

A paper I wrote some years ago, partly published in Chinese:

Article “我改造了‘中国特色’的厨房” (I renewed a kitchen with ‘Chinese characteristics’) in 中国建设报 o 房地产周刊 (China Construction News – Real Estate Weekly), Dec 27 1999. As a part in a series “住在中国” (Living in China) coordinated and published by China Construction News – Real Estate Weekly and Economic Daily – Life Weekly, it was chosen as one of the ten best on February 16, 2000.

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From Concrete Chic to IKEA Komplet

– A comparison between China and Sweden of tenants' rights and initiatives

My kitchen in an international perspective

Imagine your kitchen having all natural materials, pure and solid. Tactile surfaces that ages naturally with matching colours. All sturdy enough to withstand the wear and tear of everyday use. A kitchen accentuated with details of utmost simplicity and reflection of basic function. The bathroom is a showcase how happy craftsmen have been at work. Well, that is what you can get living in an average Beijing apartment.

Isn't that lovely, you might say, having your own cosy home in a strange environment. True, but not the whole truth. Having lived in Beijing for the past three and a half years one can make a few observations. The "matching colours" are of course light grey, grey, and dark grey; the "natural materials" bare concrete and cast iron; and the "happy craftsman" – the gas and water pipes *do* create interesting patterns criss-crossing most walls.

The apartment mentioned above is not invented, I am living there. My wife and I could borrow an apartment while finishing my studies here. We as so many others – foreigners and Chinese alike – had to find a temporary place to stay when you have no work unit to allot an apartment or a salary high enough to buy or rent commercial housing. You have to be happy with what you get.

But why does a ten year old building look like that? It seems neither the construction workers nor the tenant really finished anything, as if it is all temporary. And maybe that is just so. For fifty years most urban residents have got used to living in "a temporary solution". Then it does not matter that nothing changes for decades. And if a new housing opportunity opens, it is seldom because of one's own efforts but to a complicated and perhaps sometimes seemingly arbitrary allotment system.

When private ownership of urban housing drastically declined after 1949, the view upon a dwelling was changed into something that should be provided by the state. Housing should be provided according to needs, and to some extent, as a reward to employees. In reality, obtaining housing, and then to upgrade to a better dwelling was, and in many cases still is, a queuing process.

The feeling of always living in something temporary, always waiting for something better, and not knowing or being able to influence when or if changes will take place, are perhaps the most important issues for explaining why so many accept and do not seem to be bothered with crude interior finishings. Not so much the common "Chinese cooking is so greasy that it is no use to make a kitchen tidy", lack of money or actually having to move now and then. Americans who whole-heartedly embrace the concept of "home sweet home" actually moves every five years in average.

But there are indeed changes now happening in China. The commercialisation of Chinese urban housing has created better living conditions for many residents. It was also necessary to reform the old government subsidised allocation system which proved to never catch up with demand, neither being able to maintain what was already built. Now new home owners are embracing the feeling of having a home of their own. In an effort to catch up with what was never given any consideration in previous decades, huge sums are spent on interior decoration, new furniture and kitchen equipment.

Now to one of my points – you do not need to buy an apartment to create a decent living for yourself. It is fine in a rented as well. But now the goal in China is that *all* housing should be bought by the residents and become private in the near future. Not even "anti-public" prime minister Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain managed with that in spite of hard efforts. And it is not necessary. Countries like the Scandinavian have in average 40-45% of the dwellings in the rental sector. Half of them are owned by non-profit public housing corporations.

Public housing in Scandinavia is not only for the poorest like what has happened in the US or Britain, Instead private and public tenure, cooperative housing or private ownership is a free choice for most people. If you want to rent and enjoy a life without bank loans and worries about interest rates, that is fine. It is also okay if you feel that owning one's own house is the most attractive form of housing. Or the in-between, own a share in a housing cooperative and have a vote in the management of the property. All have their advantages and drawbacks but there is no reason to frown upon one of them and favour others.

Then what if having a "concrete kitchen" in a rented apartment – can you do something about it? When you rent an apartment, and have regulations that assures a comfortable feeling of continuity, you can and most likely want to make improvements yourself. Most people in Scandinavia willingly and at their own expense put up new wallpaper, paints and in other ways decorates their home. Technically or functionally you do not really need to, the standard is high enough anyway and the landlord will do repairs at regular intervals. Most people still want to have a home reflecting their own character.

