

# The Effect of changing HDB common spaces on Singapore's urban kampung spirit: A Reflection

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## Introduction

The research that I have done during the summer relates to how the recent and ongoing transformations to Singapore's residential landscape have affected the sense of community among residents. Specifically, this research focuses on the transformations to the Housing Development Board (HDB) flats and their common spaces, such as void decks<sup>1</sup> and precinct pavilions<sup>2</sup>. My interest towards this topic was sparked by ongoing discourses about the seemingly insidious erosion of social cohesiveness between neighbours today, in contrast to the type of solidarity – often referred to as the kampung spirit – exhibited in the past. This kampung spirit is often characterised by outward displays of trust and friendliness shared between neighbours, such as leaving their doors open and where visits from neighbours are welcomed any time. In contrast, it is commonly remarked that there is a dearth of such neighbourly interactions today, where doors often remain shut and each other's presence only acknowledged with a slight smile or a nod of the head. Notwithstanding the contentious debate about the feasibility or suitability of the kampung spirit in modern Singapore, I aim to investigate if such perceptions of a disappearing sense of community are related to transforming HDB common spaces, which seemingly contribute to an individualistic lifestyle. In addition, I will also identify the modern and emerging forms of residential common spaces in newer HDB estates today, and evaluate its efficacy in promoting neighbourly ties between residents in contrast to its traditional counterparts.

## Reflections about the research

My research findings suggest firstly, that there is indeed a perceived loss of “kampung spirit” amongst residents today, at least in a manner that is reminiscent of the past. Such loss of kampung spirit is often linked to observations with regards to the underutilisation of common spaces and the lack of prolonged interactions between neighbours. Such underutilisation was illustrated to be caused by differing perceptions of how common spaces ought to be appropriated, and also due to strict rules imposed by the municipals, which results in ambiguity and subsequent underuse of these common spaces. The fact that there are increasingly conflicted understandings of how common spaces should be appropriated, in hindsight, led me to wonder if *kampung spirit* is even an attitude that residents today wish to retain. I realise that perhaps *kampung spirit* was in fact only possible given the socio-economic conditions that persisted in the past, and that it has most certainly transformed significantly since then. For instance, mass unemployment that was prevalent in the past may have increased opportunities for prolonged encounters between residents of the same kampung; and given the poorer state of security (financial or otherwise), residents then are predisposed to greater degree of mutual dependence on each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Open common spaces situated on the ground floor of Singapore's high-rise HDB flats, intended for various social events and functions

<sup>2</sup> Open spaces shared by several blocks of flats, also intended for social events and functions

Beyond the transformations to HDB common spaces, its underutilisation may also be further attributed towards the perception of a neighbour today. Where neighbours were integral to one's living experience in a *kampung* in the past, such perceptions have seemingly shifted today. In majority of the instances, participants have indicated that their neighbours are far divorced from their social circles, often acting instead as a "back-up" for emergencies or inconvenient circumstances, such as requesting taking care of a pet/plants when going overseas. Some participants also suggest that such requests give rise to extended opportunities to interact with one another and develop a mutual dependence in times of need. Hence, such acts of neighbourliness (for better or worse) arise largely only on a functional basis, in contrast to social purposes. In this sense, it does align with Laurier et al.'s (2016) understanding of neighbourliness as being "occasioned".

This however, does not suggest a pessimistic view of neighbours being apathetic to each other. Though neighbourly interactions or relations are by no means deemed desirable on a daily basis, most participants are still of opinion that neighbours are still important – and at times, more so than individuals of their social circle since neighbours are the only people that may provide immediate assistance in times of urgent needs. The key therefore, is in the approach of upholding such neighbourly relations yet remain comfortably distant at the same time. Participants indicated that one way to accomplish this is through casual greetings (such as a smile, nod of the head or asking if one has eaten) and occasionally providing extended gestures of congeniality (such as cooking for one another or exchanging gifts). This allowed me to realise that neighbourliness between residents are not in many senses "weak", but involve a complex balance of distance and friendliness at the same time.

## **Reflections about the trip to Chiang Mai**

The trip to Chiang Mai has been an extremely enriching and unique experience, primarily because we were given the opportunity and autonomy to exercise leadership skills to navigate through obstacles that surfaced throughout the trip. The first obstacle that presented itself was that participants of the trip came from different backgrounds, cultures and had varying competencies. Being split in teams comprising of these members posed significant difficulties in organising activities and conveying instructions, which led to differing interpretations and fulfilments of our tasks and objectives. I was able to hone my leadership skills here in delegating assignments to different members in a manner that played to their strengths, which required the close observations of team dynamics. Furthermore, conflict resolution was necessary especially when there were disputing opinions pertaining to our assigned tasks. I have come to realise that cultures play an important role in disposing individuals to act or behaving in certain manners, which may come across as odd and even offensive in some ways. It has allowed me then, to dispel such antagonisms within the team and at times act as a mediator.

