



Tiong Bahru: Exploring Singapore's first public housing estate

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Tiong Bahru is a place of many faces. Originally known for its “aeroplane houses”, Singapore’s first public housing experiment once had a reputation as a haven for the mistresses of rich businessmen. These days, it is better known for its heritage housing, skyrocketing property prices and popular food establishments.

Origins of Tiong Bahru: Swamps and cemeteries

The name Tiong Bahru is derived from the Hokkien word *tiong*, meaning “graveyard”, and the Malay word *bahru*, meaning “new”. The area originally contained a number of Chinese cemeteries, and its name is likely to have been coined to distinguish it from older cemeteries in the Chinatown area.¹ A 1905 article in the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* also notes that the Hokkien name for Tiong Bahru was *O chai hng*, which means “tapioca vegetable garden”.²

Before 1926, Tiong Bahru consisted largely of mangrove swamps and several low hills, bordered by Sit Wah Road and Outram Road. The cemeteries included Si Jiao Ting, a public cemetery for Hokkiens, and cemeteries for deceased with the surnames of Choa, Wee and Lim, as well as family-owned burial plots.³ One of the more famous burials in the area was that of philanthropist Tan Tock Seng. The cemeteries sat mostly on the hilly areas of Tiong Bahru, while squatters in attap and plank huts formed colonies in the foothills near the swamps. The squatters paid rent to the caretakers of the burial grounds, and those who lived over the swamps built their huts on stilts. The area also featured pig and duck farms, a sago factory, the Sungei Batu rubber factory and the Ghin Teck Tong temple.

The early twentieth century saw the resident population of Tiong Bahru grow due to overcrowding in nearby Chinatown. The area’s infrastructure remained poorly developed, however, and the existing roads were not well maintained. This was evident when firemen were unable to reach the Sungei Batu rubber factory during fires in 1911 and 1914—in both cases, the firemen were unable to drive their engines to the factory due to the condition of the roads, and had to haul their equipment via footpaths. In 1914, *The Singapore Free Press* described Morse Road as “dilapidated and dangerous” and Tiong Bahru Road as being “in a disgraceful state of neglect, being full of huge holes and ruts”.⁴ The presence of the swamps led to poor sanitary conditions and malaria, with Tiong Bahru noted as a mosquito breeding area, although a 1918 report recorded that municipal work had greatly improved the drainage of the area.⁵

Development begins:

The Singapore Improvement Trust

In 1925, the Municipal Commission initiated a scheme to clear the land in Tiong Bahru, remove the squatters and their dwellings, and lay the infrastructure for a new town. Municipal health officer P. S. Hunter had earlier studied the sanitary and health problems of overcrowding in Chinatown, and recommended that a well-planned suburb nearby was necessary to relieve the congestion. Tiong Bahru’s unsanitary conditions were also considered undesirable given its location near the General Hospital.⁶

In June 1926, the scheme to develop around 33 hectares of land was approved. Under a joint Municipal-Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) scheme, the land was acquired for over \$600,000.⁷ The goal was to provide plots of land that could be easily built up, and lay roads and pavements. The land was to be acquired and developed by the govern-

¹ Yeoh & Kong (1995), pp. 89–115.

² Firmstone (1905), pp. 53–208.

³ Yeoh & Kong (1995), pp. 89–115.

⁴ Rubber factory fire (1914, April 6), *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 12.

⁵ Municipal Singapore (1918, May 24), *The Straits Times*, p. 10.

⁶ Renovating Singapore (1926, October 1), *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 11.

⁷ Yeoh & Kong (1995), pp. 89–115.



Tiong Bahru Community Centre, 1951. Source: National Archives of Singapore.

ment before being sold to prospective housing builders.

