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Leisure for the Modern Citizen: Swimming in Singapore

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The second half of the twentieth century saw the instrumentalization of swimming in Singapore, turning public pools into ideological landscapes. Connections between Singapore's sporting history and its politics are well established (Aplin 2016; Horton 2001, 2002, 2013), and Ying-Kit Chan (2016) shows how swimming in particular was moulded to political discourse. He argues that politics took greater control of the events of swimming (i.e., the practice of swimming, sports carnivals, etc.) after Singapore's independence in 1965, using these to strengthen a local political rhetoric of pragmatism and national survival. Chan's work is valuable, and the aim of this chapter is to make two key extensions to it. First, the chapter highlights an important continuity in the political utilization of swimming between Singapore's colonial and national governments. Second, it refocuses the object of swimming from the event to its visual representation as a part of Singapore's designed environment.

Our starting point is to consider the public pool for what it offered at face value: an experience and environment of leisure. It was for the purpose of leisure and spectacle that colonial Singapore's premier swimming organization – the Singapore Swimming Club – erected its new streamlined modern clubhouse in the 1930s (Gagan 1968). At the time, as Bruce Peter (2007) shows, there was an acknowledged connection in British culture between popular styles of modernism and the recreational landscapes that provided brief escape from everyday life. Such associations were brought to Singapore, and the Singapore Swimming Club used an image of modern architecture to transform itself into a pleasure ground for the upper strata of Singapore's British society. By the end of the decade, the Chinese Swimming Club had followed suit. At the time, sporting clubs were largely divided along racial lines (McNeill, Sproule and Horton 2003: 40), but swimming was also determined by class. Whether it was the British or Chinese club, swimming was something for Singapore's administrative and economic elites to enjoy in private clubhouses offering the leisure of modern architectural spectacle.

This changed during the Second World War, after Singapore was integrated into an expanding Japanese Empire in 1942, where all facets of life, including sport, were subjected to increasingly centralized control. The Japanese administration established the Syonan Sports Association to broaden involvement, promote public fitness, and

instil imperial values (Lim and Horton 2011: 906–7). This introduced Singaporeans to ideas of wider sporting access, while also making play and leisure an overt political tool.

Despite its image of leisure, sport has long been instrumentalized, and this is a prominent feature of modernity. Sociologist Chris Rojek (1993) shows how bourgeois and capitalist modern culture distinguished leisure from other areas of life, particularly work, but he argues that such distinctions were always fictional. In Singapore, the British administrative class may have swum in an environment that appeared modern and leisurely, but as Horton (2013: 1222) argues, they conceived of swimming through the Victorian philosophy of ‘muscular Christianity’, connecting physical health to morality and using athleticism to promote ideas of duty and hard work. Swimming was for leisure, but leisure found purpose only in relation to work and industrious character. In Japanese Singapore, sport served to develop military capacity and Japanese values. Rojek shows that recreation was a significant, but not a distinct facet of modern life, and his concept of modern leisure provides an important framing for our approach to swimming. It provides a means to bridge the design of leisure environments with other areas of modernization in Singapore, in particular, housing and economic reform.

This chapter traces a history of swimming in Singapore from the 1940s to the 1970s, not as a discrete category of leisure, but as the political utilization of a leisure landscape. It draws on a collection of primary sources: newspapers, oral history and political speeches, as well as the designed architecture and promotion of swimming. These types of materials show how swimming was shaped as a discursive object – how it was discussed in official and public capacities, and how it was visualized within the public realm.

