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Why Malaysia Needs a Decent Housing Standard

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Introduction

It is one thing to build homes, but quite another to ensure that homes are **decent** to live in.

In Malaysia today, we have regulations that govern how homes are constructed, such as building codes and floor plans. Separately, we also have public and social housing programs that operate at scale. But we do not have, at least not in any legally binding and enforceable way, a clear definition of what makes a home liveable, and the absence of this definition has consequences.

Consider the current state of housing policy. Developers are encouraged but not compelled to adhere to guidelines. The Construction Industry Standard (CIS) 26:2019[1], our construction industry standard outlines the minimum

[1] CIDB (2019)

This view was prepared by Theebalakshmi Kunasekaran and Gregory Ho Wai Son, researchers from the Khazanah Research Institute (KRI). The authors are grateful for the valuable comments from Dr. Suraya Ismail and Shukri Mohamed Khairi.

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dimensions and amenities for residential units. But it is a standard in name only, a benchmark without legal bite. The Uniform Building By-Laws 1984[2], specify the absolute minimum in structural terms: a bedroom must be at least 6.5 square meters, a bathroom 1.5. Enough to fit a bed, perhaps, but not enough to guarantee dignity.

The result is a quiet but persistent form of housing precarity. In the private rental market, tenants sign leases that are long on obligations, but short on protections. They find themselves paying market rates for rooms that might have no ventilation, unreliable plumbing, or shared access to basic sanitation. In the public/social sector, a family of 6 or more squeezes into PPR units that are more suited for a family of 3 or 4. The result of which are spaces too cramped for privacy, let alone the simple act of studying for an exam.

It is not as if we lack shelter. What we lack is a national commitment to standards that enable people to live with dignity and to aspire beyond mere subsistence.

What Happens when Homes Fail?

Imagine being a single mother raising 4 children in a 650 square foot PPR unit with three bedrooms. At night, one of your children has to travel to a nearby room, sometimes outside the PPR[3] to study, just because there is too much noise and disturbance in the home. There is no functioning exhaust in the bathroom, so the walls remain damp, and mold triggers your youngest daughter's asthma. You can report these to building management, but it takes a long time to gets things done. You do not own this flat. And under current regulations, you have no recourse. You have to tolerate and adapt to these living conditions.

Figure 1: Layout of a KL PPR unit

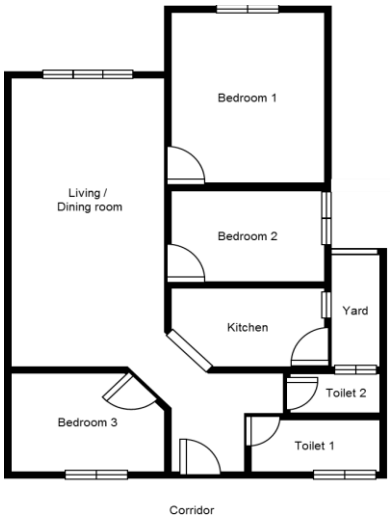

Table 1: Building plan for a KL PPR unit

	Floor area	
	m^2	sqft
Overall unit	**60.385**	**650.00**
Bedroom 1	10.821	116.48
Bedroom 2	6.671	71.80
Bedroom 3	6.505	70.00
Toilet 1 (bathroom)	3.071	33.00
Toilet 2	1.710	18.41
Kitchen	4.515	48.60
Living room + Dining room	24.19	260.42
Yard	2.902	31.23

Source (layout): DBKL (2018)
Source (table): DBKL (2018)

[2] UBBL (1984)
[3] When our team surveyed PPR Sg. Pinang in 2016, NGOs and communities rented out a space in a nearby building for children to study. On the other hand, PPR Lembah Pantai Kerinchi had a common place prepared within the building complex for children to study.

Now imagine being a student, new to the city, renting a room in a converted shop lot. Your "room" is a partitioned corner with makeshift walls and a shared toilet down the hallway. You spend RM700 a month for the 'privilege'. You have no say over who your roommates are, the 'guests' that they invite in, and the activities that other tenants do in your unit. You cannot focus, cannot rest, but cannot afford to leave as there are no affordable options elsewhere for you.

