

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: CONSERVING THE NATION'S BUILT HERITAGE

Today, Singapore stands out for its unique urban landscape: historic districts, buildings and refurbished shophouses blend seamlessly with modern buildings and majestic skyscrapers. This startling transformation was no accident, but the combined efforts of many dedicated individuals from the public and private sectors in the conservation-restoration of our built heritage.

Past, Present and Future: Conserving the Nation's Built Heritage brings to life Singapore's urban governance and planning story. In this Urban Systems Study, readers will learn how conservation of Singapore's unique built environment evolved to become an integral part of urban planning. It also examines how the public sector guided conservation efforts, so that building conservation could evolve in step with pragmatism and market considerations to ensure its sustainability through the years.

"Singapore's distinctive buildings reflect the development of a nation that has come of age. This publication is timely, as we mark 30 years since we gazetted the first historic districts and buildings. A larger audience needs to learn more of the background story of how the public and private sectors have creatively worked together to make building conservation viable and how these efforts have ensured that Singapore's historic districts remain vibrant, relevant and authentic for locals and tourists alike, thus leaving a lasting legacy for future generations."

Mrs Koh-Lim Wen Gin, Former Chief Planner and Deputy CEO of URA.

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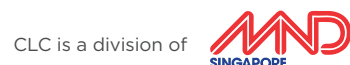
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Set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) has as its mission “to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities”. The CLC’s work spans four main areas—Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms, and Advisory. Through these activities, the CLC hopes to provide urban leaders and practitioners with the knowledge and support needed to make our cities better. For more information, please visit www.clc.gov.sg.

Research Advisors for the CLC’s Urban Systems Studies are experts who have generously provided their guidance and advice. However, they are not responsible for any remaining errors or omissions, which remain the responsibility of the author(s) and the CLC.

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Cover photo:
Chinatown: Smith Street, at the junction with Trengganu Street, showing the alfresco food street.
Courtesy of Mark Teo.

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FOREWORD

The history of a city is recorded in its buildings. For a small country with a short history of nationhood, Singapore has done well in its efforts to conserve its built heritage. As of now, over 7,000 buildings have been protected and restored according to accepted international practice. In addition, individual buildings of unique historical importance have been gazetted as national monuments. Where a heritage zone is declared for conservation, new buildings within or closely adjoining are required to be developed under envelope control.

From its earliest days, the town area was planned with ethnic areas reflecting the multi-racial composition of the population—Chinatown, Kampong Glam and the Civic District—while other areas such as Little India developed organically. They add immeasurably to the visual richness of our city and project our distinct multi-ethnic society.

Shophouses comprise the fabric of historical urban areas in Southeast Asia's port cities and in China's southern coastal cities. While the basic form is the same—narrow frontage, generous depth—architectural expressions vary widely. Many of Singapore's conserved shophouses are known for their rich and colourful details, a unique mixture of architectural expressions and materials from different parts of Asia and Europe. Furthermore, classic examples of Singapore houses built before World War Two illustrate the shrewd melding of European architectural language and tropical adaptation.

Given our rich heritage, I am delighted to see the publication of this book, which through its solid research and interviews, records the hard work and dedicated contributions of many heritage lovers over the decades. I often liken heritage buildings to Cinderella: when she is doing domestic chores in her soiled worn clothes she is not considered beautiful, but after a wash and with a new dress she becomes a princess.

Our historical buildings were once considered unattractive and were in danger of demolition. Fortunately, through the discerning eyes of heritage champions, many of these buildings today play a significant role in our urban landscape. Heritage buildings give our city memories. And, hopefully, they will inspire champions in each generation to continue to conserve and to create heritage-worthy buildings.

Dr Liu Thai Ker

Chairman, Advisory Board of the Centre for Liveable Cities
Chairman, Morrow Architects and Planners Pte Ltd

PREFACE

The Centre for Liveable Cities' (CLC) research in urban systems unpacks the systemic components that make up the city of Singapore, capturing knowledge not only within each of these systems, but also the threads that link these systems and how they make sense as a whole. The studies are scoped to venture deep into the key domain areas the Centre has identified under the Singapore Liveability Framework, attempting to answer two key questions: how Singapore has transformed itself into a highly liveable city over the last five decades, and how Singapore can build on our urban development experience to create knowledge and urban solutions for current and future challenges relevant to Singapore and other cities through applied research. *Past, Present and Future: Conserving the Nation's Built Heritage* is the latest publication from the Urban Systems Studies (USS) series.

The research process involves close and rigorous engagement of CLC researchers with our stakeholder agencies, and oral history interviews with Singapore's urban pioneers and leaders to gain insights into development processes and distil tacit knowledge that has been gleaned from planning and implementation, as well as the governance of Singapore. As a body of knowledge, the Urban Systems Studies, which cover aspects such as water, transport, housing, industrial infrastructure and sustainable environment, reveal not only the visible outcomes of Singapore's development, but the complex support structures of our urban achievements.

The Centre would like to thank the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the National Heritage Board (NHB) and all those who have contributed their knowledge, expertise and time to make this publication possible. I wish you an enjoyable read.

Khoo Teng Chye

Executive Director
Centre for Liveable Cities

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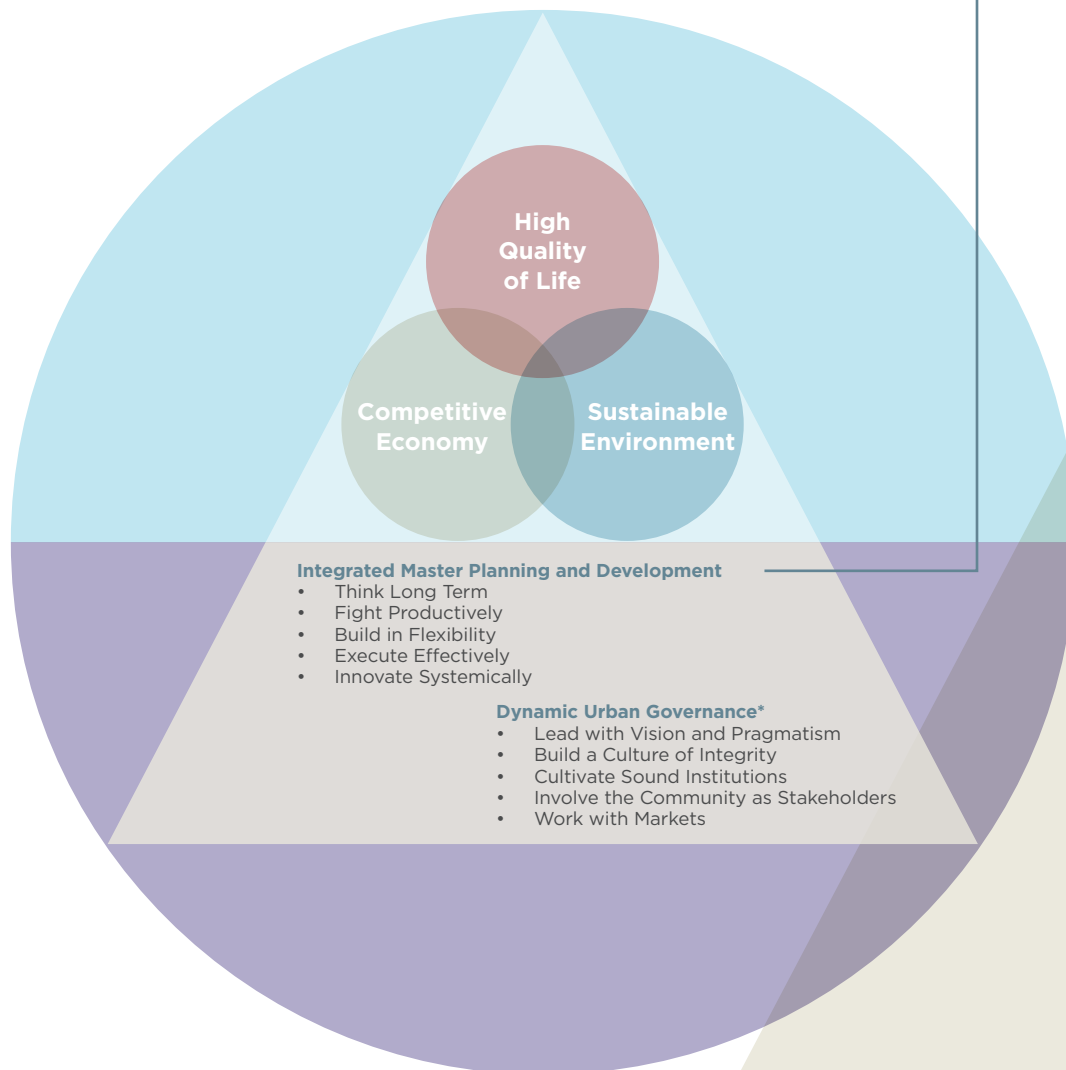
The Centre also extends special thanks to the following interviewees (in alphabetical order) for sharing their insights on Singapore's building conservation journey: Alan Choe, Didier Repellin, Doris Lee, George Yeo, Goh Hup Chor, Kelvin Ang, Khoo Teng Chye, Koh-Lim Wen Gin, Ler Seng Ann, Lim Hng Kiang, Liu Thai Ker, Pamela Lee, Richard Helfer, S. Dhanabalan, William Lim and Yeo Kirk Siang.

The writer, Katyana Melic, would like to thank Michael Koh for his astute guidance. In addition, the following colleagues at the CLC, the URA and the NHB have provided invaluable comments and help on the book—Cheong Kay Teck, Chong Hwee Jane, Elaine Tan, Eunice Rachel Low, Gregory Lee, Joanna Tan, Kwek Sian Choo, Tan Xin Wei Andy, Amanda Ngiam, John Siow, Kelvin Ang, Teh Lai Yip, Jean Wee, Marshall Penafort, Sylvia Goh and Yeo Kirk Siang. Lastly, she would also like to thank Bayan Edis for his tireless support.