Post-war leisure complexes

A British Military Administration took control of Singapore at the end of the Second World War, just as the period of decolonization was beginning. Their initial aims were to restore civic systems and rehabilitate civilians and soldiers, and as part of this, as Aplin (2016: 1367) describes, they proceeded to organize sporting competitions for Asian communities. This essentially continued the principle of open involvement begun under Japanese governance. In many ways, this connects to sport’s longer history in colonial management. As Bale and Cronin (2003: 5) explain, sports were used within colonizing processes to effect social control, structuring bodily practices to ultimately shape outlook and identity. Sport was used to train Britain’s colonial agents (the civil servants and officers returning to Singapore after the war) as well as to condition its colonized subjects (the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities that formed Singapore’s resident population). The Military Administration saw potential for mass organized sport to relieve tensions and return the island to its pre-war imperial order, that is, it was an avenue towards restoring power. This idea continued with Singapore’s civic government when it resumed in 1946 and took charge of the processes of reconstruction.

For the remainder of the 1940s, no formal swimming sites were open to the public. The old private clubs regained control of their properties and seemed set to return to the old order of elite swimming (Gagan 1968: [viii]). The city's only municipal pools, a sea enclosure at Katong Park and a public bath at Mount Emily (both built in the 1930s), were in disrepair and lacked the resources to be rebuilt. And yet the government did recognize the increasing popularity of organized sports, slowly pursuing their own centralized sporting culture (Aplin 2016). They revived the YMCA and the Singapore Amateur Swimming Association in 1947, and established the Singapore Olympic and Sports Council (Aplin 2016: 1369–70). Swimming and other sports were starting to be considered as part of the wider project of civic reconstruction.

Restoration of the municipal pools progressed slowly, until they finally reopened at the end of 1949 (Malaya Tribune 1949a; Straits Times 1949). Both were immediately popular, and by this time even the private Chinese Swimming Club was suffering from overcrowding as ever more people tried to find space in the water (Singapore Free Press 1949). There was growing demand for swimming, and calls for the city to build more pools (Malaya Tribune 1949b; Straits Times 1950).

The first new public pool was the Yan Kit Swimming Complex, which opened in 1953 in the urban residential area of Chinatown (Singapore Free Press 1952). Excitement for swimming was showing no decline and Yan Kit's crowds swelled beyond manageable limits. Restrictions were introduced as swimmers had their leisure time rotated in two-hour shifts, and floodlights were installed to extend opening hours (Chan 2016: 21; Singapore Free Press 1954b). Yan Kit's success drove plans for even greater swimming access, and by the end of the decade two more pools at River Valley and Farrer Park were completed. Whereas the older private swimming clubs were based on the prestige of limited membership and positioned outside the city centre, the 1950s pools were public and positioned within the city, this accessibility emphasizing their prominent role in civic reform. Swimming was deliberately being made a popular urban experience, securing public pools their position as an amenity of post-war urban lifestyles.

Figure 6.1. Yan Kit Swimming Complex in 1965, with early-century Chinatown shophouses in the background. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Yan Kit, which replaced an old filtration tank left unusable since the war, was designed by City Architect W.I. Watson in a straightforward streamlined style that echoed the elite pre-war architecture of the Singapore Swimming Club. It featured a low, flat semi-circular entrance building that opened to arched diving platforms (Figure 6.1) and four pools that lined the top of a hill, overlooking the rooftops of houses below. Its organic and kinetic concrete form spoke of all modern interests in newness and dynamic movement, echoing the athletic body in motion. But most important was how the style of this new building contrasted its residential location, which was otherwise

filled with terraced homes built in nineteenth-century colonial fashions that merged traditional European and Chinese styles. For Rojek (1993: 4–5), the modernist construction of leisure was predicated on the misleading idea that it involved an escape from the world of the mundane. Leisure architecture was often used to mark spaces of recreation as distinct and spectacular, reinforcing ideas on the separation between leisure and the everyday. Yan Kit's streamlined architecture demonstrates this modern principle in the way it juxtaposed the residential city around it. Its entrance marked the transition into a new kind of environment, and thus an escape from the urban conditions of post-war Singapore. At the far end of the pool, an 'under-the-sea' mural of cartoonish sea life helped emphasize the way swimmers were being transported into a new playful and watery environment. As Rojek (1993: 212–3) argues, leisure sites provide a means to experience the contrasts of modernity, or the oscillations between the old and the new. Viewed this way, Yan Kit helped position Singapore within a post-war international project of modernization, conveying reconstruction in the way it made public leisure out of broken infrastructure, and demonstrating the rapidity of change in its contrasting of modern style with the old city.

