

8-2002

In Search of Permanent Homes: Singapore's House Churches and the Politics of Space

Lily Kong

Singapore Management University, lilykong@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research

 Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies Commons](#)

Citation

Kong, Lily.(2002). In Search of Permanent Homes: Singapore's House Churches and the Politics of Space. *Urban Studies*, 39(9), 1573-1586.

Available at: http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/1730

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email libIR@smu.edu.sg.

In Search of Permanent Homes: Singapore's House Churches and the Politics of Space

Lily Kong

Summary. This paper focuses on one category of the 'unofficially sacred'—namely, those secular spaces which are used for worship and, in particular, residential spaces which are turned into 'house churches'. Using the case study of a house church in Singapore, the paper examines issues about the politics of religion in urban landscapes in a secular and simultaneously multireligious state. Contrary and in addition to current wisdoms about the politics of religious space, it is argued that various politics are observed: a politics of inclusion; a politics of hybridisation and in-betweenness; a politics of appropriation and nationalisation; and a politics of impermanence and precarity. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to bring added conceptual perspectives to the notion of 'sacred space' within the context of modern, urban, secular settings.

Introduction

In a recent review and critique of geographical research on religion (Kong, 2001), attention was drawn to the insufficient focus on the 'unofficially sacred', a notion developed to parallel Leiris' (1938/1988) idea of the 'officially sacred' (churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and such places of worship that are commonly identified as 'religious places'). The 'unofficially sacred', in Kong's lexicon, refers to other types of place which reinforce religious identity and facilitate religious practice, such as religious schools, the premises of religious organisations (communal halls), pilgrimage routes (apart from the sites themselves), religious memorials and roadside shrines, domestic shrines, religious procession routes, festival places and other secular spaces used for worship. The intention in this paper is to focus on those secular spaces which are used for

worship by church groups in Singapore, in particular, residential space, as a way of examining issues about the politics of religion in urban landscapes in a secular state. Through analysis of a particular case study (a house in a high-class residential area that was used as a church up until 1999), it is argued that, contrary and in addition to current wisdoms about the politics of religious space, the following are observed: a politics of inclusion; a politics of hybridisation and in-betweenness; a politics of appropriation and nationalisation; and a politics of impermanence and precarity. In so doing, the paper seeks to bring added conceptual perspectives to the notion of 'sacred space' within the context of modern, urban, secular settings.

That religious and sacred space is conceptualised as contested space is not a new

insight, just as the sacred has long been acknowledged as a “contested category” (Needham; cited in Chidester and Linenthal, 1995, p. 15). Van der Leeuw (1933/1986) identified four kinds of politics in the construction of sacred space. He outlined a *politics of position*, whereby every establishment of a sacred place is a conquest of space; a *politics of property*, whereby a sacred place is “appropriated, possessed and, owned”, its sacredness maintained through claims and counter-claims on its ownership; a *politics of exclusion*, whereby the sanctity of sacred place is preserved by maintaining boundaries, carving the inside from the outside; and a *politics of exile*, which takes the form of a modern loss of or nostalgia for the sacred. I wish to argue that, in the specific urban context of modern Singapore where land is scarce and where “orderly physical development” (*Revised Master Plan, Report of Survey*, 1980, p. 6) is a guiding principle in planning, a reconceptualisation of the politics of sacred spaces is needed. Through this, I hope to contribute to a re-imagining of the sacred in an urban context.

This acknowledgement that religious and sacred space is contested space can be situated within larger theoretical literatures on the politics of space and landscape politics. As Ley (1988, p. 115) acknowledged more than a decade ago, landscape is a “concept of high tension”, just as Knox (1982, p. 293) argued that the very process of creation of the built environment reflects a dominant social and political relationship. The planning and control of physical space, and the form that landscapes take, both embody and reflect the negotiation of power between the dominant and subordinated in society, each with their own versions of reality and practice (Anderson, 1992, p. 28). On the one hand, spatial patterns and landscape forms articulate the social construction of space and landscape imposed by the powerful—planners, architects, administrators, politicians, property-owners, developers—intent on advancing state ideology or consumer capitalism. On the other hand, landscape is also a “multicoded space” which in its everyday

usage, is constantly reinterpreted by “everyday people who may be ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ different languages in the built environment” (Goss, 1988, p. 398). In this sense, following Adorno, Steve Daniels (1989, p. 206) has argued that landscape may be seen as “a dialectical image, an ambiguous synthesis whose redemptive and manipulative aspects cannot be finally disentangled”.

Within recent geographical and anthropological literature on religion (see Kong, 2001), it is specifically recognised that religious landscapes may reveal symbolically and literally a local politics, or local structures of power and authority. This paper will examine the nature of such politics, or more specifically, micro-politics, in the (re)production of religious space using a case study in urban Singapore. The description of the processes as a micro-politics stems from the focus on a local-level house church in urban Singapore, situated within a small if exclusive residential neighbourhood. Yet, it is emphasised how this micro-level analysis resonates with larger questions of church-state relationships and how it is at these local sites that larger political relations between state and religion are negotiated and renegotiated.

