed remedies & workman's chawls', the BDD's mass construction of workmen's housing in the 1920s is raised and deemed too elaborate

⁹⁵ For some examples of the use of *chawl* see NAM, 4756, 4/6(21), 1927, p. 33-4, 36, 'Report on the Public Health of Rangoon Vol. I' and NAM, 11865, 4/19(22), 1960, 'Report of the Committee appointed to enquire into the effects of the removal of rent control in Rangoon', p. 13, 75.

for Rangoon.⁹⁶ In the notes of dissent, a member of the Rangoon Legislative Council, Narayana Rao, commented, ‘we have waited long, and we now expect the Development Trust to undertake such schemes [similar to Bombay’s chawl developments] because no one has come forward to do them’. In pushing the Development Trust to build mass housing for workers, Rao suggests applying Bombay’s contemporary policies to Rangoon. Arguing that ‘the improvement and expansion of the City of Rangoon, for which the Development Trust was created, could not be attained without providing cheap sanitary dwellings to the poor and working classes,’ he took the position that the role of development should be an expansive one as it was in Bombay under the BIT and even more so, the BDD.⁹⁷

In addition to these references in the context of government reports and political debates, Bombay’s experiences in ‘improvement’ loomed large in the experience of private citizens organising to fight slum conditions for the urban poor in Rangoon. The Rangoon Social Services League, a group of private citizens acting as social reformers, strongly argued, along with Rao, that the RDT should take a more active role in constructing housing and suggested that ‘something more comprehensive is needed which will have to include something like small model dwelling houses’.⁹⁸ That the Rangoon Social Services League was interested not only in the construction of houses, but also in the types of accommodation that would emerge, is perhaps not a surprise given the leadership of H.S. Jevons, the aforementioned economics professor at the University of Allahabad who had moved to the University of Rangoon in 1923. It had, after all, only been five years earlier that Jevons had protested the wholesale construction of one-room tenements as part of the BDD’s approach to housing the urban poor in Bombay. Perhaps having learned from relatively low-profile protestation of the BDD’s plans, Jevons not only became a more outspoken public advocate for providing housing to the urban poor after his move to the University of Rangoon in 1923 but also in documenting the inadequacies of one-roomed accommodation.

The evolving Bombay model and an imperial urbanism

H.S. Jevons’ work on providing housing for the urban poor in Rangoon illustrates the extent to which an urbanism was coming to spread to cities across British Asia. Not just about the similarity of spatial relationships between the city’s rich and the urban poor, this imperial urbanism engendered connections between social reformers and would-be muckrakers across

⁹⁶ NAM, 4756, 4/6(21), 1927, Report on the Public Health of Rangoon Vol. I p. 33-4.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

urban South and Southeast Asia as well as connections between the architectural forms of housing for the urban poor. While chapter four will discuss the architectural modernism of Tiong Bahru in Singapore, the similarities in form and style with the BDD *chawls* – seen comparing figures six, seven, and ten – are striking. Taken together, along with other modernist projects like the Rangoon City Hall, these works demonstrate the presence of a certain conceptualisation of modernity embedded within the imperial urbanism that emerged across Asia's port cities. And while Singapore's case does not demonstrate Rangoon's level of the depth regarding the connection to Bombay's urban environment, the juxtaposed cases of Rangoon and Singapore illustrate what Cooper has described as 'the lumpiness of cross-border connections'.⁹⁹

Despite the lumpiness of these connections, it is clear in comparison and in direct connection that Bombay's experiences with an 'indirect' attack on its slums, developed in part by J.P. Orr and constructed through the BDD, had a tangible impact on the urban development of Rangoon and Singapore during the 1920s and 1930s. Building upon the previous chapter that argued that a Bombay model came to inform approaches to slum clearance and the construction of public housing in cities across British Asia, this chapter has demonstrated that the case of Bombay continued to exert influence through the development of an imperial urbanism around urban South and Southeast Asia. While Singapore, and indeed Rangoon, adapted this imperial urbanism to their local context, as Bombay had done through the 1910s in developing its new approach, the works of the BDD, RDT and SIT indicate a number of similarities in approach, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s. These urban planning authorities all began to favour large-scale estate developments along the urban edge over more traditional 'direct' attacks and improvement schemes aimed at narrow slices of the cities' slums. These authorities all became more intimately intertwined with increasingly assertive municipal governments and became increasingly staffed by Asian officials, even if these officials comprised the lowest rung of institutional hierarchies.

And while Haynes and Rao have argued that the idea of the 'colonial city' dissipated in South Asia during the 1930s and beyond, this chapter has demonstrated the ways in which an imperial urbanism remained important to urban development in regions in between and beyond the contemporary demarcations of South Asia's boundaries.¹⁰⁰ It has suggested that these cities were connected as nodes in a network of emerging urbanism around British Asia in what is now South and Southeast Asia, along the lines of scholars connecting migration across the Bay of

⁹⁹ Cooper, 'What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For?', p. 194.

¹⁰⁰ Haynes and Rao, 'Beyond the Colonial City'; Saha, 'Is It India? Colonial Burma as a 'Problem' in South Asian History'.

Bengal and the Indian Ocean.¹⁰¹ Having established the emergence and evolution of this imperial urbanism over the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, subsequent chapters will examine the interruption of these urban circulations and their legacies in shaping post-war public housing programmes in Hong Kong and Singapore.

¹⁰¹ Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*; Green, *Bombay Islam*; Nile Green, 'Buddhism, Islam and the Religious Economy of Colonial Burma', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46:02 (2015); Amarjit Kaur, 'Indian Labour, Labour Standards, and Workers' Health in Burma and Malaya, 1900–1940', *Modern Asian Studies* 40:2 (2006).

URBAN GROWTH, SQUATTERS, AND THE MAKINGS OF NEW URBANISMS: BOMBAY, HONG KONG, AND SINGAPORE, 1936-1947

CHAPTER 4

The late 1930s through the mid-1940s was a period of tumultuous change in the urban fabric of port cities across British Asia. While the Sino-Japanese conflict beginning in 1937 led definitively to a steady stream of people into Hong Kong – many of whom joined the ranks of the urban poor – depression-era economic upheaval and transformation also led to a burgeoning population of the urban poor in the years leading up to the Second World War in Bombay and Singapore.¹ These new urbanites posed new challenges and raised additional questions around housing, urban planning and urban development for municipal and other government officials across South and Southeast Asia at a time of rising tensions – between the British and the Japanese in Hong Kong and Singapore and between the British and the independence movement in Bombay.²

Exploring this convergence of lived urban poverty and contextualizing these tensions in an urban setting, this chapter delineates evolving lines of communication and connection between increasingly divergent depression-era and late-colonial urbanisms – with Hong Kong and Singapore on the one hand and Bombay on the other.³ Locating the roots of this divergence in the approaches taken towards urban poverty in the mid-to-late 1930s, this chapter goes on to argue that the Second World War and the British Military Administration (BMA) represent an evolution of this increasingly distinct urban form taking hold in Hong Kong and Singapore. In examining the late 1930s through the mid-1940s, this chapter builds upon the themes and chronologies of previous chapters as well as sets the stage for the final post-war sections of this dissertation. While previous chapters examined the emergence and development of an imperial urbanism characterised by the centrality of Bombay's example, this chapter assesses the evolution of this urbanism as the centrality of Bombay's model dissipated. In delineating urbanisms in Singapore and Hong Kong from Bombay, this chapter also constructs the framing

¹ Margaret Jones, 'Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State: Hong Kong, 1900-1950', *ibid.* 37:3 (2003). For more on an analogous process of urban growth and migration in north India, see Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 41-7.

² Prashant Kidambi, 'Nationalism and the City in Colonial India: Bombay, C. 1890-1940', *Journal of Urban History* 38:5 (2012).

³ Benjamin Zachariah, 'British and Indian Ideas of 'Development': Decoding Political Conventions in the Late Colonial State', *Itinerario* 23:3-4 (2011).

for the final chapter of this dissertation, which explores the subsequent consequences of this divergent urbanism in Hong Kong and Singapore during the post-war period.

In analysing and juxtaposing the depression-era and wartime periods, the chapter turns again to a comparative framework to address the virtual historiographical lacuna on urban development in South and Southeast Asia that covers either the 1930s or the 1940s. While the monographs discussed in previous chapters by Kidambi and Hazareesingh on the development of Bombay span a period from 1880 to 1925, Rao's *House but no Garden* focuses more on the construction of urban identities during the 1930s rather than on the physical construction of the city.⁴ This gap in understanding urban development during the 1930s and 1940s extends to Singapore and Hong Kong as well.⁵ While Yeoh's examination of Singapore's built environment covers the 1920s and has been used to understand developments in Singapore in chapters one, two, and three, it leaves open examinations of later periods.⁶ Hong Kong's historiography on urban development is similarly scarce, though Jones' article on tuberculosis and housing, mentioned in chapter one, notes the continuity between the pre-war, wartime, and early post-war periods.⁷ Compounding, or perhaps justifying, this lacuna of research on these decades is a lack of census data critical to the understanding of urban development both before and after these years. Although an imperial census occurred in 1931 as well as 1951 in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the 1941 census was either not completed – as was the case in Hong Kong and Singapore – or completed in a barebones fashion – as was the case in Bombay.⁸ The scarcity of readily comparable census data complicates historical understandings of the city in South and Southeast Asia during this period and illustrates the elusive nature of urban change during the years leading up to, during and immediately after the Second World War.

The assertion of this historiographical lacuna on urban development and urbanism during the 1930s and 1940s is not exclusive to this chapter. Haynes and Rao have recently called for expanded historical studies of South Asian urbanism beyond the 'colonial city' into the middle decades of the twentieth century.⁹ Further, Huff and Huff recently argued that little work on

⁴ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*; Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity*; Rao, *House, but No Garden*.

⁵ There are however some works on Indonesia and Malaya, see William H. Frederick, 'Hidden Change in Late Colonial Urban Society in Indonesia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14:2 (1983); Virginia Thompson, *Postmortem on Malaya* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943).

⁶ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.

⁷ Jones, 'Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State'.

⁸ For a discussion on the difficulty of population data in this period, see Gregg Huff and Gillian Huff, 'Urban Growth and Change in 1940s Southeast Asia', *The Economic History Review* 68:2 (2015).

⁹ Haynes and Rao, 'Beyond the Colonial City'.

Southeast Asia examined urban growth around the wartime period.¹⁰ Building upon this call, in part by bringing to the table knowledge of a broader and recent literature on East Asian urbanisms in Republican China and Imperial Japan, this chapter emphasizes the connectedness of Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore through the actions of municipal and imperial officials.¹¹ In doing so, this chapter builds upon the limited historiography of these three cities during this period and argues for the importance of this decade from the late 1930s through the mid-1940s on the post-war trajectories of urban development.¹²

This chapter accepts and follows along the lines of a more recent historiography of East Asian urbanism that has tended to focus on the particulars of urban life as a means to explore larger themes, like a Japanese imperial urbanism.¹³ It also engages an older body of literature more broadly concerned with the intersection of British and European empire, disease, and medicine that has considered notions of 'laissez-faire' imperialism and 'constructive imperialism' in relation to the depression-era and late-colonial periods. Despite the age of these historiographical debates, some contemporary scholars have turned back to these questions and considered the nature of British imperialism within the urban context.¹⁴ Examining the founder of the Delhi Improvement Trust, Legg argues that disappointment in the work of the Trust in the late 1930s and early 1940s resulted from tensions between slum dweller's rights and the deeper rationalities of colonial governance; namely, to make money and maintain a healthy workforce.¹⁵ Chang follows a similar line of thought, pointing out the link between 'constructive imperialism' and the need to eradicate inhibitors to social-economic development in Singapore.¹⁶

¹⁰ Huff and Huff, 'Urban Growth and Change in 1940s Southeast Asia'.

¹¹ Tristan R. Grunow, 'Paving Power: Western Urban Planning and Imperial Space from the Streets of Meiji Tokyo to Colonial Seoul', *Journal of Urban History* 42:3 (2016); Louise Young, *Beyond the Metropolis: Second Cities and Modern Life in Interwar Japan* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2013); Janet Y. Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012); Zvia Lipkin, *Useless to the State: "Social Problems" and Social Engineering in Nationalist Nanjing, 1927-1937* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006); Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: University of California Press, 1999).

¹² Haynes, 'Rethinking the Twentieth-Century History of Mumbai'; Conlon, 'Industrialization and the Housing Problem in Bombay'; Rao, *House, but No Garden*; Rao, 'Community, Urban Citizenship and Housing in Bombay'; Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*; Jones, 'Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State'; Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*; Chang, 'Tropicalizing' Planning'.

¹³ Michael Worboys, 'The Emergence of Tropical Medicine: A Study in the Establishment of a Scientific Specialty', in *Perspectives on the Emergence of Scientific Disciplines*, ed. Gerard Lemaire, et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1976); J. M. Lee and Martin Petter, *The Colonial Office, War and Development Policy: Organisation and the Planning of a Metropolitan Initiative 1939-1945* (London: Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1982).

¹⁴ For examples of intermediaries between older and more contemporary historiography, see Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*; Douglas Melvin Haynes, 'The Social Production of Metropolitan Expertise in Tropical Diseases: The Imperial State, Colonial Service and the Tropical Diseases Research Fund', *Science, Technology and Society* 4:2 (1999).

¹⁵ Stephen Legg, 'Ambivalent Improvements: Biography, Biopolitics, and Colonial Delhi', *Environment and Planning A* 40:1 (2008), p. 53-4.

¹⁶ Chang, 'Tropicalizing' Planning', p. 38.

Chang's wide-ranging monograph, as discussed in previous chapters, also reflects a more recent historiography – articulated most forcefully by Scott in his examination of 'high-modernism' in architecture and urban planning – a literature interested in architecture, modernism and the city.¹⁷ While Scott placed le Corbusier, the famous French architect and urban planner, and his post-war Chandigarh plan at the centre of his criticism of high modernism, le Corbusier's pre-war work in Algiers has also attracted historical attention. Analysing the impact of le Corbusier and French imperialism on Algiers, Çelik examines the hybridity of urban forms and urban processes in creating a colonial urbanism.¹⁸ Along the lines of Çelik and Scott, this chapter explores these motifs of high modernism as it relates to the lives of the urban poor in all three cities, though it also takes into account the older historiography on constructive imperialism and recent works on competing notions of modernity in the twentieth-century South Asian city.¹⁹

Though Caru's monograph has explored this interplay between constructive imperialism and modernity in relation to the Development Department *chawks* and politics in Bombay, hardly any attention has been paid to this interplay in Hong Kong and Singapore.²⁰ Despite a literature portraying modern architecture as it related Hong Kong and Singapore before the Second World War, few works have examined the competing notions of modernity that developed in these cities during this period.²¹ Arguing that the development of these ideas on modernity were central to the urban transformations of this period, this chapter examines these urban modernities in the context of the urban poor in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Along the lines of Caru and Snow, who argue that the urban transformations of this period were of considerable consequence and recast patterns of post-war life and governance, this chapter considers how the years leading up to and during the Second World War meaningfully reshaped the lived experience of urban poverty.²² Wary of the narratives of so-called 'constructive imperialism', this chapter nonetheless examines how municipal and imperial officials approached the realities of the late Depression-era city. Contending that while the lived

¹⁷ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations*.

¹⁹ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*; Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity*; Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities*; Jyoti Hosagrahar, 'Negotiated Modernities: Symbolic Terrains of Housing in Delhi', in *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon*, ed. Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash (London: Routledge, 2007).

²⁰ Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*.

²¹ Norman Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life, 1819-1939* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990); Pryor, *Housing in Hong Kong*.

²² Caru, *Des Toits Sur La Grève*, 323-4; Philip Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China, and the Japanese Occupation* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. xxii-xxvii.

experiences of urban poverty converged between these cities before the Second World War, approaches taken by officials to house the urban poor diverged in Bombay on the one hand and in Hong Kong and Singapore on the other. Arguing that the differences between these emerging urbanisms in pre-war South and Southeast Asia were compounded by the contingencies of the Second World War and BMA, this chapter examines the continuities between pre and post-war urbanisms in British Asia.

Modernity, squatters and the (un)deserving poor in Singapore

Recounting a childhood spent living in Singapore Improvement Trust flats during the 1930s, Kartar Singh describes how his father – a Punjabi immigrant, a former bugler in the Kelantan Military Forces, and a low-paid employee of the Capitol Theatre in the late 1930s – managed to make ends meet for his family. Saying that his family had been in a ‘SIT house along Henderson Road, Block D’ in Tiong Bahru, Singh recalls they ‘had to move from there to the more expensive [SIT] houses’ as a result of the need to accommodate victims of the 1934 Bukit Ho Swee fire.²³ Remembering that the rent increased ‘from 7 to 8 dollars a month,’ Singh described a scheme through which his father, Ghasita, absconded to skip out on paying a few months rent to the improvement trust:

My father got a hold of a UP [United Provinces] man. You know those UP people who have the loincloth, the white cloth and they have a small tail on their head? They’re known as UP wallahs...so he got a friend, a UP wallah, and his name was Nico Singh. He [my dad] gave him eight dollars and said, ‘block H, number 10 is vacant. Please go to the SIT and get the house on your name’. So he [Nico Singh] got the house under his name and gave the receipt to my father...and so from 1934-1937 we were living in that house under Nico Singh’s name...

So after [1937], we ran away. We packed up our clothes and went to the Capitol Theatre. Then, those SIT people came looking for my Dad. They finally they learned he was in the Capitol Theatre. They came to my father and said, ‘you owe two months rent and you have not paid’. So my father said, ‘I don’t know! What? Who owes you two months rent?’ And they said, ‘Nico Singh’...he said, ‘I am Ghasita Singh, you need to find Nico Singh!’²⁴

Describing his family’s situation with much retrospective humour, Singh more seriously considered his father’s motives, ‘I don’t think my father intentionally did it. He did it out of

²³ Kartar Singh is referring to a fire at Bukit Ho Swee in August 1934. A larger fire at Bukit Ho Swee in 1961 is more commonly referred to as the Bukit Ho Swee Fire and is focus of much scholarship. For more, see chapter 5.

²⁴ NAS, OHI, Singh, Kartar, Interviewer: Dr Jason Lim, The Civil Service - A Retrospection, 002335, Reel 3, 00:21:40-00:23:50.

compulsion...he was getting a small salary'.²⁵ For Singh's father then, absconding was a way of circumventing abject poverty in late depression-era Singapore.



Figure 9. Picture of the Capitol Theatre building (now Capitol Building) in 1940. Completed in 1933, the building housed a cinema as well as flats. Both because of its grandiose neo-classical architecture and its vast, state of the art cinema, the Capitol Theatre became an iconic symbol of modernity in late-colonial Singapore. Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore. Reprinted with permission.

While staff at the SIT worked with publishers to expound their work as part of the ‘modern developments of Singapore’, Singh’s story, of fleeing as a means of avoiding rent payments, reflects a quotidian lived experience of modernity in SIT estates.²⁶ Ostensibly constructed to better the living conditions of the urban poor by providing ‘modern’ amenities, Singh’s oral history illustrates how poor people often found the cost of living in such improvement schemes prohibitive. Exposing the contradictions of pre-war urban ‘improvement’ schemes, Singh’s story complicates the teleological narratives of modernity outwardly projected by the clean lines and modernist architectural motifs of these improvement schemes, like those pictured below at

²⁵ NAS, OHI, Singh, Kartar, Interviewer: Dr Jason Lim, The Civil Service - A Retrospection, 002335, Reel 3, 00:23:50-00:24:00.

²⁶ NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/239, C.P. Kwan to H.J. Eason (Secretary, SIT), p. 001495, 27 March 1939; NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/39, H.J. Eason (Secretary, SIT) to C.P. Kwan, p. 001494, 27 March 1939.

Tiong Bahru.²⁷ Modernity, exemplified in this instance by a convergence between Western and colonial architectural motifs, also embodied a greater sense of social convergence. This social convergence, represented through the quotidian actions of the urban poor living in such schemes and discussed through discourses of tropical hygiene, was touted as a justification of the power of the colonial regime.²⁸



Figure 10. Picture of flats being constructed by the Singapore Improvement Trust at Tiong Bahru in 1940. Note the building's streamlined curves to project a twentieth-century architectural modernism. M Masson Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore. Reprinted with permission.

Taking modernity in this sense, Singh's story of leaving the modern flats on Henderson Road to inhabit the Capitol Theatre, itself an icon of Singapore's modernity for its middle classes, challenges teleological notions of 'improvement' for the urban poor.²⁹ It points instead toward a more complex and hybrid set of realities that shaped modernities for the urban poor; modernities characterised less by architectural motifs than by cyclical poverty.³⁰

Having briefly discussed the multi-faceted nature of modernity for the urban poor, this

²⁷ Scott, *Outward Appearances*.

²⁸ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, p. 113-49.

²⁹ For more about cinema and modernity in Southeast Asia see, Lewis, *Cities in Motion*, p. 227-63.

³⁰ Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations*.

section will continue to analyse the role of ‘squatters’ and the urban poor during the late 1930s and early 1940s in the context of municipal and SIT official’s quest for a ‘modern’ Singapore.³¹ Arguing that growing concerns over ‘squatters’ reflect a meaningful, but poorly elucidated pattern of urban growth in Singapore, this section will deploy the use of the term ‘squatter’ critically and analyse perceptions of a ‘squatter problem’ in the lead up to the Second World War.³²

Before understanding developments specifically in Singapore, this section briefly contextualises the broader motif of the ‘squatter’ in Malaya and the Straits Settlements. While previous chapters have focused more generally on the urban poor in Singapore in the early twentieth century, squatters, or specifically those residing on lands that were either disputed or owned by another party, increasingly came to the attention of colonial authorities in Malaya and the Straits Settlements during the 1930s and 1940s. Initially, this was due in large part to the economic conditions prevailing on the peninsula as a result of the Great Depression.³³ While pre-war Malaya and Singapore were witness to a large influx of Chinese and Indian migrants coming to work in the region’s rubber plantations and tin mines, the downturn of economic conditions left many workers without means to economically sustain themselves. Despite the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of labourers back to South and East Asia, many continued on in Malaya and the Straits Settlements.³⁴ Many Chinese immigrants sustained themselves by transitioning from labourers to small-scale cash-crop farmers.³⁵ Initially utilising lands on the urban periphery, the swelling ranks of ‘agricultural squatters’ increasingly utilised the Malayan hinterlands for their farming enterprises.³⁶ Representing a challenge to the nature of colonial

³¹ NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/239, C.P. Kwan to H.J. Eason (Secretary, SIT), p. 001495, 27 March 1939; NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/39, H.J. Eason (Secretary, SIT) to C.P. Kwan, p. 001494, 27 March 1939.

³² Ingleson has described a similar interest in urban kampong areas amongst Dutch colonial officials during the 1930s on Java, see John Ingleson, 'Fear of the Kampung, Fear of Unrest: Urban Unemployment and Colonial Policy in 1930s Java', *Modern Asian Studies* 46:6 (2012).

³³ Loh Kok Wah, 'From Tin Mine Coolies to Agricultural Squatters: Socio-Economic Change in the Kinta District During the Inter-War Years', in *The Underside of Malaysian History: Pullers, Prostitutes, Plantation Workers...* ed. Peter J. Rimmer and Lisa M. Allen (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990); Francis Loh Kok Wah, *Beyond the Tin Mines: Coolies, Squatters and New Villagers in the Kinta Valley, Malaysia C.1880-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 7-39. For an account of those conditions in Malaya, with an emphasis on Singapore, see W. G. Huff, 'Entitlements, Destitution, and Emigration in the 1930s Singapore Great Depression', *The Economic History Review* 54:2 (2001).

³⁴ Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement, 1786-1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Kernial Singh Sandhu, 'The Saga of the "Squatter" in Malaya: A Preliminary Survey of the Causes, Characteristics and Consequences of the Resettlement of Rural Dwellers During the Emergency between 1948 and 1960', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 5:1 (1964), p. 146-7; Loh Kok Wah, *Beyond the Tin Mines: Coolies, Squatters and New Villagers in the Kinta Valley, Malaysia C.1880-1980*, p. 7-39.

³⁵ Loh, 'From Tin Mine Coolies to Agricultural Squatters: Socio-Economic Change in the Kinta District During the Inter-War Years'.

³⁶ Loh Kok Wah, *Beyond the Tin Mines: Coolies, Squatters and New Villagers in the Kinta Valley, Malaysia C.1880-1980*, p. 23-39; Tim Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 96-102.

capitalism in Malaya – these squatters chose to farm rather than return to work for the mines and plantations when commodities prices rose – they became emblematic of debates about pre-war Malaya relating to race, migration, economics, and nationalism. The motif of the pre-war Chinese squatter in Malaya – broadly representing a challenge to the colonial order – prefigured conceptions and debates about urban poverty in pre-war Singapore. Briefly elucidating the motif of a squatter in Malaya, this section now contextualises these broader developments through a focus on squatters and urban poverty in Singapore.