During the 1950s, swimming pools were thus established as a viable public convenience, distinct from the older club cultures and drawing on principles of sports centralization. Singapore's municipal government had shown its interest in providing new recreational environments, advancing public leisure in a city that faced continuing hardship, and using this to convey an image of urban progress. Although there were only five public pools by 1960, they were hugely popular, and combined with the government's ideas of sporting inclusivity they helped establish a platform from which public swimming could expand.

Swimming in the public housing estate

The locations of post-war pools meant that they mostly catered for urban residents. People outside the city seem to have more commonly enjoyed informal swimming in the sea, lakes and rivers, which we know primarily from numerous reports of drownings in such places (Singapore Free Press 1954a; Singapore Standard 1954a, b; Straits Times 1955, 1956a, b, 1960, 1966). The safety of rural swimming became so problematic that in 1954 the Royal Life Saving Society implored people to only swim in formal pools so that lifeguards could be present, essentially warning against swimming outside the city (Singapore Free Press 1954c). Over time, though, these informal sites diminished as urban expansion brought new pools to old rural areas.

In the 1950s, Singapore's chief urban development body was the Singapore Improvement Trust. It was established in 1927, and after the war, it worked to address urban squalor, poor health, and an acute housing shortage (Teh 1975: 4–5). As a colonial institution that applied British planning techniques, the Improvement Trust adopted ideas from the UK parliament's New Towns Act of 1946, which allowed rural areas to be

developed as new urban centres (Home 1997: 69). Planning for a new town in Singapore's west was soon underway.

This was the Princess Margaret Estate, which began construction in 1954, though as work advanced major changes occurred in the political systems that managed it. In the 1950s, the UK progressed plans to decolonize Southeast Asia by integrating Singapore, Malaya and North Borneo into the new state of Malaysia. In 1959, Singapore was granted self-government, leading to a restructuring of its civil service. In 1960 the Singapore Improvement Trust was replaced by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which was eventually given sweeping new powers and financial support (Turnbull 2009: 317). The HDB continued the Improvement Trust's existing projects, expanding the new town model to such extent that within decades it became the dominant expression of the city's residential environment (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 116). The Princess Margaret Estate's construction continued under the new name of Queenstown, and by its eventual completion in 1970 a tumultuous period of political independence had taken place. Home rule turned into political independence in 1963 through Singapore's merger with Malaysia, and in 1965, due to the complications of regional politics, Singapore left the merger to establish itself as an independent nation. By the late 1960s, through the HDB's ongoing work, the housing crisis that initially prompted new town development had abated, and the State shifted its residential focus to improving quality of life. Along the way, it was decided that this life should include a healthy amount of swimming.

At Queenstown, the HDB's first public pool opened in 1970 (Figure 6.2). It was a small functionalist building with changing rooms and a kiosk. These were adorned by the lone styling effect of a sheet-metal roof folded into diagonal eaves and supported by structural pillars sitting external to its elevation, resulting in a collaged composition of shapes and materials. Around the building were three pools for diving, lap swimming and athletic training. As with other HDB works from the time, the building deals in the modernist language of built structure. The language of mid-century welfare architecture permeated the estate, and the graceful movement of Yan Kit's post-war *moderne* was replaced at Queenstown by the glamour of brutality.

Figure 6.2. Queenstown Sports Complex, published in: HDB Annual Report 1970. Image courtesy of the Housing & Development Board, Singapore.

