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Fewer golf courses and country clubs

What changing recreation spaces in Singapore are really about

Amid land scarcity, the principle of efficiency can be put to good use.

Sing Tien Foo

A view of Marina Bay Sands from the Marina Bay Golf Course. The tension between erecting private playgrounds for the affluent and foreign visitors that generate jobs and economic value versus using recreational land for open public spaces for ordinary Singaporeans highlights the difficult balancing act that Singapore's recreational land faces, says the writer. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

Marina Bay Sands (MBS) recently unveiled an artist's impression of its much-awaited expansion, comprising a fourth tower and a 15,000-seat entertainment arena.

In the backdrop are towering skyscrapers in the Central Business District line. Conspicuously missing from the artwork is the public horticultural attraction next door: Gardens by the Bay, a haven of nature enjoyed by Singaporeans and international visitors.

The focus on the new multibillion-dollar luxury hotel tower and arena and the omission of the gardens that have become a source of national pride to many Singaporeans highlight changing priorities and the difficult balancing act that Singapore's recreational land faces.

In this case, the tension is between erecting private playgrounds for the affluent and foreign visitors that generate jobs and economic value versus using recreational land for open public spaces for ordinary Singaporeans.

This latest expansion of MBS might suggest that the balancing act is swinging towards the former vision of Singapore instead of a home for all.

Yet this is hardly so.

RESPONDING TO CHANGING DEMAND AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The authorities have announced plans over the past year to take back large tracts of recreational land.

The old horse-racing site at Bukit Timah's Turf City was returned to the state in December 2023. The current horse-racing site of the Singapore Turf Club in Kranji will host its last race in October before the authorities take over the land in March 2027. Private recreational sites used as membership-only facilities that have not received lease extensions include golf courses at Keppel Club since 2021 and Raffles Town Club, whose lease is up in 2026.

Land planning recognises the need to respond to change, transition, and even decline. From a high of 22 in 2001 to about 15 in 2024, the number of land-intensive golf courses has dwindled.

Despite strong objections from a vocal minority, the return of these recreational lands at some point was always inevitable.

Walling off large tracts of land for an exclusive group of private users is not only unproductive, but also runs counter to societal egalitarian ideals.

The reality? For the broad middle of Singapore, golfing is not a choice leisure activity, according to a 2022 survey by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). Horse racing has also seen a decline around the world; the Taipa racecourse, owned by the Macau Jockey Club, closed after its lease expired in March.

Instead, dining out, shopping and outdoor activities top that list. Concerts dot this entertainment centre vision of the future, as sold-out shows by big names like Coldplay, Taylor Swift and Bruno Mars in 2024 and the annual Formula 1 races and concerts offer additional proof of concept.

A change in the taste of leisure visitors was also a factor behind the closure of the Tang Dynasty Village, the former movie studio theme park in Jurong, in 1999.

The pandemic yearning for open green spaces has not waned. Recharging takes the form of reconnecting with nature. The National Parks Board is preparing to strengthen linkages between 13 parks in southern Singapore, far beyond the existing 36km Coast-to-Coast Trail, so that anyone can enjoy the riverine and forested pockets there.

But even here, dual-use thinking has come to dominate planning. The former Keretapi Tanah Melayu train line, which stretched from Tanjong Pagar to Kranji, has been converted into a 24km continuous green corridor for wildlife movement, but it is also doubling up as a nature trail for the public.

Connectivity, another prime consideration, enhances liveability in a busy city and reduces the need for commuting.

The same URA survey found that Singaporeans preferred affordable recreational facilities near their home or a public transport node. As the population ages, more recreational public spaces, like the National Museum and Punggol Regional Library, are increasingly designed for improved access for seniors and people with disabilities.

Other recreational land consolidation efforts include the move of Jurong Bird Park to the new Bird Paradise in Mandai. The current Science Centre will also be relocated to Jurong Lake Gardens in 2027.

These will free up pockets of space in a land-scarce, high-density Singapore to reimagine the future and redesign the city in response to changing lifestyles and demands.

In the same vein, new alternative uses are expected to spring up with the relocation of Paya Lebar Airbase from the 2030s onwards and the resulting relaxation of height restrictions in the area.

REIMAGINING THE CITY

Big shifts in land planning are captured and refreshed by the URA through reviews of the Master Plan every five years and the Long-Term Plan every 10 years. But these exercises are, in practice, more dynamic and sensitive to new needs.