Arguing for stricter permitting for new structures on municipal land ‘extending from Thomson Road to Faber Ridge’ in January 1936, P.S. Hunter, a doctor and municipal health officer, described the presence of huts, ‘it is largely due to the practice of allowing domestic buildings to be erected in this way [without stricter permits] in the past that insanitary Kampongs have come, and are still coming, into being’. Suggesting that Singapore’s kampongs were continuing to grow along the western fringe of the urban area – with Thomson Road located to the northwest of the city and the Faber Ridge to the southwest – Hunter tacitly acknowledged that the SIT’s prior works, mainly along what was then the western edge of the central urban area at Tiong Bahru and Alexandra Road, had not radically shifted patterns of quotidian living for the city’s poorest residents. Given that these settlements were still expanding during a time when, from 1931-1936, the population of municipal Singapore grew approximately ten per cent (from roughly 445,000 to 490,000), Hunter’s description also indicates a sense that this urban growth was facilitated by the growth of Singapore’s kampongs.³⁷

Characterising the ‘squatter activities’ of those ‘genuinely too poor to pay for a plan for a hut in the residential areas’, Hunter’s description asserts that ‘his [a poor person’s] poverty connotes activities that must either seriously interfere with the permanent drainage or which must be a nuisance in some way to his better class neighbours’. Arguing that these ‘squatters’ should be relocated to areas where they would live in type-planned huts amongst themselves, Hunter suggests ‘that what is left of the Improvement Trust property in Balestier Road [a road intersecting the previously mentioned Thomson Road to the northwest of the urban area] be given up for this purpose. It would be well too to have a similar area in the Alexandra Road

³⁷ NAS, HDB 1048, SIT 90/36, P.S. Hunter to P.M.C. (President, Municipal Council), p. 228-9, 23 January 1936; Hunter is identified as a doctor and a municipal health officer in ‘Tiong Bahru Housing Plan’, *Straits Times*, p. 12, 20 April 1935; Del Tufo, *A Report on the 1947 Census of Population: Malaya Comprising the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore*, p. 45; W. G. Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 158.

district'.³⁸ While his suggestion for 'the housing of the very poor' remained 'unsettled' in December 1936, Hunter's description of 'squatters' demonstrates: the failures of the SIT to adequately address poor living conditions; the growth of urban poverty; and the need for more land, particularly along the urban fringe, to accommodate the urban poor in Singapore.³⁹

Hunter's description of accommodation for the urban poor in late 1930s Singapore is not the only evidence of a perceived problem relating to the city's 'squatters'; so is a revised policy relating to compensation to evicted squatters on Crown Lands. Ruling that 'Government admits no liability, legal, equitable or moral to compensate licensed temporary occupants of Crown Lands who are evicted therefrom,' Singapore's Governor abruptly reversed decades of longstanding policies compensating those removed from their homes for redevelopment.⁴⁰ Leaving open the possibility in cases of 'genuine hardship to make a compassionate grant', the Governor made clear that 'under no circumstances, will any grant be made by Government' for the 'evictions of unlicensed occupants of Crown Lands or of squatters on alienated lands'. Exhibiting a distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor – between 'squatters' and those facing 'genuine hardship' – the Governor's memo adopts a uniform policy on compensation for those amongst the evicted urban poor.⁴¹

This differentiation between those deserving and undeserving of aid had meaningful consequences given that the SIT and Singapore's government acknowledged demolishing more residential structures than it had constructed between 1931 and 1936. Questioned further by the SIT's Manager at the time, Langdon Williams, the Government said the figures held true despite a population increase of an estimated 40,000 persons. This number was further borne out by a reported decrease in the number of vacant dwellings, a figure taken from the 1931 and 1936 censuses.⁴² For those 'squatters' evicted then, like those scheduled for eviction at Alexandra Road in July 1940, finding new accommodation along the lines of the deserving poor was

³⁸ NAS, HDB 1048, SIT 90/36, P.S. Hunter to P.M.C. (President, Municipal Council), p. 228-9, 23 January 1936.

³⁹ NAS, HDB 1048, SIT 90/36, P.S. Hunter to P.M.C. (President, Municipal Council), p. 000232-4, 28 December 1936.

⁴⁰ While contentious, there had been an understanding that in some cases, compensation to evicted persons was paid during the 1920s, see NAS, HDB 1007, SIT 476/27.

⁴¹ NAS, HDB 1048, SIT 297/38, M.V. Del Tufo to The President, Municipal Commissioners, Singapore, p. 000376, 3 May 1937; In her book on urban poverty in Republican China, Chen argues that this period around the Second World War 'upended existing categories and boundaries' relating to poverty and, in particular, blurred the line between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poverty. Ingleson argues that a 'deserving and 'undeserving' poor became more clearly delineated on Java as a result of the 1930s depression. This delineation of the urban poor is common in Singapore up until the war, see Chen, *Guilty of Indigence*, p. 172; John Ingleson, 'Race, Class and the Deserving Poor: Charities and the 1930s Depression in Java', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46:2 (2015).

⁴² NAS, HDB 1048, SIT 721/36, W.W.D., 'Minutes from meeting 31 July 1936', p.000288, 8 August 1936.

particularly difficult.⁴³

Though narratives about urban poverty in Singapore evolved in this late-colonial period – more on this evolution later in this section – it is worth noting the similarity with which these notions of differentiated poverty existed too in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Rangoon.⁴⁴ Not quite as moralistic as defining ‘squatters’ as opposed to those with ‘genuine hardship,’ these debates about accommodation for the urban poor were often characterized by an economic lexicon. Focusing on ‘economic’ rental schemes – in which colonial officials invested very little upfront capital and expected the schemes themselves to fund future development – these debates nonetheless reflected a tacit acknowledgement that many of the poorest residents could not afford rent at the levels required to make these schemes self-perpetuating and would therefore be excluded from such urban ‘improvement’.

While SIT and municipal officials who delineated a distinction between squatters and other members of the urban poor dominated policy discussions of the late-colonial period, a few influential government officials began to lay the framework for an alternative narrative less concerned with ‘economic rent’ and the deservingness of the urban poor. Led by H. Weisberg, Singapore’s Financial Secretary, the Weisberg Building Policy Committee wrote a report in 1938 that argued that Singapore’s housing problem was not ‘primarily a problem of destroying bad houses, but rather a problem of building good ones’.⁴⁵ Broadly summarizing debates about housing for the urban poor in Depression-era Singapore, the committee writes:

There are broadly two schools of thought in housing reform. The one holds that the main thing is to get house building back on to an economic basis, that we should build as many houses as possible and let them at the lowest rents which will give a return on the money, that when there is no further demand for these houses the housing problem is solved, with the exception of a few black spots in the slums which should be dealt with by special methods.

The other school holds that this policy would leave things practically as they are now, that millions of people would still be living in overcrowded conditions and in slums, and that merely to meet the economic demand of those who are prepared to pay economic rents for houses is no solution of the housing problem. They consider that the important thing is not the ability of the family to pay rent, but their need for houseroom. They will never be content until a good house is provided for every family at a rent which it can pay.⁴⁶

⁴³ NAS, HDB 1060, SIT 485/40, Commissioner of Lands to SIT, p. 00194, 2 July 1940.

⁴⁴ For debates related to Rangoon, see Sugarman, ‘Reclaiming Rangoon’.

⁴⁵ Weisberg is identified as the Financial Secretary in short report in *The Malayan Tribune*, p. 12, 11 May 1938.

⁴⁶ NAS, HDB 1061, SIT 70/41, ‘Weisberg Report’, p. 001393-4; note that record title for the file misspells Weisberg as ‘Weisburg’, though the contents of the file and all subsequent references refer to the committee as the Weisberg Committee.

In shifting the debate towards the latter school of thought, the Weisberg Committee reframed the issue of housing for the urban poor within Singapore's government. Advocating for a larger financial outlay by the colonial government, the committee argued that, 'the position will remain as it is until alternative accommodation is available at rents which the slum dwellers can pay'.⁴⁷

Despite the Weisberg Committee Report vocally supporting a more active government approach towards accommodating the urban poor, historians have noted the slow pace of housing construction on the part of the SIT from 1938-1942.⁴⁸ While historiographical debates continue about the efficacy of the government in the years before the war, the slow pace of construction reveals a gap between discourses of urban poverty in late-colonial Singapore and actions taken by the government to address issues related to housing.⁴⁹ Related to this gap between on-the-ground-development and 'paper' schemes, is again the theme of urban corruption.⁵⁰ While the previous chapter demonstrated how BDD officials were implicated in a corruption scheme related to the construction of the department's *chawls*, the death of the forty-eight-year-old Manager of the SIT, Leonard Langdon Williams, on 27 October 1941 raises questions of improvement-based corruption in Singapore as well. Reported as 'fully dressed' and 'lying face down' Williams' body was discovered in a 'stream off the 17th mile Kota Tinggi Road' about forty kilometres north of Singapore in Johor. The same report noted that the circumstances of Williams' death were suspicious enough to warrant an inquest by the Johore Bahru Coroner.⁵¹ Though the circumstances of his death, as reported, *suggest* something larger afoot, allegations of corruption raised by two SIT employees in subsequent oral histories give further credence to theories of foul play by Williams. Soh Wah Seng, a Hokkien draftsman at the SIT, alleged that Williams – despite having inferior qualifications to other applicants for the position, like J.M. Fraser – was selected as Manager of the SIT because Dr David Galloway, a prominent physician and government adviser in Johor and the Straits Settlements, 'pulled strings' for him on the account that Williams was his nephew by marriage.⁵² Winston Arnold Reginald Matthews, a Eurasian assessor at the SIT from 1933-1941, directly linked Williams' death to

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ NAS, HDB 1090, SIT 744/50; Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, p. 154.

⁴⁹ Ronald McCrum, *The Men That Lost Singapore, 1938-1942* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017).

⁵⁰ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.

⁵¹ 'Mr. Langdon William's Funeral', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 5, 27 October 1941; I have been unable to locate the coroner's inquest, though it seems that the timing of Williams' death, just five weeks before the beginning of the Second World War in Malaya and Southeast Asia, raises the prospects that the inquest was never completed and/or is no longer traceable.

⁵² NAS, OHI, Soh Wah Seng, Interviewer: Low Lay Leng/ Tan Beng Luan, 000311, Reel 12, 00:20:00-00:27:30; 'Obituary: Sir David Galloway, M.D., F.R.C.P.Ed.', *British Medical Journal*, p. 825, 8 December 1945.

corruption, describing that he, ‘seemed to succumb to an association with Chinese contractors and involved himself in some sort of bribery or corruption’. Noting that these allegations of corruption were never proven, in large part due to the imminent invasion by the Japanese of Malaya and Singapore from December 1941-February 1942, Matthews nonetheless described Williams as a man ‘with a big question mark after his name’.⁵³ While the details of Williams’ corruption are less clear than the previous chapter’s Harvey-Nariman case, the unusual circumstances of Williams’ death along with subsequent oral history testimony illustrates that urban corruption was a part of a gap between planned and completed ‘improvement’ schemes.

Though the next chapter will examine how post-war development was informed by pre-war ‘improvement’, this tension inherent to pre-war schemes – between recommendation and action – reflects the dialectical relationship between an imperial ‘scaffolding’ and ‘skeleton’.⁵⁴ Beyond revealing the contrasts between planning and construction, this section has also demonstrated – in a period with little census data – an increasingly vocal contingent of colonial planners wary of the effects of the growth of urban poverty. While the extent to which the settlements of the urban poor grew in Singapore during the late 1930s and 1940s remains imprecise beyond the noted growth of settlements along the western fringe of the urban area, renewed interest in ‘squatters’ – the policies around evicting them and measures drawn up to rehouse them – betrays a growing sense of urgency on the part of colonial officials looking to continue to impose their sense of order on the city. This sense of urgency suggests that Singapore, as is demonstrated in the cases of Hong Kong and Bombay in the later sections, experienced a spout of growth in urban poverty the late 1930s and early 1940s. This growth is important insofar as it drove a convergence of quotidian conditions for the urban poor in all three cities. While officials in Singapore and Hong Kong marshalled particular discourses on poverty and modernity to debate sweeping plans for accommodating the urban poor, the conditions on the street reflected a fundamental disinterest in urban poverty beyond laying plans. This section has demonstrated how these discourses were deployed, debated and largely cast aside in Singapore during the years leading up to the Second World War. Subsequent sections will examine the implications of similar patterns of urban growth and poverty in Hong Kong and Bombay.

⁵³ NAS, OHI, Mathews, Winston Arnold Reginald, Interviewers: Denyse Tessensohn and Dr Jason Lim, Prisoners-of-War, 002685, Reel 3, 00:09:15-00:10:55.

⁵⁴ Peter Scriver, ‘Empire-Building and Thinking in the Public Works Department of British India’, in *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon*, ed. Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash (London: Routledge, 2007).

Migrations and the (un)making of hut houses in Hong Kong

Within a few months of the Weisberg Committee Report being finalised in Singapore, members of Hong Kong's 1935 Housing Commission were putting the finishing touches on their report after three years work. Released in October 1938, the report also called for striking changes in the ways the city housed its poorest residents and included a line strikingly similar to the Weisberg report's mantra about focusing on constructing good housing, 'accommodation must be available before slum clearance can be commenced'.⁵⁵ That Hong Kong's government, which had resisted calls for an improvement trust following the third plague pandemic at the turn of the century, was sounding so similar to Singapore's government on the issue of housing for the urban poor points to the extent to which the city was again a part of a circulation of knowledge and practices relating to urban 'improvement' in cities around the Indian Ocean world in the years leading up to the Second World War.

While an older historiography characterised the mindset of colonial officials in the city as 'laissez-faire', this section contributes to a more recent literature critical of this hands-off characterization and argues that an influx of wartime refugees from China pushed Hong Kong officials to consider schemes for large-scale housing despite the fact that those schemes did not materialize before the tide of conflict washed over the city in December 1941.⁵⁶ This section, while exploring the schemes laid by Hong Kong's pre-war officials, ultimately argues Hong Kong's experiences with urban poverty and housing reflect the convergence of an imperial urbanism in Hong Kong and Singapore – that is to say that while debates about the nature of urban poverty and its relationship to housing drew increasing attention, actions taken to accommodate the urban poor were hardly present on the ground.

The quotidian living conditions prevailing in Hong Kong in 1935 when the Housing Commission began its work and the conditions in the city in 1938 varied dramatically. The Sino-Japanese conflict, which effectively marked the start of the Second World War in Asia, began in July 1937 and resulted in many seeking refuge in Hong Kong. Estimates of the city's population suggest that its population roughly doubled from 840,000 in 1931 to over 1.64 million in 1941.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ HKPRO, Report of the Housing Commission, 1935, R.A.C. North (Chairman), R.M. Henderson, R.H. Kotewall, Li Shu Fan, J.J. Paterson, R.R. Todd, G.W. Pope, G.G. Wood, p. 2-6, 11 October 1938.

⁵⁶ Tak-Wing Ngo, 'Industrial History and the Artifice of Laissez-Faire Colonialism', in *Hong Kong's History: State and Society under Colonial Rule*, ed. Tak-Wing Ngo (London: Routledge, 1999); Jones, 'Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State'.

⁵⁷ Fan Shuh Ching, 'The Population of Hong Kong,' (Hong Kong: The Committee for International Coordination of National Research in Demography, 1974), p. 1-2.

With little suitable land available for use along the urban fringes of Hong Kong's mountainous terrain, this enormous influx of refugees from the war had three major consequences for the urban environment: it led to a proliferation of 'insanitary matshed settlements' on marginal land around Hong Kong island and the Kowloon peninsula that were repeatedly cleared under emergency measures; it jumpstarted the establishment of refugee camps; and it led to a more densely populated urban area.⁵⁸

The pressure of this wartime influx of refugees is palpable in various accounts relating to the housing of the urban poor during this period. While the Hong Kong government began to take steps in 1937 to house refugees in camps near the border of the colony at Sham Chun River, subsequent camps in the New Territories at Kam Tin and Lo Shu Ling were created through 1940 to house refugees from the Sino-Japanese conflict.⁵⁹ Arguing that the housing problem remained unsolvable without imposing some immigration restrictions, the commissioners for the housing report echoed similar concerns made by the colonial office about the 'unsettled' situation.⁶⁰ Noting that 'we do not believe that any measures which can reasonably be taken can, in the immediate future, have any noticeable effect on the problem of overcrowding,' the commissioners reflected the conditions of the enormous shift in Hong Kong's urban environment post-1937.⁶¹

In addition to acknowledging the pressure placed on housing stock and the congestion of Hong Kong's quotidian urban environment, the commissioners for the housing report also described the financial realities faced by some of Hong Kong's poorest residents, 'it is only too common, especially amongst unskilled labourers, to find three men doing the work of one and sharing remuneration which might be adequate for one but is certainly insufficient of three; while the regular employee is fortunate if he is not maintaining a number of relatives out of his earnings'. Documenting the earnings of the city's urban poor, an annex to the report estimates that a family with two working casual labourers would earn between \$14 and \$30 Hong Kong Dollars per month and could only afford a rent of approximately \$4 to \$7.50. With so little money available for rent and not enough proper accommodation, the annex articulates that

⁵⁸ HKPRO, HKRS58-1-186-7, Japanese invasion of South China, 1938 - Removal of unauthorised and insanitary matshed settlements in Hong Kong and Kowloon and housing of the occupants in refugee camps', 1939.

⁵⁹ 'Local Arrangements', *South China Morning Post*, p. 12, 25 December 1937; 'Hongkong Refugees', *South China Morning Post*, p. 16, 19 October 1938; 'Shumchun Camp Fire', *South China Morning Post*, p. 18, 18 March 1939; 'Camp Incident', *South China Morning Post*, p. 9, 24 April 1939; 'Camp for Refugees', *South China Morning Post*, p. 13, 28 February 1939.

⁶⁰ NAUK, CO 129/576/1, Malcom MacDonald to Governor, p. 8-9, February 1939; NAUK, CO 129/567/7, 'Minutes', p. 3, December 1938; *Report of the Housing Commission, 1935*, (Hong Kong: Local Printing Press, 1938), p. 2-6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

overcrowding and congestion are a result of urban poverty, rather than a choice made by Hong Kong's residents.⁶²

Though officials in Hong Kong utilised the term 'squatter' less frequently than their counterparts in Singapore, migrations of Chinese refugees after 1937 left the city's officials similarly concerned with the informal peri-urban settlements of the poor. Refugees in Hong Kong lived in remarkably similar conditions to the urban poor in Singapore, be it in 'insanitary matshed settlements' or in 'insanitary Kampongs'.⁶³ Similar to the 1934 Bukit Ho Swee fire in Singapore, one fire in January 1939 left 400 refugees of a 'squatter's camp' homeless on Canton Road on the Kowloon Peninsula.⁶⁴ Another 'camp' at Jardine's Lookout adjacent to Happy Valley on Hong Kong Island was cleared in 1940 by the government's medical authorities.⁶⁵ Reflective of a convergence of imperial urbanism, both in how the city was planned and how it was inhabited, the thread of Hong Kong's pre-war urban environment became increasingly intertwined with the fabric of other colonial port cities.

This urban fabric, of the 1930s Indian Ocean port city, is intertwined not only by quotidian perspectives on life in the city as a poor person but also by the language of an active colonial administration looking to reshape Hong Kong's urban environment in the image of other colonial contexts. The 1935 Housing Commission annex called for the creation of an improvement trust along the lines of Singapore and was based on a 'careful examination of local conditions and of the methods adopted in other countries'. Contemporaneous correspondence with the colonial office also reflects an interest in establishing an 'improvement fund' that 'would be used for rehousing schemes'.⁶⁶ These suggestions, to establish an improvement fund or trust along the lines of Singapore that would specifically aid in rehousing the urban poor, reflect the tension between colonial officials tasked with planning and those tasked with making those plans a reality.

It is this tension, present both now in the cases of Singapore and Hong Kong, that gets at the heart of an evolving imperial urbanism in the depression era. While historians have noted the work of the Hong Kong and Malayan Planning Units for the grand scales of their undertakings, less has been said about their connection to pre-war plans, like the Weisburg Report and

⁶² The 1938 exchange rate of Hong Kong Dollars to Pounds Sterling was \$16=£1; *ibid.*, p. 2-6, 13.

⁶³ HKPRO, HKRS58-1-186-7, 'Japanese invasion of South China, 1938 - Removal of unauthorised and insanitary matshed settlements in Hong Kong and Kowloon and housing of the occupants in refugee camps', 1939; NAS, HDB 1048, SIT 90/36, P.S Hunter to P.M.C., p. 228-9, 23 January 1936.

⁶⁴ 'Refugees Unlucky', *South China Morning Post*, p. 8, 31 January 1939.

⁶⁵ 'Squatter's Eviction', *South China Morning Post*, p. 14, 21 February 1940.

⁶⁶ HKRPO, HKRS156-3-4, James Greffets to Governor Sir Alexander Grantham, #6, 28 December 1950; NAUK, CO 129/576/1, 'Proposed schemes for improvements in housing conditions, 1938-1939', p. 3.

Housing Commission Report.⁶⁷ While the next chapter will demonstrate that more comes out of these housing plans in the post-war period, the development of such plans in the mid to late 1930s demonstrates a shift in the nature of imperial intervention in the urban environment of port cities around the greater Indian Ocean.

This section has demonstrated the extent to which an imperial urbanism in Hong Kong converged both around a set of grand plans for accommodating the urban poor as well as around a common pattern of living for the poorest residents of the city. While matshed settlements in Hong Kong filled up the remaining open spaces in the urban area in a manner similar to Singapore's kampongs constructed of attap huts, the Housing Commission report released in 1938 called for the introduction of an improvement trust along the lines of Singapore in Hong Kong and argued that officials needed to focus on constructing more housing. It is worth noting here the similarities amongst colonial cities peripheral to this dissertation; the Delhi Improvement Trust was founded in 1937 in part to rehouse slum dwellers while debates in 1930s Rangoon centred on the construction of chawls for the city's poorest and often transitory residents.⁶⁸

In tandem with the previous section, this section has argued that the late 1930s was a period rife with tensions in the fabric of the urban environment. While mass migrations into the city, in this case because of the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, led to large increases in the size of the urban population, urban infrastructure relating to housing was unable to accommodate the population in ways alternative to burgeoning hut settlements. Recognizing this strain on the urban environment, colonial officials worked on elaborate plans that, like the Housing Commission report, called for large-scale schemes to be taken up to rehouse the urban poor paid for by an increasingly financially liable colonial government. Unable or unwilling to realize such plans, these tensions in the fabric of the urban environment were not just lived in a quotidian sense, but also evident in the disjointed approaches of colonial officials constructing on paper and those 'constructing' on the streets.

More room(s) for growth in Bombay, 1936-1947

Like Hong Kong and Singapore, Bombay experienced tremendous population growth during

⁶⁷ John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), p.126-35; Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, p. 58; C.M. Turnbull, 'British Planning for Post-War Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 5:2 (1974); Zachariah, 'British and Indian Ideas of 'Development'.

⁶⁸ Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism*; Sugarman, 'Reclaiming Rangoon'.

the late 1930s and early 1940s. While the city was estimated to have about 1.2 million inhabitants in 1931, this number swelled to nearly 1.5 million in 1941 and growth continued to accelerate with its population reaching 2.3 million in 1951.⁶⁹ A bit less like Hong Kong and Singapore though, Bombay had seen a relatively slow pace of growth through the 1920s while it had constructed just over 16,000 flats as part of the Development Directorate *chawls*.⁷⁰ The hangover from this and a private building boom in 1920s Bombay meant that though the city did eventually face a similar set of problems to Hong Kong and Singapore relating to poor residents living in huts, these problems emerged less in the late 1930s and more in the early 1940s.⁷¹

This section examines the tensions of Bombay's urban environment of poverty from the late 1930s through the Second World War as well as in the early years of independence. In doing so, it demonstrates a reaction against active approaches to housing the urban poor rather unlike approaches being developed simultaneously in Hong Kong and Singapore. This distinctly different approach, despite comparable population growth demography and a large influx of refugees into the city following partition in 1947, left the city increasingly cut off from circulations of ideas and practices relating to 'improvement' across an urbanizing Asia. Bombay had been central to this by providing a model which other cities adapted and emulated during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Differences in pre-war policy prescriptions coupled with a relative lack of wartime destruction meant that the city became increasingly less relevant to an evolving (post-)imperial urbanism of poverty developing around the port cities of an emergent Southeast Asia.

That Bombay officials were sceptical of active government approaches to housing the urban poor is evident from the disdain with which they discussed the *chawls* that had been constructed by the BDD during the 1920s. Describing the BDD *chawls* as, 'a dead-weight round the neck of Govt.' and having 'got a bad name already,' a Public Works Department official expressed cautious optimism that if 'the chawls are properly altered and necessary improvements made,' they could potentially be of use in addressing the city's housing problems. While not going as far to argue the scheme had been a waste of money, the Public Works Department official's

⁶⁹ *Population Growth and Policies in Mega-Cities: Bombay* (New York: United Nations, 1987), p. 5; Greater Bombay also swelled 67 per cent from 1941-51, see J.B. Bowman, *Census of India, 1951: Bombay, Saurashtra and Kutch, Part 2-A: General Population Tables, Social and Cultural Tables and Summary Figures by Talukas and Petas* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1953), p. 12.

⁷⁰ There is debate about the accuracy of the growth rate determined by the census given the active and widespread non-cooperation movement in India at the time, see *Population Growth and Policies in Mega-Cities: Bombay* (New York: United Nations, 1987), p. 5.; Estimates on the number of flats come from the first year after the BDD chawls were handed over the revenue department, see BL, IOR, V/24/1993, 'Annual Report on the Administration of the Industrial Housing Scheme for the Year 1929-1930', p. 1.

