



PROJECT

KAMPONG LORONG BUANGKOK

Stories, Scenes, and Prospects of the Last Kampong on Mainland Singapore



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PROJECT KAMPONG LORONG BUANGKOK



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PROLOGUE & *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

This book aims to provide a detailed look into Kampong Lorong Buangkok, which is located on mainland Singapore, through the lens of a documentation project that was carried out to capture the rich oral history accounts and heritage information about the kampong and its people. The project also provided an opportunity to visualise and capture creative alternatives of how the space occupied by the kampong could be utilised – whilst staying relevant and in keeping with the current needs of society through the passage of time, and without compromising its essence and historical significance.

Kampong Lorong Buangkok has been around in Singapore since 1956 – even before the nation achieved independence. Hence, the stories and memories of the people who have lived in the kampong ought to be preserved, regardless of the eventual fate of the kampong itself due to gentrification and urban redevelopment in land-scarce Singapore.

This book is just one part of the heritage and documentation project done by a team of faculty from the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) from 2019 to 2021. The other components of the project are the virtual reality (VR) tour of the kampong – through an immersive experience using Oculus Go goggles, and through a web-based platform; and a three-dimensional (3D) physical and scaled modelling of the kampong.

Much gratitude is extended to the staff and students at the Singapore Institute of Technology for their participation in and support of the project, despite the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted the schedule and plans for the project; JIA Studios LLP for their advice and guidance on the VR Tour and scale modelling of the kampong; FX Media Singapore Pte Ltd for developing the VR Tour, in collaboration with SIT; and Mr Wilfred Cheah for his creation of the detailed miniature model houses of the kampong, in collaboration with SIT.

It is hoped that through this project, the narratives and memories of the kampong and its people can live on and be remembered by Singaporeans in the future, and that they will continue to be inspired by the lives and stories of our forebears.

EPILOGUE

In the early morning of the 4th of July 2021, the skies were dark grey, and the rain was dancing loudly on the zinc roof of Ms Sng's house, as we waited for things to clear for one of our last days of photography. To fill the time, Ms Sng generously hauled to the table a trove of photo albums, books and newspaper articles that featured the kampong.

Looking at the older paintings in one of the books Ms Sng laughed and shared that she almost did not recognise the image as being that of Kampong Lorong Buangkok, as it has been a long time since the residents had sawed their houses from the stilts and lowered their formerly elevated structures to the ground. She explained that before the Singapore government introduced flood controls, the stilts were how the residents mitigated the rising waters of high tides and storms. The wrinkling of the corner of her eyes hinted at a smile beneath her COVID-19 safety mask as she flipped through more time-yellowed news articles about the kampong. She laughed again, pointing to photographs in a newspaper article, of flooded ground-level homes, remembering how they had thought the flood controls would put an end to the flooding in the kampong.

Skimming through texts of the collected articles, one might get the impression that the kampong has been frozen in time, but Ms Sng's reflections help us understand the kampong that exists today is actually a very different kampong from what existed in the past. The kampong continually changes in relation to broader changes in the Singapore society. The transformation of the architecture resulting from Singapore's efforts in controlling patterns of nature, are just one example of changes in the kampong.

The chipping coats of paint on the wooden structures reveal layers of change. Changes in colour preference, paint availability, personal style, ownership, and outward expression of an owner's identity. Pointing to an old image of a completely dilapidated structure whose walls were almost more empty space than wood, Ms Sng explained that we were sheltering in the rain what used to be that home. The house had belonged to a family whose elders had passed away, and the children, unable to come to agreement on what to do with the home, decided to sell the structure to Ms Sng. She shared that she had hired a contractor to rebuild the place to her specifications, creating the interior to her design.

This structure that in a dilapidated state was a humble home is the reinvented staged 'kampong house' that Mdm Sng makes available to MediaCorp (Singapore's largest content creator and national media network), production companies, student filmmakers, tour providers, educational groups and others who come to the kampong to enact and produce imaginaries of 'historic' Singapore and 'kampong' life.

The house is no longer dilapidated, elevated on stilts, or a lived-in home of a resident. Set designers have transformed the walls with layers of paint that reflect the needs of a given production rather than the social practices of an inhabitant. Furniture is moved and staged for filming purposes and desired lighting, and the small compensation Mdm Sng receives is put back into the home for such things as modernising and remodelling of the toilet. In their attempts at producing imaginaries of a nostalgic past, the productions transform the very structures of what they intend to represent. What is created and captured is a produced nostalgia. And what is left for the tour groups and educational groups to visit are not actualities of a historic past, or a contemporary lived-in home, but sets designed for the production of nostalgia.

