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Searching for place identity in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine Singapore's recent attempt to search for place identity. There is a growing tendency to take account of lay people's opinions when making plans for conservation areas. Using the case study of Singapore development plans, it will distil the process of participative place making that recognises people as active participants in the making of place. As a portion of space, the richness of place is situated in specific time–space contexts that call for consideration of not only expert opinion but also the opinion of lay people such as residents and user groups when making plans for conservation areas.

Keywords: Place identity; Heritage; Conservation; Singapore

1. Introduction

Many cities are increasingly realising that in a changing world of growing urban competition, mobile capital flows and global city formation, the more distinctive, unique and special a city is, the more chances it has to succeed (Knight, 1989; Askew & Logan, 1994). This has led to greater appreciation of the role that heritage can play in urban development, whether through sustaining built and lived heritage, encouraging and investing in heritage industries or recognising the impact that heritage plays in defining identity, generating civic pride and fostering a sense of empowerment (Hewison, 1987; Ashworth & Turnbridge, 1990; Vanneste, 1996). The maintenance of heritage character and urban development are not opposing and incompatible notions. In Europe, the Council of Europe has argued for the concept of integrated conservation where physical conservation simultaneously satisfies economic and social objectives. In Asia, the

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city-state of Singapore is rewriting the city's development for a 5.5 million population with greater emphasis on identity.

Since the mid-1980s, instead of just demolish and build, there is a greater effort to reinforce and integrate past heritage with present developments in Singapore (Kong & Yeoh, 1994). A major turning point is the 1989 amendment to the Planning Act that provides for the appointment of a conservation authority, the designation of conservation areas, the enforcement of conservation requirements and the formulation of conservation guidelines. With the entry of urban conservation in the statute, conservation is firmly established on the planning agenda. By September 1991, the number of areas identified for conservation had increased to more than 20, covering a total land area of 751 ha. As Boey (1998, p.137) has observed,

> Where there are historic buildings that show 'Singapore's rich, multi-ethnic origins', they will be 'targeted for conservation to preserve the unique feel and heritage of Singapore'.

The search is on for buildings and places to conserve. Singapore is not unique in its emphasis on urban conservation and localisation. The New South Wales State Government in Australia is implementing a locality place-based planning approach in its local plans (DUAP, 2001). So are many European and American cities. As documented by Partners for Livable Communities (2000), these cities are emphasising local solutions to national problems and reaffirming the conviction that urban liveability requires place-based strategies.

Globalisation has seen a revival of interest in the ideas of locality and place (Kearns & Philo,1993; McDowell, 1997; Jacobs & Fincher, 1998). Some scholars, in particular the geographers, have attempted to explain the structure and centrality of locality and place in the built environment (Relph, 1976; Sack, 1997). According to Relph (1976, p. 61), 'there is no discernable limit to the diversity of identities of place, and every identifiable place has unique content and patterns of relationships that are expressed and endure in the spirit of that place.' The identification with symbols and landmarks in the built environment and the general culture of place are said to enhance the collective memory of place identities and localities.

This has prompted others to recast planning analysis of the culture-economy dichotomy into a cultural political economy of urban identities and places (Dunn, McGuirk, & Winchester, 1995; Jacobs & Fincher, 1998; Sandercock, 1998). Yet others advocate policy attention should be given to place-based planning (Baum, Stimson, Mullins, & O'Conner, 2000; Joshi, 2001). In the UK, place-based planning is seen to be emerging in public sector discourse as a potential solution to tackling social exclusion and building social capital (Davoudi, 1995). Since the late 1980s, the Australian government has given impetus to cultural planning, developing local cultural resources as the expression of local place identities to support quality of life (Landry, 2000). As Landry (2000) elaborated, the identity of place is bound up with planning the 'creative city'.

This focus on place identity and building local places offers a perspective to restate the significance of place in our cities and to reiterate that urban planning and design need to embrace difference and diversity to enliven the city. It is becoming a more frequently cited objective in urban plans. This paper will examine Singapore's recent attempt to search for place identity. Using the case study of the Singapore development plans, attempt will be made to distil the process of participative place making that recognises people as active participants in urban conservation. In the maintenance of heritage character, such participation attempts to increase

awareness, integrate conservation within the planning process and admit heritage issues as part of the public agenda.

2. Place of urban conservation in Singapore

Compared to American and European cities, Singapore has a relatively short history. Modern Singapore was founded in 1819 as a British trading port for the fast expanding trade of the British East India Company. Opportunities for work in the new port together with famine, war and unemployment in neighbouring countries of China and India fuelled rapid immigration and population growth of Singapore. From a small fishing village of less than 150 people Singapore grew to a modern city of 1 million people by 1950. In the process, colonial administrative buildings, warehouses, restaurants, department stores, residential homes, ethnic districts were added to the townscape of plank and *atap*-roofed local houses (Edwards, 1990; Teo & Savage, 1991). In the post-independence years, Singapore has consciously reinvigorated its economy to its present status of advanced industrialising nation with aspiration to be a global city in the international economy.