On opening, Queenstown's pool met with public fanfare. For residents, the excavation of an old cemetery to make way for a pool, particularly an impressive Olympic-sized one, was especially exciting (Lim 2007). High demand for swimming time continued, and Queenstown operated on rotations of one hour and forty-five minutes to address crowding. Visitors recalled a pool so full with bodies that actually swimming a lap was near impossible (Lau and Low 2017: 52). Introducing a swimming pool to Queenstown was a way of bringing enjoyment to a style of town planning originally

conceived as rudimentary 'emergency' housing. It was an important gesture in demonstrating the HDB's transition from a model of utilitarian construction to an attempt at creating recreation, pleasure, and community (Lim 1970). Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1969) discussed this new concern for public housing when he explained that new estates would be 'better designed to live in and to look at ... with amenities that make for gracious living – parks, swimming pools, playing fields, recreational centres, shopping arcades'.

Integrating such new amenities within the housing estate reformulated relationships between environments of work, living and leisure. Compared to Yan Kit, Queenstown pool bore no striking difference from the residential architecture around it. Modern architecture was no longer being used to distinguish leisure from other areas of life, and thus visually erased the supposed separation between such categories. This pool was not an escape, nor a striking vision of progress, it was an integral continuation of the modern home, acting to confirm modernization in other aspects of daily life. The HDB were transforming living conditions in Singapore, and from this there was no escape.

Swimming for the nation

Beyond leisure and urban reconstruction, it was also thought that swimming might serve a role in racial politics. Since the founding of its British colony in 1819, Singapore had attracted a large immigrant population of various Malay, Chinese, Indian and European communities. For most of its colonial history the social lives of these different ethnic and linguistic communities remained largely divided, but by the 1950s the government started taking an interest in softening communalist divisions in order to prevent potential conflict (cf Aljuneid 2009). By the end of the 1950s, organized physical education in state schools became one of the strategies to achieve this (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 33). Swimming in particular was identified as a popular activity that could run at inter-district school levels, bringing young people from different communities together through shared exercise (Saunders and Horton 2012: 1388–9). After 1965, Singapore's national government found even greater urgency in improving social integration, particularly after the 1964 riot between Chinese and Malay residents (Turnbull 2009: 291).

The State positioned itself as neutral in relation to major ethnic groups, taking a firm stand on ensuring 'cultural democracy' within a pluralistic society by promoting policies that were multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 34–5). The HDB, for example, intended new towns to desegregate the population by relocating people from communalist towns and providing a new setting for different groups to live alongside each other (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 108). Arguably, the modernist architectural language of the HDB enhanced impressions that these were neutral territories, as the style was devoid of any loaded connotations of race or social hierarchy, instead symbolizing the collective pursuit of modernization (Chua 1991:

204). As common venues within these estates, public pools provided further sites for integration, a point the Minister for Education highlighted at the opening of Queenstown pool when he stated that 'this complex [...] belongs to all of us' (Lim 1970). New housing estates and their public amenities were used in the construction of national unity across multiple lines of division.

In the late 1960s, Singapore's government aimed to invent a single national identity for the new country, where citizens would identify first as Singaporean, distancing themselves from any allegiances to cultural homelands (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 29). This set the country down a path of cultural and economic modernization based on the paternalistic development strategies of its former colonial system. It established a 'cultural logic', as Wee (2007: 59) calls it, 'a historical narrative based on the very imperative of being modern itself.' Modernization was carefully managed, and involved a combined reorganization of the nation's economy, social values, civic discourses and built environment (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 4).

Within such a programme of change, any ordinary lifestyle activity could be infused with the drastic urgency of modernization, and the rhetoric of national crisis. This is how swimming and public pools came to encapsulate political objectives in the 1960s and 1970s. As Prime Minister Lee said in 1965, 'sport is politics' (Horton 2002: 254), which directly acknowledged that sports could shape relations between people. We can also extend this beyond sporting participation to include the architecture facilitating access to such a political activity as going for a swim, and see the building of these leisure complexes as a political act in itself. The visual integration of Queenstown pool with its surrounding estate therefore becomes all the more important, since it was not just an image of urban progress, but a visible breakdown in discourses that declared leisure as distinct from life and work – all of these areas were equally politicized in the construction of a new Singapore.

