Climate change in Hong Kong worsens housing crisis for city’s poor

By Theodora Yu and Louise Delmotte
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HONG KONG — Anyone who has experienced a Hong Kong summer has a story about the oppressive heat and humidity.

This year, a heat wave has left residents sweltering more than ever. And for thousands, home is a tiny rooftop hut that offers no escape from the torrid conditions.

Au has a million-dollar view of the Kowloon skyline from the rooftop hut he calls home. But inside the metal-and-concrete structure, perched atop a 10-story building, it feels like a million degrees.

“Even when I turn on all three fans in the living room, it’s still too hot,” Au said, wiping sweat from his face as the mercury soared into the high 90s on a recent day.

Hong Kong’s suffocating summers are often made worse by an environment of concrete towers, concrete parks and roadside emissions.

But the effects of climate change are compounded here for those of modest means. Exorbitant property prices and long waits for public housing have pushed poorer residents like Au, who spoke using only his last name for fear of humiliation, into bleak living arrangements such as subdivided apartments and illegal but widespread rooftop huts that dot the tops of tenement buildings.

On Au’s rooftop in the gentrifying neighborhood of Sham Shui Po, the metal hut traps heat inside the 300-square-foot space.

The 73-year-old rigged foam to the ceiling and a canopy to his window to block the afternoon sun, but neither seemed particularly effective. He has air conditioning but can barely afford to use it; to save on electricity costs, he and his wife switch it on only when their children return from school. For most of the day, they turn on fans and eat melons to stay cool; at night, they sleep on beds laid with bamboo straw mats.

Au hopes he and his family can secure a public housing apartment soon. Inside his hut, he fanned himself with his sweat-soaked T-shirt while waiting for his children to come home from school on a recent day.

But even these circumstances are an improvement. For three decades, Au lived in a 60-square-foot hut where all four walls were made of tin. That was until he moved with his family to his current, larger hut on
where all four walls were made of tin. That was until he moved with his family to his current, larger hut on the same rooftop. On summer days at the old hut, he couldn’t stay inside at all.

“It was like an oven up there,” he said.

Heat wave hell

Some 220,000 people, or about 3 percent of Hong Kong’s population, live in cramped rooftop huts, subdivided apartments and cage homes, according to a 2021 government report. With the poor design of these structures, residents experience conditions that can be 9 to 11 degrees Fahrenheit (5 to 6 degrees Celsius) hotter than outdoors during a heat wave, according a July report by the Society for Community Organization, a nongovernment group focused on housing issues.

And while the warming climate makes summers worse, low-income families worry about soaring utility bills, said Sze Lai-shan, the group’s deputy director.

“In the short term, provision of air conditioners and electricity fee subsidies will be helpful,” Sze said. “But in the long term, provision of public housing is what they hope for the most.”

Hong Kong leader John Lee, who visited tenants in subdivided apartments in July, has pledged to boost the supply of land and housing.

Climate experts, however, say bolder action on warming is needed. Hong Kong has pledged to achieve carbon neutrality before the middle of the century, though it has only a relatively modest target of reducing emissions by 26 to 36 percent by 2030 compared with 2005 levels.

Kevin Li, researcher at environmental organization CarbonCare InnoLab, said the government’s latest climate action plan relies heavily on infrastructure projects to mitigate effects such as sea-level rise. But he said these failed to take into account the more immediate plight of disadvantaged groups, such as tenants of rooftop huts and subdivided apartments who face increasingly extreme heat waves and typhoons.

“The government departments only coordinate when large-scale extreme disasters occur, but under climate change, these events can happen anytime,” Li said.

Li wants to see a climate adaptation plan to help people prepare for extreme conditions; this could involve modifying rooftop huts to improve heat dispersion, improving ventilation systems and subsidizing electricity costs.

‘Most unbearable’

Atop a seven-story tenement building in the Kowloon neighborhood of Cheung Sha Wan, residents Tai Szelin, 52, and Hung Chi-fai, 58, each live in a small room within a 450-square-foot rooftop hut they share with four other people.

The window in Tai’s room is useless for air circulation as it faces the door of another room. On hotter days, she can get some respite by spraying water on the rooftop with a hose to lower the temperature.

To escape the heat on her day off, Tai, a restaurant worker, visits air-conditioned malls. “I moved to Hong Kong many years ago. This [summer] is the hottest and most unbearable,” she said.

Autumn may bring little relief, too: The Hong Kong Observatory predicts a higher chance of normal to above-normal temperatures until October.

In previous years, Tai said, soaring temperatures would often arrive in the days before a typhoon barreled...
“Now it’s so hot that it seems my head will explode,” she said.

Hung, a cleaner, moved to the rooftop hut in June. Previously, he lived in a “space capsule” pod of less than 20 square feet, one of 16 such pods in a single apartment.

Hung cools down by visiting a nearby library to pore through newspapers and magazines, before heading home for a shower. “I will stay there for hours until it closes,” he said.

Not only were summers getting hotter, but “abnormal” shorter winters were becoming more common, Hung noted. He felt there was little he could do.

“It’s going to get hotter and hotter,” Hung said. “We can only try our best to adapt and live our lives.”

In the nearby Kwai Chung area, retired painter Wong Chung lives alone in one of eight 50-square-foot rooms carved out of one apartment in a tenement building. The 70-year-old relies on government subsidies and budgets $14 a day to live. He has an air conditioner but turns it on only for an hour before he goes to bed.

Wong said the heat wakes him several times a night, though he hangs a white T-shirt over his one window to block sunlight during the day. With many community centers servicing the elderly closed during the pandemic, he has had no choice but to swelter at home.

“I hope the government will help tenants, especially families with kids who had to study in such cramped, stuffy spaces,” he said. “It’s so sad.”