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Swimming in Modern Singapore

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In this presentation, we will be sharing some outcomes a project we are undertaking on public swimming cultures in Singapore across the twentieth-century. Our focus today is on swimming as an expression of Singapore's modernism, which draws us to events of the 1960s and 1970s, the early period of Singapore's republican independence and New Town planning schemes.

The history of public pools in Singapore is tied to the public housing estate. From the 1950s, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) began developing its Princess Margaret Estate to address the postwar housing shortage. But in the middle of construction a political shift occurred. The British government granted Singapore internal self-rule in 1959, and this new government dismantled the instruments of the British SIT and replaced them with its own institution, the Housing and Development Board (HDB). The HDB had a new agenda and worked to different methods. Construction sped in the 1960s as cheaper "emergency" flats were built, and Princess Margaret, which had since transformed into the much larger Queenstown estate, was largely finished by 1970. Along the way, the housing crisis had abated, and other non-residential buildings were erected in the area. The New Town had schools, a market, cinemas, a clinic, and finally a swimming pool, open to the public from 1970. Queenstown would set the pattern for HDB New Towns to follow.

In the time since Princess Margaret began, Singapore had gained more than just self-rule, it had become an independent republic. National aspirations had emerged, which radically shifted the outlook of government, and which impacted on creating new attitudes to sporting culture. Completed in this climate, the Queenstown pool in many ways marks a significant shift in swimming and sporting recreation in Singapore, leaving behind the spectacle of earlier art moderne pools to engage with a much more fully invested Modernism.



Singapore Swimming Club, ca. 1950, Author's collection

Throughout the western world, swimming cultures, especially those surrounding artificial swimming pools, grew rapidly under modernist outlooks of the early twentieth-century. Such early pools have been deemed an assertion of modern engineering over nature, artificial landscapes of organised recreation, and sites for misguided eugenicists to marvel at the body beautiful. By the middle of the century, pools were often designed in art deco or streamlined fashions, and in this sense can be framed under the broad umbrella of modern leisure architecture. As with modern cinemas, hotels and the like, these pools can be argued as using modernity as an escape from mundane life, by demonstrating a spectacular future of progress as entertainment, providing recreation and escape, but ultimately not interfering with traditional home life. This was certainly the case for early pools in Singapore.



Yan Kit Swimming Complex, 1965, Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore 19980000704-0080

Consider this photograph of Yan Kit Swimming Complex, built in 1952 during the final push of modern streamlining in Singapore. The pool itself was built over an old water filtration tank left unusable after the Second World War. It turned old infrastructure into a modern leisure landscape, its sweeping built forms speaking of all modern interests in dynamic movement, echoing the athletic body in motion. In the background, a reminder of the reality of housing in this part of Chinatown, early twentieth-century homes built in nineteenth-century fashions: traditional and conventional, ornamented and static. This kind of leisure architecture suggested the promise of change, without the inconvenience of causing it.

Queenstown Swimming Complex, however, bears no striking distinction from the housing estate's late modern image. Its main building is a low flat structure, with an angled roof as a lone styling effect, which is surrounded by three open air pools. Its most striking feature is perhaps the diving board, which has none of the grace of the board at Yan Kit, but stands with the same upright sturdiness of the concrete housing slabs that made up the estate. With the work of the HDB, the gracefulness of earlier modernism was being left behind for the glamour of brutality, which permeated the whole estate as the language of mid-century welfare architecture.



Queenstown Swimming Complex, 2016, Author's photograph

The pool was, however, surely met with some fanfare when it opened in 1970. For residents, the excavating of the old cemetery hill to make way for a pool – in particular, an impressive 50-metre pool – was a point of excitement. At the time, there were still quite few formal public pools in Singapore, and this marked a change in HDB building attitudes from the purely utilitarian to an attempt at community-building. The swimming complex was one of the buildings that brought recreation to what had been an “emergency” housing settlement. It was still an impressive gesture, however when compared to earlier pools like Yan Kit, we see that in Queenstown the relationship between living and recreation was now different. The conditions of the home environment had become the source of modernising change, and the pool was not a fantasy escape, but an architectural extension of the modern home, and a confirmation of the achievement of modernisation in other aspects of life. The HDB were setting out on a programme that would transform living conditions in Singapore, and there was no escape – swimming and sporting leisure would be a fundamental expression of this new modern lifestyle.

