3. It’s Dangerous

The year 1964 was a good year — for landlords. The building boom was on, and everyone was pulling down the old and building higher. On the ground, land was scarce and at a rocketing premium; but upwards, the sky was the limit.

With the chance to make a fortune from sky space, nothing went up fast enough to satisfy the landlords. Why should landlords wait for “these people” to get out of the old houses that were to be demolished for redevelopment? Such troublesome procedures in the courts! All this haggling over compensation to the tenants! A faster procedure must be found — and it was. There is usually little difficulty in finding a way out in Hong Kong, provided you are willing to pay out a little hard cash. The way out in this case was to have the old buildings declared dangerous; that was the “open sesame” to the speedy eviction of hapless tenants.

Human beings have fashions they feel they should follow. But in Hong Kong that year, even the houses had a fashion: they threatened to fall down. Winston Churchill might have said: “Never did so many houses become so dangerous in so short a time.” Residents like myself were all affected by this new complex and found themselves walking along the streets guessing which houses looked likely to fall down at any moment. But the ones that looked like falling down stayed up, probably because they knew that their landlords had no money for rebuilding, while many that looked like staying up for an-
other century suddenly threatened to fall down at a given moment "given", because there is no doubt about it that the houses conspired with some Government servants to decide on the moment of collapse.

If you are a newcomer to Hong Kong, don't imagine for a moment that you are going to be in danger in this falling-down epidemic if it ever begins again. Few houses did actually fall: I can remember only one serious calamity. But the Public Works Department was kept pretty busy inspecting houses suspected of a desire to collapse. Mind you, the tenants were unfair and criticized. One might have expected them to be grateful to be told to remove in time to save their lives from a dangerous building. Instead they told tales of seeing landlords cracking pillars, and of people drinking tea and bargaining the price of rigging a house collapse. But of course there was never any corruption involved: at least, no one ever produced a receipt to prove corruption. Hong Kong's British "Justice" requires that a man be innocent until there is cast-iron proof of his guilt; the suffering of his victims is immaterial.

One official, questioned on the telephone about a possible swindle said: "Yes, I'm sure there's a racket going on, but don't quote me." I didn't quote him since he had been decent enough to admit the truth to me. The same day he made a public statement: "There is no racket on dangerous buildings."

When the building boom ceased in 1965, the buildings also ceased to become dangerous, no doubt
out of consideration to landlords. The latter had reason to thank their lucky houses, but the tenants must have cursed the unlucky stars over their homeless heads when they had to leave the safety of those fine old buildings and find a lodging on the open streets, or on hillsides where they suffered hardship, or even death in typhoons and floods.

If you are poor, policy always treats you badly. After 1964 the policy changed, and tenants of dangerous buildings were granted resettlement rooms, if they could afford to pay $400 a head rent in advance. Then the better-off tenants began to hope that their buildings would become dangerous. But for the poor there was no relief in the new policy: they were pushed off to the barren hillsides to build huts for their families because they could not afford $400 a head rent-in-advance. Surely none but a money-grabbing Government could have conjured up such a scheme as “rent-in-advance”!

There is no doubt that 1964 alienated many old Hong Kong residents who had previously suffered little of the hardship of life in the search for a house. How much influence did 1964 have upon the unrest of the years that followed?