In its redevelopment programme, many of the old and historic buildings and areas rapidly succumbed to the seemingly irresistible forces of modernisation and were progressively demolished to make way for new developments. Examples include Coleman's House (built in 1829, demolished in 1969), the Adelphi Hotel (built in 1904, demolished in 1980; the hotel was a prestigious social establishment during colonial time) and many shophouses in Chinatown (Keys, 1981). The inevitable resulting landscape: a highly modern city that is becoming more and more international in scale and style but also growingly faceless, homogeneous and lacking in indigenous identity. The change has not gone unnoticed but increasingly highlighted by a number of observers locally and internationally (Keys, 1981; Huang, Teo, & Heng, 1995; Koolhaas & Mau, 1995). It has also stirred government re-think. Particularly given Singapore's hope to be a global city, this issue bears scrutiny as argued by Bachtiar (2002, p. 13),

> These days, more than 200,000 Singaporeans work overseas. And many more travel frequently, laying their heads down to sleep in distant lands, gazing at novel views from their windows…its people have come to assimilate more global influences. Today's populace likes having a Starbucks around the corner and glittering megamalls. They want the cinema multiplexes, and offices of glass and chrome. But these are the hallmarks of a generic upscale town. If these are the only features of our landscape, we would be possessing only the typical structures of a high-end MacCity. What makes this city uniquely Singapore, distinct and separate from so many others, are the buildings of our heritage.

The desire to conserve is not necessarily at odds with the objectives of development. As Ruskin (1849) reminded, the historic environment defines our sense of place and is a major source for understanding our past. More recently, Hayden (1995, p. 5) has observed in the context of US urban renewal,

> Urban landscapes are storehouses of…memories…natural features such as…streets, buildings and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people…Decades of 'urban renewal' and

> 'redevelopment' of a savage kind have taught many communities that when the urban landscape is battered, important collective memories are obliterated.

Almost in a similar vein, the former Singapore Senior Minister, Mr S. Rajaratnam announced,

> …a nation must have a memory to give it a sense of cohesion, continuity and identity. The longer the past, the greater the awareness of a nation's identity…a sense of a common history is what provides the links to hold together a people who came from the four corners of the earth. (Urban Redevelopment Authority (n.d.)

The internationalisation of modernity has seen the rise of heritage conservation with the growing need to preserve the past as much for continued economic growth as for national identity. Heritage expressed in the different local ethnic-based (Chinese, Indian, Malay and minority communities of Eurasian and Peranakan) activities, spaces and traditions defines the locality and place identity of Singapore. The diverse symbols and monuments in the built environment serve as locality landmarks or to quote *Our Heritage is in Our Hands* (URA-PMB, 1994, p. 3; 29), they are 'our history, captured in brick, plaster, wood and stone' and 'to lose these architectural assets would be to erase a living chapter in our history'. History and territorial identity are important to a rapidly urbanising and globalising country. In the words of Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister (1988),

> We are part of a long Asian civilisation and we should be proud of it. We should not be assimilated by the West and become a pseudo-Western society. We should be a nation that is uniquely multiracial and Asian, with each community proud of its traditional culture and heritage (Goh, 1988, p.15).

The basic tenet is that heritage and identity gain importance in a globalising world. They are important place products in Singapore's effort to construct a modern metropolis where the familiar Asian mystique and charm continues (Wong et al., 1984; The Committee of Heritage Report 1988). The economic case for heritage conservation is highlighted in the conclusions of the Tourism Task Force Report (Wong et al., 1984, p. 6), 'to woo tourists back to Singapore, Chinatown and other historical sites would have to be conserved'. The search for citizenry identity and the economic pragmatism of product development for tourism are powerful persuasions for a new emphasis on conservation. By the mid-1980s there is greater definition and development of conservation.

In 1989, the Planning Act was amended to empower urban conservation. The national planning and conservation authority, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, in consultation with other authorities with related interests proceeded to conceive and adopt a Conservation Master Plan for Singapore. This is the first time such a plan is prepared, sealing the place of conservation in Singapore's planning and arresting the further loss of historic buildings to modernisation and urban renewal. With the aim of creating local places where the new and old intertwine to preserve 'the distinctive Asian identity in Singapore' (Urban Redevelopment Authority, n.d.), the plan provides the operative framework for conservation. Planners begin to carefully search and finely hone the historic morphology of buildings and streets to identify and recover heritage inscribed in not just individual buildings and structures but also streets or entire areas.

