

## From Humble Homes to Built Heritage: The Case of Saving Dakota Crescent

The debate over built heritage conservation in Singapore has re-emerged with greater public consciousness in recent years due to the high-profile ground-up campaign of 'Save Dakota Crescent'. Dakota Crescent was one of Singapore's oldest public housing estates built by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) in 1958 during the country's pre-independent colonial years. In 2014, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) of Singapore announced that Dakota Crescent would be demolished and redeveloped as part of its renewal plans for older public housing estates. This site was one of several recent heritage locales that had galvanised many locals and heritage enthusiasts into action and triggered public petitions to conserve their unique architectural features and social fabric.

The case of Dakota Crescent estate's conservation, and its eventual fate, illustrated the tensions between urban redevelopment and conservation policy, and the intersection between state planning, public opinion, and the ground-up effort and sentiments of local community stakeholders. This paper will also present a broad survey of the state's changing urban policies in redevelopment and conservation from its post-independence period to present-day, as well as an overview of public agencies and civil societies groups that are engaged in the efforts of preservation and conservation efforts.

### Dakota Crescent: a sleepy SIT estate thrust into the limelight

Located off the Old Airport Road area, the Dakota Crescent flats were developed by the SIT<sup>1</sup> in 1958 and was one of the last estates built by the Trust before the inception of the HDB in 1960. It was a public rental housing estate comprising of 648 units. Many of its residents had been residing there since its completion in 1958, with most of them being retirees in their 60s or older, and about two-thirds of the households had one or more elderly members.<sup>2</sup>

In July 2014, the HDB announced that the estate was slated for redevelopment. The rejuvenation plans included the demolition of 17 of the rental blocks in Dakota Crescent, and required its residents to vacate by the end of 2016. This decision affected about 400 households. These residents were given the option of renting flats at the Cassia Crescent nearby for the same price based on their existing tenancy, or buy a new flat in another location with a housing relocation grant of up to

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<sup>1</sup> The Singapore Improvement Trust was formally established in 1927 by the British colonial government and tasked with improving the infrastructure of Singapore. Particularly, the SIT oversaw the building of numerous low-cost public housing estates during the post-war years, until it was dissolved in 1960 when the Housing Development Board was established and took over its urban planning functions and public housing programme. See also, "Singapore Improvement Trust | Infopedia," accessed July 27, 2019, [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2016-03-14\\_142655.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-03-14_142655.html). and Sam Jo Yeo, "Life before HDB: What Was the Singapore Improvement Trust?," The Straits Times, December 24, 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/life-before-hdb-what-was-the-singapore-improvement-trust>.

<sup>2</sup> "Dakota Crescent Tenants Hit by News of Redevelopment," TODAYonline, accessed July 28, 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/dakota-crescent-tenants-hit-news-redevelopment>.

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\$15,000 – if they were first-time flat buyers.<sup>3</sup> The news came as a surprise to the public, and the largely long-time residents of the sleepy estate. Dakota Crescent estate had until then, been mostly left out of the city's urban redevelopment plans, even as the nearby former National Stadium at Kallang was redeveloped into the Singapore Sports Hub in 2014.<sup>4</sup> An unexpected result of this redevelopment announcement was a vibrant and sustained groundswell of public interest and debate over its architectural significance, the fate of its resident community, and its heritage and conservation value.

The conservation of the various SIT public housing estates had been periodically thrust into the limelight whenever redevelopment plans encroached on their prime locations. SIT flats are typically located in the Central Region of Singapore and their construction was closely linked to Singapore's rapid urban development during its colonial and early post-independence years. These flats were used in the resettlement of crowded tenements in the city centre to make way for prime land to be developed in the Central Business District. As the growing city centre's grab for space gradually radiated outwards to fringe areas beyond the Central Area,<sup>5</sup> the fate of SIT flats built in these planning zones, regardless of their age or locations, was typically that of demolition.<sup>6</sup>

An example of a rare successful conservation of SIT flats was that of pre-war Tiong Bahru flats located in the Central Region.<sup>7</sup> Granted conservation status by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) in 2003, these consisted of 20 blocks of three- to five-storey pre-war flats and 36 shop units were designed with unique Art Deco features and motifs distinctive of the 1930s to 1950s.<sup>8</sup> The conservation news was received positively, and it became a popular heritage trail locale for Singaporeans and tourists who wanted to experience the architectural and cultural heritage of Singapore.

Barely a decade later in 2011, another SIT estate called Redhill Close was earmarked for the Selective En-bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS)<sup>9</sup>. These 21 blocks of flats comprised of 878 flats and were built in 1955. Similar to Dakota Crescent, many of the Redhill Close residents were elderly and their

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<sup>3</sup> "Dakota Crescent Tenants Hit by News of Redevelopment."

<sup>4</sup> The historic National Stadium, Singapore's first, was constructed in 1973 and the 55,000 capacity stadium hosted three Southeast Asian Games (1973, 83, 93) and 18 National Day Parades before its official closure in 2007 and final demolition in 2010. "Kallang National Stadium," *Remember Singapore* (blog), November 14, 2010, <https://remembersingapore.org/kallang-national-stadium/>.