Beyond the team dynamics, this trip has cultivated in me the the practice of listening to both sides of the story, no matter how convincing the narrative put forth by a single party. We observe for example, how the Chiangmai municipals pinned the blame on the hillside tribes for their farming practices, which allegedly serves as the primary contributor to the worsening haze situation in Chiangmai. As we personally visited the hillside tribes however, we start to realise that the crux of the problem is far more complicated than presented by the municipals

in two manners; one, that these farming practices serve as the primary source of income for these tribes; and two, that these farming practices contributed far less to the haze as alleged by the municipals. This has allowed me to understand the nuances that impedes the formulation of a solution to address both the economic needs of these hillside tribes and the environmental problem posed to Chiangmai. Pertaining to the academic domain, this trip has also helped emphasise upon the importance of fieldwork and the ethnography of these sites in order to truly understand the subtleties of such conflicts; and that a problem cannot simply be abstracted away from its material contexts and motivations of its actors.

Finally, the Chiangmai trip encompassed a three-day stay within the village, where it placed me (and other fellow participants) far away from our usual comfort of 'proper' accommodations and its facilities such as a proper bathroom or a bedroom. It has helped me to develop resilience in the face of hardships and discomfort. A particular memorable experience I had was trekking up a mountain, where a misstep would send climbers rolling down the steep slopes. While it was certainly exhausting, it emphasised the idea of teamwork, without which we would not have been able to scale the mountain. For the duration of the climb, it matters not which languages we spoke nor which countries we came from, for we all had that common objective of reaching the top. It was empowering at least to experience for ourselves how teamwork can accomplish deeds that we ourselves are incapable of performing.

### **Reflections about Laidlaw Leadership Workshop**

The leadership workshop was certainly insightful in helping us understand what kinds of leaders we are, and how different styles of leadership may be invoked to better lead a team. Giving feedback to team members for example, is almost a necessary responsibility of the leader, yet possibly one of the hardest things to do. The workshop has showed us strategies of how to provide feedbacks and criticisms in a manner that aligns with our leadership styles and contributive to the team's productivity. Using their framework was also extremely helpful (such as the sandwich model), since it emphasised that complimenting one's views is as important for critiquing it.

Through the workshop, we were given multiple opportunities for our voices to be heard, which helped me become more confident of presenting my own views – something I have struggled with. I have learnt that having my own thoughts and opinions criticised is a learning experience not only for me, but for those who may have shared my thoughts but have not necessarily verbalised it themselves. Furthermore, it helps to establish informed consensus among the team and guides future discussion.

### **Concluding Comments**

This research has been a task that I undertook out of curiosity, as I have observed the insidious decline in the appropriation of HDB common spaces (in particular the void deck). Through the interview process, I have continually tweaked my project scope and aims as my hypothesis was admittedly pessimistic and insensitive towards the different contexts in which displays of neighbourliness can be observed. While I was originally of opinion that HDB residents (and other Singaporean citizens in general) are simply going through a process of becoming more individualistic as the nation develops (as put forth by the concept of *Gesellschaft*), I realise that the declining use of such common spaces are in fact much more layered and complex.

While I have outlined in this reflection that the de facto mode of appropriating HDB common spaces are more aligned with goals of individualism (non-disruptive use of void decks so residents are able to carry out their individual activities), I have also shown that this is due to a shift in the perception of a neighbour. In other words, the socially agreed upon mode of appropriating common spaces today differ so much, because our broader understanding today of what it means to be a neighbour differ very vastly compared to the past. Being a neighbour in the past implies and necessitates to a certain degree, an expectation of being close-knitted due to a different set of circumstance (such as rife unemployment which I have not covered in this paper). As Singapore progresses, such circumstances transform and gradually eradicate the need to be mutually dependent on each other, therefore allowing individuals to expand their social circle beyond their immediate residences.

Yet, these neighbourly ties are by no means useless or unnecessary. While distant, neighbours are still an essential pillar of support in times of emergencies, which cannot be replaced by one's intimate social circle. Rather than an erosion of ties between neighbours, I interpret that there is merely a differentiation in roles occupied by groups of individuals who differ in terms of intimacy and proximity: where one's social circle attend to their intimate needs, an immediate neighbour acts as a "back-up" to emergencies where one's social circle are unable to render help. As I have shown in this reflection, such neighbourly ties can be upheld through simple gestures of congeniality, therefore eliminating the need to invest extravagant amounts of time and effort to fill the role of a neighbour.

I would like to add however, that perceptions of neighbourliness are continually shifting, although not necessarily in line with the direction set out by the municipals. In younger neighbourhoods of Singapore for example, HDB residents create Instant-Messaging (IM) group chats across different blocks to keep up with the latest happenings at a neighbourhood level (rather than at a personal level). This suggests a general receptivity towards manifest neighbourliness rather than latent forms. At the same time, Town Councils are also increasingly organising youthful and trendy activities – such as free Zumba classes and overseas trips – at the neighbourhood level to integrate younger individuals into the community. While these initiatives hint at an attempt to build a more close-knitted community, my research findings suggest that present attitudes of younger Singaporeans towards neighbours cannot be force-fitted to establish such communities yet, since such activities are more commonly engaged between close friends rather than distant neighbours. Therefore, I believe it would be more appropriate to study current attitudes of residents towards neighbours and their modes of appropriating common spaces, which will in turn inform the urban design of future residences as well as its neighbourhood-level activities.

Beyond the research itself, I am extremely thankful for the various opportunities offered to me, from the rare experience of interacting with members of various countries and the hill tribe members, to the opportunity to learn more about myself through the leadership workshop. It has certainly helped me grow as a researcher, a leader and most importantly, as a human being.

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