Through the testing of the Queenstown estate, the Housing and Development Board set out its planning standards also in 1970, which addressed the recreational, educational and community support amenities of its New Towns, determining the proportions of these different services. Swimming complexes, it was decided, should be given 1.5 hectares of land, and there should be one swimming complex in each of the New Towns. Under the planning instruments of the HDB, there began a large increase in the provision of public swimming, and over the next decade the number of public pools in Singapore would more than double.

One reason for the push toward regular access to swimming was an earlier government policy on athleticism that had begun in 1967, set out by the newly founded Singapore Sports Council. Their swimming campaign attempted to promote wider participation in formal swimming activities – and the regimented Olympic lap pools would help to promote a more regulated and sporting approach to swimming, as compared to the lakes, rivers, and flooded construction sites that more commonly encouraged children's play at that time. A key motivator to support athleticism at a national scale was to make able bodies capable of invigorating a new industrial sector, which was necessary to establish a national economy. Consider that the Jurong Town Corporation, tasked with building new industrial towns was also a prolific builder of public pools in the 1970s. Fitness, brought on through regular swimming, would lead to a strong workforce. But there was also another reason that the state wanted to produce athletic bodies. In the same year as the SSC's swimming campaign, the

Singaporean National Service programme began to ensure a sizeable and trained military that could be called on when necessary. There were fears of an Indonesia incursion at the time, brought on by still recent terrorist attacks; Indonesia had objected to the Malayan federation, and now that Singapore had been ejected from it, the island was considered a conspicuous target.

Swimming was held in value because it suggested a way to produce a fit company of workers and soldiers, and thus the swimming pool would have to be a key part of modern life in order to create the athletic and active modern citizen. Thus a realpolitik of the body beautiful emerged in Singapore in the 1960s, not one driven by ideas of purity, but by a need to feel fit in order to survive. In 1966, Prime Minister Lee commented that “Many other small societies like ours have survived, because they are better organised ... Societies like ours have no fat to spare. They are either lean and healthy, or they die ... our best chances lie in a very tightly organised society.” He used the metaphor of the athletic body to describe modern Singaporean society, but it was only metaphor to a point, because the actual fitness of individuals was a concern. Participation in sports during recreational time was one way of making the ideal citizen, who Lee described as “rugged”, and who would therefore be able to contribute labour and military service as civic responsibilities.

By the time Queenstown was finished, the public sporting campaigns were only in their infancy; swimming was just a first step. In 1973, there followed more widespread *Sport for All* and *Learn to Play* campaigns, both of which aimed at general participation in a range of athletic pursuits. *Sport for All* sought to establish a hierarchy of involvement, ranging from mass sports like swimming and jogging, to elite competition sports. It was clear that not everyone was to compete at top levels, but that they were expected to take part in sport recreationally. And while swimming was now not the only outlet, it certainly remained one of the most popular. After ten years of the *Learn to Play* programme, 34,000 people had taken part in official swimming lessons, while a mere 5,000 had participated in the other state-endorsed organised classes in tennis and squash.

Also in 1973, a further two new public pools were opened by the HDB, one in Toa Payoh (the first New Town planned solely by the HDB), and another in Katong, close to the old east coast shoreline, almost a decade since its disappearance, where the first swimming clubs and lidos in the British fashion were established at the turn of the century. Katong swimming complex shares many of the qualities of Queenstown: its simple configuration of concrete and tiling, low level buildings, and the same striped umbrellas lining the edge of the pool. Though at Katong, there is a wonderful use of decorative titling.



