

**Case Study #4:****Bukit Brown Cemetery**

When the Singapore government announced they planned to construct an expressway over parts of Bukit Brown cemetery, variegated factions of civil society representing Singapore's ecological, cultural and historical interests organized themselves into a movement to save the cemetery. Through a series of innovative and sustained advocacy efforts, Bukit Brown activists have succeeded in establishing a collaborative relationship with various government agencies.

**CATEGORY** Heritage & Environment

**KEY ACTORS** All Things Bukit Brown (the Brownies)  
Nature Society (Singapore)  
Singapore Heritage Society  
Asia Paranormal Investigators  
SOS Bukit Brown  
Green Corridor  
Green Drinks  
Post-Museum

**WHO ARE THE ACTORS?**

**All Things Bukit Brown** are a loosely-knit group of volunteers concerned with the heritage and standing of the Bukit Brown Cemetery. These "**Brownies**" run a Facebook page and website called All Things Bukit Brown. Together, they trained tour guides and organized guided tours through Bukit Brown in a bid to increase public awareness about the cemetery's significance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Malinda-White, K. 2017. *Bukit Brown: Once Forgotten, A Historic Cemetery Awakens In A Steady Resurgence*. Retrieved from <http://popspoken.com/culture/2017/06/bukit-brown>

**Nature Society (Singapore) or NS(S)** is a nonprofit whose goals include promoting an awareness and appreciation of nature among Singaporeans by advocating for the conservation of the natural environment and the preservation of biodiversity.<sup>2</sup>

**The Singapore Heritage Society (SHS)** is a heritage preservation nonprofit which engages in research, public education and advocacy aimed at rediscovering forgotten histories and sustaining local heritage, among other causes. Their public engagement strategies have included publications, talks, exhibitions, guided walks, and an active presence on social media.<sup>3</sup>

Founded by brothers Raymond and Charles Goh, the **Asia Paranormal Investigators (API)** aims to provide objective, factual and historically accurate explanations for unusual and unexplained phenomena. They profess a desire to contribute to society in a meaningful and positive manner.<sup>4</sup>

The **Green Corridor** campaign was formed to rally public support behind the Nature Society (Singapore)'s proposal that the Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad "railway lands" be retained and regarded as a Continuous Green Corridor for reasons pertaining to connectivity, heritage and transport, among others. It is, however, distinct from the NS(S).<sup>5</sup>

**Green Drinks** is an environmental non-profit which aims to connect businesses, activists, academia and the government for knowledge sharing and collaboration. To fulfill these aims, Green Drinks has organized panel discussions, documentary screenings and workshops on pertinent environmental issues.<sup>6</sup>

**SOS Bukit Brown (Save Our Singapore)** is a conservation group whose ranks include teachers, artists, writers and other professionals who believe that Bukit Brown Cemetery should be kept intact.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, they published a statement questioning the legality of the government's construction over parts of Bukit Brown.<sup>8</sup>

**Post-Museum** is a Singapore-based initiative aiming to provide an independent cultural and social

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<sup>2</sup> Nature Society (Singapore) (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <https://www.nss.org.sg/about.aspx?id=3>)

<sup>3</sup> Singapore Heritage Society (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: [http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?page\\_id=2](http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?page_id=2))

<sup>4</sup> Asia Paranormal Investigators (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <http://api.sg/rlc4u/about-api/>)

<sup>5</sup> Green Corridor (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <http://www.thegreencorridor.org/about/>)

<sup>6</sup> Green Drinks (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <https://sggreendrinks.wordpress.com/about/>)

<sup>7</sup> SOS Bukit Brown (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <https://sosbukitbrown.wordpress.com/>)

<sup>8</sup> Jo, Y. S. 2016, January. *Bukit Brown group questions legality of land use masterplan*. Retrieved from: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/bukit-brown-group-questions-legality-of-land-use-masterplan>

space for examining contemporary life, promoting the arts and connecting people.<sup>9</sup> Their advocacy efforts include organizing afternoon guided walks through Bukit Brown for their “Intro to Bukit Brown” series, and the exhibition of an art piece entitled “The Bukit Brown Index”.<sup>10</sup>

## **WHAT'S WRONG**

In September 2011, the Singapore government announced plans to build a dual four-lane expressway over part of Bukit Brown Cemetery, a Chinese cemetery regarded by certain members of the public as significant due to its historical, cultural and ecological significance.

