

Turf Club closure necessary, but no easy winner in the race for space

There will often be difficult trade-offs when it comes to urban planning in land-scarce S'pore.

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Urban redevelopment can come into conflict with preserving heritage. In land-scarce Singapore, it is often inevitable.

But effective urban planning is necessary to ensure that the nation's land use needs are met. This often requires our urban planners to redevelop existing plots of land to create space for new developments.

What are the key considerations that determine which buildings or sites are to be conserved and which are to be redeveloped? How can our urban planners continue to ensure that Singapore's land use needs are fulfilled while at the same time retaining our heritage?

This ongoing tension arose again with recent announcements that the Singapore Turf Club would cease its racing operations at Kranji. The 120ha Kranji site

will be returned to the Government and redeveloped for housing and other needs.

The move will free up much-needed land to address our urgent needs for more housing and commercial spaces.

Considering the 180-year history of horse racing in Singapore, it is by no means an easy decision. But there are several factors that make this necessary.

A QUESTION OF SPACE

Closing the racecourse will support the development of a northern economic hub known as Woodlands Regional Centre, a plan that had already been articulated in the Housing Board's (HDB) 2017 Remaking Our Heartland programme.

Such efforts to create regional business hubs are also part of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)'s "Local Hubs, Global Gateways" strategy which aims to provide more commercial space outside the Central Business District (CBD).

According to real estate consultancy Knight Frank, office rents in the CBD rose in the first quarter of 2023, driven by a combination of tight supply and strong demand.

Singapore is also facing high demand for housing, which has translated into rising home prices

and rents. In the first quarter of 2023, private home prices rose by 3.3 per cent while those of resale HDB flats rose by 0.9 per cent.

As the space needs of Singapore's residents and its industries continue to grow, it will become necessary to redevelop existing sites to build more housing estates, innovation parks, satellite business districts and other projects.

Besides driving urban redevelopment, the URA is also in charge of conserving historically significant buildings. According to the authority, conservation requires an appreciation and understanding of the architecture and structure of historic buildings, with the aim of retaining their inherent spirit and original ambience.

Considerations for whether to conserve a building therefore involve the historical significance of the building, its architectural merit, as well as the original ambience of the building.

The recent gazetting of Golden Mile Complex as a conserved building is a good case in point, given its post-independence modernist Brutalist style of architecture and popularity as a mixed-use development.

However, given Singapore's land constraints and urgent land-use needs, it will be increasingly difficult to justify the conservation of buildings and

facilities that occupy large plots of land.

At 120ha, the Kranji Turf Club is almost four times the size of Dover Forest (33ha) and more than double the size of Keppel Club (48ha). Both of those sites have been slated for redevelopment into housing estates.

While critics of the Dover Forest redevelopment suggested building flats on existing vacant sites, housing estates are in reality developed as an integrated whole.

This means that housing estates need to include not only homes but also transport infrastructure, schools, markets, food outlets and medical facilities, requiring large plots of land rather than random pockets of space.

A QUESTION OF INTEREST

The impetus for the Turf Club's closure is also related to a broader decline of interest in horse racing.

According to a report from The Economist, horse racing viewership and attendance have been decreasing rapidly in the United States, pushed by declining interest in the sport as well as the proliferation of alternative gambling venues like casinos.

In Singapore, horse racing average attendance has fallen from 6,000 per day in 2019 to

current levels of 2,600 per day.

Beyond its size, a racecourse is also a highly specialised facility that is designed to provide space for the care, training and racing of horses.

At the Singapore Turf Club, there are multiple tracks for different race types and training purposes, racing and resting stables to accommodate horses, and an equine pool for training purposes. There are also a grandstand and carparks for accommodating spectators on race days.

It will not be easy to convert such facilities for residential and commercial uses, nor will it be an optimal use of space and resources.

It is possible that for the same reasons, other countries have considered closure of their horse racing tracks.

In India, there is an ongoing debate about converting Mumbai's Mahalaxmi Race Course into a central park.

In the United Kingdom, the Folkestone Racecourse in the county of Kent was closed in 2012 and recently approved for redevelopment into Otterpool Park Garden Town. This is a sustainability-focused town development that will provide housing, business premises and recreational facilities.

In both instances, the demolition (or proposed

demolishment) of a racecourse frees up space for building homes and green spaces.

In cases where large sports venues are conserved in the past, these often involved sports that continue to enjoy strong interest and viewership.

Such venues include Berlin's Olympiastadion, which was a stadium built for the 1936 summer Olympics that is now used for international football matches.

In Athens, there is the Panathenaic Stadium which was built around 330 BC. It has gone through refurbishments over the course of its history and remains in use as an Olympics venue.

Given space constraints, Singapore will often face difficult trade-offs between urban redevelopment and conservation.

This is further complicated by the fact that both are emotionally charged issues that matter a great deal to many.

While it is important to conserve buildings and spaces that hold special meaning or memories for their users, there is also an urgent need to ensure sufficient housing and commercial spaces.

Both are critical for the population.

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