Roman Mars:
This is 99% Invisible. I’m Roman Mars.

Roman Mars:
In 1959, after nearly a century and a half of British colonial rule, the people of Singapore took the first step toward their independence. They voted to run their own internal government.

1959 Rally Archive Tape:
For 14 years since British colonial rule was restored after the Second World War, a series of colonial administrators have ruled and ordered our lives. Well, times have changed and will stay changed. We the people of Singapore have decided to run the affairs of Singapore.

Roman Mars:
It was a joyous moment, but they inherited a difficult situation.

1959 Rally Archive Tape:
All of us want a better and a fuller life, but a rise in the standard of living of our people cannot be created overnight.

Roman Mars:
Singapore was bombed heavily by Japan during the Second World War and again by the Allies after Singapore fell to the Japanese. A lot of its infrastructure was in ruins, including the port which had brought foreign goods and a multiethnic, multilingual population of people to the island for centuries. No port meant no jobs. Poverty was rampant. Most of the island’s residents were living in unpermitted make-shift houses crammed into crowded villages throughout the island.

Katie Thornton:
If you don’t know, the country of Singapore is tiny. Today, the entire nation is really just one city. It takes less than 45 minutes to drive across the island, with traffic. But in the 1950s there were villages, and those villages were known as kampongs, a local Malay word.

Roman Mars:
That’s producer Katie Thornton. She’s a Fulbright National Geographic Fellow and has spent the last four months in Singapore.

Katie Thornton:
Kampong communities were strong and close-knit, but the living wasn’t easy. Multiple families might share one toilet or one kitchen. Many of the kampongs relied on gas for lighting and cooking and most houses were made of super flammable palm leaves or wood with roofs made of sheet metal.

Roman Mars:
The government wanted to raise the quality of life for the people. They rebuilt the port and created factory jobs. They made all the kids learn English so that Singapore could feel united under one language, but the biggest undertaking of all was to get the people out of thatched-roofed huts and into modern housing. One of the biggest challenges would be doing it with extremely limited land space.

Katie Thornton:
In 1960, they formed the Housing and Development Board or HDB, and just five years later, they had already housed 400,000 people.

1965 HDB Archive Tape:
Well, over 400,000 people, a quarter of Singapore’s population has been re-housed in the last five years in these bright modern area flats. Nowhere in the world except in Russia and West Germany is the rate of re-housing faster than in Singapore.

Katie Thornton:
The HDB achieved this pretty amazing feat by going vertical.

Roman Mars:
When planning for a growing population, most urban planners expand their cities outward, but in land-limited Singapore, that is not an option. Today Singapore’s tallest public housing buildings are 50 stories high – the tallest in the world – but from the very beginning the housing and development board went vertical.

1965 HDB Archive Tape:
The people of Singapore demand high standards of their governments and they are prepared to work hard and are capable higher skills. To them, the sky is the limit. Singapore is acquiring the one hallmark of a great civilized community, magnificent buildings plus comfortable worker’s housing.

Katie Thornton:
Today, Singapore is the third richest nation in the world and 80% of Singaporeans still live in these tall cement HDB flats. There’s about 10,000 public housing buildings on the island and new flats are going up all the time. It’s not the glitzy futuristic Singapore skyline you see in movies like Crazy Rich Asians. The buildings are tall and cement with housing block numbers painted boldly down the sides. Helping Singaporeans locate themselves in the monotonous sea of nearly identical buildings.

Katie Thornton:
Throughout the 1960s and 70s, HDB public housing developments sprung up all over the country. Khoo Ee-Hoon is a historian in Singapore. She was born in 1966 and has lived in HDB flats for most of her life. She remembers watching this housing crop up everywhere on the island. They weren’t all designed exactly the same, but pretty close.

Khoo Ee-Hoon:
Design style is different, but what doesn’t change is basically everything becomes like a matchbox, so you’re living in a little hole inside a concrete structure.

Roman Mars:
As people moved into these drab concrete towers, a lot of them missed the vibe of their old communities, what they called the “kampong spirit,” but there was a lot to like about their new homes like having their own bathrooms and kitchens with electricity and plumbing.

Khoo Ee-Hoon:
A place where they could have their own privacy. A place where they don’t get flooded every time it rains.

Katie Thornton:
And so people moved in. And the government kept building.

