

LCQ5: Design of subsidised sale flats

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Man-kwong and a reply by the Secretary for Housing, Ms Winnie Ho, in the Legislative Council today (March 26):

Question:

It has been reported that some prospective owners of Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) flats were informed only after taking possession of their flats that the kitchens and toilets in their flats were prefabricated components, of which the partitioning could not be altered, and they decided to forfeit the deposit they had paid as their flats had become much less practical. There are views that the layout and design of HOS flats fail to meet the needs of the public, resulting in quite a number of owners abandoning their brand-new furniture such as pedestal toilets, lavatory basins and zinc basins. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of applications received by the Housing Department (HD) in the past three years for altering the partitioning of subsidised sale flats and, among them, the respective numbers of applications involving alterations to kitchens and toilets;

(2) given that the subsidised sale flats of the Hong Kong Housing Society provide open kitchen units for buyers to choose from, whether the Hong Kong Housing Authority has considered increasing the supply of such units; if not, of the reasons for that; and

(3) whether the HD is aware of the wastage caused by tenants and owners of public housing units abandoning the original furniture of the units, such as, among others, countertops in kitchens, taps and zinc basins, after taking possession of their flats; if so, whether the HD will conduct a review of the indoor installations of public housing units, so as to minimize such abandonment; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

I would like to thank the Hon Leung Man-kwong for his concern about the construction methods, flat design and indoor provisions of the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) flats categorised under Subsidised Sale Flats (SSF) of the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA). My reply to the question raised by the Hon Leung Man-kwong is as follows:

Since its establishment in 1973, the HA has all along been committed to enhancing the housing ladder, assisting low- to middle-income families to achieve home ownership through the sale of SSF, with a view to promoting upward mobility.

In terms of design, the HA has been adopting a simple yet practical approach. The flats are designed according to basic design principles emphasising simplicity, sustainability and safety with provisions that comply with the requirements of the Buildings Ordinance and other relevant regulations. With the constraint of flat size, we understand that residents have to design the layout and partitions in a more flexible manner, so as to meet the needs of different family members. For example, families with elderly members or children will have vastly different needs. Therefore, SSF are partition-free, providing maximum flexibility for users to opt for layouts which suit their own needs at best.

As for construction, as early as the 1980s, the HA has adopted off-site prefabrication technology and has had most building components prefabricated in factories and then delivered to sites for installation. Not only does this technology minimise on-site construction processes, but it also enhances site safety and environmental protection. This further boosts construction efficiency and sustains the sale of SSF at a low price.

Subject to actual conditions of the site, the HA uses different prefabricated components, including precast facades, semi-precast slabs, or volumetric precast bathrooms and kitchens as building parts. For example, since 2002, i.e. more than two decades ago, the HA has been applying volumetric precast bathrooms and kitchens in public rental housing projects, and the use of volumetric precast bathrooms and kitchens were subsequently applied to HOS. So far, 22 relevant projects have been completed with a total provision of as many as 80 000 units. We noticed that for projects adopting volumetric precast bathrooms and kitchens, the required remedial works related to bathrooms and kitchens, such as water seepage, amount to at least 50 per cent less compared to traditional on-site construction projects, as reflected in the rectification list submitted by owners after flat in-take. The technology of these volumetric precast bathrooms and kitchens has been further developed and it laid the ground for Modular Integrated Construction (MiC), which is well-known to us these days. As this technology is satisfactory in terms of effectiveness and it can further enhance the overall construction quality, the HA has further extended the use of MiC to the construction of entire flats in suitable projects, in addition to bathrooms and kitchens. In March last year, the Development Bureau and the Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of Guangdong Province signed the Letter of Intent on Strengthening Guangdong-Hong Kong Cooperation in Construction and Related Engineering Sectors to deepen the collaboration of construction areas between Guangdong and Hong Kong, including the development of MiC as a new quality productive force to contribute to the high-quality national development, making MiC a strategic industry that expands to the international arena.

Regarding household decoration works, HOS flat owners or decoration workers engaged should consult building professionals on the alteration proposals before commencing works, in addition to heeding advice in the decoration guide and confirming compliance with the deed of mutual covenant of the building. Regarding the video clips recently circulated on the Internet about decoration works of new HOS flats, I would like to draw

attention to the following situations. Generally speaking, decoration works which only involve the demolition or minor addition of non-structural walls in a flat, such as altering the position of the toilet door, are exempted from prior approval and consent. If the works involve alterations to non-structural walls inside a flat, depending on the nature and scale of the works, it may be necessary to notify the Independent Checking Unit (ICU) of the Housing Bureau prior to the commencement of the works and/or upon their completion according to the Minor Works Control System. If the works involve alteration to the structure of the building or fire safety, flat owners should seek advice from building professionals to ensure that the alteration works comply with the Buildings Ordinance and relevant regulations. For example, alterations to kitchen partitioning or decoration works for conversion into an open kitchen must first be approved by the ICU. In short, regardless of construction methods, such as MiC, volumetric precast bathrooms and kitchens or planar precast components, the design and construction should be carried out in accordance with the established quality control requirements of the HA, including fabrication testing, installation and inspection procedures. Any restrictions on future modification works have no relation to the construction method used in the project, but the structural design itself. This principle has always been upheld and applicable to different SSF projects.

Regarding the design of SSF, HA's current kitchen designs aim to facilitate the habit of traditional families in cooking with open flames, and hence the kitchens are equipped with four fire-rated partition walls and fire-rated doors to comply with relevant provisions. We understand that as society constantly changes, people's living and dietary habits also evolve, and hence residents may have new demands for the design layouts of kitchens. For example, small families of singletons or two tend to prefer simpler cooking styles. Looking ahead, in view of these changes, we are actively exploring the feasibility of adopting an open kitchen design in smaller flats to keep abreast of the times. That said, the design of open kitchens requires addition of automatic sprinkler systems and other additional fire services installations. These fire services installations will also have to be inspected annually by registered fire services installations contractors. We will conduct a comprehensive study on the construction cost effectiveness and future maintenance as well as other issues.

Noting that most HOS owners carry out decoration works according to their own needs, we have decided to introduce design enhancements for HOS projects to be put up for sale starting from 2025, including removal of some provisions that many residents opined as unnecessary in resident surveys and have no relation to regulatory requirements, such as removal of kitchen cooking slab and drying rods in bathrooms to provide owners with greater flexibility in selecting preferable models.

Providing simple, decent and affordable HOS has all along been the vision of the HA. In the future, we will continue to strive for excellence by introducing new materials and technologies to suit the changes in society, and ensure success in every project that we are driving.