



CASE STUDY

Singapore | Kampong Glam

When Old is Also Hip

One of the most historically significant neighbourhoods for the Malay and Muslim community in Singapore, Kampong Glam was conserved by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) at the turn of 1990. But even with successful restoration of heritage buildings and preservation of traditional trades, the district was quiet and uneventful. This prompted the government and the community to rejuvenate the area.

The Challenge

Kampong Glam was established as the site of a new palace for Malay royalty in 1824. Named after the Gelam tree, the area urbanised rapidly with the construction of two major trunk roads, known today as Victoria Street and North Bridge Road. The residential population expanded quickly with an influx of immigrants from Malaya, Indonesia and Arabic-speaking countries.

For the next century, the district grew around its various residents. Each immigrant group's specialised trade—including basket weaving, sandal making, copper crafting and tomb carving—

emerged on different streets. These businesses were run from two-storey shophouses that define the district's landscape till today. Kampong Glam also became an important centre in Southeast Asia for the Malay print industry.

In 1989, Kampong Glam was gazetted as a conservation area due to its rich architectural and cultural history. However, the area had become rundown and quiet, with most activity centred around the textile trade. Thus, the challenge was not just to conserve Kampong Glam's architecture and history, but also to make the area lively and integrated with Singapore's modern landscape.



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Kampong Glam in 1984 before conservation and renewal efforts.





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The Solution

The URA implemented a conservation plan with seven aspects for intervention: conservation of the entire area, designation of a core area, creation of a heritage park and festival street, pedestrianisation, infrastructure development, improvements to street furniture and signage, and adaptive reuse of conservation buildings.

The designation of a core area clustered “ethnic-based activities” in buildings of architectural and historical significance near the iconic Sultan Mosque and Istana Kampong Glam. This involved selecting trades

that could remain in this area, such as the selling of batiks, sarongs and carpets. Textile businesses were concentrated on Arab Street, where they continue to be today. Incompatible trades such as bars, pubs, nightclubs, karaoke outlets and western fast-food restaurants were disallowed in the core area.

To increase walkability and street life, the area around Sultan Mosque—including Bussorah Street and Muscat Street—was pedestrianised. Bussorah became Kampong Glam’s commercial flagship, injecting new life into the area. Additionally, many state-owned shophouses along the street were refurbished and put up for sale, fuelling further private sector-led rejuvenation of other shophouses in Kampong Glam.

By the early 2000s, most of the shophouses were restored and traditional trades continued to thrive. But the challenge of increasing footfall and vibrancy remained. Some business owners and visitors described Kampong Glam as so quiet that one could even go bowling down the lanes at night, as visitors dropped by primarily for daytime shopping.

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- 01 A refashioned Kampong Glam with the iconic Sultan Mosque, Malay Heritage Centre and traditional shophouses.
- 02 One of the many shops in the area selling traditional fare such as carpets and lamps.



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To liven up the district, the URA put up additional shophouses for sale from 2003–2004. New businesses catering to young and diverse patrons moved in, creating an interesting juxtaposition with the traditional trades. Haji Lane, parallel to Arab Street, became home to trendy cafes and independent boutiques.

New commercial, residential and hotel developments around Kampong Glam also attracted office workers and tourists to the area. Other interesting new developments such as private museums—the Children Little Museum and the Vintage Camera's Museum—enhanced the district's offerings.

03 A glimpse into the unique architecture of Sultan Mosque and the shophouses in Kampong Glam.

04 Haji Lane today, with boutiques and cafes set against the modern backdrop of the surrounding area.



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The increase in bars and clubs, however, raised concerns from long-time businesses, former residents and the Sultan Mosque community over the erosion of the area's integrity. Considering these perspectives, the URA and the Police Entertainment Licensing Unit of the Singapore Police Force disallowed new bars, pubs, nightclubs and karaoke outlets from operating in a larger area around the Malay Heritage Centre in 2005. This restriction was eventually extended to the entire conservation area in 2010, although previously approved businesses could remain.

Government agencies also started placemaking efforts to enhance street life and showcase Kampong Glam's heritage.

Today, heritage trails and markers guide tourists around the area, sharing oft-forgotten stories of former residents and traders.

Local businesses and community groups have also contributed to rejuvenation efforts. Since 2014, an association of local businesses, One Kampong Gelam (OKG), has partnered government agencies and arts or placemaking groups to spearhead road closures. OKG, the Malay Heritage Centre and the Aliwal Arts Centre have organised festivals to highlight the district's characteristic traditional arts and crafts, combining them with modern performances.

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- 01 Pedestrianised Bussorah Street with its mix of modern restaurants and traditional retailers leading to Sultan Mosque.
 - 02 Restaurants that serve various local and international cuisines line the pedestrian mall at Bussorah Street.



Kampong Glam is now lively throughout the day, attracting tourists and locals with its blend of traditional trades and modern retailers.





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01 Muscat Street was upgraded in 2012 with street design and murals reminiscent of its namesake, the capital of Oman, Muscat.

02 A traditional dance performance along Arab Street, closed specially for the Aliwal Arts Night Crawl.

03 People gathering around Sultan Mosque just after prayers.



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“Ongoing conversations build understanding of the different stakeholders’ values and expectations, setting the stage for Kampong Glam to continue to grow as a place where the past and present thrive together.”

The Outcome

With these initiatives, Kampong Glam is now lively throughout the day, attracting tourists and locals with its blend of traditional trades and modern retailers. By night, office workers and tourists stream to the district’s diverse eateries. Placemaking initiatives have increased footfall by 40% over the past three years, estimates OKG’s Chairman Saeid Labbafi.

Still, not everyone is satisfied with or has benefited equally from these changes. While newer F&B establishments have benefited from the buzz, some traditional retailers have lamented that they have been left behind. Efforts to increase footfall have not improved business for some shops on Arab Street, which have closed in the past three years due to rising rents.

Reflecting on these tensions, the URA’s Director of Conservation Management Kelvin Ang explained: “Kampong Glam is an example of the next phase of conservation, beyond the hardware. We have to be involved as place managers to facilitate community conversations and look in greater detail at the expectations.”

An example is the Kampong Gelam Working Group set up in 2013 by the URA for stakeholders to discuss and collaborate for the precinct’s evolution. Business owners and government agencies have also begun discussions on creating a Business Improvement District to unite businesses. These ongoing conversations build understanding of the different stakeholders’ values and expectations, setting the stage for Kampong Glam to continue to grow as a place where the past and present thrive together. ○