Nostalgia has been described as “memory with the pain removed” (Caen, H. 1975, April 15 Editorial cited in Sedikides et. al. 2004 p. 204). While our cameras were recording, we tended to capture nostalgia, memories of the past with the pain removed. And it is nostalgia that a children’s group comes to experience in the kampong. For example, they are engaged in the fun aspects of those parts of childhood in the imagined kampong, such as playing marbles in the dirt. On camera, the stories of the frequent floods in the past become stories of children gleefully swimming after fish. When the camera is off, we might hear about the more stressful aspects of kampong history, and we may hear more about the normal contentious or stressful types of interactions one has with neighbours anywhere in the world. These types of recollections and personal narratives – painful and traumatic memories, changing and evolving feelings, and emotions about others with whom one lives in close proximity – are normally existent, but must be filtered from public discourse and widely accessible forums in order to maintain social harmony within the kampong. These are the types of experiences and narratives that one would not build into a children’s tour, or a publicly shared oral history.

We have done our best to capture a snapshot of the kampong at this contemporary point in time – at the height of a global pandemic during 2019-2021. We have captured the contemporary nostalgia at the comfort level of what residents are best able to share while maintaining social harmony. And we have done our best to capture the contemporary physical environment of the kampong that stands in stark contrast to the urban housing landscape just outside Kampong Lorong Buangkok’s walls of remaining foliage.





The location has striking similarities to the karst landscapes found elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Immediately to the east of the kampong, the towering edifice of the recently constructed Housing and Development Board (HDB) blocks of apartments (or 'flats' as they are known in Singapore), rise like impending brutalist urban concrete cliffs at the edge of the verdant village on a fertile riparian plane. The HDB's conformity of style exists in the lineage of the master planning of housing in Singapore and stands in contrast to the unique structures with architectural exteriors reflective of the owners that we find in the kampong. A resident such as Mr Jamil has decorated the interior and exterior of his home with the colourful flair of a skilled set designer. Draped with fabrics from HDB void deck weddings, intricately carved wooden furniture gifted to him by friends and folks who were remodelling their HDB flats, intricately patterned carpets, ceramic vases, throw pillows, and chandeliers, Mr. Jamil has crafted a shaded oasis filled with a spirit of magic and celebration – a special place for family gatherings. Gleaning the remnants of celebratory events, Mr Jamil has skillfully designed the exterior of his home to be a vivid expression of his beautifully unique and artistic identity.

Such practices of external expressions of identity and self within a community are part of what imbue the location with the increasingly elusive "kampong spirit." And groups from across Singapore and around the world are drawn into Kampong Lorong Buangkok on their quest to experience that spirit and the physical environment of the last kampong on mainland Singapore. On a given day you may find: A Malay-Singaporean music and dance ensemble performing heritage; Actors on break from a television production costumed in representations of the historic clothing of Singapore (e.g. the khaki shorts, high socks, and uniform tops of the post-independence police force in 1960s Singapore); Students from the Polytechnics, junior colleges (JCs), and Universities present for photoshoots or to learn about subjects ranging from cultural tourism to history and architecture; Local and international tourists present to safely immerse themselves in an observational experience of the last kampong on mainland Singapore; Parents and grandparents with children and grandchildren having discussions about life and lifestyles that are strikingly different than what exists just a few metres outside of the kampong's remaining wall of foliage.

The residents, each of these groups, and all of our interactions are socially and contemporarily producing Kampong Lorong Buangkok. We, as researchers and social scientists, were fortunate to have this opportunity to come in the kampong and produce snapshots, recordings and models of this contemporary socially produced space. This book, like all the beautiful ones that came before it, adds to the compendium of information about the kampong captured at specific points in time.



EPILOGUE

As the rainfall abated, Ms Sng flipped through the pages of a photo album. The album was a gift from a European woman who, beginning in the 1990s, had made extensive visits to the kampong over a few decades. The photos captured youthful images of several residents who were interviewed for this project. The same people, in the same geographical location, at different points in time, and stages of life. Ms Sng laughed gently to herself as she pointed to a photo of a very young child and asked if we could guess how old the little girl is today. In a happy tone, Ms Sng said the 'little girl' is older than 30 years old, and looking back down at the photo, she added "... and she still comes back to visit."

These fading Kampong Lorong Buangkok photos from decades past capture something that is largely absent from the kampong today: the presence of resident children. Through this project, we were fortunate to capture the contemporary memories of the aging residents who grew up in the Kampong. As their children and grandchildren have moved out and are not likely to continue living in the kampong except for sporadic short visits, future generations will become more dependent on projects like this, to present the memories of our ever-transforming communities. It is our hope that this book, and the other creative outputs of our project, will help inspire others to creatively capture understandings of the diverse lives and contemporary social practices that constitute Singapore and communities such as Kampong Lorong Buangkok for the benefit of future generations.