Khoo Ee-Hoon:
The building just keep getting higher over the years.

Katie Thornton:
Despite the privacy the architecture afforded, Ee-Hoon didn’t always feel alone. As a kid growing up in HDB flats, she remembers seeing shadowy figures floating above her bed. She asked her mom about it.

Khoo Ee-Hoon:
When I was very young, I told my mom, I said, “Why is it that I see dark images above me?” She said, “Silly girl, this used to be a cemetery.”

Katie Thornton:
Of the four apartments Ee-Hoon has lived in, two of them have been on old cemeteries. That might seem like bad luck, but in Singapore where land is scarce, it’s not unlikely for apartment buildings to be built on land that was graveyards not too long ago.

Roman Mars:
But building on top of a graveyard has its complications. And in one cemetery called Peck San Theng, the new housing development disrupted more than just the dead. It disrupted a way of life.

Kwan Yue Keng:
Yeah, I’m Kwan. Kwan Yue Keng.

Katie Thornton:
Growing up in the 50s and 60s, Mr. Kwan was a city boy. But his dad would bring him the 8 miles from their home near Singapore’s growing city center to the overgrown rainforest of Peck San Theng cemetery to pray at the graves of their family and friends.

Kwan Yue Keng:
When I was a kid, I was a young boy wandering around the hillsides, walking through the grass. We say prayers. We make offerings.

Katie Thornton:
Mr. Kwan’s family was Chinese. And they believed that if the dead were well taken care of, it not only meant peace for the departed, it could also bring direct benefits to the descendants, so Mr. Kwan kept going as he got older.

Roman Mars:
Going to the cemetery wasn’t just a family affair, it was a community function. Chinese migrants to Singapore set up social service organizations to help take care of their community from the cradle to the grave and beyond. Mr. Kwan and his friends would wander the untamed hillsides to the graves of their long dead community members. There, they’d burn incense and fake paper money, things they thought that the dead might need in the afterlife, and then they’d just hang out at the grave.

Kwan Yue Keng:
After all the prayers are said and done, we have a lovely meal of roast pork, roast duck and so on. It was a wonderful event. I mean we kids look forward to that actually.

Katie Thornton:
When you hear Mr. Kwan talk about going to the cemetery, you start to get why he enjoyed it. It was a nice change from the congestion and cement of the city. It wasn’t just the natural scenery that was impressive, the tombs were amazing. People would spend a fortune on big elaborate memorials with stone lions and meticulous carvings.

Roman Mars:
Peck San Theng Cemetery was sprawling with these huge ornate tombs.

Kwan Yue Keng:
At least 30 meters broad. It’s huge. It’s about 33 yards.

Katie Thornton:
30 meters wide. A tomb like that could easily be bigger than a three-bedroom HDB apartment today. Mr. Kwan is describing just a single family grave. On top of that, Peck San Theng had a lot of shared graves. One big tombstone would mark a huge area, where members of a professional or social group were buried together. At Peck San Theng, there were plots for all sorts of groups.

Kwan Yue Keng:
We have like the tailor’s association, the pot seller’s association, the opera singer’s association. I mean you name it.

Roman Mars:
An ideal Chinese tomb is supposed to be on a hill so that the fortunes of the deceased can run down to future generations. In China, and in the Chinese diaspora, the words “hill” and “cemetery” were pretty much used interchangeably. “San” of “Peck San Theng” means hill. The name translates to pavilions on the jade hills, a reference to the graveyard’s 12 covered structures where visitors could rest and eat after making offerings at the graves.

Katie Thornton:
Mr. Kwan remembers these pavilions well, but that doesn’t mean he knew his way around the graveyard. With all those grand tombs, the cemetery was enormous. 324 acres. That’s about four times the size of Disneyland in a country half the size of LA.

Kwan Yue Keng:
Sometimes the driver of the bus or the lorry bringing us there will lose his way, and then he would drive around in a circle. We have to get some of the villagers to come out and guide us.

Roman Mars:
When Mr. Kwan says they would get villagers to come out and guide them, he doesn’t mean people from a nearby village. He means people who lived in the graveyard.

Katie Thornton:
People were kind of living among the tombstones, is that correct?

Kwan Yue Keng:
Yes, yes, yes.