Empirical Context

The case study is situated within a larger empirical context of ‘homeless’ and ‘vagrant’ churches in Singapore, as captured in a letter to the press, dated 1988. The leader of a 300-member church wrote

Being a leader of a medium-sized church, I realise the shortage of property for use as a place of worship is becoming more acute. Because our membership is about 300, we are unable to fit into shophouses. Yet our accumulated funds through the years are grossly insufficient for us to bid for large pieces of land set aside for religious use in the zoning authority’s master plan. We have tried to get approval for change of use of properties like big houses

on main roads, warehouses and even an old school. But all attempts have been rejected although it appears to me that having a church in those places will not pose any traffic or noise problems to the neighbours. On the contrary, I believe our presence will benefit the area as we can provide spiritual, moral and ethical guidance as well as social care to those around us. My church also faces an urgent problem as we have been told to leave the present rented premises within a few months. I am sure the authorities would agree that meeting in public halls/auditoriums/hotels is not a long-term solution to our “housing” needs. I appreciate the need for wise usage of land in Singapore, but I hope the authorities will understand our situation and help us out of our predicament (*Straits Times*, 27 December 1988).

The scarcity of church buildings in Singapore is very real, reflecting both demand and often, ability to realise that demand. The population of Christians increased from 10.1 per cent in 1980 to 12.7 per cent in 1990 to 14.6 per cent in 2000 (*Singapore Census of Population 2000, Advance Data Release No. 2*, 2001, p. 1). This increase is not only within existing churches, but also reflects the growth of independent (indie) churches. According to the *Singapore Church Directory*, produced by Every Home Crusade, a Christian organisation, there were at least 150 such churches in Singapore in 2001, with many probably going unlisted (*Straits Times*, 25 November 1983).¹ The numbers have undoubtedly increased since, although no systematic records are publicly available. This increase in the number of Christians and churches is at least matched by a reasonable financial wherewithal to express the demand for space. At the height of a recession in 1985, at least some church groups seemed unaffected by the economic slowdown and moved ahead, seeking out land, supporting costly new buildings and expansion of existing ones, and taking over cinemas that had suffered from dwindling attendance. All this was buoyed by financial support from the

increasing number of followers, overseas money, and profits made from valuable real estate and investment portfolios resulting from gifts over the years (*Straits Times*, 9 June 1985).² However, land to erect church buildings is not easily available in land-scarce Singapore (see Kong, 1993a, and later discussion of state policies on the allocation of space for religious purposes). As a result, various strategies have been adopted by Christian groups to meet their place shortage.

A first strategy is the use of houses for worship, attractive because of the lower rentals compared to business areas and the scarcity and high cost of land on which to build. Some may even own the houses in which they operate, as in the case of Bukit Timah Evangelical Free Church (BTEFC), which will be examined in detail later. Religious leaders say that over the past few years, the number of churches operating in houses has grown, although there are no figures available (*Straits Times*, 26 October 1986) because not all of them have state approval.

The second is the conversion of cinemas to churches. The timing coincided with cinema-owners exploring new uses for cinemas, for the cinema industry had run into problems in the 1980s: from a peak of 80 cinemas in 1980, the number had plunged to 45 in 1986 because of poor attendance (*Straits Times*, 13 January 1986). Cinema-owners were therefore happy with the attention accorded them by interested church groups.

Thirdly, hoteliers began to welcome churches that wished to hold services in their function rooms as it meant more business for them. A newspaper report in 1989 highlighted how many churches, some with fewer than 50 members and others with as many as 600, were using hotels because they did not have their own premises. Small conference rooms cost a few hundred dollars for a Sunday morning and bigger ballrooms a few thousand dollars per service. Most of the churches pay for the rooms from the tithes of their members (*Straits Times*, 25 March 1989).

A fourth, albeit less common, strategy, is for different Christian groups to pool re-

sources in the construction of a common place of worship. For example, in 1985, the Anglicans and Lutherans joined hands to build a \$4.5 million church in Yishun as a way to deal with land scarcity and high construction costs. Known as Yishun Christian Church, there are separate Anglican and Lutheran services. Anglicans and Lutherans who had been worshipping in separate temporary quarters in the Sembawang area shared equally the cost of building and running the church. A joint parish committee administers the building and co-ordinates the separate and combined uses. Similarly, Mt Carmel Bible Presbyterian Church and the Independent Bible Church share the cost of building and running the Clementi Bible Centre (*Straits Times*, 9 June 1985).