THE SINGAPORE LIVEABILITY FRAMEWORK

The Singapore Liveability Framework is derived from Singapore's urban development experience and is a useful guide for developing sustainable and liveable cities.

The general principles under **Integrated Master Planning and Development** and **Dynamic Urban Governance** are reflected in the themes found in *Past, Present and Future: Conserving the Nation's Built Heritage*.



Integrated Master Planning and Development

Think Long Term

Even while the city was undergoing rapid urban redevelopment throughout the 1960s and 1970s, forward-looking planners made conservation plans for historic districts. The plans considered the character of the districts, proposed conserving whole districts and included pedestrianisation to retain the charm of the old shophouses. Government agencies also spearheaded demonstration projects of old shophouses to gradually convince the private sector and policymakers that conservation could be an economically viable project. The long-term vision of planners to create these plans allowed them to capitalise on shifting urban development priorities in the 1980s to ensure that conservation of historic districts could proceed.

(See Early Conservation Voices and Demonstration Projects, page 10)

Execute Effectively

When the Conservation Master Plan was announced in 1986, and after the successful demonstration projects like the one at Tanjong Pagar, the private sector became increasingly supportive of conservation. It was thus up to the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) to ensure that architectural conservation standards were upheld, while also demonstrating flexibility to allow for adaptive reuse. The conservation team at the URA would check on buildings on weekends and evenings to ensure that developers had not flouted rules by wilfully demolishing any parts of either the interior or exterior that had to remain as part of the conservation guidelines.

(See Galvanising the Private Sector, page 66)

Innovate Systemically

During the demonstration project of the 32 shophouses in Tanjong Pagar—part of a larger pool of 200 shophouses that had been acquired—upgrading the infrastructure of the area for modern living was essential. These shophouses had no back lane for servicing like sewerage, water and utilities. The shophouses were also on a hill of different heights and sizes, creating an additional challenge. Agencies worked together to innovatively cut into the shophouses to create a uniform back lane large enough for basic services and a fire escape. With the necessary infrastructure in place, the entire district became fit for modern use.

(See Retrofitting Infrastructure to Modernise Historic Districts, page 81)

* Dynamic Urban Governance

Lead with Vision and Pragmatism

The URA was made the formal conservation authority with the necessary powers to identify conservation districts, create conservation guidelines and uphold conservation standards in 1989, in large part because of its demonstrated ability to lead with vision and pragmatism. They had shown sensitivity to conservation even before the Conservation Master Plan, through their forward-looking plans, demonstration projects, efforts to learn from overseas examples and ingenuity. They had also advocated for adaptive reuse, rather than adopting a purist approach to conservation, which was to keep both building and its traditional use. The pragmatic approach ensured that conservation could be sustained.

(See The URA Becomes the Designated Conservation Authority, page 59)

Involve the Community as Stakeholders

The Parks & Waterbodies Plan and Identity Plan launched in 2002 by the URA had a public consultation process over the recommendations in the Plan and made use of specialised focus groups, known as Subject Groups, to engage the public. The Subject Groups included professionals, interest groups and lay people and were tasked to study various proposals in the Plan, to conduct dialogue sessions with stakeholders and obtain public feedback. Because of this engagement process, parts of Balestier, Joo Chiat, Tiong Bahru, Lavender, Syed Alwi and Jalan Besar were conserved with public support.

(See Stirring Public Interest: The Parks & Waterbodies Plan and the Identity Plan, page 110)

Work with Markets

China Square, located in Chinatown at the border of the Central Business District, is today a bustling part of the city with skyscrapers interspersed with refashioned shophouses. How this became so reflects the URA's keen approach to working with markets. The area was divided into seven parcels for sale through its sale of sites programmes. The guidelines for each plot detailed what had to be conserved or demolished, in order to intensify its land use. Demonstrating a flexible approach to working with markets while upholding conservation standards, the URA also considered a number of requests from the developers to modify some of the plans. This included retractable roof structures and a car park.

(See China Square: Mixing the Old and New, page 70)

OVERVIEW

BUILDING CONSERVATION: EVOLVING THROUGH THE YEARS

The history of modern Singapore's built environment chronicles the stories of settlers who came to these shores from across the region at the advent of colonisation. The blending of Malay, Chinese, Peranakan and Indian with European aesthetics in the conserved buildings that dot the island, mark the change and evolution of a nation and its identity.

Today, over 7,200 buildings have been conserved, along with 72 national monuments and 99 historic sites. The survival of these places as Singapore's rapid urban transformation unfolded from independence to present day is no accident. It is instead the result of deliberate, conscious planning and foresight reflecting the integrated planning approach that has characterised Singapore's urban development.

From the early days of national monuments, to the conservation of districts and historic sites, and then the greater emphasis on identity, conservation of our built heritage has become an integral part of urban planning. How did conservation become integrated into planning and how has our understanding of our built heritage evolved?

The narrative begins prior to independence with an emphasis on preserving monuments of Singapore's multi-religious heritage. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with the pressures of urban renewal in land-scarce Singapore and the rehousing of many families and individuals living in derelict shophouses, conservation did not feature highly on the government's agenda. Though the time was not ripe then for large-scale conservation, planners, community members, government officials and politicians were well aware that many of Singapore's unique buildings were being torn down in the name of development. However, small steps taken before official conservation began signalled not only the importance of our unique heritage to the identity of the nation, but also of the economic viability of conservation and maximisation of land value. Despite these constraints, national monument preservation still featured strongly during this time period.

What followed after years of preparation was a seminal moment through the Conservation Master Plan and the political support to ensure that conservation could move in tandem with urban development. Arguably

driven by a more top-down approach to conservation in the 1980s and 1990s, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), supported by key politicians, played a pivotal part in not only planning for conservation but also galvanising the private sector and community to uphold conservation standards. The new century has thus been marked by greater community involvement and voices about what constitutes our built heritage, who the decision makers are, and the importance of moving beyond hardware. The larger growth of the heritage sector spearheaded by the National Heritage Board (NHB) has moved conservation beyond architecture to consider sites and markers as key points of our history and our identity.

A number of themes come to the fore through our conservation story. The first are the constant trade-offs that planners and officials have to make in deciding what and how to conserve in the most sustainable way possible. The conservation story also highlights the importance of urban governance with its emphasis on the rule of law to uphold conservation standards and the “productive fights” between agencies to ensure integrated approaches to conservation. Another important theme is the role that the community plays in sustaining conservation and helping to push for new buildings and sites to be remembered.

This latest volume from the *Urban Systems Studies* series thus brings to life Singapore’s urban governance and planning story. It highlights the decisions, trade-offs, key decisions, players and enabling factors that allowed for systemic innovation to make conservation a planning mainstay and a significant part of the Singaporean consciousness. The story also notes some of the “losses” along the way—from our historic waterfront that was once at Collyer Quay and Raffles Quay, to more recent buildings like the old National Library building at Stamford Road—and raises questions for the future. There are still a number of challenges that lie ahead, such as the prevention of flooding in historic districts and pre-planning for the next phase of conservation of our post-independence buildings. These raise the following questions: How can we balance the right trade-offs, so that conservation does not stop with pre-independence buildings? And how can we ensure that our historic districts continue to respond to the changing city?

As we approach these future challenges, the same spirit of innovation and foresight that has characterised conservation till today will likely continue and result in a unique landscape, thus anchoring the identity of Singaporeans and distinguishing Singapore’s cityscape.

CHAPTER 1

ORIGINS

“The vitality of our citizens, our desire to demonstrate that the world does not owe us a living, our rapid industrial and economic advancement and other factors have contributed towards a surge of progress in the last decade, the like of which Singapore has not seen in the previous history, in this forward-looking state of mind and in our enthusiasm for urban renewal, we may wake up one day to find our historic monuments either bulldozed or crumbling to dust through neglect... The time has therefore, come for us to take stock of what we have of the past and seek to preserve objects and buildings that will remind us of our heritage even though it be short in span of time.”¹

E.W. Barker, Minister for National Development (1965–1975)

COLONIAL CITY: THE MAKING OF A UNIQUE LANDSCAPE

To understand the origins of conservation, one needs to go back in time. When Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore on 28 January 1819, much of the island's activities were clustered along its shores. The rest of the island was mostly

marshy swamps and villages. After establishing the colony in the same year, he left William Farquhar in charge with instructions on how to plan the colony. However, stymied by limited funds, Farquhar did not adhere to Raffles' plan. Instead, he adopted a more laissez faire approach to develop the settlement, by focusing on managing the large volume of trade passing through the port.² For example, merchants were allowed in designated government areas and privately owned houses were built along the Padang and banks of the Singapore River—Raffles had initially not wanted these two areas to fall into individual hands. When Raffles returned in 1823, he re-conveyed his vision to a Town Committee. This time, the committee led by Lieutenant Philip Jackson drew up a detailed plan, which became known as the Raffles Town Plan (or Jackson Plan).³



A segment of the Raffles Town Plan of 1822.

AccNo2158 Survey Department, Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The Plan detailed the allocation of land—ensuring that growth would be orderly—and created a grid for the road network. It also divided Singapore, primarily its central area, into ethnic districts. The area along the Singapore River, which was a hub of activity centred on port activities, was designated the Commercial Square. Another area was zoned for

government activities. Each of the newly created ethnic districts had its own unique architectural style that would come to define the settlement's urban design. This distinction in style left its mark on conservation efforts a century later, during the celebration of the multicultural milieu of Singapore's heritage.⁴



Features of a shophouse, including wall tiles (top left), floor tiles (bottom left), entrance (top right) and the *pintu pagar* (bottom right).

Courtesy of National Heritage Board (floor tiles and *pintu pagar*), JNZL on Flickr (wall tiles), and Nicolas Lannuzel on Flickr (entrance).