Government departments were quick to extend on this agenda, with Singapore's first sports campaign, focusing on swimming proficiency, being launched in 1967 by the Education Ministry (Straits Times 1967). The State used promotions, swimming lessons and the expansion of pool provision to encourage all citizens to spend time in the water. And the HDB eventually decided that pools and sports venues must be standard features of all future new towns (Straits Times 1972). Swimming complexes were to be given 1.5 hectares of land in all future estates (Wong and Yeh 1985: 103), ensuring the HDB's continued involvement in the architecture of politicized leisure.

In addition to the HDB, public pools were also pursued by the Jurong Town Corporation, another government body responsible for developing an industrial town in the west of the island (Straits Times 1968). The Jurong project shows how the politics of swimming extended to the economic functions of nation-building. In the 1950s, a series of reports cast doubt on the future strength of Singapore's economy, recommending increased industrialization (Cheng 1979: 85–7). The economy relied too heavily on trade, and with increasing labour strikes, high post-war unemployment and a booming

population, the city developed plans to expand manufacturing as a means to diversify the economy and provide jobs. After independence, as Singapore lost access to the Malaysian common market, this project seemed ever more urgent, since economic instability would impact Singapore's viability as a nation (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 30). The government expanded investment schemes to establish an export-oriented manufacturing sector (Huff 1987: 310–2). The Jurong industrial town was intended as a centre for this low-cost manufacturing, and began to develop in line with new town models, introducing workers' housing and amenities to make Jurong a fully-functioning and self-contained satellite town (Lee 1970). In 1970, just after Queenstown pool opened, so did the first pool in Jurong. A second Jurong pool was added in 1976 at Boon Lay Garden, and a third in 1978 at Pandan Gardens, providing the highest concentration of public swimming venues in any of Singapore's newly developed areas.

Jurong's swimming surplus reflects the growth of the area, but is also a telling sign of the desired link between swimming and labour. Between 1960 and 1970, industrialization policies had doubled the value of manufacturing as a percentage of Singapore's GDP, making it the second largest part of the economy; by 1970 more people were employed in manufacture and construction than in any other type of work (Cheng 1979: 96–7). The significance of manufacturing for Singapore's economy meant that the government needed a continued supply of strong and healthy workers to grow the country's productive capacity. Sport was seen as a way to secure this, but it would require sports like swimming to be framed with new values.

Centralized sports planning in the 1950s saw individual athleticism as a means to pursue Olympic medals and international recognition, but by the late 1960s such ideas were increasingly discredited. In 1973, the Prime Minister outright dismissed the idea of local sports producing gold medalists as a pointless dream (Horton 2002: 251). The new way of thinking about sport drew focus away from elite athletes in order to emphasize how sport could improve people in ways that contributed to national goals, building social discipline in alignment with the State's industrializing and modernizing ambitions. As Prime Minister Lee (1966) proposed to a group of Chinese swimmers, the purpose of their sport was to build up the 'organization and strength and vitality to prevent our society from being destroyed'. It was swimming for national survival.

Connecting the themes of national identity, sporting participation, and expanded manufacturing is the concept of 'ruggedness', which was established as one of the key qualities of the new Singaporean. Chris Hudson (2013: 18) points to the term as a key part of the gendering of national discourses in independent Singapore, where male prowess dominated the survivalist language of the time. The term 'rugged' was vague enough, and could be mobilized to infer perseverance against hardship, courage and endurance in the sense of being a hard-working factory labourer, and selflessness in the collectivist sense of foregoing luxury for the benefit of society. The concept played to the government's economic ambitions to expand manual production, as a rugged citizen would be a productive one. Swimming was no longer an activity for the elite athlete, but

for everyone, because it would assist in creating this rugged Singaporean. As Horton (2002: 251) argues, sport in the 1970s was used to mould a strong and productive workforce and allow the new economy to flourish. Though now a different social, political and economic climate, it was a similar utilization of sport as a means of building good character as had been practiced by British and Japanese colonial administrations. Incorporating swimming pools and other sports venues into the new housing estates helped establish personal fitness as part of everyday life and as an obligation to oneself, one's country and fellow citizens.