With the Singapore Improvement Trust Ordinance approved in 1927, work soon started on the slum clearance and land acquisition scheme. However, the colonial government found it difficult to clear the squatter colonies and took several years to evict over 2,000 squatters and demolish 280 huts.⁸ Several kampongs remained in Tiong Bahru and its surrounds, however, and new ones were to spring up in the future. Graves at the burial grounds were exhumed and moved to Bukit Brown cemetery, while the hills were levelled and the soil used to fill up the swampy ground. Roads in the area were named after prominent businessmen and philanthropists of the period, including Khoo Tiong Poh, Koh Eng Hoon and Seah Eu Chin.⁹

By 1931, the land work, including the laying of roads, drains and culverts, had been completed at a cost of around \$1.5 million. Over the next four years, the SIT sought to sell land sites to private developers for the development of residential property, but was unable to find buyers.¹⁰ In February 1935, the SIT decided to start housing development itself. SIT manager L. Langdon Williams, who was to direct the housing scheme, attended the International Town Planning Congress in London and visited British cities for ideas.¹¹

Construction of the estate began in March 1936, and the first block of flats consisting of 28 units and four shops was completed in December that year. The first 11 families moved in on 1 December, paying monthly rents of \$20 for a ground floor unit and \$22 for an upper level unit. By 1941, some 784 flats in two- and three-storey blocks, 54 tenements

and 33 shops had been completed, accommodating over 6,000 people. The estate had a market, a restaurant, coffee shops, a shoe shop, a dressmaker's shop and sundry shops, and the flats had a diverse population of Chinese, Indian, Eurasian and European residents.

Advent of war: The Japanese Occupation

With Tiong Bahru's development ongoing even as World War II approached, town planners built air raid shelters within the estate. The blast-proof shelters at Block 78 Guan Chuan remain intact as Singapore's first air raid shelters located within a public housing estate, while another shelter at Eu Chin Street was later turned into a community centre.¹² Children's playgrounds were also turned into makeshift air raid shelters as the Japanese advanced towards Singapore.¹³

The Japanese invasion and occupation of Singapore interrupted development of the estate, which had already cost a large proportion of the \$10 million originally allocated to the SIT for slum clearance all over the island. The roofs of a number of Tiong Bahru flats were damaged by Japanese bombing, and during the Japanese Occupation, the flat roofs fell into further disrepair through vegetable cultivation and other unauthorised uses.¹⁴

The Occupation saw a large number of new residents in Tiong Bahru, with an estimated 40% of the estate's post-war population having moved in during the Occupation. These new residents were recognised by the post-war British Military Administration, while those tenants who had illegally sold their flats for thousands of dollars' worth of Occupation-era "banana money" had their tenancies terminated after the war. Other tenants had sublet their flats, leading to the estate's resident population nearly doubling to around 14,000.¹⁵

Post-war growth and renewal

After the Occupation, construction continued on the housing estate. In 1948, a club was formed to manage the social, physical and cultural life and amenities of the community. By 1951, the estate had a physical centre, Singapore's first community centre. The centre had its own civil defence group and auxiliary police force for the area.¹⁶ In 1961, the first polyclinic in Singapore opened in Tiong Bahru. Tiong Bahru flats continued to be in high demand, with thousands of applicants on the waiting list. By 1954 the SIT added another 1,258 units to the estate.¹⁷

In the early 1950s, the population of Tiong Bahru stood at around 400,000. Besides those living in SIT housing, a number of attap hut villages had sprung up on uncleared burial



Housing and Development Board Area Office at Tiong Bahru, 1964. Source: National Archives of Singapore.

grounds. *The Straits Times* called the area "one of the worst attap slums in Singapore... haunted by a nest of gangsters and undesirable elements".¹⁸ The remaining slums and grave sites on the fringes of Tiong Bahru were only cleared by the mid-1970s.

In 1955, the SIT was dissolved and the People's Action Party government that had come to power in 1959 instituted the Housing Development Board (HDB) in its place. The HDB announced its first five-year building plan in December 1960, including the construction of some 900 flats at Tiong Bahru for lower-income groups. From March 1965, the HDB ended the rental policy of the pre-war flats and sold a number of them to their occupants, and evicted the remaining tenants who did not take up the sale option. The post-war flats came under HDB management in 1973 and residents had their 99-year leases renewed.

In 1966, the HDB announced that as part of its second five-year plan, an S\$8.5 million housing scheme for 40,000 people would be developed on Kampong Tiong Bahru, which had been the site of several major fires.

