CHAPTER 13

Conserving Urban Heritage: Remembering the Past in a Developmental City-State*

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> The history of a city is recorded not only in books, but also in its buildings. While the written word captures the evolution of events and beliefs, buildings embody lifestyles and aesthetic tastes, technology and crafts. Therefore old buildings are more than just bricks and mortar. Old town houses and shops, temples and churches, schools and institutions, are more than utilitarian objects. They also are a record of our ancestors' aspirations and achievements. In Singapore, many of the old buildings embody the visual confluence of our multi-varied ethnic roots. While the majority need some face-lift, they never cease to delight our eyes and enhance the sense of time and place unique to our own city. … We must realise that photographs and words are no substitute for life-size forms and spaces. For one cannot walk into or around the buildings in these photographs. Meanwhile ageing artisans and their crafts vanish with the passage of time. Buildings demolished are history records gone. While some must make way for progress, some, we hope, will remain to link us with our past.
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> S Rajaratnam, then Deputy Prime Minister
> Foreword, Pastel Portraits, 1984

Urban Planning and Development in Singapore: The Place of Urban Conservation

While the history of urban planning in Singapore usually begins by drawing attention to the allocation of quarters for the different ethnicities in 1822, equally conspicuous in such a recounting is the narrative of a colonial cityscape characterised by overcrowded slums, and the efforts of agencies such as the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) set up in 1920 to eradicate slums, undertake repairs and redecoration,

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and build new apartments. The SIT's failure to solve many of the problems of the dilapidated and congested city is as much a part of the narrative, which allowed for the subsequent achievements of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) to be celebrated. The account of efforts to clear the city and modernise the landscape, responsibilities later to be associated with the Urban Redevelopment Authority, is by now, a well-known one.

Amidst the energetic swinging of the wrecker's ball, calls for urban heritage conservation emerged from the 1960s. In 1962, a United Nations Town Planning expert, EE Lorange, was invited to review Singapore's First Master Plan (approved in 1958) and advise on the redevelopment of the city center. Mr Lorange recommended the appointment of three UN experts, namely, Messrs Charles Abrams, Susumu Kobe, and Otto Koenigsberger. They suggested, amongst other things, "an identification of the areas worth preserving, and a programme to improve such areas and make them more habitable" (Abrams *et al.*, 1980). A subsequent report by UN consultants similarly recommended that "some areas of historic import or those which are essentially representative of the colourful and unique character of central Singapore should be carefully conserved" (Crooks Michell Peacock Stewart, 1971). The areas highlighted were Chinatown, Arab Town, the areas between Fort Canning and the Padang, and between Fort Canning and Pearl's Hill.

The earliest concrete steps in saving Singapore's landmarks were effected through the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB). PMB was established in 1971 in recognition of the need to preserve Singapore's historically and architecturally significant buildings. In 2013, PMB became the Preservation of Sites and Monuments division of the National Heritage Board and has responsibility for: planning, research and publication to extend knowledge on nationally significant sites and monuments; regulatory support to guide restoration, preservation and protection of sites and national monuments; outreach, to promote public interest and awareness in sites and national monuments; as well as to advise the government on matters relating to the preservation of nationally significant sites and monuments. Familiar sites that have been preserved include Telok Ayer Market (or Lau Pa Sat, Hokkien for Old Market), the Old Supreme Court, Sultan Mosque, St Andrew's Cathedral, Sri Mariamman Temple, and Thian Hock Keng. Perhaps less familiar but no less significant are the Old Nanyang University Arch, Macdonald House, and Old Admiralty House.

Apart from the work of PMB, the early "incubation period" of the 1970s and early 1980s also witnessed the rehabilitation of 30 state-owned shophouses on Murray Street and Tudor Court, and the pedestrianisation of Emerald Hill Road. These efforts represent the first steps in conservation in Singapore, giving regard to the protection of buildings of historical, architectural and cultural significance and their traditional settings.

However, awareness of the value of conservation took time to develop. The years of stirring consciousness were long ones, and during those years, many beautiful buildings with historical and architectural significance were demolished. For example,

Bukit Rose, home to four generations of a prominent local Chinese family in Bukit Timah, and the setting for British author Noel Barber's novel *Tanamera*, was demolished for the Casa Rosita condominium. Old China Building, best remembered for its stained glass panels depicting Chinese mercantile activities, made way for the OCBC Centre, and the Old Arcade, built with beautiful Moorish domes in 1909 by the Alkaff family, was razed and replaced by The Arcade in the 1970s.

While proponents of urban heritage conservation have severely criticised the acts of demolition and mourn the loss of such buildings, it was also during this period that the backbone of Singapore's housing shortage was broken. New high-rise apartment blocks representing low-cost options for the majority of the population were built. New spaces of modernity, such as the first shopping complex, People's Park Complex, and new experiments in retail and mixed-use complexes also appeared. Those who defend the actions of the 1970s point to these developments as providing improvements in the lives of Singaporeans. Ironically, some of these outcomes of urban (re)development have themselves become the objects of demolition and redevelopment today, or the focus of debates about conservation. The journey to conservation and the balance with forces of redevelopment over time are clearly not debates that can be settled once and for all, but are historically-contingent moments that call for collective self-reflection. Some of these debates are documented below. They demonstrate the debates that Singapore society engages in, and the choices that need to be and are made—for better, for worse—that reflect the historical specificity, cultural sensitivity, economic contingency and social sensibility of the moment.