<sup>5</sup> According to the URA's Planning Zones, these Fringe Areas include Queenstown, Bukit Merah Alexandra, and Tiong Bahru areas, while the Central Area includes New Bridge Road, Outram, and Jalan Besar areas. Majority of Singapore's SIT flats were built in estates lying within these Planning Areas, and they had largely been demolished. Refer to URA map: [https://spring.ura.gov.sg/lad/ore/login/map\\_central\\_region.pdf](https://spring.ura.gov.sg/lad/ore/login/map_central_region.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> A non-exhaustive but extensive compilation of SIT flats, their locations, their year of completion and demolition can be found at this website, "List of Singapore Improvement Trust Estates | Tealida Website," *Map of HDB Blocks and Condos in Singapore* (blog), July 2, 2013, <https://www.tealida.com/singapore/sitlist/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Tiong Bahru | Infopedia," accessed July 29, 2019, [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1700\\_2010-08-11.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1700_2010-08-11.html).

<sup>8</sup> The main building façade and certain architectural features of these SIT flats had been codified into a conservation guideline specifying works that require renovation permit approval from the URA. See, Melody Zaccheus, "Conserve Facade, Owners of Pre-War Units Told," *The Straits Times*, May 12, 2013, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/conserv-facade-owners-of-pre-war-units-told>; "Tiong Bahru General Guidelines 240913.Pdf," accessed July 29, 2019, <https://www.ura.gov.sg/-/media/User%20Defined/URA%20Online/Guidelines/Conservation/Tiong%20Bahru%20General%20Guidelines%20240913.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> "Redhill Close Blocks Marked for SERS," accessed July 29, 2019, <https://www.asiaone.com/print/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20111203-314174.html>.

families had been living there since its completion. These blocks would be demolished and residents rehoused by 2017 into replacement flats built by HDB at Henderson Road.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Singapore's ubiquitous public housing landscape had been seen as a modern-day urban achievement. The nation's successful public housing had typically been associated with the newer HDB-built blocks and estates that were constructed during Singapore's post-independence years. Although the older pre-independence SIT-built flats were testaments to Singapore's early urban planning achievements and architectural heritage, these buildings seemed to register less prominently in the public perception. Moreover, the ageing estates were typically situated on prime sites that were earmarked for redevelopment according to the state's master planning vision.

### **Master Planning for redevelopment and heritage**

Singapore's land scarcity conundrum had been shaped by the practical tension between urban development and heritage conservation needs for a city that was growing denser and 'older' in terms of its architectural buildings and historical sites. The successful implementation of the state's Concept Plan and Master Plan, through land acquisitions and land use policies, had enabled it to catapult ahead in its urban progress.<sup>11</sup>

The demand for land for commercial development to meet the city's economic growth model historically necessitated rapid urban renewal and redevelopment. In the 1970s, this required the demolition, replacement, and adaptive re-use of historical districts and buildings for tourism and hospitality developments, as well as for commercial and retail purposes. This took the form of modern high-rise office blocks, shopping centres, and hotels. As urbanisation progressed rapidly, the impetus for development was accompanied by an increasing awareness of the balance between new developments and creating policies to protect local built heritage.

According to Kong and Yeoh (1994), "Singapore exemplifies a city caught between the countervailing pressures of modernisation and urban renewal on the one hand, and the need to reclaim its urban heritage as a means of promoting and cementing a collective past on the other" – otherwise known as 'the conservation dilemma'.<sup>12</sup> It has long been a fine balance between redevelopment and change in land use policy, and the value of tangible and intangible heritage. However, this intellectual and urban policy discourse had only more recently flowed into the realm of public discourse – as

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<sup>10</sup> A lesser publicised SIT redevelopment news, Redhill Close garnered some community efforts at recording its last years. These ground-up efforts sought to document the urban and social fabric of the estate. However, there was little to no news of contestation from the public. "Last Chance to Live in Redhill - Home," accessed July 29, 2019, [https://www.facebook.com/LastChanceToLiveInRedhill/?ref=br\\_rs](https://www.facebook.com/LastChanceToLiveInRedhill/?ref=br_rs); Remember Singapore, "A Walk Through The Old Neighbourhood – Redhill Close," *Remember Singapore* (blog), December 8, 2011, <https://remembersingapore.org/2011/12/08/old-neighbourhood-redhill-close/>; "A Family Photo to Remember for Redhill Close Residents, as Estate Empties out after 63 Years - TODAYonline," accessed July 28, 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/family-photo-remember-redhill-close-residents-estate-empties-out-after-63-years>.

<sup>11</sup> Reviewed every 10 years, the Concept Plan is used to map out long-term plans for strategic land use and transportation. Its main aim is to ensure there is sufficient land to meet our long-term needs, while ensuring the people continue to enjoy a quality living environment. The Master Plan is a statutory land use and development density plan over the medium term of 5 years. Others include the Ministry of National Development's Land Use Plan. Refer to Urban Redevelopment Authority website <https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Planning>

<sup>12</sup> Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, "Urban Conservation in Singapore: A Survey of State Policies and Popular Attitudes," *Urban Studies* 31, no. 2 (March 1, 1994): 248, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420989420080231>.

