
Choosing to Forget:

A Discussion on Singapore's National Identity with respect to Demolished Buildings

Introduction

Modern day Singapore is a clean and well-organised city-state. There have always been deliberate attempts at employing urban planning to control and manage the growth of the city since its founding. Following William Farquhar's pragmatic, but messy, way of managing the port city after Sir Stamford Raffles departure in 1819, Philip Jackson came up with Singapore's first urban plan in 1822: the Jackson Plan, also titled Plan of the Town of Singapore. In the intervening century, explosive growth outstripped all attempts by the colonial government to deal with issues such as urban congestion and housing. After gaining independence in 1965, the city-state under the PAP government created new institutions such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority and Housing Development Board to arrest these issues which led to a rapid uplifting of the standards of living ever since. However, in the process of renewal, much has been replaced and inevitably lost to the sands of time.

In this case study, we adopt the approach of a panel discussion between three learned individuals to consider some of the perspectives around the issue of building preservation and how that shapes national identity. Through the study of three notable examples, the "panellists" will illustrate the various viewpoints and demonstrate the multi-faceted and highly political nature of heritage, to show that it is not always a simple decision with regard to whether a place is demolished, conserved or preserved.

The first panellist is imagined as an established city planner who seeks to communicate the rationale of government decisions in the areas of heritage preservation and the demolition of old buildings to make way for new buildings. The second is a historian who probably has a soft spot for those very same old buildings and believes that the same process of decision-making about the buildings has to be careful and consider the voices of not only the past and current generation, but also the future generations. Finally, the third panellist is a young activist who would have been part of a ground-up non-governmental organisation which fought for the preservation of old buildings of national significance.

We chose three examples that have been demolished or are in the process of being demolished. The Old National Library was demolished in 2004, the Old Kallang Stadium in 2010 and most recently, the Dakota Crescent estate vacated and awaiting demolition works as of December 2019. These examples span a twenty-year period and collectively show an evolution of the thinking and approaches by the authorities as well as the public which will be illustrated below. We invite the reader to consider the evolution as a continual process that will change yet again in the future, and consider the implications of their own roles in this process. Although there are other types of historical buildings in Singapore, such as the

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black-and-white colonial buildings or commercial buildings that are privately owned, the consideration for the preservation and demolition of these buildings undergo a different process. Furthermore, they do not always contribute as much towards the formation of a national identity, nor do they receive the same attention by the public or the authorities when the demolition was announced.

Whether one is a public servant considering the economic merits of demolition, or a member of the public who is trying to retain memories of a place for future generations, there is value in considering how the various actors interact in the policy subsystems surrounding the politically charged issue of heritage preservation and identity formation.

Panel Discussion

Moderator: Welcome to today's panel discussion on conserving built heritage in Singapore. The discussion will begin with an introduction of the Old Kallang Stadium, the Old National Library and Dakota Crescent by each panellist, followed by a list of moderated questions for the panellists to answer. May we please have a warm welcome for our city planner.

City Planner (for Old Kallang Stadium): Affectionately, known as the Grand Old Dame of Kallang, the Old Kallang Stadium has been the site where many precious collective memories of Singaporeans from all walks of life were birthed and made. Singaporeans gathered at the Stadium to cheer and celebrate some of Singapore's greatest moments.

Prior to the building of the Kallang Stadium, the Jalan Besar Stadium was the only venue available for hosting sporting events for crowds larger than 3000 in size. Borne out of the pressing need for a stadium and venue that is able to host large-scale national events, plans for the building of a Kallang Stadium began in December 1965. It was hoped that the Stadium would be able to boost the promotion of sports in Singapore¹. Kallang was earmarked to be the site for the National Stadium due to various factors such as being a prime location, accessibility to Nicoll Highway and proximity to other sports venues². Construction of the stadium began in December 1966 and was completed in July 1972.

The Kallang Stadium was officially opened by then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 21 July 1973³. Recognised as one of Southeast Asia's top sporting facilities, the Kallang Stadium could seat up to 50,000 people. State-of-the-art facilities included an Olympic-sized synthetic track, tennis and squash courts, an exhibition area, sound systems and floodlights. Over the three decades that the Old Kallang Stadium stood, it had been the host of various large-scale events that included social, cultural, entertainment and of course, sports.

For a long time, it was the home where we would celebrate our nation's birthday. The Old Kallang Stadium held a grand total of 18 National Day Parades (see Exhibit A), bringing Singaporeans from all over the island to witness the spectacle of marking Singapore's

¹ L.F. Low, "Othman Wok: The man who built the National Stadium" (Singapore: TODAY, 2017).

² National Heritage Board, "Opening of the National Stadium" (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2019).

³ R. Chandran and L. Fong, "Our goal in sports: Mr. Lee" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 1973).

independence⁴. The Old Kallang Stadium held its first National Day Parade in 1976 and its last three decades later in 2006. Hosting up to 50,000 Singaporeans from rehearsals, National Education shows⁵ to the main event itself on National Day, it had become a place where Singaporeans identify as a place of joy and unity when they gathered at the venue to celebrate our nation's independence.

It was also the place that witnessed the breaking of various national records, thereby cementing local sportsmen and women as heroes in the eyes of Singaporeans. Without the Old Kallang Stadium, we also would not have heard the original Kallang Roar that is now a trademark when it comes to supporting our national athletes⁶. The Singapore Lions national football team would be cheered on by more than 50,000 patriotic fans packed in the stadium during their matches, particularly during the Malaysia Cup⁷ home matches⁸.

Concerts and other entertainment events were also held at the Stadium, providing a venue for Singaporeans to unwind and relax together. Major events that saw the Stadium fill up include concerts held by international stars such as Mariah Carey, Bon Jovi, Stevie Wonder, Elton John and David Bowie, just to name a few⁹. Michael Jackson performed to a record crowd of 94,000 people at the stadium¹⁰. An exhibition match featuring Muhammad Ali was also held in 1973. The Stadium was also the venue for mass for those of the Catholic faith when Pope John Paul II made his visit to Singapore in 1986¹¹.