By the early 1990s, dozens of shophouses in historic areas are saved from the fate of demolition and being conserved. Specific facade restoration guidelines, conservation guidelines and manuals lead the way in educating and ensuring that building owners comply with conservation policies and do not 'compromise…the authenticity of the historic districts' (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1988, p. 86). The identification effort is not limited to the planners. Building owners are encouraged under the Conservation Initiated by Private Owners' Scheme (started in 1991) to volunteer their buildings of architectural and historic interest for conservation. To aid the conservation process, concessions are given to the building owners including waiver of development charge, car park provision and car park deficiency charges (many of the old buildings may not have the space to provide for modern car parking requirements).

Conservation as practiced in Singapore includes a strong component of change and adaptation towards what is perceived as an improved environment rather than the simple preservation of entire old lifeless areas with their 'riot of history, architectural style and character' (Liu, 1990). The general approach taken is that the past should serve the present. Close attention is paid to creating a strong base for conservation that will transform it into a beneficial tool for the environment, one that will not incapacitate the city into an undesirable frozen situation. As encapsulated by the Chief Executive Officer of Urban Redevelopment Authority, 'We cannot freeze everything in time. Our buildings have to cater to changes and new needs.' (*The Straits Times*, 26 September 2002) The ultimate aim is to create a city that is dynamic, distinctive and delightful (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2001). In this view, a distinctive identity is consciously crafted as a key thrust of the country's latest long-term development plan, Revised Concept Plan 2001.

This is not a matter of designating buildings and city areas for conservation. Intimate knowledge of what is to be conserved, its structure, history and meanings, is essential. Lowenthal (1979, p.555) has argued that 'things worth saving need not necessarily be beautiful or historic as long as they are familiar or well loved'. To get a sense of the familiarity of urban places, planners have increasingly turned to encompass lay people's opinions when making plans for conservation areas. The process provides a conduit for residents to express their memories of places. Is it important to hear those voices?

3. Forging a sense of place

In research on man–environment relations, arguments for unpacking the memories of places and forging the unique feeling of locality or a sense of place have been propounded in architecture (Norberg-Schulz, 1980), geography (Relph, 1976) and environmental psychology (Canter, 1977). According to Relph (1976) and Norberg-Schulz (1980, p. 23), every place has what they define as genius loci or the spirit of place, representing not just 'a mere flow of phenomena, but has a structure and incorporates meanings'. This is supported by a growing number of authors from different disciplines including Lynch (1972), Proshanky, Fabian and Kaminoff (1983) and Lowenthal (1985) who have stressed the importance of place identity for human well-being. Korpela (1989) enlarges this perspective by arguing on the basis of empirical findings that place identity is part of the individual's on-going processes of emotion- and self-regulation that may most involve one's sense of self. In other words, place identity can help to provide a sense of

stability and continuity, it helps to construct and preserve our identity. As Lang (1994) observed, old buildings give us a sense of history and permanence. We would like to know not only where we are but also when we are and how 'now' relates to time past and to come. Space and time together are two of the major dimensions within which we live.

Place identity may be conceived as 'a substructure of self-identity which consists of…cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives' (Proshanky et al. (1983), p. 59). At the core of the physical world, cognitions is 'the 'environmental past' of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person's biological, psychological, social and cultural needs.' (Proshanky et al. (1983), p. 59) Satisfaction is a dimension of place belongingness or attachment. Much has been written about place attachment which simply put is the extent to which an individual values or identifies with a particular place (Altman & Low, 1992). Several human geographers have elaborated on the negative consequences of a lack of place attachment or rootlessness and placelessness (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1980). Having a sense of being in a particular environment, being fascinated by what is found there and finding it to be of some pleasure are all behaviours presumably susceptible to processes that also work in the development of place attachment.

According to this perspective, people acquire a sense of belonging through their experience and attachment or long-term involvement in geographically locatable places. These places signify special location where the specialness holds meaning and significance for the person or groups of people. They have geographical, architectural and social connotations (Canter, 1977). According to Canter (1977) places are 'the result of relationships between actions, conceptions and physical attributes' (p. 158). In other words, to fully understand and evaluate places, we must know,

- What behaviour is associated with it or may be anticipated will occur in a given location;
- What the physical properties of that setting are; and
- The evaluative conceptions, which people hold of behaviour in that environment (Canter, 1977, p.159).

The conceptions that people have of the places in which they find themselves as Canter (1977) states, are frequently the scientific key, which will unlock the processes by which those places have their impact. They are the representations that have an influence on the conservation identity, thus important considerations in decisions regarding what is to be conserved. It follows from this that conservation potential cannot be analysed without examination of the essential aspects of places: people, settings and meanings. More and more, urban conservation has to draw not only on expert opinion but also on the opinion of lay people such as residents, users and stakeholder groups. The methodology of place making inheres in people's place sensitivities and involvement in the planning process. The arguments and modes of public participation are well documented by Arnstein (1969). Public participation requires the investment of time and energy but it is also a primary mode for enhancing a better 'fit' between built form and social life. As Rapoport (1969) observed, participation allows the images and meanings of places to develop from the bottom up. This offers a provocation to greater participatory and community-based processes for the design and development of places, which in turn enhances local ownership and tolerance of urbanity. Inadequacies in the setting are far more tolerable and more easily adjusted when one is not alienated from the place making process.

