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Writer/s: [Helen Grace](#)

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'This is worse than being a movie star!' the elderly woman grumbled, as yet another group stood outside the Blue House in Stone Nullah Lane, taking pictures. She'd lived there for sixty years and wanted to be rehoused in a decent place with an indoor toilet but after all those Wong Kar Wai movies she'd heard about, people who had lived all their lives in apartments of at least 500 square feet now fantasized about the raw beauty of these tenements with families of five or six people living in a space of 40 square feet—half the size of the average second bedroom—with no kitchen or bathroom.

Not only that, but movie scouts kept coming by, wanting to rent the apartments for weeks at a time, or wanting to borrow or buy the furniture to dress sets for other movies. She always refused, because she didn't want the place messed up, but others hadn't and so they would be disturbed day and night with film crews moving in and out and strangers going up and down the steep wooden stairs, smoking and cursing and cables running everywhere and floodlights turning night into day.

This was far worse than having no toilet or bathroom or air-conditioning, this constant nuisance of people wanting to take pictures or wanting to see what it was like inside the apartments, this 'other world' for them: her life.

You had to be sympathetic to her need for this modicum of privacy, this desire not to become an image in a city which seemed nothing but image and though this was now the last such building still standing and people wanted to preserve it to remind them of the tough times and, in spite of them, the sense of community they had built, which was now gone, torn down to make way for new glass towers, she at least was pleased to see it all go.

She never visited the new shopping centres, where the washrooms of the restaurants were like palaces, all clad in marble with cubicles almost as large as the bedrooms of the old tenements while she still used the public toilet down the street, with its row of tiny cubicles and open drain running along underneath. She still shopped in the street market, where water buckets full of wild ginger lilies and huge chunks of ginger root were dotted among the stalls of fresh produce and she knew every one of the vendors and every inch of the ground between here, Stone Nullah Lane, and the Lung Mun restaurant on Johnston Rd, where she played mahjong upstairs in the noisy room, with groups of four gathered around the tables lit by low-slung lights and the clackety-clack of the tiles, slapping out the rhythm of homeliness absent in the living spaces of the players, all now aging.

In their bodies they still carried the memory of displacement, in this place which lost nearly three-quarters of its population as it fled across the border when the city fell to the Japanese. And then, when all the people returned after the war, the original population

doubled within fifteen years and then doubled again—partly because of 'political disturbances on the mainland'—as colonial bureaucrats at the time referred to the disruptions caused by 'the trickle of refugees'—and then a flood of them—in the midst of world historical events occurring across the border. Politics for them was always mere 'disturbance' to the neat administrative order which kept them comfortable, while the local inhabitants endured discomfort and bad housing and hard work.

You'll forgive me, I know, if I dwell for a moment on the description of dwellings, classified in the 1961 census:

1. "Space" not in a building
2. Room, bedspace etc in wooden house or shack
3. Whole wooden house or shack
4. Whole concrete brick or stone house
5. Concrete brick or stone house (subdivided):
  - a) Self-contained flat
  - b) Room or cubicle
  - c) Bedspace
  - d) Basement
  - e) Verandah or cockloft
  - f) Non-domestic living space
6. Roof

I know you don't want to hear the actual figures for each of these categories at this late hour, so I will spare you the detail—but suffice it to say the number of 'whole concrete brick or stone houses' was a tiny fraction of total housing types and that more than 80% of the total dwellings were rooms, cubicles or less. Facts, bluntly put, are such ugly creatures, and yet to live on a verandah or a roof has a certain quality or to live in a cockloft suggests something not conveyed by the expression, 'chicken coop'.

As the group of heritage seekers moves down the street to the old Bauhaus-style market building, about to be demolished in the Urban Renewal Authority's new plan, the elderly woman slowly climbs up the stairs again to the first floor landing and hangs out her clothes on the balcony, feeling her privacy restored. She wonders why they only come to look when the buildings are about to be demolished, when almost nothing can be done and why they kick up such a fuss and why they never return the images they take. She has to acknowledge that, though the film crews were a nuisance while they were there, the images came back in the movies repeated on television and you could see where they had got it wrong in imagining this life. And also, she had to admit, where they might have got it right, this reality already described forty-six years earlier as a bunch of official facts which hardly changed a thing.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Grace.*