It was also in the Raffles Town Plan that the five-foot way was created, which soon became an important feature of Singapore's unique shophouses. Various styles of shophouses emerged as the wealth of communities changed over time. The *pintu pagar*, the tiles, and the various ornaments and designs reflected the Peranakan, Indian, European, Chinese and Malay cultures in Singapore. These unique elements of the shophouses would also come to feature in modern conservation efforts.

Architects and engineers returning from studies in Europe and the spread of new technology—reinforced concrete, modern electricity and sanitation, structural steel and lifts—brought new styles. However, the Great Depression from 1929 to 1939 brought about a decline in wealth and led to modest architectural styles and a slowdown in the boom of the previous years.⁵

By the early 1930s, the settlement had become overcrowded and it became apparent that the Plan could not maintain orderly growth. Slums had emerged across the older parts of the settlement and the outlying areas and roads became congested with the rise of motor transport. After the damages of the Second World War, coupled with rent control designed to ease the housing shortage for a rapidly growing population, much of the city had fallen into disrepair.⁶ Overcrowding became common—8 to 10 family units could easily squeeze into just one shophouse.

THE IMPERATIVES OF URBAN RENEWAL

In 1951, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), which was the colonial public housing and planning agency, conducted an island-wide survey to identify Singapore's main urban development challenges and opportunities. This resulted in a Master Plan to guide Singapore's physical growth, as the island had by then attained city status. The 1958 Master Plan, Singapore's first statutory Master Plan, planned for Singapore to be divided into an inner city, a town centre and a rural ring.⁷ While much of its focus was to control Singapore's unordered urban expansion, the SIT was tasked to prepare a list of monuments and buildings of historical and architectural interest. It was also to protect them.⁸ Under this Plan, a total of 32 buildings were listed as historic buildings and monuments. Given these were colonial times, most of these buildings reflected British sentiments of what were considered historically valuable. This included temples and other religious institutions because they were considered "authentically Asian".

The list, also known as the *Ancient Monuments and Land and Buildings of Architectural and Historical Interest*, is the first listing of sites for future preservation by a state agency.⁹

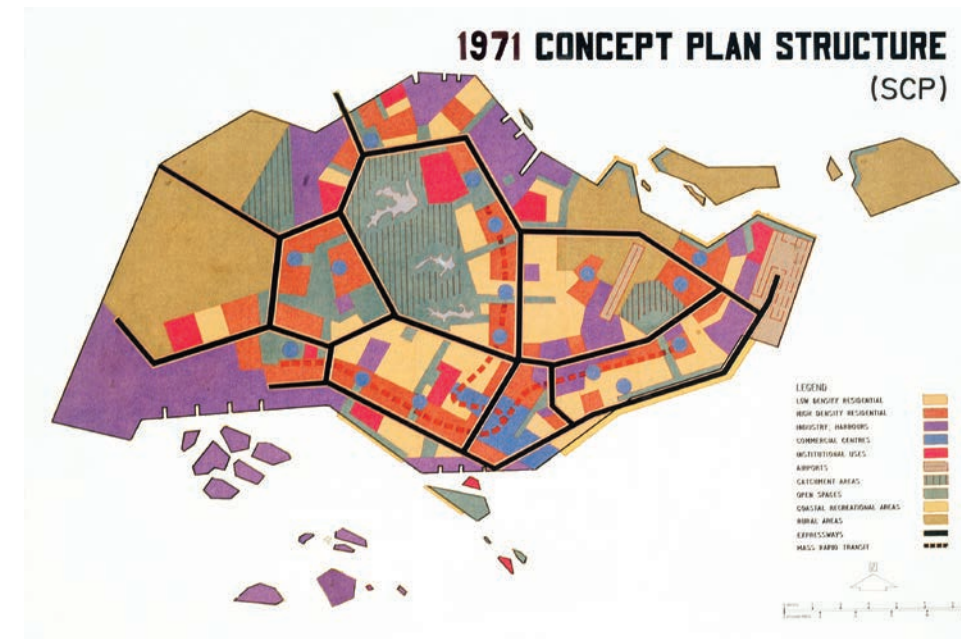
A few decades earlier in 1937, Friends of Singapore, a group of heritage enthusiasts of the colonial elite, were among the first non-government groups of people to work collaboratively with the colonial administration

to designate sites and monuments from Singapore's cultural and historical life. Given that this group included the colonial elite and wealthy local businessmen, and its patron then was the Governor of Singapore, they held some sway in the SIT's listing of buildings. Over the decades leading up to the 1958 Master Plan, their lobbying efforts led to some notable saves, including Killiney House at No. 3 Oxley Rise¹⁰ and Marina Hill, where the Malay Regiment had fought the Japanese.¹¹

However, by Singapore's independence in 1965, the 1958 Master Plan had become insufficient for further development, as the city's population was growing at faster rates than anticipated. Much of the city centre was already developed and the shophouses where most people lived were often overcrowded and unsanitary. Thus, the pressing need to redevelop the city centre, plan for population expansion, and to house the nation in modern, clean, safe and affordable homes ushered in an era of large scale urban renewal, and a rethinking of the 1958 Master Plan.

Seeing the pressing need for a comprehensive review and foreign technical assistance, the government approached the United Nations (UN) for help, which came in three stages. In the first stage in 1962, UN expert Erik Lorange recommended that Singapore's central area be systematically redeveloped, with large-scale demolition and redevelopment efforts starting in the fringes and then on to the congested core. Lorange also recommended the appointment of an urban renewal team consisting of three UN experts, Otto Koenigsberger, Charles Abrams and Susumu Kobe (also known as the KAK team), who themselves recommended three guiding principles—"Conservation", "Rehabilitation" and "Rebuilding"—in their 1963 expert report. As the city could not wait for a new Master Plan, the team proposed project-based "action programmes" coordinated by an overall physical guide concept that would help the action programmes grow into a coherent system. The team also recommended a Ring City Concept, consisting of self-contained but connected settlements along the coast.

Concurrently, another UN team addressed the need for long-term planning which resulted in the 1971 Concept Plan, Singapore's first Concept Plan. The Plan expanded the Ring City Concept, which organised development around the central catchment and an east-west corridor along the southern waterfront. It also included further development and expansion of the Central Area and earmarked land for future public transportation, roads and expressways.



The 1971 Concept Plan.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Even with the pressing urban development and renewal needs of that time, the 1963 expert report made conservation of Singapore's unique urban landscape a part of urban renewal.

In arriving at this definition of the objectives of urban renewal in Singapore, the United Nations Mission has rejected the idea of the wholesale demolition of large quarters. This decision was prompted by the desire to minimise the social upheaval and the suffering that would result from the dislocation of large numbers of people and business undertakings. It is also based on the recognition of the value and attraction of many of the existing shophouses and of the way of living, working and trading that produced this particularly Singaporean type of architecture.¹²

Despite the KAK team's emphasis on conservation, decision makers placed more emphasis on the social and economic needs of redevelopment. It was difficult to imagine then that sanitary and safe housing needs of the majority of Singaporeans could outweigh the desire for conservation. In line with the UN team's proposed redevelopment

strategies, a new urban renewal department was set up in 1964 in the Housing & Development Board's (HDB) Building Department, which was headed by Alan Choe, then a young architect-planner. The focus of the unit was to identify the precincts to begin urban renewal within the total area defined by the KAK team.

However, to approach urban renewal solely through conservation and rehabilitation was deemed untenable. Mr Choe was quoted as saying:

*Unlike England or Europe, Singapore does not possess architectural monuments of international importance. There are therefore few buildings worthy of preservation. In addition, many of the buildings in the Central Area are overdue for demolition. Hence to preach urban renewal by conservation and rehabilitation alone does not apply in the Singapore context. There must also be clearance and rebuilding.*¹³

As most of the available land in and close to the city centre consisted of old buildings, redeveloping the Central Area was key. At that time many of the city's urban poor were living in derelict shophouses and old homes that were akin to slums. Resettlement was thus a central concern of urban renewal. In 1966, the south and north areas of the city centre were the focus of urban renewal, since these areas were where most of the dilapidated shophouses were. Prime land was acquired for redevelopment projects, such as public housing and amenities, as well as public commercial complexes. The process of renewal and resettlement was rapid. By the end of 1967, 98% of the city's south had been redeveloped. With that, the face of the city changed.¹⁴ During the earlier days of resettlement, affected residents were offered the option of being relocated to new HDB developments in various parts of the city—Outram Park, Chinatown and the Crawford area.¹⁵

EARLY CONSERVATION VOICES AND DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

While the dominant economic imperative was to clear these old buildings and resettle their residents, the concept of conservation was not completely dismissed as idealistic nostalgia. Instead, government officials and planners saw it worthwhile to maintain a list of monuments and historic buildings that could be preserved without disrupting the pace of urban renewal. This list would also allow the government to consider the preservation of certain buildings.

Echoing past conservation advocates who emphasised upon the unique mix of Singapore's multicultural architectural heritage, both politicians and members of the public gradually raised their voices to advocate for conservation, and to highlight the devastating impacts that urban renewal (without conservation) would have on the nation's identity.

Outside of the government, the most notable of these voices belonged to the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR). Led by architects William Lim, Tay Kheng Soon, Chew Weng Kong, Koh Seow Chuan and Chan Sau Yan, they advocated for the conservation of Singapore's local architecture, as opposed to the architecturally grand structures common in the West. They also suggested that rehabilitation be explored before whole-scale demolition.¹⁶ Yet the time was not ripe then to approach urban renewal through the restoration of old buildings.