While these are mere isolated anecdotes, they are symptomatic of a system that treats housing as commodity first and necessity second. In the absence of enforceable standards, the housing market is induced to behave like a race to the bottom where profits are prioritized, while liveability is a secondary condition that is negotiated. We talk a great deal about housing affordability. When adequacy is ignored, affordability becomes a misleading metric. A cheap home that endangers health or erodes dignity is not a bargain, but a policy failure.

Other countries have space standards

There are no universal benchmarks for housing provision. Standards tend to reflect the specific social, economic and cultural context of individual countries. However, several countries have clearly defined 'space standards' to ensure a basic level of comfort and dignity in living conditions.

'Space standards' refer to a set of guidelines that outline the minimum acceptable dimensions and functional features of a dwelling unit[4]. These may include measurements on minimum gross floor area, ceiling height, room sizes and the number of bedrooms appropriate for the household size. These standards are important to ensure that a house is more than just a roof over someone's head but also a comfortable living space that supports the well-being and dignity of its occupants, allowing them to lead a decent standard of living.

Having adequate space in a home is vital for carrying out daily activities such as rest, study, storage and social interaction i.e. spending time with family and friends. It is also important in ensuring personal privacy and maintaining household harmony. Whereas, inadequate living space may negatively impact the well-being of occupants, affecting their physical and psychological health. For children, the lack of suitable space to study can hinder their educational performance while limited privacy may further weaken their family ties over time.

In Malaysia, housing standards have largely concentrated on building and construction specifications for new dwellings. They do not provide a framework or guidelines to upgrade the quality of existing housing stock or define suitable occupancy levels to prevent conditions of overcrowding.

In contrast, several countries have adopted structured space standards that help ensure adequate and dignified living conditions. For example, the United Kingdom's Nationally Described Space Standard outlines the minimum gross internal floor areas (GIFA) based on household size and number of bedrooms. A household of 4 to 6 persons is expected to have at least 3 bedrooms while a 6-person household typically requires a unit exceeding 1,000 square feet. However, the contrast is stark when compared with Malaysia's public housing experience, specifically the *Projek*

[4] KRI (2023)

Perumahan Rakyat (PPR). Many large households in PPR units live in conditions of severe overcrowding[5] when measured against such international space benchmarks.

Table 2: Nationally described space standards for UK, 2015 – Minimum gross internal floor areas and storage (sq ft)

Bedrooms	Bedspaces	1 storey	2 storey	3 storey	Built-in storage
1b	1p	398/420*			1.0
	2p	538	624		1.5
2b	3p	657	797	-	2.0
	4p	753	850		
3b	4p	797	904	969	2.5
	5p	926	1,001	1,066	
	6p	1,023	1,098	1,163	
4b	5p	969	1,044	1,109	3.0
	6p	1,066	1,141	1,206	
	7p	1,163	1,238	1,302	
	8p	1,259	1,335	1,399	
5b	6p	1,109	1,184	1,249	3.5
	7p	1,206	1,281	1,346	
	8p	1,302	1,378	1,442	
6b	7p	1,249	1,324	1,389	4.0
	8p	1,346	1,421	1,485	

Note: * Where a 1b1p has a shower room instead of a bathroom, the floor area may be reduced from 39m² to 37m².
Source: Department for Communities and Local Government (2015)

Similarly, Singapore has implemented a diversified public housing system through the Housing and Development Board (HDB), offering a range of unit sizes and layouts targeted for different household compositions. Over the decades, the design and size of HDB flats have evolved in response to rising living standards of Singapore citizens as well as to improve the quality of living environments.

Table 3: The GFA of HDB flats in Singapore

HDB Flat Types	2-Room Flexi	3-Room	4-Room	5-Room	3Gen	Executive Flat
Floor area (sq ft)	387 and 484	646 and 700	969	1184	1238	1399
No. of bedrooms	1	2	3	3	4	3
No. of bathrooms	1	2	2	2	3	2

Source: HDB (n.d)

In 2017, the average household size of 3-room and 4-room HDB flats was 2.63 and 3.42 respectively, considerably lower than the average household size of 4.5 in PPR units. This implies that HDB residents are less likely to experience overcrowding as compared to PPR residents, because HDB flats come in various types and GFAs, available for residents to select units based on their needs and financial capacity.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's social housing sector continues to rely on a 'one-size fits all' GFA approach, which fails to account for the diversity of household compositions. KRI's study on social housing

[5] KRI (2023)

revealed that most social housing households consist of 3 to 6 persons, with household heads mostly aged between 52 to 54 years[6]. Moreover, 1 in 10 households has at least one member with physical disabilities. These demographic features highlight the need for more inclusive and responsive housing design that accommodates aging populations and supports accessibility needs.

