

The future of Singapore's public housing lies in supertall megablocks



Developments such as (from left) Pinnacle@Duxton, SkyVill@Dawson and the planned Pearl's Hill project represent Singapore's experiment with supertall public housing. Placing public housing in locations where private housing has become unaffordable is a deliberate policy choice. It helps maintain social diversity in the city centre, ensuring that ordinary Singaporeans continue to live close to jobs, transport nodes and urban amenities. PHOTOS: MARK CHEONG, DESMOND FOO, HDB

Pearl's Hill is a use case for how a land-scarce city can create affordable downtown public housing and catalyse new forms of urban living.

Sing Tien Foo

When the Government revealed that it was exploring building a 60-storey public housing development at Pearl's Hill, most of the initial attention fell on the aesthetics: the cascading water features, rooftop gardens, and a silhouette designed to evoke the classical Chinese landscape painting tradition of *shan shui hua* (山水畫).

The project is certainly striking. Connected to Outram MRT station, set against the greenery of Pearl's Hill City Park and projected to yield about 1,700 Build-To-Order (BTO) flats, the development will become the tallest residential structure in the

Outram-Chinatown area, surpassing the nearby private condominium One Pearl Bank's twin 39-storey towers.

But the real significance of Pearl's Hill lies beneath the skyline. The project represents Singapore's continuing experiment with supertall public housing – and if it succeeds, it could reshape how planners think about land, density and affordability for decades to come.

With the Central Business District just minutes away and a major MRT interchange at its doorstep, the Pearl's Hill project will almost certainly fall under the Prime housing category, attracting greater subsidies but also stricter resale conditions. In other words, the Government is signalling that prime city-centre

living should not be the exclusive preserve of private property buyers.

MEETING STRONG DEMAND FOR DOWNTOWN LIVING

Pearl's Hill makes the case for such public housing almost self-evidently. One Pearl Bank, a private condominium on an adjacent site, recorded resale transactions in January 2026 at an average of \$2,550 per sq ft – or roughly \$2.26 million per unit.

The demand, however, is clearly there. Placing public housing in precisely the locations where private housing has become unaffordable is a deliberate policy choice. It helps maintain social diversity in the city centre, ensuring that ordinary

Singaporeans continue to live close to jobs, transport nodes and urban amenities.

Pearl's Hill also fits into a longer tradition of public housing experiments in centrally located or highly desirable areas.

Earlier projects such as Pinnacle@Duxton, Dawson and Ghim Moh Valley similarly injected new high-rise public housing and a population of young families into mature, valuable neighbourhoods, demonstrating that land intensification and estate renewal can go hand-in-hand.

Lessons in tempering the lottery effect through stricter controls such as a longer minimum occupancy ratio and subsidy recoveries have also been implemented since.

THE FINANCIAL LOGIC

Pearl's Hill builds on this legacy but takes it a step further by pushing public housing into the supertall category.

The most counter-intuitive argument for supertall public housing is economic. Building higher is undeniably more expensive. A 60-storey structure requires deeper foundations, stronger structural systems, faster lifts and more complex mechanical infrastructure. These additions significantly increase construction costs compared with conventional 30- to 40-storey housing blocks.

Yet construction costs are only one side of the equation. In

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Creating vibrant communities in the heart of the city

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central locations such as Pearl's Hill, land is often the single largest cost component, often exceeding the cost of construction itself.

Consider a hypothetical example: if a prime site costs \$400 million and construction costs \$320 million to build 1,000 flats, each flat unit effectively carries \$720,000 in total development cost.

Now suppose going taller increases the unit count by 50 per cent to 1,500 flats, and overall costs rise by 30 per cent. Total development cost climbs to \$936 million – but spread across 1,500 units, the per-unit burden falls to \$624,000, a reduction of around 13 per cent. The marginal cost of building more floors and more homes decreases as overall costs increase more slowly with increasing density.

Intensification pays off most sharply in areas with the highest land prices, like Pearl's Hill. Somewhat paradoxically, supertall public housing in prime locations can be more financially viable per unit than conventional blocks because the high land price is spread across more homes. The higher the land value, the stronger the case for going taller.

That financial approach enables housing in downtown Singapore to remain affordable to the broad middle of Singapore households. Lower gross development costs, in principle, translate into lower

prices for BTO buyers and reduced subsidy expenditure for the Government. It also means the clawback provisions under the Prime framework need not be as punishing as critics fear, if the underlying economics of the development are themselves more efficient.