Singaporeans began to vocalise their desires to treasure and retain Singapore's cultural and architectural identity, such as its post-independence modern buildings.<sup>13</sup>

Urban conservation policy impacted the architectural and cultural landscape of the city. According to Lee (1996), it created a sense of national identity and heritage, and produced economic value in the creation of viable attraction landmarks for tourism.<sup>14</sup> Guided by this approach, the urban planner's vision to prioritise the conservation of historical districts, colonial buildings, and unique landmarks and icons in Singapore, had typically been closely associated with the ability to generate tourism value. This found some dissonance with the general Singaporean public whose sentiments, as surveyed by Teo and Huang (1995), expressed that the "museumization of places may cater to tourist taste and preferences, but Singaporeans feel alienated from erstwhile vernacular places".<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein, a 2018 study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) on public perceptions towards Singapore's built heritage and landmarks found that public opinion could differ from the criteria that members of architecture and heritage community, and state agencies used to appraise the heritage value of buildings and sites.<sup>16</sup> The study acknowledged that little was known in this respect, and the survey sought to "establish a framework to understand public opinion towards built heritage in Singapore."<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the study's focus group discussions teased out four key dimensions in which its participants appraised and evaluated the value of a heritage site.<sup>18</sup> These included:

- a) *Knowledge*: The "explicit or tacit understanding of a site, including its historical and sociocultural significance". This could be historical events and chronological age. Sociocultural significance refers to its importance and associations with to various religious, ethnic groups, and the community in terms of "everyday" heritage.
- b) *Memory*: This refers to both collective memories (i.e. shared and transmitted through a generation or group) and personal memories attached to a site. Some "sites" could no longer be physically present, yet still hold collective and personal memories for generations of Singaporeans.

<sup>13</sup> Kang Shua Yeo, "Safeguarding Post-Independence 'Pearls,'" *The Straits Times*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/safeguarding-post-independence-pearls>; Melody Zaccheus, "Conserved Buildings: Consult Public before Slicing and Dicing," *The Straits Times*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/conserved-buildings-consult-public-before-slicing-and-dicing>; Mayo Martin, "'I'm Afraid One Day It's Going to Go': Saving Singapore's Old Buildings One Photograph at a Time," *CNA*, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/lifestyle/darren-soh-photograph-singapore-heritage-buildings-hdb-10636928>.

<sup>14</sup> Refer to Sim Loo Lee, "Urban Conservation Policy and the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage: The Case of Singapore," *Cities* 13, no. 6 (1996): 399–409. And, Peggy Teo and Shirlena Huang, "Tourism and Heritage Conservation in Singapore," *Annals of Tourism Research* 22, no. 3 (January 1, 1995): 589–615, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(95\)00003-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(95)00003-0).

<sup>15</sup> Teo and Huang, "Tourism and Heritage Conservation in Singapore," 611.

<sup>16</sup> Paveena Seah, Mike Hou, and Natalie Pang, "Study on the Perceptions of Singapore's Built Heritage and Landmarks" (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, June 2018); Melody Zaccheus, "Is That Building Ugly, or a Vital Part of Singapore's Heritage?," *The Straits Times*, June 24, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/is-that-building-ugly-or-a-vital-part-of-heritage>.

<sup>17</sup> Seah, Hou, and Pang, "Study on the Perceptions of Singapore's Built Heritage and Landmarks," 3.

<sup>18</sup> The following list is a concise explanation of the four dimensions. For a detailed description, refer to Seah, Hou, and Pang, 8–9.

- c) *Physical attributes*: This refers to the physical characteristics of a site, including perceptions towards a site's architectural appeal (i.e. aesthetic attributes and distinctiveness, such as colonial buildings, iconic landmarks, post-independence landmarks) and functional utility (i.e. war memorial, niche sites, repurposed sites).
- d) *Value congruence*: This refers to "intangible considerations about a site vis-a-vis one's values, beliefs or ideology".

A crucial and critical analysis from this IPS study highlighted that age differences of those surveyed (generational cohorts) affected the appreciation and evaluation of heritage sites. While older participants were more aware about buildings and landmarks related to Singapore's nation-building era and national development, younger participants were more sensitive towards sites facing threats of demolition and redevelopment.

Indeed, this pattern correlated with the groundswell of support from a largely younger cohort for the conservation of Dakota Crescent estate in response to the state's redevelopment plans. This 'activism' was amplified via social media posts, events, and activities such as "Dakota-Cassia Adventures" guided tours, open houses, and community gatherings, and even ad-hoc or student film and documentary projects.<sup>19</sup> This revealed an increasingly active and vocal citizenry who could mobilize collective will and action to protect heritage locales and architectural landmarks that they considered meaningful to national identity and collective memory.