Beijingers want that too for sure, just look at the tremendous amount of money and time put into decorating newly *purchased* homes mentioned above. Abroad when looking at China, quite a few think the Chinese are always throwing themselves between the extremes. One year burning the American flag to protest "imperialism", the next flocking there to study economics; one year all citizens are wearing the same blue jacket, the next dressing up in the most outrageously colourful outfit without anybody lifting an eyebrow. In housing it is the same! From utterly spartan to thoroughly designed.

Sometimes these extremes can exist at the same time, which perhaps is one of the remaining "mysteries of the Orient". Let say you are passing by two ordinary apartment buildings in Beijing or any other Chinese city. One is all occupied with people renting for 50 yuan a month, the other is full of families who just bought their house from their work unit and spent an average of 50.000 yuan just on interior decoration. But you just cannot see from the outside who lives where! Both buildings probably have equally dark and dusty staircases, boxes piled on the landings and an outdoor environment that cannot be characterised as clean or welcoming. Excuse me, but more than one visitor to the capital has asked me "don't people like to have it *nice* around them?" What shall I reply? I don't think anybody will say "no, I don't like it nice". On the other hand, why do not anybody do anything if the answer is "yes"?

In a Chinese apartment, is the choice really between to do nothing or to everything? Is there something in between? Especially for us (Chinese and foreigners alike) who are not sure for how long we will live here, and renting or borrowing is the only alternative. When living in a new country, adapting to local culture and customs are not only necessary, it is also interesting and gives many experiences in return. To eat and cook Chinese food together with my wife is especially enjoyable. But some aspects are harder to accept. One is the "*cou he*-ness" or "let go" attitude to the lack of convenience in a Chinese kitchen and bathroom mentioned above! And I have neither the time or money to invest in the luxury alternative, investing the equivalent to many years salary. The task was to do as much as possible for just a little money and time.

Now the fun part started. To decide what should be thrown out was not difficult. The first to go were the trough more suitable for cows drinking water than a practical asset in a kitchen. The same for the clumsy concrete bench with its ten centimeter gap between the wall and working surface. Many a carrot and cucumber slice has rolled into that abyss, unreachable to all except the occasional spider.. The bench was so heavy that I assume it was lifted into the house using a crane. The worker at the company we hired for a couple of days had to get loose on the poor piece of furniture with a sledgehammer to be able to move it. For a while our home was transformed into something that sounded and looked like a quarry.

When the demolition part of the work was finished, walls and bathroom floor tiled, we painted the walls, ceiling, windows and so on ourselves. By painting a wall, the bathroom ceiling and windows in contrasting colours, we could use the cheapest white tiles and still get an interesting colour scheme. By frequenting such different establishment as IKEA and Qinghe Old Furniture Market (*jiuhuo shichang*) we got the right kitchen furniture. The old style wooden cabinets we bought are thrown out by the numbers by many citizens when they move these days. But the quality of the wood is good and with some paint they look as new. At IKEA it is easy to find new and high standard products for the parts of your home that requires it – a laminated and easy to clean board for instance. All in all we did not have to pay more than a thousand yuan, including a 1.1 meter long stainless steel sink.

Using this as an example, I am encouraging everybody hesitating to do something themselves because "it is not mine" or "we might move soon" too. Not only can it be done at a low cost, it is also fun and even relaxing!

This may be start for a wider concern for the urban living environment. When comparing China and a situation closer to the author's experiences, we can take Sweden as an example for how tenants are trying to influence decision-making, physical environment and amenities. In Sweden there are a long tradition of popular movements to organise different interest groups and achieve goals that can only be reached by making a joint effort. Mass organisations such as unions and workers' movements in both our countries have done a lot to improve equality and raise standards of living.

But for tenants, China has no organisation listening to those at grass-root level getting caught in between pursuits of local government and developers in the current drive to modernise Chinese cities in general and Beijing in particular. In the case of conflict, residents in some aspects have strong support from laws and regulations. But who can talk for you? Now the practice seems to be that individuals or small groups of dissatisfied residents go to court or otherwise try to change decisions taken over their head. It is not easy to be heard when the opponent is a large developing agency or government bureau with plenty of resources. Both sides may have their points, but now only one side is listened to.

An organised tenants' movement should not be seen as a threat but as an asset in planning and policy making. Many mistakes and misunderstandings can be avoided and mutual benefits achieved.

