**IN THIS EDITION**

Singapore is building community hubs in HDB towns to rejuvenate town centres often dominated by commercial malls. These hubs co-locate previously separate amenities, increasing convenience and saving land. More importantly, they create more public space in the heart of neighbourhoods. Developing these co-located community hubs requires government agencies to work closely together. This article examines how this collaborative inter-agency governance approach has succeeded, and where it can be improved.



Figure 1: Patrons at the central community plaza at Our Tampines Hub (OTH). Opened in 2017, OTH is Singapore's first major example of a co-located community hub. *Source: Luther Seet*

# Co-located Community Hubs:
## Understanding how a Collaborative Inter-agency Governance Approach can Rejuvenate our Neighbourhoods

In recent years, there has been an emergent typology in Singapore's HDB towns—the co-located community hub. This type of development occupies a single plot of land and intensifies the land use by locating many public amenities (e.g., community club, sporting facilities, library, polyclinic and hawker centre) mixed with private and public tenants in the same building. The first three major examples of such community hubs are Our Tampines Hub (OTH) (see Figure 1) and Kampung Admiralty (KA), both completed in 2017, followed by Heartbeat@Bedok (HB) in early 2018.

These three hubs have several features in common that distinguish them from other developments that might, on the face of it, appear similar in intent and nature.

First, they are all public projects that are conceived, funded and operated by the Government. This is a significant point that differentiates them from the ubiquitous, private mixed-use shopping centres, such as Tampines Mall, NEX, Bedok Mall, Junction 8 and Jurong Point, in many town centres.

Second, these developments are the result of inter-agency efforts, with up to a dozen public agencies collaborating on a single development. Public consultation also plays a key role. In such hubs, numerous amenities and synergistic programmes are co-located in one building to make it more convenient for residents (see Figure 2). This collaborative planning and governance approach has been a recent feature in Singapore's urban development.

Lastly, while one key purpose of these hubs is to use land more efficiently by co-locating previously separate amenities and services, their primary function is to foster social bonds and a sense of place for residents in HDB towns, by becoming centres of neighbourhood life. This is achieved by prioritising community needs ahead of commercial considerations, with a focus on designing good public spaces and a range of synergistic programmes.

What explains the emergence of these new community hubs, and to what purpose do they serve? More importantly, what can we learn from them and of the underlying collaboration required, so as to be able to guide future iterations? This edition of CLC Insights analyses these issues, in part through in-depth interviews conducted with

> To ensure liveability even as our neighbourhoods become denser, good design of public spaces becomes increasingly important.

key players from the Housing Development Board (HDB), Urban Revelopment Authority (URA), People's Association (PA), Sport Singapore (SportSG) and other organisations, who were all central to the development of OTH, KA and HB.

## BACKGROUND

To understand the impetus behind these new community hubs, we need to look back at the historical planning and development of public amenities in HDB towns. This dates back to the redistribution of Singapore's population in the 1960s into satellite towns, done to relieve strain on the overcrowded city centre. These HDB towns are self-contained residential areas averaging 3 square kilometres, each housing an average of 100,000 residents. In these towns, there are community clubs, libraries, hawker centres, sporting facilities and polyclinics, all within reasonable commuting distance of each other.

Today, some of these towns are more than half a century old, with populations growing beyond their original planned capacities. Moreover, in some cases, their town centres are ageing and are in need of renewal (Bedok was one such example). In other town centres, there has not been enough emphasis on good design and provision of public spaces for residents. Instead, privately developed mixed-use shopping centres currently dominate many town centres.