According to the Government’s initial estimates, constructing the highway would require the destruction and exhumation of over 5,000 graves.<sup>11</sup> As of January 2019, more than 4,000 out of approximately 100 000 graves have been exhumed.

Activists are concerned that Singapore might lose a historically and culturally significant landmark. As one of the largest cemeteries in Singapore, the cemetery’s residents include hundreds of early Chinese immigrants.<sup>12</sup>

There is also concern that constructing an expressway over portions of the cemetery would have severe consequences for the biodiversity in the area. A Nature Society (Singapore) study noted that the habitats and foraging grounds of avian wildlife and other forest species would be affected by the expressway construction.<sup>13</sup>

## **WHAT DID THEY DO?**

Soon after the government announced its construction plans for Bukit Brown in 2011, civil society responded by organizing into groups such as the “Community for Bukit Brown”, an alliance which comprised non-governmental organizations and passionate individuals hoping to persuade the

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<sup>9</sup> Post-Museum. (Retrieved from: <https://www.post-museum.org/>)

<sup>10</sup> Post-Museum. 2016. Bukit Brown. Retrieved from <https://postmuseum.wordpress.com/intro-to-bukit-brown/>

<sup>11</sup> Han, K. 2013. *Singapore: The Fight to Save Bukit Brown*. Retrieved from: <https://thediplomat.com/2013/10/singapore-the-fight-to-save-bukit-brown/>

<sup>12</sup> Romero, A. M. 2019, January. *Space-starved Asian cities exhume graves to make space, including Singapore's own 'living museum' Bukit Brown cemetery*. Retrieved from: <http://theindependent.sg/space-starved-asian-cities-exhume-graves-to-make-space-including-singapore-own-living-museum-bukit-brown-cemetery/>

<sup>13</sup> Nature Society (Singapore). 2012. *Nature Society (Singapore)'s Response to the Bukit Brown Expressway Plan*. Retrieved from: [https://www.nss.org.sg/documents/BB\\_Response\\_HHC\\_AS\\_CL\\_v3-9.260312.pdf](https://www.nss.org.sg/documents/BB_Response_HHC_AS_CL_v3-9.260312.pdf)

government to preserve the cemetery.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, online support networks such as the Facebook interest group “All Things Bukit Brown”<sup>15</sup> and a blog of the same name<sup>16</sup> were created in support of the cause.

## 1. Release of Statements, Joint Letters and Position Papers

In January 2012, non-governmental organizations such as the Singapore Heritage Society and Nature Society (Singapore) published papers clarifying their positions on the Bukit Brown issue. Utilizing cultural, ecological and historical appeals, these papers were meant to persuade the government to reconsider their expressway construction plans.<sup>17 18</sup>

Representatives from various Bukit Brown civil society groups were invited to a closed-door meeting with government representatives on 19 March 2012. The groups expected to be consulted about their opinions regarding Bukit Brown’s conservation, preparing comprehensive reports and crafting proposals for alternative construction sites. Contrary to expectations, however, the meeting was intended for government officials to inform the concerned groups about their plans rather than negotiate the details of the project.<sup>19</sup>

On the same day, then-Minister of National Development Tan Chuan Jin announced to the public that they had “finalised the alignment of the new road across part of Bukit Brown cemetery. This statement assured the public that it will embark on a “documentation of graves that may be affected”.

