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A Neighbourhood in Singapore: Ordinary People's Lives `Downstairs'

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INTRODUCTION

In this article,[1] my focus is the activities and experiences of the ordinary people of Singapore City the vast majority (85%) of who live in public housing estates built by the state Housing and Development Board (HDB). Through anthropological observations of their activities and experiences (1988-89 and regularly since 1992) in everyday life and special occasions in one such public housing estate named Marine Parade,[2] I show and discuss the following: 1) the living diversity of cultures in various public spaces within the local public housing community; and 2) some ethnic, multiethnic and multicultural aspects and issues among those who inhabit, define, negotiate, administer and control these spaces and the complex relationships involved. Through examples and illustrations, I also show that material can be drawn from it to reflect, interpret and symbolise diverse groups and cultures and their relations.

In the public-private housing divide that has come to characterise Singapore class society, public housing residents are commonly viewed as that homogeneous lot of "heartlanders" (as opposed to "cosmopolitans") that lives in "pigeonholes" in uniform and unaesthetic high-rise blocks of flats in somewhat "inauthentic" communities. What I show and discuss is about how ordinary people go about their lives meaningfully both *because of* and *despite* the planned housing environment, contrary to the common view that such an environment that has replaced the older village or urban street settlement is standard, sterile and starved of spontaneous, organic and interesting life. My focus on people as active agents in their ordinary lives also offers insights into living cultures as part of Singapore City and its experience, place-making[3] and heritage, beyond those on old buildings/sites, designs and built environments which currently tend to dominate in local heritage discourse. In doing so, I hope to show the contributions of the city's ordinary citizens to its evolution which have thus far tended to escape the planner, critic or outsider with top-down, selective or superficial views of the city and the worlds of its ordinary people .

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[1] Parts of this article was first presented as a paper titled `Everyday Spaces, Everyday Life Activities and Ordinary People' at the Third Arts Conference on **SPACE, SPACES and SPACING** organised by the Substation, Singapore on 16-17 Sept 1995, and some parts appear as sections in my book `Meanings of Multiethnicity' (1995). The original paper was addressed to artists, from an anthropologist's angle. Now, 20 years later, it is revised for a chapter for a book, with recent observations and analysis made, and addressed to artists, academics, architects, planners and anyone interested and concerned with city life and its communities, sustainability and heritage. Methodologically, this `20 Years Later' turns out to be a longitudinal approach of sorts, in which I revisit some recurring themes and document new observations, and which appears to be a particularly useful way of studying the city's evolution, place-making and living heritage in its specific locales over time. Revisions to parts of the original paper have also been made with the benefit of twenty years more of hindsight and regular observations as an outsider-insider in what was at first my anthropological fieldwork site for a doctoral thesis (1988-91) and which has since become my residential community and urban `kampung' (village) since 1992. It should be mentioned that even as resident and insider, I have seldom been freed from wearing my anthropological lenses.

[2] Built in the mid-1970s on land reclaimed from the sea, Marine Parade has residents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds living in a range of room-type (5, 4, 3 and rental) blocks of flats. Its original residents were mostly those resettled from surrounding villages and areas many of which were largely ethnic-based – this explains its multiethnic and multicultural characteristics which persist to this day. Marine Parade today comes under the larger Marine Parade Town Council and Southeast Community Development Council. For details on Marine Parade's early years, see Lai (1995).

[3] For an interesting collection of articles on the meanings and making of place, see Kong and Yeoh (eds.), 1995.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

While the local community is often directly affected by the wider community, it is more than a mere microcosm of the larger entity; it has a distinct character and integrity of its own, translating and absorbing the influences from the national level by its indigenous experiences and idioms. The anthropology of locality has two themes: indigenous views of social association and the impact of the wider society on local identity (A.P. Cohen, 1982: 12-14). For Cohen, the significance of local community is in terms of its symbolic meanings held by people, or as seen by Geertz (1975: 5) it is the `webs of significance' spun around local life which is of the essence. At the same time the local community evolves complex modes of interaction and differentiation within it, their meanings and the means by which they are managed varying among different people within the same community.

The Marine Parade local residential community and neighbourhood, far away from the famous theatres, galleries, museums, historical buildings, streets and shops often associated with a city, is a place where the little vignettes of life unfold and its little dramas are acted out on little stages. These stages are those inconspicuous, unglamorous and sometimes even dirty and certainly most plain of spaces, and it is in these spaces that actors - the ordinary people who live in the neighbourhood – carry out their activities which may seem mundane or inconsequential to the outsider but are meaningful and significant to the residents themselves.

ORDINARY PEOPLE AND ACTIVITIES `DOWNSTAIRS' IN COMMON SPACES

One distinct feature of the public housing community is its planned and managed environment. For residents, living in such an environment has one major implication: it necessarily involves being drawn into and participation in public life because of residential proximity and the intensive use and sharing of common spaces.

Living in close residential proximity is such that each flat is most likely surrounded by others `above' and `below' and on the sides, within a neighourhood of tens of blocks of flats and together totally hundreds of flats and within an entire estate of several such neighbourhoods. Such `living in flats' in close proximity to many others requires residents to encounter, adjust and accommodate themselves to the presence, habits and practices of many neighbours and co-residents. The common spaces in the local public housing community are the corridors, void-decks, paths, pavements, green areas, streets, carparks, wet market, hawker-centre, coffeeshops and neighbourhood corners which are located `downstairs', outside of private home spaces and accessible by going down the stairs or using the lift. In the physical sense, these are public spaces most of which are designed, maintained and managed by the HDB, Town Councils or parastatal and community organisations. But they are also spaces in the social sense: occupied, inhabited, negotiated, controlled and administered by people in their various capacities as individuals or as formal and informal groups, as they go about their daily life and activities over time. Their social nature involves the activities and processes of use, sharing, interaction and negotiation, within which are often embedded and through which are articulated complex relationships, tensions, issues and problems. It is these activities and processes and the meanings given to them, either implicitly or explicitly and with consequences both intended and unintended, which continuous construct and reconstruct

the local community and give it structure, distinctiveness and its making and meaning as a place.[4]

`Heartland' actors are heterogeneous in occupation, culture, ethnicity, class, gender and age. They inhabit the local common spaces individually or in small groups as families, friends, neighbours or familiar strangers, some going about their everyday lives largely or even wholly within the local community, while others do so only occasionally or peripherally on their way to work, school and other places., Besides the vast majority of residents, the `unique' characters who live in the community also make their regular or special appearances: the down and out, the joker or clown, the drunk, the gossip, the loudmouth, the official and the famous.

