

Dakota Crescent: Why We should Keep this Piece of Living History Alive

By Paveena Seah
IPS Research Analyst



Photo credit: Sim Jui Liang

Stepping out of the Mountbatten MRT station, I was greeted by the bright, new and sparkling National Stadium, starkly juxtaposed against 17 blocks of aged, dull-coloured low-rise flats. At Dakota Crescent, lush grass patches filled the wide spaces between the blocks of flats. A dove-shaped playground covered in mosaic tiles, with well-preserved rubber tyre swings, rose from a sand pit. As I strolled along, the estate was unusually silent, devoid of the cries of children and the chattering of housewives.

On 25 July this year, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) announced that the residents of the Dakota Crescent flats would be moved by 31 December 2016, with the site earmarked for “future residential development”. Only Block 13 and 21 Old Airport Road “will

be retained for interim use as there is no immediate redevelopment plan”, it added. This news implies that Dakota Crescent, one of Singapore’s oldest public housing estates, is likely to be demolished, while the fate of Blocks 13 and 21 is unclear.

The impending redevelopment of Dakota Crescent raises the question of whether we should conserve our iconic public housing estates of old, and why. Experts say the Dakota Crescent flats are a key part of our housing and aviation history, with rich social and architectural significance. They should be protected, as how we treat our past will shape our sense of place and identity.

A Housing and Social Experiment

There was inadequate housing for Singapore’s growing population in the 1950s. An increasing number of people were living in slum-like conditions with poor sanitation. As Singapore’s central area became increasingly crowded, the colonial government planned to develop a new public housing estate in the Kallang Airport area.

Subsequently, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) — the predecessor of the HDB — built low-rise flats at Dakota Crescent in 1958. Upon completion in 1959, the new Kallang Airport estate had 2,936 housing units equipped with modern basic services such as piped water, flush toilets and electricity.

Interestingly, Dakota Crescent was the first estate to feature one-room flats. It was named after the Douglas DC-3 Dakota, a model of the planes that often landed at Kallang Airport, which was Singapore’s first civilian airport. The former airport’s runway has been converted into Old Airport Road, which runs parallel to Dakota Crescent today. The Dakota Crescent flats are physical emblems of Singapore’s public housing history and aviation history.

The flats also reflect Singapore’s early community-building efforts. The estate seems sleepy today, but there were over 60 shops, a market and schools in its heyday. These neighbourhood amenities supported an improved standard of living and the establishment of a residential community for the masses.

A number of Dakota Crescent residents have lived there since 1959, forging strong friendships among neighbours over time. A significant number of the flats in Dakota Crescent were used to rehouse victims from the Kampong Tiong Bahru fire in 1961. Today, these flats are also home to elderly people and lower-income families under the HDB public rental scheme, as part of broader government efforts to give all Singaporeans a home. Beyond providing shelter, the flats have given its aged residents a sense of place and identity. They have come to identify themselves as members of the Dakota Crescent estate and the larger Old Airport Road community. For those who have since moved out, the flats are physical landmarks providing a visual link to their past.

Uniquely Singapore in Design

The Dakota Crescent flats reflect a specific phase in the design and aesthetics of Singapore’s public housing. Like other SIT-built estates, the Kallang Airport estate is architecturally unique. For example, the blocks have a slightly concave façade, and are set

apart from each other, with several flats having wooden folding doors that open into angled balconies. The grilles and doors of many units are what we would call “retro” today, as they are reminders of an era long past. Conserving these SIT-era flats as heritage would give future generations an opportunity to appreciate the unique architecture of the 1950s in the flesh, instead of having to flip through old photographs.



Photo credit: Sim Jui Liang

Let's Consider Conservation

Dakota Crescent, or at least part of it, should be conserved. Singapore is land-scarce, but we can balance the competing needs of urban redevelopment and heritage conservation. There are several ways to do this, such as injecting new purpose into existing public residential buildings and revitalising the surrounding area.

As the Dakota Crescent flats are in poor condition, major renovation works that retain the façade and defining features of the estate can be done. With new public utilities infrastructure installed, these restored and upgraded units can be rented out as serviced apartments. The government may also sell the flats and the land to a private developer to redevelop it into a heritage hotel, offering a panoramic view of the glitzy Marina Bay area. Dakota Crescent is in close proximity to the new swanky National Stadium and the chic Goodman Arts Centre, which are popular with the younger crowd. Hence, it is well positioned to commercially benefit from the revitalisation of the Kallang Basin area.

The restored flats can also be used to host educational visits. As heritage buildings, these flats offer the experience of stepping back into the 1950s, allowing participants to find out

about the communities that occupied the area in the past. It will give future generations an insight into the lives of ordinary Singaporeans who lived in different times.

The conservation and adaptive re-use of the Dakota Crescent flats would not only retain the area's intrinsic character, and its historical and social value, but would also preserve its unique architectural beauty. Most importantly, Dakota Crescent can be a lasting visual reminder of the milestones Singapore has passed in our successful public housing journey.

Paveena Seah is a Research Analyst at the IPS Social Lab, a centre for social indicators research.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email paveena.seah@nus.edu.sg



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