Katie Thornton:
Peck San Theng was in fact a cemetery full of life. It was a self-sufficient village that began almost a hundred years before Mr. Kwan started visiting. When members of Singapore’s growing Cantonese community realized they needed more space to bury their dead, they purchased land on what was then the edge of town. And as the cemetery grew, so did the village. An active graveyard meant there were jobs to be had, graves had to be dug, tombstones carved, refreshments sold to mourners so people built thatch-roofed homes right there among the graves. This actually happened in a lot of big cemeteries that sprawled across the tiny island. The living just kind of lived alongside the dead.

Roman Mars:
By the 1970s, Peck San Theng Village had almost 2,000 residents. There was a large Chinese style gate at the entrance to the village. The village had its own clinic, convenience stores with thatched and tin roofs. There was a popular coffee shop and a dim sum eatery, and an open air movie theater where people sat under their umbrellas to watch films in the rain. Many of the residents worked at a soy sauce factory in the village. Livestock was reared, kids were born and families raised, all among the graves.

Mr. Lee:
I used to hang around a coffee shop. Run around, go play, play with marbles, gamble.

Katie Thornton:
That’s Mr. Lee. He just goes by Lee and he grew up in Peck San Theng Village. Like kids anywhere else on the island, he climbed fruit trees and played hopscotch with his neighbors. His house was just a few houses over from the nearest gravestones. Lee wasn’t afraid to be living so close to the dead, but he did hear ghost stories.

Mr. Lee:
Since I was a child, the older people said, every one of them said, there are ghosts here, ghost there. Everywhere you go, there are ghosts.

Katie Thornton:
There was a shallow well at Pavilion 3 where it was rumored many people died, pulled under by what Lee calls water ghosts. A tomb at Pavilion 5 boasted two large stone lions and villagers would always complain that they came to life after dark and ate their chickens.

Roman Mars:
But to Lee and other villagers, Peck San Theng was home. However, life in a cemetery was about to change. As HDB built more and more housing for Singapore’s growing population, they realized, they needed more land.

Kwan Yue Keng:
The prime minister explained that, well, we don’t have enough land for the living. The dead must give way to the living.

Katie Thornton:
In 1973, the government said there’d be no more ground burial at over 70 cemeteries including Peck San Theng. By 1974, those who died could only be buried at the single more sterile government run cemetery 16 miles from the city center or, for a fraction of the price, they could be cremated – their ashes scattered or stored in a small urn.

Roman Mars:
These were huge cultural changes. Not everyone was happy. But after the war and the nation’s independence, a lot of Singaporeans were willing to make sacrifices for the country’s development. They acknowledged that burying people in big graves just wasn’t sustainable on a tiny island. Also, they kind of had to go along with the changes. Singapore has really limited freedom of speech so when the government tells you to do something, you don’t have much choice.

Katie Thornton:
In 1978, it happened. The Peck San Theng Cemetery Association received a letter from the government saying a new high-rise public housing development was going to be built on the cemetery. Their land was being reclaimed.

Roman Mars:
And remember, there are basically two groups of people at Peck San Theng – the dead and the living – and both were told they had four years to clear out.

Katie Thornton:
The people living in Peck San Theng were mostly relocated into new government housing nearby, but it took awhile. A lot of the villagers weren’t happy to leave and they stayed as long as they possibly could. Sometimes years passed the deadline the government gave them to move.

Roman Mars:
As for the dead, and the association of family members who represented them, they weren’t eager to move either. The association wanted to find a way to keep a piece of their land.

Kwan Yue Keng:
The law was pretty strict. No more land area, means no more land burial, so that was that.

Katie Thornton:
They hired a lawyer and pleaded with the government to let them keep just 30 acres of their original 324, enough to have a temple and some administrative buildings and to cremate the dead and build a columbarium – a building made to hold urns.

Kwan Yue Keng:
Then all of a sudden, one fine day, we received a letter. We wanted 30 acres and they wrote back to us and said, “Oh, we can only spare you eight acres.” The committee met and decided eight acres is better than no acres.

Roman Mars:
Eight acres was more than most cemeteries got. At least there would be room for a columbarium and a couple of other buildings. Still, a hundred thousand bodies would have to be dug up from the cemetery. It was a huge daunting task.

Kwan Yue Keng:
We put advertisements in the newspaper, telling owners to come and clear out, so to speak. I mean I hate to use the word, but basically, they had to exhume their graves.