Each of these conditions may throw up different insights that contribute to a reconceptualisation of the politics of religious spaces, and each requires specific analysis. In this paper, I wish to focus on the first of these strategies—namely, the use of residential space for religious purposes. Insights will be gained into the spatial politics surrounding this particular strategy by focusing on one specific case in 1980s and 1990s Singapore. The material is obtained through interviews with pastors and church-goers, as well as church documents kindly made available by one of the pastors (including appeal letters, letters from government agencies, etc.).

Before engaging with the empirical case, however, the cultural politics of urban planning in a multiracial, multireligious and multicultural state will be examined. This provides further context for understanding the specific strategies adopted by the church in the case study presented here. I will do so by focusing specifically on how planning policies and principles are interpreted in relation to religious places.³

Policies applied to the allocation of space for religious use reflect general characteristics of land-use policy in Singapore. For example, 'efficiency', 'pragmatism' and 'orderly growth' form the guiding principles in land-use planning. As a result, urban renewal has generally emphasised demolition and re-

construction rather than conservation. At the same time, a centralised approach has often been taken towards planning and decision-making. In the establishment of new religious buildings, the state specifically sets aside parcels of land for tender by religious groups. These parcels of land are usually found in the new towns built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) on the basis of the neighbourhood principle, adapted from British and European town planning practices. The basic planning philosophy is to give maximum self-sufficiency with respect to basic community needs; thus, within each neighbourhood, there will be shopping facilities, community centres, recreation facilities, schools, medical care and so on to cater for the needs of residents. If there are more than three neighbourhoods close together, then a town or district centre will be built to provide higher-order goods and services, such as banks, theatres, cinemas and department stores. It is clear therefore that a strongly modernist stance is adopted in town planning in which the successful formula is based on efficiency and functionalism (Ley, 1989, pp. 47–51). In such a context, religious building sites are provided in the new towns as another amenity that sections of the population require. Precise planning standards guiding the minimum provision of such sites are drawn up in the same way as for other amenities (see Table 1). These planning standards are reviewed periodically in the light of demographic and social changes. The precise sites are usually proposed by the HDB and submitted for consideration to the Master Plan Committee and for the approval of the Ministry of National Development.

Each parcel of land is only open for tender to each particular religious group. Hence, a site for churches, for example, is open for tender to the various Christian denominations, but Muslims, Hindus and Chinese religionists cannot bid for it. The Muslims, however, do not have to tender for the first mosque site because it is a policy to have one mosque in every new town developed. A site is therefore allocated to the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Muslim Religious Council,

Table 1. Planning standards for the provision of religious sites

Religious building	Approximate site area (square metres)	Planning standard
Church	3000–4500	1 per 12 000 dwelling units
Chinese temple	2000–3000	1 per 9 000 dwelling units
Mosque	2500	1 per 20 000 dwelling units
Hindu temple	1800–2500	1 per 90 000 dwelling units

Source: Systems and Research Department, Housing and Development Board.

or MUIS for short) at a price determined by the chief valuer. This is usually three to four times lower than the market value (Kong, 1993a).

Although this general policy of ensuring that the minimum requirement of every religious group is met has prevented competition among religious groups, it has had a significant impact on Christian groups in particular, because there are more denominations seeking to set up their own church buildings than there are available sites. Church groups have become locked in fierce competition in tendering for land, as outlined earlier.

Just as the state has a role to play in the establishment of religious buildings, it also has a role in their relocation and demolition. Relocation and/or demolition take place when buildings are unauthorised structures or, more commonly, when the buildings are affected by public schemes. In a statement by Tan Eng Liang (the then Senior Minister of State for National Development), it was declared that “The resettlement policy is clear-cut, irrespective of religions, irrespective of owners and irrespective of organisations” (GPO, 1978, col. 978). The priority given to ‘pragmatic’ use of land is emphasised as is the fact that religious places of all religions are affected rather than any one religion targeted.

In brief, the planning principles adopted in secular, yet multireligious Singapore are based on ‘order’, ‘pragmatism’ and ‘orderly development’ on the one hand, but quite as apparent is a consciousness of the need to make provisions for the multiple religious groups in the country. In such plural situa-

tions, the state is cognisant of the need to ensure that different religions feel their needs are addressed. In part, one may surmise that the careful zoning and parcelling out of land for different groups on proportionate terms reflects not only a ‘pragmatic’ approach to planning, but also a political one of balancing needs and demands among communities. Without such control, the potential of proliferation of particular groups and their spaces (necessarily the more resourceful, proselytising ones) could encroach on sensibilities and spaces of other groups. Planning principles, in this sense, are ideological.

Bukit Timah Evangelical Free Church

Relocated to Woodlands (as Woodlands Evangelical Free Church) since March 1999, Bukit Timah Evangelical Free Church (BTEFC) was, for 30 years, located at 12B King Albert Park, a residential area comprising low-rise, upper-class bungalows. Next to it was a Radio Taxi Service Station and a retail complex housing McDonald’s and Cold Storage supermarket as anchor tenants. The chronicle presented in Table 2 outlines its historical trajectory and developmental vagaries.