Starting in 2002, then-Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports and the Urban Redevelopment Authority discussed the need for new state-of-the-art sporting infrastructure in order to develop Singaporean sporting talents locally so that Singapore is able to attain "high-performance sporting achievements" while simultaneously promoting a healthy lifestyle and sports participation among the general public¹². While redevelopment of the Old Kallang Stadium was initially discussed, it had ultimately been deemed infeasible due to its age and was seen to be outdated. In line with its story of renewal and redevelopment, the government announced in 2005 that the Old Kallang Stadium would be

⁴ S. Driscoll, "NDP 2016 returns to National Stadium: 5 memorable parades at the old stadium" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 2016).

⁵ National Education Shows are essentially previews of the National Day Parade held every year for all Primary 5 students. The aim is for all Singapore residents to attend at least one National Day Parade in their lifetime.

⁶ The Straits Times, "When Kallang roared" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 2006).

⁷ The Malaysia Cup is an annual Football tournament held between teams from each federal state of Malaysia. The inaugural tournament was held before Malaysia's independence in 1951 as the Malaya Cup and was won by Singapore FA. Even after Singapore's independence from Malaysia, the Football Association of Singapore continued Singapore FA's involvement in the Cup until 1994, with the team winning a total of 24 times while coming runners up a further 19 times.

⁸ The Straits Times, "Stadium memories: 1991-2007" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 2007).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The Stadium's track and field was converted into additional seating and standing space to account for the number of tickets sold for the event.

¹¹ The Business Times, "[A visit to the heart](#)". (Singapore: The Business Times, 1986, November 21).

¹² Tan Soo Khoo (Kampong Chai Chee MP), Parliamentary Debates, "Sports Development in Singapore" (Hansard, Vol 74, Sitting 17, 2002).

demolished to make way for the new Singapore Sports Hub development¹³. The Stadium was officially closed in 2007 and demolished in 2010.

Historian (for Old National Library): The Old National Library was officially opened on 12 November 1960 and it was an idea that gained traction after the initial donation of S\$375,000 by the Chinese rubber tycoon and education philanthropist Dr. Lee Kong Chian¹⁴. Before this site, the national library used to occupy the western wing of the Raffles Museum at Stamford Road. Since its demolition in 2004 to make way for the Singapore Management University (SMU) and the Fort Canning Tunnel, the National Library has shifted to its current location on Victoria Street.

The costs of building the Old National Library eventually came up to S\$2 million and it was opened by our late president Yusof Ishak with much fanfare over a week called the National Library Week. Over the next four decades, it served the needs of many Singaporeans until community libraries such as the Jurong Regional Library and the Woodlands Regional Library reduced the need for people to travel all the way downtown to use the library facilities. Nevertheless, in that time many fond memories were forged by a generation of library goers who grew to love the red brick facade and the water fountain within. Today, 5,000 of these red bricks are retained on the site of the new National Library in the basement as a contrived way to remember this important piece of heritage for Singapore, since it appears as a tokenistic attempt to preserve a part of the old library that was inadvertently going to be torn down (see Exhibit B).

Activist (for Dakota Crescent): Dakota Crescent was a housing estate that was built in 1958 by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), which was the colonial government's agency to construct public housing in Singapore, even before the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was established in 1960¹⁵. The flats in this housing estate became public rental houses let out by the HDB, which are flats catered to the low-income Singaporeans. After Dakota Crescent was slated to be demolished for further redevelopment of public housing under the Selective En bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS)¹⁶, the bulk of the rental tenants were relocated to the designated newly built rental block at Cassia Crescent, which is within walking distance from Dakota Crescent¹⁷. As of December 2019, the housing estate is vacated and awaiting demolition works.

Historically, Dakota Crescent was witness to Singapore's Constitution Exposition, which commemorated Singapore's internal self-governance in 1959 at the old Kallang Airport¹⁸. In

¹³ Parliamentary Debates, "Head I - Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports" (Hansard, Vol 82, Sitting 19, 2007).

¹⁴ Melanie Chew, "Lee Kong Chian", in *Leaders of Singapore*, (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015).

¹⁵ Ng Kok Hoe and The Cassia Resettlement Team, *They Told Us to Move* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019), p. 6.

¹⁶ The Selective En-bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS) allowed for the government to identify and acquire old blocks of flats in sites with high development potential to redevelop these areas for more intensive land use. Residents who had to relocate from their old blocks of flats were given priority allocation to new flats built near the old block with a new 99-year lease, or rental flats in the same or nearby estates for tenants.

¹⁷ Ng Huiwen, "Dakota Crescent to be redeveloped for public housing; iconic dove playground and parts of estate to be retained" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 2017).

¹⁸ Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten MP), Parliamentary Debates, "Preserving our Heritage, Culture and History – Conserving Dakota Crescent" (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 25, 2016).

terms of its physical infrastructure, Dakota Crescent is the only housing estate with the quintessential dove playground left in Singapore¹⁹. Exhibit C shows the playground located in the central courtyard of Dakota Crescent. It is also frequently featured in a local artist, Ah Guo's works, which revolve around illustrations of the demolished landmarks in Singapore²⁰. In addition, the housing flats in Dakota Crescent are also unique for their low-rise blocks that range from two to seven storeys²¹. The latter blocks were also known for their pi- or butterfly-shaped design (refer to Exhibit C).