The following segment will broadly survey the changing state policies towards the approach of redevelopment and conservation. Secondly, there will be a brief description of the various public agencies and civil society groups who are part of this conversation. Lastly, an account of Dakota Crescent will be used to elucidate some of the tensions between the state's planning aims, public agencies, residents and stakeholders, and activist groups.

## **Overview of state policies**

### *Post-independence development strategy: demolish-and-rebuild*

The early years of Singapore's post-World War II and independence era, were characterised by a 'demolish-and-rebuild' approach due to the urgency with which the government saw national and economic progress tied to urban development. This effort was predominantly focused on providing a "healthier environment for the population of Singapore as well as to make better usage of the land for commercial, industrial, residential and recreational purposes".<sup>20</sup> The new government invited the United Nations to advise a team of local personnel, who later formed the first Urban Renewal Unit in 1964. This was subsequently restructured into the Urban Renewal Department (URD) in 1966 under the ambit of the HDB. At this nascent stage of the city's development, urban conservation was not a critical priority for the planning authorities.

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<sup>19</sup> Facebook groups include: "Save Dakota Crescent" <https://www.facebook.com/savedakotacrescent/>; "Dakota-Cassia Adventures" <https://www.facebook.com/dakotadventures/>; "Between Two Homes: Stories of Dakota Crescent" <https://www.facebook.com/betweentwohomes.sg/>.

<sup>20</sup> Housing and Development Board, "HDB Annual 1963," HDB Annual Report (Singapore: Housing & Development Board, 1963), 27.

Initial urban renewal efforts involved clearing slums; resettling residents and businesses; planning and building public housing and amenities such as hawker centres, markets, shops, factories; and, improving public infrastructure. Singapore's planning agenda was primarily directed towards economic development, and providing for the housing, transport, social, and employment needs of the population.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to note that the 1967 Land Acquisition Act<sup>22</sup> was a critical tool, which gave the Singapore government the power of compulsory land acquisition for national development aims.

In 1974, the URD was reconstituted as the URA, a separate statutory board under the Ministry of National Development (MND). Its main role was to oversee the functions of renewal and redevelopment of land in Singapore.<sup>23</sup> Particularly, its major task was to redevelop and resettle residents in the Central Area. Under the URD Sale of Sites Programme, first launched in 1967, and carried out in 1968 and 1969, land was cleared, assembled and sold for new developments<sup>24</sup>. This saw the transformation of the Central Area from an area of slums and squatters into a modern financial and business hub – where the present Central Business District is.

The newly-formed URA carried over the development objectives inherited from the HDB's URD, but also incorporated two new aims: (1) the construction of more open space and landscaped pedestrian malls particularly in the central city area; and, (2) the preservation of Singapore's historical and architectural heritage.<sup>25</sup>

#### *Policy shifts: establishing a conservation stance in 1980s-90s*

The “demolish-and-rebuild” policy stance of the 1970-1980s had effectively destroyed vast swathes of old shophouses and townhouses over an extensive area of Singapore. In response to this, the URA initiated studies in area conservation and rehabilitation in 1976. This was the start of a shift in urban policy.<sup>26</sup>

Conservation studies were initiated in 1976 and included Chinatown, Emerald Hill, Peranakan Corner, Singapore River, Little India and Kampong Glam – following which, detailed studies were commissioned in 1985.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Early editions of HDB Annual Reports documented the development rationale adopted by the URD and the direction of city planning of Singapore.

<sup>22</sup> The Land Acquisition Act was passed in Parliament in 26 October 1966 and came into effect on 17 June 1967. To further expedite government developmental projects, the Act was amended in 1973 in order to curb land speculation and limit the cost of land acquisition to be borne by the state. “Land Acquisition Act Is Enforced - Singapore History,” accessed May 13, 2019, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/1f669eff-bc82-49d1-a27c-2624e4cab8c6>.

<sup>23</sup> See, Housing and Development Board, “HDB Annual 1973/74,” HDB Annual Report (Singapore: Housing & Development Board, 1974), 101. and “Urban Redevelopment Authority | Infopedia,” accessed March 30, 2018, [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1569\\_2009-09-18.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1569_2009-09-18.html).

<sup>24</sup> Martin Perry, Lily Kong, and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (New York: Wiley, 1997); “Urban Redevelopment Authority | Infopedia.”

<sup>25</sup> Housing and Development Board, “HDB Annual 1974/75,” HDB Annual Report (Singapore: Housing & Development Board, 1975), 2–3.

<sup>26</sup> See, Lee, “Urban Conservation Policy and the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage: The Case of Singapore,” 400.; HDB, “HDB Annual 1984/85,” HDB Annual Report (Singapore: Housing & Development Board, 1985), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Kong and Yeoh, “Urban Conservation in Singapore,” 249.

The URA aimed for urban renewal to coexist with conservation. However, urban and architectural scholars generally agreed that while the URA's conservation policy and principles appeared comprehensive in technical details, these did not translate effectively into satisfying results of the sensitive retention and restoration of old buildings and sites.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, physical and economic aspects took precedence over preserving the intangible culture and social-cultural fabric of the existing community.