⁷¹ For more on the private building boom of 1920s Bombay, see Rao, *House, but No Garden*, p. 103-9.

description indicates both the under-utilization of the *chawls* as well as a lack of appetite to undertake a similar project to address the ‘very serious question before them [Government] for the housing of the city’s labour’.⁷²

Reinforcing this sense of under-utilization are reports on tenancy, abscondences, and problems collecting rent from BDD *chawls* now called the ‘Industrial Housing Scheme’. The 1936-1937 annual report notes that more than half of the *chawls* constructed at the largest site at Worli remained unoccupied throughout the year meaning that more than 4,620 of the 16,000 rooms remained empty. Vacancies were compounded by problems with abscondence and difficulties with the collection of rent. In that same year, from April 1936 to March 1937, 717 flats absconded, leaving well over a quarter of the flats empty and/or in arrears.⁷³ While the 1936-37 report reflected little evolution in the occupancy of the BDD *chawls* since it had been handed over to the Revenue Department in 1929, reports from 1937 onward demonstrate a palpable shift in the utilization of the improvement schemes. Occupancy, particularly at Wori, increased dramatically over the next two years from 1937-39 despite vacancy and abscondence remaining significant.⁷⁴ The increased interest in Worli continues to be reflected in subsequent data, with the scheme approaching full capacity in March 1940.⁷⁵ While abscondences doubled to over 1,400 cases during 1939-40, they fell to 915 cases during 1940-41.⁷⁶ These numbers demonstrate then that while the occupancy rate of the former BDD *chawls* increased dramatically from 1936-1941, issues related to abscondence and rent collection decreased relative to the number of people housed.

This increased utilization of the *chawls*, particularly at Worli, reflects a growing pressure on Bombay’s housing stock. After all, the Worli scheme had remained less than half full for over a decade after its completion in 1925, and little work had been done to alter its amenities significantly. This growing pressure on the city’s housing stock in the late 1930s is further demonstrated by a petition to occupy vacant land once held by the BDD to construct a settlement of huts. Approving leases for a group of Mahar hut dwellers in Danda Village near

⁷² MSA, RD, 7860/33, M.Y. Nurri, p. 1, 30 November 1937.

⁷³ BL, IOR, V/24/1993, ‘Annual Report on the Administration of the Industrial Housing Scheme for the Year 1936-1937’, p. 1-2, 7-8; there were so many vacancies at Worli that the report also notes that a pop up jail using about 200 rooms was run out of the *chawls* from October to December 1936, see p. 3.

⁷⁴ BL, IOR, V/24/1993, ‘Annual Report on the Administration of the Industrial Housing Scheme for the Year 1937-1938’, p. 2, 7-8; BL, IOR, V/24/1993, ‘Annual Report on the Administration of the Industrial Housing Scheme for the Year 1938-1939’, p. 1-2, 6-7.

⁷⁵ BL, IOR, V/24/1993, ‘Annual Report on the Administration of the Industrial Housing Scheme for the Year 1939-1940’, p. 1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6-7; BL, IOR, V/24/1993, ‘Annual Report on the Administration of the Industrial Housing Scheme for the Year 1940-1941’, p. 6-7.

Bandra, rent for the Danda Mahar Colony was levied at Rs. 1 per month, significantly less than the Rs. 5-8 per month charged in the *chawls*.⁷⁷ An official's 1945 correspondence further reflects this growing pressure on housing through the late 1930s and 1940s, 'in the absence of any control by Government and the very inadequate control exercised by the Municipalities under the existing acts the landlords are enabled to crowd the largest numbers of tenements in the smallest possible space thereby creating extreme congestion resulting into slum areas'.⁷⁸ With the increasing occupancy of the former BDD *chawls*, petitions to formalize existing hut settlements along the edge of the urban area and colonial officials describing overcrowding in the city, the evolution of Bombay's urban environment of poverty somewhat corresponds to the simultaneous experiences of Hong Kong and Singapore.

However, the lack of any new construction or impetus for new construction of housing for the urban poor on the part of the city's colonial officials demonstrates an increasingly separate Bombay urbanism. While Hong Kong and Singapore had done little to address issues relating to housing and urban poverty during the 1920s, the BDD had built over 16,000 one-room chawls during a decade of low population growth in the city. The hangover from this building boom, demonstrated in part by the 13-year failure for the Worli chawls to achieve even half occupancy, meant that shifts in the urban population were less palpable for planning officials in Bombay than their counterparts in Hong Kong and Singapore. Additionally, this hangover left a residual hesitancy to build big along the lines of the BDD again. So while the Weisburg Committee in Singapore and the Housing Commission in Hong Kong were being drawn up and debated, officials in Bombay and the urban poor in the city were facing a different set of realities relating to housing and poverty in the city. These differences, which became pronounced in the period leading up to and during the Second World War became even more evident in the years immediately following the end of the war.

While the next section will cover the wartime destruction faced by Hong Kong and Singapore, Bombay faced less destruction than either of those cities or Rangoon, which were occupied by the Japanese and/or recaptured by the Allies. And while the years flanking the partition of the Indian subcontinent on 15 August 1947 produced comparably significant migrations of people into Bombay, the problems related to accommodating these people were not compounded by destruction like they were in urban Southeast Asia or other South Asian

⁷⁷ MSA, RD, 8820/39, P. Thakorlal, p. 1, 29 March 1943; BL, IOR, V/24/1993, 'Annual Report on the Administration of the Industrial Housing Scheme for the Year 1940-1941', p. 1.

⁷⁸ MSA, GD, 5535/33-I, V.P.K., 'General Department in relation to Director of Public Health comments,' p. M339-40, 28 July 1945.

metropolises like Delhi, Amritsar, Lahore, and Calcutta.⁷⁹

Bombay's population growth after partition, as measured by the difference in the censuses between 1941 and 1951, was approximately 840,000 people, meaning the city proper grew fifty-six per cent over this period.⁸⁰ Greater Bombay, an area of amalgamated municipalities along the city's border, recorded population growth of sixty-seven per cent from 1941 to 1951.⁸¹ While Kosambi estimates that six per cent of those 840,000 people, about 50,000, were displaced persons from Pakistan, mostly West Pakistan, Bombay nonetheless faced a large influx of new residents looking to make their livelihoods in the city.⁸²

Though the movements of people into Bombay after the conclusion of the war in many ways mirrored post-war migrations into Hong Kong and Singapore, officials in Bombay continued to approach the accommodation of these migrants differently. While officials in Hong Kong and Singapore debated and settled on ways to increase provisions of government finances for housing schemes for the urban poor, officials in Bombay debated but reached no such definitive conclusions.⁸³ Instead, planning officials focused on creating a master plan for Greater Mumbai, a plan largely laying out a series of small housing colonies on which private developers could build housing.⁸⁴ While new registrations for housing cooperatives skyrocketed during the post-war period, they were often designed with the city's middle classes in mind.⁸⁵

Reflecting in part this increasing divergence in approaches to urban poverty, the pre-war communications between corresponding planning officials in Bombay and a variety of cities across South and Southeast Asia did not restart with the end of hostilities. While Bombay had been a model of urban development for Rangoon and Singapore from the 1910s through the 1930s, the absence of such communications reflects that the city no longer remained a nexus for urban planning officials in a decolonising and increasingly post-imperial Asia.

While this chapter thus far has sought to understand the convergence of lived imperial

⁷⁹ Huff and Huff, 'Urban Growth and Change in 1940s Southeast Asia'; Ian Talbot, *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar 1947-1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁸⁰ Population Growth and Policies in Mega-Cities: Bombay (New York: United Nations, 1987), p. 5.

⁸¹ J.B. Bowman, *Census of India, 1951: Bombay, Saurashtra and Kutch, Part I: Report and Subsidiary Tables* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1953), p. 217.

⁸² Meera Kosambi, *Bombay in Transition: The Growth and Social Ecology of a Colonial City, 1880-1980* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1986), p. 125.

⁸³ MSA, GD, 4837/33-I, C.F. D'Souza to Sec. of Health and Local Gov't Dept., 'Subject: Scheme of Greater Bombay', p. M 327-31, 5 July 1949.

⁸⁴ MSA, GD, 5588/33-III, H.K. Patil, p. M 77-9, 20 August 1952.

⁸⁵ Cooperative housing societies grew from 135 societies covering 8,597 persons in 1945-46 to 984 societies covering 52,421 persons in 1953-54, see C.R. Desai, 'Problems of Urban Housing: Financial Aspects-Resources-Agencies-Taxation Policies Disincentives and Incentives', in *Problems of Urban Housing*, ed. Branch Indian Institute of Public Administration. Bombay Regional (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1960), p. 87. For a discussion of cooperative societies relating to the construction of middle class identities in Bombay, see Rao, *House, but No Garden*, p. 176-86.

urbanism in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it has also sought to explore the convergent nature of the colonial response in Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as the different case of Bombay. Arguing that years leading up to the Second World War were marked by an influx of people looking to live in all three cities, the responses to this urban growth refigured circulations of knowledge and practices relating to urban ‘improvement’ around the Indian Ocean world. Reflecting Bombay’s different approaches, this reconfiguration left the city on the fringes of circulations of urban ‘improvement’ knowledge and practices that increasingly centred on cities to the south and east. Previous chapters have demonstrated that in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, Bombay had become a model for cities like Rangoon and Singapore looking to ‘improve’ their urban environments, particularly as they related to the urban poor. The remainder of this chapter, as well as the next, will explore the how the Second World War recast these circulations.

Wartime destruction and new perspectives on an imperial urbanism in Hong Kong and Singapore, 1941-1946

While Hong Kong and Singapore fared better than Rangoon, because they were largely spared from Allied bombing during recapture, the initial Japanese assault on all three cities in 1941 and 1942 left each badly damaged.⁸⁶ Despite sources on both cities during the occupation being relatively scarce, Alfred Ponnambala, an employee at the Singapore Improvement Trust before, during and after the Second World War, recalled in a 1983 interview that ‘for the next 3-4 months [after the British surrender of Singapore], we were in fact doing nothing at all’. Ponnambala goes on to explain that while rental payments continued to be processed during the occupation, no new properties were constructed.⁸⁷ The destruction of the war, coupled with the lack of new construction left both Singapore and Hong Kong with an acute housing crisis, particularly for the urban poor, at the end of hostilities and transfer back to British control in 1945.

With the return of the British authorities came a brief period of re-occupation by the BMA. From August/September 1945 through to April/May 1946, the BMA was plagued by chronic shortages of essentials like building materials. It remained interested in housing for the urban

⁸⁶ F. S. V. Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East, 1943-1946*, History of the Second World War. United Kingdom Military Series (London: H.M.S.O., 1956).

⁸⁷ NAS, OHI, Ponnambala, Alfred Devadasan, Japanese Occupation of Singapore, Interviewer Low Lay Leng, 000327, Session 327.

poor so far as it related to public health and the prevention of disease epidemics that could disrupt attempts to restore law and order and repopulate the civilian administrations. Urban historians of Hong Kong and Singapore have tended to skip over the period encompassing the war and the BMA. This section goes on to consider the ways in which the contingencies of the Second World War were important not only in the emergence of a non-European urban elite but increasingly also in the ways in which issues of urban poverty were brought to the forefront and tackled.⁸⁸

Few examinations of the Japanese occupation of Singapore and Hong Kong from 1941 to 1945, if any, have focused on either city's housing.⁸⁹ Utilizing some of the surviving files of the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari, the organization founded to take control of the duties of the Singapore Improvement Trust during the Japanese occupation, as well as retrospective accounts of wartime life, this section illustrates quotidian urban conditions in Singapore. It also highlights the shift in power dynamics – away from European administrators and towards Asian and Eurasian voices forced to become self-sufficient during the war. The section then goes on to examine how housing conditions and similar concerns about epidemic disease not only drove the actions of officials of the BMA in Hong Kong and Singapore but also animated a generation of prominent Asians to participate in the processes remaking the city. In examining the wartime period, this section demonstrates the changing patterns of the utilization of urban land as well as an accompanying rise in concerns about epidemic disease, a continued expansion of the urban poor as a share of the urban population, and that an emerging class of Asian voices actively reshaped an imperial urbanism from 1942 to 1946.

Asian voices amidst the wartime destruction

Established on 1 August 1942,⁹⁰ the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari took control of former SIT lands and, after 15 September, former municipal properties not being used by Japanese military

⁸⁸ Harper has argued that this period was of great importance in relation to Malaya politics, see Tim Harper, 'The Politics of Disease and Disorder in Post-War Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21:1 (1990); Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*.

⁸⁹ Some examples of literature on war-time Singapore include: N.I. Low and H.M Cheng, *This Singapore: Our City of Dreadful Nights* (Singapore: Ngai Seong Press, 1947); N.I. Low, *When Singapore Was Syonan-To*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: Times Editions - Marshall Cavendish, 2004); Harper, 'The Politics of Disease and Disorder in Post-War Malaya'; Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, p. 95-136.

⁹⁰ Dates on the files on the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari go by the convention of the Japanese imperial year calendar. The calendar sets year one to 660 BCE based off the legendary foundation of Japan. This calendar maps fairly neatly onto the Gregorian calendar, with the year 2600 corresponding to 1940. 1 August 1942 then corresponds to 1 August 2602. This chapter will use the convention of the Gregorian calendar for dating, except in noting archival sources in the footnotes.

authorities. While Mr. Seah Ngee Khay was first appointed to lead the department of the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari, he was dismissed in early November of that year and replaced by Mr. Lim Foo Hee. While the department initially had 26 regular staff, 22 of who had formerly worked for the SIT, that number fell to 17 with the change in leadership.⁹¹ From early on in the occupation then, a new set of Asian voices were emerging in leading and managing the Singapore.

While there were many Asian voices in amongst the pre-war rank and file of the SIT, the occupation strengthened their voices within the administration. Ponnambala recalled that the Asian members of the former SIT staff formed the core of the initial staff of the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari. Though Ponnambala recounts being transferred to the accounts division, he recalls that his work was still largely related to the functions of the SIT – namely collecting rents from former improvement trust properties and dealing with insurance-related issues.⁹² Chua Siak Phuang, another SIT employee who continued to work under the Japanese administration during the war, recalled that ‘there was a job to do’ and described his experiences of being a draftsman before the war and becoming a maintenance man during the war.⁹³ Though Japanese archival accounts hint at some disorder, in particular, the change in the head of the department a mere seven months after founding the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari, both Ponnambala and Chua’s accounts demonstrate a more complicated and confusing management structure of the department. Ponnambala recalls two or three Japanese, a Mr Inouye and a Mr Wada, were in charge in addition to two ‘Asian men’ a Mr Tom Ton Lik and a Mr Victor Winslow.⁹⁴ Regardless of the upper echelons of the leadership, Soh Wah Seng, another SIT official before, during and after the war, noted the considerably more equal footing which Asian officials held compared to their European counterparts in the SIT after the war.⁹⁵

Though Asian perspectives became more important in the operation of the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari, wartime realities increasingly ascribed ulterior roles to the organisation. While the SIT had been focused on clearing back alleys and, by the end of the 1930s, building affordable housing, the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari records indicate a focus on more immediate and pressing concerns of wartime Singapore. For instance, the organisation became the institutional vehicle to

⁹¹ NAS, HDB 106, KKK 75/2602, Monthly Report of the K.K.K., p.000093-4, 14 April 2603. It may be also worth noting that the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari files are written on SIT letterhead, with the names of Singapore, the Singapore Improvement Trust and British dating system crossed out and replaced by hand with, respectively, Syonan-to, the K.K.K. and the imperial Japanese dating system.

⁹² NAS, OHI, Ponnambala, Alfred Devadasan, Interviewer Low Lay Leng, 000327, Session 327.

⁹³ NAS, OHI, Chua Siak Phuang, Interviewer Samuel Sng, 002881, Reel 55, 00:04:30-00:11:30, 00:17:15-00:18:30.

⁹⁴ NAS, OHI, Ponnambala, Alfred Devadasan, Interviewer Low Lay Leng, 000327, Session 327.

⁹⁵ NAS, OHI, Soh Wah Seng, Interviewer: Low Lay Leng/ Tan Beng Luan, 000311, Reel 56, 00:17:30-00:29:00.

let out plots of land to cultivate vegetables.⁹⁶ As seen both in monthly reports on the progress of the department and through a petition made to the department on behalf of a Mr Chia Que Choon, the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari was happy to allow small-scale crop cultivation as a way of raising money. After being identified as occupying land at Tyrwhitt Road in an unauthorised manner, Mr Choon was offered a lease in January 1943 on a plot less than 2,750 ft² on which to cultivate vegetables in exchange for a rent of fifty cents per month payable six months in advance. The Japanese government reserved the right at any time to seize the land without recompense for the loss of rent or crops.⁹⁷ In addition to leasing out land originally designated for the 'improvement' of the city for use as small-scale familial vegetable farms, the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari spent much of its efforts documenting municipal properties and, to a lesser extent, repairing damaged buildings.⁹⁸ Far from the work of the SIT before the Japanese occupation of Singapore, the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari then presided over a deterioration of both the housing stock and the housing conditions in the city and its surrounding areas.

While the archival records of the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari during the Japanese occupation of Singapore paint a benign picture of quotidian housing conditions, first-hand accounts of the occupation and of the six month British Military Administration paint an entirely different, and rather desperate, picture of everyday housing and living conditions. N.I. Low and H.M. Cheng, both chroniclers of wartime Singapore, describe the seizure of housing and furniture in wartime Singapore, 'a Japanese newcomer had to have a house. The house had to have furniture. This came out of the houses of the impecunious among us'.⁹⁹ In addition to contemporary accounts, monthly minutes from the BMA's Advisory Council, a body comprised of members representing a cross-section of Singapore's Asian communities, both document concerns over epidemic disease and disorder brought about by years of deteriorating conditions, and demonstrate the growing importance of Asian voices in reshaping Singapore's urban environment of poverty.

⁹⁶ Tapioca 'was generally the staple food' during the war, see Cheng Hui Ming, 'I Was a Japanese Government Servant', in *When Singapore Was Syonan-To*, ed. N.I. Low (Singapore: Times Editions - Marshall Cavendish, 2004), p. 80. Bayly and Harper, in describing wartime Singapore, call tapioca 'the ubiquitous, despised staple food of the war years'. Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, p. 102; Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 328.

⁹⁷ NAS, HDB 1067, KKK 29/2603, 'SIT Land at Tyrhitt Road Lot 45 TS XVII, Area -2,750 sq. ft. approx.', Kansai-ka Tyo to Mr Chai Que Chon, p.000478, 20 January 2603.

⁹⁸ NAS, HDB 1064, KKK 22/2602, Seah Nghee Khay to Kam Jay, p.000693, 25 September 2602; NAS, HDB 106, KKK 75/2602, 'Report of the Kazai-ka, Kanri-Kakari from 15th February 2602 to 31st July 2602', p.00096, 14 April 2603.

⁹⁹ Low and Cheng, *This Singapore*, p. 125.

Crisis and opportunity during the BMA

These concerns were made evident as early as November 1945, just two months into the British Military Administration of Singapore and Malaya. Dr Chen Su Lan, a medical doctor and a prominent social advocate who founded the Metropolitan branch of the YMCA for Singapore's Chinese population and a member of the Advisory Council to the BMA, raised 'the plight and pitiful conditions of labourers in our midst' and encouraged the Council to 'let us pay them such wages so that they can manage to live' before discussing a rise in post-war tuberculosis cases.¹⁰⁰ Arguing for the creation of a tuberculosis sanatorium in Singapore out of an internment camp on Sime Road, Dr Chen initially estimated as many as 100,000 residents of Singapore could be suffering from the disease.¹⁰¹ While data on causes of death in wartime Singapore presented to the Advisory Council in January 1946 suggests the 100,000 tuberculosis-related figure as being an overestimation, it does note a thirty per cent rise in tuberculosis deaths between 1943 and 1944 as well as identify the disease as the cause of one in twelve deaths from 1942 to 1944.¹⁰² This rise in fatal cases of pulmonary tuberculosis, particularly when placed in the context of other wartime records, suggests a deterioration of living conditions, particularly for Singapore's residents most vulnerable to the disease – the city's urban poor – through the Second World War and BMA period.

Beyond discussions that continue to thread together conceptualizations of epidemic disease and housing for the urban poor in colonial port cities, concern about the affordability of quotidian life in Singapore also reflect a dire housing situation. Tan Chin Tuan – a former municipal commissioner of Singapore, manager of the Overseas-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC) and Advisory Council member – raised the issue of daily wages for male labourers working on the wharves and working for the Municipality and came to the conclusion that they did not earn enough money even to feed themselves and their families, let alone 'spend on coffee, cigarettes, cost of transport, and schooling expenses for their children'.¹⁰³ Noting that females were paid even less for a day's labour, Tan went on to argue for an increase in daily wages to two dollars per day and an increase in rations of rice.¹⁰⁴ While Tan Chin Tuan's

¹⁰⁰ CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 13, 14 November 1945; The contemporary romanization of his name differs from that of the Advisory Council files where he referred to as 'Dr. Chuen Su Lan'.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰² These numbers come from the Health Department of Singapore in 1946 and include data documenting 'deaths from all causes', but may not include war-related death figures. For more see CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 110, 23 January 1946.

¹⁰³ CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 53, 13 December 1945. The contemporary romanization of his name differs from that of the Advisory Council files where he referred to as 'Mr. Tan Chin Choon'.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

argument for increased wages implied an affordability problem for Singapore's urban poor, another member of the Advisory Council outlined specific challenges as additional causes of the housing shortage. Arguing wartime damage, connectivity problems between the city proper and its surrounding areas, and a slow to start rubber industry that normally housed large numbers of workers on its plantations converged to cause both an increase in the number of people living in Singapore and a reduction in its already short supply of housing stock, Tan Chor Lam noted that 'tea money', a euphemism for a monetary bribe, was essential to secure sub-leases from chief tenants. Presenting a specific case in Tiong Bahru, the estate built by the SIT in the 1930s specifically to house some of the urban poor, Tan documented a demand for \$2,000 in 'tea money' for a new sub-tenant.¹⁰⁵ Taking the daily wage figures from Tan Chin Tuan – which suggest that labourers made at most \$1.20 per day – this 'tea money' alone would amount to over four and a half year's daily wages.¹⁰⁶ Pointing out that 'overcrowding and shortage of dwellings bring about diseases', Tan Chor Lam suggested that vacant land be used for the construction of temporary dwellings; an approach with similarities to measures adopted in post-war Hong Kong.¹⁰⁷

Dr Abdul Samat, another member of the Advisory Council, followed Tan Chor Lam's discussions of affordability by juxtaposing living conditions of 'Javanese coolies' who 'now find themselves in what is almost a concentration camp' with 'Dutch ex-prisoners and internees...occupying houses in the best part of our residential areas, our schools and even quarters for our Government servants'.¹⁰⁸ Suggesting that both the Dutch and Javanese represented a political problem that 'we Singapore people do not want to be involved in', Dr Samat, along emerging lines of political separation, argued for deporting both populations to address Singapore's housing problems.¹⁰⁹ Dr Samat's distaste for political events unfolding in neighbouring Indonesia aside, his testimony again points to desperate and deteriorating housing conditions for the city's urban poor. Tan Chor Lam, responding to Dr Samat, pointed out that 20 houses in the Geylang district in need of repairs 'were reoccupied by some people without my

¹⁰⁵ CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 60, 13 December 1945. The contemporary romanization of his name differs from that of the Advisory Council files where he referred to as 'Mr. Tan Chor Lan'.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ For more about debates on citizenship along the emerging lines of nation-states in South and Southeast Asia see Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, p. 212-50; Sunil S. Amrith, 'Reconstructing the 'Plural Society': Asian Migration between Empire and Nation, 1940-1948', *Past and Present* 210:Supplement 6 (2011); Joya Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship, 1946-70', *The Historical Journal* 55:04 (2012); Sugarman, 'Building Burma'. CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 61, 13 December 1945.

authority'.¹¹⁰ While neither Dr Samat nor Tan Chor Lam's account offer insight into the people living in such conditions, it is clear from both sets of testimony that squatting, particularly amongst the urban poor, was common practice in the months after the end of the war.

In the proceedings of the Advisory Council in January 1946, Rajbali Jumabhoy, a prominent Indian businessman who founded the Singapore Anti-Tuberculosis Association and became a municipal commissioner after the war, presents further evidence of the housing crisis facing Singapore in the period of the BMA. Enquiring about relief funds for 'destitutes', defined as, 'disable labourers or...their wives and children who have lost their bread-earner', Jumabhoy asked if there 'are any camps where we can direct these people to go?'¹¹¹ Jumabhoy suggested that because these 'destitutes' were 'mostly Indians' that they would 'not be a burden on the public funds, as they are entitled to the funds which are with the Immigration Fund'. Detailing that there were 'huge funds lying in the Immigration Fund Account', Jumabhoy argued that those reserves 'be utilised at the present for the relief of their distress'.¹¹² Given the widespread poverty during the war and following years during the BMA period in Singapore, it seems unlikely that the destitute were mostly Indian as Jumabhoy claims.¹¹³ While debates about who was entitled to housing and claiming identities of belonging and citizenship are an important part of developing notions of urban citizenship and nationalism in port cities around South and Southeast Asia, Jumabhoy's inquiry into the availability of camps where the destitute could seek shelter points again to a degradation and inadequacy of housing, particularly for the urban poor, during the period of the BMA in Singapore.¹¹⁴ The inadequacy of housing led to calls amongst the Advisory Council for an immediate renewal of the Singapore Improvement Trust. Claiming that 'the whole thing stopped' when the war began, Dr Chen called for the SIT to 'be taken up again and put into execution' in addition to questioning the immediacy of using pre-fabricated

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 111, 23 January 1946.