Dakota Crescent holds great historical, cultural, and social significance for many Singaporeans, and many residents had come together to submit a Conservation Report to preserve it. Eventually, the government decided to preserve the central courtyard and its surrounding blocks²², while demolishing the rest of the estate for redevelopment. On top of that, civil society members such as the Cassia Resettlement Team have drawn attention to several issues concerning the relocation process, pointing out how the government's bureaucratic institutions have not been sensitive to the residents' language barriers, community networks, and other needs²³. Thus, these issues highlight not just questions about heritage and conservation, but the fundamental relations between the state and the citizenry in policy decision-making and implementation.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tan Guan Zhen, "Local illustrator's whimsical paintings of S'pore are full of nostalgia" (Singapore: Mothership, 2019).

²¹ Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten MP), Parliamentary Debates, "Preserving our Heritage, Culture and History – Conserving Dakota Crescent" (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 25, 2016).

²² Toh Wen Li, "Former residents cheer decision to retain parts of Dakota estate" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 2017).

²³ Ng Kok Hoe and The Cassia Resettlement Team, *They Told Us to Move*, pp. 82-84.

Moderated Questions and Answers

Moderator: Thank you panellists. We will now proceed with the question-and-answer section. So, you've each talked about one building, my question is why are they so significant to Singaporeans? How did they create such a lasting legacy?

Historian: The significance of the Old National Library in Singapore's discourse about its heritage cannot be ignored. When the plan for its demolition was announced on 13 March 1999, there was then a rare outburst by the public and civil society about it²⁴. Back in late 1998 when the plans for the construction of the new Singapore Management University campus was unveiled, it was not immediately announced by the government that the plans included the demolition of the buildings along Stamford Road to make way for the SMU campus and the Fort Canning Tunnel²⁵. While there was some public information about the plans, it was a forum letter written by a Singaporean residing in the UK that brought the public's attention to the matter²⁶. Even though the immediate response from SMU was an assurance that the public will have a say in the demolition, in March 1999 SMU Chairman Mr Ho Kwon Ping announced that the library had to go. Although there were subsequent sessions held to discuss the technical possibilities of working around the Old National Library for the Tunnel's construction, it became clear to the participants that the government had no intention to change the demolition plans. In a later interview, Mr. Tay Kheng Soon described his engagements with the Ministry of National Development and Urban Redevelopment Authority as an episode that "smacks of bureaucratic inertia [...and is] a case of defending the status quo...after having committed to the decision to demolish the NL, there was face to be saved and therefore, no other possibilities could be entertained."²⁷

Since this was right before the turn of the millennium, the lengthy debate was conducted in the state newspapers rather than over social media and the internet. Multiple dialogue sessions were conducted both by the government and other parties that ultimately bifurcated into two main standpoints – that heritage conservation must be in line with national economic goals versus the argument that the retention of landmarks is an imperative part of national identity. However, despite the subsequent involvement of notable architects like Mr. Tay Kheng Soon, William S. W. Lim and Dr. K. K. Seet who gave their viewpoints when the government was putting up plans for SMU²⁸, we find that after the entire series of conversations, the final decision-making determinant was still based on economic grounds. This debate continues today for this young nation.

Activist: Dakota Crescent is an old housing estate that was not even built by the HDB. Yet, the people who have stayed at Dakota Crescent for a long time have accumulated not just memories, but an entire community of social support and a sense of home²⁹. The old houses

²⁴ Ho Weng Hin and Tan Kar Lin, "Heed the people's call, conserve built heritage" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 1999).

²⁵ Clara-Ann Kim Lin Khoo, "The Demolition of the National Library: Identity and Heritage Conservation in Singapore (1998-2004)", *NUS Honours Dissertation*, 2009, p. 1.

²⁶ Kelvin Wang, "Let's not lose National Library too" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 1998).

²⁷ Clara-Ann Kim Lin Khoo, "The Demolition of the National Library", p. 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁹ Ng Kok Hoe and The Cassia Resettlement Team, *They Told Us to Move*, p. 241.

are not only physical structures, they also embody a collection of the mundane events of everyday life, which build a strong sentiment that people attach to this place³⁰. Such strong emotions that people attach to Dakota Crescent are not unique to the residents, as the housing estate is also nostalgic for Singaporeans who have lived there when they were young, as well as for those who frequent the Old Airport Road³¹.

A renowned geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, wrote that “should destruction [of a place] occur we may reasonably conclude that the people [affected] would be thoroughly demoralised, since the ruin of their settlement implies the ruin of their cosmos”³². In other words, Dakota Crescent *is* the residents’ world, in that it encompasses their sense of belonging, their memories that constitute their identity, and their habitual practices that have infiltrated the subconscious realm of everyday life³³. These emotions are so strong that the residents have prepared a Conservation Report to the government authorities, which is clearly a case of active citizenry taking ownership of their community and history³⁴.

City Planner: The Old Kallang Stadium had been the place that gathered and united Singaporeans as one throughout the years. In light of time constraints, I will be describing why this is so in relation to one of the main events hosted at the stadium: National Day Parades. It was the first venue that could accommodate a large crowd to the tune of more than 50,000 spectators. This is in contrast to the other staple National Day Parade venue, the Padang, which could only host a maximum of 20,000 spectators. The first Parade hosted by the Kallang Stadium was also the first NDP that tickets had been distributed for free to the general public, transitioning from an event that had been strictly admission by invitation³⁵. The venue reflected a conscious decision to include as many Singaporeans from all walks of life to participate in celebrating Singapore as a nation in a collective fashion³⁶. It was also a source of pride and joy for Singaporeans that identified the then state-of-the-art structure as a new national monument that is a top Stadium in the region.

The Stadium was also designed in a way that would allow marchers, participants and spectators to bond and unite as one as the parade went on. This is because it was custom-built to allow the entire crowd watching the parade to converge in one area and have a good view regardless of where each individual was seated. This was in contrast to the Padang, where “many people had to stand up and crane their necks while those who remained seated missed seeing the contingents when they marched round the sea front”³⁷. Furthermore, with the ability to observe the entire crowd during each of the parade’s

³⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 143.

