

## **Saving Bukit Brown (Published in The Straits Times, 17 November 2011)**

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In land-scarce Singapore, the tension between heritage and modernity is not unusual, as the on-going debate over Bukit Brown cemetery demonstrates. This debate is the latest in a long line of struggles over important national spaces such as the National Library building in Stamford Road and Bidadari cemetery in Upper Aljunied Road, both of which have been irretrievably lost to the nation.

In July this year, the Urban Redevelopment Authority announced that Bukit Brown would be needed for future housing and in mid-September, the Land Transport Authority revealed plans to begin constructing a dual four-lane road through Bukit Brown in early 2013. The road will affect about 5,000 of the approximately 100,000 graves.

Critics in cyberspace and the mainstream media have made three primary arguments for the destruction of Bukit Brown.

- The first is that Bukit Brown is a burial ground for the elite, and that most Singaporeans do not have genealogies that link them to the cemetery. Advocates of this argument assert that many of the prominent pioneers like Chew Boon Lay and Cheang Hong Lim interred there have streets and places named after them, and there is thus no further need to preserve their graves. This assertion is short-sighted as the graves allow Singaporeans to draw links between abstract street names and real people.

The elitist accusation is reverse snobbery. We would never contemplate selling the Padang to a condo developer just because neighbourhood boys do not play football there. And just because most Singaporeans do not have ancestors interred there does not mean they cannot claim the space for strolls and jogs, appreciation tours, or to enjoy the rich flora and fauna there.

Tens of thousands of ordinary migrants are also buried at Bukit Brown. Furthermore, in preserving the graves of ordinary people we are acknowledging the blood, sweat and toil of those who have contributed to the development of our city port. Such a move will enrich and democratise the Singapore story.

- The second argument by critics of Bukit Brown is that the loss of the cemetery can be adequately mitigated by virtual mapping and documentation. The assumption here defies all logic for heritage preservation. After all most historic monuments from Stonehenge to Angkor Wat have lost their functional value but are no less important as signposts to past communities.

The heritage value of Bukit Brown is conveyed to us in the provincial origins of the dead, the names of their descendants, as well as the tomb design, artistic embellishment and fengshui orientation. The sacredness of Bukit Brown can be found in the practices of people who continue to pay their respects to their ancestors in the form of ceremonial rituals as well as highly personalised ways. Such sacredness is not static or dead but embedded in living habits of people.

Bukit Brown is sacred also by virtue of its biodiversity. Of the 85 species of birds that have been recorded there, two are deemed 'vulnerable', six are 'endangered', and three are 'critically endangered'. Bukit Brown has been designated a Tree Conservation Area by the National Parks Board under the Parks and Trees Act. Virtual technologies and documentation cannot replace the loss of ecology.

Bukit Brown is also valuable to the broader nation-building project. Much has been made about how Singapore is becoming more hotel than home for many citizens and many worry that Singaporeans are but rootless 'cultural orphans'. The expressions of identity and culture found in Bukit Brown are unique to local communities, reflecting the history of the Straits Settlements and broader Nanyang. They are

specific to the region, differing from those in South China where most of our forefathers came from. In short, Bukit Brown anchors firmly our sense of belonging to this region.

- The third, and most commonly heard, argument is that 'the dead have to make way for the living'. This argument makes matters seem more urgent than they may be - without destroying Bukit Brown, there would be no space for the living. But has every other space for housing been considered before turning to Bukit Brown?

It also assumes that continued population growth is inevitable. And yet there is no public discussion on the optimal population size that the island and infrastructure may accommodate before the space crunch is felt. Population projections by government agencies are not yet widely circulated for debate.

Ultimately, the struggle for Bukit Brown goes beyond saving a few graves or greenery. It is the struggle for the soul of Singapore. The decisions we make will determine the value we place on our collective identity, our multi-textured heritage and our sense of belonging. They are decisions we will have to explain to our children.