Nevertheless, in December 1986, the URA consolidated its inaugural Conservation Master Plan to delineate the conservation of the city's historic districts that were known for their rich cultural and architectural heritage.<sup>29</sup>

Finally in 1989, the URA was merged with the Ministry of National Development's (MND) Planning Department and Research and Statistics Unit to consolidate all urban planning functions under a single authority. The URA then became the national conservation and central planning authority and it began the crucial task of conserving Singapore's built heritage.<sup>30</sup>

The main conservation tasks under URA's ambit were identifying buildings and areas of historical interests for conservation; preparing conservation master plan; and guiding the implementation of conservation by the public and private sectors. Particularly, under conservation guidelines, the URA set out conservation principles, planning parameters and restoration guidelines for earmarked buildings. Broadly, the URA stipulated a "3R" principle of *Maximum Retention, Sensitive Restoration, and Careful Repair* that were applied no matter how small or large the heritage building was.<sup>31</sup> Before the commencement of any conservation work, careful research and documentation were to be done on the building to ensure quality restoration work. At the same time, URA Conservation Guidelines provided greater detail to how conservation was to be applied in different degrees to the different groups of Conservation Areas, taking into consideration their historical significance, the context of the surrounding developments, and the long-term planning intention for each area.<sup>32</sup>

This turn-around in policy stance from a heavy focus on redevelopment to a growing emphasis on rehabilitation and conservation of buildings and districts indicated the greater awareness and recognition of Singapore's architectural and historical heritage.

### *National Heritage Board*

Another statutory board, the National Heritage Board was the "custodian of Singapore's heritage". Its mission included, preserving history and celebrating the shared heritage of the country's communities; educating for nation-building and cultural understanding; and, managing the national

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<sup>28</sup> Some viewpoints include, Johannes Widodo, "Conservation in Singapore," *Membacaruang* (blog), March 13, 2014, <http://membacaruang.com/conservation-in-singapore/>; Kong and Yeoh, "Urban Conservation in Singapore," 249.

<sup>29</sup> MND Annual Report, 1987, 35.

<sup>30</sup> For further elaboration the changes in URA, HDB, and MND as public agencies, see Kong and Yeoh, "Urban Conservation in Singapore," 248.

<sup>31</sup> "Conservation Principles," accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Guidelines/Conservation/Conservation-Principles>.

<sup>32</sup> The four main groups of Conservation Areas are: Historic Districts (e.g. Boat Quay, Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India), Residential Districts (Blair Plain, Cairnhill and Emerald Hill), Secondary Settlements (e.g. Beach Road, Tiong Bahru, Geylang, Tanjong Katong), and Bungalow Areas of the Good Class Bungalow Areas and Fringe (Holland Park, Nassim Road, Mountbatten), See, "Conservation Guidelines," accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Guidelines/Conservation/Conservation-Guidelines>.

museums and heritage institutions. It was also responsible for “setting policies relating to heritage sites, National Monuments and the national collection”.<sup>33</sup>

In the wake of rising civic activism over sites such as Bukit Brown Cemetery,<sup>34</sup> the NHB had set up an impact assessment and mitigation division in 2013 to study and “conduct impact assessments of redevelopment works on heritage sites and structures and work with the necessary stakeholders to establish mitigation measures”.<sup>35</sup> The division played a mediator role between civic groups and other government agencies. Some examples included helping to negotiate the lease extension of the dragon kilns in Jurong, and broaching between civic groups and statutory boards. The NHB team had also assessed conservation proposals put forth by a heritage group, My Community, to the URA, for 18 historic sites in Queenstown – based on their architectural, historical and community merits – and found eight to be of ‘high heritage value’. Eventually, Queenstown Public Library was one of the three buildings conserved by the URA.

### *Preservation of Sites and Monuments*

The Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM) was made a division of the National Heritage Board in 2013. Originally called the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB), it was formed in 1971 as a statutory board of the MND, following the enactment of the Preservation of Monuments Act.<sup>36</sup> The Board safeguarded sites and monuments that provided a link to Singapore’s past as historical landmarks.<sup>37</sup> This was done through the identification and recommendation of sites, buildings and structures with historical, cultural, architectural or archaeological merit, for preservation. Additionally, it also documented and disseminated information to raise public awareness of these national monuments; and, provided guidelines on the preservation, conservation, and restoration of monuments.

### *Heritage and Identity Partnership*

The Heritage and Identity Partnership (HIP) was incepted in August 2018. The HIP was formed to take on an expanded role from its predecessor, the Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP) which was first organised in 2002. The role of the CAP in its sixteen years of service was to provide advice to URA on ways to protect and conserve buildings of heritage value to Singapore. The HIP was convened by the

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<sup>33</sup> “About NHB,” accessed May 11, 2019, <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/who-we-are/about-us>.