Conserving Our Heritage

The Formative Years (*1982–1988*)

In 1982, as part of the preparation for a new mass rapid transit system, a major urban planning review started. Of significant consideration in this review was the quality of the city's character and distinctiveness of its identity. At the same time, conservation, which was recognised as a handmaiden to tourism, was identified as being vital to the economy. Within this context, decisions were made to undertake large-scale reclamation in the Marina area, next to the financial district, to ensure that Singapore would have sufficient land in the city center for commercial use. In this way, the historic parts of the city center could be kept intact. Thus, in 1986, the URA announced the conservation of seven areas—Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Cairnhill and Emerald Hill. These plans gained significant impetus from the Tourism Product Development Plan, commissioned by the then Singapore Tourism Promotion Board. The consultants argued that conservation could improve Singapore's economic viability through tourism, and enhance national pride.

The first shophouse conservation project was carried out in Tanjong Pagar in 1987 by the URA, a major development that showed the way in conservation in numerous ways: in technical expertise, economic viability, historical veracity and so on. Following on the heels of this demonstration project, the phasing out of the Rent Control Act in 1988 offered further support for conservation—it allowed pre-1947 houses which had been rented out at unrealistically low rates to raise rents. This made a big difference to conservation, as the earlier low rents made it unattractive for owners to undertake any work on their buildings. Developers welcomed this as an incentive for them to invest in historical buildings. On the other hand, there was also a danger that lifting rent control could drive out the older generation that had lived in those buildings for years, thus disrupting their lives and livelihoods, and jeopardising a sense of community. Clearly, there was a cost to enabling heritage conservation using this approach that would have to be borne by a certain community.

Consolidating Efforts (*1989–1992*)

In 1989, the URA was formally appointed the national conservation authority and unveiled the Conservation Master Plan. This was followed by the gazetting of the seven areas for conservation announced in 1986, including five other areas: Blair Plain, Beach Road, River Valley, Jalan Besar and Geylang. PMB also added another 10 national monuments to its list of protected buildings. The Conservation Master Plan attempted to be comprehensive in terms of geographical coverage, range of architectural and building types, building assessment method and implementation strategy. Effort was also put into balancing the interests of conservation champions with those of owners who were not keen to keep their buildings because of concerns over costs associated with conservation.

This balance was in part achieved by adopting one policy for the Central Area but a different one for areas beyond the core. Whereas whole districts would be conserved and in-fill developments subject to stringent design control in the Central Area, new developments were allowed to intermix with old buildings in areas outside the city center.

To facilitate the Master Plan, the URA launched the "Conservation Initiated by Private Owners' Scheme" in 1991, which allowed private individual owners to volunteer their buildings for conservation in return for development incentives like bonus gross floor area. Private sector participation in the restoration and rehabilitation of buildings was also encouraged. This was a necessary step, given that about 75% of the conservation areas identified in the Master Plan were privately owned. Private sector participation also allows new ideas, entrepreneurship and financial resources to enter into conservation efforts.

Refinements and Enhancements (*1992 to 2000*)

By 1992, most of the key areas identified in the Conservation Plan had been gazetted. In 1993, the URA began full implementation of the conservation plan via the provision and upgrading of infrastructure, including sewers, power substations and carparks, as well as walkways, covered drains, and landscaping. The URA also launched *Objectives, Principles and Standards for Preservation and Conservation* to help owners and those involved in conservation work achieve quality outcomes in their conservation projects, and "to share information about how conservation can be done in Singapore" (URA, 1993). The URA also set up a conservation customer service corner to clarify what genuine conservation was as opposed to the restoration of façades, and to offer safety information and advice on building restoration.

In 1995, the URA launched the Architectural Heritage Awards, an annual award to recognise well-restored monuments in Singapore. Information plaques were also introduced to commemorate historic areas, offering information about their historical significance. Storyboards were installed in Kampong Glam, Chinatown, Little India, Boat Quay, and Emerald Hill, Cairnhill and Blair Road.

During this period of implementation, creative ideas were needed to keep a balance between opposing forces of development and conservation. In this respect, the case of China Square exemplifies the imagination and boldness of initiative that characterised this phase. The URA drew up a plan in which streets would be retained, and selected shophouse blocks restored but integrated with new high-rise developments. This allowed the sense of place and history of area to be retained while development could proceed. The area houses new office developments, as well as a combination of old and new mixed-use developments, with shops, offices, and eating and entertainment outlets. Areas along the pedestrian malls and open spaces were designated for outdoor refreshment to add to the vitality and night life of the area. About 200 units—half of the old buildings—were conserved. Urban design guidelines for individual parcels were made known to potential tenderers. During the implementation stage, the URA played a key role in coordinating inputs from other government departments and statutory boards, and facilitating dialogues between private developers, architects and the various regulatory bodies involved. The objective of the URA's coordination efforts was to ensure consistency of design along the mall, despite different portions being constructed by different parties. While some streets and backlanes were glassed over for weather protection, and lifts and escalators were added, one can still experience the feeling of walking through the old shophouses.

