

**HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABLE URBANISM:
CASE STUDIES FROM FRANCE, SINGAPORE AND THE REGION**

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Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Conservation and heritage experts from France, Singapore and Malaysia took to the podium at the Singapore Heritage Symposium in May 2016. The symposium featured conservation projects from Asia and Europe, with a focus on how Singapore's heritage conservation strategy has developed over the years. What are the approaches and policies affecting the protection, restoration and reuse of heritage buildings? How do such buildings play a part in urban planning and civic life? Ten expert speakers shared their experiences and perspectives in this symposium, organised by the Centre for Liveable Cities, the Embassy of France in Singapore and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA).

On Day 1, Mr Didier Repellin, Chief Architect and Inspector General of Historical Monuments of the French Republic, gave a number of case studies from Europe — highlighting specific building codes and policies in conservation. Focusing on a number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, he gave his insights into “reading heritage” and likened it to a book with many chapters added over time.

Dr Yeo Kang Shua, Assistant Professor of Architectural History, Theory and Criticism at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, shared his research and analysis of the restoration of religious sites in Singapore. Focusing primarily on Chinese temples and shrines, Dr Yeo proposed that the religious deed of merit-making required a nuanced approach to conservation.

Mr Ho Weng Hin, Partner at Studio Lapis, a company focusing on heritage conservation, explained some of the international standards in conservation. He gave examples of restoration projects, such as the South Beach development in Singapore and the Yangon Railway in Myanmar.

Ms Chou Mei, Group Director of Conservation and Urban Design at URA, explained her organisation's approach to conservation, including the exercise of tools such as the land sales programme to incentivise conservation by developers. Her examples included the Fullerton Hotel and efforts at conserving shophouses.

On Day 2, Mr Alfred Peter, an urban planner and landscape architect from France, shared his experiences in conservation, by allowing the natural site and climate to come to the fore. These included France's renowned Mont Saint-Michel as well as Le Peyrou in Montpellier. He also described the phenomenon of retrospective urbanism that has been spreading across Europe.

Dr Imran bin Tajudeen, from the Department of Architecture at National University of Singapore (NUS) called for the recognition and acknowledgement of the nuances and diversity within the existing "racialised" heritage districts. He uncovered several examples of sophisticated diversity in these seemingly "mono-racial" districts, and called for a commemoration such overlooked heritage.

Ms Khoo Salma Nasution, Vice President and immediate past President of the Penang Heritage Trust, described the journey taken to get George Town listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the tensions between tourism and heritage protection, and the urgent need for skilled and paid expertise in heritage management.

Dr Jason Pomeroy, Founding Principal of Pomeroy Studio, discussed some of the considerations between sustainable development, with examples from Asia as well as Europe. He listed a number of key parameters for sustainable development, namely, environment, economy, technology, cultural, replication and recognition.

On Day 3, Mr Repellin gave his account of the restoration of a shophouse in Singapore, as a demonstration project for URA. He also described in detail the restoration of the former Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus complex, now known as CHIJMES. A final example was from Cambodia, where he worked with European and local volunteers to improve a local hospital.

He was followed by Mrs Koh-Lim Wen Gin, Former Chief Planner and Deputy Chief Executive, URA; and Mrs Pamela Lee, Senior Tourism Consultant, Singapore Tourism Board, who gave their perspectives as key actors in Singapore's conservation story. Mrs Koh-Lim chronicled URA's conservation journey from inception to the early 2000s when it received international recognition for its conservation programme. Mrs Lee shared her thoughts on the state of conservation today, giving some insights to past decisions and tradeoffs while suggesting what more could be done to preserve our heritage for future generations.

The symposium concluded with site visits to the following locations:

- 1: The Civic District of Empress Place and the Padang
- 2: Cathedral of the Good Shepherd
- 3: Kampong Glam Historic District

DAY 1, 5 MAY 2016: HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABLE URBANISM: CASE STUDIES FROM FRANCE, SINGAPORE AND THE REGION

Session I: “Overview and current trends in policy, protection and restoration in France and elsewhere”

Speaker: Mr Didier Repellin, Chief Architect and Inspector General of Historical Monuments, French Republic

“... when you are talking about heritage, you are talking about the beauty, about the quality.... heritage is the haute couture of the architecture.”

— Mr Didier Repellin

When examining heritage buildings, Mr Repellin suggested a few helpful questions: “Who was behind it, how was it made, and for what reason?” He listed a number of examples, such as the Chateau de Versailles and Cluny Abbey in France, where demolitions and extensions throughout history “can be read like a book of architecture”.

The notion of “heritage” started very late in Europe, he said. For instance, while the first national heritage board was established as early 1630 in Sweden, it was only in 1920 that the country created its first list of historical monuments. In France, a few years after the Revolution, in 1819, the country created its first budget for historic monuments.

Mr Repellin described the two prevailing restoration philosophies in the nineteenth century: the Ruskinian movement, which argued that ancient buildings should be preserved by strictly maintaining their “accumulated history”; versus Eugene Viollet-le-Duc’s — the architect who famously restored the Notre Dame — who would propose completely new touches to existing structures. One example of the latter is the Parthenon, where twin bell towers were installed in the 18th century “for balance”, in line with Neoclassicism that was popular at the time. Other times, the motivations were political; for instance, in Poland, some of the buildings destroyed in World War II were rebuilt in the style prior to its loss of independence, as a symbolic gesture.

“It’s a lesson that you can add modern architecture as long as you really understand the background — it’s not necessary to just copy the profile,” said Mr Repellin.

In the case of the US, there have been considerable efforts by the private sector and individuals in preserving heritage buildings, compared to the federal government. This can be seen in colonial Williamsburg (restored by Rockefeller), while the oldest association to protect buildings was the Mount Vermont Ladies Association, in 1853.

The Americans have also been “very clever to invent substitute materials,” said Mr Repellin. For instance, the city hall in San Francisco is made of granite with a new wing made of terracotta to match the granite, and a final wing made of fibreglass to match the terracotta and the granite. “So now they have three generations of substitute materials and it’s interesting how they did it,” he said.

As the US prospered, scale has become an issue, where one could easily find an 87-storey hotel behind the façade of historical building, with a discordant result. As it became more and more popular in the US to retain old facades while radically changing the buildings behind them, UNESCO decided heritage conservation could not be just about the façades.

“Heritage — it’s a wonderful tool of communication and the common denominator is through the know-how... not so much through the style but mainly the know-how.” This can be seen in the 15th century Kyoto temple Kinkaku-ji, a wooden construction covered in gold. None of what exists today is from the 15th century, said Mr Repellin, but the know-how in its restoration is the same that went into the original.

In the city of Lyon, France, listed as a World Heritage Site, one could see an example of how cultural heritage can benefit from the UNESCO accolade, said Mr Repellin. The medieval city was built near rivers from west to east, with a natural supply of good wood that had enabled street buildings as high as five stories along winding narrow streets. But by the 1960s, experts had condemned the city layout as being unable to accommodate retail on its narrow streets; no one wanted to restore the buildings, said Mr Repellin. With the UNESCO listing in 1998, the city saw 40% more visitors in the first year. UNESCO also recommended use of the rivers. Originally filled with car parks, the city temporarily transformed the waterfront for pedestrians, increasing the quality of life. Light festivals and annual competitions for shops with the most innovative use of space have kept the streets vibrant with activities.

Mr Repellin then explained a number of his restoration projects in detail. One was Le Corbusier’s Convent Sainte Marie de La Tourette, which was first completed in 1960 in Lyon. Le Corbusier had worked “like an artist” and designed the building well within its natural site. However, its original execution was poor, due to cost-saving and a lack of building codes, and the concrete had little scaffolding resulting in poor structural integrity. Mr Repellin’s team had to reinforce the scaffolding and make provisions for electricity. The original glass lights that broke and the windows had to be reinforced with bars. All the while keeping as close to Le Corbusier’s design style. They were able to keep safety additions discrete, such as fire extinguishers and switches.

Can we mix both the modern and the old, Mr Repellin asked. Here, he pointed to the Théâtre Antique Orange in France, a World Heritage Site. In the restitution of its 17th century wall along Nassau’s Meyne river, Mr Repellin worked with the Getty Conservation Institute, to use software to marry the different types of concrete structures.

The latest project Mr Repellin and his team are working on is the rehabilitation the old central hospital in Lyon. Closed in 2010, it is “the largest restructuring operation of a historical monument in France”. It will feature a hotel, office and shops with a six-hectares façade, hundreds of rooms and windows. Today, the existing building has not retained anything from the 20th century, but features various elements from 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries and the medieval period. For instance, Mr Repellin’s team found 1st century Roman frescoes, with an unusual black background.

New building and safety codes pose significant challenges to the rehabilitation of the old hospital building, where restaurant operators and chefs had to be convinced that its high ceilings could work for kitchens. A garden is being retained and rebuilt for sensory-type plants, to provide scent therapy, he added.

