

301.54 Housing: A resume of U.S.
M993 Technical Assistance to Housin
in Free China, 1954

PN-ABL-793

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H O U S I N G

(A Resume of U. S. Technical Assistance to Housing in Free China, 1954)

"Self-help" low-cost housing program proving helpful in relieving the critical housing conditions of the island's urban worker and refugee population. (Pilot project at Keelung, implemented technically and financially by FOA in cooperation with the Dockworkers' Union and the Keelung Harbor Bureau). Workers' initiative and contribution of their own labor, plus use of inexpensive building materials and a simple but revolutionary blockmaking machine, can relieve the housing problem on Taiwan, provide a model for low-cost housing for other overcrowded underdeveloped areas.

Prepared by

Office of Assistant Director for Operations
and Information Office
Foreign Operations Administration
MUTUAL SECURITY MISSION TO CHINA

Taipei, Taiwan
November 1954

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H O U S I N G

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The visitor to Taiwan is likely to be overwhelmed by the great number of people to be seen cycling or moving on foot through every boulevard and street, or clustered in the smallest alleyway. This local population pressure, heightened by the influx of two million civilian and military evacuees from the Mainland, is increased daily by one of the world's highest birth rates. Combined with the ravages of World War II and land shortage, it has produced some of Asia's most critical housing conditions.

Squatters' shacks have cancelled out streets and parking space in many of the island's cities. Through recent years, the situation has grown steadily worse as additional thousands leave the countryside to jam the towns.

Housing for low income groups in urban Taiwan is expensive, as city land values are extremely high. Therefore, employers who offer housing usually can attract workers for low cash wages. Employer-provided housing is generally of low quality and gives the employee's family scarcely more than a shelter against the weather; often less than 15 square feet of living space is available per family member.

Self-provided housing is generally even worse. Usually it is improvised from a few old bricks, some thin boards, and corrugated iron and bamboo. As many as twenty people may live in a 9' x 12' room, sleeping on shelves along the walls. Poor lighting and ventilation, dampness and smoke join overcrowding in giving Taiwan a continuing high tuberculosis rate.

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Middle and even high income groups sometimes fare but little better. Since the end of the Japanese occupation, new housing starts have been completely inadequate to prevent a continual decline in housing standards. High interest rates and unfavorable laws have discouraged investment in housing. The result is a low housing standard for almost all Free Chinese.

Dr. Sun Yat-sen, in establishing the principles of the Republic of China, emphasized that the Chinese Government should concern itself with the three basic needs of the people; food, clothing and shelter. Free China's Vice-President, Chen Cheng, reiterated this basic principle last year in directing the establishment of a Chinese Government National Housing Plan Working Group. The Vice President stated that the Government of Free China has succeeded in solving the food and clothing problem and now must attack the shelter problem.

FOA shares the Chinese Government's desire, as stated in the Organic Law of the Housing Program Working Group, to "assist every Free Chinese citizen to own and occupy adequate housing". This high purpose is consistent with the FOA objectives of helping Free China establish the strong economic, social and political base necessary for expanding productivity and military strength. FOA and its personnel are also most sympathetic and concerned with the difficult living conditions of the Free Chinese people, and from the humanitarian standpoint are anxious to help Free Chinese solve their housing problem.

FOA's early efforts to improve housing conditions centered on helping the Chinese military to house adequately its soldiers, sailors and airmen and their dependents. This work is now almost complete and today the Chinese Military is living in austere but healthy and comfortable

barracks for the first time in decades.

FOA's China Mission has also assisted Chinese labor unions in carrying out several workers' housing demonstration projects. The first, and to date most successful of these, is the Keelung Harbor Dockers' Self Help Housing Program.

This unique project was developed in the summer of 1953, largely due to the initiative and zeal of the FOA supply officer, who, working daily with the stevedores on discharge of U. S. aid cargoes, was shocked by the living conditions of the dockworkers and took every opportunity to bring Chinese and American officials on inspection tours to see for themselves.

What they found were hundreds of dockers' families living in empty crates and in sheds, packed so closely that no partitions separated families as they slept. Sick dockers stared dully out of the gloom as the parties probed through the area.

A meeting was held with the Keelung Harbor Bureau and the Keelung Dockers' Labor Union to consider ways of improving the situation. It was learned that the dockers had a large welfare fund accumulated from wage deductions, which might be made available for improving housing conditions. FOA, on its part, recalled that fast discharging work on aid cargoes by Taiwan dockers had earned over US\$100,000 for the FOA/CUSA account in despatch premiums from shipping companies. The suggestion was made that half the despatch monies earned for the FOA/CUSA in Keelung be returned to the Keelung dockers to match their welfare fund contribution for new housing. Realizing that even this total fund would fall far short of solving the dockers' housing problem, FOA and the dockers agreed that the dockers would contribute free-of-charge the unskilled labor needed

for building new houses.

The overall plan called for the construction of 72 new houses in FY1954, with occupants to make amortization payments of 15 per cent of their monthly family incomes, plus contributing 60 days' free labor in construction, thereby owning the house in less than ten years. Monthly payments collected, plus half of future dispatch monies earned for FOA/CUSA, would be programmed for additional housing year after year.