³¹ Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten MP), Parliamentary Debates, “Preserving our Heritage, Culture and History – Conserving Dakota Crescent” (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 25, 2016).

³² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 149.

³³ Harold Garfinkel, “Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities”, *Social Problems* 11,3 (1964), p. 230.

³⁴ Kok Heng Leun (Nominated MP), Parliamentary Debates, “Preserving our Heritage, Culture and History – Conserving Dakota Crescent” (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 25, 2016).

³⁵ The Straits Times, “60,000 to see grand parade and flypast on National Day” (Singapore: The Straits Times, 1976).

³⁶ Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “The Construction of National Identity through the Production of Ritual and Spectacle: An Analysis of National Day Parades in Singapore”, *Political Geography* 16,3 (1997).

³⁷ The Straits Times, “Parade a grand show of strength, patriotism” (Singapore: The Straits Times, 1976).

proceedings, seeing the awe of a full stadium of Singaporeans celebrating the nation's independence would stoke patriotic fervour, allowing for the "national spirit of gaiety and togetherness" to be fully captured by each spectator and participant³⁸.

Kong and Yeoh³⁹ summarised the importance of the Stadium and how its ability to host the NDP regularly has resulted in its enduring legacy among Singaporeans perfectly:

"While lacking the historic grandeur and associations with a momentous past, the Stadium as a setting for the parade conjures up its own sense of occasion and ceremony by its sheer immensity of space, convergence of people and technological sophistication. As a site of spectacle, it allows for the combination of order and control with large numbers."

It is understandable that we hold these structures and buildings dear to us, for they have been the locations where many Singaporeans have created cherished and shared memories. However, our national identity goes beyond just having these buildings as national icons. I would suggest that Singapore's continuous process of renewal and self-improvement to be the best in the world in whatever it chooses to pursue, including the redevelopment of its infrastructure and buildings, which is in and of itself more critical to our identity than the buildings themselves. Although many have expressed nostalgia when the buildings that all the panellists have brought up were slated for demolition, most Singaporeans understood and embraced the decision. In doing so, they acknowledge that it is more crucial for Singapore to continuously move forward and build a better, brighter future.

Question for Discussion:

1. When does a building or physical structure become something so significant to Singaporeans that they call for its preservation?

Moderator: Since all panellists agree that these buildings have established themselves as national icons in one way or another, do you think that the demolition of these buildings is justified?

City Planner: In addition to understanding that renewal and redevelopment underpins the Singapore story, it is also critical to economic development. Just look at how the areas around the Singapore River have transformed, these developments are physical manifestations of how far we have come. From skyscrapers adorning our financial district that now define our skyline to the redevelopment and development of infrastructure for our tourism sector such as the Boat Quay area and the Marina Bay Sands project, Singapore's infrastructure and buildings have continued to evolve in step with the nation's status from Third World to First. It is common knowledge that land in Singapore is scarce, we do not have the luxury to keep everything in place and opt to spur Singapore's development by creating new projects on new pieces of land. What we have to do is to ascertain when, what and how we can maximise the use of our limited spaces to maximise economic growth and

³⁸ Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, "The Construction of National Identity".

³⁹ Ibid.

social benefits for our people. In doing so, some buildings naturally have to be demolished in place of others. If the old does not go, the new will never come.

Moderator: How exactly do you plan that?

City Planner: Urban planning policies in Singapore are crafted with a clear purpose and plan. The government has dedicated itself to ensure that land use is optimised for the various national needs from housing to retail to social mixing, but not at the expense of our heritage and culture. The National Heritage Board (NHB) and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) are the statutory boards that work hand-in-hand to determine which buildings should be preserved and how to preserve them⁴⁰. In particular, the NHB's Preservation of Sites and Monuments division is dedicated to a stringent process to determine whether a building is of sufficient importance to be preserved, as guided by the Preservation of Monuments Act⁴¹.

As mentioned before, the cultural value and heritage of these buildings has not gone unnoticed. The question here is how we can move forward with redevelopment while preserving the heritage value that comes with the buildings of old. The government has recognised the role of the Old Kallang Stadium in its contribution to our national identity and that it's a place where many cherished memories had been created by Singaporeans across the decades. A send-off for the Stadium was organised, with events such as free stadium tours⁴². It culminated in a final closing event titled "Field of Dreams – A Tribute to the National Stadium" with an exhibition match played by local football heroes. The event was attended by 45,000 people including national athletes, cabinet members and then-President of Singapore S. R. Nathan as guest-of-honour⁴³. Various e-resources have since been created to commemorate the Kallang Stadium, while a project to convert the planks saved from the stands into benches to be installed around Kallang has also been completed⁴⁴.

Activist: I think it is important to understand that any argument for conservation is not an argument against Singapore's economic development⁴⁵. I believe that many Singaporeans understand the limited resources that Singapore constantly faces, especially land, and many buildings are therefore subject to demolition or upgrading. However, we need the government to do more than acknowledge the significance of these buildings that many Singaporeans have attached meaning to. For instance, keeping a red brick wall of the Old National Library is a token policy that does not properly celebrate what the building meant to many Singaporeans. Thus, the top-down style of national heritage in Singapore has prevented us from developing an authentic national identity over the course of our history, but this is largely a result of our economic and social circumstances rather than a deliberate choice.

⁴⁰ Heng, Chye Kiang and Yeo Su-Jan, *Singapore Chronicles: Urban Planning* (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and The Straits Times Press, 2017).

⁴¹ National Heritage Board, "Preservation of Sites & Monuments" (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2017).

⁴² Y.S. Chan, "A grand send-off awaits old lady" (Singapore: The Straits Times, 2007).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ TODAY, "Former National Stadium benches preserved in 15 locations" (Singapore: TODAY, 2014).

⁴⁵ Kok Heng Leun (Nominated MP), Parliamentary Debates, "Preserving our Heritage, Culture and History – Conserving Dakota Crescent" (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 25, 2016).