Finally, Mr Repellin described details from the rehabilitation of the Coliseum in Rome. Having won the competition for the project, his team is working on the 1st century monument. While it has been repaired throughout the centuries, 2,000 years of damages can be seen due to some slapdash repairs with cement, for instance, he said. A survey with stakeholders and heritage conservationists revealed that the desire was to retain as much of the monument, but repair crumbling parts. Tourism is not an overarching concern, Mr Repellin said. An important debate is also arising between archaeologists and architects. For instance, Mr Repellin explained that “the archaeologist want to see the joints and the architect didn’t want to see [them]; they wanted mainly to see the lines of the architecture.” This is an interesting point of interest, as the monument is both a historical record as well as an artistic expression. Meantime, a significant degree of technology is going into the survey of the building — using 24-hour software to detect humidity as water is passed through cracks within the walls.

Mr Repellin concluded by pointing to some of the world’s newest coliseums, including stadiums in Brazil and Singapore. These are testaments of modern intelligence that are very well fitted to the human activities, which in turn make heritage come alive, he said.

Addressing the audience, his parting message was: “I would say you — you are the excellence in the modern architecture. The new challenge would be very interesting if we can get the same level of excellence for old districts and for heritage — in terms of how to treat the environment, how to make them clever as they used to be, because they were very clever [too].”

Session II: “Restoration and Sustaining Value — Similarities of the East and West”

Speaker: Dr Yeo Kang Shua, Assistant Professor of Architectural History, Theory and Criticism, Singapore University of Technology and Design

“...we have two different, diverging approaches — the positivist and relativist. The positivist is the substantiation of the historic material fabric, and privileges the object.... the relativist is premised on the idea that we should go beyond the consideration of the material culture and fabric.”

— Dr Yeo Kang Shua

In his presentation, Dr Yeo focused on case studies from Chinese places of worship in Singapore.

Dr Yeo recounted a visit to the Kiew Lee Tong Temple at Upper Thomson Road. A Taoist temple that was originally established in 1934 in Arab Street, the building moved to its current site in 1979. During a recent visit, a craftsman was repairing a divination apparatus that had been used for three generations. Often cracked by medium’s use of force, the “repaired” piece looked “very new and fresh” and the craftsman had made

sure to use the best materials, from expensive enamel to gold leaf. To Dr Yeo, this exemplified the stark contrast between Eastern and Western approaches to restoration and conservation. “Especially in the areas of Buddhism and Taoism,” he added, “the idea is that if you *add on* to a religious site/item, it’s a form of merit-making.”

The restoration of buildings in Singapore began in earnest in the 1980s, following the government’s recommended 3Rs principle: maximum *retention*, sensitive *restoration* and careful *repair*. Calling the guideline “highly distilled”, such that “it’s easily digestible, [and easily understood] and applied to consultants and even [to] the lay people and owners of site,” said Dr Yeo, this has its origins from a positivist principle and approach.

In recent years, however, differing approaches in conservation have surfaced serious conflicts, said Dr Yeo. One example is the Tan Si Chong Su — this time an ancestral temple of the Tan Clan. Constructed between 1876 and 1878, it was gazetted in 1974 as a national monument. In 2003, news broke of how its custodians made “illegal changes” to the monument from 1999 — in the form of new roof tiles in a different colour and additional ornaments. To the Tan Clan, “the idea of conservation and restoration is about merit-making. To the authorities who adopted a kind of positivist approach, this is a illegal alteration,” described Dr Yeo. But does this relationship need to be antagonistic, he asked.

Dr Yeo then described an example of a success story in conservation: the Hong San See Temple, built between 1908 and 1913 by the local Chinese Hokkien community. Gazetted as a national monument in 1978, extensive renovation was done from 2006 to 2010, undertaken by invited consultants and craftsmen from China to maintain the Southern Chinese style of architecture. Dr Yeo described how the temple committee had successfully set up a series of aims and objectives, followed by a clear action plan. Also imbued within this effort was the recognition of merit-making, said Dr Yeo, with a close discussion between the government and the temple restoration committee. In 2010, the temple was received the Award of Excellence in the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.

His last example was Wak Hai Ching Beo, which was established by the Chinese Teochew community in 1826. One of only two temples to receive an imperial signboard from Emperor Guang Xu of the Qing dynasty (in 1907), the temple underwent a painstaking two-year restoration by artisans from China and was gazetted as a national monument in 1997. Here, the owners and the authorities had entered “into very meaningful discussions about the definition of restoration, said Dr Yeo” — including whether the planned changes would constitute as a mere renovation, or actual restoration.

With his final case study, Dr Yeo concluded by calling for a mental shift between positivist and relativist approaches, and instead to find similarities between the two — bearing in mind cultural considerations such as merit-making in the case of Chinese places of worship.

Discussion

Panellists: Mr Didier Repellin and Dr Yeo Kang Shua

Moderator: Mr Ho Weng Hin, Partner, Studio Lapis

Asked about his personal approaches to conservation projects, Dr Yeo said he prefers to spend time with the owners of the site to find out what the restoration means to them — and with that, come up with common understanding for all the stakeholders, as each may have very different ideas of the outcome. Dr Yeo also said it is important to have “respect for the craftspersons” who are involved.

Another audience member said that Catholic traditions also has the concept of merit-making. Was it right, therefore, to frame debate between positivism and relativism, with this idea of merit-making? Dr Yeo explained how the concept of “merit-making” is “imbued in religious groups among Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures.” Often, it involves contributing money to expand an existing building. In this sense, it may be in conflict with Western ideas of restoration, which typically promotes the preservation of the original site, said Dr Yeo. Thus, merit-making in terms of contributions for renewals and expansions is an important clue to understanding why the Asian population sometimes has an issue with conservation.

Moderator Mr Kelvin Ang added that while the concept of merit-making needs to be distinguished, “once you gazette a building, it becomes a shared space.” It is therefore the role of related government agencies is to ensure no one group is privileged over another. An audience member later added that while the two temples described by Dr Yeo have the same gazette status, one is a monastic temple that serves community, while the other is a shrine that serves the family for ancestral worship. In the latter case, with the gazette, the family needs to realise its no longer a mausoleum.

Next, Mr Repellin was asked for his views on the repaired stained glass windows at CHIJMES. While he had not seen them on this recent trip to Singapore, Mr Repellin replied that based on some previous pictures, some experimentation with mastic to fill the gaps could be considered. He added that the stained glass at CHIJMES are a masterpiece by the best stained glass maker in the world, Belgian artist Jules Dobbelaere from Bruges.

Regarding considerations for authenticity, “which layer of history do you return to,” an audience member asked, especially for a site or building that has had several uses over time. Which is the most valuable to restore or conserve? Mr Repellin said this is always a debate, “what to keep, what to restore, what to remove.” First, one needs to “truly understand the building — what it used to be,” he said. “It doesn’t matter if it is a later addition.” If a later addition is well executed and fits well with what exists, that’s fine, he said. “If you start to be demanding with the *know-how*, you will know the limit,” he added.

Asked whether Singapore’s conservation plans have led to an efficient restoration of buildings, Mr Repellin recalled how he was shocked to learn that close to 100 shophouses were demolished per day when he first visited in 1987. “What is a city? It’s a book of architecture. If you remove the first chapter, the second and the third won’t be so interesting. But it is not an ordinary book. It’s a novel. You are always waiting for the next chapter.” He was glad to see that by 1989, Singapore had the beginnings of a

preservation department. Mr Repellin added that he is “very impressed how clever and how intelligent your old architecture used to be.” It often adapted very well to the climate, he said. Today, around the world, “everyone is talking about climate,” he added. “Your heritage is the most modern one.”

The next question about balancing [the] heritage wants of the archaeologist and the urban conservationists, while keeping in mind commercial elements. “You have the parameters of history, of archaeology, of usage, of the previous usage — and the new ones, of the environment, the social environment and so on,” said Mr Repellin. “So one of the problems is to create a hierarchy between the different elements.” But this process may threaten to “sterilise these buildings”, when a hierarchy is strictly applied or followed. He suggested that it is better to have a heritage development plan rather than a conservation plan — “we should be developers of heritage than conservators of heritage,” he said. As for the commercial requirements of heritage projects, especially with adaptive re-use projects, Mr Repellin said that many of the projects he had introduced earlier were commercial ones. He acknowledged that the difficulty would lie in religious sites such as temples, where use is not as adaptive. “You can do whatever you want, technically I say... in any building,” he said. “But then you always have to apply the good sense. And the good sense tell you what is not nice.”

Next, an audience member asked if Dr Yeo was suggesting that Chinese owners should be motivated by the “restoration approach”, by treating it as a form of merit-making. How would this impact the technical aspects of restoration? Dr Yeo replied that objective set at the start would help determine technical methods. In fact, there “are still traditions for restoring temples in China, in the region, in Southeast Asia,” he added. If craftsmen today cannot surpass the skills of the past, conservators can try modern techniques and use science to restore what is damaged.

Finally, Mr Repellin was asked for his views on “living heritage”. Mr Repellin said that indeed, the fourth dimension of heritage is “human heritage” — which gives the everlasting feeling. The main criterion for a national monument is that it is never obsolete. When leading a work site, never be afraid about technical problems — the human issue is always more challenging, he concluded.