4. The search for identity

At the national level in Singapore, place-based planning is given particular emphasis in the country's latest long-term development plan (Concept Plan) with much of this focus on place identity. The challenge is to create a thriving world-class city in the 21st century where Singapore is not just a workplace but also a home. As articulated in the Revised Concept Plan released in 2001,

> We envisage a city that is dynamic, a thriving business hub that can hold its own in the global playing field; a city that is distinctive with a unique identity that is recognisably our own; and a city that is delightful with energy, excitement and entertainment. We want to be a global business centre, a hub for culture and arts, an island city that celebrates its tropical greenness and a city that reflects its identity and history. (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2001, p. 10)

This is the first time emphasis is placed on identity as a key thrust of urban development. In resonance with the wider global processes, place identity and urban heritage are increasingly recognised as key building blocks for economic well being and social vitality. As the Singapore Minister for National Development declared,

> The future of our city has to go beyond meeting the functional needs of the business community. We need to build vibrant quality places. Singaporeans today want a more attractive and liveable city, as confirmed from the feedback we received from the Focus Groups, which were set up for Concept Plan 2001. (Singapore Government Press Release, 30 April 2001)

This conscious choice is based on the realisation that there are many issues of globalism/localism, intercity competition and urban regeneration to address with a higher population of 5.5 million in sustaining economic growth and providing a good quality of life. In the Concept Plan 2001 review, the total population scenario was revised to 5.5 million (from 4 million in the first plan of 1970). The figure of 5.5 million, as the Minister for National Development announced, is not a target or an optimal population. It is a 'reasonable' figure that planners use as the basis for long-term planning in dealing with the question, 'What kind of population can Singapore have in the long-term to give us that additional boost, yet not place undue strain on our resources?' (*The Straits Times*, 1 May 2000). Inevitably, more houses are needed to house the larger population. More land has to be allocated for business, industries, transport and all other infrastructure and services required by the larger population. Planners' estimate is that an additional 16,000 ha of land would thus be required.

However, the land area of Singapore remains limited (660 km^2). The authority calculated that land reclamation can at best add 15% more land (or 12,000 ha) for development (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2001). There is a limit to the amount of land that may be reclaimed. The need for land intensification and redevelopment seems paramount. The view is taken further with serious attention on quality of life and heritage conservation and articulated as a major planning dilemma of how Singapore should seek to preserve a sense of identity while optimising the use of land. To that extent, the substantive feedback from the community is that they are sensitive to identity and heritage as seen from their continuing support of heritage and

conservation over the years (Boey, 1998; Bachtiar, 2002). They held an unequivocal view about the need to retain and enhance place identity in the Concept Plan 2001, exhorting the authority to,

> Keep old features/conserve, especially those with valuable memories, 'adaptive reuse' of old buildings. (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2000, p. 33)
>
> Make heritage a national issue, like health and education (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2000, p. 33).
>
> The Concept Plan should conserve more of the built heritage and nature areas in Singapore…conservation should embrace not just buildings from the colonial and other early periods but also more recently developed areas which are rich in culture and character. (*The Straits Times*, 24 November 2000)

4.1. The process, the outcome

During the Concept Plan 2001 making, public feedback was gathered through multiple means including the media, focus group discussions and public dialogues over a 10-month period, as summarised in Fig. 1. The focus group on identity versus intensive use of land had 30 members of varying background from the private sector, community groups and professional institutions. The