After a series of meetings the dockers' agreed to the plan for building and owning their own new houses. Money was deposited in the Housing Fund by FOA/CUSA and the Dockers' Labor Union and for the first time in Chinese history an aided self-help housing program under which Chinese workers could build and own their own homes became a reality.

In the Keelung Project, dockers voted for their choice from four designs of houses from scale models designed by architects. The winning design was one utilizing cinderblocks and reinforced concrete and offering 288 feet of living space including 2 bedrooms, a living room, kitchen and toilet. Dunnage lumber from incoming vessels, which previously was frequently thrown overboard at sea after discharge, was purchased from the vessels at low cost by the dockers and was the sole lumber to be used in the house. The cost of the house including electricity and running water installation is about US\$400 at the realistic rate of exchange.

Due to land shortage and reluctance to use precious rice land, a steep hillside building site was chosen for the houses, and the land loaned on a long-time free lease by the Harbor Bureau. Preliminary Chinese cost estimates for preparing the building site for house construction using hand methods were larger than the cost of the houses themselves.

The estimate included 6000 man days' labor for earth moving.

To meet this problem, an Allis-Chalmers angle blade bulldozer and four Chinese Army enlisted men operators were borrowed from the Chinese Army Engineering School. They completed the site preparation work in eight days at a cost, including fuel for the dozer and subsistence for the soldiers, of less than the equivalent of US\$100.-.

This served as a graphic demonstration of what heavy equipment can do to help underdeveloped countries. One Chinese official in the Keelung Harbor Bureau remarked "this bulldozer is the greatest weapon of peace I've ever seen".

Construction started on Confucius Birthday, September 28, 1953. One year later, a mountainside in Keelung was covered with 102 shining new houses standing as a monument of hope for Asian laborers willing to use their own hands to help themselves to a better livelihood.

Meanwhile, FOA encouraged extension of the Keelung idea to the Kaohsiung Harbor in South Taiwan, where 75 houses are being built by Kaohsiung dockers and to the salt fields and coal mining areas of the island, where more than 200 more self-help houses are being built by miners through their labor unions and with matching Welfare Funds.

Other groups have taken inspiration from the Keelung dockers and have started their own self-help housing programs for low income groups.

Refugee intellectuals from Hong Kong, assisted by the ARCI (Aid Refugee Chinese Intellectuals Inc., an American-financed volunteer agency), have built their own houses and have formed a small building cooperative to assist others wanting to undertake self-help housing.

One of the greatest self-help aids is the South African-developed soil blockmaker now being built in Keelung, Taiwan. This ingenious

hand-operated machine utilizes soil from the building site combined with cement, lime, bitumen or simple straw for the production of building blocks by unskilled hand labor. The blocks produced are true to size and interlocking, thus requiring less mortar and little skill for laying. Transportation costs and mason costs are reduced to the minimum and the farmer or factory hand can make his own blocks and build his house walls at costs lower than those for cinderblocks or red brick. The same block machine can also make floor and roof tiles. One machine costing well under the equivalent of US\$200 can produce enough blocks in two days for one house. One machine can be used over and over for years.

The self-help spirit is catching on in Taiwan and is spreading throughout the island as people begin to realize they can do something for themselves without waiting for the Chinese or U.S. Government to come along and do it for them.

Self-help housing and raising shelter standards of Formosan workers not only is important socially and politically, but it is yielding increased production. Keelung dockers have reduced vessel turn around time by about half this past year. Damage to cargo has decreased and pilferage has become almost non-existent. The Keelung dockers are not only emerging from their holes in their sheds and packing crates but they are developing a group consciousness --- expressed by their organization of a Stevedore Training School and their plans for a community school for their children, a library and a hospital and tuberculosis sanitarium.

FOA's action in implementing a program which has gotten down to the level of the individual Chinese worker is paying off in tangible results. The "grass roots" approach on an urban level may yet yield all that sociologists have long predicted possible.

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Meanwhile, FOA is giving technical assistance and providing a long term low interest loan to help the Chinese Government National Housing Program Working Group implement its program.

This Program will aim at encouraging housing development by amending existing laws and formulating new laws conducive to housing investment, through demonstration projects, use of new building materials for lower cost stronger buildings, lower interest rates for house financing, developing sources of financing such as cooperatives, savings and loss associations and welfare funds, etc.

Emphasis will be on low cost and self-help in order that a maximum number of homes can be built utilizing existing resources such as surplus labor and surplus building materials and the limited capital financing available. The Program is well along in the planning stages and a large demonstration project featuring 52 selected low cost housing designs to be shown in a National Housing Exhibition is under construction. The Exhibition is scheduled for January 1955.

The workers' Self-help housing project has been proved successful and containing unlimited opportunities for improving Free China's housing conditions. Mobile sound trucks, featuring photos, movies and demonstrations of soil-cement blockmaking methods are being readied for touring small and large towns. Demonstration houses will be built on the spot by the unskilled labor of farmers and factory workers watching the demonstration.

In Taiwan, the Chinese Government and FOA are working to carry out Dr. Sun's principle of shelter for the masses. The self-help ingredient is being added as a catalyst. Realization of the objective of adequate housing for all through their own hands... is on the horizon.