

Importance of public housing satisfaction

IN TAKING the pulse of flat dwellers, the latest Housing Board Sample Household Survey offers much grist for the mill of planners. With about eight in 10 living in HDB flats, it would be prudent to submit the glowing sentiments expressed to a prism of careful scrutiny. For example, the flat is seen by most as hearth and home (nine in 10), evoking pride among householders (seven in 10), and offering value for money (nine in 10). This provides the empirical basis for the view that public housing is “one of the greatest social policy successes” in the nation’s history, as noted by Singapore Management University professor Phang Sock Yong.

Against the favourable reviews, one

should probe areas where approval ratings are slipping. The proportion of those proud of their flat dropped by around 10 percentage points compared to 2008 – similar to the increase among those who felt neutral towards their flat. Taking such infrastructure for granted, these groups thought it was common to live in public housing or considered it a basic necessity. To the extent this portends a trend of creeping dissatisfaction or matter-of-fact perception, it could represent a weak spot in the social fabric – for example, when a loss of civic pride is manifested in lower levels of care for common property and less social interaction.

And against the 57 per cent who were

content with their present flat type, there is a growing proportion of heartlanders who hankered after better housing – 35 per cent compared to 28 per cent in 2008. It’s natural to have such aspirations, of course. And one would not be wrong to associate this impulse with the young, as borne out by the larger proportion of those aged below 35 with an eye on a bigger flat or private property. Within the bounds of realism and without overextending oneself financially, having “skin in the game” could promote social stability and foster the work ethic, as opposed to a lack of rootedness among the young. Acknowledging such needs, the HDB has provided aspirational housing choices

and developed extensive upgrading programmes for older estates.

Taking these efforts into consideration, together with the billions of dollars involved, it would be chastening if certain indicators tracked by HDB’s household survey do not meet the higher expectations of the young. To the credit of agencies like the HDB and Urban Redevelopment Authority, the HDB living environment continues to generally please Singaporeans despite rising population density. The challenge lies in building on what has already been achieved, given the limits of budgetary resources, land and the rebalancing efficacy of tax and subsidy codes in redistributing wealth.