

And who is my neighbour?

We need ways to bring back kampung spirit to heartlands, but also, to redefine our idea of 'neighbours'

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Traditionally, we think of our neighbours as those who live right next to us and our neighbourhoods as the physical areas surrounding our domestic places of dwelling. But what do the words "neighbour" and "neighbourhood" really mean in the context of Singapore today?

The "neighbour principle" was legally established in 1932, when Lord Atkin held in the case of Donahue and Stevenson "the rule that you are to love your neighbour becomes in law, (that) you must not injure your neighbour". This means we must, at the very least, not intend to harm our neighbours.

Who, then, is my neighbour? This ruling came with the broadest of definitions, where neighbours are people who might be "closely and directly affected" by our actions so that we "ought reasonably to have them in contemplation".

At another level, neighbourhoods represent communities that have a special place in our hearts - which give us that sense of belonging and identity. It is found in the collective and is greater than the sum of the individual parts, or rather, persons.

This notion of who our neighbours and where our neighbourhoods are has evolved with societal change in Singapore. In the early days where kampungs were a regular feature on the housing scene, lives tended to revolve considerably more around the domestic neighbourhood, directly around those who lived physically next to us.

As Singaporeans moved into public housing flats, and as more women entered the workforce, our sense of identity and the communities that we relate to has shifted well beyond our physical home.

The Changing Social Picture

In fact, as homes got smaller than the open vastness of kampungs, people relocated to their Housing and Development Board flats guarded their privacy jealously once they shut their doors. Identifying who you "ought reasonably to have in contemplation" might not be the person living next to you.

The entry of a large number of migrants over the past few years, along with the cultural and social norms from their countries of origin, have changed the way Singaporeans look at themselves and foreigners, neighbours and neighbourhoods. This trend of bringing in a certain number of migrants each year is likely to continue, to mitigate the effects of falling birth rates and an ageing society.

Yet, paradoxically, the role of neighbourhoods has become all the more crucial to the process of social integration of everyone in Singapore's residential estates - not only those in public housing.

At a basic level, one can count on a good neighbour to gently point the way when social norms have unwittingly been infringed. But Singapore lacks the close-knit communities found in rural small towns that, we imagine, would help newcomers and even those that

have been around for a while quickly understand and be reminded of the social norms of the community and country.

Research by political scientist Robert Putnam of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government has shown that the introduction of greater cultural diversity tends to erode trust and cohesion in society. Hence, culturally diverse communities and societies need to work doubly hard at fostering links between cultural groups and building bonds among those they live in close proximity to, so that they can "reasonably ... have them in contemplation".

Neighbourhoods as communities can provide that sense of identity that one can feel anchored to in today's fast-changing world. That is why we must think seriously about them and begin by asking ourselves afresh: Who are our neighbours today?

Neighbourliness In Malls, At Work

Many public programmes have been introduced over the years to foster trust and understanding in our domestic neighbourhoods. Findings from research by the Institute of Policy Studies among local- and foreign-born citizens suggest that the home is seen as a private space and Singaporeans do desire a general sense of good neighbourliness than any more intrusive sort of community-building in our public housing heartlands.

This implies that there may be limits to how we share our social norms with newcomers if efforts are targeted at public housing estates.

Existing policy initiatives aimed at developing a sense of neighbourliness, the process of "social norming", may indeed have to extend beyond domestic neighbourhoods to workplaces, schools and other common and public amenities - supermarkets, shopping malls, parks and the like.

What are the ways in which those residing here can properly consider the people they meet in these places their "neighbours"? That they practise some common Singaporean socio-cultural norms like queuing up, placing trash in the appropriate places, where and how to hang out clothes and mops to dry, keeping corridors clear of clutter and that sense of respect for the different races and religions, the smells and sounds of our land?

Rethink Public Housing

At the same time, the time has come to re-examine the way public housing is built.

Singapore has come a long way since the early days of public housing development, where simple and utilitarian blocks of flats were very quickly built to accommodate a fast-expanding population. Today, Singapore is home to award-winning public housing projects like the Pinnacle@Duxton.

Let us build on this success and think of ways to bring back some of that kampung spirit in our heartlands. We can think of developing vertical villages, kampungs, more public spaces, more common thoroughfares.

That is what Nominated Member of Parliament Laurence Lien suggested: Creating "infrastructure that supports the building of relationships". Allowing Singaporeans to discuss and vote at the local level, on what they will see in common spaces in their neighbourhoods, is likely to increase the rate of usage and the chance that they might get to know their neighbours better.

In addition, purpose-driven living arrangements have seen a greater level of community spirit, in the form of arrangements where single elderly folk care for each other. Singapore might find the extension of this initiative a worthy experiment.

For instance, families that would like the idea of taking turns to take care of each other's children should be able to find each other - and who knows how that can be developed further.

Singapore stands at the cusp of an exciting future. The time has come for us to rethink the notion of who our neighbours are and re-imagine our neighbourhoods.

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