Swedish Tenants' Movement

The Swedish Tenants' Movement works for good housing and good living conditions. It combines two different roles, those of the popular movement and

of the pressure group. With its over 600,000 members the Tenants' Movement is one of the largest non governmental organisations in Sweden and a powerful consumer organisation that contributes to developments on a local community level. Virtually all Swedish tenants are members of the movement.

Through its pro-active work to improve housing areas, the organisation is helping to develop sound environments for people to live and work in. The movement has 20 independent regional associations that together cover the whole of Sweden.

Community development and education

The Swedish Tenants' Movement has been working with local community projects in Sweden for 75 years. The projects have focused on making the most of people's potential, for example by developing service functions and consumer interests as well as developing democratic forms for people to influence their housing areas.

In recent decades, important fields of interest are housing policy, environment, health and safety in housing, services to tenants and new technologies for ecologically sustainable housing. One example is to initiate collaboration between neighbourhood police officers, housing companies and unemployed youth to help prevent vandalism and the threat of violence on housing estates.

Every year the Tenants' Movement holds courses for approx. 10,000 members on the local level in different subjects such as economics, legal matters and tenants' rights, environment issues, consumer issues, etc. There is also a special training programme for younger members. Courses for unemployed members have been run in many housing areas to find innovative paths along which they can find new working roles, for example in environmental work or in service functions. There is always an emphasis on men and women being able to take part in the work of the organisation on equal terms.

The guiding principle behind the way the Tenants' Movement looks at education issues is the importance of supplying people with the tools and working methods that make it possible to make visible and to activate the competence available both in the individual and within the group.

Learning means a lot more than just "doing a course". The Tenants' Movement, like other non-governmental learning organisations, education have to stimulate curiosity, innovative thinking and development. Seen in a

holistic perspective, individual development schedules should contain a number of different types of development activities in order to enhance expertise both in traditional and in new areas of competence. People should be given the opportunity to develop both as members, as elected representatives and as employees of the organisation.

Historic background

Like most other mass movements, the Tenants' Movement has its roots in the late 19th century. Wages in the agricultural sector were seriously cut which led to a migration from the countryside. Some left to find a new future in America, others went to the cities. The urban population mushroomed and Sweden had a significant housing shortage and among the worst urban housing conditions in Europe. At the turn of the century, one of every four workers in Stockholm had no dwelling of his or her own but were inmates, renting either a room or just a bed.

In other words, there were many reasons for the tenants to organise themselves. The first tenant's association was formed in Stockholm 1907. Recent skyrocketing rents lay behind the demand for an organisation, as well as the frequent speculative buying and selling of tenements (the owners changed but not the dwelling, which fell more and more into disrepair).

Even if Sweden never was participated into the First World War, the 1910's was a decade of crisis and social unrest. The housing situation was characterised by overcrowding and emergency housing had to be built in the large cities. Unfinished constructions waiting to dry out was rented out to desperate homeless in spite of being unhealthy, thus giving more profits to the landlord. As a response, several tenants' associations were formed in the latter part of the 1910's. The first task undertaken by the Stockholm association was to arrange a lottery in 1917 with apartments and furniture as prizes. The lottery was a great success and two years later 51 apartments in a new garden suburb were finished, using the profits from the lottery.

When the Rent Control Act of 1917 was abolished in 1923 and rents skyrocketed, a reaction came immediately in the formation of the first national cooperative housing organisation (Tenant's Savings and Building Association) with the objective to build good housing the members themselves were financing, owning, maintaining and deciding over. Eight tenants' associations merged to become stronger and formed the National Tenants' Movement. From now on the tenants' and cooperative movements were closely knit together with common goals but different practical tasks. The

former to take the supportive and advisory function, the other to implicate in built form.

This popular movement was not so closely related to established society as in Norway and Denmark where the government and philanthropical societies had initiated housing improvements. Instead many founders had their background in labour unions, earlier tenants' pressure groups etc. They could not rely on municipal funding so instead they promoted savings in order to make it easier to secure the sum needed by the members for a new house. The first period was also characterised by the formation of democratic working methods and organisation, and high goals of housing standards for its time. The tenants' movement therefore became a pioneer for social housing policies.

While the Tenant's Savings and Building Association continued as a more independent cooperative movement aiming at building and promoting good housing, the Tenants' Movement focused more and more on policy making, legal advice and rent negotiations. In 1936 the first law office specialising on rent issues for its members was opened.