While the city was not ready for large-scale conservation, forward-looking planners like Alan Choe could already see the value of conservation after the city's pressing urban renewal needs had been met. Alan Choe recalled walking around the city centre with Erik Lorange and beginning to appreciate the charm of the old buildings. He said:

*Through our daily walks, not only did I get to know every nook and corner, I was also awakened to the beauty and charm in some old buildings and sites.*¹⁷

Inspired by the beauty of Singapore's unique landscape, he and his team began their plans for urban renewal that did not call for total demolition. Using extensive knowledge gleaned from his experiences learning from other cities in the United Kingdom, Japan and the United States, Mr Choe began identifying parts of Little India, Chinatown and Kampong Glam for possible conservation.¹⁸ He was also inspired by the unique multicultural history that these various districts represented, each telling the stories of the generations of immigrants that had made Singapore their home.¹⁹ As a board member of the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB), Mr Choe also felt compelled by the tourism potential of pedestrianised and well-conserved historic districts. He said:

*So, I made plans to conserve [the] whole street and retain the character and proposing to close off roads, so that it becomes pedestrianised and we landscape it a bit and then make it more colourful. So that plan was prepared in advance because I was more influenced by tourism. So nobody ask about it, but I had already thought for tourism promotion we want to do that.*²⁰



The row of Tudor-styled government quarters, refurbished in 1970 to become the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board's new office.
Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

A challenge to conservation was the derelict condition that most of the shophouses were in. Indeed, rent control had disincentivised many owners from refurbishing their properties and it was difficult for both policymakers and members of the public to see value in conserving them. This, coupled with the pressures needed for urban renewal, meant that conservation efforts were limited to demonstration projects for much of the 1970s.

This meant that forward-looking planners of the time had to look deep for opportunities to prove the potential socio-economic value of some of these old buildings. One approach had been to run demonstration projects, otherwise known as pilot projects, to refurbish selected state-owned buildings. In 1970, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and

the STPB refurbished a row of Tudor-styled government quarters (on the edge of Orchard Road) into an office for the STPB. Six years later, a row of 17 shophouses along Cuppage Road was refurbished for new businesses. That same year, another row of old shophouses on Murray Street, which was located in the Tanjong Pagar/Chinatown area, was also refurbished and rebranded as the Murray Terrace Food Alley. This popular food street attracted both locals and tourists to its famous hawker food on offer.²¹ With the success of both refurbishments, a series of pre-war houses along Emerald Hill Road was restored in 1981. The houses in these three areas were restored, but not gazetted for conservation.

These efforts however were not part of a systematic plan, and former URA's Director of Conservation & Urban Design Koh-Lim Wen Gin describes them as being "piecemeal, albeit important, efforts".²² The significant turning point for systematic planning was to come with the Central Area Structure Plan in 1985, which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

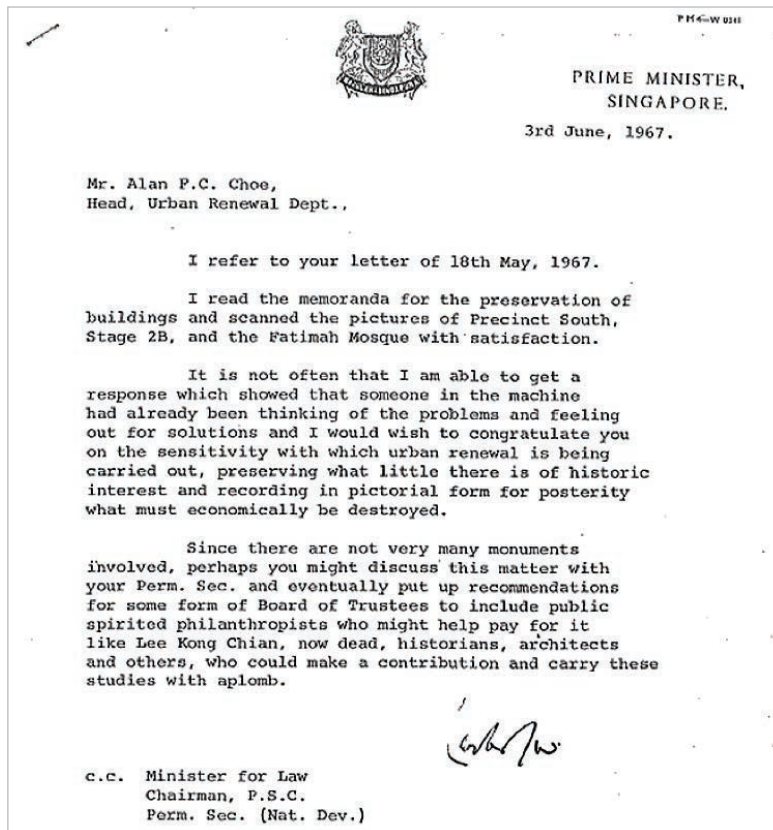
Yet these demonstration projects showed the growing traction that conservation had throughout the later 1970s and early 1980s. Referring to the Cuppage Road and Murray Street projects, the URA shared in their 1977 annual report:

*Preservation of such buildings will serve as a nostalgic reminder of our architecture and history and at the same time afford the streaming tourists with a view of the "old Singapore". In this connection, the acid test of URA's versatility in design would be the rehabilitation of Chinatown, which is presently under active study. One of the main considerations in the preservation of this area is to improve the environmental set-up without losing the engaging bustle that is the mark of Chinatown.*²³

It would be another 10 years before the URA's bold and forward-looking approach to having pre-planned district conservation plans bore fruit. But one telling example from the late 1960s showed that it was not just the URA that had been thinking about conservation.

Most of what posterity recalls of Singapore's first Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew's views towards conservation was his emphasis on the economic and social imperative of urban renewal and thus the impracticality of conservation. However, Mr Choe recalls once receiving a letter from PM Lee that asked him: were there plans for conservation? In response, he sent his plans and later received a telling reply, which acknowledged the value of preserving buildings of historic interest and

also encouraged him to set up a committee to embark on a detailed study of various monuments and sites of significance.²⁴ The role of the public was also emphasised upon, with particular reference to philanthropists who could fund preservation works.



A copy of Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's reply to Alan Choe about preservation plans.

Courtesy of Alan Choe.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PRESERVATION OF MONUMENTS BOARD

The foundations for conservation had been laid. While conserving whole districts was not yet a realistic possibility, an emphasis on sites and monuments meant that iconic markers could be remembered for their historic and architectural value. With the blessings of then PM Lee, the

former Ministry of Culture set up a committee to systematically look into creating a National Trust for the preservation of buildings. Reflecting the growing consciousness of the value of conservation, the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) was set up in 1971. Through the Preservation of Monuments Act, the PMB was designated the authoritative body to recommend sites and monuments to the Ministry of National Development (MND) for protection.²⁵

The first Board comprised public servants, including Alan Choe and former Permanent Secretary of National Development Cheng Tong Fatt, as well as philanthropists and members of the public. This reflected the cooperative relationship between the government and the public that has since characterised conservation efforts.²⁶ From its inception to 1997, the PMB was a statutory board under the purview of the MND, and it being under the Ministry responsible for urban renewal was significant in helping to ensure that the preservation of specific sites and buildings, modest as they were in those early days, moved in tandem with urban renewal.

Lien Ying Chow, a well-known banking tycoon, was the Board's first Chairman. He described its importance as the "muscle and teeth" to the Act of Parliament and a first step in protecting buildings. He said:

It has for some time been a matter of concern. In Government and other quarters, that with the rapid pace of urban redevelopment, our historic monuments may disappear unless something is done.²⁷

Among the PMB's first tasks was to comprehensively list monuments "that are of historic, cultural, traditional, archaeological, architectural, artistic or symbolic significance and national importance".²⁸ By 1973, just a year into its existence, the first eight national monuments were placed under the protection of its Board. The choice to protect religious and public buildings was deliberate, as these were less contentious buildings that represented different but important parts of Singapore's religious and cultural history. It was also easier to justify protecting them, since their functions would not change. These included the old Thong Chai Medical Institution, Armenian Church, St. Andrew's Cathedral, Telok Ayer Market (Lau Pa Sat), Thian Hock Keng Temple, Sri Mariamman Temple, Hajjah Fatimah Mosque and the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd. On paper, the PMB had the authority to contribute grants or loans to preservation works, yet in reality it had little financial capacity for doing so. In fact, it was hoped that private citizens would contribute actively to the PMB to ensure conservation efforts continued.



Some of Singapore's first preserved monuments (clockwise from top):
Telok Ayer Market (also known as Lau Pa Sat), Sri Mariamman Temple,
Thian Hock Keng Temple and Armenian Church.

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Armenian Church and Thian Hock Keng Temple) and its Chu Sui Mang Collection (Telok Ayer Market), and Information and Services Hub (Sri Mariamman Temple).

In accordance with its legal authority, the PMB issued guidelines and worked with owners to ensure that a monument could maintain its integrity even after it had been gazetted. Being designated a national monument confers the highest standards of preservation on a building. The original act dictated that no part of the property may be demolished, removed, altered or renovated, or have an addition without the written consent of the Board.²⁹

Yet despite these legislative powers, the Board was stymied by its lack of resources. For example, as part of its purview, the PMB also acquired buildings and one of the first buildings it acquired was the Thong Chai Medical Institution. However, the high cost of restoration works prevented the Board from making further acquisitions. In 1972, the Board also contemplated preserving Telok Ayer Street, but these discussions did not progress as the PMB faced limitations with preserving buildings, let alone whole streets.³⁰ Alan Choe, a member of the Board, had suggested that they consider preserving shophouses in Chinatown. However, the PMB's financial committee rejected the idea, especially after their experience with the Thong Chai Medical Institution.³¹ Despite these limitations, the preservation of selected sites was significant: not only did it ensure a building (or monument) was protected from demolition and alteration, it also helped to preserve it in public memory, thus connecting Singaporeans to the history of the island.