Politics of Inclusion

Van der Leeuw (1933/1986) argued that the sanctity of sacred place is maintained when the ‘inside’ is reinforced by keeping some persons out. A vivid example of this is the Hindu belief that a menstruating woman should not enter a temple because she will pollute sacred space. Thus, space is sacred

Table 2. The chronicle of BTEFC, 1969–99

Date	Event
1969	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — BTEFC purchases the original single-storey bungalow from the now-defunct Singapore Oxygen. — Building used for religious purposes even though the freehold property was designated for residential use.
1977	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — BTEFC applies for permission to carry out alterations and additions to the property. Authorities become aware of the unauthorised use of residential property. — BTEFC receives notification from the Development Control Division, Urban Redevelopment Authority, that it has to submit a formal application for ‘Change of use’ of the property from residential to religious, which it duly does. — Written permission is granted on the basis of a Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL), renewable every three years.
1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — BTEFC is granted permission to set up Evangel Kindergarten in the existing bungalow/church building.
1981	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The first students are admitted.
1983	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — BTEFC submits plans to construct a four-storey church with ancillary facilities. — The application is rejected in May because the proposed development would “detrimentally affect the residential amenities of the existing developments in the vicinity” (MND DC266/83–83/W/454, 11 June 1983). — An appeal is launched in July but turned down in August.
1987	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — BTEFC writes to its immediate neighbours to ask for an expression of ‘no objection’ to the construction of a church building. Neighbours oblige. Note that not all neighbours are Christians.
1988	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Another application for reconstruction is submitted. — The application is rejected because the site is within “a Good Class Bungalow Area where only bungalow development can be allowed”.
1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The congregation has grown; the building is falling into some disrepair; more and better space needs become apparent. — BTEFC submits a plan to construct a two-storey building to the Urban Redevelopment Authority.
1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — URA advises that the lay-out and floor plans should reflect a dwelling house. — Revised plans are submitted and approved. — BTEFC raises nearly \$2 million for reconstruction.
1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — New building is completed. BTEFC applies to URA for a formal change of use or permanent rezoning from residential to church-cum-kindergarten. — Application is rejected because “the subject premises is within a Good Class Bungalow Area. The proposed church and kindergarten is out of character and will affect the residential amenities in the vicinity” (cited in letter to Acting Minister for National Development, 28 September 1994). — The church appeals to the Permanent Secretary (Ministry of National Development), but the appeal is rejected. BTEFC is told to relocate within six months from March 1994.

- 1994 — BTEFC appeals to the URA for permission to stay until December 1997 for, although it can stop recruiting new kindergarten registrants, it has current commitments to pupils until the end of 1997.
- The URA extends the grace period till December 1994.
- In June, the church informed parents that the kindergarten had to relocate and that its search for alternative sites had thus far been unsuccessful.
- Some parents appeal to the URA, requesting reconsideration of the decision to relocate, or at least the timing of it.
- 1994 BTEFC appeals:
- On 3 September, two church leaders met URA officers on an informal basis, but despite “sympathetic, helpful and friendly” officers, the advice was about how to choose new sites and the possibility of extending the deadline for relocation if the purpose was for preparation to relocate.
- A petition is sent to the Member of Parliament (MP) for Bukit Timah, Dr Wang Kai Yuen, by 29 members of the church.
- Another request is made to Dr Ong Chit Chung, MP for Bukit Batok, who appeals to the Acting Minister for National Development, Mr Lim Hng Kiang, on the church’s behalf.
- The church also writes to the Acting Minister directly.
- The response is still negative.
- 1995 — The church sets up a “search committee” of eight to look for available properties.
- 1998 — The church successfully bids for a Housing and Development Board site in Woodlands on a 30-year lease. This came after two earlier bids for plots at Hougang and Jurong East, which BTEFC had lost. In order to ensure success at Woodlands, BTEFC put in a bid at \$8 million, way ahead of the second-highest bid of \$6.4 million.
- 1999 — The church moves to Woodlands by March 1999.
-

because of a politics of exclusion, with boundary maintenance of paramount importance in sustaining this binary of sacred and secular.

The Singapore state, through its explicit planning policy and land-use allocation, adopts a similar conception which separates that which is religious (and, by extension, sacred) and that which is secular in the city. The state specifically sets aside parcels of land for tender by religious groups, as described earlier. A principle of separation and exclusion is evident in the allocative process.

Where a building is allocated to secular use, the only conditions under which it may be given over to religious activity is if a Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL) is awarded as an interim measure, in anticipation of relocation, or if a permanent redesignation is done, transforming residential to religious use. In both instances, there is exclusive differentiation between religious and secular use.