Everyday life activities and special occasions bring out in full play the dynamics of interaction and relationships involved in living in close proximity and sharing common spaces among heartlanders. While everyday activities appear mundane, their significance should not be lost and much may be understood from them. A. P. Cohen (1982: 6) points out that the mundane circumstances of everyday life provide the context for the `experience of culture' because it is based on pragmatic and appropriate evaluation: `each commonplace event is a metaphorical statement of the culture in which it occurs.' According to Berger and Luckmann (1966: 33-8, 43-5), everyday life, among several realities, is `reality *par excellence*' in which tension and demand on consciousness are highest. As the commonsense reality of the ordinary members of society, it is a world that is original to them, and maintained by their thoughts and actions. Furthermore, everyday life is an inter-subjective world shared with others who have different perspectives. In the face-to-face encounters of everyday social interaction, each apprehends the other's subjectivity by means of his or her own `typificatory scheme', and the two schemes enter into an ongoing negotiation. Heller (1984:220-5, 247-8) elaborates on the `modalities of everyday contact' which range from the random to the organized, and notes the occurrences of `collisions' in everyday contact, such as quarrels and clashes of opinions. Suttles (1968) emphasizes participation and mutual learning in street life and neighbouring, and the rules and moral order in everyday life which govern a place. Gouldner (1975) relates everyday life specifically to the political arena in terms of their contrast,[5] yet the two arenas are mutually interactive because politics impinges upon and transforms everyday life while ordinary people in turn affect the political, among other actions, through everyday responses and resistances (Scott, 1985).

[4] Among the community's common spaces, the coffeeshop or *kopitiam* (in various Chinese dialects) or *kedai kopi* (in Malay) is arguably the most outstanding example. It is indeed a ubiquitous and quintessential institution in Singapore (the other being the hawker centre, see Kong, 2008), and is to the Singaporean heartlander what the pub might be to the English and the *adda* to the Bengali (see Tan, 2007). Here, from early 6 a.m. morning till near midnight, residents are able to eat, drink and be sociable. From its humble beginnings as a stall or small "eating" shop serving workers or residents of a village, street or neighbourhood, the heartland kopitiam, usually one each situated at both end of a row of main shops in the planned neighbourhood centre, is today a site of multiculturalism and living heritage, offering a vast range of ethnic and fusion foods amidst an ebullient ambience of multisensory experiences to local residents who feel its draw regularly (See Lai, 2008).

[5] In his view, everyday life emphasizes the stable, recurrent and seemingly unchanging features of the social life of ordinary individuals, while political life is one of competition, struggle and conflicts between elites and organizations.

Special occasions, on the other hand, are `special', using residents' own terminology, in that they are, like rituals, highly patterned actions and performances which set them apart from the flow of everyday life. They are also special because of their `alerting quality' through which rules which bind and mark them out as significant and, therefore, require attention and appropriate observance (Lewis, 1980). Their repetitive occurrence within the local community's regular or annual life cycle renders them part of its public and social life in two senses: their social recognition and transmission, and their location and expression. Taking place in common spaces and in proximity to living areas such as in void-decks, car parks and open spaces, they are therefore, constituent parts of the community's public and cultural environment which residents must respond to in one way or another. Special occasions in the local community range from weddings to funerals, ethno-religious events such as celebrations of Chinese deities, the Chinese Seventh Moon Festival and Muslims' end of Ramadan prayers, and celebration of National Day.

Bearing in mind the above, I will now illustrate the complex and multilayered facets of some common everyday life and social activities of ordinary people in some common spaces in the local community.

ORDINARY PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY LIFE ACTIVITIES

Women with Young Children at the Playground

Women - mothers, grandmothers and foreign domestic helpers or babysitters - with young children are among the most locale-bound and visible residents in the local community. They are found at different times of the day in playgrounds, void-decks, at the marketplace, in the shops. Among them are mothers who, either by choice or necessity, quit or sequence their careers to take care of their children full-time. Others are grandmothers who look after grandchildren while their adult children work. Yet others are women, both single and mothers, from the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka who have left their children or families to work as live-in domestic helpers in households in Singapore.

For many mothers and grandmothers, informal and adhoc arrangements or chance meetings with other women in playgrounds and void-decks provide the opportunities for interaction and exchange of news and ideas. These can range from parenting and cooking tips to family and work issues they face. Some women I spoke to called for better designed spaces for mothers' and children's interaction groups and more organized activities and better information sharing and support. In talking to young mothers I met at a playground, I observed two sets of concerns about their lives and daily routines. The first relates to their work options and social attitudes regarding their full-time parenting status, such as pressures for opting for full-time parenting, the sense of isolation from adult interaction and work environment, the sense of being a `nobody' and a `dropout', given the notion of `women going out to work' and having a career as being desirable, and limited work options for women with young children. The second set of concerns and issues are related to the availability and use of spaces and facilities in their everyday work and lives.

Janice is one such woman I met in the community. What she told me told the story of the work-family dilemmas faced by many women and families:

> *"I wonder when I can go back to work. I feel so stagnant; but if I do, I feel guilty about leaving the children for such long hours. I worry about their development if I am not around enough of the time. And once their school starts, you can imagine all that tuition and supervision I will have to see to....Sometimes my husband does the marketing but sometimes he is unable to because he has to go to work early or work weekends. Then I have to go and I have to bring the two children along to the market; I dare not leave them alone in case something happens. But it can be quite hard work, especially carrying the marketing down two storeys. You just hope you or the children don't fall because you don't have four or six hands. Why don't they have a lift on every floor? Either these people don't have to carry loads or they don't have common sense..."*

Youths at the Games Court

Here, I focus on the interethnic dimensions of sharing and negotiating play space among male resident youths –mainly Chinese, Malays and Indians – and their friends at the local street basketball court (which doubles up as street soccer court). These dimensions, besides the rules of court behaviour and the game itself, appear to be significant in the allocation and use of the much sought after but limited common space. It should first be noted that youths' outdoor sports can be divided into two categories. The first is common to all (e.g. soccer, cycling) and there are both ethnically mixed and homogeneous groups. The second category of games is, for historical and social reasons, strongly identified as ethnic games or have large ethnic concentrations of players, such as basketball, wushu and volleyball (Chinese) and silat and sepak takraw (Malay). One clear exception is soccer which is popular among all, although there are strong concentrations of Malay players in school and national teams. Besides school, the local community is an arena which provides opportunities for ethnic and interethnic play and sports and for negotiation over play spaces among youths of different ethnic groups.

In the local community which I observed, everyone has a claim to public play areas but limited facilities force youths to share and to convert spaces for multiple use on the basis of certain principles. On the whole, the sharing of spaces operates on a first-come-first-served basis. In impromptu games, those who come first are compelled to consider the others who also want to use the space - by either sharing grounds for simultaneous play (of same or different games), joining forces (if same game), or agreeing on the duration of a game. Those waiting to play are, in turn, expected to be patient for a game to be over. For organized teams which need space for regular practice, sharing tends to be negotiated, such as over day and time of play by each group. Such negotiations are facilitated by varying degrees of familiarity as friends, schoolmates and co-residents. Mutual understanding of the nature and rules of a game further adds to the tendency towards a give-and-take attitude and to negotiate. The following is illustrative:

> *"Our Indian football team play at the basketball court on Tuesday and Thursday 7 - 10 p.m. while the Chinese basketball team play same days, before 7 p.m. What to do, no football field... we arrange like this because one time we were playing, they came and said they want the court, like want to fight, so we tell each other what we want"* (Raja).