¹¹² CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 61, 13 December 1945; CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 111, 23 January 1946; The 'Immigration Fund' mentioned by Jumabhoy is almost certainly the Indian Immigration Fund, or Tamil Immigration Fund. Founded in 1908 as a mechanism through which to provide funding for Indian indentured labour to travel to Malaya, during the 1930s it became used as a means to repatriate unemployed labourers. For more see *Annual Report of the South Indian Labour Fund Board 1959* (Federation of Malaya: Government Press, 1960), 'Appendix A: History of the Indian Immigration Fund', p. 9-12; Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, p. 24; Amarjit Kaur, *Wage Labour in Southeast Asia since 1840: Globalisation, the International Division of Labour and Labour Transformations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), p. 69; Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement, 1786-1957*, p. 165.

¹¹³ This conflation of 'Indian' with 'poor' or 'destitute' has strong echoes to debates about urban poverty and housing before the Second World War in Rangoon where many municipal officials felt that the problem of urban poverty was an Indian one. See Sugarman, 'Reclaiming Rangoon'.

¹¹⁴ Sugarman, 'Building Burma'.

houses to house thousands of people in Singapore.¹¹⁵ While a tax levied under the statutes of the Singapore Improvement Trust Ordinance of two per cent per annum on the value of ‘all houses, buildings, lands and tenements whatsoever within the Municipality’ had been levied beginning anew in November 1945, the SIT had not reinitiated its functions as of 23 January 1946.¹¹⁶ Taken together with the increasing prominence of Asian perspectives in the administration of Singapore during the war, these proceedings of the BMA not only demonstrate concerns about sanitation, disease and the change in the utilisation of urban land, but also how Asian voices participated politically – by crafting and shaping policies of urban governance through the war into the early post-war period.

While this section has so far focused on Singapore, Hong Kong’s experiences under Japanese occupation and British re-occupation had similarly negative consequences for the city’s housing stock and for the urban poor. While Hong Kong as a whole did not experience as much physical damage to its housing stock and communications infrastructure, a report of the BMA estimated in September 1946 that overall damage to housing property could be averaged at fifteen per cent.¹¹⁷ Though reports of the BMA in Hong Kong spend relatively little time considering issues of urban poverty when compared with similar reports about Singapore, it is clear that with widespread malnutrition and lack of access to cash, Hong Kong’s poorest residents also faced poor and degraded housing conditions.¹¹⁸ In describing housing occupied by ‘particularly the poorer classes of Chinese’, the report noted that accommodation was ‘scarce’ and that ‘it became scarcer as the population increased consequent upon the removal of the immigration restrictions on entry from China’. That the report highlighted this lack of housing does suggest a general degradation of conditions for Hong Kong’s urban poor. Limited measures to ‘ensure that landlords were prevented from using the housing shortage as a means of exploiting their tenants’ also point to harsh housing conditions. Quickly freezing rents at their 1941 levels, the BMA subsequently established tenancy tribunals ‘composed mainly of local

¹¹⁵ CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 132, 23 January 1946. A memorandum from March 1946 suggests that the SIT had again begun its work, see NAS, HDB 1062, SIT 67/46, ‘Subordinate Staff – reinstatement of former Trust employees’, 16 March 1946. For more on the use of pre-fabricated houses throughout East and Southeast Asia as well as connections with post-war American anti-communist schemes, see Kwak, *A World of Homeowners*, p. 46-87.

¹¹⁶ CUL, British Military Administration, Malaya. Gazette. Singapore Division, p. 69, 2 November 1954.

¹¹⁷ CUL, The British Military Administration of Hong Kong: August, 1945, to April, 1946, p. 13.

¹¹⁸ The Report on the British Administration published in Hong Kong in 1946 focuses much of its attention towards the conditions of colonial officers, their families and European residents of the city. An example of this is found under the six-paragraph sub-section of ‘Accommodation’. Only the last paragraph deals with housing as it is experienced by a large majority of the city’s residents. The other four paragraphs discuss housing as it relates to the community of Europeans and colonial officers; see *Ibid.*, p. 13-5. The report describes 80 per cent of the population of the colony as showing ‘signs of malnutrition in some form or other’ and 90 per cent of the colony as ‘no money and little immediate prospect of obtaining any’; see *Ibid.*, p. 4.

residents' meant to order evictions, set rents and settle landlord-tenant disputes. Bringing local voices into issues of urban governance, these tribunals bespeak the ways Asian perspectives were increasingly incorporated into Hong Kong's post-war politics and administration.

While it seems that there was little headway into the problem of providing sanitary accommodation to Hong Kong's urban poor, the BMA's report nonetheless noted that 'the medical and sanitary rehabilitation of the Colony was still gravely impeded by the shortage of accommodation and supplies of all kinds'.¹¹⁹ It also raised issues relating to tuberculosis, including the creation of an adequately sized sanatorium, as well as concerns about the spread of venereal disease – all issues raised in the course of discussing accommodation and urban poverty in BMA Singapore.¹²⁰

While the BMA report does not deal much with housing for Hong Kong's urban poor, James Wakefield, an officer in the military administration who later became an officer of the Social Welfare Department, recalled in a 2003 interview the conditions amongst a 'very poor' Chinese community in the New Territories just after the Japanese occupation. Describing interactions between the military administration and a community close to a military airfield, Wakefield recalls negotiating between the need for improved infrastructure near the airfield and taking 'land away from people after they have suffered under the Japanese occupation for some 3½ years'. Though Wakefield remembered that 'one or two access roads were bulldozed (but no private land was affected thereby)', his recollection is perhaps indicative of broader attitudes toward housing on the part of the lower ranks of the BMA in Hong Kong.¹²¹ Despite individual officers, like Wakefield, feeling conflicted about clearances of the urban poor, authorities higher up in the chain of command seemed unfazed by the possibility of destroying already limited accommodation without a clear sense of rehousing or resettlement.

The reports on Hong Kong and Singapore during the BMA illuminate the continuing link between issues of degrading housing stock, epidemic disease, urban poverty and the prospects for post-war stability. They build upon evidence that the Japanese authorities in Syonan-to saw a similar link in maintaining improvement trust infrastructure and knowledge through the creation of the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari. Though shortages of building materials and supplies used in repairing damaged housing ran short during the BMA in both cities, authorities in Singapore envisioned 'a scheme for new housing in Singapore to be put into operation at the earliest possible moment'. Admitting that 'there was a housing shortage in Singapore before the war', the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

¹²¹ HKU, OHA, Accession No. 14, James Wakefield, English, Tape 2, Side A, p. 4-5.

Deputy Chief Civil Affairs Officer for Singapore laid out a joint effort with the Colonial Office to ‘employ an officer and a draughtsman to make the necessary investigations’ and ‘to relate what has been done on a drawing board in London with conditions he finds in Singapore’.¹²²

While it is unclear to what extent this draughtsman’s efforts had on planning, it is clear the Second World War had an enormous impact on the condition of housing for the urban poor in Hong Kong and Singapore. Though each city had varying approaches to developing such accommodation before the war, wartime experiences during the Japanese occupation and, to a lesser extent, wartime planning outside of these cities, clearly shaped how future housing post-war projects could be envisioned.

Beyond the top-down discussions of planning and poverty most evident from colonial archives, it is also clear that the quotidian actions of the urban poor, demonstrated most clearly in the urban farming plots described in the Kansai-ka, Kanri-Khari records, shifted established patterns of utilizing urban land. Pre-war Singapore had been a city of dense neighbourhoods characterized by their diversity of religion, ethnicity and wealth.¹²³ With the Japanese occupation and a sudden need for many to farm as a supplemental means of survival, the character of these neighbourhoods changed. Some urban dwellers left the dense urban area in favour of the more spacious urban fringe while those who stayed in the urban area utilized the less densely populated land differently. This pattern of peri-urbanization, depopulating the established urban area and pushing the fringes of the city outward, was an important precursor of shifts in both Singapore and Hong Kong during the post-war years.

In addition to altering long-standing patterns of urban land use, the period of the Japanese occupation and the BMA fundamentally redistributed wealth amongst Singapore’s residents and in particular its Chinese population. In the first meeting of the Advisory Council to the BMA in Singapore, Tan Chor Lam raised ‘the case[s] of a dispute over land transactions’ involving

¹²² CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 62, 13 December 1945.

¹²³ While contemporary Singapore’s urban landscape is characterized by neighbourhoods that project a certain kind of ethnic homogeneity (i.e. Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glan), the contrast with which these neighbourhoods can be extricated from their surroundings is a relatively recent phenomenon, see Laurence Wai-Teng Leong, ‘Commodifying Ethnicity: State and Ethnic Tourism in Singapore’, in *Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*, ed. Michel Picard and Robert E. Wood (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997). Though Leong and others have suggested a separation along the lines of Furnivall’s ‘plural society’ where ethnic groups only came together in the marketplace, recent scholarship has argued against Furnivall’s reading of urban society in Southeast Asia, see Lewis, *Cities in Motion*; Li, ‘Revisiting the Nineteenth-Century Marketplace, and the Chinese Community in Moulmein’. The distinction between neighbourhoods of colonial Singapore and their surroundings then seems to be less sharp. Though no single work seems to support this characterization in its entirety, the following tend to support this idea of the fuzziness of urban ethno-spatial distinction, Siddique and Shotam, *Singapore’s Little India*, p. 13-4; 6-8.

transactions where Chinese residents were ‘compelled to sell some of their properties’ in order to pay an eight per cent tax levied on them by the Japanese authorities. In pointing out that ‘the cost of living rose very high and many people who were not engaged in the blackmarket [*sic*] had to sell their property in order to support themselves’, Tan argued that ‘there are people who made a lot of money because they collaborated with the Japanese and by some wicked means have accumulated wealth’.¹²⁴ Casting a shadow over those who made money during the war in Singapore, Tan’s comments demonstrate a shift in the patterns of pre-war wealth distribution central to contemporary debates about the nature of the Second World War and global wealth inequality.¹²⁵

Describing the redistribution of property and wealth amongst the residents of Singapore, Tan utilised a circulatory system metaphor to warn of the consequences of failing to address this redistribution, ‘if there is no such way of settling this dispute, I can compare this matter to the human body through which the blood cannot circulate’.¹²⁶ Despite Tan’s warnings, the BMA and the subsequent Singaporean Civil Administration did not fundamentally address these issues of wartime property transfer, though they did halt the sale and mortgaging of property for a time. In ultimately avoiding intervention in these disputes, the BMA fostered this wartime shift in the patterns of holding wealth which in turn, shaped future patterns of post-war growth. While there is not detailed data to illustrate the precise manner of wealth redistribution over time amongst a class profiting from black market sales, illicit profiteering does not lend itself to the democratisation of wealth.¹²⁷ If the black market was the primary path to upward economic mobility in wartime Singapore, then the Japanese occupation almost certainly led to elevated levels of urban poverty in addition to the large post-war migrations into the city during the BMA.¹²⁸ In this way, in shifting patterns of land utilisation and certainly also in others, the quotidian experience of urban poverty during the war helped sow the seeds of post-war plans to accommodate the urban poor.

¹²⁴ CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 31-2, 14 November 1945.

¹²⁵ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014); Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹²⁶ CUL, Proceedings, British Military Administration, Malaya, Advisory Council, Singapore, p. 31-2, 14 November 1945.

¹²⁷ For more on the ‘Black Market Administration’ in Malaya, see Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, p. 101-14; Huff and Huff, ‘Urban Growth and Change in 1940s Southeast Asia’.

¹²⁸ While migrations of the 1950s are difficult to measure in Hong Kong, as the first post-war census was not conducted until 1961, a UN report estimated that more than 1.2 million people entered Hong Kong between 1945 and 1949. For more see David Podmore, ‘The Population of Hong Kong’, in *Hong Kong: The Industrial Colony*, ed. Keith Hopkins (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1971); Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth*, p. 43-4.

As earlier chapters have demonstrated, colonial administrators and municipal officials in port cities across Asia had argued for decades over the importance of housing and quotidian conditions for the urban poor. It is clear that the Second World War and the subsequent military administration shifted those debates. While the war gave more credence to Asian voices in the politics and administration of Hong Kong and Singapore, these perspectives also shifted the emphasis of the urban administration in a way that made it more responsive to the problems of the urban poor. Though political independence in Bombay and in India as a whole in 1947 certainly also lent credence to Asian voices in administering the city, the similarity with which Asian voices emerged during the wartime period in Hong Kong and Singapore drove a further distinction between an imperial urbanism of Bombay and of Hong Kong and Singapore. The destruction of the war and the period of reconstruction in the first years following the conclusion of hostilities then further cemented the differences between these emerging urbanisms.

An Urban Moment, The Laying of Plans and a Divergent Bombay Model

This chapter has explored the period of the mid-to-late 1930s through the Second World War as it relates the evolution of an urban environment of poverty in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore. It has demonstrated that this period is characterised by both a growth in the population of the urban poor in all three cities as well as evolving patterns of land use – be it burgeoning hut settlements on vacant urban land or the growth of peri-urban settlements along these cities’ fringes. While noting the convergence between all three cities and similar patterns of the growth of urban poverty, this chapter has also highlighted the divergent responses of officials in, on the one hand, Hong Kong and Singapore, and on the other hand, Bombay.

That Bombay, a city that had found itself at the centre of circulations relating to urban ‘improvement’ during the first decades of the twentieth century, found itself on the margins of emerging circulatory patterns relating to improvement in the 1930s was a two-fold consequence of the BDD *chawls*. An inspiration for other improvement trusts around South and Southeast Asia, the *chawls* were also unique in the scale of their undertaking and construction in British Asia during the 1920s and 1930s. While the Delhi Improvement Trust was created in 1937 in part based off the work of the BDD and debates about housing in Rangoon specifically centred around the construction of ‘chawls’ for the urban poor in the city, no improvement trust or

municipal authority had constructed housing quite on the scale of the BDD.¹²⁹ This set the urban environment of Bombay apart from other South and Southeast Asian cities, which responded to the pressure of late 1930s urban migration more similarly.

These differences, pronounced in how 'improvement' was conceived as relating to the urban environment for the poor, were compounded by the destruction of cities across East and Southeast Asia as a consequence of the Second World War. While the extent of this destruction varied from city to city, a sense of commonality emerged amongst municipal officials amidst the destruction. This sense of a shared challenge of urban reconstruction coupled with, to some extent, the similar experiences under the auspices of the BMA, cemented the differences between these two imperial urbanisms that had emerged in the late 1930s.

In addition to arguing that this period of the late 1930s was a moment of urban growth for all three cities, this chapter has demonstrated that this growth was primarily amongst the ranks of the urban poor, particularly those living in huts along previously undeveloped urban and peri-urban land. While it has analysed the designs that municipal and imperial officials had on the city during this period, it also illustrates the extent to which the urban poor themselves remade their urban environments and reshaped their cities along lines that differed significantly from the 'improvement' projects of colonial administrators. The contingencies of the Second World War, which increasingly gave voice to those outside the traditional European colonial administration, further recast patterns of an imperial urbanism in an emerging Southeast Asia. While this chapter has demonstrated this reconfiguration of an imperial urbanism in the years leading up to and during the Second World War, the next chapter will examine the evolution of this new urbanism in Hong Kong and Singapore during post-war years through 1960.

¹²⁹ Legg, 'Ambivalent Improvements'; Sugarman, 'Reclaiming Rangoon'.

A NEW MODEL OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT?

RECONSTRUCTING HONG KONG AND SINGAPORE, 1946-1960

CHAPTER 5

Hong Kong is like a heart whose function is to pump international trade through the circulatory system of which it is at the centre. To whom, then, is the heart's first duty? To the muscle-cells of which it is itself comprised, or to the other vital organs and limbs at the extremities of the same system?¹

K.M.A. Barnett's circulatory system metaphor, itself quite well-utilized by transnational historians, suggests that those with the ability to direct government resources in Hong Kong saw the city as a central node in a system of international trade reconnecting the post-war world. Though Barnett – a 1929 matriculant of King's College, Cambridge who came to Hong Kong in 1932 as a cadet officer in the territory's civil service, fought and was interned in the city during the Second World War and became the Chairman of Hong Kong's Urban Council² during the 1940s and 1950s – portrayed the city as the centre of an international trading system, his comments following the construction of this metaphor suggest less a healthy circulatory system and more a Faustian bargain between keeping the heart or its limbs.³ Continuing on from his metaphor, Barnett makes clear that the Hong Kong government should not provide housing assistance to the tens of thousands of squatters working to pump the heart of international trade and not to 'intervene directly either by building those houses, by lending money to others to build them, or by guaranteeing a loan for the same purpose'. In assuming assistance to Hong Kong's urban poor was 'out of the question', Barnett embedded himself within a certain strain of

¹ NAUK, CO/1023/164, Government of Hong Kong, Daily Information Report, 'Rotarian K.M.A. Barnett Details Government Plans for Squatter Resettlement', p. 3, 30 Jan 1952.

² As noted in chapter one, the Urban Council had been formed out of Hong Kong's Sanitary Board in 1935 and was tasked with running sanitary, medical and other services. Following the Second World War, the council was reconstituted initially as an entirely appointed body, with elected officials being slowly reintroduced, see Lau, *A History of the Municipal Councils of Hong Kong, 1883-1999*, p. 71-84.

³ Barnett, as the Census Commissioner from 1959-1962, the Commissioner of Census and Statistical Planning from 1963-7, and the Commissioner for Census and Statistics from 1967-9, was also instrumental in conducting a 1961 census that became important for developing housing policies into the subsequent decades. For biographical data, see King's College Modern Archive, Cambridge, United Kingdom, the Papers of John Tresidder Sheppard, JTS/2/11, 'Letter from K.M.A. Barnett to JTS', 23 May 1947; James Hayes, Derek Davies, and Solomon Bard, 'Obituary: K. M. A. Barnett, O.B.E.', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27:1 (1987).

pre-war debates circulating around Asia's port cities that advocated that little to no public monies should be spent on housing the cities' poorest residents.⁴

That Barnett's views, as a high ranking civil servant responsible for reinventing Hong Kong's emerging post-war government, had shifted – he wrote at the end of his thirty-seven year career in Hong Kong that 'there has been no suggestion that the housing problem in Hong Kong is other than a continuing one, demanding the application of long-term constructive thought rather than immediate nostrums' – suggests an important change in the ways in which the problem of accommodating the urban poor was conceptualized in Hong Kong.⁵ In part, this chapter follows these changes and shifts in Hong Kong, contextualizing and connecting them with analogous turns in post-war Singapore.

These changes came at a time when housing 'squatters' had a new urgency. While previous chapters have discussed how conceptualisations of the 'squatter' evolved over time and space, 'squatters' had a new meaning to post-war Hong Kong and Singapore – not only was the term virtually synonymous with the urban poor, but these 'squatters' and slum-dwellers were increasingly at the centre of post-war and early Cold War urban politics. In a period of uncertainty and change, 'squatters' became central to a politics of urban discontent – a sometimes-communist politics that became wrapped up with broader Cold War narratives.⁶

It is precisely this period of decolonization and of global reconfigurations of empire that has attracted the most historical attention to urban poverty in Hong Kong and Singapore. Perhaps because of the historiographical shift towards writing in terms of nation-states – both cities remained politically detached from their hinterlands, the brief exception being Singapore joining Malaysia from 1963-1965 – work on Hong Kong and Singapore stands out as rather exceptional. Beginning in the 1970s, social scientists started both constructing comparative frameworks on the housing policies of Hong Kong and Singapore as well as more closely studying urban housing in both cities.⁷ Building off of these comparative frameworks, Castells, Goh, and Kwok

⁴ NAUK, CO/1023/164, Government of Hong Kong, Daily Information Report, 'Rotarian K.M.A. Barnett Details Government Plans for Squatter Resettlement', p. 3, 30 Jan 1952.

⁵ K.M.A. Barnett, 'Introduction', in *Hong Kong Urban Rents and Housing*, ed. W. F. Maunder (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1969), p. 1.

⁶ Leong Yee Fong, 'The Impact of the Cold War on the Development of Trade Unionism in Malaya (1948–57)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 23:1 (1992); Leong Yee Fong, *Labour and Trade Unionism in Colonial Malaya: A Study of the Socio-Economic and Political Bases of the Malayan Labour Movement, 1930-1957* (Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1999).

⁷ D. J. Dwyer, ed. *Asian Urbanization: A Hong Kong Casebook* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1971); Stephen H.K. Yeh, ed. *Public Housing in Singapore: A Multi-Disciplinary Study* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1975); William Siew Wai Lim, *Equity and Urban Environment in the Third World: With Special Reference to Asean Countries and Singapore*, ed. Weisong Zhuang (Singapore: DP Consultant Service, 1975); Drakakis-Smith and Yeung, 'Occasional Paper No. 8: Public Housing in the City-States of Hong Kong and Singapore.'; Riaz Hassan, *Families in*

argued in 1990 that public housing in both cities was crucial in their economic development success.⁸ More recently, historians have, to some extent, considered urban poverty as it relates to housing in post-war Hong Kong and Singapore. Loh Kah Seng's *Squatters into Citizens*, Alan Smart's *Shek Kip Mei Myth*, and Gregory Clancey's work on spatial emergencies point to the importance of fires amongst the settlements of the urban poor in shaping post-war housing programmes.⁹ Though these works go a long way in filling the historiographical lacuna about urban poverty along Asia littoral, historians have only just begun to utilize frameworks looking beyond the municipal limits of either city. Smart begins to do this by placing Hong Kong's development of public housing firmly within the context of 'the geopolitics of the early Cold War'.¹⁰ Nancy Kwak goes farther, using the lines of the Cold War to construct transnational histories of housing assistance and argues that American housing assistance in East and Southeast Asia evolved as 'a part or larger Cold War concerns'.¹¹

This chapter, while certainly acknowledging and agreeing on the importance of Cold War politics in shaping development projects in the 'Third World', argues that a broader set of interweaving connections, particularly those developing between reimagined post-war Asian governments, were influential in shaping the urban environments of Hong Kong, Singapore, and other Asian port cities as they relate to poverty and housing.¹² In doing so, this argument utilises an inter-Asian connective approach to understand a continuing transnational conceptualization of housing for the urban poor in port cities across Asia littoral.¹³

In dealing with the difficult post-war situation in urban centres across East and Southeast Asia, authorities in Hong Kong and Singapore initially turned to pre-war plans, with their ambiguities and protean stories of 'success', to address the housing crisis facing the urban poor. Though in both cases the geopolitics of the Cold War played an important role in shaping developing programmes meant to house the urban poor, this chapter points to the many continuities that link post-war housing projects to the pre-war circulations of knowledge and

Flats: A Study of Low Income Families in Public Housing (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1977); Pryor, *Housing in Hong Kong*.

⁸ Castells, Goh, and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 4.

⁹ Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*; Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth*; Clancey, 'Toward a Spatial History of Emergency'.

¹⁰ Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth*, p. 15.

¹¹ Kwak, *A World of Homeowners*, p. 47; Kwak, 'Selling the City-State'. For more on the role of the Cold War in determining American foreign policy relating to housing after the Second World War see chapter two of Kwak, *A World of Homeowners*, p. 46-87.

¹² Discussions about the emergence of the 'third world' have been of interest to historians for many years and receiving recent attention as well. See Cindy Ewig, 'Cold War Archives in the Third World', *Wilson Center Blog on Sources and Methods*, 13 March 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/cold-war-archives-the-third-world> (Accessed on 19 October 2017); Paul Betts, 'Red Globalism: Eastern Europe, Decolonization and African Culture', (paper presented at the World History Seminar, University of Cambridge, 9 March 2017).

¹³ Amrith and Harper, *Sites of Asian Interaction*.

practices described in earlier chapters. In doing so, this chapter demonstrates both how post-war plans and programmes expanded over the 1940s and 1950s to accommodate large and larger swaths of the urban poor, and how these developments represented a post-imperial urbanism that evolved out of pre-war discussions on tackling urban poverty as well as post-war realities in port cities across South and Southeast Asia.

Contiguous Connections: 'New' ideas, new circulations and new institutions in post-war Singapore

Meeting under the auspices of the Special Commissioner for South East Asia, delegates from emerging Southeast Asian nations gathered together in Singapore from 19-23 August 1947 for a Social Welfare Conference. While some of the papers presented were on broad topics unrelated to issues of urban governance, the submission guidelines had called for papers analysing 'any features of the territory which may have an effect on Social Welfare Work, such as race, religion, illiteracy and general social and economic conditions', the list of those in attendance demonstrates a deep knowledge of 'social welfare' as it related to urban conditions across the Southeast Asia. Hong Kong, a city now contextualized within East Asia but firmly within the Southeast Asian milieu of the early post-war period, sent representatives from the Social Welfare Council and Medical Department; institutions crucial in shaping the city's resettlement responses. French Indo-China and Cochin China sent representatives working in Saigon while Cambodia sent delegates working in Phnom Penh as the 'Chief Engineer, Public Works Department'. The Tonking delegate was recorded as a member of the 'Administrative Committee' in Hanoi. The Malayan Union's delegation all worked in Kuala Lumpur while the Netherlands East Indies delegation all worked in Batavia. Sarwak and Siam each had one representative while North Borneo had two. Singapore had its own delegation, with T.P.F. McNeice, the current Secretary for Social Welfare, future President of the Municipal Council and *ex-officio* Chairman of the SIT, leading the delegation. Also in attendance representing Singapore was Goh Keng Swee, a member of Singapore's Social Welfare Department and leader of its 1947 and 1953-1954 social surveys.¹⁴ A Burmese delegation planned on attending but was forced to remain in Rangoon by bad weather impeding air transport. The Burmese delegation included U Chit Maung, who was at that time Chairman of the RDT, and Dr U Maung Gale, a later board

¹⁴ Ho Chi Tim, 'Goh Keng Swee in a Social Welfare History of Singapore', in *Goh Keng Swee: A Legacy of Public Service*, ed. Emrys Chew and Chong Guan Kwa (Singapore: World Scientific, 2012); Tim and Wee, *Social Services*, p. 49-53.

member of Rangoon's 1954 survey of housing and social conditions; a survey crucial in shaping Rangoon's responses to post-war urban poverty. Australia, China, India, New Zealand and the United States all sent delegates along with a handful of non-state organizations like the UN, WHO (World Health Organization), YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), and YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association).¹⁵

While chapters two and three of this dissertation have demonstrated the ways in which developments in Bombay relating to the BIT and BDD shaped and framed an imperial urbanism in other port cities around the Indian Ocean world before the Second World War, this section will illustrate the ways in which Singapore, the SIT, and the HDB assumed a new centrality in this urban story and came to overtake Bombay's role as a model framing debates relating to poverty and housing in a post-imperial and unevenly decolonizing world. Examining circulations and connections that cut across emerging Cold War lines, this section illustrates the complex pathways through which ideas about poverty, housing, and the city moved around South and Southeast Asia during a period when Singapore continued to expand its approach and reshape housing for the urban poor into the 1960s.

