The 47-year-old block of flats stands on a hill in Queenstown, towering over a busy intersection, the neighbourhood school, and newer public housing projects a stone’s throw away. Residents who have lived in Block 81, Commonwealth Close long enough have witnessed from their doorstep the steady evolution of Singapore – from the building of MRT lines to the rise of the Central Business District, visible in the distance. Rising 16 stories, the block is an icon of the nation’s development. It belongs to a cluster of flats built in Singapore’s first new town, Queenstown, soon after the Housing and Development Board was established in 1960 to tackle a dire housing shortage.

The public housing system was some-what part of a grander scheme. Large tracts of land were compulsorily acquired from land owners to build flats that were sold at a subsidised price, amounting to a systematic redistribution of wealth. Through this, Mr Lee and the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) recast the housing subsidies. Singles, meanwhile, could buy only resale ones when they reached 35 years of age.

After independence in 1965, I was troubled by Singapore’s completely urban electorate. I had seen how votes in capital cities always tended to vote against the government of the day and was determined that our households should have a stake in the government, otherwise we would not have political stability. My other important motive was to give all parents whose sons had to do National Service a stake in Singapore their sons had to defend.

People who were not allowed to buy new HDB flats or get married later.

For a government ostensibly against ethnic integration, the HDB introduced quotas for different ethnic groups in 1989 to prevent enclaves from forming. Although it subsequently lowered the prices of flats owned by ethnic minorities, Mr Lee said in his memoir, “This is a small cost for achieving our larger objective of getting the races to intermingle.”

The public housing system was something that Mr Lee took a special interest in, and returned to over and over again during his time in government.

Mr Liu Thai Ker, the HDB’s chief executive officer from 1979 to 1989, remembers how Mr Lee would visit public estates with HDB staff three to four times a year. Mr Lee, said Mr Liu, was willing to pursue unpalatable decisions based on logic. “ ‘The style of Mr Lee and his Cabinet is clarity equals courage,’” he said.

In the 1970s, for example, high-rise public housing was written off by many governments as slums in the making. But the HDB decided to forge ahead with high-rise dwellings. Mr Liu said: “If we could not go for that kind of density, we could not deliver on home-ownership. We would have run

handsomely, housing formed a key plank in our social welfare programme. With a large chunk of retirement savings used up for housing, the flat quickly became a hedge against inflation and a store of retirement income.

Starting about 20 years ago, at the suggestion of Mr Lee, the Government shored up the value of ageing flats by upgrading them. Given its extensive reach, public housing also became a means of social engineering. The Government encouraged family formation by giving citizens who were married, or who chose to live near or with their parents, for example, more in housing subsidies. Singles, meanwhile, were not allowed to buy new HDB flats and could buy only resale ones when they reached 35 years of age.

It gave rise to a uniquely Singapore phenomenon of men proposing marriage to their housemates by asking them if they wanted to buy a flat.

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Quality, affordable housing

out of land a long time ago."

Today, quality, affordable housing continues to form a key part of the PAP Government's promise to successive generations of Singaporeans.

While widely admired around the world, Singapore's housing policy has its detractors. Academics have warned that the system encourages overspending on housing as well as an overdependence on it to provide for retirement needs. In an interview last year, housing economist Joseph Ouyouni from the University of Pennsylvania argued that the extensive use of CPF fund for housing was akin to betting one's retirement savings on the steadiness of housing markets. He told The Straits Times: "It's the current low interest rate of 2.5 per cent for the ordinary CPF account a factor that creates disincentives for households to keep the money in their accounts instead of using the CPF savings to finance a bigger house?"

That said, most would agree that Singapore's housing policy has done immensely more good than harm, according not just shelter but also a bulwark against social division and political upheaval.

In the HDB's 50th anniversary book Our Homes, released last year, Mr Lee was quoted as saying: "Without 'this scheme, Singapore could not have been so politically stable as it has been.'"