Though the establishment of the Board signalled a slowly but emerging emphasis on conservation, the modus operandi throughout the 1960s to the early 1980s still remained urban redevelopment, which included demolition works. At that time Singapore lost large parts of major districts, which were acquired and re-parcelled into plots to be sold for redevelopment or for public housing. This included the old Malay area in Kampong Rochor, leaving only the Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, a national monument.³² The Bugis area, a popular tourist area known for its transvestites and transsexuals during the 1970s, was redeveloped in part to clean up its shady though popular reputation. In other parts of the city, the areas stretching from Hong Lim Complex down to Selegie House were acquired to build public housing. However, the time was still not ripe for large-scale conservation.³³

THE LOSS OF THE OLD WATERFRONT

Singapore's history as an important trading post is embedded in the architectural history of Singapore's civic and cultural district. Before Sir Stamford Raffles' arrival, Singapore had been a thriving port from the 14th up to the 17th century. Because of its strategic location and establishment as a major entrepôt in the Straits of Melaka, the island was a focus for Malay chieftains during the 14th century. Johor sultans through the 16th and 18th centuries engaged in numerous power plays with the arrival of the Dutch and Portuguese to the region. By 1819, the island had gone through a period of depopulation, due in part to a megadrought in the region and the locus of trade shifting to the Riau Islands. To Raffles, however, the island was ideal for resettlement and to establish a British dominance in the region.³⁴

Soon after his arrival, Raffles set out to build up the island using his 1823 planned layout—the nerve centre would house the major British institutional buildings. On Bukit Larangan (today known as Fort Canning Hill), Raffles built the first colonial Government House on the remains of the historic site of a royal palace and temple, which

was likely home to a succession of kings throughout the island's settlement history.³⁵ Other administrative buildings were built, each serving a colonial function to control the indigenous and settlement population. These included the Court House, Singapore Town Hall (now Victoria Memorial Hall and Theatre), the Secretariat (former the Attorney General's Chambers, now part of the Parliament House), and later, the City Hall and the Supreme Court (now National Gallery Singapore).³⁶

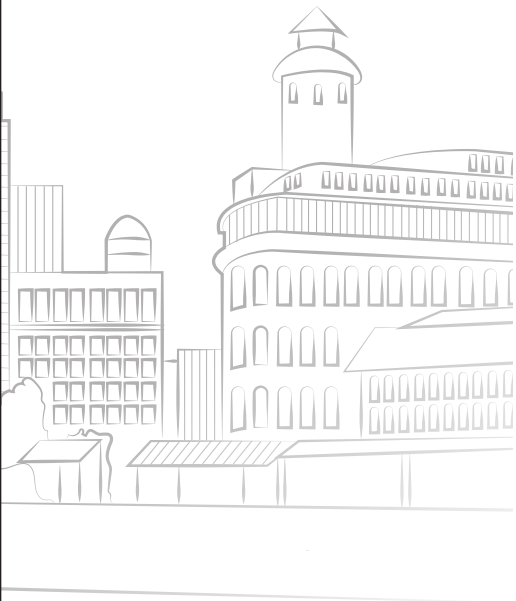
Over the following decades, sports clubs, schools, churches, retail outlets and even monuments and memorials soon emerged, each of these buildings representing the modern achievements of colonial Singapore. Raffles Place became the site for Singapore's first department stores—Robinsons and John Little—that sold British goods.

Collyer Quay and Raffles Quay underwent a period of renewal in the early 20th century, after the old warehouses-cum-offices built along the quays during the 19th century were demolished. The quays had been built on reclaimed land and came to house the handsome buildings of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Alkaff Arcade, Ocean Building and Clifford House. By the end of the 1930s, the rapid pace of renewal spurred on by the pre-Great Depression boom years had created a riverfront arguably rivalling that of Shanghai's Bund.³⁷ With the Great Depression came a slowdown in redevelopment that characterised the decades before it. However, Collyer Quay remained relatively untouched. By 1950, over in Raffles Quay, many new modernist icons began emerging, including the Asia Insurance Building, Rubber House, Bank of China, Denmark House and the American International Assurance (AIA) Building. These buildings were known not just for their height and modern architectural façade, but also for how they were designed for the tropical climate.



THE LOSS OF THE OLD WATERFRONT

Continued...



At the advent of modern Singapore came the monumental task of urban renewal and the pressure to redevelop; the lack of land to do so meant that much of the district's colonial past was lost to the bulldozers. The Control of Rent Act, which had frozen rent to pre-war levels, was gradually phased out in 1969 through the Controlled Premises (Special Provisions Act). The latter gave the Ministries of Law and National Development authority to decontrol rent in selected areas,^{38,39} and the growing economy helped to facilitate urban renewal.⁴⁰

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the government acquired fragmented plots of land for redevelopment. At the same time, private owners weary of acquisition also initiated projects to redevelop various plots of land in the area, including the grand 1920–1950s landmarks of the waterfront. This decontrol of rent proved to be a major catalyst for the private sector—the development of the 21-storey Straits Trading Building at one end of Collyer Quay and the new OCBC Bank Centre at the other marked the beginning of rapid change for the entire area. The land along Battery Road, Chulia Street, and all the way down to Phillip Street



View of Collyer Quay from the sea, in 1932. Prominent buildings include (from left) Ocean Building, Alkaff Arcade, Union Building, Hongkong and Shanghai Bank and Fullerton Building.

Lee Kip Lin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

was transformed by modern skyscrapers. Chulia Street, which had been home to Indian trading firms and some of the early Chinese banks, transformed from a street with no sewerage or back lanes, to become the centre of Singapore's booming financial industry and its accompanying skyscrapers. With the boom in demand for real estate in the Central Area, redevelopment expanded further south towards Shenton Way. Roads were realigned and extended to ease congestion.⁴¹ Expansion also continued further east and west in the Golden Mile area along Beach Road, to ease pressure on the

THE LOSS OF THE OLD WATERFRONT

Continued...

Central Area. The riverfront gradually transformed to reflect the high value of land in the commercial centre, in the form of new skyscrapers and intensified plot ratios. However, none of the older buildings there had been gazetted and the dominant approach in those days was to intensify the entire Central Area to ensure it was able to keep pace with economic growth and attract investors.⁴²

It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s when a few precipitating factors, which will be discussed in the next chapter, made conservation a more realistic possibility. But by that time, much of Singapore's historic core at the waterfront had already disappeared. Looking back, could more of the historic waterfront have been saved? Or was it imperative for redevelopment that these plots of land be acquired, buildings demolished and land re-parcelled and sold to build new high-rise buildings, or that owners of grand landmarks were not made to retain their buildings?



CHAPTER 2

FORMATIVE YEARS

“A sense of history is what provides the links to hold together a people who came from four corners of the earth. Because our history is short and because what is worth preserving from the past are not all that plentiful, we should try to save what is worthwhile from the past from the vandalism of the speculator and the developer, from a government and a bureaucracy which believes that anything that cannot be translated into cold cash is not worth investing in.”⁴³

S. Rajaratnam, Minister for Culture (1959–1965)

FROM MONUMENTS TO DISTRICTS

The Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) efforts throughout the 1970s and early 1980s to conduct demonstration projects and prepare district-wide conservation plans in advance were to bear fruit as urban redevelopment priorities began to shift.

Soon, conversations and debates within the government began to centre on expanding the preservation of monuments to the conservation of districts. This sentiment was also echoed in various policymaking spheres: then Minister of State for National Development Lee Yock Suan announced in Parliament that the Ministry was considering expanding the scope of the Preservation of Monuments Act to consider specific districts.⁴⁴

It soon became apparent that the mechanisms within the Preservation of Monuments Act were too rigid, as the guidelines on modifications imposed on newly gazetted national monuments were not suitable for all historic buildings. Furthermore, since the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) did not have adequate resources to undertake larger areas, it needed a more flexible approach to rehabilitation and reconstruction and a more systematic and longer-term plan. This would come through the URA's conservation efforts and the Central Area Structure Plan.

This Plan had its origins in the Central Area Planning Team (CAPT) (formed in 1979), which had been tasked to coordinate the rapid developments in Singapore's central area and had to “guide planning effort, resolve difficult issues and problems and so perform an advisory role in development control”.⁴⁵ With this mandate, the CAPT created a common land use concept plan that provided an avenue for integrating conservation into future land use planning.

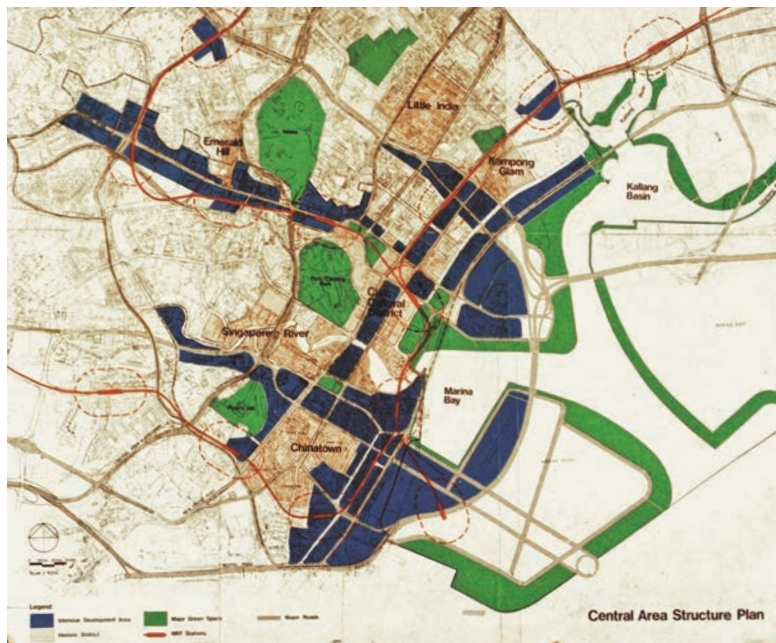
Another coinciding factor was the planning review undertaken in preparation for the construction of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) in 1982—there had been much debate about the need for such a transport system in the decade before. Once the need for the MRT had been established, it signalled a shift in urban planning. As the Central Area had largely been redeveloped into a modern commercial district by the early 1980s, a more holistic approach to land use optimisation in this area had to be adopted. The MRT, because of its decentralising function, thus provided an opportunity to alleviate the need for high-density commercial activity in the Central Area, thus paving the way for district-level conservation.

