

COMMUNITY HERITAGE SERIES III:
**VOID
DECKS**

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VOID DECKS

COMMUNITY HERITAGE SERIES III

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FOREWORD

The void deck carries fond memories for many of us. The term “void deck” is a uniquely Singaporean one, referring to the ground floor of HDB blocks that has been left open as sheltered space, where residents can gather to meet friends or where our children can run around, whether rain or shine.

Today, our void decks may also house a convenience shop, a resident’s corner or even an early education centre. We also use the void deck as a venue for important celebrations, including birthday parties and weddings.

Other times, they serve as places where we hold sombre gatherings following the passing of a loved one. It is clear that as a shared space, the void deck has been instrumental in developing a sense of community in our public housing.

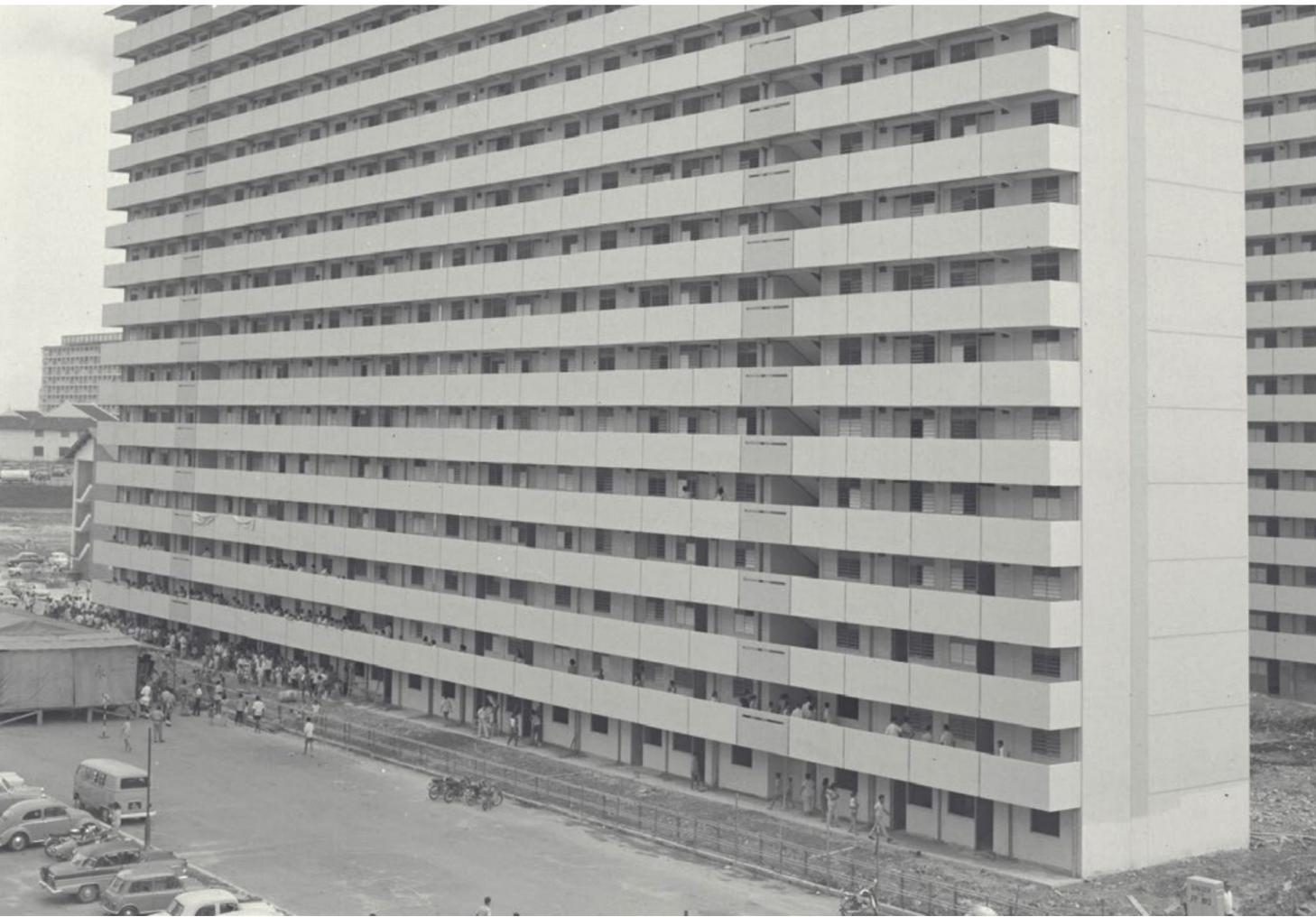
Over time, the use of void decks will continue to evolve. For example, void decks have recently served as a venue for travelling exhibitions that celebrate our heritage; or as a showcase for community art where residents gather to paint murals and enjoy their art work.