Moderator: What should be done instead?

Activist: I think that we are now wealthier as a nation and we should have more freedom to decide what is important to us. Redevelopment and conservation measures may be coupled and operationalised via mixed land use planning. For example, in the Conservation Report for Dakota Crescent, there are suggestions on how the estate can be redeveloped for different uses by arts groups, social enterprises, or even as rental flats for couples waiting for their BTO flats⁴⁶. Keeping the buildings intact is crucial for preserving the memories and the experiences associated with the place. Taking such a middle ground between preservation and redevelopment would allow us to protect and promote our identity as a nation with a rich history bound by common, relatable narratives, and at the same time show how far we have developed from our past⁴⁷. This hybridity is precisely what may distinguish us from the world – a national identity shaped by a compromise between the ceaseless progress of the nation and the recursive activities of the people’s everyday lives that strike a chord with everyone⁴⁸.

Historian: It is first necessary to define what benchmark is used to evaluate what is just. I define what is just as the course of action that effectively preserves the Singapore identity and our heritage for the sake of the nation. I would therefore find it difficult to agree with both the city planner and the activist who is making a compromise between conservation and development. According to a French historian, Ernest Renan, a nation must have a “common...rich legacy of memories...and...a common will in the present”⁴⁹. The government’s rhetoric of continuous renewal and self-improvement only fulfils the latter. However, due to its incessant future-orientedness, it inevitably loses something valuable from the past. The Sports Hub, for example, is obviously not a replication of the Old Kallang Stadium. Instead, it is a setting that allows for the state to host global sports and music events to further Singapore’s engagement with global capital, like Marina Bay⁵⁰. It was not rejuvenated to revive the National Day Parades. Essentially, the need to attract global capital has become the dominant priority for the use of space in Singapore⁵¹, as its urban redevelopments have to give way, in some way or another, to facilitate the inflow of such capital⁵².

Moderator: Why would a hybrid between conservation and redevelopment not work?

⁴⁶ Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten MP), Parliamentary Debates, “Preserving our Heritage, Culture and History – Conserving Dakota Crescent” (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 25, 2016).

⁴⁷ Kok Heng Leun (Nominated MP), Parliamentary Debates, “Preserving our Heritage, Culture and History – Conserving Dakota Crescent” (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 25, 2016).

⁴⁸ Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation”, in *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 294-297.

⁴⁹ Ernest Renan, “What is a nation?”, in *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 19.

⁵⁰ Daniel Goh, “Choreographing Singapore’s Utopia by the Bay”, in *Tourist utopias: Offshore islands, enclave spaces, and mobile imaginaries*, edited by Tim Simpson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 102.

⁵¹ Henri Lefebvre, “Plan of the Present Work”, in *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 41.

⁵² Daniel Goh, “Choreographing Singapore’s Utopia by the Bay”, p. 97.

Historian: Even if a fusion of preserved buildings and new establishments were achieved for Dakota Crescent's refurbishments, there is the question of who the gentrified establishments target, what kind of new memories are choreographed by the state's urban planners⁵³, and who are left out in these redevelopments. Gentrification is a palimpsest of erasure and recreation⁵⁴; something novel overwrites what is left of the old, after the old has been effaced. Some traces of the old remains, but these are residual and are not representative of the original.

Given how places like Chinatown and Bugis have fundamentally changed from what they used to be after rejuvenation⁵⁵, it is likely that the people who used to live in Dakota Crescent would not be those who would frequent its new establishments in the future. The future generation would not be walking through and experiencing for themselves the exact same places that their parents and grandparents had previously walked through⁵⁶; it would not preserve the same local culture and sense of belonging that the old blocks offer, despite being located at the same space.

Questions for Discussion:

2. How should a city-state like Singapore balance economic growth and national identity priorities?

3. How can a building or heritage site be redeveloped while preserving its 'authenticity'?

Moderator: Since you all suggest that these buildings are shared public spaces that have forged shared memories among Singaporeans, who should claim ownership over the decision to keep or demolish them?

City Planner: These buildings are indeed important public spaces where people live and work together. As such, we must always ensure that the use of these spaces benefit the people and where appropriate, retain them to allow for the preservation of memories in these places. However, it is not a simple matter of who claims ownership over the decision to keep or demolish a place. We have quite a number of things to consider when making such a decision.

Firstly, who owns the building? Is it a privately-owned space or has it come under the ownership of the state? In the case where it is a privately-owned building, is it a freehold property or is its lease ending soon? What if it's a privately-owned building that is in an area

⁵³ Ibid., p. 111.

⁵⁴ A.J. Stockwell, "Conceptions of Community in Colonial Southeast Asia", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 8 (1998), p. 354.

⁵⁵ Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten MP), Parliamentary Debates, "Preserving our Heritage, Culture and History – Conserving Dakota Crescent" (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 25, 2016).

Mr Lim was referring to how there were attempts to re-create the setting of these two places, but they did not succeed. Although he did not elaborate how these rejuvenation attempts failed to replicate the authenticity of these places, he was probably referring to how the profile of the people who frequented these places in the past differed from those who frequent them today. For instance, Chinatown used to be the largest kampong for Chinese immigrant settlers, but it has become a tourist and historic site today after urban resettlement. Bugis was once a red-light district for transvestites and transsexuals, but it is now a shopping district with some preserved shophouses.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

that has to be repurposed according to national plans? This has happened quite often over history for the downtown area – modern day Singapore looks vastly different from the 19th and 20th century Singapore precisely because it is constantly evolving.

This evolution of the spaces, be it in terms of structures and buildings or the connections between the public spaces like parks and amenities, have collectively contributed to the carefully planned, clean and neat Singapore that we see today. It is no longer messy and segregated, but is integrated and an international hub for businesses and people to come together to live and work. All these do not occur coincidentally, but require careful planning. And Singaporeans are included in that planning process too.