Session III: “Restoration and reuse — Case studies of Singapore and the region”

Speaker: Mr Ho Weng Hin, Partner, Studio Lapis

“... not every building is publicly accessible... you need to have done some investigation into the building before writing up the codes to preserve the building. So I would suggest that a government fund could be initiated to incentivise this research and field work that could lead to recovery of such concealed heritage, and over time this will also help to build up a solid database.”

— Mr Ho Weng Hin

Mr Ho explained how his company Studio Lapis has been working within Singapore’s Heritage Conservation Framework. Studio Lapis focuses on heritage conservation and consultation, from conception to construction and completion — while also producing

historical research and studies as well as making recommendations to conservation efforts.

There are five important principles underlying his approach to conservation, said Mr Ho. First, preserving the layers of history, as “every building has layers of history to it, and it will be too reductivist to just go back to a single point in time,” said Mr Ho.

Second, there needs to be a dialogue between the old and new. Additions are fine but Mr Ho generally does not “believe in replicas in artificial history... the historical and the new must have meaningful dialogue,” he added.

Third, in cases “where we can’t preserve the building, [try to] preserve the elements in its original place.” In this regard, he always encourages the re-use and upcycling of original materials — especially those with historical significance. For example, a lot of the timber that his team encounters in their projects are actually felled and processed from large, mature trees, unlike today.

Fourth, he considers it a good practice “to have the principle of compatibility and reversibility.” This means that in addition to design, the new materials also should not cause any damage to the old ones.

Finally, he always advocates customised solutions “because, working with a team of consultants, everybody has their own agenda, own goals... there is no standard solution to a conservation project and how to upgrade the building.”

Mr Ho then referred to a number of international codes and frameworks, in particular, Australia’s Burra Charter (or the Charter for Places of Cultural Significance). He emphasised its conservation approach that is based on a respect for the existing fabric, use and meanings, and highlighted the following sentence in the Charter, “a cautious approach of changing as much as necessary but as little as possible.”

Next, he gave specific examples of restorative works, in Singapore and Yangon in Myanmar.

In Singapore, he described the South Beach development, a first of its kind in that it is a complex of buildings, “not [just a] bespoke or grand building,” said Mr Ho. As former military and industrial-type buildings, the complex is conserved to maintain the urban streetscape and to honour the national memory. There was a specific control plan to safeguard heritage features, and Mr Ho’s team had to identify what was missing in the current site, what could be preserved and how.

As a mixed-use development, there was also pressure to maximise usable floor space. A new mezzanine was added, which “contains the extra floor space without adding anything to the exterior of the buildings,” explained Mr Ho. His team also ensured that the extensive glazing that the developer wanted (“that would allow people to view what’s inside the building”) was “in a language that is similar... not 100% totally replica [but] does not look out of character with the original building.”

A second example from Singapore was the Art Deco-style Capitol Building, a popular theatre and cinema restored by US-based Richard Meier with Singapore's Architects 61. The conservation guidelines emphasised the facades, due to an "urban conservation slant", said Mr Ho, which privileges the streetscape with considerations for its social memories.

Overall, around 60% of its original features were lost, some due to re-fabrication and flimsy reinforcements over the years. For example, the zodiac dome with its text inscriptions — a feature well remembered by the public — was reinstated. Sturdy India-made ceiling fans from the 1930s were also restored.

A technical challenge was its adaptive reuse, to make it a venue for a cinema, a theatre and a banquet hall. While this was a commercially driven and sound business plan, it proved challenging due to conflicting acoustic requirements, where reverberation for live acts is necessary but not ideal in the case of the cinema. Acoustic panels had to be planned in detail.

Mr Ho's final example was of the Burma Railway Building in Yangon, Myanmar. Previously the country had mainly protected religious buildings; colonial buildings in Yangon were not protected due to political reasons. This project was a first, planned for a future luxury hotel, the Peninsula Yangon.

With intense development plans, the national building code for the downtown conservation zone is now being revised. "There is a rapidly evolving landscape," said Mr Ho. "From the time we came on — there were no controls at all on the building — to two years down the road, there were more and more controls on the building.... So you have to meet the new requirements that come out on the fly."

The former railway building was "the nerve centre of Myanmar railway", and expanded to Thai and Chinese borders. As a government building with limited public access, there was little archival material — and not much could be found in the archives in the United Kingdom either, said Mr Ho. Therefore, the team had to its due diligence to understand the building — through technical studies, laboratory tests on materials, as well as commissioned impact assessment reports because it was close other monuments in a historical neighbourhood. With AUSAID's assistance, a series of oral history records were also conducted, to include the social significance of the site. For instance, there was a community living around the building, sometimes in the stationary train carriages that were converted to housing for railway staff.

Mr Ho said Singapore and Myanmar shared challenges in conservation and adaptive reuse — in that both Singapore and Myanmar faced commercial pressures, and most historical buildings end up having commercial imperatives. A point of departure for the two countries is that the colonial past is widely accepted in Singapore, whereas this is viewed with ambivalence in Myanmar.

In conclusion, Mr Ho said: "...you need to have done some investigation into the building before writing up the codes to preserve the building. So I would suggest that [a] government fund could be initiated to incentivise this research and field work that

could lead to recovery of such concealed heritage, and over time this will also help to build up a solid database.”

Session IV: “Making urban heritage accessible — 30 years of evolution in Singapore”

Speaker: Ms Chou Mei, Group Director, Conservation and Urban Design, Urban Redevelopment Authority

“... we have to fit the needs of both a city and a country including housing, jobs, industry, and also port, airport, defence, infrastructure, facilities within a very small limited area... all the more it’s important for us to make sure that we maintain a high quality living environment, with greenery, public spaces and strong sense of identity.”

— Ms Chou Mei

Ms Chou said that at URA, planners take a long-term approach to conservation — it forms a critical component of urban planning.

With an area of 716 square kilometres and a population of 5.4 million, Singapore’s needs as a city and a country — from housing and parks to industry, defence and infrastructure — require a fine balance. For instance, planners need to strike the balance between preserving the old and making plans for the new; pragmatically speaking, not everything can or should be kept, she said.

The 1950s and 1960s were formative years in Singapore’s urban and commercial development, and conservation was not viable in the face of urgent rehousing for the people. Many shophouses made way for high-density housing, said Ms Chou. With UNDP’s assistance, a conceptual masterplan was unveiled in 1971, with considerations to design, greenery and heritage. This helped to identify civic and ethnic areas for conservation. There were also other assistance extended to Singapore; such as in 1987, the French Embassy and Mr Didier Repellin helped restore a shophouse along Armenian Road within 10 days.

From the 1980s, the long-term land reclamation in Marina Bay to accommodate future development gave URA the confidence to retain its historic districts such as Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam and Boat Quay. “These historic districts were all occupying prime land which could be redeveloped to Grade A offices or hotels,” said Ms Chou. “Our planners did their sums. This could be equivalent to 10 OCBC Towers, which is quite significant because at that time OCBC Tower was probably one of the tallest buildings in Singapore.”

“At the beginning of our conservation journey, there was very little incentive for the private sector to conserve buildings,” said Ms Chou. “So the government had to play a bigger role.” The government undertook its pilot restoration of a shophouse, located along Neil Road. With its success, the government went on to restore entire streets, such as Tanjong Pagar in the Chinatown area. Significant flexibility was given for the types of trades operating there, recognising that changing market needs meant that types of

commercial uses allowed could not be too stringent Today, Tanjong Pagar is lined with an interesting array of bridal shops and Korean eateries.

Ms Chou explained that the Government Land Sales Programme became an implementing mechanism for many conservation plans. Several sites were sold to intensify use while retaining history. China Square, dating back to 1822, which became a slum area in the 1980s, is one such site. Shophouses were retained for some areas while others were sold to accommodate high-rise constructions. In the case of the Fullerton Hotel — the former Post Office — many developers had wanted a high-rise building, given its limited space with no carparks. Instead, URA sold it with the waterfront parcel and underground connection, and allowed the developer to add another floor to make the project more viable. URA also insisted on retaining the Straits Ballroom for its barrel vaulted ceiling. Ten years later, the government sold the adjoining waterfront site, Clifford Pier and Customs House, carving out a space between the two historical buildings to locate the new Fullerton Bay Hotel. Considerations for accessibility to the waterfront had to be presented by interested bidders, who had to submit a “two-envelope assessment”, so that URA could consider the concepts (without pricing), then review the prices. Today, the waterfront area is open to public access.

For the Capitol Building, as described by Mr Ho Weng Hin earlier, a similar two-envelope system was included in the tender. To accommodate retail as well as theatre, URA provided guidelines so that certain elements had to be retained, such as guiding the height of the development.

In 2006, URA won a ULI Global Award for Excellence for its conservation programme. To date, URA has conserved over 7,000 buildings. In 2015, the Botanical Gardens in Singapore was listed as a UNESCO Heritage Site. All these are excellent opportunities to turn the public focus on having more on accessibility, on place management and community partnership, said Ms Chou.