These will be useful efforts as part of our *Living Arts, Loving Culture* suite of programmes for both young and old, and serve as an encouragement for arts practitioners and heritage enthusiasts to emerge from within the community. In this way, the void deck will always remain a part of our lives – common yet unique to communities.

Join me as we take a deeper look at our links with void decks in this e-book produced by the National Heritage Board (NHB)!



Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim
Minister for Ministry of
Communications and Information



▲ An early HDB flat in Toa Payoh where the ground floor was occupied with residential units instead of a void deck (1968).
 Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings

A HISTORY OF VOID DECKS IN SINGAPORE

During the 1960s, the Housing and Development Board's (HDB) main priority was to provide adequate public housing for the local population and as a result, many of the HDB blocks built during that period were filled with either homes or shops.

Since the 1970s, HDB has been constructing its public housing on "pillars" to free up ground level spaces. The term "void decks" came into usage in the local newspapers around 1970. According to a report in *The Straits Times*, the oldest void deck in Singapore was built in 1963 at Block 26 in Jalan Klinik.

The objectives for introducing void decks were to create opportunities for residents to meet, interact and bond through the regular use of shared common spaces and to provide residents with space to hold social functions, celebrations and funeral rites. It was also part of HDB's efforts to provide "a sense of relief" in the densely built city.

The introduction of void decks has undeniably improved the lives of HDB flat dwellers as they provide shelter from the rain and sun, promote good airflow and natural light, and allow passers-by easy passage through the estates.



▲ The oldest void deck in Singapore at Block 26, Jalan Klinik (2012).
 Courtesy of National Heritage Board



▲ A letterbox at the void deck of Blk 54, Marine Terrace (2012).
Courtesy of Belinda Tan

VOID DECKS AND THEIR COMMON FEATURES



◀ A two-tiered bicycle rack at the void deck of Blk 19, Marine Terrace (2012).
Courtesy of Belinda Tan

When void decks were first introduced in the 1970s, they featured basic amenities such as lifts, letter boxes, bicycle racks, dustbins, public telephones and staircase landings. Up to the 1980s, void decks remained spacious and were mainly rectangular in shape although there were variations. They were also given a uniform look with bare white-washed walls and cement floors.

During the 1980s, void decks also offered recreational amenities such as ping pong tables and Chinese chess/checker tables with stools and benches. Since then, the range of amenities has increased to include vending machines, advertisement corners, CCTVs as well as the first automated external defibrillator which was installed in the void deck of Block 20 in Toa Payoh in January 2010.

In the 1990s, HDB launched the Design and Build scheme which resulted in a variety of HDB block designs as well as more complex and less spacious void deck layouts. At the same time, HDB also introduced alternative communal spaces such as car park roof gardens, outdoor “community malls” containing benches and children’s playgrounds as well as precinct pavilions.



▲ A ping-pong table at the void deck of Blk 440, Ang Mo Kio (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



▲ A group of elderly residents playing chess at the void deck of Blk 337, Ang Mo Kio (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOID DECKS

Void decks have an important role in building community ties and promoting racial integration because they serve as venues for social and recreational activities, and present opportunities for residents of different backgrounds, age groups and races to meet and bond.

During the 1970s to the 1980s, void decks serve as a gathering place and a substitute for former communal kampong compounds for many residents who were newly resettled from villages and who were in the process of adapting themselves to a high-rise and high-density living environment.

Today, void decks continue to serve as popular hangout areas for senior citizens, as common spaces for Singaporeans and new citizens to “hang out”, and as venues for community activities organised by Residents’ Committees.

As void decks in Singapore continue to evolve as a result of new public housing designs, the need for shared common spaces for the purpose of building community relations and ties will continue to be important, and the void decks of yesteryears will continue to have a special place in the hearts of heartlanders who grew up in HDB estates in the 1980s and 1990s.

▼ A group of retirees who gather daily for chit-chats at the void deck of Blk 32, Marine Crescent (2012).
Courtesy of Belinda Tan





▲ The former Nee Soon Central Community Children's Library (1999).
Courtesy of National Library Board

CHILDREN'S LIBRARIES

At its peak in the early 2000s, there were 45 Community Children's Libraries (CCLs) located at the void decks of HDB estates throughout Singapore. These CCLs were jointly set up by the National Library Board (NLB) and the People's Action Party Community Foundation.