Activist: Both the state and the society have a claim over these buildings and public spaces. Ultimately, the government gains its political legitimacy from the electorate, and it has to consider the multiple interests of the people in making decisions that affect the everyday lives of the citizens. Through the Dakota Crescent episode, it is evident that the government does consider the people's voices in making decisions. According to the Minister for National Development⁵⁷,

A common feedback was that the central courtyard, where the Dove Playground was located, holds special meaning for the residents as it was where they used to gather. The central courtyard includes a cluster of six blocks which contains all the distinctive building typologies and architectural features of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) flats found in the estate. Hence the decision to keep the central courtyard and the six blocks. We have received suggestions for the central cluster of buildings to be put to civic and institutional-related uses. This is currently being studied. The Government will continue to work closely with the relevant stakeholders in planning such uses.

It is clear just by comparing the government's attitude towards the Old National Library and Dakota Crescent that the government is gradually progressing towards a more consultative approach of decision-making. Perhaps the government can improve by taking a more proactive approach of outreach to consult the residents or relevant grassroots stakeholders before making the decision, instead of reacting to the public's outcry or grievances after the decision.

Historian: The answer to this question ultimately depends on which paradigm on state-society relations you subscribe to. If you are a pluralist, the distribution of power should embody individual freedoms and fundamental human rights, which is manifested in a liberal democracy⁵⁸. In this paradigm, what is crucial is that power is divided evenly, and it accumulates divergent viewpoints and interests while melding them together through consent and compromise. The state here is the agent who acts on behalf of the principal,

⁵⁷ Lawrence Wong (Minister for National Development), Parliamentary Debates, "Criteria for Retention of Central Cluster over Other Buildings in Dakota Crescent" (Hansard, Vol 94, Sitting 61, 2018).

⁵⁸ Robert R. Alford, "Paradigms of Relations Between State and Society", in *The State: Critical Concepts*, edited by John A. Hall (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 64.

who is the citizenry. The citizenry has the prerogative to claim ownership over such decisions.

If you subscribe to elitism, you would think that power is never evenly distributed in society, as all large-scale organisations have to assume a bureaucratic form and run in a hierarchical manner for them to function effectively⁵⁹. Political power is essentially appropriated by a minority group that dominates the majority. Usually, the ruling elite has the mindset that they know ‘better’ than the ‘foolish’ citizenry, and sometimes makes unpopular decisions that best serve the people’s interests, supposedly⁶⁰. Especially if the ruling government is elected, it has the political legitimacy to claim ownership and make such decisions regarding these buildings.

Finally, the statist paradigm argues that the state is an institution that is an independent actor and it cannot be reduced to the organisations or individuals that constitute society. The state has its own capacity and resources, and it can shape society in a way that is autonomous from the demands of the capitalists and the people in society⁶¹. I believe by now we know which paradigm characterises Singapore’s state-society relations.

Questions for Discussion:

4. Who should determine what a country’s national identity is?

5. How should national identity develop?

6. What constitutes a nation in a city-state, and why is this important?

Moderator: So far, we have been discussing what has happened. Will there ever come a point when a relatively new development – those built in the last decade like the Integrated Resorts and Gardens by the Bay – be so critical that it would not come under the threat of demolition?

City Planner: We have achieved much in terms of building impressive and iconic structures that have come to be places that Singaporeans can bond over and be proud of. However, as I have highlighted earlier, Singapore’s need to be adaptable and dynamic prevents us from precluding redevelopment plans. However, I have faith that our current institutions – the NHB, URA, and Preservation of Sites and Monuments division – will continue to make the necessary decisions to ensure the preservation of our heritage and culture through buildings that will go hand in hand with Singapore’s future developments.

Activist: While the voice of civil society has been growing louder, we are aware that civil society activists still belong to the minority and many Singaporeans are still either silent or apathetic regarding such matters. Perhaps it would take many more years for civil society to mature and show that the majority of Singaporeans care enough and have a large enough

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 64-65.

⁶⁰ Kenneth Paul Tan, “Harnessing talent for a macho-meritocratic elite”, in *Governing Global-City Singapore* (Oxfordshire and New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), pp. 22-23.

⁶¹ Theda Skocpol, “Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research”, in *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter B Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

voice to influence the decision-making concerning these developments that have become Singapore's iconic landmarks, and stop them from being demolished.

Nonetheless, even if civil society were to mature, voices might be divided as there might also be Singaporeans who prefer to continuously upgrade these developments to ensure that their property values rise. However, I believe that the hallmark of a mature civil society is that it is one that would consensually place heritage above the paranoid pursuit of economic growth; it would be a society that has grown enough to put aside wealth and aim for non-material priorities that matter.

Historian: The question boils down to the ideology of pragmatism that both the state and society hold on so dearly to. All policy decisions are still made based on instrumental rationality, where new policies are implemented as a means to achieve specific goals, with the ultimate end of maximising economic growth and keeping Singapore competitive. This ideology applies to all policy domains, regardless of whether it is urban planning, employment, or education.

Therefore, the question we should instead be asking is whether Singapore can break out of pragmatism. Is economic rationality still our most important value? The problem with framing such economic rationality as an ideology, as an *-ism*, is that it becomes something dogmatic and unchangeable, and people take it for granted that it is natural and right, which forms the conceptual boundaries in which Singaporeans use to reason in their everyday lives⁶². However, it must be remembered that the ideology has a historical context, which emerged after Singapore's struggle for survival⁶³ – pragmatism emerged during a time when decisions had to be made rapidly, when the country could not afford to be bound to 'western' liberal values⁶⁴, when we basically had to do what 'works'⁶⁵. If we continue to abide by this ideology without any alternative, it becomes a problem when we treat it as a magic bullet for continued advancement as a nation. What occurred in the past need not necessarily be what must happen now or in the future. The present reality is only one manifestation of a whole range of possibilities, of which we can be freed from an unquestioning compliance to pragmatism. Therefore, if the future generations can be sensitised to the fact that pragmatism is not a necessity, then there is a possibility that national heritage concerns can supersede economic priorities, where the old might prevail over the new.