Through the 1970s the number of public pools more than doubled as new venues were built in suburban developments such as Toa Payoh, Katong, Geylang East, and Henderson Road. But the relationship between sport, labour and national survival meant that these pools were more of an economic engine than a landscape of leisure, since going for a swim had been turned into a continuation of work and civic duty. This is why it made perfect sense to multiply the swimming complexes of Jurong, the symbolic centre of Singapore's factory workforce. They were not recreational additions to the factory, but a logical extension of it, which made recreation a productive industrial exercise and further reduced cultural distinctions between living, labour and leisure.

Sport for all

The involvement of swimming in national development necessitated its large-scale adoption, where swimming together might encourage socialization through repeated actions in a public arena. For this, the large public pool is the most logical venue, and here, the lone swimmer makes little sense. Mass involvement had been part of the Japanese and post-war British approaches to public sports, and it infused the early work of the Singapore Sports Council, which in 1973 began the Sport for All and Learn to Play programmes to foster wider athletic participation. After ten years of Learn to Play, over 30,000 people had taken part in official swimming lessons, far more than were involved in other organized classes in tennis and squash, something that the Sports Council attributed to the wide accessibility of public pools (Straits Times 1983).

Though perhaps none of the Sports Council's programmes were so clear in their collectivized vision as the mass participation events. The Mass Swim, for example, was designed to get as many people in the water together as possible. A 1979 poster for the event (Singapore Sports Council 1979) showed the ideal: eight identical figures in the same state of motion propelling themselves through the water.¹ With struggle and endurance on their repeated faces they bring individual athleticism to unitarian precision. The visual repetition of the swimmer in this poster encapsulated a national sporting ideology that had come to avoid the rhetoric of individual success in favour of group contributions to a national system that valued strength and perseverance. That

¹ The 1979 Mass Swim poster can be viewed online in the poster collections of the National Archives of Singapore (www.nas.gov.sg). It can be accessed by searching 'mass swim' in the archive catalogue, or directly through the address: <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/posters/record-details/305bfa64-115c-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

poster encouraged thousands of far less precise swimmers to take part in the Mass Swim that year, where they struggled to keep afloat in public pools while not bumping into each other. And even though reality could not live up to the idealized image, events such as this did serve to identify the popularity of the preceding decade's participation campaigns, while managing to display all those 'rugged' bodies the campaigns helped to create.

In addition to demonstrating the popular adoption of a collectivized outlook to swimming, Mass Swim events also served another function for the built environment, continuing earlier uses of swimming as a symbol of urban progress. This was seen in the 1984 Mass Swim in the Singapore River (Straits Times 1984). Just several years earlier, the idea of swimming in this river would have been very unpleasant, as it was still a commercial waterway filled with boats and filth. But a cleaning of the river began in 1983 as part of continuing urban rejuvenation schemes. That by 1984 there were four hundred people willing to dive in and make the 120-metre swim was a powerful symbolic marker of how far the cleaning had gone, showing what improvements had been made to the city's environment. Similarly, that so many people would attend public pools and get into the water together attested to their attachment to national interests, as well as the developments of physical infrastructure that gave them access to athletic swimming. They convincingly demonstrated the extent to which the government's aims for sport were progressing, and provided an image of an engaged and participatory national citizenship.

In posters for the Mass Swim, large-scale sporting carnivals like the Pesta Sukan (Festival of Sport), and in the media coverage of these events, it was the image of bodies filling the water that provided the greatest sense of dynamism to Singapore's modern pools. The buildings themselves otherwise tended toward the straightforward and utilitarian, sometimes allowing for small markers of leisure and entertainment like the angled roof line and candy-stripe metal umbrellas at Queenstown. Politically, much greater emphasis was placed on swimming bodies than on the swimming environment, as we find hinted in the architectural decoration of one of the HDB's pools of the 1970s.