<sup>20</sup>

In response, seven signatories - Green Drinks, Singapore Heritage Society, Asia Paranormal Investigators, All Things Bukit Brown, SOS Bukit Brown, Nature Society (Singapore) and Green Corridor - sent a joint letter to the Ministry of National Development. This letter formally requested that a “moratorium in all plans for Bukit Brown, until clarity over long-term plans for the area and discussions

<sup>14</sup> Singam, C., & Thomas, M. (2017). *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books.

<sup>15</sup>All Things Bukit Brown. (Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/all-things-Bukit-Brown-290489694353282/>)

<sup>16</sup>BukitBrown.com. 2013. "Give Us a Chance". Retrieved from <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=8547>

<sup>17</sup> Singapore Heritage Society. 2012. *Position Paper on Bukit Brown*. Retrieved from: [www.singaporeheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/.../SHS\\_BB\\_Position\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.singaporeheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/.../SHS_BB_Position_Paper.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Nature Society (Singapore). 2012. *Nature Society (Singapore)'s Response to the Bukit Brown Expressway Plan*. Retrieved from:

[https://www.nss.org.sg/documents/BB\\_Response\\_HHC\\_AS\\_CL\\_v3-9.260312.pdf](https://www.nss.org.sg/documents/BB_Response_HHC_AS_CL_v3-9.260312.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Jamal, F. 2017. *Three Lessons For Engagement In Environmental Activism In Singapore*. *Civil Society and the State in Singapore*, 31-48, doi:10.1142/9781786342478\_0002

<sup>20</sup> Land Transport Authority. 2012. *LTA Finalises Alignment of New Road Across Bukit Brown*, LTA webpage. Retrieved from: <https://www.lta.gov.sg/apps/news/page.aspx?c=2&id=3409b41og5bkgr1vr0asqb8vmgzeso0ghnwn0212451i6dxwk8>

over alternatives have been exhausted".<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Public Exhibits and Events

Soon after the Bukit Brown construction project was announced, the Singapore Heritage Society organized a symposium at the Asian Civilizations Museum entitled "Spaces for the Living: A Discussion on Bukit Brown Cemetery" in November 2011.<sup>22</sup> This symposium served as a forerunner for various public exhibits and events launched in the subsequent years.

Among these events are the January 2013 exhibition "Celebrating Bukit Brown" held at the Substation - Singapore's first independent contemporary arts centre.<sup>23</sup> Organized by the Singapore Heritage Society and All Things Bukit Brown, the event allowed concerned poets, academics and activists to present their works to nearly 400 attendees.<sup>24</sup>

In June 2013, a public event entitled "Bukit Brown, our Roots, our Future" was held at the Chui Huay Lim (Teochew) Club. This event comprised a series of presentations whose topics included paranormal investigations into Bukit Brown by the Charles Goh (the founder of API) and the importance of Bukit Brown's ecological and biological diversity by Dr Ho Hua Chew from the Conservation Committee of NS(S).<sup>25</sup>

In September 2018, the Substation would host a Death Song exhibit (described as an "elegy for our architectural landscape") which featured Post-Museum's "Triptych of the Unseen". This exhibit presented audiences with a *getai* stage complete with painted scenes of the cemetery and invited them to adopt the perspectives of three figures affected by the Bukit Brown construction plan - a government official, an activist and a ghost - via virtual reality technology.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Singam, C., & Thomas, M. 2017. *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books.