BTEFC's experience of compulsory relocation illustrates this state approach of separating the religious and the secular in urban space. In 1994, when the church appealed to the Permanent Secretary (Ministry of National Development), the appeal was rejected on the grounds that

- (1) only bungalow development was permitted in the area;
- (2) existing policy did not allow for change of use in established residential areas;
- (3) approval for reconstruction had been given on the basis that the lay-out reflected a residential bungalow; and
- (4) the use of the building as a church-cum-kindergarten would adversely affect the privacy and amenities of the other residents in the area (ND 265/3-2782; 28/9/94).

This was consonant with the URA's Planning Report (1993) for the area, which falls within the Bukit Timah Development Guide Plan (DGP). The vision was to have a premier residential area which included a good-

quality mix of low- and medium-rise housing to enhance the prime residential character of the area, to be achieved by relocating incompatible uses. Sixty-two per cent of the proposed residential housing in the Bukit Timah DGP was low-density, including the King Albert Park area.

The Singapore state's approach to BTEFC—namely, the insistence on relocation because of its “incompatibility” with the high-class residences in the area—is a clear statement of a politics of exclusion. However, in this instance, it is the ‘sanctity’ of the high-class preserve that is to be maintained. This politics of exclusion, however, is inverted and subverted when churches such as BTEFC negotiate for their space using a politics of inclusion instead. In emphasising values of spatial proximity to its constituents and the desired social and spatial interactions, the church seeks to emphasise the integral intersections between the sacred and the secular. This is evident in the arguments that BTEFC raised in support of maintaining its location and continued functioning.

In its appeal to the state, BTEFC emphasised proximity to its constituents as a way of giving itself meaning in place. High-class residents, it argued, also have social and spiritual needs

Just as the HDB has correctly allocated lots for religious places to be built, there is also an urgent need for churches to be built in high class residential areas. The alternative is for people ... to travel to some faraway places, causing unnecessary road congestion and environmental pollution (letter to Acting Minister for National Development, 5 September 1994).

Where it was, the church was a central node of activity for residents in the vicinity, and was integral to the functioning and interactivity of the neighbourhood and community. This was most evident in the petition by church members to the MP for Bukit Timah, in which the integration of BTEFC into the community life was emphasised. Evangel's

commitment to pre-school education was highlighted, a commitment made possible because of church support. The petition highlighted how no rental and utilities were charged; how some of the staff were members of the church whose salaries were not commensurate with their education and training; and how families that could not afford the already-low tuition fees were welcomed nevertheless (disregarding the fact that the high-class neighbours would not have this problem). Church volunteers also led a company of the Boys' Brigade from a neighbourhood school. Teenagers went to BTEFC after school, bathed, did their homework, played games. Students from a nearby polytechnic used the place to study. A volunteer coached 'A'-level students there, and at least 50 per cent of the students were not BTEFC members. Retirees and senior citizens helped out with the office work, enhancing their self-worth. Trained counsellors worked with the troubled without any charge. The church's community mission was thus emphasised, thereby integrating the sacred and the secular. Additionally, the community mission, it was argued, could be better, or indeed, could only be fulfilled because the church was physically located within the community. As one church member, Paul, forcefully argued, there was a need to bring people in the neighbourhood together, and BTEFC could play that role because it was "on site". As he said, why should there not be a church in a high-class residential area—the church "is not a low class sleazy thing" and high-class communities need churches as much as low-class neighbourhoods. Contrary to the state's firm separation of the sacred and the secular, the church sought to conjoin the two. Instead of a politics of exclusion, the church's stance was one anchored in a politics of inclusion, embracing not only the Christian residents of the neighbourhood, but also the non-Christians who were welcomed to its various community activities. Indeed, the inclusionary tactics succeed insofar as local residents benefit from the amenities and secular activities offered by the church, without the intrusion of its religious form (see below).

Politics of Hybridisation and In-betweenness

This politics of inclusion is a short step from the politics of hybridisation and in-betweenness. A 'hybridisation' of physical form is the church's negotiated response to being a religious place in a strictly secular neighbourhood. This hybridisation is reflected in the way the church seeks to mix and fuse spatial practices and relations as prescribed by the state. In particular, it maintains an external façade of secularity and an internal presentation of religiosity. Externally, BTEFC looked just like a residence rather than a church. The only indication that it was a religious building was a simple cloth banner on its outer wall. Apart from the building requirements (that it be built as a residential bungalow), its ordinariness and lack of signages were intended, so that it might not be too conspicuous in its surrounding landscape. Rani, a church member, pointed out how the church "did not threaten the environment" because its appearance fitted in well with that of the neighbourhood. One of the pastors explained that the church had "reconstructed the building to be just as beautiful and good as any building around here". This 'inconspicuous' sacred exterior was fully intended.