The CCLs were the result of a concept mooted by Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong (then Prime Minister) in 1992 to cater to children aged 10 and below. The first four void deck CCLs opened their

doors in 1993 while the remaining 42 were established during the period 1995 to 2001.

However, as NLB expanded its network of Community Libraries, a review of CCLs was carried out which led to the decision to close down these void deck libraries. The last CCL, located at the void deck of Block 322 in Clementi, closed its doors on 30 April 2011.



▲ The former Tampines Central Community Children's Library (1999).
Courtesy of National Library Board



▲
A former children's playground
located at a void deck.
*Courtesy of Housing &
Development Board*

PLAYGROUNDS AND TOY LIBRARIES

In the past, sheltered children's playgrounds were built in the void decks of HDB flats in areas such as Bishan, Tiong Bahru and Tampines. These playgrounds would be equipped with facilities such as miniature slides and other play facilities.

However, a fire broke out at the void deck playground at Block 261 in Tampines in 2005. Following that incident, Town Councils were asked to relocate these playgrounds and under HDB's latest guidelines, playgrounds are no longer allowed at void decks for fire safety reasons.

From the late 1970s onwards, there were also a number of toy libraries set up at void decks to make available educational toys such as those produced by Lego and Fisher-Price for children from low income families. These included the first toy library at the void deck of Block 149 in Toa Payoh opened by the Kuo Chuan Citizens Consultative Committee in 1979.

In 1988, a Toy and Book Library was also set up by Lioness Club, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the National Library Board and the National Trades Union Congress at Block 96 in Henderson Road. For a dollar a month, children could play with the toys within the library's premises for two hours every Friday.



▲ Buddhist funeral rites being conducted at a void deck.
Courtesy of Sean Tan

CHINESE FUNERALS

Chinese funerals are commonly held at void decks of HDB estates. In the past, the Chinese believed that funeral wakes should be held near one's home so that one's soul could find its way home. In today's context, funeral wakes are held at void decks out of convenience rather than superstition as they make it more convenient for the bereaved family members to rest at home and for neighbours to attend the wake.

According to Chinese customs, nightly vigils are held to prevent evil occurrences such as spirits stealing the soul of the deceased, or a black cat jumping over the coffin and causing the corpse to rise. A common ritual conducted during wakes

is the chanting of prayers by priests on the first and last days of the wake. The final day of the wake often involves "live" music by funeral bands or drum-and-gongs troupes from various associations as well as the burning of paper offerings such as paper houses, cars etc.

Chinese funerals are usually held over an odd-number of days and most void deck wakes are held over three, five or seven days. The set up of the altar depends on the religion and the coffin area is often blocked from external view with the use of a tentage. Tables and chairs are also provided to provide resting areas as well as for mahjong sessions.



▲ A Taoist funeral setup at a void deck.
Courtesy of What's Up



▲ A Malay wedding at a void deck with the wedding dais on the right.

Courtesy of What's Up

MALAY WEDDINGS

Malay weddings are a common sight at the void decks of HDB estates. The actual Malay wedding day is known as *bersanding* which refers to the sitting together of the bride and the bridegroom. The *bersanding* often lasts for six hours from 11.00am to 5.00pm and invited guests are free to come and go within the time period. Loud Malay music is often played during weddings and “live” bands are often engaged to perform for guests.

The focal point of a Malay wedding is the beautifully decorated wedding *dais* (*pelamin*) upon which the couple will sit. Besides the *pelamin*, there will be a huge seating area comprising long rows of tables and chairs as well as a tentage

for on-site cooking. These days, the long rows of tables have been replaced by round tables and void decks are often transformed into “modern ballrooms” with carpet, flower arrangements, chandeliers etc.

In the past, void decks were popular wedding venues for the Malay community because of space and cost considerations. Void decks were also spacious enough to accommodate the expected large number of guests and Town Councils often impose a nominal fee for the use of electricity and water. In recent years, more and more Malay couples are choosing alternative venues for their weddings.



▲ A Malay wedding held at the void deck of Blk 605, Choa Chu Kang (2011)
Courtesy of Salleh Md Amin



▲ A colourful void deck mural at Block 229, Bishan, depicting the area's heritage (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

ART GALLERIES

Painted murals started appearing on the walls of HDB void decks in the 1980s and they could be found all around the island in housing estates such as Yishun, Ang Mo Kio, Bishan, Serangoon Eunos, Tampines, Simei, Kaki Bukit, Ulu Pandan and many others.

