

Singapore's Last Kampung

In 2017, Member of Parliament Intan Azura Mokhtar called on the Singapore government to preserve Kampung Lorong Buangkok, a 122-hectare plot of land that was the last remaining *kampung*, or traditional village, in mainland Singapore. She suggested that the government consider turning the *kampung* into a site for education or conservation. "Surely we can explore ways where the kampung can co-exist and, in fact, enhance and bring value to urban life," she said.¹



Figure 1: A sign at the entrance to Kampung Buangkok.

Kampung Lorong Buangkok (Figure 1, Figure 3) bore little resemblance to the rest of Singapore. Over 80 percent of Singapore's residents lived in multi-floor, concrete structures called Housing Development Board (HDB) flats (Figure 2), and Singapore's most iconic structures included a three-tower resort topped by the world's longest infinity pool, a grove of concrete "supertrees" covered in plants, and a theatre whose roof resembled a durian made of steel (Figure 4). Home to 26 families in the north of Singapore, the *kampung* consisted of single-floor, zinc-roofed houses and dirt roads surrounded by a lush overgrowth of trees and shrubs. Clothing lines and weather-worn furniture stood outside many homes, some of which lacked gates so that individuals could easily approach others' front doors. Crowing roosters occasionally broke the

¹ Royston Sim, "MP Calls for preservation of last kampung on Singapore mainland," *The Straits Times*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mp-calls-for-preservation-of-last-kampung-on-spore-mainland>.

calm, quiet atmosphere of the village. Right outside the village, in plain sight from within it, were the HDB flats more typical of the Singaporean landscape.



Figure 2: Housing Development Board (HDB) flats visible from within the *kampung*.

At the time of writing, two schools, part of a park, and a road to an area in northeast Singapore, Seletar, were earmarked for construction on the *kampung's* land. Intan suggested exploring how the *kampung* could co-exist with the two schools, as it had the potential to become a site for students to learn about community values.² She also said that the *kampung's* residents should be left to live their lives as normal. In response to Intan's comments, Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee asserted that the developments would take place far into the future, with plans such as the road to Seletar likely to happen in several decades from the time of writing. He also called upon the government to ensure that stakeholders were closely engaged in the process.

“This must involve deep engagement with the kampong families living there at that time, to understand and consider their needs and interests. Some may not want to move away from the kampong. But they may also not want their community to be turned into an educational or heritage attraction, drawing crowds of curious visitors. We will also consider the wishes of Singaporeans who want the heritage and educational value of kampong life to be properly documented, retained and celebrated.”³

² Ibid.

³ Desmond Lee, “Reply by Minister Desmond Lee in response to Adjournment Motion by MP Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar on “Preserving Green Spaces and Heritage in Jalan Kayu Constituency,” (speech, Singapore, October 17, 2017), Ministry of National Development, <https://www.mnd.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/view/reply-by-minister-desmond-lee-in-response-to-adjournment-motion-by-mp-dr-intan-azura-mokhtar-on-preserving-green-spaces-and-heritage-in-jalan-kayu-constituency>.



Figure 3: Kampung Lorong Buangkok.



Figure 4: The three towers of the Marina Bay Sands integrated resort. Image by Erwin Soo, distributed under a CC BY 2.0 license.

In the same address, Lee mentioned restoration works taking place on *kampung* houses located on Pulau Ubin, a boomerang-shaped island in the northeast of Singapore where Singapore's other remaining *kampung* stood, as well as efforts to “enhance the rustic, nostalgic and authentic feel of the island”.

Kampung Buangkok, which sat on top of what used to be a swamp near Sungei Punggol (Punggol River), started out with just five or six families in the 1950s, when traditional Chinese medicine seller Sng Teow Koon acquired the land. With the help of residents and neighbours who volunteered their efforts for construction works, the

kampung grew to house 40 families in the 1960s. The *kampung*'s nickname became “Kampung Selak Kain”, which meant “*kampung* of hitching up sarongs” in Malay, because of the frequent floods that plagued the low-lying village. The construction of a canal in the 1970s helped alleviate some, but not all, of the flooding. In the early 2000s, the *kampung*'s residents banded together on a tight budget to build reinforcements against the floods when they did not receive the \$10 million in funding that would be necessary to flood-proof their homes. Then environment minister Lim Swee Say describing the potential use of the money as not “cost-effective.”⁴