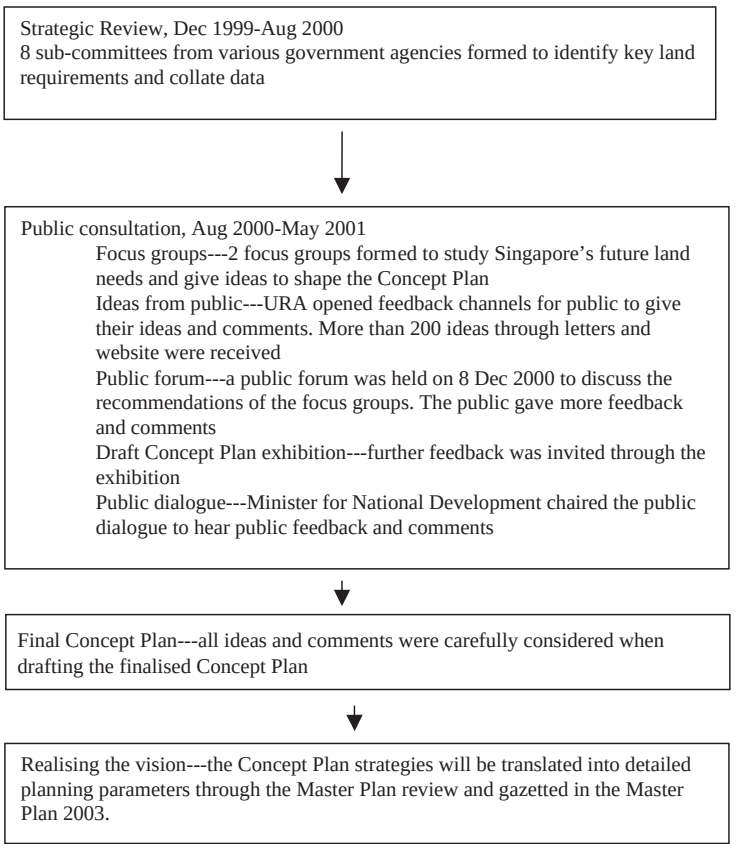

Fig. 1. Public consultation in Singapore Concept Plan 2001. Source: Urban Redevelopment Authority (2001, p. 53).

group held many meetings, site visits and discussions with the authorities as well as the public over $3\frac{1}{2}$ months, all designed to elicit views from different stakeholders, including the general public.

This is a significant milestone in the conservation development of Singapore, the activating of public participation and partnership for heritage conservation in the urban planning process and in the address of two fundamental and often controversial questions: 'with whose past are we dealing?' and 'to whom are we presenting it?' (Turnbridge, 1984; Brisbane & Wood, 1996) As the Minister for National Development explained,

> In this Concept Plan review, we aimed to ensure Singapore's continued competitiveness, meet the people's aspirations for the future, and build a distinctive home we can identify with and be proud of. Striking a fine balance between the needs and ideals of every Singaporean and taking care of our limited resources is never an easy task. That is why we have spent many months seeking public feedback and consulting various groups and individuals before putting together the Concept Plan 2001. (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2001, p. 5)

The most interesting outcome of the consultation exercise was the process and volume of responses. As one focus group participant observed,

> The process of public participation is unparalleled…The URA has taken a back seat to let the public discuss. It did not impose (its views) or insist on things, but listened and made all the logistics possible for us to interview and discuss with various authorities, so this Concept Plan comes with a very good cross-section view. (*The Sunday Times*, 29 April 2001)

Close to 300 people attended the public forum on the focus groups' reports and much public feedback was received via the internet, exhibitions and other feedback channels throughout the plan review period. A summary of these feedback, discussions and recommendations were included in the final report on Identity versus Intensive Use of Land (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2000). A number of the public feedback called for conservation to be extended beyond the built form to include activities as well. They emphasised the importance of including the social and cultural components, the varied Singapore culture in the maintenance of local cultural identity and heritage. As summarised by the focus group on identity versus intensive use of land, current conservation efforts in a number of cases (for example, Chinatown) have been more successful in conserving the physical fabric and less in the cultural elements, making a case for greater collaboration and consultation with local residents and other stakeholders to help identify elements and places of identity in local areas. It emphasised that conservation should be about dynamism, diversity in the physical landscape and distinction or distinctiveness as the city evolves and highlighted the challenges ahead.

The planning authority was urged to review its planning and development control policies which at the present time are applied island-wide and tend to encourage uniformity in townscape. Others suggested comments relating to the need for more landmarks and natural features in Singapore. They urged the authorities not to demolish a building only to leave the plot empty and argued for the preparation of heritage guide plans that include social landmarks. Yet others gave feedback on the need to develop distinctive identity for each public housing estate and new town. The standardisation and uniformity of public housing had been drawing attempts by the public housing authority through policy and various actions to ameliorate such impacts (Teo, 1996).

Many of the feedback and recommendations were accepted and incorporated in the Concept Plan 2001:

> Identity will become an important aspect in our planning process. We will continue to look into conserving more buildings in order to retain the collective character and memory of places. The process can perhaps be further enhanced by setting up a heritage conservation trust which is currently under study. (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2001, p. 23)

4.2. The challenge

There are clearly many daily lives and place experiences. The policy for place identity will require developing a robust system of meaning on place quality and place-making approaches in relation to the diverse and multiple viewpoints that can transect a place. Hitherto, the state has by and large been the final arbiter of what is to be conserved (Kong & Yeoh, 1994). State-driven conservation while with merits may overlook the delights of familiar places for the richness of places and people's attachment to them grows from their everyday use of these spaces. As Wagner and Mikesell (1971, pp. 6–7) have argued, these places are developed through a process of 'internal evolution' from a range of elements and activities to form a 'culture complex' that is 'so elaborate and idiosyncratic that it would be very unlikely to recur accidentally in widely separate places'. As a culture complex, the place would have 'acquired social meaning only when its neighbourhoods and physiognomy are stamped with the character of its residents and its services and facilities are attuned to their needs' (Buttimer, 1980, p.48). Put simply, the richness and identity of place is inextricably linked to the lives, movements and activities of its people. To illustrate, we look at the local area of Tanjong Katong.