### A need for more efficient land use and town centre renewal

Hence, there is a need to use land more efficiently by co-locating amenities and land uses. At the same time, there is recognition that communities need a greater number of high quality public



HDB TOWN MODEL WITH SEPARATELY LOCATED AMENITIES

CO-LOCATED COMMUNITY HUB WITH SYNERGISTIC PROGRAMMING AND PUBLIC SPACE

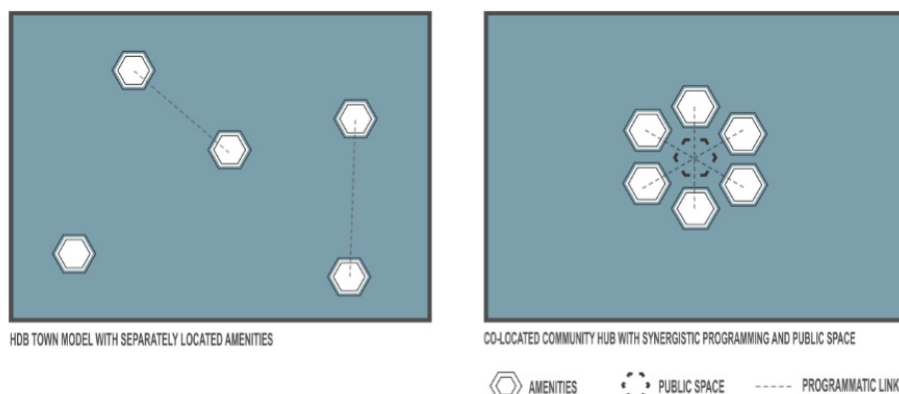⬡ AMENITIES    ⬡ PUBLIC SPACE    ----- PROGRAMMATIC LINKS

Figure 2: Conceptual diagrams comparing separately located amenities in conventional HDB towns with co-located amenities in community hubs. This creates more public space and opportunities for synergistic programming. *Source: Illustration by CLC*

spaces in their neighbourhoods. To ensure liveability even as our neighbourhoods become denser, good design of public spaces becomes increasingly important.

To tackle these issues, newer-generation HDB towns are being built in higher densities. This keeps horizontal sprawl in check, while still ensuring that amenities are within reasonable travel distances for residents. Where possible, amenities are being co-located, and more public space created.

Early efforts at co-location prior to 2000 faced much resistance from agencies, which preferred to build and manage their own facilities. The first successful co-location project was the redevelopment of the Marine Parade Community Club in 2000. This was followed by other attempts, some more successful than others. One example of an unsuccessful attempt was the co-location of a neighbourhood police centre and community club in Henderson (see Figure 3).

OTH, KA and HB are the first examples of a more ambitious push for co-location. Have they succeeded where previous inter-agency attempts have struggled?

If so, how? And how has a more concerted public consultation benefited the process?

As a more collaborative governance approach continues to characterise Singapore's urban development, insights from these three major inter-agency projects will be useful to understand how agencies and stakeholders navigated this process and overcame their conflicts to achieve good public outcomes.

### KEY GOVERNANCE INSIGHTS FROM THE THREE HUBS

Singapore prides itself on its action-oriented governance approach to solving problems, underpinned by strong political will. This laser-like focus on identifying a problem and tackling it has served the country well for decades. It has helped Singapore solve fundamental national issues such as water supply, housing and pollution, while also strengthening its economy.

However, even as the Government strives to meet its peoples' evolving needs as land scarcity intensifies, it has had to complement its successful

> (The Government) has had to complement its successful governance model with softer values such as collaboration, flexibility and public participation… co-located community hubs are an example of these new governance values at work.

governance model with softer values such as collaboration, flexibility and public participation. Government agencies are now working more closely together despite natural resistance. They also have to be prepared to change their existing ways of doing things and become more open to listening to public feedback.

Co-located community hubs are an example of these new governance values at work. Collaborating, listening and being willing to adapt and compromise are habits that do not come easily. It should not come as a surprise that large statutory boards accustomed to their own respective ways of working, and to pursuing a singular core mission, would naturally be resistant to making compromises.

In-depth interviews conducted with key figures behind OTH, KA and HB reveal how agencies navigated this inter-agency process. In this section, we propose five guiding principles for achieving a successful co-located community hub:

### i) "Residents First. Good Public Spaces"

This was the common mantra during the planning of the co-located community hubs. In the past, whereas the primary motivation behind co-location was to save land by intensifying its use, it is the community's needs and wants that are shaping these developments today.