Jumpstarted by the attendance these geographically diverse delegates represented at the Social Welfare Conference, Singapore's centrality in the story of providing post-war housing for the urban poor was further demonstrated by the delegates' qualifications, many of whom had had and would have ties to developing post-war housing for the urban poor in Hong Kong, Rangoon, and Singapore. As a result, the content of the conference, particularly as it related to social surveys, would have lasting implications for institutions like the SIT, HKHA, and RDT. While discussions about promoting research and social surveys of various Southeast Asian cities and territories did not happen until the end of the conference, these surveys – in 1947 and 1953-1954 in Singapore, 1954 in Rangoon, and 1961 in Hong Kong – came to play a critical role in enumerating housing problems for the urban poor and calling for more forceful government intervention in providing sanitary and proper accommodation.¹⁶ As part of the final discussions of the conference, a 'Singapore model' of a social welfare council was suggested specifically for Hong Kong; a suggestion buttressing the suggestions for the creation of a Singapore-style improvement trust taking place in Hong Kong contemporaneously and covered later in this chapter. Helping frame discussions around urban poverty in setting up an outline from which to

¹⁵ NAUK, CO 859/157/3, 'Minutes', p. 6-10, 15.

¹⁶ NAUK, CO 859/157/3, 'Minutes', p. 57-62. For social surveys, see NAS, SWD 1109/52, 'Social Survey', 1952-56; NAM, 14, 11/8(17), 'Housing and Social Survey', 1954; Barnett, 'Hong Kong Urban Rents and Housing'; Ho and Wee, *Social Services*, p. 49-53.

conduct research and social surveys, the 1947 Social Welfare Conference demonstrates the increasing stature of Singapore both physically as a place of connection – the conference was, after all, held in the city – as well as an intellectual nexus, namely model from which officials across an emerging Southeast Asia could frame their work.¹⁷

Though Singapore found itself as a physical site of inter-Asian interaction between and inspiration for various urban planners across Southeast Asia in the post-war period, these meetings often took place within a framework of unilateral delegations visiting the city.¹⁸ More frequently though, SIT and municipal officials found themselves responding to inquiries from various cities relating to the improvement trust's work at accommodating the urban poor. That these inquiries came from municipal authorities across an emerging Commonwealth offers another lens through which 'to view the organization from the outside in'.¹⁹

The first such inquiry was made in June 1947 by the Commissioner for Land and Mines, Trengganu.²⁰ Writing to enquire about 'the constitution and working of the Singapore Improvement Trust', the Commissioner expressed his interest in constituting 'a similar body on a small scale to work out long-term Town Planning schemes in Kuala Trengganu'.²¹ Responding in July, the SIT prepared and sent the Commissioner 'a short account of the constitution and working of the Singapore Improvement Trust'.²² The second inquiry, made in July 1952 by a Pakistani civil service officer hoping to arrange 'a short visit to one of your Housing Estates'. While the programme during the officers' visit to Singapore was 'rather a comprehensive one', two hours, 11.30 am to 1.00 pm, was set aside specifically to tour a SIT scheme.²³ Taking them to multiple sites, Mr. Woolmer, a SIT official, received thanks from the officers following the conclusion of their trip in August 1952.²⁴

The third inquiry, made by a town planning advisor in Accra in September 1952 followed similar outlines but was more granular. Writing 'we are considering setting up an Improvement Trust in Accra on the lines of your organization', the advisor, who already had seen copies of bulletins and annual reports for 1947 and 1948, asked for 'any information of a more detailed

¹⁷ NAUK, CO 859/157/3, 'Minutes', p. 251.

¹⁸ Amrith and Harper, *Sites of Asian Interaction*. Later sections of this chapter will cover Hong Kong's visits to Singapore and the SIT. Rangoon officials appear to have visited the city as well, see NAM, 22, 11/8(5), p. 17, 'The Housing Problem in Rangoon (Memorandum by Dr H.M.J. Hart, Statistical Advisor to the Government of the Union of Burma, in collaboration with U Kyaw Sein, Acting Chairman, Rangoon Development Trust)', 1950-51.

¹⁹ Dubow, 'The Commonwealth and South Africa', p. 284.

²⁰ Currently spelled Terengganu, this chapter utilises the colonial spelling in line with the primary source.

²¹ NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/39, J.M. Brander to Chairman, SIT, p.001481 26 June 1947.

²² NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/39, Alex Greenhill to J.M. Brander, p.001480, 8 July 1947.

²³ NAS, HDB 1096, SIT 656/52, Abu Bakar to Colonial Secretary, Singapore, p. 002169, 15 July 1952.

²⁴ NAS, HDB 1096, SIT 656/52, Visit of Pakistan Civil Service Officers, to Colonial Secretary, Singapore, p.002164, 22 August 1952.

character than that contained in your bulletins, especially a copy of the legislation under which your 'Trust works'.²⁵ J.M. Fraser, the Manager of the SIT, unable to provide more detailed literature, instead provided a history of the SIT, writing that it 'was originally set up on the lines of the Improvement Trusts in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, as an Authority to facilitate town improvements to acquire land for town expansion'. In providing this history, Fraser seems to suggest that it may be worth inquiring with these Indian improvement trusts as well, though he writes later in the correspondence 'the Indian Improvement Trusts have, I think, long since disappeared but the Singapore Improvement Trust continues on its way, having expanded considerably from its original conception and, particularly since the War, in relation to Public Housing'.²⁶ While Fraser's claims of expanding the work of the SIT would contradict the platform of Singapore's newly elected PAP government led by Lee Kwan Yew in 1959, officials from around the Commonwealth remained interested in the work of the SIT through the 1950s. Corresponding in June 1956, the Town Treasurer of Mombasa wrote of the Municipal Board's interest in establishing an improvement trust in order 'to enable development of certain old portions of the Mombasa to take place'. Asking for 'a copy of the legislation under which your Trust operates and any other information which you consider will be useful to the board in setting up a Trust', the Treasurer expressed interest in similar materials as previous inquires.²⁷

Taken in the context of each other, these correspondences illustrate the ways in which officials from around Asia and Africa drew their own connections in an increasingly post-imperial world. While it would appear that these connections fit nicely into what Saunier and Ewen have described as a 'transnational municipal moment', the complex and varying scales of these correspondences – from 13 Pakistani civil service officers to a Malayan land and mines commissioner and a municipal treasurer – demonstrate that while they had municipal consequences, these exchanges also had implications beyond the simple communication of municipal officials.²⁸ Representing, at least in part, a way in which imperial circulations of knowledge and practice informed those leading into the era of decolonization, the communications also reinforce the notion of Singapore as a nexus connecting far-flung urban landscapes not only in Southeast Asia, but around Asia and Africa more broadly.

That the circulations of knowledge and practice about urban public housing flowed in ways which are not well documented or studied in Southeast Asia, in Asia more broadly, and in Africa

²⁵ NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/39, A.E.S. Alcock to J.M. Fraser, p.001467, 9 September 1952.

²⁶ NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/39, J.M. Fraser to A.E.S. Alcock, Town Planning Adviser, Accra, Gold Coast, p.001465-6, 29 September 1952.

²⁷ NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/39, Town Treasurer, Mombasa to SIT, p.001460, 2 June 1956.

²⁸ Saunier, 'Introduction: Global City, Take 2: A View from Urban History'.

does not though exclude the existence of better understood forums of connection and interaction. The same J.M. Fraser who participated in much of the above correspondence also participated in more familiar post-war structures of knowledge sharing. In 1955, Fraser was invited to attend a July 1956 UN Technical Assistance Administration and Danish government-sponsored seminar on 'Housing through non-profit organizations' with participants from Asia and the Far East. Described as a 'group training course' and introduction to 'forms of non-profit housing in Scandinavia', the seminar also featured a 'round-table discussion on how to apply similar methods to conditions in the ECAFE [Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East] region'.²⁹ Though it is possible that Fraser attended this seminar, it is more likely that a subordinate at the SIT was sent instead. This is because Fraser petitioned the Singapore government in August 1956, just a few weeks after the conclusion of the ECAFE seminar, to allow him leave to represent the Town Planning Institute at the Fourth Congress of the Australian Planning Institute as well as be a guest speaker at the Australian Planning Institute in September 1956.³⁰

These visits, seminars, conferences and sets of correspondence with the SIT demonstrate that the experiences of Singapore's Improvement Trust assumed a new centrality to an emerging post-war urban story from which other cities around world shaped their own programmes of development and housing. While these post-war circuits of the exchange of urban planning knowledge reflect a fundamental shift in the way that knowledge about urban planning circulated – chapters one, two, and three have argued that Bombay was central to pre-war flows of expertise and knowledge – this section has also suggested that substance of this knowledge, related to urban improvement, continued to be informed by pre-war thought. In other words, while Singapore and its Improvement Trust became a post-war nexus for the exchange of urban planning thought and practice, this thought and practice remained remarkably related to the knowledge circulating from and around pre-war Bombay.

From a pre-war to a post-war approach?

In addition to Fraser's citation of the Indian Improvement Trusts as setting the historical precedent for the SIT, actions taken by the Trust in the early post-war years reflect that the city's post-war 'development' had much continuity with its pre-war 'improvement' schemes, seen clearly through the continued protean categorization of 'slum dwellers' and 'squatters'.

²⁹ NAS, HDB 1239, HB 229/56, G.A. Atkinson to J.M. Fraser, 29 Dec. 1955.

³⁰ NAS, HDB 1219, SIT 959/56, J.M. Fraser to The Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing, p.001823, 15 August 1956.

S. Sinnathamby, a resident of Kampong Bahru Road deemed to be squatting on SIT land, wrote to the Commissioner of Lands in August 1947, eleven months after the end of the BMA in Singapore:

Soon after the BMA occupation, like the other neighbours around I occupied this land and built two huts on it. I was so busily occupied, that I could not find out as to who the owner of the land was. I understand from my neighbours who have also built huts in a similar manner that they have paid land rents to your office. I am rather anxious to pay up the rents that is [*siz*] due, hence kindly advise me as to how much the payment could be effected. I am quite prepared to adhere to any rules and regulations as set by you.³¹

Sinnathamby's application to continue living on the land, a parcel on which two sublet 'sheds', a stall selling coffee and a small patch of banana trees were documented, was 'refused' in December 1947 by the Commissioner of Lands managing lands for the SIT at Tiong Bahru.³² Personifying the difficulties of post-war life for the poor in Singapore, Sinnathamby's petition demonstrates many of the urban complexities left in the wake of the Second World War and BMA period. While Sinnathamby was clearly part of the peri-urban trend of the period, utilizing land along the edges of the urban area for living and some small-scale farming, his sense of being singled out amongst his neighbours by his lack of knowledge also highlights the arbitrary nature of enforcement measures taken against those categorized as squatters.

While Sinnathamby's petition illustrates the flexible ways in which the term 'squatter' was applied to those living informally in makeshift settlements, his story by no means unique. In the midst of the Sinnathamby petition, the Lands Section Manager of the SIT, Mr. Magnay, summarized the ways in which the trust evicted those it deemed squatters on its lands. Noting that 'physical force is resorted to in the case of all new squatters', Magnay describes 'as squatting is reported, a Trust demolition gang, supported by a Senior Officer where required, removes or causes to be removed, any erections or materials on the land in question'. What is less clear for Magnay's description is the process through which these 'squatters' were discovered amidst existing informal settlements on trust land. Given that Magnay's memo outlines a shortage of staff and describes the prospect of further staff employment as 'unsuitable', it seems that determining who was a 'squatter' and who was not was often as arbitrary as it was in the case of S. Sinnathamby.³³

³¹ NAS, HDB 1278, SIT 140/48, S. Sinnathamby to The Commissioner of Lands, Land Office, RE: Land at Tiong Bahru, p.001138, 1 August 1947.

³² NAS, HDB 1278, SIT 140/48, Commissioner of Lands to S. Sinnathamby, Crown Land – Lot 25 Mukim I, pp.001135, 3 December 1947.

³³ NAS, HDB 1278, SIT 650/47, Lands Section (Mr. Magnay) to Manager, SIT, 'Memorandum', p. 001121-2, 22 September 1947.

While utilizing protean categorizations of the urban poor – in a way similar to the pre-war BIT, BDD, and SIT – certainly reflects a continuity between pre-war and post-war approaches to housing in a quotidian fashion, continuities amongst the milieu of urban planners also characterized Singapore’s post-war housing efforts. Writing in 1947 to the Municipal Office about housing reform in post-war Singapore, the Manager of the SIT, J.M. Fraser, specifically forwarded on copies of the 1938 Report of the Weisberg Committee as starting point from which to conceptualize new plans.³⁴ The report, which emphasized that Singapore’s ‘slum problem is not, as is commonly thought, primarily a problem of destroying bad houses, but rather a problem of building good ones’, had been central to pre-war plans to expand the SIT’s housing stock.³⁵

Though the Trust, in its refusal of Sinnathamby’s request and policies on ‘squatter’ eviction, seems not to have always taken the Weisberg Committee’s suggestion to focus on building good houses, it did, in some cases, offer to rehouse those it evicted as part of its development. ‘Squatters’ evicted as part of the development of SIT flats on Balestier Road in 1948 (Figure 11) were offered accommodation in the new development, though at rates even trust officials acknowledged would mean that ‘only a small proportion’ of the evicted hut dwellers would accept.³⁶ At least then in the first few years following the end of the Second World War, urban planners like Fraser and the SIT staff turned to pre-war plans and suggestions to approach post-war questions of poverty, housing, and urban development.

³⁴ NAS, HDB 1061, SIT 70/41, Singapore Improvement Trust, Municipal Office to Chin Chye Fong, Esq., Singapore, p. 001374, 13 January 1947.

³⁵ NAS, HDB 1061, SIT 70/41, ‘Weisberg Report’, p. 001393-4.

³⁶ NAS, HDB 1248, SIT 646/47, Manager, Improvement Trust (MIT) to Chairman, Improvement Trust (CIT), p. 0008, 17 July 1947.

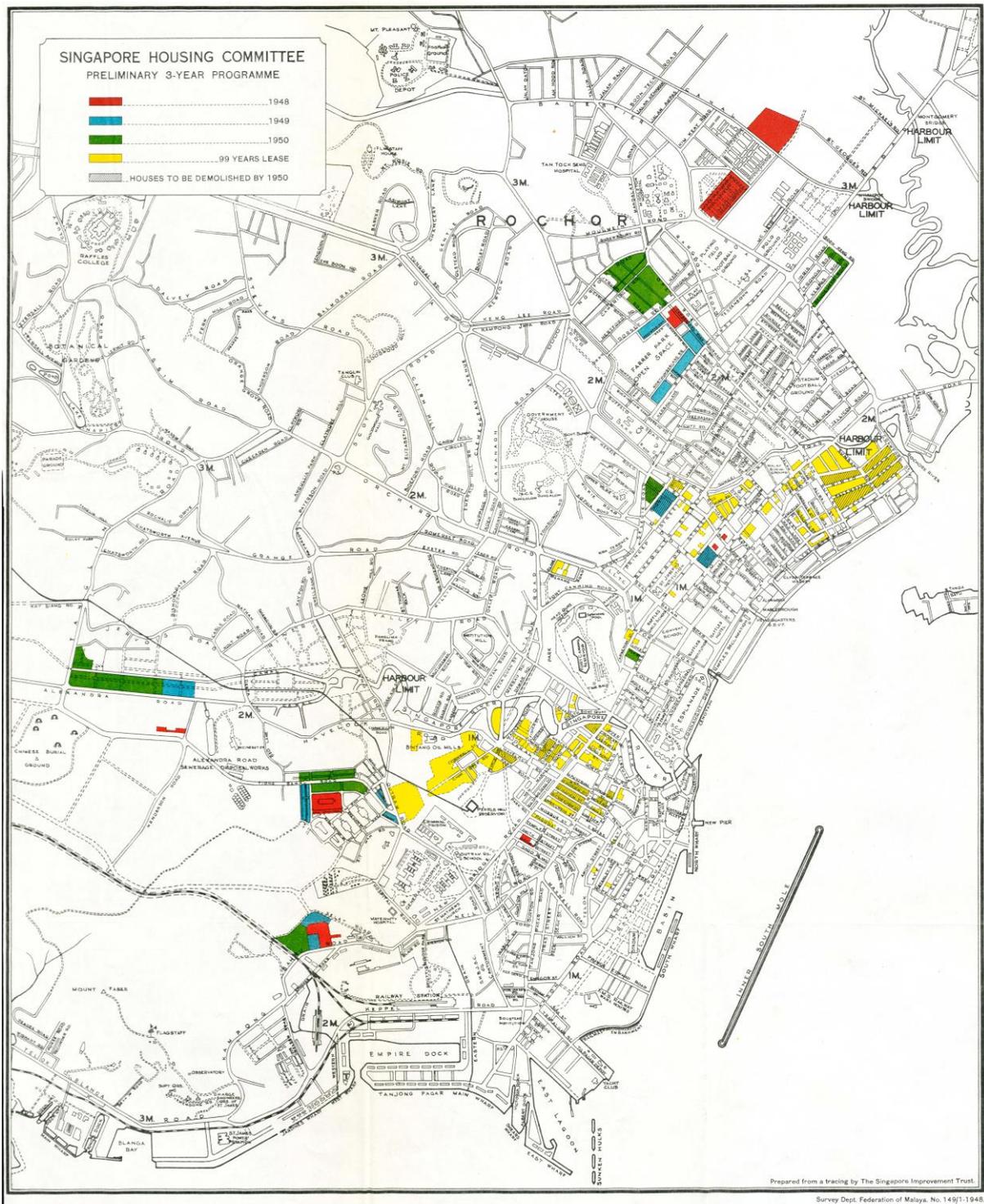


Figure 11. A 1947 map of housing works planned by the Singapore Housing Committee. Focusing on redeveloping urban areas, this map of early post-war developing in Singapore demonstrates a less immediate post-war interest in building large-scale housing for the urban poor and notes demolition works. The demolitions at Balestier Road are noted in the red territory towards the northeast of the map. © The British Library Board, General Collections, C.S.B. 230/3, Report of the Singapore Housing Committee, 1947, Map of Preliminary Development. Reprinted with permission.

Improvement Trust to Housing Development Board

This section has argued that pre-war approaches and plans for housing the urban poor formed the basis for the SIT's post-war approach in the late 1940s through the mid-1950s and examined the ways in which this knowledge circulated amongst urban planners in cities across Southeast Asia and the decolonizing world. This sub-section examines the process through which these early post-war ideas evolved in the mid-to-late 1950s in Singapore and shaped the creation of a new institution, the Housing Development Board (HDB), which assumed a newfound centrality amongst urban planners and remains an influential example for social scientists studying housing and urban poverty today.³⁷

The driving force behind this evolution in the late-1950s, which led to further government investment in housing for the urban poor and a significant scaling up of the construction of new housing, was continued frustration with a number of people still unable to find a more permanent home. While S. Sinnathamby's petition to the SIT to stay in his huts along Kampong Bahru Road had been settled in 1947, the SIT still seemed completely overwhelmed by the prospect of providing alternative housing to hut dwellers nearly six years later in 1953. In describing three areas designated for 'squatter resettlement', J.M. Fraser argued that 'sites (2) and (3)', south of MacPherson Road and off Buona Vista Road were, the 'wrong areas' if 'the intention is to resettle squatters rapidly'. Noting the irony that that an estimated 2,000 people in approximately 200 huts would have to be evicted just to redevelop the area south of MacPherson Road into a squatter resettlement area, Fraser argued against the plan, saying that 'the amount of initial work required to prepare the site is out of all proportions to the squatter redevelopment which is proposed for it'. He suggests instead at the end of his note that, 'it would surely be better to use the land for the erection of permanent housing development'.³⁸

Fraser's frustrations with squatter resettlement plans in March 1953 reveal the tensions of the SIT's early post-war approach to housing. Despite emphasizing the Weisberg Committee's report and its emphasis on constructing good housing to municipal officials in 1947, little 'good' housing was actually being constructed. While a municipal official, J.A. Harvey, noted, as early as 1952, that Singapore needed to construct housing more quickly if 'we shall ever solve the

³⁷ For example, see Beng Huat Chua, 'Navigating between Limits: The Future of Public Housing in Singapore', *Housing Studies* 29:4 (2014).

³⁸ NAS, HDB 1090, SIT 808/50, 'Notes by MIT on Squatter Resettlement', J.M. Fraser, p. 001248-9, 10 March 1953.

housing problem in Singapore', it is apparent that that had not happened by March 1953.³⁹ The SIT had begun construction on some new accommodation, namely at Queenstown and at Tiong Bahru in 1953 and 1951, respectively, but these developments comprised only a few hundred flats.⁴⁰ The slow pace of construction continued through the mid-1950s; a 1961 report of the Housing Development Board estimated that the SIT constructed an average of only 1,700 units per year from 1947-1959. Noting that at its peak in 1958 the trust constructed 3,841 flats, nearly double the annual average for the period, the report drew attention to the lack of construction in the intervening years.⁴¹

The slow pace of construction also manifested itself in pent-up demand for flats. While the SIT register consisted of 8,849 applicants in 1955, that register had increased to 14,500 applicants by September 1958.⁴² That the register increased in size from 1955-58 reflects a particularly slow pace of construction; applications for SIT flats were increasingly being limited. One such example comes from Mr. Soh, a 'tenant of Trust premises No. 55A Tiong Bahru Road' who applied 'for additional Trust accommodation for his second wife and her family'. While a SIT official points out that 'Mr. Soh's application is in order', he requested 'a ruling upon the procedure to be adopted when one applicant makes applications for two separate premises in order to house 2 wives and their families'. That the SIT rejected the application, after a discussion between Fraser and the Board of Trustees, bespeaks both a tightening of the procedures based on the applicant pool for flats as well as the Trust's cultivation of nuclear family based domesticity in its flats.⁴³ Rules regarding the applicant pool adopted in 1960 further demonstrate both the cultivation of a certain domesticity amongst those living in SIT and HDB flats as well as efforts to restrict applications for flats. In addition to specifying all applications needed to be legally residing in Singapore under the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance of 1957, applicants needed to have at least 4 people in addition to themselves who could 'be considered as forming an economic family unit'.⁴⁴ More narrowly defining 'family' as the 'husband or wife of the applicant', 'the applicant's children, their wives/husbands and/or grandchildren', 'the

³⁹ NAS, HDB 1090, SIT 808/50, 'Resettlement', J.A. Harvey, Commissioner of Lands and T.E. Smith, Ag. Secretary for Social Welfare, p. 001289-93, 16 July 1952.

⁴⁰ NAS, HDB 1281, SIT 244/50, 'Senior Architect & Planner, Improvement Trust to SRA', p.001009, 25 October 1951; 'Introducing Queenstown, Singapore', Singapore Improvement Trust (Singapore: 1957).

⁴¹ NAS, HDB, 1096, SIT 498/52, 'Housing', Secretary, Housing & Development Board to the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Culture, p.000836, 17 May 1961.

⁴² NAS, HDB, 1096, SIT 498/52, 'Press Release – The Trust– The True Picture', A.B. Sewell, p.000931-4, 17 September 1958.

⁴³ NAS, HDB 1090, SIT 705/50, 'Minutes', p.00729, 28 June 1950.

⁴⁴ The ordinance granted Singaporean citizenship to those born in Singapore and Malaya as well as British citizens who had resided in Singapore for at least two years. Those with other nationalities who had resided in Singapore for eight or more years could go through a process of naturalization.

applicant's parents or parents-in-law', or 'any other blood relation of the applicant who is under 21 or over 60 years of age and is solely dependent upon the applicant', the application process clearly both aimed to limit applications as well as favour certain nuclear familial connections over alternative family structures.⁴⁵

That demand continued to build throughout the 1950s reflects that 'up to 1958 the Trust has been unable to achieve its building targets due to the difficult task of clearance'. This pressure from an increasingly long register of applicants began to be manifest in Singapore's political sphere. The Chairman of the SIT in 1958, A.B. Sewell, noted that 'there was a time when the Trust staff were not harassed by politicians. Today, however, appeals, requests to stop legitimate actions, and accusations of favouritism and corruption by certain politicians have reached such a pitch that vital work is being slowed down to deal with them'.⁴⁶ Dismissing 'accusations' of corruption, Sewell nonetheless notes a growing political pressure on the SIT. This political pressure, building in September 1958 ahead of the May 1959 election of Lee Kwan Yew and his Political Action Party (PAP), forced a re-evaluation of the SIT's approach.