The history of Tanjong Katong is rooted in the early 19th century with the development of cotton and coconut plantations and subsequent establishment of some of Singapore's earliest seaside houses and holiday bungalows (Lee, 1988; Edwards, 1990). In the pre- and post-war years, the area continued to grow as a wealthy and upper middle class suburb. To cater to the needs of the wealthy families, hawkers, shops and providers of services soon began to spring up along its major roads: East Coast Road and Joo Chiat Road (Fig. 2). The wealthier of these traders built shophouses with various decorative and ornate details, especially during the period 1918 and 1930 (Fig. 3). The area continued as an active retail and entertainment hub in the 1950s and 1960s, known to locals for its supermarket (Tay Buan Guan was the first supermarket in the Katong area; it was reported in a television programme (*Changing Times*, 27 September 1992) that everybody would go to Tay Buan Guan at the slightest excuse), bakery (Red House Katong Bakery) and food (Katong laksa and other local food specialties). This shared knowledge becomes part of the local culture and place meanings. As reported by Phua and Kong (1995, p. 129),

> …the attraction of Katong lies in 'those quaint little shophouses' along East Coast Road and Joo Chiat Road. For some, these shophouses epitomise the material culture of Katong. These are the people who feel strongly against their demolition and argue for the conservation of the buildings and ambience associated with them.

Such areas occupy special niche in the hearts of people and have the intangible effect of increasing resident attachment to place. Even though ordinary places, they have activities that

Fig. 2. Services of temple, shops and food continue to ground Katong's local area place connection.

Fig. 3. An eclectic row of shophouses with differing details along East Coast Road.

create diversity and augment place meanings which give areas like Tanjong Katong the spirit of place where the architectural symbolism of individual buildings (such as the Red House Katong Bakery) is inexorably tied up with cultural roots and place identity (Fig. 4). They are textured by memories which are important ingredients of collective identity, of feeling that 'this is our place',

Fig. 4. Shophouse of the past like The Red House Bakery is an icon in the Katong area, recently closed for restoration works.

that can add much colour and vibrancy to the modern cityscape (Hayden, 1995). Sassen (1999, p. 146) provides us with the rationale for their recovery when she asked,

> Why does it matter to recover place in analyses of the global economy, particularly place as constituted in major cities? Because it allows us to see the multiplicity of economies and work cultures in which the global information economy is embedded. It also allows us to recover the concrete, localised processes through which globalisation exists and to argue that much of the multiculturalism in large cities is as much a part of globalisation as is international finance.

The challenge is to recognise and keep alive old and familiar places and strengthen their particular heritage and place quality as the country continues its city development and vision. There is a need to conserve and situate these places in the 'explosion of spaces' in the increasingly global world (Lefebvre, 1979). They are the city's legacy to connect the past to future generations. To quote the Minister for National Development, 'As Singapore becomes more cosmopolitan, these old buildings, rich in history and culture, will not only give our city more character but also serve to remind us of our past, and make us appreciate our identity and culture' (Singapore Government Press Release, 26 June 2003). To demolish them would have erased some of Singapore's charm and character. Conserved such areas would provide a spectacle of local culture, architecture and history, a certain magical power of permanence in the increasingly modern climate of cultural amnesia, a continuity of the past in the architectural grammar of the present (Duncan, 1990; Lowenthal, 1985). There is strong evidence to suggest that investing in distinctiveness cannot be the lone result of statutory action.

Too often we are reminded of the threat of state-driven conservation effort becoming no more than artificial replica of the past, a landscape spectacle emptied of life and with cultural memory

lost (Ley & Olds, 1988; Yeoh & Lau, 1995). Yeoh and Lau (1995) in tracing the state-developed conservation project of Tanjong Pagar in Chinatown, Singapore, have argued that state action have tended to involve the promotion of a landscape spectacle, designed to impress through architectural splendour rather than actual substance. Those beautifully restored shophouses are not synonymous with the 'storehouses of personal memories' (Hayden, 1995, p.5). The most frequent critique in the literature is that conservation is conducted in the interests of the tourism industry and capital (Hewison, 1987; Jacobs, 1992) rather than to the voices of local residents.