As opportunities opened up, learning how best to approach conservation was also a priority. In 1985, then URA's Director of Conservation & Urban Design Koh-Lim Wen Gin and her team visited several cities known for their comprehensive conservation plans and learned from their experience in these cities.

Reflecting on how her team capitalised on such precipitating factors, Mrs Koh-Lim said:

I call that plan as a very important plan, the Central Area Structure Plan. So we presented to the Minister and the Cabinet this structure plan for the city centre in the early 80s, when the politician[s] decided that we should proceed and build the first MRT line, you know.

So that was when we took a major review of the Central Area, and we set out that plan to identify, in relation to the road system as well, where should be the major corridor for high-rise, high-density development and, location such as the Greater Chinatown that is the four zone, the four sub-zone[s]: Greater Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India as well as parts of [the] Singapore River and the Civic District. They are what we call the lungs of the city. They are low rise, they naturally serve as lungs of the city and they are in a way...where Singapore started its first development. And we feel that they should be conserved on an area basis.⁴⁶



The Central Area Structure Plan detailing conservation areas (in light brown), intensive development areas (in dark blue) and major open spaces (in green).

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The successful emphasis on conservation in the Central Area Structure Plan signalled larger changes in Singapore's overall urban development, urban planning priorities and in the role of the URA in the mid-1980s.

Mrs Koh-Lim identified four such changes⁴⁷:

(1) The success of the physical development: Most of the city's residents were now living in safe and modern housing. This showed that the city's sustained growth had been completed. This allowed planners to focus on the quality and aesthetic value of the built environment.

(2) Land reclamation in the Marina Bay area: The new expanded land expansion of the Central Business District (CBD) towards Marina Bay helped reduce the need to increase the density of the old CBD.

Former Deputy Chief Planner of the URA, Goh Hup Chor, who was in charge of planning and urban design of the Central Area from 1984, recalled how he systematically convinced senior politicians that the new reclaimed land would compensate for the loss in Gross Floor Area (GFA) from not tearing down and replacing the old shophouses with high-rise buildings. He said:

Then I built the models, I put in the extra blocks that I have for Chinatown and all these building[s] that if I do not have the plot ratio what does it mean to me. So I go down there and said, "Very simple, okay, stack all these building[s] on this new building." You save all these three district[s], I put back all the plot ratio onto Marina South for you. You don't lose one square...GFA. That's how I convinced them. There's totally no loss of GFA because we have the reclaimed land to build back your needs.⁴⁸

(3) Tourism as a major contributor to the economy: When Singapore experienced an economic slowdown in 1985, new strategies for stimulating growth were needed. One such strategy was to make tourism a major contributor to the economy, by marketing Singapore as a "modern city with a historic past". At that time a third of Singapore's economic growth came from the construction industry. However, when the construction sector slowed down, this resulted in an oversupply of hotels and shopping centres, thus putting the brakes on further redevelopment efforts in the Central Area.

Mr Goh described how this decreased pressure to redevelop the historic heart of the city and the new pressing need to distinguish Singapore's tourism appeal, convinced policymakers of the viability of conservation.

(4) Changing aspirations of Singaporeans: Buoyed by relative affluence, more and more Singaporeans were able to travel widely and think deeper about what gave Singapore its identity and character. Undoubtedly, a unique built environment reflective of the diverse history of the nation is a distinguishing contributor to identity.⁴⁹ Thankfully, it was not too late to begin conservation, since the planners had earlier on practised a deliberate phasing of urban redevelopment that left a significant part of the historic core intact.⁵⁰

These four milestones in Singapore's development story paved the way for focus to be placed on the quality and identity of the cityscape, and thus unlocking the unique possibilities of conserving whole districts.

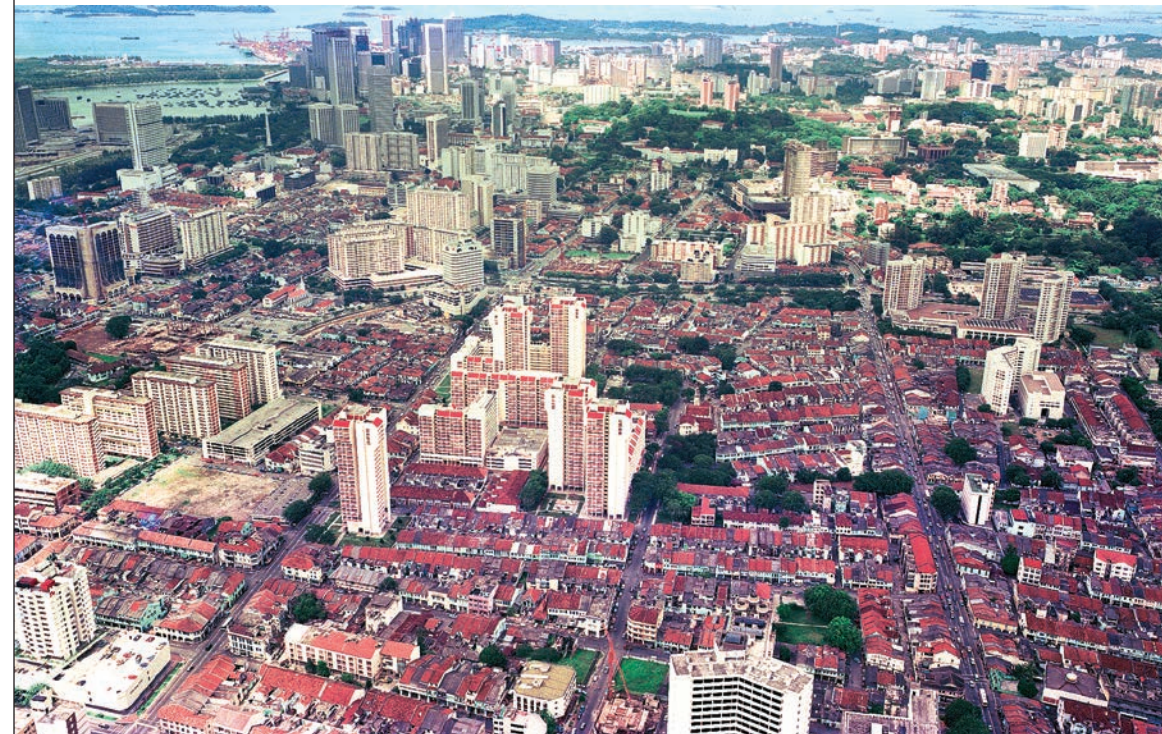
CONSERVING DISTRICTS

Conserving historic districts is done not just for architectural value, but for their ecosystems and social fabric too. Also, as each of the chosen districts evolved around a dominant ethnic group of distinct identities, the buildings within trace the history of their urban settlers and their livelihoods, and their evolving architectural style reflect the wealth status of their inhabitants over the years.

Former Deputy Chief Planner of URA, Goh Hup Chor, describes the significance of historic districts as giving identity to the planning of Singapore as a whole, and how it reflects the "historical pattern of the city". He recalls piecing together the history of these historic districts, detailing the possible time periods the buildings (based on their architectural style) were built in. He also learnt about how building materials changed with time, for example, when cement and concrete started to replace timber and when balusters became more elaborate. He said:

If we preserve all these areas, we give identity to the whole planning of Singapore. And this architecture, these buildings are so poor, if we tear it down, we do not have the history of architecture of how it grows. So that caused me to be convinced that when we conserve the whole district all these buildings also have to be kept.⁵¹

Conserving districts involve transforming conservation efforts from piecemeal and ad hoc efforts to a systematic urban plan. Districts, rather than individual buildings, also convey the impression that a cluster of low-rise buildings would serve as the "lungs of the city" and "provide an urban window to comprehend the beauty of the city".⁵²



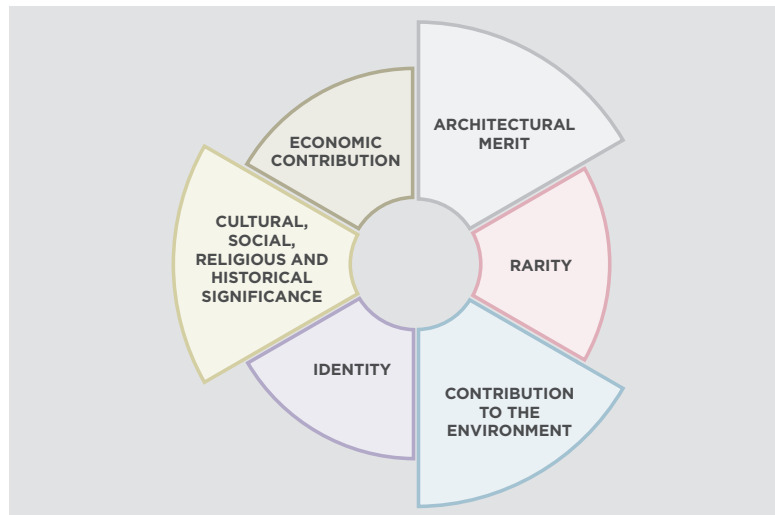
An aerial view of Little India in 1985, which upon closer inspection, resembles the lungs of the city.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

To support the district-level conservation approach, the team at the URA, under the guidance of then Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chief Planner Liu Thai Ker and Mrs Koh-Lim, made concerted effort to make the case for conservation through systematic documentation that would set the standard of what would become conservation guidelines. For 18 months, the team systematically combed the island, went through archives and took pictures of almost every building or monument older than 30 years old, to create an indelible historical record of conservation buildings that would be crucial to developing new guidelines for conservation efforts.