Some of the community level partnerships can be seen in projects like Kampong Glam. A symbolic centre for the Muslim community, Istana Kampong Glam is now the Malay Heritage Centre, while the Aliwal Arts Centre nearby is a multidisciplinary arts site with strong contemporary programming. Most recently, URA facilitated a work group in 2011 to encourage cross-collaboration on issues by various stakeholders. Some of the recent programmes include “Picnic in the Park — under the Gelam Trees”. During fasting month, visitors went there here to break fast, said Ms Chou, with public benches set up and makeshift lights. Restaurant owners near the park took ownership of the site such as helping to turn off the lights. Another is the Haji Lane closure where the street is off-limits to vehicular traffic for several hours on Fridays and Saturdays to allow pedestrian activities. After a three-month trial by the URA, Haji Lane tenants and stakeholders took over the programming.

In the Civic District, a distinct transformation is taking place, said Ms Chou. From the administrative seat of the government until the 1960s it showcase several civic buildings, many of which are restored as venues for museums and the arts. These include Victoria Theatre, National Gallery, Asian Civilisations Museum, with a seamless connection via Old Parliament Lane. Close by is Connaught Drive, said Ms Chou, which has been paved over for to give pedestrians priority, allowing vehicular traffic

comprising only public coaches and busses. She added that Empress Place and Fullerton Road have also been converted to create larger open spaces, with a wide set of steps to water from Esplanade Park.

In February this year, URA held its first car-free Sunday, where it closed roads around the CBD and city centre to welcome cyclists and pedestrians onto the roads. Residents of all ages could be seen enjoying the space, and public museums opened much earlier in the mornings so that more could enjoy them.

Concluding, Ms Chou pointed to heritage areas as an important part of Singapore's identity. While we cannot be "very purist" in our approach due to limited land, she said, heritage conservation *can* be successful through "sensitive and adaptive re-use, innovative programming and community partnerships with stakeholders."

Discussion:

Panellists: Mr Ho Weng Hin and Ms Chou Mei

Moderators: Mr Kelvin Ang, Director of Conservation Management, URA; and Mr Yeo Kirk Siang, Director, Heritage Research and Assessment, National Heritage Board

Responding to the possibility of Myanmar restoring more of its colonial buildings, Mr Ho said there was clearly a move towards that. When the Myanmar government moved its seat to Naypyidaw, these buildings in Yangon are slowly being commercialised. It is however, happening at an alarming speed, said Mr Ho, and sometimes leased out without a strong framework to control the integrity of the change coming into the city.

The comment was made that an intangible part of cultural heritage could be in traditional businesses. When asked about striking a balance in accommodating such trades, Ms Chou replied that for URA it is sometimes more important to allow buildings to be economically relevant and a part of everyday life. To some extent it is nice to keep traditional trades — such as the fabrics shops in Arab Street — but she was not sure how much of this was possible for all traditional trades. It is not realistic to expect the whole of an area to focus on a particular traditional trade, she said.

Mr Ho added that indeed gentrification has threatened to displace original usage in some neighbourhoods. However, such "content can't be forcibly brought back." To him, place management could be a solution, guided by the community. Also, one could carry out research or document the history of an area, and celebrate it in different ways.

Moderator Mr Kelvin Ang suggested that an equally positive outcome could occur with some careful planning, such as The Pinnacle in Duxton, which reintroduced new residents to a city centre that has been "hollowing out" for years due to property prices.

Next, Ms Chou was asked about the dialogues between local stakeholders for Kampong Glam — how did this occur when majority of the original residents have moved out. Were these mainly with the retail owners? Ms Chou and Mr Ang replied that indeed, due to the 1980s resettlement programme, the residential community was no longer there, although other communities remain deeply connected. These include traders, some former residents, school associations and landlords. URA was a neutral platform in

bringing all these different parties together, where otherwise different egos might have overwhelmed discussions.

In terms of balancing between resources that can be used for land development and promotion of “software” such as Car-free Sunday, Ms Chou replied that the resource considerations could only be justified by prototyping and through experiments. Do these programmes give a sense of place? For Car-free Sunday, the question URA wanted people to think about was, “is it possible to live without a car?” Such demonstration projects also help spread the word and allow people to have discussions about the issue at hand.

DAY 2, 6 MAY 2016: HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABLE URBANISM: CASE STUDIES FROM FRANCE, SINGAPORE AND THE REGION

Session I: "Urban History as a Part of Creative and Inclusive Society"

Speaker: Mr Alfred Peter, Urban Planner and Landscape Architect

"... this is the difficulty of protection. What do we have the right to do? And if we have the right to do something, what will be the conditions attached?"

— Mr Alfred Peter

Speaking through a translator, Mr Peter described how planners had a responsibility to protect in order to develop. We have never lived at such an accelerated rate of development, he said, and acceleration is also the first impression he has of Singapore. This is very relevant to the topic of heritage; with such intense acceleration, it is important to bring ourselves back to our roots as a reference point, he added.

On the question of heritage, what should we transmit to future generations, he asked. Citing famous composer Gustave Mahler, Mr Peter believed that "Tradition is not to preserve the ashes but to pass on the flame." And this involves not only the architect builder, but also the planner, the landscape architect, etc.

When examining heritage, Mr Peter "always starts with water, the foundation of all towns in the world." Describing how Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa had introduced greenery over his buildings, Mr Peter champions building to suit the local climate. Yet, "this is the difficulty of protection. What do we have the right to do? And if we have the right to do something, what will be the conditions attached?" he asked.

First, there is cultural remediation to consider. Heritage is not only about monumental scale; it must consider the people in it. In protected zones like Chinatown and Little India, we see that protection has retained human activity, said Mr Peter. In places like Mexico City, Pondicherry and Marrakech, protected sites have become tourist spots and some degree of cultural mediation is needed. "Do we look at architecture and heritage? But if we change the nature of the purpose of place, what happens?"

Second, Mr Peter suggested looking for "the genius of the place". Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, a French military engineer, architect, writer and hydrologist of the 17th century showed such capability, in being able to apply varied disciplines. Another example can be found in Josep Plecnik, from Ljubljana, Slovenia, who was commissioned by the mayor of Ljubljana to carry out all works in the town — from the town hall to the library, bridges, etc. He was able to build heritage with classicism principles in unbelievable scenarios, said Mr Peter. One such case was how Plecnik had to enlarge the downtown. Instead of expanding it with construction, he managed to build two others by creating an inventive "triple deck".

Third, one should take advantage of the elements on the site, said Mr Peter. One example is the Schaulager museum by Herzog & de Meuron in Basel, Switzerland. The walls are made of stones from the original construction, and its open-access to otherwise private works of art gives the public full access.

Coming back to sustainable development, Mr Peter re-emphasised that one should “always start by inspecting water in the [site]... the more I travel the more I'm persuaded [that] water is the priority.” Sometimes there could be too much water, sometimes too little; water could also be polluted or underground, he added. All these aspects should guide one in the development of the site.

He gave an example of Le Peyrou in Montpellier in southern France. The garden is located at the highest point in the town, and underneath is a reservoir of potable water. Water goes through the dyke — a clever alternative to canals. On the other hand, the recent incident at Fukushima, Japan, shows the dangers of ignoring the relationship between town and its surrounding waters, said Mr Peter. In addition, referring to the controversial decision to destroy a hotel at Pointe du Raz, France's equivalent of Land's End, Mr Peter said that the decision was right because it returns the site to its origins, and enables planners to mitigate the problem of rising waters.

Sometimes, to do his work, he does the bare minimum so that nature can do the rest, said Mr Peter. One example is in France along the Mediterranean coast. The beach has disappeared over time. All Mr Peter did was construct a new road at a different angle, and the natural tide recreated the beach quite soon after.

Across old Europe, there is a phenomenon of retrospective urbanism. This is especially so in Berlin, where there is a long debate on reconstructing something as it was before, e.g., the Berlin castle, City Palace, etc. His view was that this tendency to “redo” history sometimes leads to a “trap of decoration”. He gave a number of examples, from vacation homes to working with brownfields.

Mr Peter continued by describing the most complex project he had undertaken: Mont Saint-Michel in France. It consisted of rehabilitating the second-most visited site in France. The charm of Mont Saint-Michel is in the manner in which water flows around the island. But if nothing were done, sediment would build up such that the commune would be on dry ground in 20–40 years. Three important actions had to be taken: the destruction of a linkway, replaced by a bridge; the reinstatement of parking for visitors; and a hydrological project to drive water out into the sea. The site that was reconstructed had a barrage to drive water into the sea. “For me, this was the most complicated project, and emblematic about crossing heritage with architecture,” said Mr Peter. The hydraulic project highlights the protection element to its heritage.

Concluding, Mr Peter suggested that such projects truly open up new perspectives, because ecological concerns are tipped to be one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century.

Session II: “Urban heritage as a source of history for diverse societies”

Speaker: Dr Imran bin Tajudeen, Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore

“...we need to recognise and act to acknowledge the nuances and diversity within what we already have protected and promoted, marketed even, as heritage districts with a racial tag.”

— Dr Imran bin Tajudeen

In his introduction, Dr Imran said that heritage is not equivalent to history. We need to look at urban heritage in other ways — not what has been valorised or rarefied by heritage conservation so far, he added.

First, we need to recognise and acknowledge the nuances and diversity within the existing “racialised” heritage districts in Singapore. Dr Imran said these districts, from the 1980s, have been largely marketed as tourist attractions. He believed that Singapore was now ready for “a more nuanced and sophisticated” framing of these districts.