4.3. Harnessing partnership—the Singapore Master Plan 2003

The Master Plan review is the next step in the planning cycle of the Revised Concept Plan 2001. The Master Plan is a short-term development guide plan, reviewed once in every 5 years within the framework of the long-term Concept Plan. Aimed for release in November 2003, the Master Plan 2003 review has taken on the public feedback to the Concept Plan and focused much attention on the issue of identity and providing opportunities to bring together people and places. In July 2002, a draft identity plan was released at the start of a public consultation process for the public to have a say on the strategy. The stages for public consultation prior to submission of the draft Master Plan involved three exercises: discussing the issues, exploring new ideas and formulating a draft Master Plan for further public consultation before Ministerial approval. The Master Plan 2003 review involved the most extensive level of pre-draft consultation exercise on conservation plans. It employed a range of methods to increase public awareness and admit heritage issues as part of the public agenda,

- Subject groups, three subject groups comprising 17–22 members each from diverse backgrounds and organisations (professional, non-government and community) were established to provide meaningful critique of how the proposals can be improved and to suggest new creative ideas and recommendations of innovative strategies for the proposals. They were supported by resources to conduct discussions with the planners, key stakeholders and residents over 3 months (23 July to 22 October 2002);
- Stakeholder discussions with local residents and several other groups, including non-government organisations and other government departments, to seek their feedback; and
- A variety of channels for the general public to give feedback and suggestions, including a 3-month long public exhibition, weekly feature articles in the media and online poll.

The encouraging aspect of the Master Plan 2003 review is that it moves away from the government's usual way of making plans. As the Minister of State for National Development announced during the opening of the public consultation and exhibition on the draft identity plan, 23 July 2002,

> Instead of pre-determining how a place should shape up according to our plans, we are now looking at how what is already on the ground…can be enhanced.

The process is one of partnership: joint partnership of public and private sectors with the community in identifying the places to conserve and how to conserve them. According to reports in the local press (*The Straits Times,* 26 July; 26 September 2002), crowds have turned up, mostly around lunch time to look at the plan, 'the feedback has been rolling in'. People are interested, to

voice their views, to share their suggestions and to express in dialogues. More than 2000 people from different areas and walks of life, students, professionals, housewives and others have given feedback through the website, exhibition feedback forum and discussion forum in the first 2 months of the exhibition, including suggesting additional sites for conservation consideration. There appears a general excitement and desire to retain place identity, lending legitimacy and support to the planners' quest for identity in conservation to give Singaporeans a sense of belonging and rootedness (*The Straits Times*, 26 July 2002). It also releases different views and voices.

While there is unanimous support for conservation, there are fewer consensuses on its form and approach. Many (64%) were for conserving the old and historic part of buildings while allowing for modern rear extensions to be built. The remaining preferred to conserve the entire building. They were however divided as to whether the uses should be left to market forces even though the majority (87%) were for more to be done to retain certain trades and businesses that characterise the historic areas. Recognising the multiplicity of the Singapore identity, the focus group on identity versus intensive use of land has called for identification of the place identity that exists at different levels: national, local and individual. As several scholars have observed, the notion of place has many dimensions of meanings (Agnew & Duncan, 1989).

For a start, fifteen areas of rich architectural heritage, thriving street life and unique streetscapes were identified on an island-wide basis for discussion: What can we do to retain their history, character and life while they continue to grow and evolve? (Urban Redevelopment Authority, July 2002) These areas are grouped into four categories, reflecting their local features:

- Old world charm of shophouses: Balestier, Tanjong Katong, Jalan Besar, Joo Chiat/East Coast Road;
- Urban villages of local activity nodes: Anak Bukit, Jalan Leban, Thomson Village, Springleaf and Coronation areas;
- Southern ridges and hillside villages of relaxed atmosphere: Morse Road and Gillman Village areas; and
- Rustic coast by the sea: Punggol Point/Coney Island, Changi Village, Pasir Ris and Pulau Ubin.

The areas were selected after consulting various government agencies, community leaders and non-government organisations. The basis of selection included place characteristics such as unique streetscapes, interesting architecture, rich local history and activities. Areas listed are not final but presented as a major opportunity for wider public participation in place making. As the Chief Executive Officer of Urban Redevelopment Authority declared, 'We want to hear from the public, communities, the grassroots, the man-in-the-street about how they want to live, how we can make Singapore more of a 'home' to them'. The authority is willing to listen, engage and work in partnership with the public about the quality of places, developing collaboration among stakeholders in policy development and delivery. As stated in its exhibition brochures (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2002),

> We need you (the public) to play your part. Please share your views, opinions and ideas to help refine the plans. Based on your feedback, we will refine and develop the…Identity Plan further.

The implementation of the ideas and possibilities will require the joint partnership of public and private sectors with the community.