The move of the former racecourse from Bukit Timah to the more remote Kranji is a prime example of how land planning is responsive to the surrounding residential build-up and worsening traffic conditions along Dunearn Road.

Recreational land, including private recreational sites like Raffles Town Club (left), when taken back can act as a buffer in future land use planning, says the writer. Such land can serve both as an important lever to meet changes in housing demand in the future and as a way to relieve urban density stress. ST FILE PHOTO

The Turf City Bukit Timah site is slated to have a new Cross Island Line MRT station in 2032, making the area more accessible to a larger car-less public, while also raising the surrounding land value and rendering any low-density recreational use less economically viable.

The neighbourhood is surrounded by low-rise housing estates – Watten Estate, Sixth Avenue, Namly Drive and Coronation Road.

Offering a diverse range of housing options there – high-density Housing Board flats and private condominiums – seems like a natural next step.

Land around the Grandstand area, near the future MRT station, can also be converted into retail and commercial spaces.

In rejuvenating old lands, the goal is not simply a one-for-one replacement or building another like-for-like recreational site.

Instead, a public feedback channel can crowdsource and cross-fertilise new ideas to repurpose and optimise limited land to meet competing demand for residential, commercial, recreational, infrastructural and other uses in the long term.

This same ethos underpins the search for commercial and community uses of dead spaces beneath flyovers and viaducts.

It's in this context that the recently announced public consultation on the 2025 masterplan for recreational land use stands out as an equitable, ground-up approach compared with a free market system, where the highest bidders squeeze out other land uses.

WHY DO WE NEED SO MANY HOMES?

A key question arises each time new redevelopment plans are unveiled: Why does Singapore need so much land for housing?

The Ministry of National Development's (MND) land use projection will set aside about 17 per cent of Singapore's land for residential use by 2030, up by 3 percentage points from the projection in 2010.

The Turf City site can house between 20,000 and 26,000 housing units of varying density.

These, together with the projected 9,000 private and public residential units at the old 48ha Keppel Club site and the plan for 6,000 new housing units at Pearl's Hill recently announced by URA, seem sufficient to meet more than one year's supply for both public and private housing needs.

The current housing stock of 1.56 million dwelling units, comprising 1.13 million public housing flats and about 450,000 private housing units, can comfortably house our 4.15 million residents, assuming a household size of not more than 2.65 people.

Still, it may be simplistic to assume each household occupies only one house in a nation where Singaporeans still aspire to own their home and a second property to rent out despite property taxes and stamp duties tempering ambitions.

Changing demographics also complicate projections of future housing needs, given declining fertility and rapid ageing tempering demand, amid a growing number of singles, growing affluence and resilient investment demand for housing boosting interest in residential property.

Here, the objective of land acquisition and redevelopment is not immediate marksmanship of how many homes are needed in the 2030s but to provide options for adjustments.

Other tracts of recreational and institutional sites, at Gillman Barracks, the former Mediacorp Broadcast Centre in Caldecott, the Old Police Academy, and Mount Pleasant neighbourhoods, provide options for the authorities to augment the stock of residential land when needed.

AN ABILITY TO RECONCEPTUALISE THE FUTURE

The land allocation for community, institution and recreation facilities by 2030 will be reduced by 1 percentage point to 7 per cent compared with the 2010 allocation planned by the MND, but this does not mean people will be short-changed.

A land-efficient strategy can help us overcome Singapore's land constraints. As the creation of Mandai Wildlife Reserve and the closure of the Tang Dynasty Village show, packing more in smaller tracts of land and creating new experiences have always been in Singapore's mantra, ensuring people don't feel like something will be lost in the equation.

Beyond accommodating growth and new economic activities, land planning considers and prioritises how Singapore can remain an inclusive home for all Singaporeans, where they can spend weekends and other pockets of time with family, friends and loved ones amid busy schedules and lifestyles.

With society's changing leisure preferences and uncertainty over future population trends, the recreational land taken back can act as a buffer in future land use planning. Such land, even when left behind, can serve both as an important lever to meet changes in housing demand in the future and as a way to relieve urban density stress. There are more options on the horizon as Paya Lebar Airbase and Tanjong Pagar ports are relocated.

No inch of land in Singapore should be set in stone. To do so would stymie efforts by urban planners to refresh our urban landscape.

In an ever-evolving Singapore, at nearly 60 years of independence, we have not and must not lose our ability to reimagine and shape the future of public recreational spaces and land use.

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