China Square thus presents an innovative example of how to achieve the twin objectives of maximising land use to create a modern business city while keeping the historical and architectural heritage.

Greater Public Involvement (*2001 to 2010*)

The spirit of greater public consultation that had begun especially in the late 1990s was to take full shape in the 21st century, a reflection of larger shifts in society towards a more engaged citizenry, and recognition that the authorities do not have a monopoly of wisdom. These shifts reflected a citizenry searching for a sense of collective past and a shared identity, seeking to make a difference to the future through individual and collective roles.

The involvement of expert groups was clearly signaled by 1999 when a joint review of conservation guidelines was undertaken by the URA and the Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA). This venture into consultation was taken further in 2000, when a Concept Plan Review was initiated. Focus groups comprising citizens from various walks of life (including professionals, interest groups, academia and grassroots) were convened to discuss urban planning issues such as "identity versus intensive use of land" (URA, 2000). Amongst other recommendations, the group suggested more sustained engagement with the public through the establishment of an independent heritage conservation trust.

In response, the Minister for National Development announced the setting up of a Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP) in 2002, to give inputs on built heritage proposals submitted by the URA, propose buildings for conservation, and promote greater public education and understanding of gazetted built heritage (URA, 2002a). The first CAP comprised 15 members from varied backgrounds, including the building industry, media, medicine, education, arts and heritage, and has since expanded to include heritage property owners.

Another outcome of the consultation process was the launch in 2002 of Identity Plans by the URA (URA, 2002b). These plans acknowledged the importance of retaining places with a sense of history and identity. Fifteen areas were identified for study, grouped into four clusters: Old World Charm (Balestier, Tanjong Katong, Jalan Besar, Joo Chiat/East Coast Road); Urban Villages (Anak Bukit, Jalan Leban, Thomson Village, Springleaf and Coronation areas); Southern Ridges & Hillside Villages (Morse Road and Gillman Village areas); and Rustic Coast (Punggol Point/Coney island, Changi Village, Pasir Ris and Pulau Ubin). A Subject Group, with members drawn from different walks of life, was established for each cluster to study proposals in depth, conduct dialogue sessions with stakeholders and consider public feedback.

Consultation now occurred at two broad levels. At a macro level, there is broad consultation regarding which areas deserve to be conserved. At a micro level, there is discussion with individual owners regarding conservation of their units, specific restoration work to be undertaken, and any concerns they may have. The net result of this increase in public involvement was that the number of buildings gazetted for conservation increased by a quarter (about 1,400 buildings), and simultaneously, more buildings were restored (about 4,200 out of 7,000 gazetted buildings).

Conservation Projects

Perhaps the best way to engage in a discussion of how well conservation efforts are progressing is to examine specific projects. Below, I draw examples from historic districts, black-and-white bungalows, and secondary development areas, and foreground different issues and solutions that were at play in their conservation.

Historic Districts

The Historic Districts, originally gazetted on 7 July 1989, comprised Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, Emerald Hill, Cairnhill, Boat Quay and Clarke Quay. Today, the latter two, together with Robertson Quay, form the Historic District called "Singapore River", while Emerald Hill and Cairnhill are part of the residential historic districts. The principles underlying the URA's conservation of historic districts like these are: to retain and enhance the existing activities which are a part of the historical and cultural heritage; to restore buildings of historical and architectural significance; to improve the physical environment; to retain traditional trades while introducing new, compatible ones; to incorporate new features that enhance the identity of the place; and to involve both public and private sectors in carrying out conservation projects (URA, 1995).

Singapore River

The three main areas comprising the Singapore River—Boat Quay, Clarke Quay and Robertson Quay—total 85 hectares and stretch over the 2.9–kilometre length of the river (URA, 1992). Each area contains distinct architecture, differentiated land-use patterns and diverse histories. Near the mouth of the river are several iconic buildings such as The Fullerton Hotel (previously the General Post Office building). Across the river is Empress Place, around which are some of the most historic landmarks of the city—Raffles' Landing Site, Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall, the Asian Civilisations Museum and The Arts House (formerly Old Parliament House).

Most eye-catching are the distinctive godowns and shophouses, vernacular architecture that blends "Malaccan, European, Chinese and Indian styles" (URA, 1991). Besides these heritage buildings, nine unique bridges span the river—from Cavenagh Bridge at the mouth of Singapore River to Kim Seng Bridge almost three kilometres upstream. Beyond Boat Quay, where the river narrows into an "s" bend, is Clarke Quay, flanked by rows of shophouses and some warehouses. Now managed by CapitaLand, a collection of restaurants, clubs and entertainment outlets characterises the area. Further upstream is Robertson Quay, offering a more tranquil ambience with its wine bars, alfresco dining places, hotels and arts establishments, several of which have been adapted for reuse from the warehouses. Examples include the Singapore Tyler Print Institute which houses a printmaking workshop, art gallery and paper mill, and the Singapore Repertory Theatre.

These modern recreational and entertainment facilities mask the early origins of the river and its trade activities, which were dominated by the Hokkiens and Teochews. To accommodate trade and the rapid growth of Chinese immigrants, two- and three-story shophouses were first built in the 1840s, though most were built in the 1920s and 1930s. Many underwent significant renovations after World War II.