While Sewell bemoaned that the SIT 'has but a short life now', a new approach to constructing housing for Singapore's urban poor was already in development. In September 1958, Sewell mentioned a new 'planning bill' in the wings, that bill became law in January 1959 and was ultimately carried out by the PAP government which came into power in June 1959.⁴⁷ In part capitalising on a politics of urban discontent around housing conditions, the PAP moved swiftly to try and placate this discontent and thereby deflate more socialist-leaning political alternatives to the party. Reconstituting the SIT as the HDB in early 1960, the new board was given a much broader mandate to 'implement the Government policy of providing public housing for Singapore Citizens in the lower income group'. Aiming to construct each year '14,700 permanent housing units for the next 10 years', the HDB then planned to construct between eight and nine times the number of flats per year as the SIT had actually constructed from 1947-1959. To do so, the PAP government prepared to spend \$230 million Singapore dollars during the first five years of the HDB, 1960-1964.⁴⁸ Along with increased funding, the HDB reflected additional political discontents with the conditions of Singapore's housing. The

⁴⁵ NAS, HDB, 1096, SIT 498/52, 'Basic qualifications governing registration of applications for Board's dwelling accommodation', Estates Manager to CEO of Housing Development Board, p.000899, 12 May 1960.

⁴⁶ NAS, HDB, 1096, SIT 498/52, 'Press Release – The Trust– The True Picture', Chairman of Trust, A.B. Sewell, p.000931-4, 17 September 1958.

⁴⁷ Ibid.; '2 New Boards Take Over from the S.I.T.', *The Straits Times*, p. 7, 1 February 1960.

⁴⁸ One Singaporean Dollar was worth £0.12 Pound Sterling in 1961; alternatively, one Pound Sterling was \$8.59 Singaporean Dollars; \$230 million was then roughly 27.6 million Pound Sterling.

PAP had won elections in 1959 in part by campaigning against corruption and this campaign manifest itself in creation of the HDB. The new board took measures to systematize appointments to work at the HDB, dismantled the points-based system for SIT/HDB flat allocation instead instituting public balloting ceremonies, and, perhaps in a nod to the alleged corruption of L. Langdon Williams discussed in chapter four, revised and standardised contract procedures.⁴⁹

The 'new' approach developed in the late-1950s to housing Singapore's poorest residents, the HDB, represented an evolution on decades of debate surrounding the funding of housing for the urban poor. While chapters two, three and four have noted the debate between those advocating self-sustaining 'economic' rents and those advocating for government financial support for public housing projects, the creation of the HDB in Singapore represented a fundamental shift towards government intervention in housing markets, particularly for those at the lower end of the income and wealth distributions. This shift was particularly meaningful given that Singapore had assumed a new centrality for municipal officials around Southeast Asia and around a post-imperial world in Asia and Africa more generally. Though Singapore's approaches to housing and urban poverty through the late-1950s had largely reflected pre-war plans for the city and the urban environment, this shift towards expanding access at government expense had ramifications far beyond Singapore's municipal limits. In a manner analogous to pre-war Bombay, Singapore's post-imperial urbanism of poverty had echoes in cities across the world. The remainder of this chapter will now examine the particular significance of those echoes in Hong Kong.

Slum Asia: Housing Hong Kong and 'The Critical Phase', 1946-1952

Though Singapore's post-war approaches to housing the urban poor were largely developed in the city before the Second World War, Hong Kong's post-war approaches to housing for the poor varied drastically from pre-war conceptualizations of tackling urban poverty. While chapter one of this dissertation has examined the ways in which Hong Kong, and its approaches to urban poverty, was a part of the fabric of an emerging urban Asia littoral, chapter four noted the city's outlier status when compared to schemes deployed in cities like Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, and Singapore. In fact, Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, and Singapore all had some sort

⁴⁹ Jon S.T. Quah, *Public Administration Singapore-Style* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2010), p. 66-7.

of Improvement or Development Trust before 1927, while Hong Kong remained without any analogous institution until after the Second World War.

This section examines the conditions under which the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HKHA), analogous to the BIT, RDT, and SIT, was founded in 1954. Though there were hints of big plans being drawn up by the Colonial Office towards the end of the BMA period, the years 1946 to 1954 were crucial in finally linking Hong Kong's approaches to urban poverty to those that had been circulating and developing in urban centres around the wider Indian Ocean. In arguing for the importance of these initial years in setting the stage for future approaches to housing, this section borrows Louis' phrase, 'the critical phase', used to describe the importance of a roughly similar period on the wider geo-political histories of post-war Hong Kong.⁵⁰ And while Louis argued that decisions made during this period within the colonial administration for Hong Kong to remain a Chinese city – or one without its own distinct political character – ensured its continued colonial status, this section demonstrates that the actions taken on housing during this period placed Hong Kong and its slums well within the character of emerging Asian megacities in the early years following the Second World War.⁵¹

Though previous research on housing and poverty in Hong Kong has argued that this early post-war period was indeed instrumental in the creation of public housing programmes, it has largely framed this moment as a product of local crisis in the face of multiple squatter settlement fires or along 'the geopolitical vulnerability of a British colony on the edge of communist China during the early stages of the Cold War'.⁵² Rather than contextualize the development of public housing in Hong Kong squarely within the geopolitics of East Asia during the early Cold War or within a 'myth' of localized disaster and fire prevention, this examination of housing policy in Hong Kong from 1946 to 1954 argues that a wider South and Southeast Asian milieu was crucial in shaping Hong Kong's post-war approach towards accommodating the urban poor. While the Shek Kip Mei fire, a disaster that left approximately 53,000 people homeless on the Kowloon peninsula on 25 December 1953, was undoubtedly important in shaping the ways in which the HKHA conceived its first projects in the mid-to-late 1950s, earlier events and connections

⁵⁰ W. M. Roger Louis, 'Hong Kong: The Critical Phase, 1945-1949', *American Historical Review* 102:4 (1997).

⁵¹ Huff and Huff, 'Urban Growth and Change in 1940s Southeast Asia'; Peter James Rimmer and Howard Dick, *The City in Southeast Asia: Patterns, Processes and Policy* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009); Freek Colombijn, *Under Construction: The Politics of Urban Space and Housing During the Decolonization of Indonesia, 1930-1960* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2010); Christopher Silver, *Planning the Megacity: Jakarta in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2008); T. G. McGee, *The Southeast Asian City: A Social Geography of the Primate Cities of Southeast Asia* (London: Bell, 1967).

⁵² Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth*, p. 3; M. M. Suen, 'Foreword', in *Fifty Years of Public Housing in Hong Kong: A Golden Jubilee Review and Appraisal*, ed. Y.M. Yeung and Timothy K.Y. Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2003), p. xxvii-xviii.

ultimately helped inform the immediate and long-term responses to housing the fire's victims and reconstructing a post-war urban Asia.⁵³

Chapter four demonstrated the extent to which plans for Hong Kong had become part of a series of debates about accommodating the urban poor in cities across Asia littoral before the Second World War, but this outward-looking framework for planning post-war Hong Kong was taken further during the course of planning for the reoccupation of the city during the Second World War. In the middle of the war, in 1943, the Colonial Office in London was interested in encouraging colonial governments to develop their own housing schemes arguing that while 'no uniform organisation for the planning and execution of housing schemes can be laid down... there are certain particular points which are likely to require attention by many Colonial Governments, or which may commonly be worth considering'. Laying out suggestions in terms of new legislation, town planning measures, setting up housing committees and practicing slum clearance, the report also encouraged the direct exchange of information and experiences 'of some Colonial Governments' which 'may be useful to others'. Encouraging inter-personal contact between housing officers in addition to more routine government communications, the report suggested that 'through this means they should quickly discover what of their experience can most usefully be made available to others and what they themselves have to learn from experience elsewhere'.⁵⁴ Despite the state of the war in East and Southeast Asia in 1943, colonial office officials were thinking about the ways in which a post-war world could be configured around housing for the urban poor.⁵⁵

Though it is clear that the sharing of information and experiences was not substantially adopted in Hong Kong during the short period of the BMA, this kind of connection between Hong Kong and Singapore quickly developed in the years immediately following the reoccupation. As early as July 1948, the Director of Public Works in Hong Kong, V. Hennesy, became interested in 'an Improvement Trust introduced in Singapore' and 'a similar

⁵³ 'The success of public housing' in Hong Kong is described as 'somewhat accidental' as a result of the Shek Kip Mei fire in Y.M. Leung and Macro Wu, 'Introduction', *ibid.*, p. 7. It also describes the initial response to the fire as 'an emergency measure... that was the beginning of a public housing programme that would grow greatly in scale in the following decades'. Catherine Jones describes the situation 'as every student of the Hong Kong housing story now knows, serious Government action came about 'because of' the Shek Kip Mei squatter fire of December 1953', Catherine Jones, *Promoting Prosperity: The Hong Kong Way of Social Policy* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1990), p. 184.

⁵⁴ Hong Kong Public Records Office, Hong Kong, China (henceforth HKPRO), HKRS156-1-579, 1944-1961, Housing - Miscellaneous documents received from the S of S on -, General Aspects of the Housing Problem in the Colonial Empire, December 1943, #1(A1).

⁵⁵ Colonial officials were not only active in planning for a post-war future in Hong Kong, but were interested broadly in planning for post-war Southeast Asia. For more on planning in Burma, Malaya and Singapore see Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East*, p. 135-52, 271-2; Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, p. 58-61; Sugarman, 'Reclaiming Rangoon'; Turnbull, 'British Planning for Post-War Malaya'.

Improvement Trust operated in Bombay' that he only had 'a vague idea' about.⁵⁶ Expressing his interest to the Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Alexander Grantham, Hennesy's petition spurred Grantham to correspond later in July to his counterpart in Singapore, Franklin Gimson:

Grateful for any literature or other information which you may be able to provide on the subject of this Trust which I understand was set up as a result of the Housing Commission of 1928.

Purpose of this inquiry is in connection with the replanning of the bombed-out areas of this Colony which the land is mostly sub-divided into small lots of unsuitable shape belonging to different owners. It may be that the experience of the Improvement Trust in replanning slum areas in Singapore may offer some useful guidance to those who are studying this question here.⁵⁷

Expressing Hong Kong's interest in Singapore's replanning of slum areas, Grantham's inquiry makes an implicit link between pre-war slum clearance in Singapore and post-war refashioning of Hong Kong's most war-torn neighbourhoods. This link between pre- and post-war urban development relating to housing for the urban poor was then further solidified in Gimson providing 'three copies oof [*sic*] a Singapore Improvement Trust report for the period 1927-1947' in August 1948 'and three copies of the Singapore Improvement Trust Ordinance No. 134 of 1 July 1927 with amendments are attached'. In addition to providing reports and information regarding the historical workings and legal structure of the SIT, Gimson also offered 'copies of a report by a Committee appointed to examine the question of housing in the Colony' to be 'sent to you when printed'.⁵⁸

While this exchange of information about the SIT to Hong Kong's urban planning authorities took place in part amongst the upper echelons of the colonial government, the interactions between lower-level officials, like V. Hennesy, also informed attitudes in Hong Kong. P.S.M. Sedgwick, the then acting Chairman of Hong Kong's Urban Council, described his thoughts relating to correspondence about the SIT documents, 'my personal reaction is that a somewhat similar organisation [such as the SIT] suitably modified to meet Hong Kong's circumstances and method of administration could do very useful work in the implementation of town planning schemes, in slum clearance and in rehousing'. Moving an official usually 'reluctant to recommend the creation of additional Government Departments or semi-official organisations', the SIT reports and documents caused Sedgwick to 'suggest that the machinery

⁵⁶ HKPRO, HKRS156-1-1768, V. Hennesy, Director of Public Works, #1, 9 July 1948.

⁵⁷ HKPRO, HKRS156-1-1768, Governor of Hong Kong to Gov. of Singapore, #2, 20 July 1948.

⁵⁸ HKPRO, HKRS156-1-1768, Governor of Hong Kong to Gov. of Singapore, #3, 9 August 1948; it appears that Gimson is referencing the *Report of the Singapore Housing Committee, 1947* (Singapore: Government Printing Office), 1948.

used in Singapore is worthy of serious study and consideration' despite the inability to 'finance them out of current revenue'.⁵⁹

While debates about an analogous Hong Kong improvement trust started as early as 1948, the situation on the ground in the city sparked some immediate actions in addition to debates about longer-term planning. Set up in 1947 initially as a sub-committee of the Hong Kong Council of Social Services, the Hong Kong Housing Society was quickly spun off as a separate non-profit seeking organization in order to 'alleviate housing conditions by the provision of accommodation at reasonable rent prices for the less wealthy members of the community'. Though the society had been set up relatively quickly in the aftermath of the war and reoccupation, it seems that lack of access to capital and to construction material limited the scope of its initial impact. The Housing Society first opened 270 flats at Sheung Li Uk in September 1952 and advertised a more substantial 1,026 flats under construction at Hung Hom in 1955.⁶⁰

Resettlement Areas, Disease and Fire

While the Hong Kong Housing Society was coalescing in 1947, sanitary and planning authorities in Hong Kong simultaneously began to clear squatters and organise resettlement areas for Hong Kong's urban poor in the intervening years between the war and the creation of the HKHA. This subsection will analyse these efforts of resettling those urban poor deemed 'squatters' and argue that the implications of these previously understudied resettlements had a catalysing effort in creating an institution analogous to an improvement trust in Hong Kong and helped link the city to previous approaches to tackling Asian slums.

Starting in 1948, these clearances and resettlements were designed to screen the squatters, determine eligibility and then move them to 'tolerated' and 'approved' sites for resettlement on the outskirts of the urban area.⁶¹ While there are no estimates for how many individuals were resettled in 1948 and 1949, the Deputy Director of Health Services estimated the Squatter

⁵⁹ HKPRO, HKRS156-1-1768, P.S.M. Sedgwick, Ag. Chairman, Urban Council, #4, 10 August 1948.

⁶⁰ HKPRO, HKRS70-1-452-23, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Information Bulletin', p. 1-2, 27 March 1954.

⁶¹ Squatters in certain settlements were allowed to remain as part of a system of 'tolerated' areas in addition to 'approved' areas. 'Tolerated' areas were deemed areas where 'squatters are permitted to remained but where little or no attempt is made to enforce and standard of construction' whereas 'approved' areas were defined as 'any area of Crown Land already approved by Government for development of standard type wooden huts for squatters'. As of 1950, 'tolerated' areas were estimated to have a capacity of accommodating about 190,000 people while 'approved' areas only 18,500. See NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Memorandum for the Executive Council: The squatter problem', p. 1-4.

Control Unit removed 9,926 'huts' during the initial clearance of targeted areas and another 4,903 structures reported as 'attempts to re-squat in those areas'. Though these figures do not count those cleared during or before 1950, one report estimated that there were roughly 210,000 squatters who 'ought to be cleared from their present sites' – of which 180,000 lived in Kowloon and 25,000 were located on Hong Kong Island.⁶²

For those facing clearance and resettlement, the terms of registering and moving were harsh. Though permits for the plots were proposed to cost only \$1 or \$2 per month, huts and bungalows in the 'approved' areas were estimated to cost \$750-900 and \$1,000-1,500, respectively.⁶³ Given that more than half of Hong Kong residents had a monthly family income less than \$300 HKD, even by the end of the 1950s, the costs associated with moving to 'approved' areas meant that only about 10 per cent of those cleared from 'squatter settlements' could afford to resettle in 'approved' areas.⁶⁴ For the other 90 per cent of those screened and cleared, 'tolerated' areas were all they could afford.

Living in 'tolerated' resettlement camps was significantly less expensive, with those resettling still referred to as 'squatters' who built 'huts to their own liking, only the size, siting, and the present minimum standards of construction being controlled'.⁶⁵ While these tolerated resettlement areas may or may not have been better equipped to house the city's poorest residents, resettlement authorities continued to see these areas as requiring 'particular attention' and suggested staffing these areas with resident 'Section Supervisors' corresponding roughly one officer per thousand residents. In addition to these supervisors, a few hundred 'sanitary coolies', 'gangsters', 'foremen' and 'overseers' were hired to manage tolerated areas in addition to an extra 100 policemen.⁶⁶ Though the conditions for the urban poor in tolerated areas may not have materially improved from previously living situations, they were now increasingly under the watchful eye of urban sanitary and planning authorities.

While Hong Kong authorities did not describe these areas as 'camps', these 'approved' and 'tolerated' areas seem in many ways analogous to the plague-era camps in Bombay discussed in chapter one. In addition to providing insight into the ways in which camps continued to inform imperial responses after the Second World War, these 'approved' and 'tolerated' areas reveal deeper concerns, predating the Cold War, about the nature of potential threats posed by the

⁶² Ibid., p. 2

⁶³ Ibid., p. 2, p. 6.

⁶⁴ HKPRO, HKRS890-1-11, J.M. Fraser, #1A, p. 1-6, 19 May 1959; NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Memorandum for the Executive Council: The squatter problem', p. 4-5.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 6-7.

urban poor in colonial contexts. And while these ‘approved’ and ‘tolerated’ areas were not literally outposts of ‘barbed-wire imperialism’ described by Forth in his new monograph, they represent deeper and more violent colonial angsts laying at the intersection of a post-war urbanism of urban emergency and Hong Kong’s geo-politics.⁶⁷

Despite resettlement authorities reporting the relocation of an estimated 30,000 people into ‘approved’ and ‘tolerated’ areas by 1951, estimates of the number of squatters in Hong Kong continued to balloon, by about 50 per cent, in just one year – 330,000 in March 1951 over 210,000 in 1950. In addition to describing those roughly 300,000 people as ‘concentrated into a small number of large, congested and highly insanitary settlements on the outskirts and in the rural parts of the urban area’, Hong Kong’s annual report also notes that the rate of incidence of typhoid ‘nearly three times as great’ for those living outside of these resettlement areas compared with ‘the rest of the population’. While fears about epidemic disease were an important factor driving the expansion of resettlement efforts, fears about fire were increasingly important in justifying efforts to intervene in the case of housing for the urban poor. Apart from reporting disease, a 1950-51 Annual Report of the Urban Council notes the impact of ‘several major fires’ in squatter settlements as well as ‘attempts’ to clear fire lanes through these settlements.⁶⁸

Though the 1950-51 report notes that these fires resulted ‘without loss of life’, it is clear that by early 1952, squatter settlement fires, in addition to epidemic disease, were also capturing the attention of resettlement and planning authorities as well as reshaping debates about to move forward with addressing housing for the urban poor. A Social Welfare Office (SWO) report from January to March 1952 notes that ‘further measures were taken to assist the resettlement...of some of 600 of the poorest victims of the Tung Tau squatter fire’. These measures included financial assistance of \$440 to build new ‘huts’, regular employment with the Urban Council and the Malaria Bureau of the Medical Department as well as food assistance for families where no member was regularly employed.⁶⁹

Contemporaneously to the S.W.O. report, the daily bulletins of the Hong Kong Government began publishing frequent reports of efforts made to aid the urban poor.⁷⁰ Two reports in

⁶⁷ Forth, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*; Forth, ‘Britain’s Archipelago of Camps’; Aidan Forth, ‘The Birth of the Concentration Camp? British Imperialism and the Origins of Modern Detention’, *Perspectives on Europe* (2013); Clancey, ‘Toward a Spatial History of Emergency’; Loh, ‘Emergencies’.

⁶⁸ NAUK, CO/1023/164, ‘Extract from Hong Kong Annual Reports, 1950-1951: Urban Council and Sanitary Department’, p. 200.

⁶⁹ NAUK, CO/1023/164, ‘Social Welfare Office: Extract from Quarterly Report for the three months 1st January to 31st March 1952’, p. 134.

⁷⁰ These ‘Daily Information Bulletins’ were produced by the Public Relations Office of the Government of Hong Kong.

February 1952 discuss relief work and efforts to rehouse victims of 1952 Tung Tau fire.⁷¹ A report from early March documents describes the living conditions in Fuk Wa village where some of the fire victims were resettled, 'under Urban Council arrangements latrines were dug, a small dam was constructed for the storage of water and paths serving the new village were improved'.⁷² From descriptions like this in early March, it seems that resettlement authorities were so overwhelmed with the scale of the task at hand. Rather than address sanitary and fire concerns by resettling 'squatters' in suitable accommodation that met sanitary standards while mitigating the risk of fire, authorities seemed to be shifting squatter populations around Hong Kong.

While uprooting and not raising the living standards of the urban poor demonstrates the failures of the resettlement approach in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the exercise of screening those relocated seems to have impressed upon planning authorities an awareness of the size and scale of the problem of housing Hong Kong's urban poor. An attachment to a bulletin from the end of April 1952 notes that about 10,000 people had been physically resettled while almost 21,000 people had been screened as part of the resettlement process end of the month.⁷³ Despite the upbeat tone of the report, it seems clear that even by the Government's own estimates, their resettlement programmes were only scratching the surface of the city's squatter problems and that large squatter fires continued to jeopardize their efforts.

In addition to 'reporting good progress' on the number of people screened by the resettlement department, the same April 1952 bulletin notes a large fire at Tai Hang Shi which burned down over 2,000 huts, killing two people.⁷⁴ It seems that this fire, near Kowloon Tong on the Kowloon Peninsula, represented a turning point away from efforts to simply resettle Hong Kong's urban poor. A Public Relations Office report from 3 May, a few days after the fire at Tai Hang Shi, announced the formation of the Hong Kong Settler's Housing Corporation. Describing the corporation as 'going to the market for its capital', the Government nonetheless provided 'a substantial loan' to get the corporation's activities off the ground. Comprised of 10 sponsors 'all well-known in public life', the structure and financing of the corporation, a 'public company...non-profit...[and] subject to public control', seemingly echoes the improvement

⁷¹ NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 11 February 1952', p. 222; NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 16 February 1952', p. 178.

⁷² NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 10 March 1952' p. 172.

⁷³ NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Work of Resettling Colony's Squatter Population: Chairman of Urban Council reports good progress during April' p. 136.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

trusts founded in Bombay, Rangoon and Singapore decades earlier.⁷⁵ Tasked with building houses with rents that do not exceed \$30 per month, a threshold seemingly reflective of the combined family incomes of the urban poor, the new corporation also planned to begin construction within a week at the newly cleared Tai Hang Shi site.⁷⁶

While bulletins from May 1952 discuss applications for the corporation's housing, as well as those approximately 12,000 people left homeless by the Tai Hang Shi fire, subsequent reports revert to covering the number of people screened by resettlement authorities, some 31,000 by December 1952, in addition to reporting a series of fires breaking out amongst squatter settlements around the city.⁷⁷ The tone of these reports shifts again in early 1953 after a series of three 'large fire[s]' at Houmantin, Kowloon Tsai, and the Kowloon Walled City left thousands more homeless by the end of February.⁷⁸ There was a brief note on 142 families being resettled in a second tranche of homes constructed by the Hong Kong Settler's Housing Corporation housing on 26 February, but otherwise, the bulletins from March to 22 December 1953 report tepid progress on 'resettlement' – an estimated 43,015 people were screened during the seven to eight years of the resettlement approach to tackling housing for Hong Kong's urban poor.⁷⁹

What then can be said of Hong Kong's approach to housing its neediest residents up to 1952? While the resettlement approach only scratched the surface of the 'squatter' problem in providing safe and sanitary accommodation, a burgeoning population of urban poor meant that many in 'tolerated' areas were still left in untenable conditions. The increasing regularity of large fires, like the ones that took place at Tung Tau and Tai Hang Shi, not only left thousands of people homeless but also helped shape a situation in which poor populations were being processed without a resolution to their poverty.

Apart from the implications for the urban poor, the resettlement programmes that continued

⁷⁵ Ten sponsors listed in the report are Dr. S.N. Chau (chairman), Lee Iu Cheung, Ngan Shing Kwan, Dhun Jehangir Ruttonjee, Fung Ping Fan, Bunnan Tong, I.N. Chau, Lee Sai Wah, Lam Chik Hoe and Li Fook Shu (Secretary and Treasurer). Sir Man Kam Lo was appointed as a legal adviser. Ruttonjee in particular comes from a prominent family prominent in Hong Kong's Indian Community. A Parsi, Ruttonjee's father, Jehangir Hormusjee Ruttonjee immigrated from Bombay as a teenager in the 1890s and played an important role in funding a sanatorium and hospital in Hong Kong.

⁷⁶ NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 3 May 1952' p. 158-9.

⁷⁷ NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 6 May 1952' p. 156-7; NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 9 May 1952' p. 144-6; NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 3 May 1952' p. 158-9; NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 19 December 1952' p. 108-9; see the intermittent reports from May to December 1952 in the same file.

⁷⁸ NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 25 February 1953' p. 80-1.

⁷⁹ NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 26 February 1953' p. 76-7; NAUK, CO/1023/164, 'Government of Hong Kong Daily Bulletin, 22 December 1953' p. 39-42; see the intermittent reports from March to November 1952 in the same file.

past 1952 both demonstrated certain similarities with previous approaches taken to address sanitary crises in other cities along Asia littoral, as well as acted as a catalyst for a new approach in Hong Kong-based on approaches from the urban milieu of South and Southeast Asia. While the ‘tolerated’ areas and a Housing Corporation led by the upper echelons of Hong Kong’s civil society had a historical resonance with the approaches taken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bombay, the failures of these programmes also set the stage for new, shared Asian approaches in the future. This next section will consider the ways in which comparisons with and connections to Singapore prefigured the ways in which housing for the urban poor was subsequently conceived.

