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Fairview Park: Living the Dream in Hong Kong Suburbia

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PREFACE

Architect/developer Clifford Wong was smitten by North America suburbia. So he tried to recreate it here in Hong Kong

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Andrea Tam was six years old when her family began spending time in Fairview Park. On weekends, they would travel from their flat in Kowloon to a house near the **Mai Po marshland**, enjoying the fresh air and quietude while riding bikes down quiet streets. She built pillow forts with her cousins in the bedrooms upstairs. "It was like a holiday," she recalls. "It was so fun. I want to live there now."

Tam is now a project manager living in Canada, but if she went back to Fairview Park today, she would find a place that has remained much the same in a city that is now very different. When it was completed in the 1980s—around the time Tam first visited—Fairview Park was Hong Kong's first truly suburban housing estate, a sleepy, out-of-the-way place where everyone lived in single-family houses with a garden. Today, the estate's residents enjoy express bus service that reaches Central in about 30 minutes. The vast skyline of Shenzhen—the mainland Chinese city that was still a collection of farming and fishing villages when Fairview Park was built—looms on the horizon. Once in the middle of nowhere, Fairview Park is now in the middle of everything.



It's an estate that wouldn't stand out in many cities around the world. But in hyper-dense Hong Kong, where most people live in small high-rise flats, it's extraordinary. Not only for its scale—5,024 single-family houses with a population of around 15,000 people—but for its demographics. Unlike expat-oriented Discovery Bay or the luxurious estates on the south side of Hong Kong Island, Fairview Park was explicitly geared towards middle-class Hongkongers. It's the closest thing Hong Kong has to a **Levittown** or a **Milton Keynes**: the suburban dream brought to life.

And yet it's still an oddity in Hong Kong. Many people haven't even heard of it. "Most young families still prefer to live somewhere near the MTR, so Fairview Park attracts a more self-selecting subset of families," says Douglas Wu, executive director of Fairland Holdings, the company that manages the estate. "When people visit, their first reaction is, 'Wow. This isn't Hong Kong.' It's like they're transported to the US—the open space, the houses."

It was Wu's grandfather, an architect named Clifford Wong, who laid the groundwork for Fairview Park and a sister estate in Tai Po called Hong Lok Yuen. "Our family has always been low key, but I always knew we did something pretty amazing, pretty unique in Hong Kong," says Wu. "My grandfather really introduced a mode of living that people in Hong Kong hadn't really experienced before."

Wong was born in Hong Kong in 1933. He studied architecture at McGill University in Montreal, which is where he met his wife, Louisa. Together, they had five daughters—two while they were still students. "His nickname at McGill was 'the tourist' because he was absent from so many classes to help with the babies, and because he used a Pan Am travel bag to carry his books around," notes his third daughter, Frances, in a biography of her father.

Wong graduated in 1960 and returned home to work as an architect. These were Hong Kong's boom years, when **high-rises were mushrooming** around the city, including in many **public housing estates** dedicated to families that were living on rooftops and in the **shantytowns** that covered the hillsides of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Wong designed one of those estates, **Lai Tak Tsuen** in Tai Hang, which opened in 1975 and is known for its unusual cylindrical towers. "His purpose was to nurture a sense of community among neighbours – you meet a lot more people when you can pass by their homes from either direction," writes Frances.

He attempted to take things even further in Fairview Park. "I remember him and my mother on their hands and knees in our living room positioning model houses on a giant sitemap to make sure that the parks, recreational sites and shopping malls would bring families and neighbours together," recalls Frances.



His time in Canada had convinced him of the benefits of lower-density living, with houses that gave families a direct connection to the outdoors. That wasn't anything novel in itself; suburban development was already the norm in many countries by the time Wong started planning Fairview Park – just not Hong Kong. The benefits of such development were by no means obvious, but Wong was convinced of them. He was driven by passion more than any sort of calculated business strategy. "There is no evidence of there being any market research, just the conviction that at the right price, there would be a market for people to realise their own dream of living in a house with its own garden in a well-planned estate," writes Roger Nissim, a retired surveyor and former adjunct professor in the department of real estate and construction at the University of Hong Kong, in his book *The First Estates: The Story of Fairview Park and Hong Lok Yuen*.

Wong faced an uphill battle from the very beginning. He already owned the land, after buying it from a property company he had invested in after returning from Canada. But when he submitted his development application to the government in 1971, he was met with firm rejection. "The scheme is one of considerable magnitude and situated in a somewhat awkward location," wrote a civil servant in the New Territories Administration (NTA) in response to Wong. "Your application must be refused, since it is considered that a development such as this must be provided with proper services and this will not be feasible for a long time to come."