The shophouses along the Singapore River have distinctive architectural features designed during Raffles' time. Specific features conceptualised by Raffles include the five-foot ways in front of shophouses which facilitated trade and pedestrian traffic, and offered shelter (Beamish *et al.*, 1985). Many shophouses along the riverfront are also distinguished by their third-story verandahs, which call to mind the viewing galleries of European riverside residences. However, many of the shophouses built from the 1940s to the 1970s were much simpler. Construction was more often in concrete rather than the original timber, and simple rectangular windows lacked plaster decoration.

The godowns were first built during the 1830s along the south bank of the river, often by merchants who had no legal land rights. The early buildings were therefore not architectural masterpieces, but did represent a marriage of east and west. Many were owned by prominent Chinese merchants like Tan Che Sang (one of the earliest merchants from Malacca to come to Singapore in 1819) and Tan Kah Kee. Even the early Europeans owned space, for example, Alexander Laurie (founder of Singapore's first European trading house in 1820) and Riley, Hargreaves & Co.

Due to neglect over the years, the shophouses and godowns became slums, and the waters became polluted. Trading activities led to the development of other related industries such as shipbuilding and repair, which were co-located in the same expanse of river, and added to the pollution. By the 1980s, there were many vacant buildings requiring restoration, and attracting suitable tenants posed a challenge.

In 1986, the STPB-commissioned report made a case for the Singapore River to be a "superb national asset" because it is a "locally used, active, domestic district and a bustling transportation segment" (Lipp *et al.*, 1986). The STPB and the Ministry of Trade and Industry announced their readiness to develop new facilities for entertainment, shopping, hotel and cultural activities to revitalise the area. Since its gazetting as a conservation area in 1989, the shophouses and warehouses have been carefully restored. These efforts have drawn the most public attention in the entire Singapore River conservation exercise.

On the other hand, infrastructural efforts have often gone unnoticed, such as the strengthening of the riverwall and refurbishing of the bridges. Other conservation efforts include the introduction of street furniture (public sculptures and statues) and lighting up the river.

Several conserved buildings along the Singapore River give the waterfront its abiding character. These include the grand old post office which has become Fullerton Building, the Waterboat House, Clifford Pier, Customs House and Change Alley Aerial

Plaza. Conserving these buildings was not straightforward. For example, many developers were keen to buy the land, but none of them wanted the original buildings as they had limited space and no carpark. The case of Fullerton Building illustrates this.

Named after the first Governor of the Straits Settlements, Fullerton Building was the symbol of the colonial government's vision for a classically monumental civic district. Designed by Keyes and Dowdeswell and built in 1928, the building used to house the General Post Office, the Exchange, the Chamber of Commerce and the Singapore Club. The URA packaged the eight-storey landmark with a reclaimed waterfront site across the road to address the issue of limited space and the need for carparks (The Straits Times, 1996). It guided the developer around some constraints such as the tunnel through which mail from ships was brought to the post office. This was eventually integrated into the foyer area of the basement ballroom. Another unique feature of the building is its vaulted coffered ceiling in a fourth-storey room, which was converted into a function room with balconies overlooking the atrium. The rooftop lighthouse that used to guide ships into Singapore's port was enlarged to accommodate a restaurant.

Black-and-White Bungalows

The iconic black-and-white bungalow is so called because the timber structures, windows and doors of these standalone houses are painted black while the infill plaster panels are white. They are characterised by verandahs located along the front and sides of the house, a symmetrical layout with three bays across the front, a carriage porch on the ground floor, minimal ornamentation, and broad, overhanging hipped roofs (Teh *et al.*, 2004). They are essentially single-storey houses raised about two feet from the ground on small pillars or timber posts, which helps to enhance ventilation.

Built from the 1900s to 1920s, these bungalows earned conservation status from late 1991 onwards. The early bungalows are a blend of mock Tudor and Malay kampong houses. Some say they were inspired by the sprawling suburbs of England.

The early bungalows catered to the Europeans, particularly the British colonial officers, and later the rich Chinese too. The black-and-whites thus came to represent social distinction. The distinctiveness of the architectural style was matched by the large compounds surrounding these houses, much of it external garden space. Today, bungalows gazetted for conservation may be found in areas such as Dalvey Estate, Nassim Road, Chatsworth Road, Draycott Drive, Pepys Road, and Mount Faber Road.

733 Mountbatten Road

An example of an award-winning house is 733 Mountbatten Road (URA, 2004). This single-storey Early Style bungalow was built in 1927, with an outhouse added in 1957. In 1999, it was bought by the Ang family, with the aim of turning it into

a multi-generational home consisting of three separate wings and a common family wing. The restoration and integration of a new two-storey extension took three years to complete. The restored bungalow was recognised with a 2008 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation, specifically for innovation (UNESCO, 2008). The jury, comprising 12 international experts, found that the contemporary additions had successfully added floor space while retaining the original building. The spatial arrangement and massing of the new building in relation to the historic bungalow also created an appropriate balance between the old and new.