There were over 20 households left in Kampung Buangkok at the time of writing, with each one paying a very low rent—\$9.10 per month in one household, for example⁵—to Sng Mui Hong, the daughter of Sng Teow Koon. “Before my father died, he told me that the *kampung* people are not rich, so we cannot charge them high rent,” Sng told *The Straits Times* in 1999.⁶ “We are all like one big family here.” Some residents described rent collection in the *kampung* as a very high-trust and informal system, with residents simply passing the rent to Sng when they encountered her.⁷

The *kampung* was the last traditional village that remained on Singapore's mainland. Other villages had long since given way to public housing, a practical means for ensuring that there was space for Singapore's dense population to live comfortably on the small island. Land was a very scarce resource in Singapore, and the government, which managed Singapore's land use extremely closely, had taken numerous steps to increase the country's land mass as well as its available land. Many of Singapore's best-known spots, including the Marina Bay Financial Centre, Changi Airport, and Gardens by the Bay, sat on land that had been reclaimed via sand imports from neighbouring countries as well as bits of rock and soil. Land reclamation, which began as early as 1822, had enabled the country to increase its size by nearly 14,000 hectares. But space was still scarce: at the time of writing, discussions about waterborne and subterranean housing and communal spaces were taking place. With a projected population of 6.9 million by 2030—1.3 million more than the population at the time of writing—the government had predicted that Singapore would need to further increase its land mass by 5,600 hectares to ensure sufficient space for infrastructure, housing, community facilities, and industry.

Various heritage sites in land-scarce Singapore had given way to modernity over the years. In 1965, over 200 tombs in the Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery, a cemetery that had served as a Chinese burial ground since 1922, were exhumed for the purpose of realigning a road. Further exhumations took place in later years for purposes such as the construction of a new four-lane highway that connected MacRitchie Viaduct and Adam Flyover, and the rest of the cemetery was to be converted into housing. Numerous other cemeteries had also disappeared from Singapore—Ngee Ann City, an upscale shopping centre located on Orchard Road, sat on part of what had previously been a Teochew cemetery, for example. Supporters of grave exhumations pointed out

⁴ Arti Mulchand, “No spare \$10m? Get out the changkul,” *The Straits Times*, March 17, 2004.

⁵ Ng Huiwen, “One day in Lorong Buangkok, Singapore's last kampung on mainland,” *The Straits Times*, October 8, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/one-day-in-buangkok-singapores-last-kampung-on-mainland>.

⁶ Zusanita Zakaria, “A place and lifestyle trapped in time,” *The Straits Times*, January 19, 1999.

⁷ Ng, “One day in Lorong Buangkok.”

that graves were simply impractical in a small country with a high population density, while detractors argued that the memories and rituals associated with cemeteries provided important and irreplaceable historical meaning. Other heritage landmarks that no longer existed at the time of writing included the Sungei Road flea market, Singapore's oldest flea market and last permanent zone for free hawking, and the National Library Building on Stamford Road, among others. Kampung Khatib Bongsu, which was demolished in 2007, was the most recent traditional village to exist on the mainland prior to Kampung Buangkok.

Many responded to the discussion about Kampung Buangkok's future by calling for the village's preservation. They argued for the *kampung's* historical and educational value, and the importance of showing the young how previous generations had grown up. "Please preserve," Chan Wai Ping wrote in response to the article posted on the Facebook page of *The Straits Times*. "Heritage and common memories keep the sense of belonging, the connection across generations, sense of familiarity and the feeling of home." Lee had noted that it would not work for the government to modernize the areas around the *kampung* while leaving the *kampung* in its original state, "isolating it from the rest of the community".⁸ The various sentiments on Kampung Buangkok's fate reflected different strands of moral reasoning such as deontology and utilitarianism. Justifications for preservation—heritage and educational value, *kampung* spirit—took a deontological view of the issue, calling for the state to fulfil its duty in preserving the space for the good it could bring to Singaporean society. Meanwhile, arguments for redevelopment asserted that schools and a new road would serve a greater number of people than there were residents in Kampung Buangkok, thus putting forth a utilitarian interpretation of the debate.