It was perhaps an understandable position, since at the time, the New Territories was almost entirely rural. The **Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR)** was still a single-track railway that took more than an hour to reach Tsim Sha Tsui from Fanling, and the only road access to the New Territories was on narrow routes that wound their way through the steep Kowloon hills. Fairview Park's proximity to the Mai Po marshes also sparked environmental concerns. When the Conservancy Association and Hong Kong Natural History Society got wind of Wong's proposal, they launched a campaign against it, penning newspaper editorials that suggested it would be a financial flop and a danger to migrating birds.



But Wong would not be deterred. After three years of fruitless back-and-forth with the New Territories bureaucracy, he scored himself a meeting with Hong Kong's then-governor, **Murray MacLehose**, whose stated ambition was to improve the average Hongkonger's quality of life. Unfurling maps and drawings in MacLehose's office at Government House, Wong made his case for the development. MacLehose was convinced. He had already started work on a plan to upgrade the KCR and create **new town developments** throughout the New Territories. Fairview Park seemed to dovetail nicely with that initiative – a private investment that would complement the public estates MacLehose wanted to build.

With MacLehose in his corner, Wong quickly won approvals from government officials, and work began on the first thousand houses at Fairview Park in 1975. It was the first development in Hong Kong to make use of prefabricated components, notably walls and roofs, which cut costs and sped up construction. Being on the vanguard has its price, though: Wong struggled to find manufacturers who could actually make the components, so in the end about 60 percent of the houses were prefabricated, with the rest built conventionally on site. Although prefab is more and more common today—Hong Kong's newest public housing estates are made from prefab components—the industry has been slow to adopt it.

There are two types of houses in the estate. Both are semi-detached duplexes with pitched roofs, but one has 1,050 square feet of living space with an additional 600 square feet of outdoor space in the front and back; the other measures 850 square feet, with 500 square feet outdoors. They are neatly arranged along roads that form concentric circles around an artificial lake in the heart of the estate, which is home to a dozen black and white swans. The lake is flanked by two parks, a country club, and an outdoor shopping centre that contains both a wet market and one of the earliest locations of grocery chain ParkShop.

As the first houses in Fairview Park were being built, Wong was already drawing up plans for a sister estate in Tai Po. He named it Hong Lok Yuen (hong1 lok6 jyun4 康樂園)—Healthy Happy Garden—and pitched it as a more upscale counterpart to Fairview Park. It offered three different types of semi-detached and detached houses ranging in size from 1,000 to 3,500 square feet, with 22 different designs, most of them inspired by the Spanish revival style that Wong grew fond of while visiting California.

Over the years, the estate's scenic topography and spacious homes have attracted a number of high-profile residents, including Cantopop legend Sam Hui, pop star Cecilia Cheung and irreverent actor Chapman To. It was also popular with expat Cathay Pacific pilots who appreciated the suburban atmosphere and easy access to Kai Tak Airport, as well as with entrepreneurs with factories in Shenzhen, which grew into China's economic engine in the 1980s and 90s.



Wong died unexpectedly in 1987 at the age of 53, but his family's company still manages Fairview Park. (Hong Lok Yuen was sold to mega-developer Sun Hung Kai in 1991, although Wong's family maintains a 10,000-square-foot mansion he built for them in the estate.) They recently revamped the estate's shopping centre, adding colourful murals and more greenery to its walkways, and reconfiguring some blocks of shops so they face the surrounding streets instead of an internal courtyard. The central plaza was reconfigured with more seating and a more open layout to accommodate festivals and other events.

Douglas Wu says the town centre has been especially lively during the pandemic as the estate's residents stay closer to home. If anything, the past two years have underlined the advantages of living in an area with more outdoor space than a typical Hong Kong neighbourhood. "You get to have your own little world," says Wu. "People have done an amazing job of growing great gardens – various fruits and vegetables, trees and other plants. Residents trade fruits and vegetables with each other all the time. That's quite a happy thing to see."

It brings to mind the resurgent appeal of suburbia in North America, the spiritual birthplace of Fairview Park, as the pandemic has normalised working from home and made some people nervous about crowded urban spaces. "More Americans want the suburban dream," noted [environmentalist news site Treehugger](#). ("Revenge of the suburbs" is how *The Atlantic* described it.) But Hong Kong's suburban dream is mitigated by its urban reality. As Roger Nissim notes in his book, current planning and environmental regulations would make it nearly impossible for something like Fairview Park to be built today.



Wu hopes a little bit of the estate's spirit can find its way into Hong Kong urban planning. "This scale is hard to replicate," he says. "Both the government and developers are really

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conscious of the limitation of land supply. But I really hope Fairview Park can serve as inspiration to rethink what can be done and what people may want. Does it always have to be 300 square feet super-dense apartments? Economic forces—not to mention the government's housing policies—say the answer is yes. But in Fairview Park, at least, the suburban dream lives on.

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