Liveability compromised for cheaper rates

Another structural issue arising from poor housing standards is the prevalence of substandard units in the rental market, particularly in urban areas. Landlords often refurbish existing units into smaller partitions thus compromising basic living standards to offer rooms at slightly below-market rates. This happens because demand is high in dense, urban areas where affordable rental supply is limited. In extreme cases, so-called "coffin-sized" rooms are rented out for as low as RM300 in the Klang Valley[7]. Some students or working adults have no choice but to resort to these cheaper options, resulting in them enduring a lack of space, poorly ventilated and inadequate living conditions.

If adequate housing standards for shelter were in place and enforced, many of these substandard rental units or rooms would not be in the market in the first place. However, a key question remains: is it possible to regulate opportunistic behaviour by landlords? Even when housing regulations exist, there is still no consensus on what constitutes an "acceptable standard"[8]. What some landlords may consider adequate or "good enough" may not align with the 'objective standards' set by the state, building or healthcare professionals. This is a common challenge in less established markets such as ours.

However, this is not an issue for developed countries as they have adopted well-designed standards, and they engage in continuous processes to improve and reconcile housing standards for both newly built and existing landlords and tenants. As a result, good quality standards are explicit in the rental tenancy agreement between landlords and tenants in developed countries[9]. The local council or the agency in charge regulates and monitors both the rents and quality of houses in order to ensure that rent prices commensurate with the quality of homes provided.

Preventing building dilapidation through standards

Inadequate housing standards also contribute to long-term structural and financial challenges. When houses are built with substandard materials or poor designs, they tend to require more frequent and costly maintenance. As a result, many low-cost housing projects face risks of physical deterioration driven by both substandard initial construction and limited funding for maintenance.

These conditions have led to recent proposals for urban renewal initiatives as a solution to address concerns over dilapidated and unsafe buildings. However, much of this deterioration

[6] KRI (2023)
[7] Suraya Ismail (2022)
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

could have been prevented through stronger construction standards and proper adherence to national housing guidelines. Without clear and enforceable "acceptable standards" in place, urban renewal initiatives risk creating another similar vicious cycle of building deterioration.

Humanizing Housing

So how might Malaysia begin to close the gap between the homes that we build and the lives we want these homes to support?

We could start with a National Housing Survey. This would be useful, not just to count units, but to assess conditions: space per occupant, adequacy of light and ventilation, access to clean water and working sanitation. This is often complemented with a Housing Condition Survey to give the institutions a better description of the current state of housing conditions in the country. With limited information on the dynamics of housing demand and how housing markets have responded to them, the federal and state governments will not be able to plan and regulate the housing sector effectively.

Next, we need a Rental Tenancy Act that protects tenants from unfair rental practices, including drastic rent hikes and substandard housing conditions. This should be a clear legal framework that defines and protects minimum standards of habitability, particularly in the rental sector. No one should have to live in a 'coffin-room', nor should have to plead for repairs.

We should also revisit our public housing design. A 'one-size-fits-all' flat may be efficient to build, but it is wholly inadequate for the diversity of family typologies that live in them. Larger households simply need larger units. Elderly residents need lifts that work all the time. Hence, building units of multiple GFAs catered to different household sizes would work best. This has also been recommended in an earlier KRI study[10].

Finally, we must begin to think of housing as a platform for social mobility. A good home does more than shelter. It supports health, facilitates education, enables stable routines, and nurtures family life. In short, it creates the necessary conditions for human flourishing. If we want to build a fairer Malaysia, we must begin by building homes that are not merely habitable, but decent and liveable.

[10] KRI (2023)

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