Secondary Development Areas

Secondary development areas are areas outside the central city district which developed partly as a result of the crowdedness of the city center, and which have established their own distinct identities. They represent a significant stage in Singapore's urban development in the 1900s to 1940s, and form the transitional residential areas between homes in the historic districts and residences in the contemporary new towns and suburbs. Secondary development areas are characterised by shophouses and terrace houses, and include areas like Joo Chiat, Balestier and Tiong Bahru.

Joo Chiat

The area called Joo Chiat includes Joo Chiat Road, Joo Chiat Terrace, Joo Chiat Place, Everitt Road, Koon Seng Road and Tembeling Road, plus the stretch of East Coast Road from Marshall Road to Joo Chiat Road. In 1991, 518 buildings in Joo Chiat were gazetted for conservation, and in July 1993, Joo Chiat was designated a "Conservation Area" (URA, 2008). The first phase of gazetting saved the mainly two-storey shophouses and terrace houses of the Transitional, Late and Art Deco styles from demolition.

In the early 20th century, Peranakan landowner and trader Chew Joo Chiat bought the tract of land originally made up largely of coconut plantations (Hamilton, 1995). In the 1920s and 1930s, residences began to appear as the Peranakans moved from the city center to the eastern part of the island on account of crowding. As the area continued to grow as a middle class suburb in the post-World War I years, shops, hawkers and other service providers thrived. The successful traders began to build their own shophouses, and the more decorative and ornate styles apparent today may be attributed to the construction of that period (especially between 1918 and 1930). Another characteristic, particularly of the Late-style Peranakan shophouse, is the narrow and usually elaborate and embellished façade that belies the depth and spaciousness of the residence. Interiors are long and narrow, and in order to ensure there is adequate air and light, airwells were constructed internally. Walls were covered by mosaic and tiles imported from 19th century England; balustrades and doors sported fine wood carvings. Many of the motifs were of mythical figures, flowers and birds.

Conservation guidelines today have allowed some flexibility, even permitting rear extensions of shophouses up to a maximum of five storeys (Teo *et al.*, 1985). Owners of conservation bungalows are also allowed to have new extensions within their compounds subject to planning controls for the area. They may divide the inside areas of their bungalows into apartments for sale or rent as long as the external façades are kept intact.

To attract owners to the cause of conservation, government assistance is offered to owners of conservation buildings in the Joo Chiat and Mountbatten Conservation Areas in these forms: the development charge payable and the provision of carparks and payment of carpark deficiency charges will be waived if conservation guidelines are fully complied with and the conservation work completed in accordance with approved plans. Owners can also apply to the Tenants' Compensation Board to recover their tenanted rent-control buildings; and owners facing difficulty in finding alternative accommodation for their old tenant may approach HDB for assistance (URA, 1994).

The URA-sanctioned possibility of rear extension has given Joo Chiat a new lease of life. Lotus at Joo Chiat is a key example. The development showcases the restoration of a row of 18 two-storey Peranakan shophouses of the Late style fronting Joo Chiat Place. The owner, Casuarina Properties Pte Ltd, chose to keep the entire row and build a new four-storey block with 32 apartments and basement carpark at the rear. The rear of the shophouses was turned into a beautiful second frontage with green-glazed tile canopies and ornamental gateposts. They open onto a beautifully landscaped garden complete with playground, swimming pool and pavilion. The new apartment block has moldings and panels similar in design to those of the shophouses, creating a synergy between old and new.

Another successful attempt at blending the new and the old is the adaptive reuse of traditional shophouses for modern contemporary living. A number of terrace houses on Koon Seng Road have witnessed this trend. Remaining untouched in the front and back according to URA guidelines, these shophouses have been radically reconfigured internally. One such house is 7 Koon Seng Road, where the ingenious synthesis of traditional design and modern décor can be seen in features such as a mini rock-pond in the airwell, a studio tucked into the top floor of the shophouse and abundant use of Malaccan carvings (Seow, 1973).

In 2002, Joo Chiat was identified as a site for further deliberation by the URA. Following consultations, additional shophouses were recommended for conservation. On 1 December 2003, 191 buildings of the simple Modern style were gazetted for conservation.

The URA also undertook detailed consultations with owners of 228 buildings located in the study area in an attempt to convince them to join efforts to conserve their buildings. At the end of the consultation exercise, the owners of 58 buildings agreed to conservation whereas those of 71 buildings objected. No response was received from the owners of 99 buildings. The results of the consultation exercise were

then assessed in a comprehensive manner, along with other criteria such as the historical and architectural significance of the buildings, rarity and contribution to the environment. In the end, the URA shortlisted 100 out of the 228 buildings for conservation. These were deemed the most critical to the heritage character of the area.

Controversy, Contestation and Closure

In many parts of the world, urban heritage conservation raises issues that are often controversial, sometimes heavily contested, occasionally without closure. Singapore is no exception. The controversies and contestations bear testimony to the fact that Singaporeans care about their places, have alternative ideas, and are willing to speak up, in order that their voices may be heard. In this section, I will highlight just one case: the highly controversial demolition of the National Library (2004).