Co-located community hubs can achieve both these goals. But their primary objective is social: to create a place with well-designed public spaces where local residents can gather and bond, and over time, forge a closeness to the place and to



Figure 3: An attempt to co-locate a neighbourhood police centre and community club in Henderson resulted in the above development—two separate buildings superficially connected with link bridges and an entrance façade.
*Source: Google Earth*

each other. This lays the foundations for a tightly knit community with a strong identity and a deeply anchored sense of place.

"This sense of community is very, very important, and sometimes we forget," said Tan See Nin, Senior Director (Physical Planning) at URA. Older town centres like Toa Payoh Central have successfully achieved this by placing emphasis on designing public spaces well, he added, but this emphasis has been lost.

The new community hubs seek to remedy this. One big way in which a "residents first" approach has helped foster a sense of community is immediately apparent when visitors walk into the new hubs.

All three buildings have high-ceilinged, spacious plazas extending as natural thoroughfares across their ground floors (see Figure 4). These plazas are central community nodes, immediately distinct from the commercially driven shopping centres commonly seen here. Residents gather easily to mingle and attend community events such as free movie screenings and Zumba workouts, or simply to sit and relax. Shops and restaurants, which so often dominate prime ground level space in private developments because of the high commercial returns they generate, are at the margins here.

The whole point of these new neighbourhood hubs becomes unmistakable —Residents first. Good public spaces.

Extensive public consultations were first conducted to understand the needs of residents. The stakeholder agencies also listened to key public feedback— to designate the ground floor as public space for the community.

"That's the thing: not meeting my [organisation's] requirement; meeting the peoples' requirement," said Foo Soon Leng, Senior Specialist (Buildings & Estates Management) at the PA. "We put a lot of commercial outlets at the basement [of OTH] because residents said, 'I don't want a commercial building in Tampines. I actually want a building that belongs to the people.'"

Extensive public consultations were first conducted to understand the needs of residents. The stakeholder agencies also listened to key public feedback— to designate the ground floor as public space for the community. This reinforced the government's vision to prioritise the community over commercial considerations. Typically, developers would otherwise have concentrated commercial tenants at the ground floor to maximise rental yield.

According to Ms Foo, extensive public consultation and meaningful implementation of useful feedback received is beneficial in at least three other ways.

First, when residents feel that the Government has listened to them and cares about what they think, they gain a sense of ownership over their community hub.

Second, reimagining the way these community hubs are designed and built (through feedback from youth) helps to attract the younger generation.

Third, placing residents' needs at the core of these community hubs acts as a rallying call to unify stakeholder



Figure 4: The ground-floor community plazas in (from left to right): Kampung Admiralty, Our Tampines Hub, and Heartbeat@Bedok. *Source: Luther Seet*

agencies. This same clarity of vision guided the agencies behind KA. "We agreed that this was an opportunity for us to do something better to serve the residents," said former HDB deputy CEO Yap Chin Beng.

However, care must be taken to filter public feedback, prioritising those that benefit the wider community and not just a vocal minority.

**ii) Good design is critical: architects should be key members of the steering committee**

In land-scarce Singapore, where it is becoming increasingly dense, people are living, working and playing even more closely to each other. For highly dense urban environments to be liveable, it is imperative that urban planning be accompanied by good design. Otherwise, issues such as noise pollution, human congestion, and the lack of privacy and public space will adversely impact the liveability of our neighbourhoods.

As Singapore increasingly co-locates amenities, public space, commercial outlets and perhaps even HDB flats in these community hubs, how these tight spaces are designed could make the difference between good and poor liveability.

This is where architects can and should play a key role. For example, WOHA's— the local architecture practice responsible for KA's design—insistence on paying

Architects—who have the design expertise—should be given an active role and be involved from the start to end of these projects.

attention to design has ensured that noise from the adjacent MRT station and tracks does not disturb residents. It achieved this by stacking the building up against the station to act as a "shield" against noise, said WOHA's joint founding director Wong Mun Summ. An important additional benefit of a quieter environment, he added, is that residents can open their windows for natural ventilation—saving on air-conditioning—without having to bear noise pollution. WOHA's design thinking also ensured that the upper residential levels remain peaceful, green and semi-private, while the noisier, active, public areas are confined to the lower floors. Accessibility and vibrancy is achieved without compromising on peace and privacy.