Accommodation and negotiation thus allow groups to establish among themselves an overall order in the competing claims to limited space. They also result in a situation where there is no clearcut ethnic identification or monopolization of spaces; any territorial claim is limited, at most, to the duration of the game and not as a permanent monopoly. Equally important, accommodation and negotiation overcome major tensions, including that which may be interpreted in ethnic terms.

The absence of major tensions at play, when youths do join forces to share play space or are in ethnically mixed groups in which the youths know each other, does not, however, preclude arguments and verbal abuse during which ethnic expletives and derogative language are frequently used. Common ethnic swear words used by Malay youths on Chinese youths are *Cina kui* (Chinese devil), *syaitan* (Satan), *Cina babi* (Chinese pig), *babi syaitan* (Satanic pig), *anak jin* (spirits of children). In return, Chinese boys heap abuse on Malay boys with *babi Melayu* (Malay pig), *babi belacan* (pig paste), *huan ngah kui* (aboriginal devil). The Eurasian is sometimes teased as *chap cheng* (mixed type), *grago* (shrimp); the Indian is referred to as *kling* (from sound of clinking chains of Indian convicts), *orh pueh* (black skin).

Ethnic expletives reveal the complexities of cross-cultural differences and exchanges. They derive from certain ethnic markers, perceptions and stereotypes, most significant among which relate to religion and food, while ethnic insults also make implicit comparisons and judgements of ethnic and religious practices.[6] The degree of sensitivity and seriousness with which ethnic insults are made and received depends on each situation and level of familiarity among parties. However, they do not assume the seriousness of hate abuse. In most instances of friendly joking, bantering and excited play, they are not meant to be taken so seriously that the situation turns sour; instead, they require an attitude of expression and humour appropriate to the situation for mixed play to be possible. Indeed, in certain situations the free flowing exchange of abuse and obscenities arguably helps to dissipate tension, while the context of the game in a common shared space provide the opportunity of playing together and even interacting or at least familiarizing with each other as co-residents.

Elderly Residents at the Kopitiam, Hawker Centre and Corner Benches

The conversation, which involves the exchange of ideas and clash of opinions, is a special `modality' of everyday life (Heller, 1984:226). For older residents many of whom are largely community-bound, the conversation is the main everyday activity through which they socialize and maintain relations with friends and neighbours in the community. They frequent the coffeeshops, hawker centre, void-decks, benches in neighbourhoods and senior citizens' corners for everyday meetings and socializing at which some of the most common engagements are talking politics, telling personal stories and joking and bantering.

[6] Among these, the metaphor *babi* is the most potent and quintessential of ethnic insults. Pork is a forbidden food item in Islam but a favoured offering in Chinese folk belief and regular food item. In teases, disputes and tensions during play, its powers are summoned and directed at a core dimension of the other's religious identity - religion - and is meant to hit where it hurts most. Used by Chinese on Malays, it implies the height of contamination and blasphemy by turning the latter's taboo onto themselves; used by Malays on Chinese, it represents the latter's religious infidelity and ultimate pollution. References to *syaitan* (Satan) and *jin* by Malay youths juxtapose their worship of God with what is perceived as Chinese superstition and devotion to devils and deities. The same perception is also held of Hinduism with its various deities; Indians are also sometimes referred to by Malays as *anak jin*. Some youths, unable to retaliate by insulting God, hurl abuse at Malays with *babi belacan* (suggesting foulness as belacan, a prawn paste used in cooking, has a pungent smell) and turning the favourite Chinese term *kui* (devils, ghosts) back against them.

Talking Politics

Talking politics as popular everyday conversation, commonly and appropriately termed `coffeeshop talk' since it often takes place in that distinct gathering place, is, in the Singapore political context, regarded by both political elites and ordinary people as a major measure of public opinion and any public `disquiet' over controversial political issues. At the same time, political discussion is considered by some to be highly sensitive and even dangerous in Singapore's political environment, and can also be highly charged with emotion. Specifically, ethnic issues, because they are usually viewed as benefiting a particular ethnic group only or at the expense of other groups and because they may involve criticisms of other ethnic groups and of powerful political forces, are also deemed too sensitive and controversial to be raised with non-ethnic others. It is also a common assumption that members of a particular ethnic group will naturally side with his or her group and its interests. Overall, raising issues perceived to be sensitive may be costly to oneself and to valued relationships, as conflicting views and differences may cause misunderstanding, offence, and tension. It is therefore not surprising that political discussion is characterized generally by its avoidance with political authorities or those considered not on the same side, and indulged only among the like-minded in coffeeshop talk. Said one elderly resident: *"We do talk politics but if get angry, emotional when disagree, then better not or friendship also lost"*.

Telling Stories

Safer topics of conversation (that may still involve interethnic and intercultural exchange) are life and personal histories and experiences.. "I came from Hainan Island, Boon Sio Kwai....", "I used to live in Siglap, this fishing village with Chinese and Malay fishermen..." and "My father came from Jawa..." are starting points of many a personal tale told while sitting on a bench under the shade of a tree or at the kopitiam table. The intimate knowledge and personal disclosures involved in the relating of life histories not only provide the basis of interethnic friendships among individuals, they also often provide the occasion for mutual learning and exchange about the social and historical experiences of different ethnic individuals and groups and hence the commonalities and differences involved. One such example is that of Mr Koh's history about his interethnic marriage:

> *1938. I was 20 years old. I saw this woman with very red cheeks selling pineapples in Joo Chiat. I thought: what a beautiful woman, so red cheeks. So I went up to her, and using sign language I told her I want to buy the whole lot, "semua beli". Two baskets of pineapples she carried on her shoulder. Then I told my friend who can speak Hokkien to tell her tomorrow I want to buy up the whole lot also. My friend said "what! You gila* [mad] *ah?" I said "she is very beautiful". That is how I got to know her. And in no time, I wanted to marry her. But for that, my father disowned me, chased me out of the house. He wanted me to marry a nyonya, a Baba, somebody inside the race. She is China born, we are Straits born, different. But for me, I don't want to marry a Baba...Because they `nyiok nyiok nyiok nyiok' (uses fingers to show incessant chatter or gossip).... So my father `halau'* [chased] *me from the house. So I left. We got married in the Chinese temple, just do like that, bow, get a piece of red paper. I don't know where that paper is now, that time got no marriage certificate. And then we had a `makan'* [feast]. *None of my friends came; only her amah friends from the amah keng came. And only when we had my daughter that my father came to the house to see the grandchild.... My wife*