He described how school textbooks have traditionally marked out certain areas as racial enclaves — Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Little India — harking back to the Jackson Plan of colonial Singapore, deemed a tool to divide and rule the different communities. Dr Imran said this has unfortunately continued as URA, then still a department within the Housing and Development Board in the 1970s, rehabilitated buildings to create an “instant Asia” that was ideal for tourism marketing — even before the official launch of heritage districts in the 1980s.

For example, Chinatown has been known to local Chinese as *niu che shui*, which is a translation of its Malay street name Kreta Ayer. The “Chinese-ness” of the area is later reinforced by the modern Chinatown MRT station, the Chinatown Heritage Centre, and the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple — what Dr Imran views as “synthetic proxies to make it more Chinese.” Clues to the area’s real racial diversity include the Malay, Tamil and Chinese schools located there in the past (now the location of a hotel chain). Within Amoy Street and China Street are also buildings by Malay and Arab architects, in addition to a wide variety of places of worship, such as the former Kling Chapel, Chulia Mosque, Thian Hock Keng Temple, and the Nagore Durgha Sufi Shrine.

To Dr Imran, these result in three forms of “interpretive violence”: a mono-ethnic enclave narrative, racial stereotypes and “discarded districts”. He added, “now when we talk about multi-culturalism, it’s a bit [of a] token... it’s usually superficial and sometimes exoticised.” He described a few more examples, such as Peranakan Place that is contained along Orchard Road, and Muscat Street in Kampong Glam, which is culturally inaccurate as Singapore Arabs were originally from Yemen, not Oman.

Dr Imran’s next exhortation was that narratives on architectural types should honour the history and diversity of their production and use. For instance, while we often think of shophouses as former tenanted squatters for Chinese coolies, many of these were in fact owned by Javanese merchants and designed by Chinese builders. The shophouse can also be understood as an incarnation of the compound house — known as *kampungs* — that were raised to two stories, bearing Malay, Dutch and Portuguese influences. As for the pseudo-Tudor black-and-white bungalows typically linked to the colonials, painting the wooden beams and columns black had a more practical use, i.e., it protected the wood in the climate, while white walls approximated cleanliness.

Another building is the Sultan Mosque. Today it features Middle Eastern flourishes, although its original design had a more Southeast Asian form, said Dr Imran. Looking at its list of trustees confirms the diversity of the Muslim community behind it: Bugis, Javanese, Malay, North Indian, South Indian and Arab.

Another signifier of diversity can be found names. For instance, Chin Chew Street — part of the China Square Conservation Area — had a number of different names in different languages, as did Cross Street, which had names in Hokkien as well as Tamil. Hong Kong Street also had Tamil, Muslim, Arab, Eurasian homeowners.

Dr Imran said we could act now to commemorate some of these lost heritage and nuances. From demolished buildings and neighbourhoods to even rivers where different communities lived, many of them depart from racial stereotypes in Singapore — for instance, that the Chinese were coolies and merchants and the Malays were largely fishermen, etc.

Finally, Dr Imran urged the audience to go beyond the physical forms in so-called areas and zones. Giving “Malay-esque” features to buildings, for instance, limits the heritage to token physical forms. Urban heritage requires us to think about economic viability rather than just physical structures, he said. “[Geylang Serai] is Malay because of the shops and the retail culture and so... in this sense urban heritage requires us to think about economic sustainability.”

Discussion

Panellists: Mr Alfred Peter and Dr Imran bin Tajudeen

Moderator: Dr Wong Yunn Chii, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore

A comment was made that culture, architecture and use of the buildings all evolve with time. In this context, how does one define heritage authenticity? Mr Peter replied that for him there is “no universal value in authenticity”, at least not in the objective sense. When asked how one could “save heritage” in face of climate change, Mr Peter said that climate change is a fact that the world has to face — and adaptation is critical. He also expects relationships with heritage to become “more tangible” in this context.

In response to Dr Imran, an audience member asked if Sultan Mosque’s Middle Eastern design — while not fully reflective of the actual communities who had lived and traded there — could be useful signifiers of a gradual Arabisation of Islam in Singapore. Dr Imran said that this would be anachronistic, as those names originated from the 1920s and 1930s and had little to do with Arabisation, which is more recent. Dutch and European designers then had their own Middle Eastern references, and these colonial architects were not familiar with Southeast Asian materials and modes of construction by the Javanese.

When asked how one would determine “what is worthy of conserving” and what could be a fair methodology, Mr Peter replied that in all conservation policy, one needs to take into consideration what one wants to transmit to future generations. History cannot determine that we must keep something, he added. For Dr Imran, fairness is difficult to

determine. One approach is to ask what kind of new development would replace the current one. Does the new development protect or further economic variety and social cultural diversity? Dr Imran also noticed that oftentimes places were demolished and left fallow for years, so the land demand might not be as urgent.

When asked about suggestions for a more sophisticated approach to heritage districts in Singapore, Mr Peter said, “diversity is a richness that Singapore enjoys.” This should not be destroyed or treated in a banal way. His advice would be “to keep this multiculturalism”. Another very good example is Toronto in Canada, where there is a mosaic of multiculturalism — it has become a highly liveable city because of this diversity. Dr Imran added that decision-making from top-down often has limited information, whereas enthusiasts, historians and the community at large can provide a deeper ethos to conservation efforts, leading to a framework that is more nuanced and varied.

A comment followed, from an audience member, about the potential over-emphasis of heritage areas — and whether that could be a reflection of a stratified society? By that same token, for the reframing to be more nuanced, it needs to be reflected in government policy, such as the racial categories of CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) and beyond. Dr Imran was not convinced that this was due to a political agenda to stratify society, but perhaps more “to do with the expediency of marketing for tourism.” Here, he referred to the world’s first “Chinatown”, in San Francisco, where the Chinese themselves decided to “Disney-fy” themselves to attract more visitors.

An audience member who had worked with the URA disagreed that the heritage areas were driven by tourism aims. At the time, there were indeed an ethnic majority in some of these areas in terms of residents and trades. Dr Imran replied that while this could be true at the point in time, earlier records show otherwise and that needs to be acknowledged if we wish to have a longer view of heritage and history.

A comment from the audience was that one could not help but think, “We do not know what we do not know.” Oftentimes, efforts in heritage conservation are guided by strong personal interests. What is important is that a variety of options are considered when conserving.

Session III: “Georgetown World Heritage Site — Sustaining History, Heritage and Folkways”

Speaker: Ms Khoo Salma Nasution, Vice President and immediate past President, Penang Heritage Trust

“... we’ve been lobbying the state government since the 1980s... our challenge is [to] promote cultural significance of individual buildings and also of areas and the city — and also to change the development paradigm and the tourism paradigm, to convince government and investors of the economic value of heritage.”

— Ms Khoo Salma Nasution

Presenting on George Town, Penang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Ms Nasution highlighted three values: History, heritage and people. Citing Northcote Parkinson, she believed that “history is a community's memory, and community without history is like a man without memory.”

Inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 2005, George Town has a core and buffer zones. Heritage buildings are divided into Category 1 (where no change is permitted) and Category 2 (where adaptive reuse is permitted). To her, the universal value of UNESCO resonates well, in that George Town should be a living testimony to traditions through its buildings.

Introducing the Penang Heritage Trust, Ms Nasution described it as an advocacy group founded in 1988. It began by organising site visits, sending alerts to its members of development plans, and has had the counsel of a UNESCO advisor from Bangkok since the 1990s.

In 1991, the trust invited Mrs Pamela Lee to bring a tourism hook for the conservation of George Town. This was necessary because at the time, “the Penang government wasn’t interested in heritage at all. So we said, look Singapore is doing it — it must be a good idea... tourism is an argument that you can sell to the government... at that time,” she said.

By 1993, the trust successfully lobbied the government to have its first heritage conservation project. “Actually it was Didier [Repellin] who convinced the chief minister and the prime minister,” she said. Mr Repellin did the roofing of the Acheen Street Mosque.

Ms Nasution also described how George Town had a high degree of inter-religious trust. Temples and mosques would be situated quite close to one another. However, due to public housing needs, some members of the community had to move away, while others were priced out of the area. She also shared a number of technical details to some of the buildings that were successfully conserved, such as the Judge’s Residence built by military engineer McNair. The aim is to protect heritage by acknowledging both the vernacular and European history, which brings to fore the religious diversity and plurality of the site.

Today, heritage concerns have various new dimensions such as multicultural values, expressions from civil society, local democracy, emergence of citizen historians, archivists, etc. “We are the social memory of the city, because we remember the city in different parts,” said Ms Nasution. In fact, the trend now is to start thinking regionally, beyond the nation state.

In terms of understanding and interpreting cultural value, the Penang Heritage Trust has “the Penang story” platform, where the community can participate and add depth to the oral narratives. Sometimes, where tangible items cannot be protected, invest in archiving the materials online for posterity. There is in fact a rising demand for heritage management, but skilled and paid expertise is hard to come by, said Ms Nasution.