Katie Thornton:
They wrote letters to the families asking them to remove their dead loved ones from what was about to be a construction site. But as the deadline approached only about half of Peck San Theng’s 100,000 graves had been unearthed.

Roman Mars:
The association members were at a loss as to what to do with the nearly 50,000 bodies still in the ground. Who would pay to dig up the graves, cremate the bodies and give them another resting place? The association explained their predicament to the housing and development board who agreed to help them deal with the lingering dead.

Kwan Yue Keng:
Which is a fair thing. After all, they tow-away 324 acres of our land, you see.

Roman Mars:
The HDB and the cemetery association hired people from the village to dig up the bodies, people like Mr. Lee, the guy who grew up in the village at Peck San Theng. His mom, dad and brother all dug up graves. Lee would walk behind them carrying their spades and tools. He studied how they removed the heavy soil from the grave and carefully broke the coffin lid. Then he was ready to do it himself.

Mr. Lee:
The bones have sunken into the earth and you have to scrape with the spades to find the bones. Sometimes, when the work is easy, we may spend about an hour working on a tomb. When it is a hard job, it may take us three to four hours.

Katie Thornton:
At first, Lee was scared to dig. Many of the bodies were only just starting to decompose.

Mr. Lee:
This is a filthy job. I’m not ashamed to say it. You need three criteria to be in this job. First, you have to have to the guts; second, the strength; and third, the skill. If you have no guts, there’s no way you can do this job.

Katie Thornton:
After going to work on the hill day in and day out, he got the guts.

Mr. Lee:
When you are on the hill alone, it’s futile to be frightened. You need to fulfill your obligation. Even if I’m frightened and alone, I still need to complete the job.

Katie Thornton:
And he did. After years of digging the 100,000 bodies were all removed. The half that were unclaimed were cremated together and scattered at sea in a solemn ceremony.

Roman Mars:
Like many other living members of Peck San Theng, Lee and his family were re-housed in a nearby HDB estate. For most of the villagers, the transition wasn’t easy. Sure, their housing was taken care of, but you couldn’t have a farm in a high-rise or a tombstone carving business without burial. Lee was lucky. He found work digging up other nearby cemeteries that were also getting repossessed.

Katie Thornton:
Peck San Theng had been able to hold on to eight acres. It was more than most people got, but it wasn’t much. Going from a 324-acre cemetery to an eight-acre complex with a temple, an administration building and a columbarium for urns meant space had to be maximized.

Roman Mars:
There was also the issue of design aesthetics. For most Chinese, the tradition was to bury in grand tombs like the ones at Peck San Theng. When it came to building the columbarium to house the urns, there was no real model to harken back to.

Katie Thornton:
Columbariums were novel structures, because the whole practice of cremation was pretty new to a lot of Chinese Singaporeans. Just 20 years earlier only 10% of the country’s Chinese population was cremated, but by the time Peck San Theng wanted to build their columbarium, that number was almost 70%.

Roman Mars:
Without much by way of architectural precedent for their columbarium, the Peck San Theng Association took a gamble. They chose a somewhat controversial architect who cut his teeth designing brutalist superstructures. A modernist named Tay Kheng Soon.

Tay Kheng Soon:
That project was an interesting moment for me, because I have been thinking about the problem of how do you modernize and yet respect the traditions and the history and the aesthetics of the past.

Katie Thornton:
Mr. Tay didn’t want to build a warehouse for the dead. That, he said, would be antithetical to the “nature loving and Feng Shui-oriented ethos of Chinese burial.”

Tay Kheng Soon:
There is a problem of how to accommodate the number of urns that had to be entered within the columbarium.

Katie Thornton:
Just like the Housing and Development Board did when faced with the issue of overcrowding, Mr. Tay built up.

Roman Mars:
From the outside, it almost looks like any other new multi-story construction for the living. Before the columbarium opened in 1986, one newspaper said, “It could easily be mistaken for a flashy new condominium, but the inside was different. Mr. Tay’s columbarium stretches up over about nine different staggered levels. The building rises gently in a series of cascading stories and half stories forming cement hills like traditional Chinese tombs. The large windows and sky-lit corridors made it sunny and airy. Urns line the walls from floor to ceiling. There was a waiting list of over 20,000 urns from the cemetery ready to move into Peck San Theng columbarium, but nearby housing units for the living weren’t so quick to get sold.”