(De)constructing Asia’s Slums: Connections to Singapore

Simultaneous to the evolution and construction of the resettlement programmes in Hong Kong, civil servants under the purview of the Urban Council continued to express their interest in Singapore’s approaches to fighting urban poverty – tackling its post-war slums and squatter populations. This subsection explores this continuing interest in the Singaporean example and concludes this section by arguing that these comparisons and connections were influential in shaping the contours of the HKHA, and an urbanism of Asia’s slums, in the years after its founding in 1954.

While previous parts of this section pointed out an interest in Singapore on the part of Hong Kong’s Urban Council in the 1940s and the ways in which Hong Kong’s resettlement camps reflected earlier approaches to political and sanitary threats in British Asia, the comparisons between these Asian post-war cities continued on through to the 1950s. In a ‘reply to a questionnaire on worker’s housing in Asian countries’ from 1952, an unidentified civil servant argues that ‘it will be seen that the worker’s housing problems of Hong Kong are entirely different to those which exist in other parts of Asia and that the expedient methods which can be applied elsewhere to solve the problem are largely inapplicable in Hong Kong’.⁸⁰ While the civil servant does not explicitly mention which other Asian countries are ‘entirely different’ from Hong Kong, the fact that she/he is addressing this question at all suggests a certain pervasiveness and banality in making these comparisons. Her/his answer, that no comparison can be made at all, is particularly odd at face value considering the contemporaneous visit of the Mayor of Rangoon and various municipal officials in 1952 to Hong Kong to glean, in part, Hong

⁸⁰ NAUK, CO 1023/164, ‘Reply to a questionnaire on worker’s housing in Asian countries’, p. 197, 1952.

Kong's insight into housing its urban poor.⁸¹ Apart from this visit, it is also clear from the archival record that members of Hong Kong's Urban Council were increasingly interested in and aware of Singaporean approaches to post-war housing and overcrowding.

A meeting comprising of some of Hong Kong's most senior officials, including the Governor, Colonial Secretary, Financial Secretary, Mr. W.J. Carrie and Deputy Financial Secretary on 20 December 1950 reflects this continuing interest in the Singaporean example.⁸² Discussing Hong Kong's housing situation and the means through which Government could provide a solution to the problem – the broad outlines of a housing programme to build flats funded via Government loans was agreed upon – the group noted that it needed to 'consider further the problems involved in setting up and [*sic*] Improvement Trust and possibly, at a later stage, consulting the Colonial Secretary, Singapore, with a view to a member of the Singapore Improvement Trust visiting Hong Kong to advise on the matter'.⁸³ In raising specifically the Singaporean example, the Governor and the other senior officials continued an emerging post-war pattern of looking at Singapore both as a place of knowledge expertise relating to housing for the urban poor, but also as a point of comparison. In a note to the Governor the following week, James Greffets writes of both current and past suggestions to study Singapore's improvement trust:

Just before the war, Mr. W.H. Owen...an architect in the Public Works Department, Hong Kong, received an award from the Carnegie Trust to study town planning and housing in Europe. His report was presented in April, 1940. It was considered here to be a most valuable document and that "if it were possible for the Hong Kong Government to go ahead with the institute of a new Authority on the lines of the Singapore Improvement Trust, such as I advocated, this serious and obstinate problem might be tackled more actively than had been found possible in the past"... I agree with much that is said by Mr. Owen and...would suggest that, if an organisation on the lines of the Trust which I have proposed, appears to you to offer a solution to the housing problem in Hong Kong, you should consult Mr J.M. Fraser, who has had many years' experience with the Singapore Improvement Trust and has overcome many difficulties in bringing the Trust to its present condition.⁸⁴

⁸¹ HKPRO, HKRS41-1-7185, 'Mayor of Rangoon and Party - Visit of'; For more on Rangoon and Burma turning towards post-war Southeast Asia comparisons see Sugarman, 'Reclaiming Rangoon'.

⁸² Prior to the Second World War, W.J. Carrie had been Chairman of the Urban Council, see Hong Kong Legislative Council Minutes, Nov. 13 1941.

⁸³ HKPRO, HKRS156-3-4, 'Notes of a meeting held at Government House on 20 December 1950', #4, 20 December 1950.

⁸⁴ HKPRO, HKRS156-3-4, James Greffets to Governor Sir Alexander Grantham, #6, 28 December 1950. It appears that W.H. Owen's 1947 legislative draft of a 'Hong Kong Development Ordinance' proposing the creation of a Hong Kong Development Trust was lost to colonial administrators. As described by Greffets and along the lines of 1948 inquires from Hong Kong to Singapore, the legislation imagined an institution very much along the lines of the SIT with close integration with the Municipality, the power to declare buildings a health hazard and a mandate to create a master plan for Hong Kong along with public housing for the urban poor. See HKPRO, HKRS41-1-2944, 'Ordinances-Draft Hong Kong Development Ordinance prepared by Mr W.H. Owen', 1947.

Greffets' recommendations, that the Hong Kong government should specifically consider the case of Singapore, further substantiates the regularity with which the Lion City became the primary and pre-eminent point of reference and contrast for Hong Kong's urban planners. Suggesting that J.M. Fraser, the then Chairman of the SIT, consult Hong Kong's government, Greffets weaves together the challenges facing both cities in housing the urban poor.

While J.M. Fraser, a figure who looms large in the connections between accommodating the urban poor in post-war Hong Kong and Singapore, did eventually come to Hong Kong to work for the HKHA in 1958, James Wakefield, a former Social Welfare Officer in Hong Kong, recalls in an oral history that he was dispatched to Singapore in late 1951 'in order to see the Singapore Housing Improvement Scheme'. Noting that he was sent 'at the HK Government request', Wakefield goes on to say that he 'submitted a report to the HK Government on the "pros and cons" of setting up in Hong Kong, a Housing Authority on similar lines to that one in Singapore'.⁸⁵ Wakefield's report, submitted in January 1952 was an extensive history and analysis of the SIT, its successes and failures. Though Wakefield does not go back as far as explaining the Bombay connection, as some post-war SIT correspondence explaining its history does⁸⁶, he notes that Singapore's government provided generous funding via loans to help expand the trust's efforts starting in 1948. Arguing forcefully for the need for and shape of an improvement trust in Hong Kong, Wakefield suggests few adaptations of Singapore's model; including adopting a similar system of finance, administrative structure as well as aims and goals.⁸⁷

This section has demonstrated that Wakefield's recommendations were part of a recurring pattern of correspondence and interaction connecting and shaping approaches to accommodating urban poverty in both cities. While the next section will focus on the actions and consequences of the HKHA, it is apparent that the resettlement programmes that characterized Hong Kong's early post-war attempts to house the urban poor sharpened the need to adopt new approaches to the city's housing situation. Smart's *The Shek Kip Mei Myth* correctly points out the public mythology surrounding the 25 December 1953 fire and that it did not begin or jumpstart Hong Kong's public housing programmes. Extending Smart's assertions about historical memory, this section has demonstrated that the debates and actions of the late 1940s, and indeed actions taken to combat plague in the early twentieth century, beyond Smart's post-1950 chronology, were interconnected to the debates and actions of the early 1950s that

⁸⁵ HKU, OHA, Accession No. 14, James Wakefield, English, Tape 2, Side A, p. 17-9.

⁸⁶ NAS, HDB 1057, SIT 240/39, J.M. Fraser to A.E.S. Alcock, Town Planning Adviser, Accra, Gold Coast', p.001465-6, 29 September 1952.

⁸⁷ HKPRO, HKRS156-3-4, 1950-1952, J.T. Wakefield, p. 2-21, #32(1) 23 January 1952.

together form 'the critical phase' that shaped Hong Kong's future approaches to housing its urban poor.⁸⁸ As the remainder of this chapter illustrates, these comparisons to and connections with Singapore up until 1952 had meaningful consequences for the newly created housing authority.

Hong Kong's 'New' Approach: The Housing Authority, housing societies and an emerging Asian urbanism, 1952-1960

If the example of the Singapore Improvement Trust had loomed large in the debates leading up to August 1952, the month when Governor Grantham began advocating for the creation of a housing authority within the administrative structure of the Urban Council, it continued to be the pre-eminent point of comparison during discussions of how to streamline Hong Kong's multi-pronged efforts at creating affordable housing for the urban poor and working classes.⁸⁹ In step with creating a new singular housing authority along the lines of the SIT, the Chairman of the Urban Council, the Chairman of Hong Kong's Reform Committee – a committee representing the interests of the city's landlords – and the Colonial Secretary all weighed in from 1952-53 on the extent to which the new authority would coordinate existing projects managed by the proliferative list of post-war housing societies like the Hong Kong Housing Society, Hong Kong Model Housing Society, and Hong Kong Economic Housing Society.⁹⁰ The vision of the Urban Council and Colonial Secretary, along the lines of the unified authority of the SIT, won out, 'it is intended also that the properties controlled by the Hong Kong Housing Society and the Hong Kong Model Housing Society, which were pilot projects in low cost housing, should be transferred to the Housing Authority in due course'.⁹¹

The Hong Kong Housing Authority (HKHA), envisioned as an umbrella organization to oversee Hong Kong's various efforts at creating housing for the urban poor and working classes, was created by the Hong Kong Housing Ordinance of May 1954. While the previous section argued that connections to the Singapore Improvement Trust prefigured Hong Kong's approach to housing its urban poor, this section is interested in exploring the extent to which the actions of the HKHA and its associated housing institutions reflected connections with earlier circulations of urban 'improvement' knowledge. In addition to considering some of the

⁸⁸ Louis, 'Hong Kong: The Critical Phase, 1945-1949'.

⁸⁹ HKPRO, HKRS523-2-1, Chairman, Urban Council to Hon. CS, #1, 5 November 1952.

⁹⁰ HKPRO, HKRS523-2-1, 'Summary of Mr RC Lee's Proposals', #13, 20 April 1953.

⁹¹ HKRPO, HKRS523-2-1, 'Colonial Secretary', #15, p. 2.

consequences of this urban redevelopment for those continuing to be deemed ‘squatters’, this section will also discuss the extent to which J.M. Fraser, a figure central to the early years of the HKHA, cemented the emergence of an urbanism of poverty along with a Hong Kong-Singapore post-war axis.

In a speech regarding the opening of flats constructed by the Hong Kong Economic Housing Society in 1955, Governor Grantham notes that the Housing Authority, which was ‘set up about a year ago’, is ‘only just getting into its stride’. In the meantime, he argues, other housing societies have ‘all stepped into the breach and have done, and are doing, yeoman service’. Describing the Economic Housing Society development, the Governor documents opening 280 single-family flats ranging in size from 332-492 square feet. Claiming that even with 8-10 persons living in the largest units, ‘every occupant will have an average space of 50 square feet’, the Governor describes that the development’s ‘object is to keep the rents as low as possible’ and that, ‘the total rent works out at about \$45 a month’.⁹² While the Governor acknowledges that these rent figures do not include the interest on loans that the Society expects tenants will need to take out to make a substantial down payment on these flats, he seems unconcerned by either the comparatively small-scale of the project or the 50 square feet in which each resident is expected to live. In overlooking these important questions of the appropriateness of the development in terms of its size and scale, the Governor’s overtones echo those of BDD director Lawless Hepper in response to the criticism from Professor H.S. Jevons mentioned in chapter three.⁹³ Jevons’s criticisms, that small single-room flats did not reduce overcrowding and did not meet the needs of the urban poor in 1920s Bombay, were met by pronouncements of financial constraints. These constraints, which were again raised against Jevons’ work with the Rangoon Social Services League’s in advocating for the creation of social housing for the urban poor in Rangoon, had been a fixture of discussions relating to urban ‘improvement’ since the advent of the BIT in 1898.⁹⁴

The prefiguring of financial debates limiting the size and scale of housing developments meant to address the hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers estimated to be living as squatters seemed to come with the territory of these smaller housing societies with some regularity. A Chinese language advertisement, explaining in 1955 the history of the Hong Kong Housing Society’s Ma Tau Chung development, and the amenities it offered, demonstrates both the limited size and scope of these initial developments. Of the 128 units available, each flat was

⁹² HKPRO, HKRS70-1-452-20, Sir Alexander Grantham, p. 1-3, 18 July 1955.

⁹³ MSA, PWD DD, 1921, 702, Sir Lawless Hepper to H. Stanley Jevons, p. 32-3, 4 April 1921.

⁹⁴ Naryana Rao, *Contract Labour in Burma* (Madras: Triplicane, 1930), p. 86, 9-90.

estimated to accommodate up to five people and was sized at 13 feet by 13 feet and ten and a half inches (approximately 4 meters by 4.2 meters).⁹⁵ Assuming a flat had four or five residents, the approximately 600 residents of Ma Tau Chung were each allocated even less than 50 square feet of space (approximately 4.4 square meters).

While it seems that urban council officers and high-level officials, like Governor Grantham, were full of praise for the limited progress made in the first years after the creation of the HKHA, private landlords were more frustrated by the housing situation. R.H. Lee, the Chairman of the Hong Kong Property Owners Association wrote to Brook Bernacchi – an elected member of the Urban Council, the chairman of Hong Kong’s Reform Club and future board member of the HKHA – about a report on low-cost housing and slum clearance, ‘we believe that the only effective solution to our housing problem is to build and to encourage building. Any effort to create further restrictions or to continue present restrictions may give satisfaction to some people but will never solve the problem’. From the correspondence, Lee and the Property Owners Association seem interested in investing in tenement housing for the urban poor, though they are sceptical of the motives of those seeking low-cost accommodation. In demanding that ‘all real estate development by private enterprise should continuously be treated by Government as an economic enterprise and not totally as a social project’, Lee goes on to argue for a ‘fair rent board’ to prevent overseas Chinese from utilizing the low-cost rents to ‘remit money for investment in property’.⁹⁶ In painting those seeking low-cost housing as savers looking for an entry into the property market themselves, Lee expresses frustrations from a landed perspective that new housing policies will squeeze Hong Kong property owners out of their market.

Landlords from the Property Owners Association were not the only Hong Kong residents feeling frustrated and squeezed. Three months prior to Lee’s correspondence, a ‘Committee of Yaumati Ten Streets Kaifong’ claiming to represent 10,000 residents of areas targeted for redevelopment in Yau Ma Tei petitioned in Chinese against the scheduled demolition of housing and businesses to make way for a social activities centre. Questioning how ‘hawkers’ and ‘wage earners’ residing on the ‘upper floors’ would be able to afford rent increases resulting from redevelopment, the Committee called for ‘the Authorities to consider the businesses of the more than hundred shops as well as the living of the ten thousand residents in the area’ and use

⁹⁵ HKPRO, HKRS70-6-842-2, ‘Housing Society – ENCL’.

⁹⁶ HKPRO, HKRS115-1-86, ‘RC Lee, Chairman, The Hong Kong Property Owners Association to Brook Bernacchi, Chairman, Reform Club of Hong Kong’, 4 September 1956.

adjacent ‘available’ sites or reclaim land for the establishment of a social activities centre.⁹⁷ In voicing frustrations about the affordability of rent for those at the lower end of income distributions, the Yau Ma Tei committee’s petition points not only to concerns about redevelopment but also to others ways in which the urban poor managed to accommodate themselves. In mentioning those living on the ‘upper floors’, the Committee raises the issue of rooftop living – another means through which housing authorities characterized ‘squatters’.⁹⁸

A Cantonese language interview as part of the Oral History Archives of Hong Kong project at Hong Kong University explains in part the conflation between rooftop dwellers and squatters. ‘Those few households were all rooftop sheds. They came down from the Mainland’, recalled Wong Miu-Ping (黃妙萍) when discussing her life residing on Thompson Road in Wan Chai during the 1940s and 1950s.⁹⁹ While the hundreds of thousands of people deemed ‘squatters’ by housing authorities certainly represented a diversity of backgrounds, those fleeing from conflict in Mainland China made up a large share of those without proper accommodation in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁰⁰ In this way then, there was a connection between populations of refugees living at the ground level in camps as ‘squatters’ and those living on rooftops. The conditions of rooftop living were also similar to those living in some of the squatter settlements, they ‘lived in a shed on our rooftop, that is, self-built. That way no rent needed to be paid, and they came down to ours to collect water’.¹⁰¹ The self-built rooftop structures with lack of direct access to water described by Wong fit contemporaneous understanding of ‘slums’ though they lacked certain patterns of population density. Wong’s description of rooftop dwellers points to the protean definition of ‘squatters’ in Hong Kong as well as the ways these definitions complicated efforts by organizations like the HKHA and housing societies to accommodate the urban poor.

⁹⁷ HKPRO, HKRS337-4-287, ‘Committee of Yaumati Ten Streets Kaifong to Town Planning Board’, #18, 19 June 1956.

⁹⁸ J.H. Bottomley, a Chief Building Surveyor wrote about defining slums, ‘it is difficult to define clearly what is meant by a slum. The dictionary definition states “a dirty back street or court or alley in city.” If this is accepted, slums can be cleared by increased activities on the part of the Urban Council cleansing staff. I would suggest for consideration however that a slum should be described as “a group of buildings owned by and occupied by persons who are lacking in civic consciousness to such an extent as to permit the buildings to become dilapidated, dangerous or detrimental to the health of the occupants.”’ See HKPRO, HKRS337-4-287, ‘J.H. Bottomley, Chief Building Surveyor’, #8, 12 March, 1953.

⁹⁹ 嗰幾家人都係天棚嗰啲屋呀啫，喺大陸落嚟㗎啦。 , HKU, OHA, Accession No. 004, Wong Miu-Ping (黃妙萍), Cantonese, Tape 1, Side B, p. 64-7.

¹⁰⁰ Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth*, p. 43-4.

¹⁰¹ 住我哋天台嗰屋呀咁樣，即係...自己搭㗎。咁呀唔使租咁嘛，咁呀落嚟我哋嗰度擺水呀咁樣囉。 , HKU, OHA, Accession No. 004, Wong Miu-Ping (黃妙萍), Cantonese, Tape 1, Side B, p. 64-7.

Another such categorisation of ‘squatters’ that attracted the attention of the new housing authorities were the ‘fishing’ or ‘boat’ peoples of maritime Asia; in Hong Kong namely the on-water peoples as well as boat dwelling populations of Hoklo and Punti people. While these peoples had lived on the ocean as a way of life and for centuries, traversing oceanic East and Southeast Asia, conflicts both within and between new nation-states resulted in a hardening of borders and a subsequent decreasing maritime mobility.¹⁰² As a result, settlements of boat peoples arose on beaches on Hong Kong Island as well as on islands around the Hong Kong region during the late 1940s and 1950s.¹⁰³ Hong Kong administrators described their initial settlements as ‘comic attempts at settlement on land’, noting that ‘a small number of families have dragged their old boats ashore and balanced them on stilts’. While these administrators may at first have found these structures of these settlements ‘comic’, the Acting Commissioner for Co-operative Development, H.W.J. Topley, saw a role of housing societies and the HKHA to help build land-based accommodation for these peoples. Writing that the Housing Society was considering ‘a scheme for fishermen’s four storey [*sic*] flats at \$30-50 a month’, in Shau Kei Wan, the Commissioner also suggested similar schemes could be taken up in Aberdeen and Ap Li Chau.¹⁰⁴

This consideration of using newly built government accommodation as a means to improve the livelihoods of boat dwellers mirrors discussions more generally about land-based ‘squatters’. In another echo of characterizing the accommodation of the land-based poor, the Director of the Marine describes the ‘insanitary condition’ of ‘houseboats’ as susceptible to the ‘dangers of fire’.¹⁰⁵ Though administrative authorities saw the onshore settlements of boat dwellers as problematic, Topley’s plans for \$30-50 per month rented flats demonstrated a lack of nuance in understanding boat peoples’ livelihoods; a census survey of boat peoples at Cheung Chau estimated that a quarter of families earned less than \$50 per month and that the average family income was \$71.26 per month.¹⁰⁶ While approximately half of the families of boat peoples at Cheung Chau were estimated to earn between \$50 and \$150 per month, the Housing Society’s suggestion of a monthly rent between \$30-50 doesn’t reflect an understanding of or address the

¹⁰² Sunil Amrith has discussed a similar hardening of borders around the Bay of Bengal in the post-war period, see Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, p. 212-50; Hiroaki Kani, *A General Survey of the Boat People of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Southeast Asia Studies Section, New Asia Research Institute, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1967).

¹⁰³ Some of the settlements mentioned in the HKPRO files include: Aberdeen and Shau Kei Wan on Hong Kong Island, Tai O on Lantau Island, Tap Mun on Grass Island, Ap Chau, Cheung Chau, Kat O on Crooked Island as well as Sha Tau Kok and Yuen Cheun Tsai in the New Territories; see HKPRO, HKRS945-1-4, J.C.C. Walden, ‘New Fisherman’s Settlements in the Taipo District’, #1(1), p. 1-2, 7 April 1959.

¹⁰⁴ HKPRO, HKRS945-1-4, H.W.J. Topley, ‘Fisherman’s Housing’, #4, p. 1-3, 25 August 1959.

¹⁰⁵ HKPRO, HKRS945-1-4, A.G. Parker, Director of Marine, ‘Fisherman’s Housing’, #5, 1 September 1959.

¹⁰⁶ HKPRO, HKRS945-1-4, W. Yeung, ‘Report on a Census of residents of illegal temporary structures on Cheung Chau’, #10, p. 1-4, 25 April 1959.

poorest segments of Cheung Chau's boat dwelling population.

These protean definitions of 'squatters' – between those living in makeshift huts in dense peri-urban settlements, those living on rooftops of more established buildings and those moving onshore from floating houseboats – had been a fixture of programmes building housing for the urban poor as part of pre-war 'improvement' schemes since the 1890s. While architectural historians have discussed the ways in which the emergence of 'tropical architecture' influenced and informed the architectural structure of these post-war housing schemes, the continuing poor understanding of urban poverty in port cities similarly set the stage for the ways in which problems of accommodating the urban poor could be conceived.¹⁰⁷ That Hong Kong's housing authorities were continuing to struggle with appropriate housing for these flexible categories of urban poverty speaks to the ways in which earlier circulations of urban 'improvement' knowledge prefigured and informed early post-war plans for 'development'.

Connecting administrative approaches to housing

So far, this section has followed the early redevelopment schemes of the housing societies under the HKHA as well as the ways in which pre-war circulations of thought and practice on urban 'improvement' continued to inform post-war approaches to accommodating the urban poor. This sub-section will follow the developments of HKHA in the late 1950s as well as the emergence of firmer and longer-lasting connections between the approaches of Hong Kong and Singapore in developing housing programmes for the urban poor. In particular, it will focus on the figure of J.M. Fraser as a means of exploring the kinds of connections between Hong Kong and Singapore's housing programmes throughout the first two decades of the post-war period.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, J.M. Fraser was an urban planner with the Singapore Improvement Trust who left the trust in July 1958 to work with the Hong Kong Housing Authority as its Chief Executive beginning in February 1959.¹⁰⁸ Though the first records of Fraser in Singapore appear in 1929, he was appointed that year to a SIT-related committee with purview over quarantine stations and municipal affairs, it appears that he had joined the SIT prior to his committee appointment.¹⁰⁹ Soh Wah Seng, a former employee of the trust, recalls in

¹⁰⁷ Home, *Of Planting and Planning*; Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*.

¹⁰⁸ Fraser retired from the SIT in July 1958, and began work for the HKHA in February 1959. For retirement see 'Big Task of Rehousing Singapore', *Straits Times*, p. 9, 4 July 1958; for his arrival in Hong Kong, see HKPRO, HKRS890-1-11, #1A, p. 1, 19 May 1959.

¹⁰⁹ NAS, SIT 521/29, HDB 1276, '(II) Appointment of Mr. Fraser, MIT on the Committee for Government Quarantine Station & Munip'.

oral histories that Fraser was the assistant to the first manager of the SIT, W.H. Collyer, who held the post from 1927-1930.¹¹⁰ Another former SIT employee, Chua Siak Phuang, recalls that Fraser arrived in Singapore in 1927 as an architect from London. Stating that he thought Fraser 'had never been to university', Chua recounted that Fraser had been raised by his grandmother in Aberdeen and had been active in the Boy's Brigade.¹¹¹ After applying for a medical leave in 1932, Fraser seems to have worked his way up through the ranks of the SIT.¹¹² Working primarily as an architect, Fraser was a Member of the Town Planning Institute (MTPI) and held a fellowship at the Royal Institute of British Architects (FRIBA).¹¹³ Upon the aforementioned questionable death of the Manager of the Trust, L. Langdon Williams, in 1941, Fraser rose to become the head of the SIT.¹¹⁴ Though Fraser held the position until his retirement from the trust in 1958, Soh recalled that Fraser had been sent to the Burma-Siam railway during the Second World War (Figure 12).¹¹⁵ Outside of his roles within the Trust, Fraser was active in Singapore's YMCA as recalled by a partner of a SIT employee in an oral interview and documented in pictures taken at a 1956 'farewell party' for Fraser hosted at the Singapore YMCA.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ NAS, OHI, Soh Wah Seng, Interviewer: Low Lay Leng/ Tan Beng Luan, 000311, Reel 12, 00:20:00-00:27:30; in a paper presented in 1960, Fraser says he worked in Singapore for '31 years', suggesting that he came to Singapore in 1927, see HKPRO, HKRS156-1-519, 'Planning and Housing in High Densities in Two Crowded Tropical Cities', J.M. Fraser, p. 2, 5 September 1960.

