

FINAL REPORT

HERITAGE RESEARCH STUDY FOR A
FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AREA

for



Executive Summary

Introduction

This Heritage Research Study for a Future Development Area (“HRS”) has been commissioned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore. It relates to the site of the former Bukit Timah Racecourse located on the north side of Bukit Timah Road a little to the south of the Central Nature Reserve. In summary, the HRS comprises an inspection and recording of the extant buildings and site features and preliminary assessment of condition; a review and summary of readily available archival materials; an evaluation of the heritage significance of the site; a review of the proposed redevelopment plan and the heritage impact that arises from it (heritage impact assessment (“HIA”); and an interpretation plan.

Description of the Former Bukit Timah Racecourse Site

The site was used as a horse racing venue until its closure in 1999. Since 2000 it has been operating in a mixed-use format including a retail shopping mall (located in the former North and South Grandstands) and the Bukit Timah Saddle Club (a riding club), which continue to operate to this day.

The site comprises 98 hectares and contains numerous buildings ranging from major public buildings, principally the North and South Grandstands, to modest workers’ quarters, all set in a lush green landscape of mature trees, grassland and topographical features, with distant views north toward the Central Catchment Nature Reserve.

The general condition is good, the degree of wear and tear consistent with the age and form of the buildings.

Heritage Value

The heritage value¹ of the site is high. The former Bukit Timah Racecourse operated as a commercial racecourse from 1933 to 1999. It built on the development of the former racecourse at Farrer Park and it proved a commercial and philanthropic success. It was one of many racecourses in South-East Asia founded by expatriates but was soon used by locals from a variety of backgrounds, which was enhanced by the switch in 1960 from being a private members’ club to a sporting venue open to the general public. Bukit Timah owes its success to this change.

¹ Heritage value – a measure of the importance of a heritage asset, typically expressed in terms of its historical, aesthetic and social significance.

Horse racing in Singapore is closely intertwined with the Singapore Turf Club (“STC”) and the Bukit Timah Racecourse. The founding members of the Singapore Sporting Club (the forerunner of the STC) – William Henry Macleod Read and the STC’s first chairman - Tan Sri Runme Shaw – were respectively the same people who founded the first racecourse in Singapore at Farrar Park and later developed the Bukit Timah Racecourse. In later years the STC became an agent of the Singapore Totalisator Board (“tote board”), which regulated horse betting. It is therefore fair to say that the development of horse racing in Singapore and the history of STC are synonymous.

The STC and the Bukit Timah Racecourse are, however, mutually distinctive. Whilst STC was instrumental in establishing, and for many years responsible for, running horse racing, the Bukit Timah Racecourse was, and remains, the tangible evidence of it. The racecourse and all that comprises it – the buildings and the spaces between them, the landscape, and outward views from the grandstands – embody a strong sense of place that recalls the experience of ordinary people when they visited, including the anticipation and thrill of the race; the serenity of distant views; the grandeur of the major buildings, and the crisply presented landscape.

Overall, the site played a significant part in the life of Singapore at a time when the country had quite recently become independent. The North Grandstand in particular embodied an enterprising spirit that was outward-looking and ambitious for the future. This building represents both the high point of horse racing in terms of the capacity that it provided and the self-confidence of an architectural style that was internationalist rather than colonial.

The site also has intangible heritage value. Beyond the association with STC, the site’s value to society is in its representation of the people associated with its growth, development and day-to-day operation. Considerations have also been given to site’s recent history from 1999 onwards, during the value assessment process.

Heritage Impact and Assessment

The commissioning of this HRS is a significant step toward realising intentions to redevelop Bukit Timah Racecourse. There are inevitably some consequences. When Bukit Timah was in its heyday it presented itself as “..up-to-world standard..” and along the way it acquired a distinction that was manifest in some of its buildings, its landscape and setting. The demise of horse racing at Bukit Timah following its relocation to Kranji, inevitably meant that the site’s principal heritage value – its association with horse racing – was lost. It is also inevitable that the redevelopment of the site, for residential use, will diminish the site’s heritage value still further.

The site's principal source of heritage value lies in its association with horse racing as noted above. Therefore, the baseline for assessment of the site is as a horse racing venue. However, since the transfer of racing to Kranji in 1999, the site's last tenanted use is an interim circumstance that is both partial (The site generally is substantially under-used) and without distinction. Therefore, any considerations for future plans within the site should be sustainable, and this should be reflected in the mitigation and interpretation strategy. The Heritage Impact Assessment at section 9.9 has been developed on this basis.

This HRS therefore considers the scope for mitigation of negative impacts and the opportunities for enhancing the new development. It concludes that effective mitigation can be applied in two forms – firstly, to retain selected buildings that are deemed the most significant and to find sustainable new uses for them; and secondly, to interpret the heritage value of the site more generally. The intended outcome of this is to retain that which is considered valuable yet capable of change, whilst creating new buildings and spaces that acknowledge and draw on the significance of the place. By these means, a new asset is intended that seeks to achieve optimum use of land for the future that takes inspiration from the past.

Conclusion

This HRS concludes that the proposed redevelopment of the former Bukit Timah Racecourse is capable of retaining sufficient heritage value that would tell the story of horse racing at Bukit Timah and more generally in Singapore. There will be negative impacts, some of which will be substantial, but selected retention of extant buildings including the North Grandstand, the former Secretaries' Bungalows and the racetrack, are sufficient to convey tangibly the principal characteristics of the former racecourse. The conservation guidelines outlined in Chapter 8, together with the interpretation plan in the same chapter, provides a range of ideas that will assist in mitigating the impacts of the proposed works and sets a series of guidelines that can be referenced in any emerging redevelopment proposals for the site. The overarching intention is to provide future residents and visitors alike with the opportunity to know more of Bukit Timah Racecourse's history and to appreciate the special nature of this place by virtue of conserving the heritage elements of value and improving accessibility to it.

Recommendations

In addition to the further measures set out in this HRS as required by the Brief, it is recommended that a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) is commissioned. A CMP is typically an authoritative record of the heritage value of a place because it follows in-depth research across a wide range of archival sources. Among other things, a CMP would provide a policy framework that would provide a useful basis for informing the design development and assist any future public engagement measures. Its principal purpose is to facilitate change, which sometimes can be radical in its nature and/or extent, in a manner that is sensitive to the heritage value of a place. As such it can be a valuable tool when considering a change of use of culturally significant sites.