Katong Swimming Complex, 2016, Author's photographs

From the diving board, a figure is about to project himself into the pool. We see the depth of the water and figures in various swimming postures. One way of looking at the imagery is as a diagram of swimming technique, a visual companion to the *Learn to Play* programme; a picture of one figure, as a Muybridge-like *body in motion*, taking a lap. But it would a body in particularly erratic motion.

However, knowing that swimming was not positioned culturally as an independent sport, the lone swimmer makes little sense – swimming was to encourage regularity and group participation. Another way of looking at these adornments is as a series of bodies all taking part together in their collective betterment, therefore as a prefiguration of the later Mass Swim events of the 1970s and 1980s that showcased the fitness of the country, demonstrating the communitarian appeal of swimming. A poster for the Mass Swim of 1979 shows us the ideal – identical men swimming in tight formation, where individual athleticism is brought to unitarian precision. The real events could involve thousands of far less precise people, but they did serve to identify the popular success of the participation campaigns, and to put on display the athletic bodies of all of those “rugged” Singaporeans that the campaigns helped to create.

There was, however, another function for events like the Mass Swim, which was made clear in the 1984 Mass Swim in the Singapore River. The exercise, a 120 metre swim in the old river at the centre of Singapore city, attracted 400 participants. The symbolic importance of the event was that anyone at all was willing to dive into the river. Coastal swimming of most kinds had disappeared half-a-century earlier as industrial shipping lanes had made the seascape too polluted, and the Singapore River, which had a high commercial traffic of junks and ferries, became particularly dirty. The ability to swim it was a marker for the improvement of the urban environment, a modernising (and cleansing) of landscape and provision of luxury lifestyle. Swimming the Singapore river highlighted the effects of its 1983 cleaning, the Queenstown pool was a modern redevelopment of an old peripheral cemetery, the Delta swimming complex of 1979 replaced an old 1850s Chinese temple to the god of war. In these cases and others, swimming facilities were among the evidence of improving physical urban conditions state efforts at bettering lifestyles that had begun in 1960. In 1971, *The New Nation* newspaper indicated that owning a personal swimming pool was a key indicator of ‘gracious living’ – or luxurious and modern living. At the end of the decade and through the 1980s, the public pools of the government estates began to show higher amounts of decoration and flourished effect, showing the construction of this gracious living for everyone. In some ways, this started a move back toward mid-century leisure complexes like Yan Kit, but not completely. These pools of the modern housing estate were still not an escape from the practicalities of life, but an integrated component of it, as a demonstration of quality lifestyle, and communitarian and athletic values.

There are many more stories that could be told about the development of swimming cultures in Singapore over the twentieth century, but what these examples show is how swimming can be viewed as a vehicle for understanding the incorporation of a modernist ethos in the 1960s, one that sought to transform both the built environment and the citizens of state. Here, the swimming pool represented (and was used to encourage) a variation of the modernist values of bodily strength, fitness and leisure, which took their particular form through Singapore’s relations to other countries at that sensitive period of its political independence. The formalised swimming culture was adopted from early-century British approaches to recreational swimming, and because of uncertain regional relationships with Malaysia and Indonesia, swimming was transformed through mass sporting programmes initiated by the new republican government. This resulted in swimming being used as what sports historian Peter Horton has referred to as a tool for “social engineering”, cultivating communitarian values of commitment and perseverance, and physical strength, but also, we would add, in securing the experience of modernity within the living conditions of nationalist Singapore.

The setting of the swimming complex, as an environment of leisure, from the 1970s was an extension of the new living environment of the HDB estate. Swimming in this setting was used to create a new modern citizen – an athletic figure, industrially productive and military-minded – as well as to provide venue for the spectacle of this modern body, a platform for their individual display, and collective display through events like the Mass Swim. Swimming pools provided an outlet for directed leisure, a marker of physical improvement in the built environment, and stylistic demonstration of the new. For Singapore in the 1970s, swimming was a thoroughly modern activity, and was instrumental in the state's construction of a modern polis.

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