<sup>22</sup>Asia Paranormal Investigators (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <http://api.sg/rlc4u/2015/06/02/spaces-for-the-living-a-discussion-on-bukit-brown-cemetery/>)

<sup>23</sup>Substation (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <http://www.substation.org/aboutus>)

<sup>24</sup>BukitBrown.com. 2013. "Celebrating Bukit Brown a Success!" Retrieved from <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=5959>

<sup>25</sup>BukitBrown.com. 2013. "Our Roots, Our Future: The English Talks Part 1". Retrieved from <https://bukitbrown.com/main/?p=7027>

<sup>26</sup>Chai, A. 2018. *The Substation's next exhibition explores the weird tug-of-war behind conservation in Singapore*. SG Magazine. Retrieved from: <https://sg.asia-city.com/arts-things-to-do/news/substations-next-exhibition-explores-weird-tug-war-behind-conserving>

### 3. Collaboration with Government Agencies

As a result of the aforementioned efforts, civil society groups and advocates were soon invited to collaborate with government agencies on various projects and committees concerned with the historical, cultural and and ecological value of Bukit Brown.

After the “Bukit Brown, our Roots, our Future” event was launched, Bukit Brown activists were invited to meet the National Heritage Board’s Impact Assessment and Mitigation Division, which was formed to study the impacts which development might produce on Singapore’s heritage.<sup>27</sup> In 2017, members of All Things Bukit Brown and the Singapore Heritage Society acquired seats at the working committee on Bukit Brown chaired by the Ministry of National Development.<sup>28</sup>

The government has also displayed a willingness to contribute to the activists’ public outreach efforts through grants. For instance, the book *WWII@Bukit Brown* by Brownies Claire Leow and Catherine Lim was published with the support of SHS and a partial grant from the National Heritage Board in 2016. In November 2017, the SHS launched *The Wayfinder* - a self-guided trail in Bukit Brown - with a grant from Ministry of National Development and the National Heritage Board.<sup>29</sup>

## **WHAT TACTICS WERE USED?**

### 1. Allying with other civil society organisations

When it was announced that the Land Transport Authority (LTA) planned to exhume the 5,000 graves for the highway, the outcry that ensued culminated in the very first tentative collaboration between the Nature Society (Singapore) and non-nature and non-environmental groups such as the Singapore Heritage Society.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, a multiplicity of arguments from various stakeholder perspectives were made, bolstering the appeal for the cemetery’s preservation.

NS(S) issued its own statement objecting to the plans based on the project’s adverse effects on the environment and the area’s biodiversity, recommending that the LTA should conduct a thorough

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<sup>27</sup> Singam, C., & Thomas, M. 2017. *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Jamal, F. 2017. *Three Lessons For Engagement In Environmental Activism In Singapore*. *Civil Society and the State in Singapore*, 31-48, doi:10.1142/9781786342478\_0002

Environmental Impact Assessment before taking further action.<sup>31</sup> Other groups such as SHS focused on the appeals to heritage, with its position paper espousing the importance of Bukit Brown cemetery to showing Singaporeans their historical and cultural origins.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. Creating and maintaining a good relationship with the Government

The creation and maintenance of good working relationships with the government can be useful at times when it becomes necessary to engage with state institutions on contentious issues. Accordingly, Bukit Brown activists endeavour to maintain a good relationship with the government.

For instance, despite ongoing disagreements on the Bukit Brown issue, NSS collaborated with the Ministry of National Development on the Green Corridor initiative.<sup>33</sup> In addition, NSS often encourages and invites Ministers and policymakers on nature walks and outdoor trips. Tan Chuan-Jin, for instance, joined NSS in a kayaking expedition to the Mandai Groves.<sup>34</sup>

Keeping in mind the government's regard for empirical reports, activists have placed emphasis on research-based advocacy in the hopes of bolstering their credibility with the authorities. As such, their position papers are often based on prior research.