National Library

The National Library now stands on Victoria Street, a symbol of the new Singapore, with its sophisticated technology, sensitivity to green architecture, integration of reading material, public talks, research services and more. The plans to demolish its predecessor building, a low-rise red-bricked architecturally nondescript building, had drawn out passionate individuals and civil society groups who protested plans to pull down the building. The myriad views from the public were a demonstration of a sense of place and a sense of identity at its most ardent in Singapore. These sentiments, alas, had to run up against pragmatic planning needs.

The old National Library at Stamford Road was built between 1957 and 1960. Designed by the British architect Lionel Bintley, of the Public Works Department, the reinforced concrete-framed structure with brick walls was said to reflect the red-brick era of British architecture in the 1950s. Not everyone liked it back then though, for some thought it failed to harmonize with the "aesthetically pleasing and dignified National Museum" next to it (URA, 2002c). Nevertheless, the building became a popular destination for young people from the 1960s to the 1980s, especially given the concentration of schools in the vicinity.

In 1987, a Heritage Link Study was commissioned by the STPB, and a panel of foreign consultants was brought in to consider how to revitalise the Heritage Link area, demarcated as the Civic and Cultural District by the URA in 1988. A key component of the widely-publicised plans for the District was the relocation of the National Library. A dialogue with the Minister for National Development was organised on 28 May 1988, where invited professionals such as planners, architects, real estate developers, property consultants and engineers could share their views of the Civic and Cultural District Masterplan (The Straits Times, 1991). During the dialogue, the

proposed demolition of the National Library to create a clear view of Fort Canning Hill from Bras Basah Park was discussed.

In 1992, the URA held a public exhibition on the Revised Civic and Cultural District Masterplan, in which a one-way Fort Canning Tunnel was publicised for the first time. The tunnel would enter the hill at the existing National Library site and emerge at Penang Road. Its purpose was to help direct heavy traffic away from the Marina to the Orchard area. Work on the tunnel would begin when the National Library had been relocated to the former Raffles Girls' Primary School nearby.

By late 1998, the Singapore Management University (SMU) had begun to publicise its plans for a new city campus in Bras Basah. It would occupy six parcels of land, including the National Library's Stamford Road site and the former Raffles Girls' Primary School site. SMU organised a public symposium to gather feedback for its campus masterplan. The turnout was overwhelming. Emotions ran high as attendees heard about the definitive decision to demolish the red-bricked building. The next day, the national newspapers carried the headlines "National Library to go" on the front page, together with a special report featuring the views of generations of library users, for whom the building held deep meaning and fond memories (Kwok *et al.*, 2000).

In an effort to provide an alternative, architect Tay Kheng Soon put forward his version of a Masterplan for SMU in January 2000 (Balamurugan, 2004). He proposed sinking Bras Basah Park, retaining the course of Stamford Road, and re-routing the tunnel in order to save the National Library. Various government agencies studied the idea carefully as well as another option of expanding Stamford Road. Each posed challenges which persuaded them that the original solution was still the most practical.

First, keeping Stamford Road, indeed expanding it without building the tunnel, would not improve the traffic and pedestrian friendliness of the area. The road is bounded by the National Museum, and expansion can only be achieved by encroaching into Bras Basah Park, which would require Stamford Canal to be reconstructed and all the existing trees cut down. Even if this were technically achievable, a wider road would not achieve the goal of reducing traffic in the Bras Basah area. The Fort Canning Tunnel, on the other hand, would help divert traffic going to Orchard Road away from Stamford Road, thus reducing traffic volume in front of the museum and SMU. The suggestion to have the tunnel dive more steeply to avoid the foundation of the National Library was evaluated to be technically not feasible as the stretch of road was too short and the library structure was 10 m below ground level, resulting in a very steep gradient that would pose safety concerns.

From February to April 2000, members of the public called for the URA to reconsider its plans to demolish the building. On 7 March 2000, the Minister for National Development Mah Bow Tan announced in Parliament that the National Library building would be demolished (The Straits Times, 1999). In acknowledgement of the groundswell of public sentiment, he assured the House that the URA had

not ignored the public outcry, for there had been "extensive public and private discussions on the issue since 1988 when URA formulated the Civic District Master Plan". In fact, he said, there had been general support for removing the library then.

Today, the tunnel is in place and the red-bricked building lives only in memories. The National Library building in Stamford Road closed its doors on 31 March 2004. In an effort to keep alive some of the memories of the National Library, some of the well-loved red bricks were brought to the new building in Victoria Street. The old path from the National Library to Fort Canning and an old gatepost were also kept.

The public outcry over the demolition of the National Library demonstrated how Singaporeans are not apathetic, unconcerned citizens. Whether it is as private individuals, as members of interest groups, or as professionals, Singaporeans stepped forward with views, in order that the place they call home may be shaped the way they think fit. Sometimes, these counter-voices are heard and the views acted upon. At other times, the contrary views are just too different to be accommodated. At yet other times, compromises are made. In a microcosmic way, the negotiations and decision-making in the world of urban heritage conservation reflect a larger social compact evolving, with multiple voices, sometimes testing the limits, tugging at the fringes, but often focused on what is best for Singapore.

A Future for the Past?