Fires in Tiong Bahru

There were numerous fires in Tiong Bahru, both big and small, before the development of widespread modern housing in the area. In August 1934, more than 500 dwellings across the kampongs of Tiong Bahru, Bukit Ho Swee and Havelock Road were destroyed by what was then described as "one of the worst fires in

years". Up to 5,000 people were left homeless.

Fires in 1955 and 1958 left hundreds in Kampong Tiong Bahru homeless, leading to the formation of a volunteer fire-fighting force in 1958. The easily flammable materials used to construct attap huts in the kampongs and the densely packed nature of their layout meant that fires spread quickly and caused major damage. Another fire in February 1959 caused up to 12,000 to lose their homes and \$2 million worth of damage.

On 25 May 1961, a fire that began near the site of the 1959 fire at Kampong Tiong Bahru spread across 100 acres, and the homes of nearly 16,000 people were destroyed. The Bukit Ho Swee fire, as it came to be known, is considered one of Singapore's worst-ever fires and gave new impetus to the government's policy of clearing attap hut settlements and shifting to flatted public housing.

Growth and redevelopment

By the 1980s, Tiong Bahru was seen as an estate with a greying population and ageing facilities. The 1990 Singapore Census of Population showed that those aged above 60 made up the highest proportion of residents in the estate.¹⁹ However, a combination of redevelopment and an influx of new residents attracted to the architecture and culture of the area changed the demographics of Tiong Bahru in the early 1990s. A shopping mall, Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station, new public housing and private condominiums sprang up around the area.

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⁸ Yeoh (2003), p. 300.

⁹ Savage & Yeoh (2003), p. 386.

¹⁰ Yeoh & Kong (1995), pp. 89-115.

¹¹ Tiong Bahru housing plan (1935, April 20), *The Straits Times*, p. 12.

¹² Price (2012, January 27), *MyPaper*.

¹³ Yeoh & Kong (1995), pp. 89-115.

¹⁴ Yeoh & Kong (1995), pp. 89-115.

¹⁵ Jalleh (1949, July 24), *The Straits Times*, p. 8.

¹⁶ Tiong Bahru community centre plans own police (1951, November 30), *The Straits Times*, p. 4.

¹⁷ Yeoh & Kong (1995), pp. 89-115.

¹⁸ Modern housing estate from the slums (1964, October 16), *The Straits Times*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Yeoh & Kong (1995), pp. 89-115.



Kim Pong Road, 1992. It was named after Low Kim Pong, whose firm Chop Ban San was once the largest druggist in Singapore. From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.

The iconic Tiong Bahru Market underwent a two-year, \$16.8 million redevelopment, with the new building following the Art Deco architecture of the estate.

In 1995, a five-hectare site opposite Tiong Bahru Plaza, including 384 flats built in 1952, was chosen for the first Selective En-Bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS). The scheme was for older estates considered unsuitable for upgrading, and these 16 blocks of flats were acquired by the government and redeveloped into 1,402 new flats, more than three times the previous number.²⁰

From the early 2000s, Tiong Bahru began to attract a new generation of residents. Drawn by the area's unique architecture and heritage, the influx of young professionals helped rejuvenate Tiong Bahru's community life and retail scene, with art galleries, bookstores, cafes, restaurants and specialist boutiques setting up shop.²¹

SIT architects and managers took inspiration from public housing in British New Towns like Stevenage, Harlow and Crawley. These influences were applied to the estate's flats and shophouses, creating a blend of imported and local styles.

Conservation and renewal

In late 2002, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) held a public consultation and exhibition of sites proposed for conservation. Tiong Bahru was not part of this exhibition, but was later included after a public show of support for the estate.²² In 2003, 20 blocks of pre-war SIT flats were granted conservation status by the URA, which meant



National Day Parade at Tiong Bahru, 1975. Source: National Archives of Singapore.

that changes to the building structures were restricted by URA guidelines. From the late 1990s and into the 2000s, both the pre-war and post-war SIT flats were highly sought after by home buyers, and property prices rose to some of the highest in Singapore.²³

Two blocks of conservation flats were developed by Chinese firm Hang Huo Enterprise into the S\$45 million Link Hotel, a budget boutique hotel that was completed in 2007. The Link was joined by Hotel Nostalgia in 2009 and Wangz Hotel in 2010, giving Tiong Bahru the feel of a boutique hotel enclave.