Recently, government plans for a transport hub to be built near the Prangin Canal, built by the French in 1804 as a defensive moat during the Napoleonic War, has given cause for concern. This reflects the endless lobbying and protection efforts that go into maintaining the integrity of a site. “We thought that... after World Heritage listing all our troubles were over, we can rest. But now, we have to face things like that.” Having seen some negative effects of tourism demand, Ms Nasution was of the view that “if you cannot protect, do not promote.” Tourism needs to be curtailed in some cases, she said.

Referencing Cassandra’s curse, Ms Nasution gave this parting quote for her presentation: “Those who don’t study history are doomed to repeat it and those who do study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it.”

Session IV: “Traditional Building and Urbanisation — Lessons for Today and the Future”

Speaker: Dr Jason Pomeroy, Founding Principal, Pomeroy Studio

“Thirty-five of our mega cities of the world are in floodplains. The 35 mega cities are having 10 million people or over and we’re constantly seeing the cataclysmic effects of climate change. No wonder when we look at COP in December, 195 countries signed up to the idea that we will not be trying to exceed 1.5 degrees over pre-industrial levels.”

— Dr Jason Pomeroy

For his presentation, Dr Pomeroy focused on the ideas of “sustain and retain” in building and urbanisation. His specialty, in evidence-based sustainable design, requires an extensive degree of interdisciplinary knowledge and practice. One of the key considerations today is that the “triple bottom line doesn’t go far enough,” in terms of considering what is sustainable. “What of culture, space and technology?” These will become increasingly important considerations as well, he said.

For him, there are six key parameters of sustainable development. First is the environment, which has seen cataclysmic effects. At COP21, many could not believe we can ever revert to pre-industrial temperatures, he said. Second is the economy. Alternative methods other than high-rise are being aggressively explored to increase density. For instance, one might not realise that Paris in France is actually denser than Kowloon in Hong Kong — “it is a perception game,” said Dr Pomeroy. Hong Kong feels dense because one often cannot see the sky from a building and the street level feels oppressive, he said. But this can be achieved with clever use of terraces and courtyards

Third is technology. He urged the use of technology, and to do so wisely — “don't refer to it at the end,” he said. Technological concerns and solutions should feature right at the start of a project.

Fourth is culture. In this area, Dr Pomeroy acknowledged that globalisation has had a huge impact. “What's it mean to be Malaysian, Singaporean, European?” For instance, in Nottinghill Carnival in London, one could easily find a huge variety of goods from

England to the West Indies. Sometimes a rich cosmopolitan environment exists from globalisation, other times these cultures arise from people fleeing from their homes, he added. A complex question within that also whether one should assimilate into an existing culture, he said, citing the Jewish and Bangladeshi communities in London from the 19th century on. Finally, how do we even ensure “that we’re not overrun by globalisation?”

Fifth is replication. When we have a replica of something, Dr Pomeroy suggested asking if it is “pastiche or real conservation”. While it’s not wrong in trying to preserve the heritage of the street and ensuring its structurally sound, transporting a skyline entirely, as in the case of the replica Rialto Bridge in Venice in Macau would be considered “pure replication”. Whereas, the painstaking restoration of Warsaw, which was thoroughly destroyed in WWII, is significant and remains one of the most prominent tourist centres in Poland.

Finally, there is reinterpretation. Here, one needs to ask the question: Is it radical enough to be considered a reinterpretation? Here he elaborated on his project for Sime Darby, to create the “most sustainable house in Asia”. The only parameter was that it had to be carbon neutral. Climate lessons from a *kampung* house structure were reinterpreted in a modern house. The resulting house was controlled by phone, and it was modular in that it could be converted from a three-room to a five-room house. The design gave wide opportunities for social interaction outside, and the home featured solar panels to generate energy.

Dr Pomeroy concluded by saying, “architecture like society has to assimilate into the existing fabric of the city without losing its identity. It adapts to the surroundings but need not copy, for assimilation — nor be a cultural island, for non-assimilation. Climate is the true constant that has the ability to help define the culture of a place.”

Discussion

Panellists: Ms Khoo Salma Nasution and Dr Jason Pomeroy

Moderator: Dr Chua Ai Lin, Assistant Professor in the Department of History, NUS and President of the Singapore Heritage Society

A question was raised about the decision-making process in deciding what to preserve. Ms Nasution suggested looking at “the context... and the quality of... what is to be preserved.” Her general view is to attempt to preserve what is scarce, this could be due to age, and in the case of George Town, it could be pre-Merdeka or pre-WWII. Nonetheless, there is also a need to preserve some of the more modern architecture, for balance. Dr Pomeroy added that if one were to leave it to architects, style would dictate what gets preserved “which is bad” because what might be considered good taste would often change. In fact, many heritage boards have a good balance — looking at factors such as the character of a place in a period of time, he said. For instance, Erno Goldfinger as a modernist architect heavily involved with the Brutalist movement was not considered stylish in the UK, but is today very much sought after.

When asked if George Town was a lot better preserved than Malacca, and what of other Malaysian towns and cities, Ms Nasution described how rent control in George Town had lasted until 2000, which indirectly helped in the preservation of its buildings. Also,

the heritage movement in George Town had already begun as early as the 1990s, so there was a groundswell in terms of interest in maintaining these old buildings. The Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s also meant that the pressure to develop was not too strong. Malacca, on the other hand, is much smaller and tends to be overwhelmed by reclamation and new developments around it. Other small towns are seeing growing projects in conservation, but sometimes the local governments are not equipped to see these through. On the other hand, a big city like Kuala Lumpur can promote monuments but the development drive is too strong there, she said.

Dr Pomeroy added that in one of his television episodes on cities, where he visited Kuala Lumpur, there was a recurring sense that the city has a “layering of history”. There is a strong element of a sense of quest — for post-colonial independence and “hero building” even — in structures like the KL railway, National Mosque and the Petronas Twin Towers.

DAY 3, 7 MAY 2016: HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABLE URBANISM: CASE STUDIES FROM FRANCE, SINGAPORE AND THE REGION

Session I: “Lessons and Pointers for the Future in Heritage Preservation in France, Singapore and the Region”

Speaker: Mr Didier Repellin, Chief Architect and Inspector General of Historic Monuments in France

Mr Repellin described his involvement in two work sites in Singapore: one being the restoration of a shophouse as a demonstration project, the second being the preservation of the former Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHI). He followed these with an account of a Cambodian work site.

In 1987, Mr Repellin received a telex from Mrs Pamela Lee from the Singapore Tourism Board. Soon after, he would receive Mrs Lee and her entourage as part of their whirlwind tour of Europe to understand restoration efforts there. Mr Repellin brought the team of 20–30 people on a one-day tour in Paris that October, fielding rapid-fire questions along the way on restoration that was done in the country.

One of the questions was how to go about preservation in general. Mrs Lee explained that whole buildings were being torn down to make way for development in Singapore. “I told her, you have to read the building like a book,” said Mr Repellin. “But it’s a sophisticated one. You have to learn how to read between the lines.”

Three weeks later, Mr Repellin found himself on a flight to Singapore. There, he would spend three days walking around the districts of Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam. He also visited around 20 historic buildings including the Supreme Court, the City Hall and the Victoria Memorial Hall. The task was to analyse these buildings and present ways in which to preserve them to Mrs Lee and her team.

In Singapore, Mr Repellin admired the unique structure of the shophouse, and beautiful ornamentation and carvings that were full of “personal expression — beautiful and spontaneous,” he said. He felt it was a shame that so many of these shophouses were being demolished, which certainly would have been attractive to anyone, both locals and visitors.

“Heritage is always local expression... the real expression of a country, [it] doesn’t come from anywhere else. So everything is local, made by the local. That very important,” he added.

After his analysis, Mr Repellin suggested a demonstration project to preserve a shophouse. They picked 53, Armenian Street, where roofers and masons from Europe would work with locals to save the building, not just the facade. This became a “school worksite”, with onsite “craftsmen training”.

During this demonstration project, the European and local craftsmen removed the asbestos roof, replaced damaged beams and rafters. V-shaped roof tiles were duplicated

with different coloured clay. Mr Repellin noted that these tiles were very adaptive to the local climate, as it allowed rainwater to run off quickly.

It was also interesting to see the Singaporeans and Europeans working together. Although none of them spoke a common language, the tools they used were the same language, said Mr Repellin. Local craftsmen learnt to remove the mortar; masonry was well done, where natural pigments were chosen. Local products were also prioritised, and white lime wash rather than yellow was applied to achieve transparency to make the building more vibrant, he added.

One of the European craftsmen had worked on some of the sculptures in the Versailles by hand. In Singapore, he was able to clean the friezes to reveal different details, most of which were done freehand by former artisans. The process also exposed the original blue colour of the facade. Finally, mouldings that were missing in the original were added.

The sample shophouse project was completed in three weeks. While the final product was not extremely distinct, the coordination between the craftsmen left a deep impression on Mr Repellin.

Next, he described his restoration of the CHIJ across from today's Raffles City. An MRT had been constructed underneath, and his team had to create concrete slabs to protect cables. While the school was no longer operating on that site, it was still an interesting French order brought by Fr. Jean-Baptiste Beurel from Brittany at the age of 25. Fr. Beurel had built the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd in 1837 and went on to set up mission schools to educate the young — both boys and girls.