¹¹¹ NAS, OHI, Chua Siak Phuang, Interviewer: Samuel Sng, 002881, Reel 3, 00:00:00-00:09:00.

¹¹² NAS, HDB 1031, SIT 617/32, Mr J.M. Fraser (Medical Leave).

¹¹³ HKPRO, HKRS156-1-579, 'Planning and Housing at High Densities in Two Crowded Tropical Cities', J.M. Fraser'.

¹¹⁴ Fraser, 'Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1927-1947', p. 8.

¹¹⁵ NAS, OHI, Soh Wah Seng, Interviewer: Low Lay Leng/ Tan Beng Luan, 000311, Reel 56 0:17:30-00:29:00; the head of the SIT was changed from 'Manager' to 'Chairman' in 1956.

¹¹⁶ NAS, OHI, Thevathasan, Gnanasundram (Mrs), Interviewer: Pitt Kuan Wah, 000345; NAS, Photographs, PCD0066-064, 'Farewell Party for Mr J.M. Fraser of Singapore Improvement Trust at Y.M.C.A.', 13 June 1956; NAS, Photographs, PCD0066-063, 'Mr J.M. Fraser (left) of Singapore Improvement Trust being presented a memento during his farewell party at Y.M.C.A.', 13 June 1956.



Figure 12. A 1958 picture of J.M. Fraser. J.M Fraser (centre) with officials of the Singapore Improvement Trust after a certificate presentation. Picture was taken on 1 July 1958, the month of Fraser's retirement. The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

As examined in earlier sections of this chapter, Fraser's time as head of the SIT corresponded with a significant scaling up of the 'Trusts' activities in addition to a fundamental shift from an 'economic' model of financing towards a model of expansion utilizing government resources. That Fraser, who had spent a most of his career of growing and expanding the scope of the SIT, moved to Hong Kong at a time when the HKHA was scaling up its activities and increasingly utilizing government loans to fund an expansion of housing for the urban poor is more than coincidental. After all, Hong Kong's urban planners had been considering the SIT as

a model as early as 1946 and corresponding with and about Fraser by 1950.¹¹⁷ Fraser's move to Hong Kong can then be seen as further cementing the connections between approaches to housing the urban poor in Hong Kong and Singapore in the post-war period.

This synchronisation of approaches can be seen in some of the work Fraser contributed to the HKHA during his first two years as Chief Executive and Housing Commissioner in 1959-1960. Upon arriving in Hong Kong in February 1959, Fraser tried to familiarise himself with the city's housing situation and in May 1959 wrote a response to the 1956-1958 Final Report of the Special Committee on Housing. Emphasizing that there were 'certain basic principles and beliefs which I hold quite firm', Fraser explained these principles, writing 'every family should have its own dwelling (house or flat) where living and sleeping can be separated and the sexes over 10 segregated', and that 'anything less than [sic] the self-contained dwelling for each family should be regarded as a temporary expedient until something better is possible'. These complimentary points, about the spatial specifications of proper housing, reflect and acknowledge debates about Improvement Trust housing dating back to 1920s Bombay. While Governor Grantham seemed unaware of such debates in opening housing for the Economic Housing Society in 1955, Fraser's points indicate his willingness to apply knowledge and practices based off of earlier circulations and convergences of knowledge in Singapore to post-war Hong Kong. Further spelling out his principles, Fraser argued that the 'over concentration of population and business in the centre of the city will ultimately lead to uneconomic congestion and will cost more than gradual decentralization, which should be the aim', and again reflected the formalisation of the peri-urbanisation that had begun, particularly in Singapore, during the Second World War. Specifically pointing out that 'housing should as far as possible be carried out on an economic basis, but public housing for the lower income groups which comprise nearly 80% of Hong Kong's population will require considerable Government assistance', Fraser argued that Hong Kong should follow the approach taken under his own leadership of the SIT. Finally, Fraser outlined what he saw as favourable forms of 'assistance' and acceptable levels of rent to be paid as a percentage of incomes, 'government assistance should take the form of capital grants in cash or land and favourable interest rates. There should be no continuing or individual subsidy and tenants should pay the maximum rent they can afford viz. from 10% to 20% of family income'. In advocating for policies along the lines of post-war Singapore, Fraser demonstrated a

¹¹⁷ The 'Final Report of the Building Reconstruction Committee' in Hong Kong called for a re-examination of the Report of the Housing Commission, 1935. This report, written by W.H. Owen, in part suggested that 'the Hong Kong Government to go ahead with the institute of a new Authority on the lines of the Singapore Improvement Trust'. See NAUK, CO 129/5/6, p. 30, 9 April 1946; HKPRO, HKRS156-1-1768, James Greffets to Governor Sir Alexander Grantham, #6, 28 December 1950.

substantial connection between the future direction of Hong Kong's approach to housing the urban poor and Singapore's past and contemporaneous efforts.¹¹⁸

In addition to laying out principles along the lines of those that guided the SIT's work in Singapore, Fraser argued that 'good housing is a permanent asset to the Colony both socially and economically'. He supported that point by arguing, 'the only alternative is bad housing which is a liability socially and economically'. In identifying housing as an asset, Fraser reshaped pre-war debates about housing for the urban poor in Hong Kong by wedding it to long-term economic and social stability. The arguments Fraser advocated reflect a career spent developing urban 'improvement' and post-war 'development' schemes relating to housing in Singapore. With that experience, Fraser brought both a sense of historical knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of past approaches in Singapore, itself a reflection of earlier circulations of knowledge and practices from Bombay. In part reflecting that knowledge, Fraser pointed out that 'it is better to house some people satisfactorily than to provide poor housing for double the number. Permanent housing must stand the test of time'.¹¹⁹ Arguing that housing must be seen in the longer-term, Fraser's comments reflected debates in Singapore around the time of his departure. While Fraser undoubtedly had expanded the scale of the SIT's schemes during his tenure, particularly in the post-war period, the new People's Action Party government that came to power in May 1959 in Singapore argued that the pace of that expansion was too slow. Fraser's departure from Singapore in July 1958 roughly corresponded with the dissolution of the SIT and the foundation of the Housing Development Board (HDB) in January-February 1960; an organization expressly intended to build as many low-cost units as possible.¹²⁰ Suggesting that Hong Kong needed to build for the future and rethink housing as a long-term 'asset', Fraser's arguments reflect an application of his Singapore-based experiences and knowledge to his new role leading the HKHA.

Connecting urban environments and shared problems

While Fraser's experiences in Singapore were influencing and informing his actions in understanding and advising how to tackle Hong Kong's housing problems, Fraser himself increasingly saw the two situations as linked. Presenting a paper, 'Planning and Housing in High Densities in Two Crowded Tropical Cities', at a Town and Country Planning Summer School at St. Andrews in September 1960, Fraser drew a number of connections between his work in

¹¹⁸ HKPRO, HKRS890-1-11, #1A, p. 1-6, 19 May 1959.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ '2 new boards take over from the S.I.T.', *The Straits Times*, p. 7, 1 February 1960.

Hong Kong and Singapore. Framing his remarks in an almost Malthusian discourse, Fraser argued:

The population of the world is expanding at such a rate that it is estimated that in forty years it will have reached a total of between six and seven thousand million...the greatest problem will be that of housing the people in communities where their living conditions will measure up to the requirements of nuclear age and where the comforts and amenities made possible by modern science may be enjoyed by the people who help produce them.¹²¹

In setting up this economic problematic of how to house the world's billions, Fraser elucidated the stakes of failure 'in many cases, particularly in the more undeveloped regions of the world, people crowd into the cities in order to earn a living and survive...instead of finding the comfort and amenities for which they are searching, they are doomed for the rest of their lives to live in poverty and squalor'. Encouraging 'members of the school to compare these cities with the cities which they know', Fraser suggested that he saw these comparisons and connections as important in emerging global discourses on housing the urban poor. Concluding that the increasing density of both cities continued to surprise him, Fraser envisioned residential densities over 2,000 people per acre house and asked, if 'the Housing Authority in Hong Kong and Singapore are trying to provide now for thousands of families who are living in slums...how many other crowded cities in the tropics are also trying and what have they been able to do?'¹²²

While Fraser connected the problems of density and scale evolving in Hong Kong and Singapore to perhaps larger trends in urbanisation during his time in Hong Kong from 1958, Asian officials in cities like Rangoon had made connections between Asian urban environments earlier during the 1950s. Visiting Hong Kong in 1952, the Mayor of Rangoon and a few Burmese government officials viewed about a dozen sites relating to Hong Kong's public infrastructure over four days.¹²³ Expressing to K. M. A. Barnett, the Chairman of Hong Kong's Urban Council, that his chief interest lay 'in the problem of water supply, refuse removal and resettlement of squatters', the Mayor pointed out that these interests were 'problems of pressing importance of his own Municipality'.¹²⁴ Drawing a link between Hong Kong and Rangoon's challenges, the delegation toured public water works and hospitals, saw squatter settlements at Blue Pool and

¹²¹ HKPRO, HKRS156-1-519, 'Planning and Housing in High Densities in Two Crowded Tropical Cities', J.M. Fraser, p. 1, 5 September 1960.

¹²² HKPRO, HKRS156-1-519, 'Planning and Housing in High Densities in Two Crowded Tropical Cities', J.M. Fraser, p. 1-10, 5 September 1960.

¹²³ A calendar of the Mayor of Rangoon's visit can be found in HKPRO, HKRS41-1-7185, 1952-1956, 'Mayor of Rangoon and Party - Visit of', #3(2).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, #3.

resettlement areas at Ching Man as well as visited the Hong Kong Housing Society at Sheung Li Uk and land reclamation works in Happy Valley along Stubbs Road.¹²⁵ The Mayor's visit built upon a 1950-51 report analysing solutions to post-war Rangoon's housing problems by carefully examining the case of the Singapore.¹²⁶ The report's authors clearly drew conclusions from the Singaporean case, both including as an annex a 1920s report on the housing problem in Singapore and also converting the costs per head of constructing tenements in Singapore from Singaporean dollars to figures denominated in 1950s Burmese currency. Going on to argue that 'good housing is, however, a good investment, even though it may not give "economic returns"', the report cited that house rent in Singapore, regardless of wealth, did not usually exceed 15-20 per cent of income.¹²⁷ In utilising the cases of pre-war Singapore and post-war Hong Kong, Rangoon's efforts demonstrate a new post-imperial urbanism developing in East and Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s that was based on a set of shared problems of the urban environment and was contiguous with and built upon an India-centred imperial urbanism that had developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In drawing these connections between emerging Asian megacities and suggesting that other cities around the world could learn and benefit from their experiences, the Burmese case and Fraser's 1960 paper demonstrate an increasingly dense cluster of connections between housing, particularly of the urban poor, in Asian cities. While Fraser himself exemplifies the increasing frequency and depth of these administrative connections between the HKHA and the SIT, connections between the shared quotidian and lived realities of the urban poor emerged in parallel. So too did trends in urban politics. While Singapore's politics of urban discontent manifested itself in the election of the PAP in 1959, the discontent of Hong Kongers was expressed in the late 1960s in a series of left-leaning riots that shook the colonial government.

When contextualized in combination with the previous section of this chapter, it is clear that the frequency and density of connections between planners, planning and the poor in Hong Kong and Singapore had appreciable consequences for the kinds of approaches taken in developing housing for each city's inhabitants. While J.M. Fraser's role in creating a close connection between Hong Kong and Singapore around which issues relating to housing, poverty, 'improvement' and 'development' were shared, debated and adapted was personal, his story begins to scratch the surface of an emerging post-war environment in which connections

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, #3(2).

¹²⁶ NAM, 22, 11/8(5), 1950-51, p. 2-5, 'The Housing Problem in Rangoon (Memorandum by Dr H.M.J. Hart, Statistical Advisor to the Government of the Union of Burma, in collaboration with U Kyaw Sein, Acting Chairman, Rangoon Development Trust)'.
¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13-4.

between cities like Hong Kong and Singapore were increasingly exemplified by the quotidian livelihoods of their residents.

Configurations of Post-war Urban Connections

Building upon discussions of previous chapters, this final chapter has argued that while the post-Second World War patterns of the circulation of knowledge relating to development, housing, and urban poverty shifted significantly, the substance of those flows was linked inextricably to pre-war circulations of urban 'improvement' knowledge. These new patterns, in which Singapore became a nexus for the exchange of ideas and practices relating to the housing of the urban poor, suggest a complex series of overlapping relationships emerged relating to the exchange of municipal housing practices in the initial years after the conclusion of the war and throughout the 1950s. In some ways reflecting the hardening lines of the early Cold War in East and Southeast Asia, these patterns also reflect the ways in which ideas and experiences relating to urban poverty flowed along alternative pathways and played a role in shaping regional and post-imperial geo-political configurations.

Mindful of Frederick Cooper's criticisms of those uninterested 'in the limits of interconnection', this chapter has built upon the historiography of post-war Hong Kong and Singapore by stressing the importance of the initial years after the conflict.¹²⁸ While interconnections between Hong Kong, Singapore and other Asian municipalities in this 'critical phase' are both abundant and meaningful, they do not entirely preclude Smart's emphasis on the 'geopolitics of the early Cold War' as crucial to the longer-term development of Hong Kong's approach to public housing in the 1950s and 1960s.¹²⁹ Despite being focused on the interconnections of an urban environment related to poverty between both cities, this chapter has also explored some of the local and global circumstances outside of these connections that played an important role in shaping housing programmes in both Hong Kong and Singapore. In terms of local circumstances, the Shek Kip Mei in 1953 and Bukit Ho Swee Fires in 1963 played an important role in shaping the trajectories of housing programmes in both Hong Kong and Singapore as did a politics of urban discontent.¹³⁰ Globally, the Cold War played a role in shaping

¹²⁸ Cooper, 'What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For?'

¹²⁹ Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth*, p. 15; Louis, 'Hong Kong: The Critical Phase, 1945-1949'.

¹³⁰ Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth*; Loh, 'Kampong, Fire, Nation'; Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*; Clancey, 'Toward a Spatial History of Emergency'.

the paths through which this kind of urbanism relating to housing and poverty could be shared.¹³¹

Identifying the pathways through which knowledge about urban housing programmes was shared, this chapter has illustrated the importance of inter-Asian post-imperial connections. While the inter-Asian dimensions of these connections between government officials are clear and have been perhaps more cogently defined, this chapter has also demonstrated the connections between emerging patterns of urban life in post-war Asian cities.¹³² Not only did the urban poor confront together the crisis of post-war urban reality by living in similar peri-urban 'squatter' settlements and semi-permanent camps along the edge of the city in the mid-to-late 1940s, but urbanites also moved together into similar high-rise estates over the coming decades.

Decidedly not an examination of the commonwealth 'from the outside in', this chapter nonetheless reflects the renegotiated relationships between officials representing cities with a range of imperial relationships.¹³³ While Hong Kong remained a colony throughout this period, Singapore was well on its way towards autonomy and the long process of eventual independence in 1965. That officials in each city corresponded with their counterparts representing independent territories of the Commonwealth, in the case of Pakistan, independent territories that had decidedly left the Commonwealth, in the case of Burma, and territories on the road to independence in Kenya and Nigeria, suggests that renegotiated imperial connections remained pertinent. Given the complicated relationships between emerging nation-states and the British Empire, these connections suggest an emerging post-imperial urbanism in which municipal and planning authorities exchanged information along a series of circuits informed by a sense of a shared imperial past. In this way, this post-imperial urbanism related to poverty and housing was contiguous, but not continuous, to an imperial urbanism that preceded it. That the emergence of this post-imperial urbanism relating to poverty and housing overlapped with inter-Asian circulations of knowledge and the 'Afro-Asian Moment', points to the ways in which matters of urban governance flowed along pathways alternative to more didactic Cold War narratives.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Kwak, *A World of Homeowners*.

¹³² Amrith and Harper, *Sites of Asian Interaction*.

¹³³ Dubow, 'The Commonwealth and South Africa'.

¹³⁴ Su Lin Lewis, 'The Afro-Asian Moment', *Medium*, 3 March 2016, <https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/the-afro-asian-moment-11b29157ae0> (Accessed on 20 October 2017).

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored a story of urban development, particularly as it relates to housing and urban poverty, across Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Rangoon from the third plague pandemic through the 1950s. In addition to exploring the many links between the schemes of municipal officials, sanitary officers, and urban planners in each of these four port cities, this dissertation has also considered local responses to these plans and schemes as part of an emerging urbanism connecting these port cities across ‘imagined’ regional boundaries.¹ In doing so, this dissertation has revealed previously unseen connections across these built environments that constitute a new thread in an emerging pattern of connection between Asia’s port cities.

Much of the recent scholarship on South and Southeast Asia has challenged current geographical understandings of the region. Some recent examples of this include Amrith delineating the Bay of Bengal as its own region, van Schendel describing Zomia, and Saha questioning the applicability of area-studies labels to Burma’s history.² While this dissertation has not put forth its own distinct regional characterisation, it has added a new urban lens to these unconventional regional characterisations. And though historians like Lewis have already considered the urban dimensions of connections across Asia’s port cities, these studies have described connections related to migration and culture between these cities rather than connections between the built environments.³ This dissertation, while exploring an urbanism of protest and adaptation that emerged in these port cities in response to colonial plans and schemes to remake the city, also considers the more physical and infrastructural elements of urban connection between Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Rangoon. In contextualising the development of the built environment in each city, this dissertation is also a tangible and rooted examination of the colonial port city – a categorisation that is more often theoretical and historiographical than archival.⁴

¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

² Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*; van Schendel, 'Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance'; Saha, 'Is It India? Colonial Burma as a 'Problem' in South Asian History'.

³ Lewis, *Cities in Motion*; Lewis, 'Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl'; Lewis, 'Print and Colonial Port Cultures of the Indian Ocean Littoral'; Lewis, 'Asian Urbanites and Cosmopolitan Cultures.'

⁴ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, p. 1-27.

Rooted in interrelated local contexts, this dissertation is also a study in jumping scale in the practice of regional and global histories. While an older historiography on the evolution of colonial port cities tended to paint with brush strokes so broad that they subsumed local contexts to studies of urban imperialism, this dissertation has explored how local contexts broadly helped shape colonial plans and schemes.⁵ The importance of this emphasis on interrelated local contextualisation goes beyond an older historiography to a newer set of studies of global history. Though this dissertation does not make claims at being a global history, its emphasis on scaling urban histories upwards from the local context is relevant to the emerging field of global urban history and, more generally, to the practice of world history. In both comparing and connecting these interrelated local contexts, this dissertation's emphasis on a small set of interrelated case studies is itself a contribution to the historiography, beyond its interventions into a number of other historiographical discussions.

The interrelatedness of these cities is visible across all five chapters. In chapter one, disease – first the plague pandemic and then tuberculosis as well as ‘tropical’ diseases – sparked and continued to feed a growing movement of urban ‘improvement’ across Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore. And though Bombay adopted a more aggressive approach to ‘reordering the city along sanitary lines’ in creating a Trust in 1898, officials in Hong Kong and Singapore looked to Bombay as an example for conducting these urban reformations.⁶ While Hong Kong and Singapore did not at first create their own Trusts, officials in all three cities focused on housing – particularly for the urban poor – as a site of contagion. This focus on remaking houses engendered similar resistance from the residents of Bombay and Hong Kong, many of whom distrusted colonial interventions into domestic spaces. By comparing the responses to disease across all three cities, from the creation of camps to the focus on the housing of the urban poor, chapter one demonstrated the connections between the cities’ responses as well as examined the beginnings of an imperial urbanism across South and Southeast Asia resulting from contestations and adaptations of those colonial responses.

Chapter two examined the interrelated efforts of urban ‘improvement’ in Bombay, Rangoon, and Singapore with the creation and early works of the BIT, RDT, and SIT. While each Trust adapted ‘improvement’ to fit local circumstances, the organisational hierarchies and financial structures of the Trusts demonstrated the array of connections between them. And though each Trust conducted work according to local circumstance, the kinds of projects these Trusts

⁵ Home, *Of Planting and Planning*; Anthony D. King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power, and Environment* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1976).

⁶ Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*.

embarked on were remarkably similar – particularly street schemes to remake certain areas and the funding of these street and housing schemes through the laying out of new urban areas. Taken together, these projects illustrate not only the ways in which the built environment evolved along similar lines across these three cities, but also the extent to which Bombay served as a model and example for port cities across littoral Asia in the early twentieth century.

Continuing on from chapter two to show the ways an evolving Bombay model helped shape developments in the built environment of Rangoon and Singapore, chapter three explored the consequences of a second wave of ‘indirect attacks’ on urban slums. It considered the creation of the BDD in Bombay and the construction of large-scale housing estates along the urban edge in Singapore as well. And though chapter three showed that Rangoon did not build this kind of housing in the 1920s and 1930s, it did illustrate how influential Bombay’s example was – not only was such housing debated in Rangoon, but the use of the word *chawl*, a Marathi term from Bombay, in those discussions reflected a link to and knowledge of contemporaneous urban development in Bombay. But while Bombay’s example remained important to planners and urban officials across cities in South and Southeast Asia, the corruption associated with the housing projects of the BDD, exposed by the Harvey-Nariman case, also became a feature of the Bombay-centric imperial urbanism.

And though chapter four examined how and why Bombay became less important as an example for municipal officials in Hong Kong and Singapore, it also demonstrated some of the continuities between an evolving imperial urbanism – corruption being one of them. While the corruption allegations surrounding the death of the Manager of the SIT, Langdon Williams, on the eve of the Second World War were less detailed and sensational than the Harvey-Nariman case or the complaints about land speculation during the 1910s in Bombay, corruption embedded in such ‘improvement’ schemes remained a constant. Beyond exploring the continuities of an imperial urbanism, chapter four focused on the ways this urbanism was reconfigured across East, South and Southeast Asia during the late-colonial period and Second World War. While chapter four demonstrated that the late-colonial period was a period of burgeoning urban population across all three cities, the overproduction of housing in 1920s Bombay meant that the city’s experiences relating to urban poverty were increasingly less relevant to cities like Hong Kong and Singapore. Meanwhile, the growing spectre of the ‘squatter’ was having a more tangible impact on urban development in Malaya and Singapore, while refugee camps accommodating those fleeing the Sino-Japanese conflict were proliferating in Hong Kong. The Second World War, which wrought destruction and brought swift changes to the built environments of Hong Kong and Singapore, also disrupted long-standing patterns of

Asian contestation of colonial urban ‘improvement’. While chapters one, two, and three noted the ways Asian voices interpreted and contested such schemes, chapter four illustrated the prominence with which these voices now guided ‘improvement’ efforts in a wartime and early post-war context in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Exploring the interrelated post-war built environments of Hong Kong and Singapore, chapter five also examined the emergence of a post-imperial urbanism that was contiguous with a pre-war imperial urbanism concerned with the housing of the urban poor. Relating pre-war improvement schemes to post-war urban and economic development, chapter five also connected the creation of resettlement ‘camps’ in post-war Hong Kong back to the anti-plague camps in late nineteenth century Bombay. Beyond demonstrating the continuities relating to urban development and the built environments of Hong Kong and Singapore between the pre-war and the post-war period, chapter five also illustrated the centrality of Singapore in post-war circulations of urban development and planning across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean world. While chapters one, two, and three focused on the importance of a Bombay model of urban ‘improvement’ to Asian port cities, chapter five illustrated the extent to which Singapore became a new nexus for the circulation of urban planning knowledge, particularly in regards to the housing of the urban poor. And though previous histories of housing in Hong Kong and Singapore – as well as East and Southeast Asia more generally – have focused on the geo-politics of the Cold War as the framework through which exchanges regarding knowledge about housing and urban planning flowed, chapter five demonstrated that post-war circulations of knowledge about urban poverty, planning, and housing were structured by a broader set of shared urban concerns as well as some of the pathways along which imperial urbanism had flowed before the war.

Concluding with discussions of the pathways and patterns of the circulations of knowledge relating to urban planning and urban development, chapter five returns to where this dissertation began – in discussing the twenty-first-century flows of knowledge about urban planning, housing, and development from Singapore to India. While a Singapore model for housing, urban poverty, and economic development has certainly changed since 1960, the now clearer evolution of the Housing Development Board from the Trusts in Singapore and Bombay illustrates the irony of the article in *The Indian Express* when it described that urban planning concepts would be ‘imported’ from Singapore to Indian cities in the twenty-first century.⁷ Rather than flatten the

⁷ ‘Housing in Cities: Adapting the Singapore script for an India story’, *The Indian Express*, 14 November 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/business/business-others/housing-in-cities-adapting-the-singapore-script-for-an-india-story/> (Accessed 23 November 2017).

complex processes through which cities grow and change to a set of practices that can be packaged for import or export, this dissertation has demonstrated the complexity and scope of the circulations of knowledge about urban poverty, housing, and planning across Bombay, Hong Kong, Rangoon, and Singapore over the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Demonstrating how each city interpreted and adapted these circulating discourses and practices, this dissertation has also explored how the patterns of these trans-municipal connections have shifted and reoriented across littoral Asia. While the Second World War, the Cold War, and the post-war barriers erected by nascent nation-states across the region reoriented and disrupted the flow of people and ideas between these cities, it seems that a more connected twenty-first century may re-establish these urban links. And while the current direction of these flows seems to have changed, at least from the perspective of this dissertation, the circulations have not – perhaps providing a glimpse into an Asian urbanism of the twenty-first century.

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