## 3. Nurturing public pressure

In March 2012, representatives from Bukit Brown conservation groups were invited to a closed-door meeting with the government. In a bid to address "the reasons declared for displacing Bukit Brown", these civil society groups prepared their appeals (which included drawing up reports detailing the various benefits of Bukit Brown and constructing proposals for alternative sites of construction).<sup>35</sup> During the meeting, however, they were not given time to present their case. It was later explained by the Minister that the closed-door meeting on the fate of Bukit Brown was "never intended to be the type of dialogue desired and claimed by these [environment and heritage] groups".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Nature Society (Singapore). 2012. *Nature Society (Singapore)'s Response to the Bukit Brown Expressway Plan*. Retrieved from:

[https://www.nss.org.sg/documents/BB\\_Response\\_HHC\\_AS\\_CL\\_v3-9.260312.pdf](https://www.nss.org.sg/documents/BB_Response_HHC_AS_CL_v3-9.260312.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Singapore Heritage Society. 2012. *Position Paper on Bukit Brown*. Retrieved from:

[www.singaporeheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/.../SHS\\_BB\\_Position\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.singaporeheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/.../SHS_BB_Position_Paper.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Tan, A. 2011. *Informal group to discuss railway land use*. The Straits Times. Retrieved from

<https://global.factiva.com>.

<sup>34</sup> Jamal, F. 2017. *Three Lessons For Engagement In Environmental Activism In Singapore*. *Civil Society and the State in Singapore*, 31-48, doi:10.1142/9781786342478\_0002

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Chua, Y. 2012. *Bukit Brown meeting never intended to be type of dialogue desired and claimed by these groups*. Yahoo News Singapore. Retrieved from:

In response, seven civil society groups released a joint statement criticising the Government's handling of the meeting as a demonstration of "the old practice of presenting decisions as fait accompli to concerned groups instead of genuine engagement and discussion."<sup>37</sup> They called for a moratorium on all construction at Bukit Brown until genuine public debate regarding the issue had occurred. This statement would spark public interest, raising awareness for their efforts.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, the Singapore Heritage Society launched The Wayfinder - a self-guided trail along 25 tombs in Bukit Brown Cemetery - on October 2017. SHS touts this trail to be easily-accessible as it guides visitors along well-worn paths while offering them the opportunity to learn about Singapore's diverse collective history and heritage. This helped raise awareness among the public about the significance of the cemetery.<sup>39</sup>

#### **4. Galvanizing International Pressures**

As a result of the continuous advocacy efforts, the Bukit Brown Cemetery was included in the World Monuments Watch in 2014 - the first time that a Singapore site attained such status. The World Monuments Watch is a "global, nomination-based program that uses cultural heritage conservation to empower communities and improve human well-being". It does so by highlighting sites in need of urgent or timely action.<sup>40</sup> Bukit Brown's inclusion as a World Monument site demonstrated international recognition of its historical importance as a national monument and heritage site.<sup>41</sup>

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<https://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/bukit-brown-meeting-never-intended-type-dialogue-desired-121405492.html>

<sup>37</sup> BukitBrown.com. 2019. *Call for moratorium: Statement to the Ministry of National Development issued by the Community for Bukit Brown*. Retrieved from [http://bukitbrown.com/main/?page\\_id=2530](http://bukitbrown.com/main/?page_id=2530).

<sup>38</sup> Jamal, F. 2017. *Three Lessons For Engagement In Environmental Activism In Singapore*. *Civil Society and the State in Singapore*, 38. doi:10.1142/9781786342478\_0002

<sup>39</sup> Singapore Heritage Society (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <http://www.singaporeheritage.org/bukitbrownwayfinder/> )

<sup>40</sup> World Monuments Watch (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <https://www.wmf.org/watch>)

<sup>41</sup> Singapore Heritage Society (Retrieved on 25 March 2019 from: <http://www.singaporeheritage.org/?p=3165>)

## **CONCLUSION**

As of 2019, the exhumation of the graves at Bukit Brown continues; a section of the new highway has since been opened.<sup>42</sup>

However, the government's willingness to collaborate with Bukit Brown advocates on numerous state-endorsed projects and committees signals, to some degree, the state's recognition of Bukit Brown's importance to Singapore's cultural and natural landscape.