From the onset, Dr Liu and Mrs Koh-Lim guided the team and established a set of objective criteria (see Exhibit 1) to assess what type of buildings would be worth conserving.

Exhibit 1 The Six Criteria for Assessing Whether a Building Qualifies for Conservation



Reflecting on the significance of those efforts, Dr Liu shared:

When I was appointed CEO and Chief Planner of URA in 1989, besides working on the updating of the Singapore Concept Plan, I also embarked very quickly on the effort of creating a set of concerted actions to conserve whatever were still remaining of historical buildings. At that time, fortunately for Singapore and me, there were nearly a dozen mostly lady officers in URA, including Koh-Lim Wen Gin, who were passionate and knowledgeable about the right approach to conserve old buildings. I was informed that, according to international practice, only buildings more than 30 years old could be considered for conservation. In order to ensure that any recommendation for conservation by me and my colleagues could be seen by Singapore government to be assessed with a fair degree of objectivity, I asked these ladies to recommend a set of criteria as objective bases to assess historical buildings. After some months, they came up with six assessment criteria which were consistent with international practice and are available on the URA website. After that it took them another

15 to 18 months to assess some 15,000 buildings, 30 years or older and shortlisted about 4,500 of them in private ownership for conservation. This was immediately presented to our then Minister Mr Dhanabalan who in a short time accepted our recommendation in its entirety. In my view, such a decision has provided a solid ground and momentum for Singapore to continue to identify more buildings for conservation to an impressive level today.⁵³

Doris Lee, who had started her career as a technician in the resettlement department of the Housing & Development Board (HDB) and ended up with the conservation department spearheaded by Mrs Koh-Lim in 1985 as a senior technical officer, related the challenges and excitement of those days. She said:

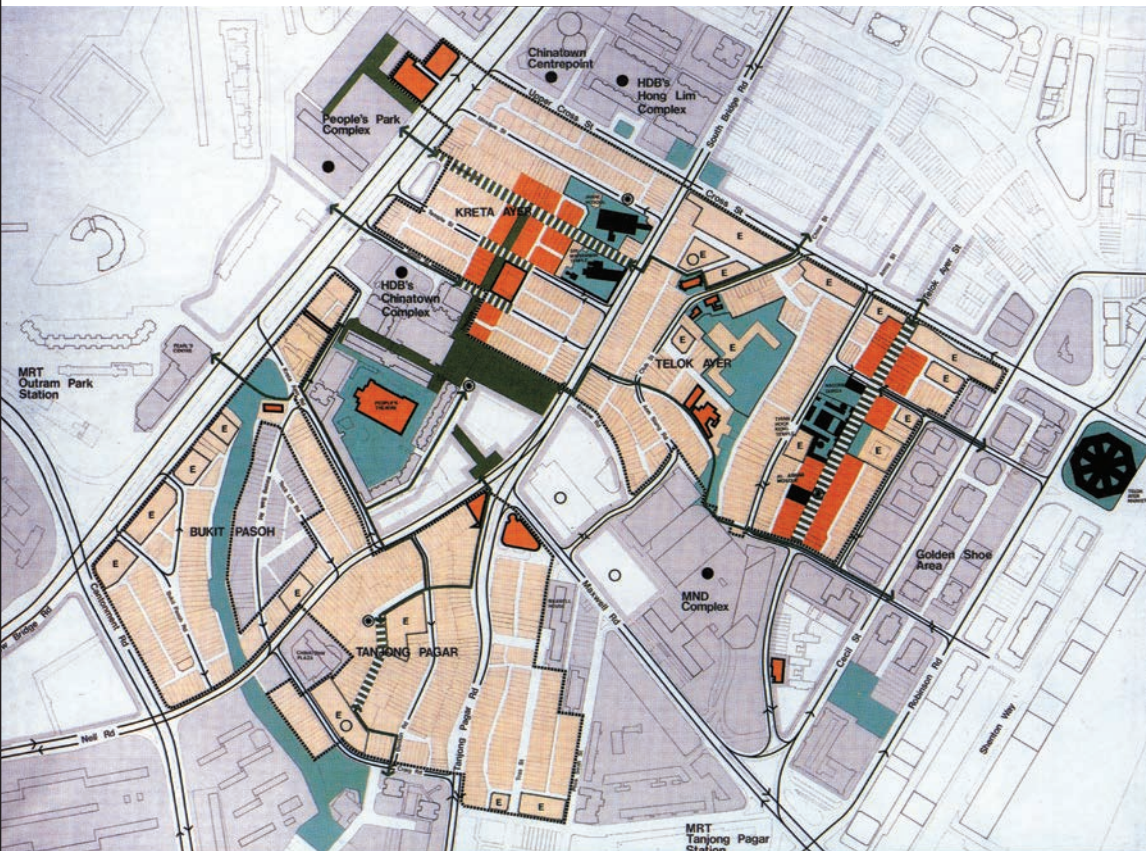
We had to measure about 200 buildings in the Tanjong Pagar area to prepare restoration guidelines for these buildings to be sold under a pilot sale of site for conservation project. The buildings were old, dirty and dilapidated, and some were in poor structural condition. One day, while inspecting the interior of the buildings with another colleague to establish whether there were anything ornamental to keep, we met a colleague who was a clerk-of-works in charge of external works along the back lane and we started chatting. Suddenly, there was a commotion and you know what happened? The façade of the building next to us collapsed! Which such accidents can happen, the Sale of Site conditions require the developer to restore it according to original design, footprint, scale, height and material.⁵⁴

The efforts of this conservation team were important, not just for conservation, but also in inspiring the URA to adopt such systematic forward-looking plans for other areas. Former Minister for National Development Lim Hng Kiang reflected on this:

When we went there in '87, '88, URA was already in the final stages of doing the conservation. There was already a change in policy that we ought to preserve part of the old city. So that was what started off the conservation plan. So we decided that if your conservation plan can be forward-looking, telling us what you want to do and how you want to evolve and develop, then surely we can do that for other plans. So we used the experience of the conservation plans because URA is an extremely well-run organisation even then and they were very professional when they did the conservation master plan, they practically surveyed every unit and they could come up with the guidelines of what they would want the developer or the owner to do. So we were very impressed that if you can do that kind of level of planning, surely you can do so for other districts and other areas.⁵⁵

THE HISTORIC MILESTONE: THE CONSERVATION MASTER PLAN

After years of strategic planning, the URA launched its first exhibition of the Central Area Structure Plan in 1986. The Plan, which became the first Conservation Master Plan, spanned seven conservation areas (Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Emerald Hill and the Heritage Link) and about 3,200 shophouses were conserved under it. This marked the beginning of a new stage of Singapore's conservation efforts, one that would progress hand in hand with urban development.



The Chinatown Historic District Conservation Plan.
Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Former Minister for National Development, S. Dhanabalan, recalled discussions at the Cabinet on the value of conservation. The below discussion centres around Chinatown, which had originally been acquired and earmarked for public housing, before conservation became a serious consideration.

When I came into MND, URA presented a conservation plan to me and I thought it was something that really was worth attempting to save. And the argument that I put to Cabinet, and which Cabinet accepted, was that we could clear everything and not even have public housing, but have modern housing, modern buildings. Then I asked, "What is the difference then between Singapore and any city in the West?" Because the architectural profession is pretty international, they tend to design things more or less the same everywhere, everybody wants to have an iconic structure. Raffles City could have been a building anywhere in the world. You have similar buildings now in Shanghai, Beijing, everywhere all over the place. So we asked ourselves: should we knock down the whole of Chinatown, all those low-rise houses and build modern buildings? Then the question was: if you don't knock them down, what could they be used for? Can we go back to using them the way that they used to be used, basically housing? And what would be the cost of such housing? And what would be the change in the street environment?⁵⁶

He also reflected that the Cabinet had been grappling with the importance of Chinatown's heritage. The housing problem had largely been resolved by then and land reclamation had eased the pressure on the historic core. These factors made the conservation of Chinatown, and subsequently other historic districts, a much easier consideration. The Cabinet was also clear that preserving (or prolonging) the original way of life of this area was not realistic or tenable—much of it had previously been urban slums. Another consideration was that if the public housing plan had come to fruition, the area might have been quiet without commercial activities to enliven it. The plan for conservation would thus focus more on the hardware and preserve the landscape of the districts. The question of uses would become a more serious consideration in later years, as will be explained in the next chapter.

The URA could have opted for a more cautious and piecemeal approach to conservation, but by capitalising on the political will of the government, this reflected the holistic approach—which provided more "soul" to conservation—that the URA felt was important to the historic pattern of the city.⁵⁷ The resulting Conservation Master Plan was thus comprehensive, bold and thoughtful.



Public viewing of the Conservation Plan for Kampong Glam in 1986.
Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The Cabinet was also clear that this strategy would include both government and private-led efforts. While the government would demonstrate commitment through pilot projects (otherwise known as demonstration projects), infrastructure improvements and a framework for implementation, securing the private sector's participation was equally important.

At that time, however, the main challenge was convincing private owners of the value of conserving their shophouses. In 1987, about 75% of the conservation areas in the Master Plan were privately owned.⁵⁸ This meant that in order for conservation to be a success, it was necessary to persuade these owners to make the financial investment to restore their largely dilapidated properties, and in some cases change the purpose of their shophouses.

Two more challenges stood in the way: the first was rent control and the second revolved around the owners' desire to capitalise on the land value.