Katong Swimming Complex opened in 1975 (Straits Times 1975) and it was one of the simplest architectural swimming sheds, but a rare use of decoration draws further attention to the image of the athletic body. A tiled wall by the children's pool shows a figure (Figure 6.3). From the diving board, he projects himself into the water; we see the depth of the water and figures in various swimming postures. In some respects, it looks like the sequencing of a body in motion taking a lap alongside the pool. But some of the awkwardly submerged figures create irregularities in the sequence. It is also possible to see the wall as representing multiple figures swimming together in a precursor to the Mass Swim, or view it through its simple form as a diagram of swimming technique and a visual companion to the Learn to Play scheme. In any case, the tiling draws attention to the fact that pools were made to be filled with bodies, and in this context, against the

backdrop of Singapore's cultural and economic modernization, it was specifically for athletic and 'rugged' bodies that incorporated political ambitions into their leisure time. Public pools had made space for public swimming, and the HDB and Jurong Town Corporation turned swimming into a part of the everyday urban landscape, but the value of swimming was its potential effects on the public and the individual bodies that performed at these sites.



Figure 6.3. Tiling design at Katong Swimming Complex. Photograph by Nadia Wagner, 2018.

Conclusion

The decades following the Second World War saw Singapore's public pools become part of a larger redevelopment scheme that sought to remake both the built environment and the citizen. Whether it was Yan Kit's transformation of damaged infrastructure into an escapist leisure environment, or Queenstown turning a peripheral cemetery into an extension of residential reform, swimming pools were important markers of urban modernization. Pools offered new ways for people to use their leisure time, and showcased the State's commitment to improving lifestyles. But access to these venues was loaded with expectations that were carried through political rhetoric and official sports promotions. Sporting involvement came to be framed as a national duty to produce a fit, resilient, and integrated citizenship. These pools, therefore, were part of a wider transformation of urban life and public identity.

From the late 1970s the survivalist rhetoric of Singapore's early nationalist politics began to dissipate. The public language of housing crisis was replaced by top-down efforts to establish community identities in modernist estates, and a bottom-up desire for increasingly consumer-led lifestyles. From this time, public swimming pools slowly became more extravagant – returning to architectural entertainment. A new pool in itself was no longer a public luxury, so the architecture of swimming tried to allure

and entertain. Thus, alongside the continued growth of public pools, private waterparks appeared, such as Big Splash in 1976, with its fountains and rainbow water slides. Physically, Big Splash did not accommodate the athletic kinds of swimming for national gain that the public swimming complexes endorsed, this was a new venue for the consumer-swimmer, looking more for enjoyment than personal improvement.

Swimming in Singapore is a vehicle that helps us understand the adoption of a mid-century modernist ethos that desired the total transformation of both people and environment. It demonstrates post-war changes in the political ambitions of Singapore, but also the roles that the images and discourse of urban modernization played in national constructions in postcolonial Asia. For Singapore, swimming pools represented (and encouraged) a variation of the modernist values of bodily strength, fitness and leisure, which took their particular local form through Singapore's emerging national politics. This formalized swimming culture was adopted from early-century British approaches to swimming, and because of Singapore's uncertain political and economic situation in the mid-1960s, swimming was transformed through mass sporting programmes, resulting in its use as a tool for 'social engineering' (Horton 2013: 1222). It was to cultivate collective values of commitment, perseverance and physical strength, but also, we would add, to secure the experience of a modern urban lifestyle within the living conditions of Singapore. Swimming in this setting was used to create new modern citizens – athletic and productive figures – as well as to provide venues for the spectacle of these modern bodies and their collective display. As an outlet for directed recreation, a marker of urban development, and a stylistic demonstration of the new, swimming was a thoroughly modern activity for Singapore, and one that was instrumental in the State's construction of a modern polis.

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