More importantly, the prominence of Bukit Brown advocacy efforts have inspired art pieces, public interest and academic discourse. The cemetery features prominently in artistic mediums such as theatre<sup>43</sup>, film and comic books<sup>44</sup>, and has been the subject of local<sup>45</sup> news and international media<sup>46</sup>. Public interest in Bukit Brown in relation to personal genealogy<sup>47</sup> and cultural history<sup>48</sup> has been reignited, facilitated in part by social media groups such as "All Things Bukit Brown". Local academics have published extensively on the topic, elevating the conversation around the multiple spaces the cemetery inhabits<sup>49</sup> and environmental activism stratagems<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Romero, A. M. 2019. *Space-starved Asian cities exhume graves to make space, including Singapore's own 'living museum' Bukit Brown cemetery*. The Independent Singapore. (Retrieved from <http://theindependent.sg/space-starved-asian-cities-exhume-graves-to-make-space-including-singapore-own-living-museum-bukit-brown-cemetery/> )

<sup>43</sup> ArtsEquator. 2017. *Art That Moves: Han Xuemei*. ArtsEquator.com. (Retrieved from [https://artsequator.com/art-moves-han-xuemei/?fbclid=IwAR3dO7J72KzNN4BTKe\\_VLzi-12aW20u5eG6mFHpxZZsf4n7sBAu-K4Ff1fs](https://artsequator.com/art-moves-han-xuemei/?fbclid=IwAR3dO7J72KzNN4BTKe_VLzi-12aW20u5eG6mFHpxZZsf4n7sBAu-K4Ff1fs))

<sup>44</sup> Martin, M. 2017. *Hawkers, aliens, zombies: Comic books put a twist on Singapore's history*. Channel News Asia. (Retrieved from [https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/lifestyle/hawkers-aliens-zombies-comic-books-singapore-history-9361600?fbclid=IwAR26PuG\\_hgfjz4rFptkyiBKwn9hYJa\\_0k3wpNtIGIAiCXi30tvbuz1Nqjn4](https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/lifestyle/hawkers-aliens-zombies-comic-books-singapore-history-9361600?fbclid=IwAR26PuG_hgfjz4rFptkyiBKwn9hYJa_0k3wpNtIGIAiCXi30tvbuz1Nqjn4))

<sup>45</sup> Jagdish, B. 2018. *Too much heritage affected by roads and MRT lines: Architect, historian Lai Chee Kien*. Channel News Asia. (Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/lai-chee-kien-architect-historian-on-the-record-10181678?cid=FBcna&fbclid=IwAR0cPNfiSDbh6E55MWGqJG1NFNL9TgKqYbcuXLmdHqup9v8vyrDmejgrxo>)

<sup>46</sup> Lim, R. 2012. *Singapore to drive road through historic cemetery*. BBC News, Singapore. (Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17594008>)

<sup>47</sup> Facebook.com. (Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/bukitbrown/permalink/2547565198647012/> )

<sup>48</sup> Youtube.com (Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h2VUOVT6L8&fbclid=IwAR1S1xti\\_cyJe0FVW6INMGZ5Eck3Un7gmtga8qYAdLtGDDIdMoQHkLb4wV0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h2VUOVT6L8&fbclid=IwAR1S1xti_cyJe0FVW6INMGZ5Eck3Un7gmtga8qYAdLtGDDIdMoQHkLb4wV0))

<sup>49</sup> Chong, T. and Chua, A.L. 2014. *The Multiple Spaces of Bukit Brown*. (Retrieved from [https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814578332\\_0002](https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814578332_0002))

<sup>50</sup> Jamal, F. 2017. Three Lessons For Engagement In Environmental Activism In Singapore. *Civil Society and the State in Singapore*, 31-48. doi:10.1142/9781786342478\_0002

In conclusion, the progress made by the Bukit Brown advocacy movement serves as a testament to how sustained and strategic advocacy efforts by civil society groups can lead to conversation and collaboration with government bodies, in addition to igniting artistic expression and inciting academic exploration into the issue.

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