These painted murals brightened up the void decks and some murals even contained educational messages. Today, many of early void deck wall murals have been repainted over. However, new mural painting projects continue to take place at void decks and they are particularly common on the exterior walls of childcare centres and kindergartens located at void decks.

In 2010 and 2011, murals in HDB estates were elevated to a different level when fine arts wall murals were completed at Block 2 in Holland Village as part of Holland-Bukit Panjang GRC's racial harmony day activities and when Singapore's first void deck art gallery was created at Block 56 in Pipit Road showcasing interpretations of artworks by Vincent van Gogh.



▲ The community art gallery located at the void deck of Blk 56, Pipit Road (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



▲ A typical weekend morning at the bird singing corner at Block 440, Ang Mo Kio (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

BIRD SINGING CORNERS

Bird singing corners are commonly found at HDB void decks and they are characterized by horizontal rails with rings installed near the ceilings of void decks. Some of these rings are attached with number tags to identify the birds and their owners during bird singing competitions.

These corners can be found in areas such as Ang Mo Kio, Bedok, Jurong West, Woodlands and Yishun. One of the most well known bird singing corners is found at Block 440 in Ang Mo Kio where large numbers of bird owners and their birds “hang out” throughout the week.

As an activity, bird singing helps to promote friendship and bonding between residents as well as enthusiasts who would sit around, drink coffee and chit-chat while their birds learn and/or compete in the art of singing.

The bird singing corner in the void deck of Block 440, Ang Mo Kio (2012).

▼ *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*





▲ The ground-level bomb shelter at the void deck of Block 310, Yishun Ring Road currently occupied by a minimart (2012).

Courtesy of National Heritage Board

CIVIL DEFENCE SHELTERS

The Singapore government embarked on the building of civil defence bomb shelters at the foot of new HDB blocks in 1987. These shelters were found at the basements of HDB flats and the first shelters were completed in the late 1980s. By 1992, there were 60 underground shelters built and another 117 being constructed in different parts of Singapore.

In the early 1990s, the government started to build bomb shelters at ground-level and the first such shelter was completed at Block 468 in Hougang. The key reason for building shelters on ground level was to enable better peace-time use of these shelters to off-set maintenance costs and to acquaint residents with the layouts and locations of the shelters.

In September 1994, the Singapore government announced that household shelters would be built inside new HDB flats to facilitate access during war time. Following this, the practice of building public bomb shelters at the void decks of HDB flats was discontinued. Today, there are a total of 177 basement shelters and 269 ground level shelters.



▲ One of the entrances/exits to the ground-level bomb shelter at Block 310, Yishun Ring Road (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



▲ The former Khe Bung Neighbourhood Police Post at Boon Keng Road (1983).

Courtesy of the former Ministry of Information, Communications & the Arts

NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICE AND FIRE POSTS

Neighbourhood police posts were first introduced in the 1970s to strengthen crime prevention in the HDB heartlands. The first two police posts were located in Toa Payoh and Ang Mo Kio, and the majority of these posts were located at HDB void decks.

The first police post to feature colourful wall murals was the former 24-hour post at Block 461 in Ang Mo Kio. The murals featured the Neighbourhood Police Post logo and a cartoon showing a policeman and a resident lifting weights together with the words "Together we fight crime." Today, there are approximately 50 neighbourhood police posts throughout the island.

In addition to neighbourhood police posts, neighbourhood fire posts managed by the Singapore Civil Defence Force can also be found in various HDB estates. There are a total of 26 neighbourhood fire posts and they can be found in estates such as Jurong West, Nee Soon Central, Pasir Ris, Eunos, Toa Payoh etc.

▼ The Teck Ghee Fire Post at Blk 463, Ang Mo Kio (2012).

Courtesy of National Heritage Board





▲ The Kolam Ayer St George's West Residents' Committee centre located at Blk 1, St George's Road (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

RESIDENTS' COMMITTEE CENTRES

Residents' Committees (RCs) were introduced in 1978 to promote neighbourliness, racial harmony and community cohesiveness in the HDB heartlands. Each committee operates out of a centre which will be used to conduct meetings and/or to organise activities for residents.