> *came from Kwangtung province, she came with some friends and lived in the amah keng. When first came, she worked in Pulau Ubin, granite quarry, carry stones. You know, that type where they wear the red cloths on their heads. Then she worked as amah. Then she was selling pineapples.... When I wanted to marry her, I went to the amah keng to ask the lady [head] permission. But she said "cannot", she said "you are Straits born, she is China born, may not get along. And what if after married and she is pregnant and you don't want her?" But I persisted and in the end we got married.... At first I couldn't speak a word of Cantonese and she spoke only Cantonese, so we used sign language lah, ha! ha! ha! Then slowly, I taught her Malay, sampai* [until] *she knew how to, then we speak in Malay... At first, she wore the cheongsam and samfoo, then I bought her sarong and jewellery ...*

It is also through these everyday conversations and oral story telling in the local community's common spaces that the lesser known sides of Singapore's history and less famous individuals may be learnt. From one resident who calls himself Champion Dollah for helping others, I learnt about Singapore's work history:

> *During the 1960s, [we tried to] introduce Malay girls to work in the factories, very difficult you know... [That was in] Kampung Ubi CC* [Community Centre]. *It is not political. The idea is to uplift the standard of the Malays.... Aziz Yakob was our leader. We send 40-50 girls to the factory, 10 remain. Send another 40-50, 5 remain. It takes years, you know. But now, you can see everywhere people work in the factory, especially Malay girls.*

From another resident who once lived in old Geylang Serai, I learnt about Malay and interethnic group gangsterism and about individual gangsters:

> *In those days, there is no way you cannot get involved in gangster activities. They won't leave you alone, at least you have to pay protection money, especially if you have a business. There are two ways you get involved. Either you are a fighting member or you are a paying member. They were everywhere, and you know which society controlled which area. Chap Si* (Fourteen) *is here, It Kong Puek* [One Zero Eight} *is there. Some mixed, some only Chinese or Indian.* [Malay gangs?] *That, only one, under one Wahab, Chap Si. He was the chief, he had all the other gangs under him, he was very famous. But he was tortured and died during the war. Tortured by the Japanese, he had needles poked under his fingernails and was very badly beaten up.... Here in Geylang side, there was one Dollah. He was not a gangster but a fighter. He heard about this Wahab, so he wanted to fight him, to see who is a better fighter. So they arranged for a fight, bare fist fight. And on that day, wah, they fought from this street down to Tanjong Katong, Joo Chiat side, fight until fall into the drain, get up and continue fighting. In the street, eveybody came to watch. Fight for more than an hour. It took the chief inspector to stop them, nobody dared to stop them, ordinary policeman also dared not stop them.*

And from a third elderly resident sitting on a bench near the market, I learnt about fighting and peace during the 1964 ethnic riots:

> *Like this, Kampung Chai Chee and Kampung Siglap, one is a Chinese kampung and one is a Malay kampung. Actually they know each other because just next to each other. But because they were afraid of being attacked, they formed groups. Each one is afraid the other will attack. But in the end, what happened was, each side got three old men, both sides walked down the road to the middle, like up to here because from kampung Siglap to Kg Chai Chee is down a hill and up again, so they went there, middle of the valley, both sides carried white flags. And they talked peace, not to fight, what is the point of bloodshed? Some more, they know each other, the kampung just next to each other, so what for fight? Better to join together so that both sides don't get attacked* [by outsiders]*.... And they make sure they sent old people. Old people, they are experienced, they don't fight and they have respect. Young fellows, they are emotional... And in my own kampung, mostly Malays, only two Chinese families - the bicycle shop and the grocer shop. So we told them, don't fight, and don't be frightened, we will protect you. In fact, one of them, a Malay family took them in.... Always outsiders who attack, people in the kampung won't attack each other, they know each other.*

Joking and Bantering

Another safer form of conversation about ethnic and cultural matters than direct discussion is joking or bantering. In the contexts of multiethnic living and sensitive ethnic politics, joking and joking relationships assume an added significance: they provide a `front-stage' avenue for residents to maintain good relations by enabling them to keep a safe distance from seriously different views; at the same time they provide a safety valve through which to express different and potentially offensive, challenging or subversive views (Douglas, 1975) in acceptable terms. Joking relationships among residents of different ethnic backgrounds thus provide at once a measure of both the closeness and the distance between them. Honed to a fine skill, jokes may be even accompanied by witty repartee but they seldom exceed a limit that would turn a situation sour. The following illustrates the dynamics and subtleties of interethnic jokes and joking relationships among some elderly men who gather daily near the market:

> Greg: *You are from Boyan, you can carry flag with picture of a fish, and he can carry flag with pig head because he is Chinese. And the two of you can walk down the street together. Everyone will clap, ha! ha!*
>
> Ahmad: *And you, a Baba, what flag can you carry?*
>
> Greg: *You always play dum* (Malay chess)*, can go dumb you know. Malay dum is so dumb, can only move forwards, cannot go sidewards or backwards. See lah, Chinese chess, can jump about all over the place, and Western chess, there are kings, queens and soldiers.*
>
> Ahmad: *So you Chinese leap all over the place, really cunning, isn't it? (Turns to another resident, pretends to be angry) See lah, he says Malays are dumb to play dum but he Baba speaks Malay.*
>
> Greg: (Pretends to whisper to me but within earshot of the others) *You know, Malay dum needs a lot of intelligence and sharpness to make the right move. Difficult because can only move forwards so have to think carefully first. Otherwise, get eaten up, man.*

The company and community offered in common spaces to the elderly and lonely is perhaps best illustrated when it is lost and longed for. Here, I relate what one `Auntie' told me at the local annual Seventh Moon Festival celebration for residents. A large part of her life story is about her settlement and resettlement [which reflects the larger history of Singapore] - she immigrated from China in the 1940s and settled in various parts of Singapore, first in Hylam Street, then Kampung Ubi, then Marine Parade and finally Siglap where she moved into private housing with her married son and family because he wanted to `upgrade'. But for her,

> *"this time moving house* [to Siglap] *is the worst even though the house is the biggest. It is very lonely in the neighbourhood. Everyone stays in their own house and own garden, they don't need each other. If you go out, you need a car - it is too far from anywhere to walk, and if you walk, the dogs bark at you and chase you. I think in this type of place the dogs see cars moving more often than they see people walking. So I get to go out only when my son and his family bring me out to the restaurant or my son's club. And my friends don't come to visit, it is too difficult for them. Not like here, here you can come downstairs every morning and walk and chat. That is why I come for this celebration, even if it is only once in a year. I come to pray and to see my friends and be with people. So `lau juak'* [atmospheric].

ORDINARY PEOPLE AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS

In the local community, various special occasions and their accompanying rituals are held in void-decks, carparks and open spaces, their repetitive occurrence rendering them part of its public, social and cultural life. Most of them are cultural or ethnic based, and range from weddings and funerals to ethno-religious events such as celebrations of Chinese deities, the Chinese Seventh Moon Festival and Muslims' end of Ramadan prayers. Others are national events, such as the celebration of National Day.