<sup>34</sup> Bukit Brown Cemetery, located near the Central Catchment Area of Singapore was a historic public burial ground for the Chinese since 1922. Prominent pioneers like Chew Boon Lay and Cheang Hong Lim, and tens of thousands of ordinary migrants were also buried at Bukit Brown. In September 2011, the URA, Land Transport Authority, and National Parks Board announced a new dual four-lane road would be constructed to alleviate the congestion along existing Pan Island Expressway and Lornie Road. The roadworks would impact the cemetery grounds and require the exhumation of numerous graves. Members of the public, Nature Society and Singapore Heritage Society were among many who called for careful consideration of the area’s physical and cultural heritage, and its ecological and environmental impact, as well as conservation alternatives to be explored. “Bukit Brown - Singapore Heritage Society,” accessed July 30, 2019, [http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?page\\_id=1352](http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?page_id=1352); Kirsten Han Diplomat The, “Singapore: The Fight to Save Bukit Brown,” The Diplomat, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/10/singapore-the-fight-to-save-bukit-brown/>; “Nature Society (Singapore),” accessed July 30, 2019, [https://www.nss.org.sg/special\\_announcement.aspx?id=ohgTSSH5Yo0=](https://www.nss.org.sg/special_announcement.aspx?id=ohgTSSH5Yo0=).

<sup>35</sup> Melody Zaccheus, “New National Heritage Board Unit Plays Mediator on Heritage Issues,” The Straits Times, October 26, 2013, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-national-heritage-board-unit-plays-mediator-on-heritage-issues>.

<sup>36</sup> “Preservation of Monuments Board Is Established - Singapore History,” accessed July 30, 2019, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/a3be461e-c6a1-4fe0-8740-f7ec29baa8ef>.

<sup>37</sup> “About Preservation of Sites and Monuments,” accessed April 3, 2018, <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/psm/>.



URA as a partnership “to support public-private-people collaboration in shaping and promoting Singapore’s built heritage and identity”.<sup>38</sup> The HIP comprised 18 members from diverse backgrounds and specialisations. They included individuals from the building industry, arts and heritage sector, journalism, business and property owners, and academia. This diversity was aimed at collecting a broad spectrum of perspectives and ideas in sustaining and the built heritage and memories of not just buildings, but also places in the city. One of the HIP’s responsibilities was to work with the URA on the Master Plan review to garner views on how to integrate heritage and identity as a meaningful part of development plans of new areas and redevelopment of the city.

### *Singapore Heritage Society (SHS)*

A non-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 1987, the SHS functioned as an independent voice for heritage conservation in Singapore. As a civil society group, it produced research, conducted public education, and took on advocacy for matters pertaining to Singapore’s tangible and intangible heritage, such as, physical sites like Bukit Brown, Pulau Ubin, and promoting cultural authenticity and vibrancy in existing heritage sites such as Chinatown and Little India.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of Pulau Ubin, a rustic island off the Singapore mainland, in 2014, Dr Chua Ai Lin, president of the SHS called for heritage and environmental impact assessments to be done before cementing redevelopment plans for Pulau Ubin. These studies would look at building and structures as well as the environmental, social and community life. This was akin to the Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) used by countries like Hong Kong, which faced similar developmental impetus.<sup>40</sup> Some of the compulsory aspects to be considered for the Hong Kong HIA included a baseline study consisting of desktop study, field survey, historic buildings and structures survey, and archaeological survey, as well as a baseline report and impact assessment as advised by an expert in cultural heritage<sup>41</sup>.

As at 2019, there were no regulatory or legal requirements for the government, private developers or individuals to conduct a HIA exercise on sites deemed to be of cultural and heritage value in Singapore before undertaking any plans to redevelop or modify land use. According to the Culture, Community and Youth Minister Grace Fu, the NHB adopted a “calibrated and sensitive approach” towards heritage preservation and development, and “the [heritage impact] assessment frameworks adopted by other countries were studied but these were not fully applicable to Singapore”.<sup>42</sup>

In support of the Dakota conservation efforts by various civic groups and the Dakota Crescent community, the SHS organised a forum with a film screening and discussion in September 2015. The documentary film ‘Heartland’, based on the Dakota Crescent community and estate, and the event

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<sup>38</sup> “Formation of New Partnership on Built Heritage and Identity,” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Media-Room/Media-Releases/pr18-49>.

<sup>39</sup> “About Us - Singapore Heritage Society,” accessed May 13, 2019, [http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?page\\_id=1363](http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?page_id=1363).

<sup>40</sup> For example, the Antiquities and Monuments Office of Hong Kong requires heritage impact assessments “for all new capital works projects involving historic and built heritage... the project proponents and relevant works departments will be required to consider whether their projects will affect sites or buildings of historic or archaeological significance (collectively known as “heritage sites”).” “Heritage Impact Assessment - Antiquities and Monuments Office,” accessed May 13, 2019, [https://www.amo.gov.hk/en/hia\\_01.php](https://www.amo.gov.hk/en/hia_01.php).