Imaginative design thinking has also benefited patients in KA's medical centre, despite initial resistance from medical planners. All the waiting areas in the centre are situated together, with views overlooking a small forest oasis, creating a large, peaceful "living room" for users (see Figure 5). To boost patients' healing, day surgery recovery rooms also overlook this greenery, with one-way vision glass windows ensuring their privacy. In times of severe haze, the spacious, air-conditioned "living room" waiting area can also function as a safe shelter for elderly residents.

Simple and often commonsensical design interventions can result in significant liveability improvements. All that is required is an emphasis on design during the planning and construction process. How can this be applied to co-located community hubs?

Architects—who have the design expertise—should be given an active role and be involved from the start to end of these projects. They should also be

centrally involved in shaping the vision for these community hubs, together with the stakeholder agencies and "champions".

WOHA's experience as the architects for KA is instructive. Mr Wong was a key member of the KA steering committee, along with HDB's former deputy CEO Yap Chin Beng, and Mr Liak Teng Lit, an advisory board member for CLC and local champion for the KA development. Mr Wong's design thinking and interventions had the support of the steering committee as well as Minister Khaw, and have been crucial to making KA highly liveable despite its intensified density.

Architects can also be involved in the pre-planning process, by being brought in prior to the tender stage as consultants to advise on feasibility studies, and to make the design brief more descriptive.

### iii) Agencies will fight for their interests and need to be convinced of the vision

It is certainly human nature to defend one's interests. Government agencies are no different, nor should they be expected to be. Gather them to work together on a co-located community hub and they will "all fight tooth and nail to get what they want", said WOHA's Wong Mun Summ. How then can an inter-agency collaboration avoid succumbing to narrow vested interests and instead achieve inclusive, community-centred outcomes?

The key lies in the "fighting".

As the steering committee plays the role of mediator in the decision-making process, it may try to avoid conflicts by pleasing or appeasing every stakeholder agency. This may be one way to unify contested interests, but it would be the wrong approach to take.



Figure 5: The waiting area at Kampung Admiralty's medical centre is designed as a green "living room", with views out onto a lush landscape. *Source: Luther Seet*

"It's easy to compromise, very easy," said Mr Wong. "Because if you compromise, all the [agencies are] happy to accept it because you are not fighting with them and I think that's somehow the case with most public projects. You end up taking the path of least resistance."

Such an approach would result in co-located community hubs that satisfy the disparate interests of agencies, but not the needs of those who matter—the public. Instead, steering committees should "push"

Steering committees should "push" and challenge agencies, and convince them to jointly find solutions that act in the interest of the community they serve.



Figure 6: The new hawker centre design at Kampung Admiralty challenged conventional mindsets, resulting in a cleaner, more comfortable and airy open space for patrons to enjoy their meals. For example, architectural treatment was used to conceal ducts and vents usually exposed in hawker centres. *Source: Luther Seet*

and challenge agencies, and convince them to jointly find solutions that act in the interest of the community they serve.

"Different agencies will have different priorities. Sometimes we have to see how we can break through this," said former HDB deputy CEO Yap Chin Beng.

Mr Liak Teng Lit shared how the hawker centre at KA had been reimagined because the steering committee challenged NEA to reconsider its mindset. NEA had been keen to retain many features of existing hawker centres, but was pressed to aim higher, to design an even more comfortable, airy and easy-to-clean hawker centre. The end result? Hidden ducts and vents (to prevent bird droppings from mynahs and other birds which now have nowhere to perch), a more spacious, high-ceilinged, breezy dining space filled with natural light

from all sides, and a new elevated but nonetheless still prominent and easily accessible 2nd-storey location (see Figure 6).

As a result, the KA hawker centre underwent a vast improvement in design and is now "one of the best" in the country, said Mr Liak. He added, "There were people who were conservative, who wanted to continue more of the same. And we had to persuade them, we had to push them… not everybody is enlightened and open to doing this."