These centres are often located at HDB void decks to be "at the doorsteps" of the residents they serve. Sometimes, RC centres become favourite meeting places for residents. For instance, the RC centre at Kebun Baru Zone "D" is a popular hangout for residents who gather to play carom, watch television etc.

Likewise, the Yio Chu Kang Zone "B" RC centre is also a popular meeting place for youths who gather at the centre to read, play carom, watch television and/or prepare for RC related functions. Today, there are more than 500 Residents' Committee centres located at HDB void decks throughout Singapore.

A Chinese New Year event organised by Marine Terrace Walk RC and held at the void deck of Blk 5, Marine Terrace (2012).

▼ *Courtesy of Belinda Tan*





▲ A purpose-built Senior Citizens' Corner at the void deck of Block 232, Bishan Street 22 (2012).

Courtesy of National Heritage Board

SENIOR CITIZENS' CORNERS

In the 1980s, the Residents' Committees decided to construct purpose-built clubs to meet the needs of the elderly residents by renovating and partitioning the void decks of HDB estates. These senior citizens' clubs would be equipped with facilities such as games, television and music rooms.

In comparison, Senior Citizens' Corners at void decks can either comprise built-in facilities including constructed tables, benches, metal cabinets and signages, or be set up by residents themselves through the contribution of furniture such as tables, chairs and other decorative items such as potted plants.

Seniors Activity Centres have also been set up at void decks by non-profit organisations to cater mainly to low-income elderly residents. These centres function as drop-in centres that offer support services as well as social and recreational activities.



▲ A Senior Citizens' Corner set up by residents at the void deck of Block 440, Ang Mo Kio (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



▲ The Sheng Siong supermarket at Block 301, Woodlands Street 31, which opened in 1995 (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

COMMERCIAL SHOPS

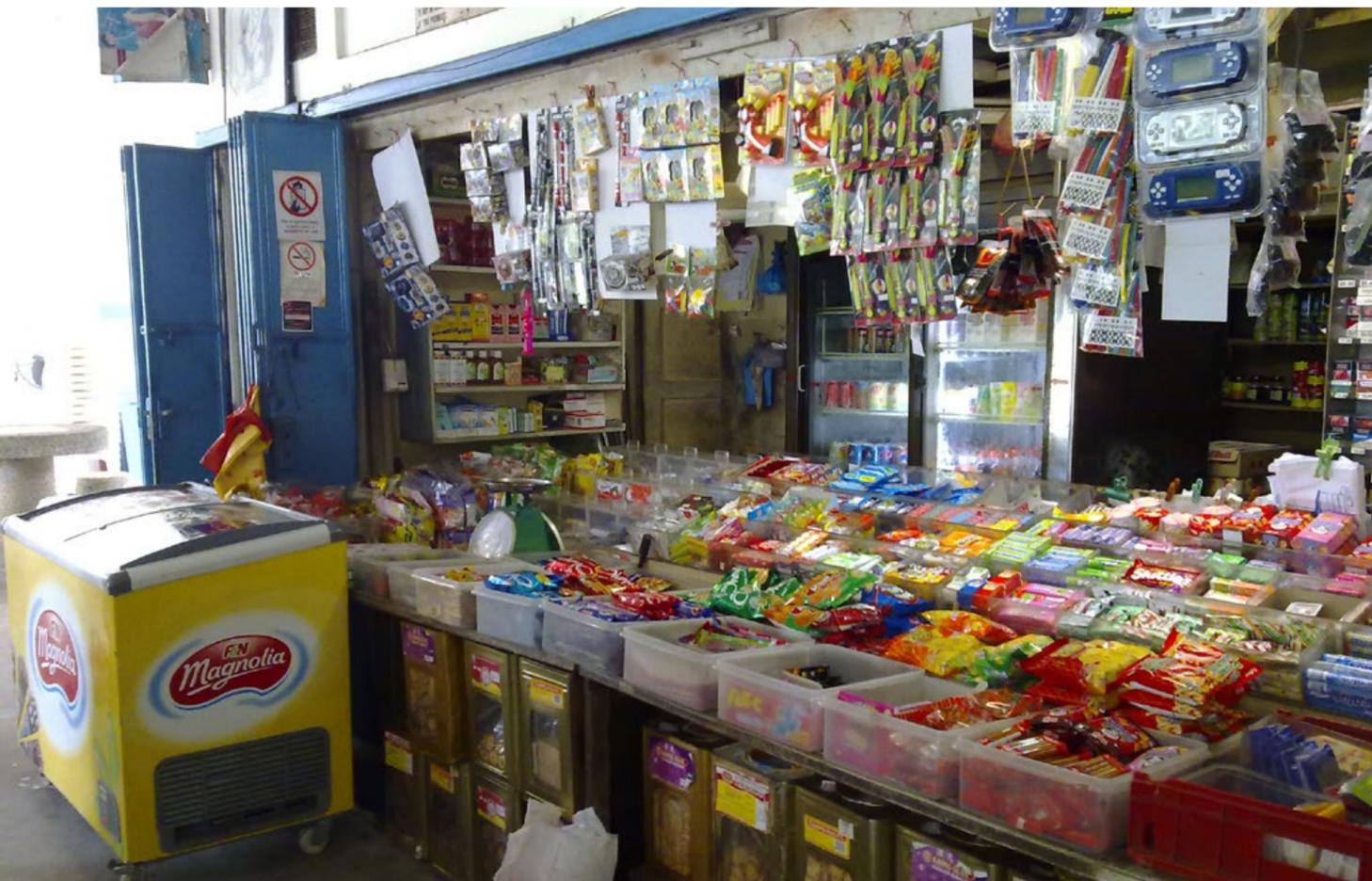
Traditionally, shops located at HDB void decks would include commercial and retail shops such as coffee shops, provision shops, Chinese medical halls, clinics, stationary shops, barber shops, bakeries and even minimarts.

