



# BALIK KAMPUNG

A group of elderly residents brave hungry mosquitoes and a clampdown to call a derelict plot home

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**JUST LIKE HOME:** Senior citizens like Ah Or are drawn to Kampung Sungei Pandan because it reminds them of the villages they were resettled from in the 1970s, under Singapore's urban renewal programme.

IT'S 530AM as Yeo Buck Chwee leaves his three-bedroom apartment at Clementi Avenue 4. The 85-year-old enjoys a cup of *kopi-O* or black coffee at the nearby coffeeshop before heading down a bougainvillea-lined path towards Ulu Pandan Park Connector.

But instead of joining the other early risers who gather at the scenic water-front park to cycle or practise *tai chi*, a form of Chinese martial arts, Yeo passes a sign that reads 'Private Land, Trespassers will be Prosecuted' to reach his 'second home'.

Set along an abandoned railway track owned by KTM Malayan Railway, this home is literally just a roof over his head – a hut consisting of zinc panels held up by metal scaffolding. Around it are farm plots where he spends his mornings weeding and watering rows of sweet potato plants, as he has been for the past three decades.

But he is not alone. This place is also home to some 30 senior citizens who visit daily. Affectionately known as Kampung Sungei Pandan to them, they gather here to farm or chit-chat over cups of tea.

*Kampung*, which means village in Malay, also refers to a rural way of life in Singapore that has made way for today's

modern living.

"Being out in the fields gives me a break from the four concrete walls of my home," Yeo explains. He likens the open spaces of Kampung Sungei Pandan to those at his old village along Sixth Avenue, now a prime real estate area where million-dollar properties stand. Yeo and most of the regulars were relocated in the late 1970s under the nation's urban renewal programme.

Nicknamed Ah Or, a reference to his tanned complexion in Hokkien, he prefers the *kampung* setting to the air-conditioned rooms found at the nearby Clementi Community Centre, which conducts many activities for senior citizens like him. There, for less than \$100, Ah Or can pick up calligraphy or learn to play the *guzheng*, a traditional Chinese string instrument. Yet, even if they were for free, Ah Or would not be the least bit interested.

"Community centre activities and elderly-friendly exercise parks are boring," he says, adding that he enjoys spending time at Kampung Sungei Pandan as it gives him the freedom to pursue what he wants, when he

wants to.

**HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS**

Many years ago, 10 other farming enthusiasts, including 53-year-old Cai, took the cue from Ah Or and began growing sweet potato and yam on adjacent plots. They became fast friends, tilling each other’s lands and even arranging barbeque get-togethers at the hut.

Back then, armed with crude tools and determination, Cai and his friends cleared weeds and chased out snakes from the once-vacant plot of land. They also raised funds for the setting up of a Taoist altar and purchased potted plants, carpet grass and a lawn mower.

“We contributed our household items and belongings, each of us had a part to play in the construction of this shelter,” says Cai. He sifts through items such as plastic chairs, foldable tables and a rusty electric stove to look for faulty ones to throw out, and adds, “It’s messy, but it really looks and feels just like home.”

Urban sociologist Ho Kong Chong cites the *kampung* as an example of how people can create places of their own, a process he calls “place making”. The professor from the National University of Singapore (NUS) also suggests that the *kampung* has fostered a sense of community among

residents through the sharing of memories.

“When people intermingle or pursue a common activity, there is a possibility that they will move on to negotiate and solve problems together,” Prof Ho says. “Urban planners should think beyond just constructing static spaces that are void of character and instead place more attention on the nurturing and retaining of social spaces, such as the

**“Urban planners should think beyond just constructing static spaces that are void of character and significance.”**

**PROF HO KONG CHONG,**  
urban sociologist



**NATURE’S RELIEF:**  
For Kampung Sungei Pandan’s regulars, this place is a welcomed getaway from the concrete housing environment they live in.



*kampung,” he adds.*

### SHORT-LIVED HAPPINESS

In 2000, word spread that someone had struck lottery after giving offerings at Kampung Sungei Pandan’s Taoist altar. This news attracted visitors from as far as Changi, and a flood of donations allowed the devotees to convert the altar into an elaborate concrete shrine.

But this also caught the attention of the land owners. Cai recalls the day in 2002 when the Malayan Railway authorities came by for the first time and ordered the demolition of the shrine. Since then, the devotees have left Kampung Sungei Pandan in a dilapidated state. They are unwilling to rebuild the place for fear of a second clampdown.

In this manner, there is a lack of a long-term relationship with the physical environment, says urban planning expert Ooi Giok Ling. This discourages a sense of ownership among residents and they become unwilling to spend time and effort on its maintenance, she says.

**OUR LAND:** Shen, 40, shares the fruits of his labour with Ah Or under the shanty hut.



Kampung Sungei Pandan sits on land the size of two soccer pitches. It is located at Clementi Avenue 4, above a gas pipe that belongs to the Public Utilities Board. The collection of farm plots is bordered by HDB blocks, the Clementi Avenue 6 flyover and Sungei Ulu Pandan.

It runs along the KTM Malayan Railway built on land belonging to Malaysia, thus making it difficult for Singapore’s authorities to develop the site. Hence, the state have left it alone... or at least for now.

**BIRD'S EYE VIEW:**

From Florence Ghng's 10th floor apartment, muddy ponds and shanty huts found at the *kampung* stand in contrast with the modern amenities around.



“This hampers grassroots planning activities and gives the space a temporary look, exactly the kind of problems that the authorities dread as it is untidy,” adds the professor from the Nanyang Technological University.

For Florence Ghng, who gets a bird's eye view of Kampung Sungei Pandan from her 10th floor apartment, the sight of brown muddy ponds and messy zinc roof panels isn't a pretty one. But the 48-year-old hardly seems to mind.

“It's good that these senior citizens have a space to do something they love and enjoy, like rearing fishes, gardening or just chatting,” she says. “How else would they pass time?”

Having moved into her apartment at block 305 in 2001, Ghng recalls how her elderly father noticed the vegetable plots downstairs and wished he had such a *kampung* under his own block.

But unlike Ghng, not all residents have been supportive of the *kampung*. Over the years, others have complained about dengue threats at the compound, leading to frequent visits by officials from the town council and the National Environment Agency.

In order to quell such fears, 58-year-old Sunny rears fishes in the ponds to prevent the breeding of larvae. The

regular at Kampung Sungei Pandan is thankful that besides these checks, the authorities have pretty much left him alone.

“They know we're just regular folks,” says the technician. “The police came to check if Mas Selamat was hiding here,” he recalls. “I told them this place is like a *kampung*, we're all friends and everyone knows everyone else. Even Mas Selamat wouldn't dare to hide here lah!” ■

This is a story from a journalism project, RECLAIM LAND. You can read other stories and see more photos at [HTTP://RECLAIMLAND.SG](http://RECLAIMLAND.SG)