"Pushing" agencies is not about forcing them into decisions. Rather, the onus is on the steering committee to convince them to find solutions together. Lim Teck Yin, CEO of SportSG—one of the stakeholder agencies involved in OTH and HB—cautioned that if steering committees,

local champions or lead agencies forced their vision through without giving due consideration to all involved agencies' concerns, some may not find the cost-benefit trade-offs viable.

This process of convincing agencies is not easy, said Mr Wong. All parties need to have stamina and commitment to work through issues, and it doesn't help that some agencies do not react well to mediation efforts.

"It's not easy work because we have to demonstrate and come up with reasons why [the agencies should support our vision]. Sometimes, we have to find precedents, and [put up] a cost-benefit argument. So we really have to go beyond our usual roles to come up with answers for [the agencies]," he said. For their efforts, WOHA has gained a reputation

for "being troublesome". But Mr Wong noted, "People who have actually worked with us realise that it is 'troublesome' for good, to get a better outcome."

This process of "fighting productively", which CLC has outlined in its Singapore Liveability Framework, is by no means easy, but rather a process of "pain" that one has to persevere through. Only then can agencies jointly create public developments to be proud of, because these developments can then serve communities well for generations.

"When you look at the final result, everyone thinks it is such a simple solution. It [Kampung Admiralty] is very simple looking. But it's actually hard work to get there," said Mr Wong.

### iv) Involving political "champions" and senior management makes decision-making smoother and more inclusive

In Singapore's development experience, strong political backing ensures that things get done.

The need for high-level political backing is a given, but the experience gained from developing the three co-located community hubs has also highlighted the important role played by political "champions", who include the likes of former Minister for National Development Mah Bow Tan and Minister for Finance Heng Swee Keat for Our Tampines Hub (OTH), then Minister for National Development Khaw Boon Wan for Kampung Admiralty (KA), and former Minister of State for Trade and Industry Lee Yi Shyan for Heartbeat@Bedok (HB).

Political champions not only throw their support behind the project vision, they are key to resolving disagreements between agencies. Foo Soon Leng, Senior Specialist (Buildings & Estates Management) at the PA, who oversaw the development of OTH, related how agencies had been tussling over prime ground floor space until Mr Mah settled the issue by suggesting that

the hawker centre—a key community space—should be situated at the ground floor for easy access. The agencies readily agreed. Ms Foo added, "[The agencies] all later agreed that for future such projects, the hawker centre would be either on the ground floor or second floor."

In another case, Minister Khaw intervened to persuade SMRT to share their underused loading bay facilities with KA's supermarket and hawker centre tenants.

Political champions can also help keep planners focused on the task of building a community hub that will be valued by residents. Minister Heng, for example, wanted to delay the concept plan for OTH by six months to ensure that more resident feedback could be obtained, said Ms Foo, who also recounted a separate incident when Mr Mah reminded her to ensure that the elderly would feel comfortable walking into and using OTH. "[There's] no point in you building a nice, iconic building, but people don't use it," said Ms Foo.

Political champions, or in some cases local champions such as Mr Liak Teng Lit (who passionately galvanised the team behind KA), are essential to realising the vision of a co-located community hub. As respected figures of authority, they are able to see the big picture (of putting residents' first) because they sit above the fray. They can also unite stakeholder agencies that might otherwise let respective narrow interests trump the greater vision.

The decision-making process is also expedited by directly involving the agencies' senior management. For example, HDB CEO Cheong Koon Hean was on the steering committee for KA. Having enough key people committing themselves to seeing the project through is important, said Mr Liak, adding that trust and friendship between these senior representatives also helps with resolving issues.

SportSG CEO Lim Teck Yin added that having senior management from the different agencies represented on steering committees helps ensure that each agency's views are incorporated, so that decision-making is inclusive. This way, the architect responds to the collective view of the steering committee and not just, for example, the lead agency. He gave the example of a sports facility that is being developed in Punggol. Due to its proximity to MyWaterway@Punggol, SportSG invited the CEOs of NParks, HDB and URA, agencies that had been involved in the planning of the waterway, to join Mr Lim on the steering committee. "All the considerations of these different stakeholders who have a stake in MyWaterway@Punggol are represented. And therefore the architects look at the [entire] steering committee as the boss," said Mr Lim.