However, internally, the house church provided evidence of the fusion of secular and sacred spatial practices, and the subversion of state intentions through transgressing intended secularity. Banners proclaiming religious messages adorned the walls. A few stained glass windows were installed to approximate a church setting. A sanctuary was set up on the first floor. Two small rooms were set aside for prayer groups. Chairs were laid out in rows in lieu of pews. The internal-external dichotomy was a negotiated compromise reflecting a hybrid condition, an in-between state straddling secularity and religiosity. This physical hybridisation is paralleled in the religious fusion with social commitment, earlier discussed in terms of a firm commitment to and integration with the neighbourhood and community. Central to this argument is the notion that religion has a

social function and that religious space is therefore at least partially social space or, more accurately, space for a social purpose. The house church is, in this sense, an in-between space straddling the sacred and the secular.

A further hybrid and in-between condition centres on a compromise of the public-private binary. Hitherto, the literature has dealt with conceptions of sacred space purely in terms of what is public and what is private. Yet, sacred spaces may exhibit characteristics of in-betweenness, rendering them public and private simultaneously. This is borne out in BTEFC's preferred logic when negotiating to remain in King Albert Park.

This preferred logic is the argument that BTEFC is in an in-between position, cushioning the public and the private. The church's physical situation between the upper-class bungalows, on the one hand, and the taxi centre and 11 King Albert Park, on the other, is turned into a meaningful fact in the process of place invention. In its various appeals, this location was invoked in its favour, making it a buffer between the bustle of a city's retail and transport functions, and the more dignified calm of King Albert Park residences. Their routes of ingress and egress, they argued, also did not affect the flow of traffic in King Albert Park. Church members were instructed not to park their cars along the roads within King Albert Park but to park some 300 metres away at the paid carpark in Bukit Timah Plaza. Further, their location had caused its members to form part of a regular clientèle for McDonald's and Cold Storage, a fact they suggested gave these retailers reason to want BTEFC as a neighbour.

BTEFC was therefore consciously invented as a hybrid place, simultaneously sacred and secular, in between public and private. These qualities of hybridity and in-betweenness were created or harnessed to enable the church to stay at King Albert Park against the state's preferred relocation decision. The part played by these qualities of hybridity and in-betweenness in the negotiated solution contributes to a politics of space.

Politics of Appropriation and Nationalisation

The production of religious space is also sometimes anchored in a politics of appropriation and nationalisation. I argue that this may be a useful strategy for religious groups in the context of a secular state that endorses freedom of worship and multireligiosity. In such a situation where there is potential or real competition among different religions for adherents or where there is a need for religious groups to negotiate their way in particular matters involving the state, religious groups could better gain state support and sanction if they appropriated the state's ideological positions and 'nationalised' religion.

Symbolically, BTEFC argued that it was a local beacon of ideological values that are central to the state's construction of the Singapore nation. The state's project of identifying particular core values is a central strategy in its nation-building endeavour and the church appropriated some of these core values in its discursive strategy to contest the relocation decision. The state's ideological constructions were particularly explicit in 1991 when an exercise was conducted to articulate Singapore's 'Shared Values', designed to guide personal behaviour among Singaporeans. These 'Shared Values' emphasised nation before community and society above self, upholding the family as the basic building block of society, regard and community support for the individual, resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention, and racial and religious tolerance and harmony. Some of these 'Shared Values' find resonance in BTEFC's appeal to the Acting Minister for National Development in 1994.

We believe the family unit is the basic building block of any society. Individuals belonging to strong families are those who are most likely to grow up into well-balanced, law-abiding individuals with closely-knit families. All these add up to greater social cohesion, enabling the nation to prosper. Our programme of regular

and well-structured Bible teachings, with its emphasis on strong marriages and hence strong families, is designed to attain this goal. ... The teachings at BTEFC emphasise the importance of marriage and family life, and the need to respect and love our elders. ... With the promotion of these wholesome values, BTEFC definitely has a role to play in our society to counteract the current trends of sexual promiscuity, increased divorce rates, lawlessness, and many more. With the projected development of more private housing in the Bukit Timah and Clementi Road areas, we foresee increasing demand for our services. We believe our continued presence in King Albert Park will enable us to avail ourselves to meet the increasing need for good and wholesome activities (28 September 1994).

Another example of the church's appropriation of national values was evident in the argument that the church would have been more willing to relocate if its plot of land was to be used for a larger good, reflecting the state's preferred ideological stance of community and society before self. As one of the pastors argued

If the land is needed for larger use for the society, then it's a different story. But here, we are talking about a residential place just for one family. How can such a place contribute to the well-being and benefit of society?

This is echoed by Susan who accepts that, in general, a church or any religious building will have to move "if it is for development purposes, for example, a road extension, since everybody will benefit and it is for the good of everyone". However, when the larger good is not apparent, the relocation decision becomes more difficult to accept.