With recognition of the importance of heritage comes the responsibility of deciding what constitutes heritage, which buildings and areas deserve to be conserved and preserved, and what can be demolished to make way for new developments. What new uses might old buildings be put to, whose views are to be taken into consideration, and whose responsibility it is to upkeep the buildings—these are all issues that need to be addressed. Further, with a more vocal and engaged citizenry, the task has become more difficult.

The ideals of conserving Singapore's heritage have to be translated into practical actions. The URA's step-by-step approach, honed through the years, is a methodical one. It begins with pilot projects, the successful completion of which injects "a greater sense of confidence among owners, developers and professionals for conservation projects" (Ler Seng Ann, Group Director of the URA's Conservation and Services Department). According to him, these pilot schemes also "demonstrate the proper approach, method and technique for restoration of old buildings, and become benchmarks for the private sector in their restoration works".

Beyond the pilot projects, the URA introduced the Sale of Sites Programme to involve the public and private sectors. Since the mid-1980s, more than 900 conservation buildings have been released for restoration through the Sale of Sites Programme. This was in acknowledgement of the importance of working with the private sector to

build a successful conservation programme in land-scarce Singapore. To attract private sector involvement, the government offered incentives, lifted rent control, allowed for change of use, and provided much-needed infrastructure.

In more recent years, URA has also attempted to adopt a more consultative approach, for example, through the use of focus groups to seek public feedback, the establishment of the Conservation Advisory Panel, and the involvement of owners. Beyond the work of conservation itself, URA also seeks to promote the outcomes of conservation, educate the public about its value, and reward those who undertake the conservation and/or restoration work. To recognize efforts, organising exhibitions, talks and the annual Architectural Heritage Awards now constitute part of its work.

Public Sentiment and Professional Evaluation

If the views of Singaporeans, architects and urban planners, tourists and expatriates living in Singapore are anything to go by, there is much support for conservation, though it is often tempered by a sense of pragmatism. There is much admiration for what has been achieved, but not without some dissatisfaction.

Young people, sometimes criticised for lacking in a sense of roots and belonging, have spoken up in favour of conservation often and wholeheartedly, with some claiming that "To know where we're going to, we must remember where we came from". Even stronger evidence of the value placed on conservation buildings may be seen in several examples of young entrepreneurs who have chosen to set up businesses in restored shophouses. In Kampong Glam, beyond the somewhat bohemian Haji Lane, along North Bridge Road, is Jamal Kazura, a revamped traditional Arab Muslim perfumery run by the younger generation carrying on the family business. Their choice of the heritage buildings to bring the old business into the future is premised on an evaluation of the appropriateness of the environment. Similarly, young entrepreneur Kenny Leck and partner Karen Wai chose a shophouse originally built in the 1910s for their book business. Nestled among the century-old clan associations in Club Street, they run BooksActually, one of Singapore's leading independent bookstores. However, the realities of land scarcity and the pragmatism of a people are also often evident, and Singapore's small size and the importance of building our economy are often cited in a bid to understand the need for redevelopment.

The duality of views expressed about whether to conserve or to redevelop is similarly evident in public assessments about the outcomes of conservation. There are certainly appreciative members of the public who applaud the efforts. Some admire the black-and-white bungalows, praising Rochester Park, for example, as "a charming idea". Others appreciate the willingness to conserve where land value is high. Yet others applaud the value that young Singaporeans place in conserved apartments, as in Tiong Bahru, where many have invested time, resources and energy to purchase conservation

units and keep faith with heritage in their interior design. And finally, there are those who enjoy the architecture and treatment of the conserved buildings.

But, equally, there are those who are critical. Those disapproving of Chinatown and Clarke Quay, for example, frown on what they perceive to be compromises to the authenticity of the sites. For example,

> Of Chinatown: "Sometimes they spoil the character by giving too much free hand. The net result is a whole splash of colors like rainbow on it. That's not quite conservation. Conservation has got to have a subdued look, like patina on copper, it ages beautifully. The character's not quite there."

> Of Clarke Quay: "…the "eco-umbrellas" … take away from the character of the old buildings around Clarke Quay."

Others complain about the extent of commercialisation, using Chijmes as the example: "It's just way too commercialised. It really changed the character of the place. It used to be like a grand duchess. But with all this commercial activity, there's no meaning and no remaining true to character. Singaporeans need to touch base with their cultural roots." And certainly, there are those who lament the loss of iconic buildings: "They should have kept National Library, National Theatre and the Van Kleef Aquarium which were post-independence Singapore icons."

Enthusiastic, pragmatic, supportive, appreciative, critical—the voices are myriad, whether from individuals, interest groups, or professionals. Perhaps this will always be so to varying degrees, for multiple values will always be at stake.

Celebrating Successes

Notwithstanding local debates, the URA's efforts have won international recognition. In July 2006, the URA's conservation programme won the Asia-Pacific Urban Land Institute (ULI) Award for Excellence. Singapore was the only Global Award winner from the Asia-Pacific region.