Architecture and culture

SIT architects involved in the design of Tiong Bahru estate included Lincoln Page, Robert F. N. Kan and A. G. Church, who were influenced by the International Style popular in Europe during the period. The style spurned elaborate, decorative construction and focused on simple expressions of clear lines and planes.²⁴ SIT architects and managers took inspiration from public housing in British New Towns like Stevenage, Harlow and Crawley.²⁵ These influences were applied to the estate's flats and shophouses, creating a blend of imported and local styles.

The layout of the estate incorporated plenty of open spaces, with an emphasis on small neighbourhoods. The pre-war flats were neatly laid out and circled a central communal

zone. This zone included a market and hawker centre, coffee shops, a pet shop and a Chinese temple. The hawker centre housed reputed *chwee kuay* (rice cakes), pig organ soup and *pao* (bun) stalls, and the pet shop and bird-singing corner attracted both local bird lovers and tourists. The bird corner at Block 53 along Tiong Bahru Road was started in 1957, and was flagged by international travel writers as a slice of heartland Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁶ It closed for a period of redevelopment but has since reopened on the grounds of the Link Hotel.

The pre-war flats showed the influence of the shophouse, the prevalent dwelling form among Singapore's urban population at the time. The flats were based on a modified shophouse plan featuring courtyards, air-wells and back-lanes, but also combining the aspects of a modern apartment and designed in a way that provided a high level of privacy for individual homes.²⁷ A new style took hold in the form post-war flats, which were slab blocks of long, narrow buildings bordered by greenery. These walk-up apartments had clean architectural facades with rounded balconies and exterior spiral staircases.²⁸

In the first few decades following its pre-war origins, Tiong Bahru estate gained the colloquial tag of *mei ren wo* (Mandarin for "den of beauties"). This nickname came about as the estate developed a reputation for housing the mistresses of many rich men, as well as nightclub singers and hostesses working in the nearby Keong Saik Road red-light district and Great World Cabaret.²⁹ The pre-war flats were also called *puay kee chu* or "airplane houses" in Hokkien, as their design resembled that of the control tower at Kallang Airport, constructed around the same time. The estate was also dubbed "the Hollywood of Singapore" by locals who had previously only seen flats in American movies.³⁰

The regeneration of Tiong Bahru from the early 2000s has led to a sense of an incipient arts and culture scene taking root in the area, with new residents, art galleries and boutiques drawing inspiration from the heritage and culture of the estate while adding their own narratives to the Tiong Bahru story.³¹ The estate has also drawn artists and filmmakers—Tiong Bahru estate appeared in scenes of *Be With Me*, a 2005 movie by local filmmaker Eric Khoo, while in 2010, the short film *Civic Life: Tiong Bahru* featured residents of the area and told the stories of the relationships between the community and the environment.

About the author

Alvin Chua is an independent researcher who writes on Singapore history, culture and heritage. Since 2008, he has contributed numerous articles to Singapore Infopedia, NLB's online encyclopaedia on Singapore. He previously wrote for the *TODAY* paper and a number of websites.

²⁰ Williams (1995, August 23), *The Straits Times*, p. 1.

²¹ Huang (2008, February 24), *The Sunday Times*, p. L35.

²² Kong (2011), pp. 165-167.

²³ Loo (2004, September 5), *The Sunday Times*, p. 25.

²⁴ Lou (1990, December 5), *The Straits Times*, p. 4.

²⁵ Wan (2009), pp. 169-171.

²⁶ Lev (1996, December 26), *The Orange County Register*.

²⁷ Wan (2009), pp. 169-171.

²⁸ Wong (2005), p. 46.

²⁹ Jalleh (1949, July 24), *The Straits Times*, p. 8.

³⁰ Ng (2006, September 3), *The New Paper*.

³¹ Tan (2011, July 30), *The Business Times*.



Tiong Bahru Market. All Rights Reserved. National Library Board Singapore 2007.



Flautist Herbie Mann performing at the Tiong Bahru bird corner, 1984. Source: National Archives of Singapore.

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