That does not mean the gains are unlimited. Taller structures require larger structural cores, additional lift shafts and thicker service systems, all of which reduce usable floor space.

Estimates that a jump from 40 to 60 storeys automatically increases housing supply by 50 per cent should therefore be treated as an upper bound rather than a guarantee.

Gains in liveability and quality of life in these projects depend vitally on creative design and engineering ingenuity coming together. Past projects such as Pinnacle@Duxton also demonstrate that sky bridges, shared gardens and varied building forms can break down the scale of very tall structures and create vibrant communal spaces.

INTENSIFYING LAND USE

Singapore's interest in supertall public housing comes at a critical moment in its long-term land planning. Singapore's long-term land constraint is not a new observation, but it is sharpening. The Ministry of National Development projected in 2013

that 17 per cent of land would be allocated to housing by 2030. With a fixed landmass, expanding housing supply without squeezing green reserves, military land or industrial capacity is a genuine challenge.

Vertical intensification is one of the few levers available. The Pearl's Hill experiment has direct implications for two significant land-use decisions ahead.

The first is Paya Lebar Air Base, which will be vacated in the 2030s. Once flight-path restrictions are lifted, large tracts of surrounding land can accommodate taller buildings.

The second is the Voluntary Early Redevelopment Scheme (VERS), under which ageing HDB blocks returned to the Government after 2030 may be redeveloped. Many older estates sit on brownfield sites near MRT stations and town centres – exactly where supertall redevelopment would be most justified. If HDB can rebuild returning blocks at double the original density, VERS will become not just a renewal mechanism but a meaningful source of new housing capacity, without requiring additional land.

COMPACT TOWNS AND THE '15-MINUTE NEIGHBOURHOOD'

Supertall developments also open the door to a different way of organising urban life. When thousands of residents are concentrated within a small

footprint, it becomes viable to integrate amenities directly into a building. Lower levels can accommodate shops, clinics, childcare centres and food outlets along with a gym or a library; upper levels house residents, while shared sky gardens and bridges create communal spaces.

The building becomes its own small town. Such designs can help support the idea of "15-minute neighbourhoods", where residents can meet most of their daily needs within a short walk or cycle. A network of such compact precincts across Singapore could promote diversity, localism and sustainability while reducing car dependence.

A denser resident base, concentrated in such structures, generates commercial demand that makes neighbourhood retail viable. Shops and services that might struggle in a conventional, thinly spread housing estate can sustain themselves when a few supertall blocks bring thousands of residents to a single precinct. This, in turn, creates employment close to where people live, reducing the commuting burden.

The vision of a "15-minute town", where residents can meet most of their daily needs within a short walk or cycle, becomes far more achievable when density is concentrated vertically rather than sprawled horizontally.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS

Yet the idea of extremely tall

residential developments inevitably raises concerns. International examples have shown the risks of poorly designed megablocks – from fire safety tragedies to the deterioration of high-density buildings into poorly maintained enclaves.

Fire safety is the most serious of these concerns. The lessons of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London and the 2025 Wang Fuk Court fire in Hong Kong are instructive. Supertall structures demand fire-resistant external cladding, robust structural systems capable of withstanding sustained high temperatures, and the elimination of combustible scaffolding materials. More stringent building codes and design guidelines will be essential.

Density at this scale also risks creating the overcrowded, underserved atmosphere of Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions or the ageing "Monster Building" in Quarry Bay. An increase in the number of flats should not be made at the expense of smaller internal space, which should be safeguarded for liveability. Multi-tiered sky gardens, sky terraces and generous shared space can counteract that feeling – but only if they are built in from the start, not retrofitted as afterthoughts.

Communal spaces that bring families together can ease the frictions of dense living. Mixing a small proportion of rental flats

among owner-occupied units would further diversify the social profile of the building.

THE REAL TEST

Singapore has built iconic public housing before. Pinnacle@Duxton, with its seven 50-storey towers linked by sky bridges, showed that public housing could be architecturally distinctive while remaining widely accessible.

Pearl's Hill is a more ambitious proposition – not just as an architectural statement, but a proof of concept for a broader urban strategy. If it demonstrates that supertall public housing in prime locations can be financially efficient, physically liveable and socially accepted, it could set the tone for how Singapore approaches public housing and urban planning in the decades ahead.

In a land-scarce city, the challenge is not simply building higher. It is ensuring that height serves a larger purpose: preserving land, sustaining affordability and creating vibrant communities in the heart of the city. Pearl's Hill may well show how that future could look.

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