This is not the only opportunity of community participation in the place making process. According to the Minister, 'all the public feedback gathered would be incorporated into a draft Master Plan that will be exhibited by regions in the first half of 2003. The public would have another opportunity to raise any further feedback they have, before the Master Plan is finalised and gazetted as the new Master Plan 2003.' (Minister Speech, 23 July 2002) The target is to gazette the Master Plan 2003 by November 2003. The responses to the consultation exercise will provide a much-valued input into the drafting of the Master Plan 2003 and the conservation effort.

The identity plan with its public participation process of debating and refining to build consensus has set in place a framework for participative place making and production of places that embody aliveness and an emotional connection between people and settings, places that are loved by people. By having a clear cause of identity in its plan and a process of partnership and participative place making, the planners are seeking to better understand the essence of these places themselves and preserve their use and meaning to make city spaces into places. Participation has its advantages even though not an easy task. The possibility of being involved opens new perspectives for changing the city and strengthening the social tissue. The search for place identity puts a reglementation on our social landscape, allowing ordinary people to become actors, to get a real sense of belonging and a step closer to working together to improve quality of life for all.

5. Conclusion

This paper has outlined some of the issues and possibilities of place identity and conservation in the city. Places that are identifiable encourage people to dwell, to stay a little longer and connect with one another and be connected. They are healthy places. They provide opportunities for urban life and are important to the health and well being of the people living in the city. They have a tangible image, we know where and when we are there. They are not empty spaces but engender the active participation of people. As people places, we cannot neglect the value of participatory place making notwithstanding the universal concerns of participation constraints and risks that stem from the fact that people are not a homogeneous category. People in any community consist of diverse groups representing a host of interests which may lead to conflicting opinions and issues of whose views should be heard and taken (Arnstein, 1969; Turnbridge, 1984). These are tough issues with no ready answers. They call for adequate preparation and building of mechanisms to deal with the constraints and risks. Much literature has been written about the strategies for participation including the UNDP (1997) Guidebook on Participation, which documents 'how this is to be done' and will not need to be repeated here.

The Singapore search for identity in conservation however underscores one of the first principles of participatory development: the primacy of people. The promotion of participation is an integral part of the urban conservation planning process. People are interested in conservation and identity; their interests, needs and wishes must thus be allowed to underpin the key decisions

and actions in the identification of place identity and places to conserve. As Bachtiar (2002, p.17) has observed of the planner–public partnership,

> The process will demand weighing conflicting factors very carefully...Having these open channels of communication, more than ever, is vital as we write a new chapter on conservation. Together.

Participatory place making enhances the chances of a 'good fit' between built form and the social life it is intended to support and sustain. It is one key strategy in the making of the distinctive city. In other words, the successful conservation project has to make use of not just quantitative analyses of the urban fabric and mix but also people's views to identify the underlying qualities of the sense of place and feeling of locality. Its implementation calls to attention the need to foster a more place-focused public policy and governance. As Healey (1998, p. 1531) has argued,

> …the governance capacity to deliver improvements to the quality of places lies in the quality of local policy cultures. Some are well integrated, well connected, and well informed, and can mobilise readily to act to capture opportunities and enhance local conditions…They shift the task of urban planning from 'building places' to fostering the institutional capacity in territorial political communities for ongoing 'place-making' activities.

In the case of Singapore, the hegemony of conservation and place identity policies is supported and cast within the wider language of globalisation and specific ideology of Singapore as a 'home'. Central here is the notion of Singapore as 'a home to cherish'. In the recently released draft report of the Remaking Singapore Committee, the most recent public discourse on Singapore's social, political and cultural policies, programmes and practices, emphasis is placed on striving 'towards a balanced conservation of heritage icons and natural features that uniquely define a Singaporean experience for our people.' (Singapore Government Press Release, 12 June 2003) Public involvement in the identification and preservation of Singapore's shared heritage is envisioned as one of the draft report's key recommendations on 'a home to cherish' (the report will be submitted to the Prime Minister in July 2003). Particularly from the late 1980s, the state has developed a public rhetoric that emphasises public involvement in the process of governance and building on and expanding our commonalities as it progresses with the goal of Singapore becoming a global city.

To unlock the potential of places and community aspirations, Singapore has given increasing emphasis to urban conservation as a way to strengthen the city's identity and made the quality of places a more important outcome of its development plans. In the process, it has sought to actively engage the public in identifying what people associate with an area and in the consequent discussion of what we can do to retain an area's history, character and life as it continues to grow and evolve. Against the city's multiplicity of designed spaces, a sense of identity is one way of giving urban residents more control and connection to public places: 'Tell us about them' (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2002), which is an attempt at providing some optimal psychological fit between people and their physical environment. It remains to be seen how this approach to building better places will deliver. What is clear is that place identity is a basic element in the making of places that people desire to dwell, one issue that will continue to challenge cities in an increasingly global world.

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