Over the years, several residents of Kampung Buangkok had expressed their reluctance to move elsewhere, with many citing ample space, good neighbour relations, and natural beauty as key attractions of their *kampung*. "I have the freedom to *jalan jalan* [walk about]," 72-year-old Hafsa Yarman told *The Straits Times* in 2004.⁹ "In a flat, I would feel like a bird in a cage." Habsah Roheng said that, in contrast with an HDB flat, her *kampung* house gave her open space to enjoy in her free time and allowed her to cook anything she wanted.¹⁰ A secondary two teenager, Nur Farhana Hilmi, told *The New Paper* that the greenery of her village was a source of cheer for her. "Even when I grow up, I'll still like to live here, it's so peaceful, maybe I can even bring work home from the office to finish here," she said.¹¹ Nassim, a resident of the *kampung* at the time of writing, described how there seemed to be fewer barriers—literal and figurative—between people in the *kampung* compared to in HDB flats.

"Here, you share," he said. "You need lemons, you can go into someone's house and open the fridge and get them." Nassim said he felt that this sort of neighbourly spirit was less prevalent in HDB flats. A 2013 HDB survey of 7,755 households found that

⁸ Lee, "Reply by Minister Desmond Lee in response to Adjournment Motion by MP Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar on "Preserving Green Spaces and Heritage in Jalan Kayu Constituency."

⁹ Arti Mulchand and Crystal Chan, "Floods fail to wash away kampung's charm," *The Straits Times*, March 11, 2004.

¹⁰ Arti Mulchand, "Floods, flies and a life of freedom," *The Straits Times*, November 1, 2004.

¹¹ Shree Ann Mathavan, "Peace and quiet: priceless," *The New Paper*, August 20, 2007.

while over 98 percent of residents exchanged neighbourly greetings, only a tenth reported having “shared memories and common experiences” with their neighbours.¹²

Life in the *kampung* did present hurdles, however, such as finding suppliers for building materials like zinc roofs that had long gone out of fashion.¹³ Resident Annie Ridwan also mentioned inconveniences such as water seeping into her home when it rained. She described her house as being old, and said that family members had not managed to fix her leaky roof.¹⁴

“Despite these challenges, and the uncertainty that lies ahead, many residents are insistent on staying, as they feel their way of life is far superior to that of the average HDB dweller,” Alfred Chua wrote in *Today*.¹⁵

Sng noted that there did not appear to be much interest from potential new residents in moving into the *kampung*. Nassim suggested that some were interested in staying in the *kampung*, but could not necessarily get their families on board with the idea. The *kampung* would occasionally receive visitors who were curious to experience life in a traditional village, and Sng would allow them to stay for free with another member of the *kampung*. More casual visitors—schoolchildren, tourists, passers-by—who simply wanted to catch a glimpse of the *kampung* were common, and signs hung up around the *kampung* cautioned them to be respectful of residents' privacy (Figure 5a, 5b).

¹² Singapore Housing & Development Board, “Public Housing in Singapore: Social Well-Being of HDB Communities: HDB Sample Household Survey 2013,” accessed August 23, 2018, <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/Satellite?c=HDBDoc&cid=1383797763960&pagename=InfoWEB%2FHDBDoc%2FDocLayout>.

¹³ Alfred Chua, “The Big Read: At Singapore’s last kampung, villagers cast a wary eye on the future,” *Today*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/big-read-singapores-last-kampung-villagers-cast-wary-eye-future>.

¹⁴ Ng, “One day in Lorong Buangkok.”

¹⁵ Chua, “The Big Read.”



Figure 5a, 4b: Signs around the *kampung* request that visitors respect residents' privacy and avoid filming and photography without permission.

Discussion questions

1. What are some of the options available to city planners in proceeding with Kampung Buangkok? Which option makes the most sense?
2. Who are the key stakeholders in the preservation or redevelopment of Kampung Buangkok?
3. Interest from new residents in moving into Kampung Buangkok does not appear to be particularly high. What implications might this have for decisions about the way forward for the *kampung*?
4. Singapore was described in a *New York Times* article as having a “transactional relationship with the ocean” due to its extensive land reclamation efforts. Should the country have a “transactional relationship” with pockets of land on which sit landmarks with historical and/or cultural significance? Why or why not?
5. What are some oppositions to the deontological and utilitarian views of Kampung Buangkok's preservation? Are there other moral approaches that could better guide policymakers on this issue?