Question for Discussion:

7. What is the role of new developments in shaping our national identity?

⁶² Chua Beng Huat, "Pragmatism of the PAP government", in *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 68.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 58.

⁶⁴ Chua Beng Huat, "Liberalism Disavowed", in *Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), pp. 67, 73.

⁶⁵ Kenneth Paul Tan, "Pragmatism and the neoliberal state", in *Governing Global-City Singapore* (Oxfordshire and New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), p. 44.

Conclusion

We have imagined a panel discussion between three individuals who have knowledge about the preservation of heritage and hold strong positions on how to approach this thorny issue from various viewpoints. However, they are by no means representative of the city-state, nor do their collective memories come close to telling the full range of stories and experiences of Singaporeans who grew up in this young nation since its independence.

What about those citizens whose sole experience of the government's decision-making is about how their old homes that were demolished after the enactment of the Land Acquisition Act⁶⁶ in 1966? What about those citizens who are indifferent because they have neither benefited from the new buildings nor possess any affection for the old structures that have been demolished? And what about the next generation who have yet to have the chance to fall in love with some of these places and form new memories with their friends in these community spaces?

How will the views of these citizens change over time, and how will an increasingly mature civil society contribute to the multi-faceted and at times highly charged conversations between the government of the day and its people? Can we ever have an identity that brings us together, and even in dark times binds us? Whether we choose to remember our names or forget our days, only time will tell.

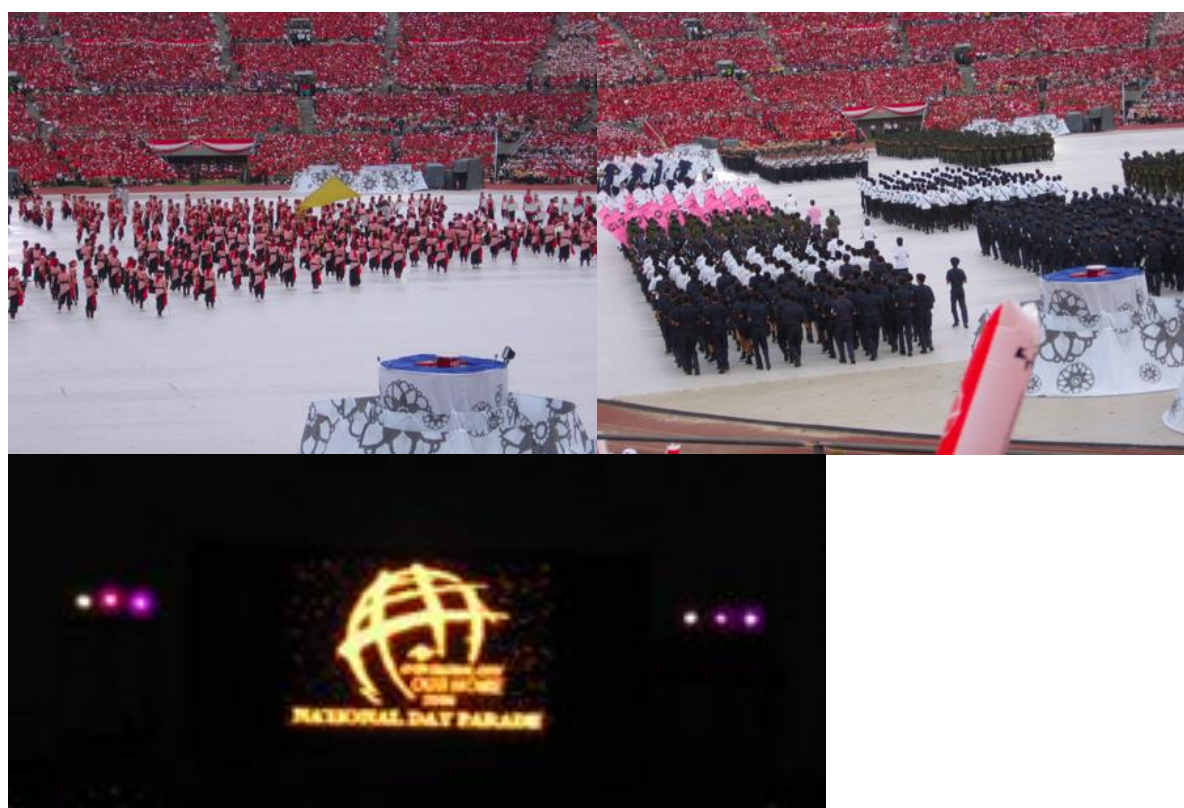
⁶⁶ Cheong Koon Hean, *Singapore Chronicles: Public Housing* (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and The Straits Times Press, 2017), pp. 19-20.

The Land Acquisition Act allowed for the government to acquire land mandatorily, subject to some compensation to the previous owners. People who were implicated in resettlement from squatters were also compensated. In 1973, the Act was amended to ensure that the compensation for acquired land was pegged to the market value in 1973 or at the date of the Gazette Notification, whichever was lower.