Belonging and Identity: Local and Ethnic

It may be argued that for those Malay and Chinese residents who participate in these events, such occasions help renew two intertwining senses of community: the local and the ethnic. Among Malay residents, the holding of weddings is the most common and colourful of events. In the void-deck of the couple's block of flats in full view of all, major aspects take place, including the *rewang* [communal cooking], *kenduri* [feast], *silat* [martial arts], *kompang* [group drumming], music and other public displays. The newly married couple, as `royals' of the day, sit on a specially decorated dais to receive guests, gifts and blessings. Another annual feature of Malays and Muslims is the end of Ramadan in which hundreds of local residents gather for morning prayers and a sermon in an open space specially prepared for the event. Both types of events involve local organizational and social structures, reinforce both belonging to the local community and the sense of being Malay. As Malay and religious events, weddings and end of Ramadan prayers involve members of the Malay community as kin, friends, neighbours, co-residents and co-religionists. Through them, the essence and sense of unity and belonging to the Malay community are regularly experienced, elaborated and revivified.

Similarly for Chinese residents, the Seventh Moon Festival celebration expresses a collective sense of belonging and identity to two communities - local and ethnic. Held in the lunar seventh month, this is the biggest annual community-based event that combines the appeasement of spirits and ghosts (who return to earth from hell) through prayers, offerings, dinner and shows, with charity through the collection of funds from auspicious items auctioned at the grand dinner. A whole day affair held in specially prepared open space such as a converted open carkpark, offerings and prayers are held with much burning of incense and other paper items. It culminates in a grand evening dinner of tens of tables that takes place simultaneously with an opera, puppet show or *getai* (stage show) amidst the loud auctioning of donated and special items. The sense of belong is based on the event's initiation, organization and participation by local residents, hawkers and shopkeepers. At the same time, it is an ethnic occasion that draws individuals together as a Chinese community.

Negotiating Ethnic Diversity and Multiethnic Living:
Accommodation, Acceptance and Appreciation

Special occasions and their rituals, because of their powerful emotional and symbolic contents, also act as symbolic markers of boundaries in relation to others in the multiethnic context. In such a heterogeneous context accentuated by close residential proximity and sharing of common spaces, special occasions provide the opportunity for individuals and groups which are normally segregated to interact (Frankenberg, 1978:145). All are drawn into them, whether as actors or spectators, givers or receivers. So, where rituals say something about the essence of a community, what do they say to non-members and what do these others, in turn, make of them and the community represented? Some examples below show the range of responses by ethnic others in their negotiations of ethnic diversity and multiethnic living that are heightened by proximity and space.

On the Malay wedding:

> *There is at least one most weekends, and it is usually on Sundays so we can hardly have any rest. They are very noisy. Like last week, they even had dancing at night, and the night before already the music started. For such a special occasion, they should hold it in the community hall or hotel, why in the void-deck? The void-deck is for residents to sit or walk past. What kind of wedding is it anyway, with people looking and walking past? (James)*
>
> *I notice that they really make it nice with atmosphere. Everybody comes to help do the preparation, cooking; people come in and out, play the drums. And the costumes that the bride and groom wear are really traditional and grand. I really like their wedding, it is full of tradition, not like us Chinese. (Julie)*
>
> *I have heard other people say it is so noisy but I don't hear it. I don't mind. Live in this type of place, must get used to it. The wedding lasts only for two days, our Chinese funeral also lasts for about two days, about the same. What for get angry? What for complain? (Ah Sin)*
>
> *We have our way of doing ours, they have theirs. You can't compare, can't say ours is better or theirs is better. We are different from them, they are different from us. (Ah Soh)*

In the cross-cultural contact involved, comparisons are made which reveal different cultural knowledge and expectations of the formalities, rules, and general conduct surrounding wedding rites. For example, the appropriateness of wedding venue (home, hall or hotel?) reflects different spatial and symbolic expressions of such an occasion as well as notions of public and private. As Daud put it:

> *Chinese wedding in the house very simple, but dinner at hotel very grand. For us, in the house very grand. It is a family occasion so we want people to come to our house. That is only a hotel, why make it so grand?*

Behavioural awkwardness can also arise from cultural differences, while judgements made in cultural comparisons become more contentious when they result in negative ethnic stereotyping. However, as the examples show, as much as there is ethnocentrism and ignorance among some, there is also tolerance, acceptance and appreciation among others.

On Chinese occasions:

> *At first astonished, felt angry. So much noise, cannot sleep. Next day got to work isn't it? Also, so much ash. But after a while, accept it. Just shut window and go to sleep. Must accept lah, Chinese got their own way. Living together, give and take. In Singapore, must accept each other's way. (Ali)*

> *The Hokkien and Teochew, always `tong tong chang!' .... It is not a problem when I have to clean up, just my work.... Sometimes they put things under the tree but that is no problem. I just tell the datuk* [tree spirit]*, `Datuk, I am cleaning the place for you, only removing the food that has gone bad, not removing you from here'. I tell him by thinking it in my head. (Cleaner)*

> *I don't mind the burning. I just make sure I don't step where they burn, something can happen... It happened to my son once... he must have kicked it or urinated at it. He got fever for many days.... Even though I am Hindu, I don't share the same religion, I believe it, better to believe. (Malar)*

> *I eat the food my Chinese neighbour gives me after praying with it. It is all right, I believe in our Lord ... I am not worried by other people's religions. That is your own belief, you can do what you want. We just have to respect it no matter how stupid or silly you think it is. Every person has his own way of praying. Actually, in the end, everybody prays to the same God, just different way of praying. (Rita)*

Initial encounters with Chinese cultural-religious practices by non-believers and non-Chinese range from shock and disbelief to curiosity, but most eventually come to regard them as familiar and take them as aspects of their living environment. Underlying this attitude is a range of devices which they have developed to contend with the Chinese events' outspills of noise, ash, and offerings: treating outspills as physical dirt which can be cleaned up or shut out, failing which one just bears with it; viewing them as embodiments of Chinese culture and religion for which respect is due and right of practice accorded even if not agreed with; believing in the superiority or strength of one's own religion; believing that all share the one same God, even if the means of reaching God are different (and sometimes in rather shocking

ways) and, by extension, mutual `non-disturbance' and peaceful coexistence of different religions; and allowing for the possible existence of spirits.

Through the public nature of ethnic special occasions, a cultural and symbolic map can be drawn of the local community which provides visual feasts of its ethnic-cultural diversity and gives meanings to its multiethnic and multicultural character. As expressive and symbolic discourses of the social relationships surrounding them, special occasions communicate on two levels simultaneously - among individuals within an ethnic community, and between ethnic communities. Special occasions confirm and strengthen ethnic community, giving it meaning and identity; at the same time, they provide the basis for others' ethnographic knowledge and socialization about the ethnic community. Tolerance and acceptance of each other's activities are highly developed because of the proximity of living and shared spaces.