### v) The ideal size depends on community needs

Five government agencies worked together to create Heartbeat@Bedok (HB), while seven agencies did the same to make Kampung Admiralty (KA) a reality. At Our Tampines Hub (OTH), however, a total of 12 public agencies were brought together to collaborate. While the first two hubs are fairly compact, OTH takes up an area of 53,000 square metres, or the size of seven football fields. Feedback from some government officials suggests that OTH's footprint is too large for a community development.

This gives rise to the question: for agencies to work well together, and to create spaces ideal for residents to socialise and bond, should there be a limit to the size of these community hubs and number of stakeholder agencies involved?

Other perspectives have to be considered. Despite certain sentiments against large-scale community hubs, it must remain clear that the beneficiary of such projects is the community. Hence, the

question of size should be answered from the user's perspective. While several of our interviewees opined that OTH is excessively large, feedback shows that the community loves it, according to Foo Soon Leng, Senior Specialist (Buildings & Estates Management) at the PA.

However, the sizable footprint of community hubs like OTH raises design and usability issues that need to be addressed. The larger these hubs are, the more difficult it will be for less mobile users, such as seniors or the disabled, to move around comfortably. Thus, there is a need to adapt such public spaces to a human scale.

In such cases, we can draw lessons from airports, which are also hubs. The footprint of airport terminals is necessarily very large to contain their numerous functions. Airport planners tackle this size in numerous ways, for example: (1) introducing people-mover systems for effective circulation; (2) ensuring adequate natural light and greenery; (3) providing enough toilets and other amenities; (4) creating intuitive wayfinding; (5) creating human-scale spaces; and (6) designing a great user experience.

There are also benefits that come with size, which can make co-located community hubs greater assets to residents. When more community functions are inserted into a building, users get more options, and the inter-operability of the programmes and hub-like status of the development intensifies.

OTH, the largest of the three community hubs, has an extensive array of facilities, including: (1) a community club, hawker centre, supermarket and medical centre, and shops and eateries, (2) a sheltered jogging track, multi-purpose sports hall, Olympic-sized swimming pool, bowling alley and rock-climbing wall, and badminton courts and tennis courts, and (3) a theatre and a 5-storey library.
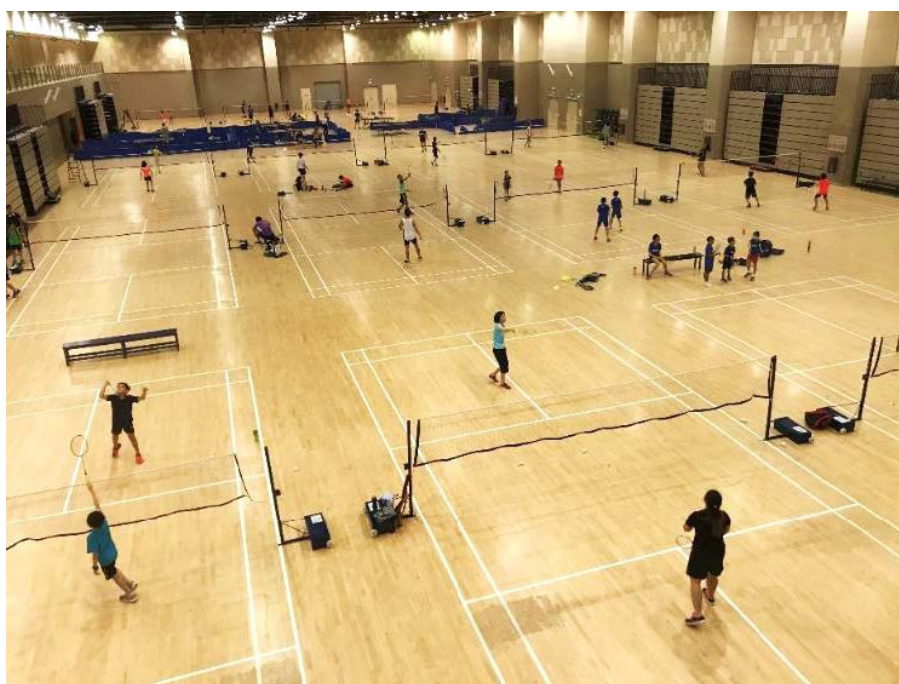