The site for the girls' school was built by architect George Coleman. The nuns who ran the school were from the order of des Dames de Saint Maur — known for their education and aristocracy, with the motto, "Simple in virtue, steadfast in duty."

During his involvement, Mr Repellin met many former students of the convent, including members of the school association. They all "loved the convent," he said. He even went north into Malaysia to meet a former orphan who used to attend the convent. From the 97-year-old, who spoke in distinct 18th century-style French, Mr Repellin found out that abandoned infants were put in a contraption on the door to the convent. This contraption was aptly named "Gate of Hope". The same lady recounted how every orphan would have a godmother, to foster generosity, and hers was a sister of the order. When all the nuns were made to return to France, the sister continued to stay in touch by sending letters and poems. Mr Repellin believed that telling such human stories to the URA had contributed to the decision to retain the Convent and preserve it.

As to its restoration, the original chapel in CHIJ was not well built. It was cracked and these cracks would make loud noises even as students prayed within, and the roof had even collapsed once. The Mother Superior at the time had to move prayer mass into her salon, and there Mr Repellin and his team managed to reveal an inscription "Come along with me and be perfect". This would be come the motto for the restoration, he said.

Mr Repellin worked alongside architect William Hong, and Dr Liu Thai Ker was the supervisor. There were not many worksites at the time, so it was difficult to find the materials to set it up, such as scaffolding.

Here, Mr Repellin paused to relate the story of a passer-by at the work site, in her 80s, who cried uncontrollably thinking that the convent would be demolished. She was ecstatic to hear that it would be restored instead, and it was revealed that she was an orphan who went through the Gate of Hope, who eventually married an Australian Prime Minister.

On the work done on the site, he added that the original workers did “beautiful work” and were clearly respectful of the site, wanting to offer their best efforts to the new generation. He was amazed by the quality of the original construction. However, water damage was quite severe. His team of Italian restorers was able to restore the mosaics. As to modern fittings like air-conditioning, it was fortunate that the gothic architecture allowed the concealment of pipes.

“The second thing which was amazing is the stained glass windows.” Made by the best stained-glass maker in the 19th century, Jules Dobbelaere, the stained glass pieces as Mr Repellin’s team found them were mixed up and several were missing. Interestingly, due to the Asian reverence of dragons, Saint Michael was depicted as killing a European crown instead of a dragon. A competition was held to secure a new stained-glass maker. A local studio provided a sample but this could not match the life-like quality of the original, and another company got the tender instead.

During the restoration, the Catholic Church, sisters and members were able to fundraise as well. Overall, this was a wonderful time “putting back to life this book of humanity,” he said, with a strong lesson between architecture and humanity.

In his final case study, Mr Repellin described a project in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It is the restoration of a Napoleon III pavilion. He recounted how a young Cambodian had come to his office with drawings to seek a job at his company. The 17 year-old named Sapan was a refugee from the genocide invasion by Pol Pot. He had escaped by foot and was rescued by the Red Cross after arriving in Lyon. Mr Repellin found that the young man designed well and had gone to design school, and employed him for the next six years. By around 1988/89, Sapan’s parents were ill and Mr Repellin helped him secure a French citizenship to be able to visit Cambodia and return to France after that.

On this trip, Sapan brought back pictures of the pavilion, a gift from Napoleon to Cambodia, hoping to work on restoring it. They were unable to get support from the French government, but decided to make a site visit at their own costs. On his flight to Cambodia, Mr Repellin met a passenger who was working on restoring an old hospital in Phnom Penh. He went to visit the hospital and was appalled to see that there were 600 patients with no sanitation, water or electricity. There were no beds, only floorboards. Yet, no one was crying, he added. It was then that Mr Repellin decided to work on the hospital instead of the Napoleonic pavilion.

In order to carry out the work, he had to enlist the help of the locals. The older generation was corrupted and so Mr Repellin decided to train the younger generation.

He went back to France to hire a master to help with roofing and masonry. He also enlisted volunteers — 27 students between 18–24 years. He also hired 27 Cambodian orphans to help with the site, such as building the scaffolding.

Due to the local conditions, the team lacked tools — a year had to be devoted to preparing the worksite and tools needed. And while there was no inspector for the worksite, everyone was careful. In the summer of 1991, work began in earnest.

Throughout the process, locals would come forward to help. One such instance was when an old man came forward. He had worked at the hospital and wanted to help, bringing with him a tool that he had buried in his garden when Pol Pot killed his family. With two other Cambodians and only one tool, they made three pairs of door in a few weeks, said Mr Repellin. Other instances of resourcefulness include the use of local plants to create paintbrushes. The work was completed in September, and launched in November, graced by King Sihanouk who had recently returned after his exile.

After the project, all the Cambodian orphans had a chance to travel to France to work for some period or to train. Many wanted to stay in the pavilion to work. Mr Repellin said the worksite was like a “candle of friendship” between cultures. “Even if we don’t speak the same language — you see heritage is a wonderful common denominator and a link between cultures.”

Discussion

Speaker: Mr Didier Repellin

Moderator: Mr Kelvin Ang, Director of Conservation Management, URA

An audience member asked Mr Repellin for his thoughts on the post-restoration conversation on CHIJMES, specifically on the decision to adapt it for commercial use including bars and shopping areas so as to recoup the cost of restoration.

Mr Repellin understood that the chapel was relegated for cultural use (e.g., weddings) and was already deconsecrated prior to the restoration. “The [Cathedral of the] Good Shepard is just across the street so there was no need in term of religious buildings,” said Mr Repellin. He added, “This type of building is not so easy to reuse. I will say, if the cultural events can raise your soul and your spirit, that’s already something in the same spirit of the building itself.”

Regarding the restoration of the Napoleon III pavilion in Cambodia, an audience member asked if the timeline coincided with the return of Prince Sihanouk, whether the French government was involved in funding the project, and if being French was an impediment seeing the Khmer Rouge were still in power. Mr Repellin said the pavilion work had absolutely no link to the restoration of the Royal Palace. In fact, the Prince’s travel back to Cambodia was delayed several times, and his return was unexpected because the Khmer Rouge had wanted to retain its seat of power.

In terms of finance, international students that came to Cambodia had to pay for their own costs and air tickets. Mr Repellin himself gave many talks to secure sponsorships, tools and donations. “I think I gave 200 lectures about this, just to get the money,” he said. Still, his team was missing eight air tickets and 80,000 francs. Close to the planned

departure date, Mr Repellin received a call from an elderly lady who, with her sister, had wanted to make a donation. It turned out their father had worked in Cambodia and Vietnam. Mr Repellin recounted how the two ladies received him at their home and donated a gold bar on the very day, which helped to raise the missing funds.

Session II: ‘The Singapore Conservation Story, Lessons from the Past, its Current State and Prospects for the Future’

Speakers: Mrs Koh-Lim Wen Gin, Former Chief Planner and Deputy Chief Executive, URA; and Mrs Pamela Lee, Senior Tourism Consultant, Singapore Tourism Board

“In order to extend the lifespan of these significant post-independence buildings, there is a greater need for public and private partnership. We need to develop a pragmatic process and mechanism including appropriate incentives. I use the word ‘appropriate incentives’. Incentives that are sensitive to why we are extending the life of these building — either retention or conservation — to encourage these buildings to be retained or conserved voluntarily by the owners.”

— Mrs Koh-Lim Wen Gin

Mrs Koh-Lim described how she had joined the URA team in 1974 to redevelop the city centre. The work of an architect-planner is never boring, she added, as urban planning and design required at that time the clearance of slums, planning for public housing, government sale of sites for commercial development, etc. This was post-independent Singapore, where many houses were dilapidated and not sewerred, she said.

“The primary goal then was to transform the city into a modern efficient centre for business, finance and tourism,” she explained. This began a 15-year demolition period with some attempts at preservation. By the early 1980s, Singapore’s city centre was transformed to concrete, glass and high-rise. Looking like any other city, Singapore architects felt that the country was losing its sense of identity. A decisive attempt began at that point to retain the city’s character and identity, she said.

In early 1992, the government decided to build the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT). URA architects and planners “seized the opportunity to carry out a comprehensive review of the central area,” she said. Mr Goh Hup Chor, who was seconded from the Housing & Development Board to URA, appointed Mrs Koh-Lim to lead a team. At the time, she and her team would walk the city for their research. In fact, groundwork and research was already done in 1985 to plan for the conservation of significant historical districts, parks like Pearl’s Hill and Fort Canning, and the extension of downtown into Marina Bay.

In the mid-1980s, URA proceeded with more confidence. It obtained government approval to conserve 10 districts and 400 shophouses. Between 1985 and 1989, her team worked hard to convince shophouse owners to conserve their buildings according to URA guidelines.

In 1986 there was a PATA review of tourism in relation to heritage and culture. In 1987 Mr Repellin was invited to work on the demonstration project on Armenian Street. Here

were lessons on how to read a building and proper practices, as well as bringing back the human touch. “We tend to think new is good, old is bad. But on the other hand we can’t save all the old; we have to be selective. So, having saved and protected what we have, we have to make sure they still retain some degree of patina,” said Mrs Koh-Lim.