Such articulations represent the church's appropriation of the state's ideological values to achieve its own end—in this instance, to avoid relocation. Whether or not these are the church's own positions regardless of the state's ideologies is less important than the

fact that they are articulated by the church as consonant with the state's ideology, as a strategy to avoid relocation. At the same time, religion is 'nationalised' to the extent that its teachings are equated with national values and its desires are elevated to national goals. This 'nationalisation' of religion is an ironical outcome in a state that is avowedly secular, but may be interpreted in at least two ways. First, it is understandable to the extent that the Singapore state's ideological presence is so strong that it influences heavily the ideological discursive space of other groups (see Kong, 1994, for example). Secondly, less powerful groups than the state may seek to subvert the effect of state ideology by inverting the state's ideological apparatus on the state itself.

Politics of Permanence and Impermanence

A fourth dimension of politics in the construction of religious space is the politics of permanence and impermanence. While BTEFC appeals and negotiates to remain in King Albert Park, and speaks in one voice to the state about why it deserves to remain—drawing, as elaborated above, on a politics of inclusion, a politics of hybridisation and in-betweenness, and a politics of appropriation and nationalisation—internal paradoxical tensions emerge frequently among church adherents between place and placelessness as expressions of their religiosity and spirituality.

Tensions arise when adherents, who seek the rootedness and identity of place and who encounter BTEFC as a repository of personalised memory and a centre of everyday routine, are confronted with the need to resolve and cope with the imminence of relocation. The preference for permanence is then balanced with the virtue made of impermanence. Church-goers, for example, draw on the notion that 'the church is the people', not the bricks and mortar. As church member Pearl rationalises, "King Albert Park is but a place". This is reinforced by Desmond, who

emphasises a non-material conception of the church

You and I, we make up the church, the body of Christ. You can worship anywhere, a building, somebody's home. A church is not the building, but the people.

These views resonate with Lane's (1988, p. 161) articulations, that place should be viewed with detachment, much as "primitive Christianity" celebrates "impermanence and detachment".

On the other hand, place is also critical in celebrating the "personalist conviction that full human dignity requires a place of one's own, a profound sense of rootedness in space" (Lane, 1988, p. 161). This is evident in the expressions of attachment and regret among church-goers who felt "accustomed to the place" (Daniel); a sense that "We belong here and can identify with it" (Linda); and that "We have established a routine and comfort level here" (Clara).

This paradoxical tension between the "idealist's celebration of placelessness and the materialist's attention to the concrete demands of placement" (Lane, 1988, p. 163) is a tension "between property (and place) that is to be revered because it reveals God's providence and grace, and property and place that should be offered back to God in case it becomes an end in itself". In the tension between place and placelessness, between permanence and impermanence, church members find a way to deal with their desire for a familiar, stable place while confronting state power and the displacement and relocation it asserts. In balancing the desire for permanence with the virtue of impermanence, adherents find a coping strategy for toxic (Porteous, 1988), or loss of place.

Conclusion

The paper began by highlighting the call for geographical research on religion to include more attention to the 'unofficially sacred', beyond the focus on the 'officially sacred'. A redirected focus, as in this paper, throws up a

common, but also different, set of politics from that which might be examined when studying the politics of the 'officially sacred' (see, for example, Kong, 1993a, 1993b). In brief, I would argue that in a highly urban, land-scarce context where planning policy emphasises orderliness and clear allocative principles and procedures, and in a multireligious context where allocative principles serve as a means of managing religious relations, religious groups in search of permanent homes confront various politics: of inclusion, of hybridisation and in-betweenness, of appropriation and nationalisation, and of permanence and impermanence.

Unlike the insistent politics of exclusion that van der Leeuw (1933/1986) described as central to the definition of a sacred place, the notion of sacredness and of sacred place is expanded to be inclusive in the case of BTEFC. The church's argument is that it is worth keeping the church where it is because of the integration of the sacred and secular in the particular locale. The church is therefore constructed very much as a place of inclusion, not exclusion. In other words, the church is not distinctly a sacred *or* secular place, but a hybrid place that is simultaneously sacred and secular. This is borne out in the hybridity that characterises its internal and external physical forms, where its place identity is consciously invented in terms of an external mutedness and a refusal to proclaim its religiosity, and an internal effort to create a sanctuary for religious practice. The in-betweenness is also evident in the emphasis that the church placed on its transitional character in relation to the bustle of retail life of the city and the tranquility of suburban upper-class residential life—a simultaneously public and private domain. A kind of in-between place is thus invented, contrary to the state's desire to exclude the religious from an overtly secular space, pressing for segregation and singularity of use.

Further to the politics of inclusion, hybridity and in-betweenness, the church in a secular state seeking state support for its place—literally and metaphorically—may engage in

a politics of appropriation and nationalisation. Religious teachings are mapped onto national ideologies; religious practices are spotlighted as consonant with national goals.

In the case of BTEFC, these various politics failed to reverse the state decision to relocate the church. A consequent politics is observed in the tension between permanence and impermanence: a preferred permanence borne of a sense of place, and a celebration of impermanence and placelessness, borne of a need to cope with topocide. The successful balance of these tensions proves to be a coping strategy for adherents seeking to make sense of their loss of place.