Figure 7: OTH's large footprint enables it to contain a wide range of amenities, including a sheltered jogging track *(top)* and multi-purpose sports hall *(bottom)*. *Source: Luther Seet & David Ee*

Providing such a diverse range of amenities for the community has been made feasible by the large footprint of the development (see Figure 7). Could this be taken a step further by introducing cycling and PMD infrastructure into the building, or even linking it up with park connectors in the vicinity? With early planning for future such developments, this is definitely possible.

Ultimately, whether a co-located community hub ends up large or small, or containing either a vast or limited range of amenities, cannot be prescriptive. It depends on factors that vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, and should be assessed early on in the planning phase using these factors: existing supply and location of amenities, community needs and demand, and site context. Though some planners may feel that OTH is excessively large, they should not be afraid of "going big" if it is necessary to meet community needs. OTH's wide

> There are also benefits that come with size, which can make co-located community hubs greater assets to residents. When more community functions are inserted into a building, users get more options, and the inter-operability of the programmes and hub-like status of the development intensifies.



Figure 8: Well-frequented by the community, libraries, such as this one at Heartbeat@Bedok, are important community nodes and should be a core amenity in community hubs. *Source: Luther Seet*

range of amenities achieves a critical mass that gives it the vibrancy and high visitation rates (approximately 1,000,000 footfalls every month) that a community hub should have.

To address concerns pertaining to massive, single-plot hubs, planners could spread the hub out across several nearby plots, and integrate it harmoniously into the surrounding neighbourhood.

### CONCLUSION

Within the next decade, we will be seeing more co-located community hubs emerging in HDB towns such as Toa Payoh, Punggol, Buangkok and Admiralty. They will be an integral part of these towns, saving land and providing more public space and convenience for residents, while transforming and renewing town centres.

Whether developed by the Government, or with private sector involvement, these community hubs will be significant but worthwhile investments of capital, resources and time—they will leave

Instead of re-locating a library, planners can build upon the sense of place, legacy and community value of the existing one, by creating a hub around it.

a long legacy by becoming fixtures in communities and neighbourhoods for decades, and form a part of future community heritage. It is thus important to learn what we can from the early examples of OTH, KA and HB.

Even as we put in place good inter-agency governance processes, there is another question to ponder as Singapore strives to improve the liveability of its dense neighbourhoods: Can more value be placed on local neighbourhood heritage and character?

For example, community hubs can be sensitively integrated—in form and silhouette, materials and connectivity—with HDB neighbourhoods. Instead of re-locating a library, planners can build upon the sense of place, legacy and community value of the existing one, by creating a hub around it (see Figure 9). Opportunities for adaptive reuse of existing buildings as hubs should also be explored. Sensitive consideration, not only of amenity needs and design, but also of neighbourhood heritage and what communities value, will help Singapore increase both the density and liveability of its HDB towns.



Figure 9: Opened in 1970 and now gazetted as a conservation building, the Queenstown Public Library is Singapore's first branch library. If a community hub is built in Queenstown, planners can build upon the sense of place, legacy and community value of the existing library, by creating the hub around it. *Source: Google Street View*

## Authors

**Luther Seet**

Luther Seet is a Senior Assistant Director at CLC Co., where he focuses on research and advisory projects. He is registered with the Board of Architects Singapore, and has previously served on the council of the Singapore Institute of Architects. Experienced from his last 10 years of private practice, he specializes in the design of buildings with public spaces, notably the National Gallery of Singapore and Terminal 4 Changi Airport, as well as commercial mixed-use projects in other parts of Asia.

**David Ee**

David Ee is a researcher at the Centre for Liveable Cities, where he focuses on urban governance, local planning and integrated developments research. Prior to joining CLC, he worked in the sustainable development and communications sectors.