URA had Dr Liu Thai Ker as its board member from 1979–1992. Dr Liu was a strong supporter for conservation and leader in master planning and urban design, and in 1989, the URA Act was amended to include the designation of conservation areas. A masterplan was unveiled for the city centre with guidelines for each and every shophouse. This was followed by programmes with the private sector, education forums, recognition rewards, and close collaboration with the Singapore Institute of Architects.

Some of the challenges Mrs Koh-Lim recalled were convincing contractors to avoid replicas. Singapore also wanted to close the gap with international standards in conservation. To inform the wider public, a series of conservation stories were pitched to the press.

In 1995, the government introduced the 3R principles, allowing contemporary techniques in restoration. In 2006, URA’s conservation programme received an award for urban excellence from ULI. The award citation read:

“In a rapidly modernising country, Singapore has established a model conservation programme to preserve its rich heritage of vernacular building and colourful neighbourhoods using a collaborative approach involving government organisations, the public and developers. The island republic’s URA has achieved a balance between free market economics and cultural conservation.”

As to the critical success factors, Mrs Koh-Lim said the reclamation of Marina Bay promised large tracts of alternate land, which allowed URA to conserve some of the city centre. Public awareness and a healthy state of economy were also critical to a comprehensive planning approach. The timely formulation of the masterplan, and the government’s endorsement and commitment to the plan, as well as contributions from solid professionals in the field were essential. In terms of masterplan reviews, Mrs Koh-Lim said these prioritised the enhancement of the quality of our physical environment and life and the strengthening of identity.

Concluding, Mrs Koh-Lim said that what we have today did not happen by chance. It was a combination of hard work and strong political leadership — and planning a city employs the mind and the heart, she said. Singapore as a nation will likely continue this journey of re-evaluation, and she looked forward to greater collaboration between the private and public sectors in this respect.

“Do we really study what was originally there and do we respect what is there? And do we then adapt it to new living but without killing the spaces and the feeling? I believe that it can be done, you can hide all your wiring, you can put in your modern toilets. But you don’t have to make four floors out of three floors. You don’t have to get rid of courtyards.”

— Mrs Pamela Lee

Mrs Pamela Lee spoke next, titling her short presentation, “If the walls could speak”. She imagines historic districts — Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, Emerald Hill, Tiong Bahru — would thank the URA for conserving them as whole districts, instead of singular buildings being preserved.

What we need today is a greater control of the “urban edge”. For instance, the five-foot way should really be kept for walking, not for merchandise, she said. Tourists and pedestrians also need places to rest their feet.

And although the LTA and Ministry of the Environment managed to bring back street stalls, gone are figures like the clock maker, fortune teller and calligrapher. Nevertheless, new trades are in their place and these will become part of the heritage landscape in due time, said Mrs Lee. This is why stories are critical, she added. “I think the tourist brochures or our own write-ups should include the earlier, richer history of what the other buildings were and the other communities that helped grow these historic areas.

While she did not agree with the building of a highway across Clifford Pier and fought fiercely against it, because the city would be severed from the body of water, it eventually had to be done in order to control the traffic. Still, she was glad that the URA has pedestrianised many areas as well as installing several green belts in the city area, giving a sense of space.

In her efforts to conserve the identity of the Singapore River, she had successfully put bumboats there, but could not get more boats, resulting in a river that is “too quiet and too dead,” she said. Also, diners could not enjoy a meal on the river while being on the boats due to regulatory reasons. Finally, a lot of hard work also went into the planning of the lighting for the Singapore River. It is harder today now that lighting is everywhere — the river needs to be dark for the lighting to be dramatic, she said.

As to the many black and white houses kept by URA and the Singapore Land Authority, she applauded their courage to do so. However, many are empty and costs are written off to maintain them year after year. Perhaps some could become small hotels or charming restaurants. There is certainly a need to change their uses, she said.

Mrs Lee also suggested that URA conducts some conservation courses so that its staff could also understand what had gone before, the actions by previous planners and their rationale for them.

Regarding political leaders, Mrs Lee said that some were wonderful in their support while others were not at all sympathetic. Former Finance Minister Richard Hu for example, after a fire in Chinatown, helped expedite the lifting of rent control there so that more buildings could be quickly restored and saved.

Mrs Lee sometimes wondered if we really study what was at a site and respect it — then adapt it without killing the original feel of the place. Modernity can be well accommodated without getting rid of everything, she said. She noted that many younger

architects tend to want to gut a space to create something new, instead of using the space and working around it. Very few owners have the latter approach as well — one exception was Dr Geh Min — who would respect the way the building was.

If walls could speak, Mrs Lee believed that the buildings would want to be appreciated for their built forms that go well with the climate of Singapore. Today, there is overbuilding and while not everything could be brought back, Mrs Lee hoped that the form of buildings could at least be retained.

Finally, if the walls could speak, they might say that Singapore is not ready for fine conservation. Mrs Lee said that due to the drive for modernity, Singaporeans might not be ready to live in such restored buildings just yet.

Discussion

Panellists: Mr Didier Repellin, Mrs Koh-Lim Wen Gin and Mrs Pamela Lee

Moderator: Professor Lily Kong, Provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences, SMU

Moderator Prof. Lily Kong posed the first question to the panellists: Seeing that a natural tension exists between development and conservation, and often not in a simple two-dimensional manner (i.e., not just economic versus cultural), whose heritage should be conserved? And whose responsibility is it? “And if each of you had a choice or model or place in mind where the aspect of conservation has been exceptionally well done, what can we in Singapore learn from that,” added Prof. Kong.

Mrs Lee said that the question on higher quality conservation lies with Singapore’s youth. They will be the “the customers who go to these conservation sights. And their eyes will know good conservation from overdone or wrong conservation,” she said. “So if the URA planners keep holding the line,” she added, “keep the form, keep the cityscape I think it’s only a matter of time the young people will say, ‘I don’t really like this. It’s overdone.’”

For Mr Repellin, there are many different “fashions” in conservation — one generation may want open spaces while another prizes division and privacy. Calling heritage a “living” thing, Mr Repellin said the critical thing is to save this heritage. Other than that, it is a question of adding more sophisticated finishes.

Mrs Koh-Lim said Singapore has done a lot to protect the physical, but not as much in place management. For instance, URA at a time had wanted to keep wooden shop front planks, but this turned out to be highly impractical. The owners must want to do it from the heart, she said, because economic forces are at play, which cannot be fully controlled. One example of market forces at work is how Haji Lane is now largely patronised by visitors or tourists.

An audience member asked the panel if a Christian-themed area could be carved out in the area comprising the Cathedral of Good Shepherd, CHIJMES, the Armenian church, etc. This could be somewhat similar to the European concession areas in Shanghai, Tianjin and Chengdu.

The next question focused on architecture in the curriculum. Could this be useful for the appreciation of our places, and enable members of the public to have deeper conversations about restoration, etc.? Mr Repellin said for him, learning about traditional architecture gives one a sense of hierarchy, of what should be listed or demolished. In Singapore, Mrs Lee described how the Economic Development Board had recommended that children learn art in school, if Singapore wants to be a top design destination. However this has yet to come into reality. For instance, even though Singapore had succeed in securing the Tang shipwreck treasure — because the salvager felt that Singapore would take better care of the treasure — it is often the Chinese visitors who are reverent. Singapore visitors are hardly interested.

An audience member said that with the gloomy economic prospects in the medium term, would Singapore lose more buildings — this time perhaps modern buildings? Mrs Koh-Lim said that indeed some of the buildings are being torn down too soon, e.g., within 20 to 30 years of construction. This is complicated by the overwhelming force of the free market in Singapore. Mrs Koh-Lim does not believe that incentives can sustainably drive conservation. No one entity holds the solution — we can only continue to debate and discuss.

Out of so many disciplines, why did Mr Repellin chose conservation — especially when there was more money to be made in modern architecture, an audience member asked. To the ladies on the panellists, the same audience member asked what had driven them in their journey, considering this was a largely male-dominated arena that required one to deal with government ministers.

Mr Repellin replied that he had enjoyed modern architecture but he was not a creator; instead he “needs roots to create something”. Conservation provides that and he has enjoyed every minute of it. For him, conservation is not just “fixing and restoring”, it is an adventure as well, he added.

Mrs Koh-Lim revealed that she did not have an ambition to study architecture while she was young. Architecture was a midway point where she and her parents met; she had wanted to study fashion while her parents had wanted her to pursue a professional degree. When she left university to join the private practice, Alan Choe from URA, her soon-to-be mentor, had advertised aggressively for town planners and Mrs Koh-Lim answered the call. Her career has included the reclamation for the Marina Bay, planning for acquisitions as well as a broad range of urban design planning — something she said her son was now proud of, despite her spending long hours at work when he was young.

Mrs Lee tried to imagine Singapore without conservation. It would just be about “glass, steel and lots of greenery,” with buildings torn down every few years to increase plot ratio, she said. Conservation is “us, our soul, our warmth and everything we’re familiar with,” she concluded.

The symposium concluded with site visits to the following locations:

- 1: The Civic District of Empress Place and the Padang*
- 2: Cathedral of the Good Shepherd*
- 3: Kampong Glam Historic District*