In sum, based on the case study of BTEFC, I argue that the conception and meaning of sacred place are malleable in a secular, multireligious context. Sacred place is a construction, not the hierophantic manifestations that Eliade (1959) expounded, in which the sacred reveals itself. Sacred place in a modern, urban condition is invented through physical creation, ideological construction and symbolic interpretation. The distinct break between that which is sacred and that which is secular that has hitherto consumed analytical attention must now be rethought and focus given to that which is betwixt and between. Certainly, the example of BTEFC illustrates that place-making processes are anchored in an everyday politics (indeed, a micro-politics) that seeks to conjoin the sacred and the secular in the city. It urges the development of a theory of urban space that pays full attention to intersections and integrations, not just of race, class and gender, as scholars have been wont to do, but which also takes full account of religion.

Notes

1. Such 'indie' churches are self-governed (free from central authority) and self-funded, and tend to have a younger following, with a strong sense of fellowship, and worship styles that are not quite ritual-bound and solemn. They also tend to be spin-offs from a parent church, and often occupy hotels, auditoriums and disused cinemas, a trend that began in the early 1980s (*Straits Times*, 25 November 1983). Houses belonging to a

sponsor or follower are often also used because these groups usually find it more difficult than the established churches to raise building funds—the consequence of their newness and smaller number of followers. Generally, people are also less inclined to donate money to lesser-known groups.

2. The socioeconomic profile of religion in Singapore suggests that Christians tend to be among the more highly educated professionals in the higher-income brackets (Clammer, 1985; Kuo and Quah, 1988).
3. This discussion is drawn primarily from Kong (1993a).

References

- ANDERSON, K. J. (1992) *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- CHIDESTER, D. and LINENTHAL, E. T. (1995) Introduction, in: D. CHIDESTER and E. T. LINENTHAL (Eds) *American Sacred Space*, pp. 1–42. Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press.
- CLAMMER, J. (1985) *Singapore: Ideology, Society and Culture*. Singapore: Chopmen.
- DANIELS, S. (1989) Marxism, culture, and the duplicity of landscape, in: R. PEET and N. THRIFT (Eds) *New Models in Geography, Vol. 2*, pp. 196–220. London: Unwin Hyman.
- ELIADE, M. (1959) *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by W. R. TRASK. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- GOSS, J. (1988) The built environment in social theory: towards an architectural geography, *Professional Geographer*, 40, pp. 392–403.
- KNOX, P. L. (1982) The social production of the built environment, *Ekistics*, 49, pp. 291–297.
- KONG, L. (1993a) Ideological hegemony and the political symbolism of religious buildings in Singapore, *Environment and Planning D*, 11, pp. 23–45.
- KONG, L. (1993b) Negotiating conceptions of sacred space: a case study of religious buildings in Singapore, *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers*, NS, 18, pp. 342–358.
- KONG, L. (1994) 'Environment' as a social concern: democratizing public arenas in Singapore?, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 9, pp. 277–287.
- KONG, L. (2001) Mapping 'new' geographies of religion: politics and poetics of modernity, *Progress in Human Geography*, 25, pp. 211–233.
- KUO, E. C. Y. and QUAH, J. S. T. (1988) *Religion in Singapore: Report of a National Survey*. Singapore: Ministry of Community Development.

- LANE, B. C. (1988) *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, New Jersey: Paulist Press.
- LEEuw, G. VAN DER (1933/1986) *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- LEIRIS, M. (1938/1988) The sacred in everyday life, reprinted in translation in: D. HOLLIER (Ed.) *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, pp. 24-31. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- LEY, D. (1988) Culture's geographies, *Environment and Planning D*, 6, pp. 115-116.
- LEY, D. (1989) Modernism, post-modernism and the struggle for place, in: J. A. AGNEW and J. S. DUNCAN (Eds) *The Power of Place: Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations*, pp. 44-65. Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- PORTEOUS, J. D. (1988) Topocide: the annihilation of place, in: J. EYLES and D. M. SMITH (Eds) *Qualitative Methods in Human Geography*, pp. 75-93. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Straits Times* (1983) More disused cinemas being used as churches, 25 November.
- Straits Times* (1985) Anglicans and Lutherans get together on a church, 9 June.
- Straits Times* (1986) More new roles for cinemas, 13 January.
- Straits Times* (1986) Churches and temples take-over houses: High rentals in business areas is one reason, 26 October.
- Straits Times* (1988) Church faces problem finding a 'home', 27 December.
- Straits Times* (1989) Sunday service—in a hotel, 25 March.
- Straits Times* (1989) Church under probe for using Mandai house, 11 July.
- Straits Times* (1989) Nee Soon church told to stop service, 20 July.
- URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (1993) *Bukit Timah Planning Report 1993* (available at: http://www.ura.gov.sg/dgp_reports/btimah/text.html).