Negotiating Ethnic Diversity and Multiethnic Living: Tensions

The high degree of tolerance and acceptance of ethnic occasions does not, however, imply the absence of tension. On the contrary, the potential for religious tension is ever present, and there have been some experiences of religious tension, particularly in the early years of the community. Their management and resolution have taken time to evolve, with the local HDB Area Office (a branch of HDB serving a locality) playing an instrumental role in careful negotiation among parties involved.

Fires and Fines

One experience of ethnic tension in the early years of the local community's formation when residents first settled in the community involved official treatment of ethnic occasions. Some Malay residents perceived as unfair the HDB's differential treatment of Chinese and Malay occasions: `*What I think is unfair is that when the Malays burn the turf when they do cooking, they get their deposit penalized, but when the Chinese burn the grass when they pray, they don't get fined'* (Zul). Under the terms of renting void-deck space from the HDB for special occasions, the user's deposit is penalized if there is any damage to property. Malay users are generally careful when undertaking large-scale communal cooking for *kenduri* (feast) in turf areas but there have been cases of grass being burnt, resulting in the forfeiture of deposits. On the other hand, the individual Chinese who damages turf when burning incense in a quick disappearing act is hard to detect, while large-scale burning during the Seventh Moon Festival is usually ignored by the HDB Area Office. But after complaints from both residents and cleaners, the HDB Area Office quickly made some provisions to overcome the problem of incense ash and prayer offerings: the provision of bins during major Chinese festivals, and the imposition of a fine for indiscriminate burning under the Common Property and Open Space Rules. Similarly, through complaints, it soon became aware of the charge of ethnic discrimination against Malays and ceased imposing fines.

Malay Wedding versus Chinese Funeral

The HDB Area Office's allocation of void-deck space for Malay weddings and Chinese funerals was another source of tension and test of its ethnic impartiality in the early years of the community. While the Malay wedding is prepared in advance with the booking of void-deck space usually made a month ahead, the Chinese funeral often occurs suddenly upon the death of a resident, and perparations for the wake, including the placing of the coffin, may be immediately made in the void-deck without first obtaining a permit. It has thus occurred

several times that a Malay wedding and a Chinese funeral both took place in the same void-deck on the same weekend!

> *In the past, both sides just ignored each other; even though in same void-deck, use different ends of it. HDB's part here depends. It can directly intervene or not intervene. If intervene, then may ask the Chinese to stay, the Malay to move to another location even though they booked in advance. Explain to the Malays that according to Chinese custom, once coffin is put there, cannot move it. But if don't intervene, then we tell the Chinese to go and speak to the Malay themselves. HDB will give them permit if they can convince the Malays of the need to change place (Estate Officer).*

The Area Office tried using both approaches in the past but both obviously still risked antagonizing and discriminating against Malay residents. It was thus decided that the first-come-first-served principle be strictly adhered to, irrespective of how strongly one party might feel about the inviolability or significance of his or her cultural practice. This would reserve a resident's right of use of the area for the duration of the event, at the same time ensure that there is no charge of ethnic discrimination or of ethnic quarrels and tension among neighbours. In turn, residents would have to abide by this principle - a procedure they have come to accept and to expect. Today, the potential charge of the HDB's bias and ethnic tension among residents over the use of void-deck space for special occasions is largely checked by this principle, and complaints about both bias and outspills are considerably fewer.

Here, it also relevant to note that, through a process of trial and error and learning from experience, the Area Office's management of local disputes such as those described is characterized by a complex combination of HDB provision and rules, expectations and exhortations about residents' behaviour (such as mutual tolerance and respect for one another's cultural practices) and use of the Housing Maintenance Inspector's (HMI) negotiation skills and personal knowledge. Given the residents' and the Area Office's own experiences, it is also not surprising that the Area Office staff should possess an acute sense, at times bordering on the overcautious, of the potential for interethnic and inter-religious antagonism among residents. As one Estate Officer put it:

> *Both sides have their mentality - majority mentality and minority mentality. That is why we have to be careful how you handle a situation... Let the matter mellow first. We would rather pay the price for being overcautious than not cautious. Ultimately, the Board has the right to do anything, everything, but better to handle things sensitively. If not, there may be an explosion. The explosion may not show up now but may build up and something like this can be the last straw. So better to deal with each matter sensitively whenever it comes along. That is why you haven't seen a riot yet. Have to remove each straw, then we can have room to maneuver when other issues arise*.

The Gods Are Too Noisy?

A third `incident' involving religious tension occurred during one night celebration of *Sunwukung*'s (Monkey God) birthday in a void-deck. In the celebration the deities *Sunwukung and Nacha, Twa Ya Pek* and *Tze Ya Pek* (the two guardians of Hell) were summoned to earth to perform various rites, through four mediums, accompanied by much

chanting, prayers and rituals. The `visit' by the two guardians of Hell was particularly long, involving cleansing of and consultation by individuals, after which the two stayed on to wine and dine loudly till close to midnight. Then, just as they were about to return to Hell, a resident appeared and shouted to them to shut up. The deities bellowed in anger. Some followers got agitated, others got frightened. One of them grew aggressive, went towards the complainant, and spat at him: *`How can you offend our gods?'*. The man retorted: *`Do your gods know what time it is?'* Both men were pulled apart before a fist fight could start. One woman whispered to me:

> *"Ya lah, a bit too late and these two [meaning the guardians of Hell] are loud, but they are like that. And what to do, they don't want to go. Actually these gods are ghosts from Hell, we can't force them to go, can't complain. That man must be a Christian"*.

TWENTY YEARS LATER …

I have lived in the local community discussed above for the past 20 years as an outsider-insider, first as a student anthropologist (1988-1991) and then as resident (1992 onwards).[7] Some of the many intertwining changes and continuities I have observed and experienced are local in dimension in some respects, while others are very much part and reflective of the larger processes that Singapore, as a city and nation-state, has undergone and experienced. Among the most significant, rapid and obvious of changes experienced by the thirty-year old local community which impinge upon its communal life and culture are changes in small trades, businesses and organizations, the high turnover of residents through the resale and rental of flats, the presence of immigrant residents and workers,[8] and the HDB's main upgrading programme for older estates.

[7] See footnote 1.

[8] The new shops which have replaced some Indian-Muslim groceries and Chinese medicinal hall now sell new consumer products and services which reflect changing tastes, trends and needs, such as `dermatological products', `spas' and laundry services. Some new services are provided by new organizations, such as family help services and counseling by the Marine Parade Family Service Centre (a joint collaboration of the Catholic Welfare Services and the Ministry of Community Development and Sports) and infant- and child-care by the Southeast CDC. The ownership of the two kopitiam and of some individual food stalls as well as those in the hawker centre have changed hands several times, and fusion foods are now sold alongside traditional dishes, but the two institutions remain as solid sites of multiculturalism. In the high turnover of residents, there are many `new' individuals and families who have moved into the community, including immigrants some of whom are short-term residents and others who have settled indefinitely. Immigrant workers from China and Malaysia are most obvious in the kopitiam while Bangladeshis do daily cleaning of common areas, but they live elsewhere in rented rooms and workers' quarters. The community has been spared the more difficult challenges of adjusting to and integrating immigrants in its midst, even as there are individual instances of tension due to misuse of space and littering. In other residential locales elsewhere, local residents and immigrants are drawn into disputes over norms and issues of everyday living and behaviour in shared common spaces, such as littering, urinating and (mis)use of common spaces. The large-scale housing of immigrant workers by their employers and agents in some residential locales, together with cases of abused foreign workers and exploitation by recruitment agencies and employers, have raised issues of employment, integration and segregation. These are currently framed within `class', `humanism' and `rights' perspectives by academics and advocates but tend to be seen in everyday practical terms by many locals, while policy officials at the Ministry of Manpower negotiate between national economic considerations and workers' protection.