In the 1930's socialist ideas became dominant in Scandinavian politics and the half century long construction of the "Welfare State" started. The cooperation government – labour unions – employer's associations went on smoothly. The popular movements could make their voice heard and were also listened to. The new rent control act of 1941 had been demanded by the Tenants' Movement for several years. Now rents could not be raised without permission from the new central government Rent Advisory Board or Rent Committee set up in every municipality. Landlords were now increasingly restricted in their right to increase rents or carry out evictions.

After World War II, Sweden again faced a mass migration to the cities and housing shortage once again emerged. Tenement owners saw no reasons to improve or modernise their dwellings when the demand for housing always surpassed the supply. The Rent Advisory Board was gradually weakened and in 1955 rents could be raised 7-20% without demands on improvements or repairs from the landlord's side. The escalating conflict between tenants and landlords more and more included poor maintenance and increasing dilapidation. Finally the situation became so serious that a number of "forced repairs" had to be carried out. The Tenants' Movement put aside money in a special fund which could be used for emergency repairs. Later the bill was sent to the property owner. In 1957 an agreement between the National Tenants' Movement and the Propertyowners Association was signed. From now on

necessary repairs had to be carried out and rents could not be raised without compensation in the shape of improved standard.

The principle of "Utility Value" is now more or less into effect and will be refined during the coming decades. Rents for apartments of similar size, standard and equipment shall be the same. Aspects of location play only a minor role. In this way there is a redistribution of rent income between property age groups. In practice it is the public non-profit housing corporations who set the appropriate rent level, and which the private companies and individual landlords have to follow. The Tenants' Movement was and is closely monitoring and participating in the negotiation process.

Even if housing conditions gradually improved, the housing shortage was still at an alarming level in the late 1950's. Most people in the cities lived in buildings from the last century, many times without central heating or private toilet. An enormous programme was launched: to build one million apartments in ten years, 1965-1974. The goal was to build good housing for all: good environment close to nature, high standard of facilities and apartment layout, comprehensive social and commercial services and near places of work and culture.

The sixties can perhaps be characterised by growth and consumerism and the projects undertaken were sometimes very large. Maybe too large when looking back . It was also a time for awakening. Pollution, historical preservation and other environmental aspects began to be widely discussed. For developing countries like China, there are a lot to be learnt from this period. Not to repeat these mistakes will give a tremendous advantage for the 21st century.

For the Tenants' Movement, the 1960's also became a decade of interest in social issues and democracy development. So called Contact Committees were formed in the housing areas. Decision-making should be spread to lower levels of the hierarchy and tenants' should have a right to influence their own living environment. Issues such as good and safe playgrounds for children, leisure time activities for youth and environment upgrading were widely discussed and pushed forward. These Contact Committees are still in place in every housing area but their interest has followed the times. In the 1990's the focus is on ecology and community development.

The new economic conditions of the 1970's called less for extensive spending on recreational activities but the more to control real estate speculation and con men among the landlords. The Tenants' Movement participated in drawing the outline for a new law, controlling the property trade and who could buy a

tenement. In 1978 the new Rent Negotiation Act regulated that the tenants' and property owners' associations should centrally negotiate and reach a common agreement on the rent level for the common year. All public housing corporations and almost all private owners signed the agreement, thus firmly positioning the tenant (represented by the tenants' organisation) at a strong position at the negotiating table.

The fight is not over

At present, there is still a lot of work for the Tenants' Movement. The interest of tenants must be continuously guarded against unfair treatment and decisions. The tools to be used are signed name-lists, demonstrations, lobbying and public debates. In 1999 they managed to stop a proposal to introduce market rents in Stockholm. What everybody feared was an uncontrolled rent-increase which would lead to only the very wealthy could live in an attractive area. Now the Utility Value Principle is still in place to fight against segregation and the right for good housing to all.

Another issue which still has not been solved is how to reduce the proportion of wages going to the rent. Today about one third of an average salary after taxes are used for paying rent. Many even pays more than half. The goal for the Tenants' Movement is to reduce that proportion to at most 25%. Trying to keep rent levels as low as possible through central negotiations is one way. In a smaller scale they can help members to inspect their apartment to check that the living area, standard and rent are matching. If there is a conflict, legal help can be provided.

Conclusion

The main goal for the Tenants Movement in Sweden is that all have right to a good dwelling to a reasonable price. Additionally they demand that all tenants should be guaranteed safety, participation and community. Goals that must be easy to agree with both in Sweden and in China. It will be interesting to study the development here in the future.

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December 1999