In the later years, retail chains started to expand their networks into the HDB heartlands by opening up outlets at void decks. These include supermarkets such as NTUC Fairprice and Sheng Siong, convenience stores such as 7-Eleven and Cheers, and fast food chains such as McDonald's.

More recently, a new generation of businesses such as premium ice-cream shops and boutique cafés have found their way into void decks and they are set up by budding entrepreneurs who wish to take advantage of the lower rent. In November 2011, the first makeshift coffee shop selling only cooked food prepared elsewhere was set up at the void deck of Block 930 in Hougang.

▼ The first makeshift coffee shop selling only cooked food at Blk 930, Hougang (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board





▲ The "mama shop" which has been operating at the void deck of Block 41, Sims Drive, since 1981 (2012).
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

"MAMA SHOPS"

During the mid 1970s, HDB started to establish standalone kiosks (also known as "mama shops") at void decks as part of its efforts to cater to the needs of residents for sundry everyday items such as sweets, biscuits, ice-cream, newspapers, magazines etc.

In 1979, a kiosk selling sundry goods was introduced at the void deck of every fourth block and the kiosk would be built facing lift lobbies as a means to boost neighbourhood security since kiosk operators might notice unsavoury characters and notify the authorities where necessary.

At their peak in 1983, there were about 600 standalone kiosks located at void decks around Singapore. However, low demand from prospective operators and competition from neighbourhood provision shops have led to a decrease in the number of kiosks today.

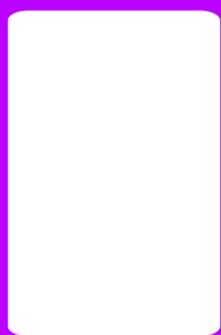
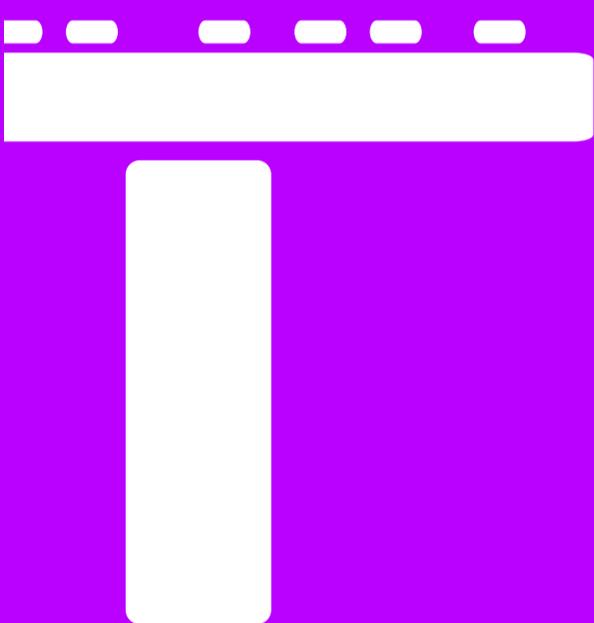


▲ The "mama shop" at Blk 34, Marine Crescent enjoying brisk business (2012).
Courtesy of Belinda Tan

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- Moulmein-Kallang Town Council



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