<sup>41</sup> Environmental Protection Department of Hong Kong, “Guidelines for Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment,” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.epd.gov.hk/eia/register/study/latest/figure/esb1442006Appendixb.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> Melody Zaccheus, “Parliament: National Heritage Board Launches One-Stop Heritage Portal Roots.Sg,” *The Straits Times*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/national-heritage-board-launches-one-stop-heritage-portal-rootsg>.

brought together a forum of heritage observers, stakeholders, and academic experts in architectural history and heritage conservation.<sup>43</sup>

### **Saving Dakota Crescent – an urban tension**

That Dakota Crescent gained prominence among heritage enthusiasts and the public was quite unexpected. One of Singapore's oldest public housing estates, its central courtyard green was fondly recognised by its mosaic-tiled dove-themed playground. The architectural significance of this estate of blocks went beyond its exterior. The estate was named after the Douglas DC-3 Dakota, a model of plane that used to land at the now-defunct Kallang Airport nearby.<sup>44</sup>

The post-war modernist blocks of Dakota Crescent were but one of many physical structures of its time, signalling a turning point in Singapore's economic and financial progress on the global stage. Yet, the subject of conserving modern public housing flats – save for the pre-war Tiong Bahru SIT flats – had rarely been broached in the conservation oeuvre of Singapore. Historically, conservation was largely reserved for pre-independence era architecture such as shophouses and townhouses.

*“Until the recent decade, modern public housing had not been the subject of heritage and conservation, which were traditionally more focused on public monuments, colonial ethnic districts, as wells as religious and cultural centres.”<sup>45</sup>*

This estate consisted of 17 blocks: eight prominent “butterfly blocks”, four slab-blocks, and five blocks which face Geylang River<sup>46</sup>. These “butterfly blocks” – curved buildings designed with two perpendicular wings – were a rare sight in contemporary Singapore. These blocks were designed to facilitate better ventilation through an open central courtyard located between both wings.

Physically and aesthetically, the 60-year-old brick and concrete blocks seemed unremarkable in their plain colour, mostly rectangular form, and simple façade openings as compared to their more modern steel and glass condominium counterparts. However, architectural and heritage enthusiasts lauded its simplicity as distinctive and charming because it represented the urgency of housing needs for quick construction during its time. The openness of its large courtyard and generous streetscape was fast becoming an obsolete feature of newer dense high-rise public housing estates of the HDB new towns.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “The Obsession with Dakota Crescent,” TODAYonline, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/lifestyle/obsession-dakota-crescent>; “Dakota Crescent - A Reflection about Our Heartland | Facebook,” accessed July 30, 2019, [https://www.facebook.com/notes/singapore-heritage-society/dakota-crescent-a-reflection-about-our-heartland/907432139304423/?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=H-R](https://www.facebook.com/notes/singapore-heritage-society/dakota-crescent-a-reflection-about-our-heartland/907432139304423/?__tn__=H-R); “Dakota Crescent: The Community Life and Built Heritage of Public Housing (Film Screening and Discussion),” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/events/870273696399901/>.

<sup>44</sup> Wen Li Toh, “Dakota Icons to Be Kept as Estate Is Redeveloped,” The Straits Times, December 12, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/dakota-icons-to-be-kept-as-estate-is-redeveloped>.

<sup>45</sup> Kok Hoe Ng and The Cassia Resttlement Team, eds., “Dakota Estate’s Warm Sunset: Active Citizenry and Public Housing Heritage,” in *They Told Us to Move: Dakota-Cassia* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019), 211–19.

<sup>46</sup> Melody Zaccheus, “Group Pushing to Save Dakota Crescent,” The Straits Times, May 25, 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/group-pushing-to-save-dakota-crescent>.

<sup>47</sup> These new towns include Toa Payoh, Bishan, Woodlands, Jurong, and Bedok. These estates were situated farther from the city centre and served the housing needs of workers at newly developed industrial estates and factories.

The founder of the Save Dakota Crescent campaign, architect Jonathan Poh, noted that two of the blocks (Blocks 10 and 20) recalled other long-demolished SIT blocks in St Michael's estate in Whampoa and the Princess and Duchess estate in Queenstown. These blocks featured "alternating balconies and walls along their corridors" and Dakota Crescent's blocks were the last surviving examples of such architecture in Singapore.<sup>48</sup>

#### *Dakota community and social groups raise awareness*

*"A notice is delivered, in which 400 households living at Dakota Crescent are told to move. It sets off a cacophony of responses from its residents – anguish, anxiety, resignation, anticipation, and sometimes silence."*<sup>49</sup>

More significantly, the social and cultural fabric of long-time residents in this community would be uprooted. Over the months, a steady stream of interest from the public and civil society about this old estate gained momentum. Some residents such as Bilyy Koh connected with heritage and architectural enthusiasts. Some examples of ground-up groups involved in raising awareness about the fate of the estate included Save Dakota Crescent, My Community, Between Two Homes, and the Cassia Resettlement Team.<sup>50</sup>

As part of these groups' efforts to raise the visibility and public awareness of the estate's heritage value and champion its conservation, heritage activists collaborated with residents to conduct events such as heritage walking tours, open houses, and community events. Following the groundswell of awareness, the Mountbatten area's Member for Parliament Lim Biow Chuan met residents and the members of Save Dakota Crescent to discuss the estate's conservation potential and fate.