The case made for Singapore's award was built on the following submission. First, within a relatively short timeframe of 20 years, Singapore had managed to designate 6,563 buildings for conservation, located in 86 conservation areas, covering 204 hectares of land. The majority of the buildings that were in dilapidated condition have been fully restored while the rest have been kept in good condition. Second, a "win-win situation" had been achieved for all stakeholders. The unique character and beautiful architecture had been kept, while innovative solutions had been found to allow a wide variety of new uses, from residential to commercial, cultural and entertainment. Third, successful public-private partnership had been forged, and a market-oriented approach to conservation had been achieved. Close consultation with professional

bodies and the community and a high degree of public support was evident. And finally, the Conservation Programme has garnered international recognition: Brunei, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan and Malaysia have come to Singapore to learn about its approach. Additionally, Indonesia had specifically asked the URA to conduct a course on conservation for its officials, while Thailand and Cambodia (through UNESCO) invited the URA to share Singapore's urban conservation efforts at their respective conferences.

Given the interest from other countries in Singapore's conservation efforts, perhaps Singapore has the potential to offer a heritage conservation model in the region.

Looking Ahead

Efforts are under way to extend the scope of conservation to include familiar landmarks that possess aesthetic, engineering, design and historical merits. These may include park and garden structures such as gazebos, pavilions and bridges, colonial military structures like forts and gun batteries, and infrastructural or utility structures such as bridges, gates and water towers. One of the most recognised structures is the cast-iron gazebo and bandstand in the Botanic Gardens, most recently named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The move elicits a sense that there are few buildings left as obvious targets for further conservation, resulting in the turn towards considering discrete elements of architecture. Individual structures, however, are abundant, and clarity of criteria will be necessary to ensure that not everything is preserved simply because of age. Further, if preservation is to consider the integrity of the surrounding environment, the challenge would be great for small independent structures to be integrated with new developments around them.

Similarly, it is perhaps because most of the notable buildings and areas have already been earmarked for conservation that public attention in the mid-2000s has turned to more recent architecture—large, multi-storey buildings of the post-independence period. While some consider the architecture of many modern and post-modern buildings unremarkable and undeserving of conservation, others recognise them as markers of an era and sites of collective memory. Often, members of the public who appeal for conservation are not the owners who seek to realise or maximise the value of their properties. At the same time, owners of strata title properties often have different views about what to do with the same building.

One example of these dilemmas is public disquiet over a few 1970s condominiums that had succumbed to the en bloc sales fever in 2006 and 2007. Some argued that Singapore would lose its sense of familiarity and identity if even relatively recent buildings were demolished. Yet, to others, keeping individual buildings is not important, particularly when they are not architecturally distinctive, and hold only personal sentimental value. Given myriad views that will inevitably be expressed about any one site or approach to conservation, it is clear that decisions cannot be made on the basis of consensus views.

The URA's task hence is to balance the interests of sectors that value conservation and owners who have a certain right over their buildings and an expectation, for example, to retirement funds that could come with en bloc sales. To address these issues, the URA hopes to encourage more public-private-people sector collaboration.

Still, the big challenge remains of how to handle the conservation of large modern buildings. Here, examples set in other countries may be instructive. In New York City, for example, land values are much higher than in Singapore, but through the vision of enlightened owners like that of Seagram Building (owned by a German American firm, RFR Holdings LLC), the 38-storey monument of the International Style was given a new lease of life. RFR volunteered to conserve the Mies van der Rohe building in 1989, turning it into successful office space with an impressive tenant roster. Another example is Lever House by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, which became a designated landmark in 1982, and was also bought over by RFR Holdings LLC. RFR announced a US$25-million restoration programme in 1998, believing the building to be a trophy landmark building, deserving restoration. As a result, what was once the headquarters of a consumer giant has now been turned into a successful multi-tenanted building which, together with Seagram, remains an icon for Modernism, not just in New York City but worldwide.

Alternatively, trust funds have been established in various countries, often as community-based efforts, to support conservation. There are different models. For example, the Japan National Trust for Cultural and Natural Heritage Conservation is a non-profit, tax-exempt, public-benefit corporation supported by its members and contributions from industry, government and private foundations, and is under the Ministry of Transport. In the United Kingdom, the National Trust is a registered charity independent of the government, reliant only on the generosity of 3.5 million subscribing members and other supporters. In the United States, the National Trust for Historic Preservation is a private, non-profit membership organisation that includes advocacy and education among its roles. There lies a possibility of an equivalent development in Singapore.

While there remain challenges for the conservation of large modern buildings, it is important not to forget the many smaller, unique buildings that have already been conserved. It is critical to ensure that these buildings are kept in good condition, remain economically viable, and that their social and economic vibrancy is improved. While we need to "make places", we also need to "manage" them. Making places includes restoring buildings and providing supporting infrastructure for them to be physically viable. Managing places means, amongst other things, ensuring that there is interesting information on the history of the building for public consumption, balancing the types of trades to ensure a historically appropriate yet economically viable mix, facilitating a vibrant social calendar, as well as encouraging residents and owners to organise themselves to develop that sense of identity and pride, and foster the

viability of trades. Whereas place-making purely in terms of restoring the physical infrastructure has been successfully carried out with many buildings, place-management in terms of cultivating the social, cultural and economic life of place now warrants fuller attention. Indeed, some would argue that a place is not made if it is only physically restored; a place is made if it is lived. This form of place-making cannot be legislated or fully managed. Providing information about the history of places is one thing; getting people to be interested in that history is quite another.

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