Katie Thornton:
As promised, those HDB flats were going up all over the grounds that were filled with dead bodies just a couple of years earlier. They called the development “Bishan,” a Mandarin version of the Cantonese Peck San or Jade Hills.

Roman Mars:
The new Bishan development had everything the HDB imagined people needed. They opened a train stop, what Singapore calls Mass Rapid Transit or MRT. There were schools, malls, entertainment and easy access to the city. In other words, it was an ideal place to live except for one thing.

Katie Thornton:
The ghosts. Newspapers wrote about ghost sightings in Bishan. The new MRT station there was known to be haunted by ghosts from the cemetery. Like apparently, it was just common knowledge. Do you hear any stories?

Kwan Yue Keng:
Yes, it was well known throughout the whole of the Bishan MRT station. Everybody tried to avoid getting off, they say especially the last train at night. (laughs)

Katie Thornton:
There were reports of a ghostly woman who boarded the last night train at Bishan and without fan fare took off her head and put it on the seat next to her. Some passengers were known to cast no reflection on the train windows.

Roman Mars:
Many of the train residents who did move in, didn’t want any additional reminders of their neighborhoods macabre history, but one tangible piece of evidence remained. One of the cemeteries covered pavilions still stood near the new train station.

Katie Thornton:
Until the Peck San Theng Association got a call from the Housing and Development Board about shadows.

Kwan Yue Keng:
They say that the residents have been complaining that they see shadows at night around the pavilion.

Roman Mars:
Creepy ghostly shadows.

Kwan Yue Keng:
What shadows are they talking about? I would like to stay one night there and then see what are the shadow that is coming out. Really. We were prepared to go there, bring a cup of coffee, and stay one night there. I’d be happy to meet these shadows.

Katie Thornton:
The HDB told them pavilion would be demolished. The association knew they had no say, the government already owned the land. They had to oblige even if some of them weren’t happy.

Kwan Yue Keng:
They demolish it. To us in Peck San Theng it was a sad thing. The last remaining structure of Peck San Theng to be demolished.

Roman Mars:
With that, all the physical remnants from the graveyard were gone from the landscape. The cemetery was no longer a cemetery, it was a huge urban development with a multi-story columbarium that people could easily avoid if they wanted to, and people forgot. With time, Bishan became an appealing place to live.

Kwan Yue Keng:
We Chinese are very pragmatic people. I think the economic demands overrides the spiritual demands so to speak. I mean let’s put it that way. People just forget that this was a cemetery before. In fact, many of the younger generation didn’t even know of Peck San Theng Cemetery, really it was, they’re living on cemetery land.

Roman Mars:
Many, many other Singaporeans live on old cemeteries whether they know or not. So many other cemeteries were cleared for development and it’s still going on right now.

Katie Thornton:
Losing the cemeteries has forced a total 180 and how a lot of Singaporeans think about dying. When the first government crematorium opened in the early 60s, they did about four cremations a week. Now, more than 80% of Singaporeans get cremated when they die. Substantially more than in the US where that number is just over 50%. And all of those traditions that people like Mr. Kwan did, like burning offerings and having a feast at the grave, they’ve had to be way downsized to fit into the tight hallways of the columbariums.

Roman Mars:
Today, Singapore has four government run columbariums, but columbariums also don’t meet everyone’s needs, because they only house cremated remains. Chinese are the ethnic majority in Singapore, 75% of the population, and the country’s Hindu community has long practiced cremation, but most of the country’s large Malay community practices Islam which doesn’t permit cremation.

Katie Thornton:
So in 2007, the Singapore government implemented their new crypt burial system. It’s a prefabricated series of interlocking concrete walls like a deathly grid assembled above ground and then sunk into the earth. But you only get 15 years in your own grave, and then you have to be consolidated up to 16 bodies per grave.

Roman Mars:
All this rearranging of the dead has been a painful change for a lot of Singaporeans, but there was also a widespread understanding that something had to give in order to get so many people their own homes on such a tiny island.

Kwan Yue Keng:
Let us be practical. I mean cemetery do take up huge land space, and that land space, in my opinion, must be sacrificed.

Katie Thornton:
The Singaporean people did sacrifice, not just the land, but centuries of rituals and traditions for their dead. All to get homes for the living.