#### *Cultivating the ground: alternative conservation proposals*

By May 2016, the team of Save Dakota Crescent, which consisted of a group of architects, had begun a conservation proposal paper for alternative redevelopment plans for the estate<sup>51</sup> which was submitted to the MND for consideration. Some of the options proposed were a wholesale conservation of the estate and selective re-adaptation of some blocks for commercial, retail and hospitality; another was a partial conservation of specific iconic structures to be gazetted for protection; or introducing new functions and user types such as arts groups and social enterprises, or rental flats for young married couples, into the existing estate to revitalise it. In October 2016, MP Lim Biow Chuan filed a motion in Parliament to push for the conservation of the estate with the presentation of the group's proposal, and subsequently arranged for a meeting with the government agencies involved, including the URA and NHB.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Zaccheus, "Group Pushing to Save Dakota Crescent."

<sup>49</sup> Kok Hoe Ng and The Cassia Resettlement Team, eds., *They Told Us to Move: Dakota-Cassia* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019), 246.

<sup>50</sup> For further information, visit the respective groups' Facebook pages.

<sup>51</sup> Zaccheus, "Group Pushing to Save Dakota Crescent"; "ST Heritage Correspondent Melody Zaccheus on Covering the Story of Dakota Crescent," *The Straits Times*, February 5, 2018, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/sts-melody-zaccheus-on-covering-the-story-of-dakota-crescent>.

<sup>52</sup> "Conserve Historic Dakota Crescent Estate, MP Urges Govt," *TODAYonline*, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/conserved-historic-dakota-crescent-estate-mp-urges-govt>; "Motion to Conserve Key Areas of Dakota Crescent," *The Straits Times*, October 11, 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/motion-to-serve-key-areas-of-dakota-crescent>.

*Epilogue: a partial conservation*

On December 11, 2017, Minister for National Development Lawrence Wong announced the government's move to reimagine Dakota Crescent as a mixed-use development, public housing estate to retain the quality and character of the estate that was familiar to many Singaporeans. MND announced its decision for a partial conservation and build new HDB flats on the redeveloped land "to provide more public housing options near the city, and allow another generation of Singaporeans to build their own memories of the place."<sup>53</sup>

The central cluster of six blocks (Blocks 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20), along with the iconic dove playground in the middle of the courtyard would be kept and repurposed for civic and community uses. The selected blocks were representative of the four types of SIT building typologies. These included two seven-storey curved "butterfly" blocks, two seven-storey slab blocks, one three-storey block and a two-storey block.

This scheme would be achieved through the adaptive re-use of the old buildings and injection of convenient amenities into the development plot.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Wong indicated the MND's intentions to continue to engage stakeholders and involve the wider community to redevelop this estate.

In the Draft Master Plan 2019, the URA affirmed the redevelopment and conservation plans for Dakota. Furthermore, future public housing would be planned with these conserved buildings in mind, incorporating "ideas from heritage groups, former residents and community leaders".<sup>55</sup>

The Dakota Crescent redevelopment outcome prompted heritage observers to hope for a more inclusive and formalised mechanism for the community and stakeholders to provide suggestions and feedback to the Government's redevelopment and demolition plans. Heritage groups had been accorded a wider platform via social media to raise awareness, debate conservation issues, and appeal for a more nuanced approach to redevelopment of contested sites. Yet this remained a measured and iterative process for the government, grassroots communities, residents, civil society groups, and other stakeholders.

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<sup>53</sup> "Dakota Crescent to Be Redeveloped into Public Housing Site," Channel NewsAsia, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/dakota-crescent-to-be-redeveloped-into-public-housing-site-9488216>; "Partial Conservation of Dakota Crescent Gives Heritage Enthusiasts Hope," TODAYonline, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/partial-conservation-dakota-crescent-gives-heritage-enthusiasts-hope>.

<sup>54</sup> "Dakota Crescent to Be Redeveloped into Public Housing Site."

<sup>55</sup> "URA Draft Master Plan 2019: Renewal for Bayshore, Dakota Crescent, Farrer Park; Farrer Park to Retain Heritage," The Business Times, March 27, 2019, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/real-estate/ura-draft-master-plan-2019-renewal-for-bayshore-dakota-crescent-farrer-park-farrer-park>.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. Share examples from your experience how a conserved building had a positive or negative impact on your life.
2. What are the different values that you would ascribe to buildings, landmarks, neighbourhoods, etc? Which aspects are more or most important to you?
3. Growth and (re)development: How should Singapore decide what to conserve? What are the opportunities and constraints for the various stakeholders involved?
4. Singapore had several private en-bloc redevelopments such as Pearl Bank Apartments, Golden Mile Complex and People's Park Complex. These triggered public petitions to protect the buildings from the en-bloc and demolition process. What are your thoughts about the different ways Singaporeans have responded to these scenarios?

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