The most impactful of changes affecting all residents is clearly the main upgrading programme of the HDB (undertaken in stages by neighbourhoods since 2000).[9] Through it, there are now new and renewed common facilities and spaces "downstairs", such as seating areas, play areas, mini stages and renovated hawker centre, market and multi-storey carparks. Suggested improvements such as lifts on every floor and better designed kerbs and pavements for strollers, trolleys, bicycles and wheelchairs have also been taken up. However, the now "iconic" multi-storey carpark, of which there are three within a half-kilometre stretch, have inadvertently removed natural meeting points for brief chats and encounters among residents, especially homemakers and the elderly, along the tree-lined edges of the previous open space carparks.[10] The older layout of open spaces with benches under the shade of trees has been largely replaced by that of shade-less seating areas surrounded by decorative puny plants which "birds cannot even perch on", including that for the neighbourhood centre which warrants a specific mention here. During the brief tenure of one Town Council mayor prior to the main upgrading programme, the neighbourhood centre underwent its own `upgrading' in which its grass patches and seats under trees were replaced by an expensive fountain (that was never turned on) and a military-style tiled grounds with steel-plated seats that were too hot to sit on after 9 a.m. This new and obviously expensive layout was strongly criticized by residents, as was the mayor's private carpark specially created for him at the Town Council's entrance and which intruded onto common walking space.

Amidst these changes, the life and culture of the local community continue to be played out `downstairs', day in and day out and throughout each year, revolving around the everyday activities and special occasions of chatting, playing, celebrating, exchanging and negotiating. Many actors on the local stages have changed, but many others remain with memories of having lived in the community and witnessing its changes, such as children now grownup adults, retirees, hawkers and stallholders. What of women with young children, youths and elderly in common spaces `downstairs'?

Twenty years' later, young mothers, grandmothers and domestic workers with children remain a highly visual picture in playgrounds and void-decks. The scenes are familiar – children at play and adults at chatter. For children and adults alike, the playground remains one of the most accessible and easiest place to meet someone, either in a one-off encounter or regularly and form neighbourly and friendship ties over time. The games played and the

[9] I was invited by the Chairman of the Marine Parade Residents' Committee (RC) to be a member of my neighbourhood's upgrading committee, by virtue of my previous job as a researcher at the HDB. Other committee members were architects and planners from the main HDB office, representatives from the local HDB office and the Marine Parade Town Council, the neighbourhood's Residents' Committee members, the local Member of Parliament (MP) and building contractors. I requested that two other residents personally known to me to be included in the upgrading committee, for their inputs as an architect and as a long time resident with experience of living in the estate since it was first built. The committee sat for the 3-year duration of the Main Upgrading Programme (2002-4), meeting every 2-3 months to discuss design and implementation details of the Programme. Overall, my observation and experience of the committee's work is that officials and experts in a community's upgrading programme, while well meaning, need ordinary residents' inputs in a consultative process about their living environment. This is because the RC members tended to go along with most proposed designs unquestioningly, while architects, designers and contractors already largely accepted their own proposals and simply wanted to get on with the work.

[10] In the upgrading committee I sat on, one of the most contentious issues was over the multi-storey carpark for which a huge budget had been allocated by the HDB but which was objected to by residents (including myself). In a clear rejection of this icon of Singapore's modernity, much to the surprise of officials, all RC ordinary members and the three residents in the committee (including myself) voted overwhelmingly against its construction, preferring to keep the existing space with its openness and its many trees.

topics discussed remain largely same. Among the young mothers are homemakers and workers, the latter among whom are more likely to bring their children to the playground only on weekends. Their issues about work and family pertain to the need to work, work-life (im) balance (especially long working hours) and children's education. Noticeable among the homemakers are foreigners married to local men, as they keep to themselves, speak different languages and may even dress distinctly in ethnic clothes (such as those from India).

There are many more foreign domestic workers than mothers at the playground on weekdays and they clearly form groupings by nationality – mainly Filipino, Indonesian and Sri Lankan. Over the years, their gatherings at playgrounds while minding children and also at the morning market while shopping have become part of the local community structure and everyday life, such gatherings providing the opportunities for their daily interaction outside of otherwise private homes and sometimes highly controlled work conditions. At such gatherings in such spaces, they are able to phone, gossip, complain, compare, exchange and plan on what are most common to immigrant women's everyday lives and life's options – children, marriage, family, employer, opportunities, side businesses, training courses, weekend trip, trip home, the future.

Twenty years later, youths have a proper street soccer court and it is often in great demand especially in the evenings and during weekends. Space negotiations remain the same, with unwritten but recognizable time-tabling of play by bigger groups. Individuals wanting to join in a game are usually invited to do so or have their personal request acceded to. This inclusiveness is part of established practice developed at both the local court and school grounds, unless the youth is marked as being consistently one who does not play by the rules of the game and of court behaviour. The use of ethnic expletives as well as sexual obscenities in moments of anger and excitement remains strongly part of local male culture and expression.

Twenty years later, there are more elderly residents in the local community and they are more visible in its public spaces, including on wheelchairs.[11] `The Good Life at South East', a joint community project[12] for the physically mobile elderly, focuses on graceful and healthy ageing and provides a gym and meeting place in one void-deck. Its participants are mostly women, including widows, while reading the papers and playing chess in another specially designated corner for elderly residents is more popular among the men. Elsewhere in the kopitiam, hawker centre and other seating areas, talking politics, telling stories and cracking jokes remain part and parcel of everyday life and the contents of conversations. Old Immigrants' stories are less heard as those of the old immigrant generation pass away, replaced by those of newer immigrants of the "I come from Johor" and "I am from the Philippines" variety, while work histories and of family lives `then' and `now' are regularly recollected by retirees.

Twenty years later, special events such as those described above continue to remain part of the local community's public, social and cultural life. Most residents have come to regard them as familiar and accept them as aspects of their multiethnic and multicultural living environment, and have evolved civil mechanisms, modes of behaviour and response to these

[11] By the year 2030, 30% of Singapore's population is estimated to be of ages 65 and above. In Marine Parade, one in six residents is elderly compared to the national proportion of one in twelve.