Exhibit A: Old Kallang Stadium

Name of Building	Former Singapore National Stadium Also known as Old National Stadium; Grand Old Dame of Kallang
Year Built	1973
Year Demolished	2007
Original Function of Building	Multi-Purpose Stadium
Key Events Held At Venue	National Day Parades (A total of 18 spanning from 1976 to 2006) Malaysia Cup Football Games ASEAN Football Championship Games Large Scale Concerts 'Field of Dreams' Closing Ceremony
Plans for the Place After Demolition	Singapore Sports Hub Project
Best Known for/Key Features of Building	Olympic-Sized Track Football Field - Home of the Singapore National Football Team Iconic Spectator Stands with Wooden Plank Benches





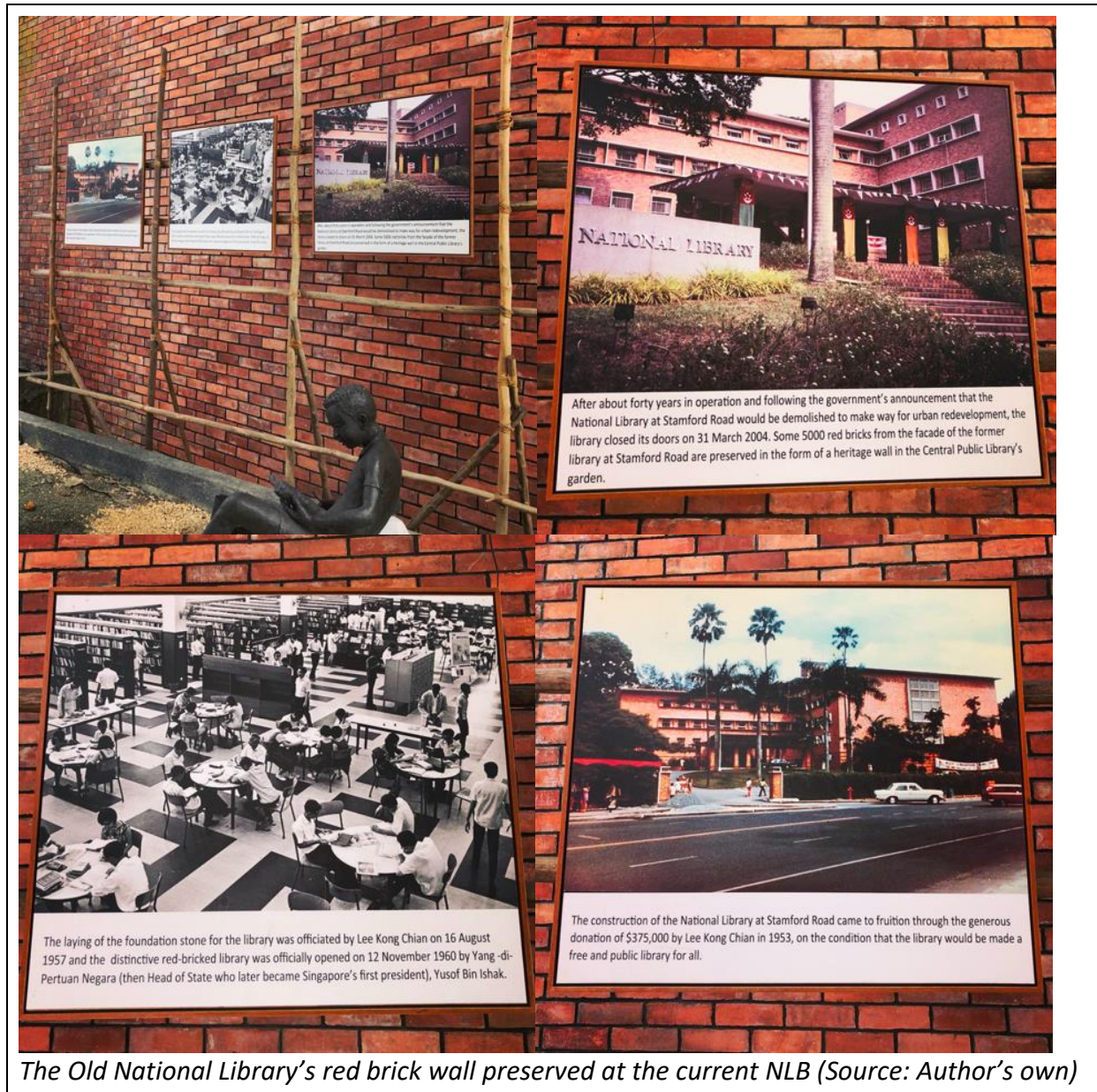
Last National Day Parade held at the Old Kallang Stadium in 2006 (Source: Author's own)

Exhibit B: Old National Library

Name of Building	Old National Library Building
Year Built	1960
Year Demolished	2004
Original Function of Building	National Library
Events Held At Venue	Story-telling sessions for children; Talks for teens and adults; Popular spot for students to study
Plans for the Place After Demolition	Fort Canning Tunnel
Best Known for/Key Features of Building	The <i>Courtyard Café</i> ; The <i>Fountain</i> Red-brick epoch of British architecture
 <i>The Fountain</i>⁶⁷	 <i>The Courtyard Café</i>⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ng Cheng Kiang. "Fountain at the old National Library courtyard." *Flickr*. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chengkiang/6025294968/in/photostream/>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.



The Old National Library's red brick wall preserved at the current NLB (Source: Author's own)

Exhibit C: Dakota Crescent

Name of Building	Dakota Crescent Housing Estate
Year Built	1958
Year Demolished	Began in 2019, Still in Progression as of 2020
Original Function of Building	Public (Rental) Residential Buildings and Related Amenities
Plans for the Place After Demolition	New Public Housing
Best Known for/Key Features of Building	15 Blocks of Low-Rise Flats with 4 Building Typologies - 7-storey butterfly-shaped (pi-shaped) blocks - 3-storey walk-up apartments - 2-storey commercial blocks/shop house - 7-storey slab (straight) blocks Dove Playground



Dove playground at Dakota Crescent (Source: Author's own)



Low-rise blocks (3- and 7-storeys) at Dakota Crescent (Source: Author's own)



Butterfly-/pi-shaped block at Dakota Crescent⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Wikipedia, "Butterfly-shaped block (Block 18, Dakota Crescent)", *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakota_Crescent#/media/File:Butterfly_shaped_blocks.jpg.

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