[12] By the Marine Parade Family Service Centre, the Southeast Community Development Council and the Marine Parade Citizens' Consultative Committee

cultural and religious manifestations. To the extent that some of these occasions are changing in character such as shortened wedding celebrations and a preference for *getai* over opera, this is not primarily due to the planned environment (even though incense sticks have been shortened so that they burn out within a day instead of three in the interests of environmental cleanliness and fire safety). It reflects changing values, meanings and expectations about cultural expressions, ethnic identities and lifestyle choices.

The possibility of religious tensions between Muslims and those of other faiths at the intergroup and local levels has become a security concern among political and religious authorities in the aftermath of September 11 and several terrorist attacks elsewhere. In the local community, there appears to be no such tension, while local tensions caused by the aggressive proselitisation of evangelical Christians in the 1980s appear to have dissipated with the passing of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1991. The regional Southeast Community Development Council (CDC), which has taken over from the HDB Area Office in mediatory roles and developed other instruments of community development such as the holding of job fairs and dispensing of social welfare, also undertakes interfaith harmony work in collaboration with local Inter-racial and Inter-religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs). It remains to be seen how any larger religious conflict will reverberate at the local level.

CONCLUSION

Singapore, as an Asian city, has an interesting story to tell. A part of the `big' story, already told and often repeated, is about its rapid urbanization under a regime of strong authority and planning, with public housing being the most outstanding and significant dimension. What remains to be told are the many `small parts' of that big story – those which are about human experience in its local places and HDB neighbourhoods; about meaningful and significant practices, processes and principles of living in close proximity and shared common spaces among its ordinary citizens in their everyday lives and on their special occasions; and about living and evolving cultures and heritages. Singapore as a `multicultural' city, so often spoken in broad macro terms, must also necessarily be understood within specific locales and through local communities, subgroups and individuals.

I have given numerous descriptive examples and illustrations of the cultural and symbolic map that can be drawn of a local community and neighbourhood in Singapore, of what characters and lives in it can be like, and shown that there are various meaningful activities, relationships, events and incidents taking place among individuals and groups. Here is diversity and heterogeneity, both because of and in despite of larger forces at work. In doing so, I hope to have shown that there is much sense and significance, life and liveliness, and colour and complexity to be found in the commonsensical, mundane and the ordinary within a neighbourhood and local community in Singapore City. It is these - people and their activities both material and symbolic - which give the local community its structure, essence and distinctiveness over time as a place; it is these which are part of the larger Singapore urbanization story, providing content and material to its human and cultural dimensions. At the same time, its 30-year long existence and experiences of intertwining changes and continuities speak to two issues of Asian urbanization, place-making and community formation: heritage, and democratic consultation with and participation by ordinary citizen inhabitants.

To me as an anthropologist and resident, Marine Parade is an ordinary place with ordinary people which, like many other similar neighbourhoods in the big Singapore City, is a living heritage site with its unique combination of cultures and planned and spontaneous processes. Recognition of such a place by heritage experts and lovers, artists and other outsiders is overdue. I hope to have conveyed the point that such a place is where not just the academic anthropologist but also the artist, writer, painter, photographer or actor can find interesting and imaginative material for their works, be these stories and sayings, plots and ploys, settings and scenes, or compositions and colours, for a scholarly article, script, play, painting, photograph or movie. But to do so, one would need to go deep beneath its cover of uniformity and planned design. The theatre group *The Necessary Stage* set up its base in Marine Parade in 2004 and regularly stages performances there, while several movies and television series have their characters drawn from and plots situated within HDB settings. The write-up of a book titled `Heartlands' (Ong 2008) which documents an exhibition of watercolour paintings by world renowned local artist Ong Kim Seng, notes how his art works

> `celebrate the significance of Singapore's public housing landscape … his most important old paintings of heartland scenes … in an innovative style he calls "realist surrealism". Vital images of scenes that now live only on the memory are incorporated into seemingly everyday settings in the present. With this fantastic juxtaposition, he invites the viewer to appreciate the meaning of the only home that he has known and embraced, in the homeland that he cherishes'.

In a poem titled `Corridor, Bukit Merah', Koh Buck Song (in Ong, 2008) writes:

> these are the lanes
> we must now tread
> to reach one another …
>
> just solid linear platforms
> to build community
> if given open access
>
> no more attap anxiety
> or borrowing sugar, with
> a minimart downstairs
>
> this is how we level
> with each other, in this
> kueh lapis kampong

Heritage lovers and artistes can continue to hold onto nostalgic notions of past places yet expand their horizons to those whose present plainness may well be future treasures. The present, like the past, can be remembered and made an intrinsic and distinctive part of Singapore's heritage and arts. Indeed, it would be ironical that Singapore's heartlands in which 85% of the population live and which dominate the country's landscape is absent in its representations in heritage and artistic works. "Taking" arts from the people would also complement recent efforts to "bring the arts to the people" in the heartlands and develop a connection and reciprocal relationship between scholars, artists and people.

There is also some urgency in capturing present heartland communities in heritage and artistic works because of rapid economic, social and cultural changes taking place. It appears easier to develop a cosmopolitan and international outlook than to have a sense of and appreciation of the local amidst rapid change and globalisation. Yet, the local mediates between individual and the larger worlds and provides the contextualised and rooted meanings of many universal themes of life and living. There is also no need for validation by those who can pay premium prices for flats and for gentrification to occur in a particular place[13] before it is considered attractive enough for heritage enthusiasts to pay it attention.

Finally, heartlanders deserve to be consulted by officialdom, simply because of the fact that public housing's planning, layout and design inevitably leads people to live cheek by jowl and to have to adjust to each other. I have shown how residents respond as active agents to such living both in spite of and because of such conditions. By now, after nearly forty years of public housing and even though the public-private housing dichotomy has become a strong indicator of Singapore's social class divide, HDB heartland living is a taken for granted condition by the bulk of the population. I have never met residents who lament the demise of the village bucket latrine even if they are nostalgic about past kampong days, but I have met many residents who lament top-down and distant decision-making by `them', whether in everyday living matters or about economic and political issues. Many a local anecdote from various heartland neighbourhoods jokingly or angrily tell of out of sync building designs, shady trees cut down, favourite meeting spots removed and citizens' vegetable plots demolished without as much as prior information let alone consultation.

Large scale public housing necessarily requires corresponding scales of planning, provision and management. Yet, heartlanders need to be recognized by politicians, housing officers, architects, planners and town managers as the real inhabitants of the estate, with their local knowledge, needs, preferences and tastes. Officialdom needs to remember that a place belongs to its residents, even if it public housing, and that a place's identity and a community's meaning is shaped and owned by its members. Democratic consultation and decision-making processes involving residents about their living environment would not only be a desirable but also rightful part of the making and meaning of community in the big story about Singapore's urbanization. This would make for a new chapter about leveling and community building for the people `downstairs'.

[13] This appears to be the case with some locations in Singapore, such as the Tiong Bahru area that has Singapore Improvement Trust flats with art deco themes built in the colonial period.

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