THE CHALLENGE OF RENT CONTROL

After the Second World War, the Rent Control Act was introduced to address the major housing shortage. Unfortunately, tenants were subject to unscrupulous landlords.⁵⁹ And although the Act was crucial in helping to protect many of the city's poor, the Act made it difficult for owners to find income to fund refurbishment works, thus disincentivising them from doing so. For older buildings, which formed the bulk of potential buildings for conservation, disrepair was commonplace. Mrs Koh-Lim, while reflecting on the uphill battle that rent control presented, said:

But now, in the 80s, we championed very hard and it was not easy because everybody looked at the shophouse...because there was rent control so they were not maintained for decades. So everybody looked at us and say, all these crummy looking building about to collapse, why are you advocating for us to conserve them?⁶⁰

Similarly, former Minister for National Development, S. Dhanabalan, who presided over many of the policy changes favourable to conservation, reflected:

In some of the old areas, the landlords have absolutely no incentives whatsoever to do anything because sometimes the rent they charge is not even enough to give the house a coat of paint.⁶¹

Ironically, many properties that were in danger of being demolished were left standing, because rent control meant that "tenants could not be expelled and landlords could not redevelop their properties".⁶²

Nonetheless, in order for conservation to work, it was still necessary to revise the policy. In 1988, Mr Dhanabalan announced the gradual lifting of rent control. During the first phase, rent control for premises in conservation areas was lifted, with the condition that owners would commit to restore their homes.⁶³ Under Mr Dhanabalan's leadership, owners who submitted a serious plan for conservation under the ten guiding principles and who completed works within a certain time frame, would be assisted by the government to resettle their tenants into newly built HDB flats. This highlighted the importance of the integrated approach to city planning—without the new HDB homes to house tenants it would have been challenging to incentivise private owners to conserve their properties.⁶⁴

WORKING WITH OWNERS

Besides lifting rent control, the government also made efforts to demonstrate the value of conservation buildings to private owners.

The conservation of the warehouses along Boat Quay is one of the early examples of getting the private sector on board.

The warehouses along Boat Quay were originally privately owned and their facades were diverse as they were each built in different time periods, contributing to a unique riverfront. Boat Quay's conservation status was also reinforced by the Singapore River Plan of 1985, which envisaged the Singapore River as a corridor for commercial and leisure activities, and planned to enhance the character of the area by retaining old buildings with historical and architectural merit, while constructing new buildings on a compatible scale.

After the Conservation Master Plan was announced and Boat Quay was designated as a conservation area, there was debate over whether the site should be acquired or if the URA should instead work with the owners to restore their properties for conservation. The latter approach was adopted. A deadline was imposed for warehouse owners along Boat Quay to restore their properties. To facilitate this, the URA staggered deadlines (i.e., for the submission of restoration plans, the commencement date of renovations, etc.) for the owners to meet. These various milestones across a 5- to 6-year spectrum were supposed to give these owners, many of whom were embroiled in family squabbles, sufficient time to get their affairs in order. Even then, it was necessary to convince them of the value of conservation. In a telling example, Mrs Koh-Lim recalls the onerous task of convincing these Boat Quay shophouse owners:

I remember having to personally meet all the 117 owners through many trying sessions, over a period of five years, to personally persuade them to restore the buildings. The owners were mainly old Chinese speaking businessmen who had been operating their warehouses for decades and would have liked to continue their business as it was. It was by no means an easy task for a young architect, but fortunately being young, I was able to endure the harsh words from the owners, and finally we managed to get them to see the potential value of conservation, and the restoration of all the 117 shophouses was completed within six years.⁶⁵

The choice to work with the shophouse owners over an extended period, rather than through force, for example, by land acquisition, reflects the government's collaborative school of thought: for conservation to be a success, both the public and private sectors had to share the economic and social values of conservation.

Many of the conservation buildings, not just in Boat Quay, also shot up in value after restoration works, even simple ones, within a short amount of time. Gradually, more private owners came on board.

In support of the efforts of the private owners, the URA, by working collaboratively with agencies like the Land Transport Authority (LTA), spearheaded infrastructural development, which included creating servicing lanes, building electrical substations and pedestrianising the river promenade (see Chapter 4 for more details on such infrastructure works). The river promenade was first enhanced through a simple outdoor refreshment area and eventually evolved into more deliberate place-making efforts such as working with restaurants and bars along the river to make it the picturesque scene that we see today.⁶⁶

This collaborative approach was also reflective of the changing role of the URA. By the late 1980s, the URA had moved from being a direct implementer of renewal projects to one of that as planner and facilitator of urban redevelopment. Professor Khoo Cheng Lim, Chairman of the URA in 1987, describes this changing role as a shift towards a more collaborative government approach. He said, "This will mean less government involvement and more private enterprise and public participation."⁶⁷ In the case of conservation, which had become a central concern of urban planning, the URA's role was to: (1) initiate rehabilitation for government-owned properties, (2) coordinate infrastructural needs, and (3) provide guidelines for the private sector.⁶⁸

NEIL ROAD AND ARMENIAN STREET: WINNING OVER THE SCEPTICS

In 1987, when the URA began its programme to restore 32 shophouses in Tanjong Pagar, an old dilapidated shophouse at 9 Neil Road was chosen to be its demonstration project. Many of the shophouses were in a terrible condition—blackened and damaged by years of wear and tear. Thus, there were many who were sceptical of conservation.

Liu Thai Ker, who was then the CEO of the HDB, recalled how the project was initiated when a French company that was working with the HDB on prefabricated materials approached him to lament about the rapid loss of old buildings in Singapore. They suggested that they could spearhead a pilot project, even if it was just putting a new coat of paint on an old shophouse. Working with the URA, 9 Neil Road was found to be an ideal candidate.⁶⁹ The project's aims were two-fold: to demonstrate the government's commitment to conservation and to convince the unconvinced that conservation was indeed possible. Mrs Koh-Lim reflected on that experience:



The façade of the bungalow at 9 Neil Road before and after restoration works.
Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

But before that [Tanjong Pagar restoration], we also did a pilot demonstration project within four months at 9 Neil Road, where the Queen visited. And to show that within four months, you can restore a building because you don't rebuild, you just do repair, restore and you know, replacement. So, we did the project to demonstrate government's commitment and to set an example to the private sector that dilapidated shophouses can be beautifully adapted for new uses.⁷⁰

The property had been in poor shape, with much of its façade and interior suffering from years of neglect. Its structural beam was also badly damaged. Restoration thus provided the perfect opportunity for planners to come up with construction methods that could restore the building safely, as an example for other shophouses facing similar challenges. An additional challenge facing the team was the restoration of the beautiful drawings, depicting the techniques and art of that time, uncovered beneath the broken

NEIL ROAD AND ARMENIAN STREET: WINNING OVER THE SCEPTICS

Continued...

façade. Thus, the project required both skilled structural engineering to ensure the building would be strengthened, and sensitive craftsmen to restore the decorative façade.⁷¹

Dr Liu, while reflecting on the significance of the restoration of this shophouse, called it the “monument of all monuments” that paved the way for large-scale conservation.⁷²

A little further north of the city centre, another notable demonstration project took place at Armenian Street. This time, the project came under the auspices of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB). In 1988, Didier Repellin, a noted

French conservationist, had been invited to Singapore to advise and convince the building industry of the value of conservation. He suggested that the best way to do so was to showcase a beautifully restored shophouse, thus providing the genesis for the demonstration project at 53 Armenian Street, which had been an acquired but vacant shophouse. Unremarkable in its dilapidated condition, this shophouse would soon become an important catalyst to spark enthusiasm for conservation.

This project was done in partnership with the Construction Industry Development Board⁷³ and Mr Repellin invited over French master stonemasons and roofers to be part of his existing team of craftsmen. This would help build up skills in local craftsmen to carry out sensitive restoration. Within three weeks the team had beautifully restored the property—the restoration had unveiled the elegance of the original architecture and knowledge of the original craftsmen, who had painstakingly designed the ornate decorations, the symmetry of the shophouse and its clever design that made it suitable for the tropics. All of which had been hidden underneath years of neglect.

The success of these two demonstration projects finally convinced those who had been sceptical of the conservation potential of shophouses.⁷⁴



Details of a column at 53 Armenian Street before (left) and after (right) restoration in 1988. Courtesy of Didier Repellin.

THE TOURISM APPEAL OF CONSERVATION

Parallel to the efforts of urban planners in the 1970s and 1980s, tourism officials actively worked to build consensus on the potential value of conservation in building up a distinctive national identity, which would in turn promote tourism. Mrs Pamela Lee, who was in charge of Marketing at the STPB in the late 1970s to early 1980s, explained the need to gradually build up both interest and expertise on how conservation could be comprehensively rolled out in Singapore to boost tourism. The turning point came when Mrs Lee attended a conference in Nepal organised by the Pacific Area Travel Association (PATA) in the 1980s.

The Nepal Conference gave me the chance to “see who could do what”. I was not just looking for information or technical knowledge on conservation, I was looking for sensible people who could work with our authorities. We needed to build up trust and momentum for conservation. We must not forget that at that stage, the STB was seen merely as a marketing authority with no knowledge of skill in the development arena.⁷⁵

Substantiating this, former Deputy Chief Planner of URA, Goh Hup Chor, recalls discussing with Mrs Lee on the need to learn from the experts on how conservation was done in other cities.⁷⁶ Eventually, Mrs Lee went on to invite the PATA to conduct a study of Chinatown, together with the STPB and the URA in May 1985. This study recommended that the history of the district be brought back to give tourists “a sense of place”. It also recommended that the neighbouring district of Tanjong Pagar serve as a test bed for conservation. Also, restoration efforts should be done with minimal disruption to residents and businesses.

At that time, conservation knowledge and expertise resided with Western cities. As a result, international study trips were organised for officials to travel to these cities to observe how historical buildings were able to tell the story of a city. The visits also provided these officials with the opportunity to learn about the meticulous work that went into conservation and the importance of conservation standards.⁷⁷

With the growing traction for conservation, the government launched the Tourism Product Development in 1985 and set aside S\$1 billion for preservation and restoration projects. The plan included upgrading historical areas and landmarks through a Heritage Link, redeveloping places like Bugis Street, Sentosa and Fort Canning Park. Most notably, the

conservation project in Chinatown would serve as a pilot for other historic areas like Little India, Kampong Glam and Geylang Serai.⁷⁸

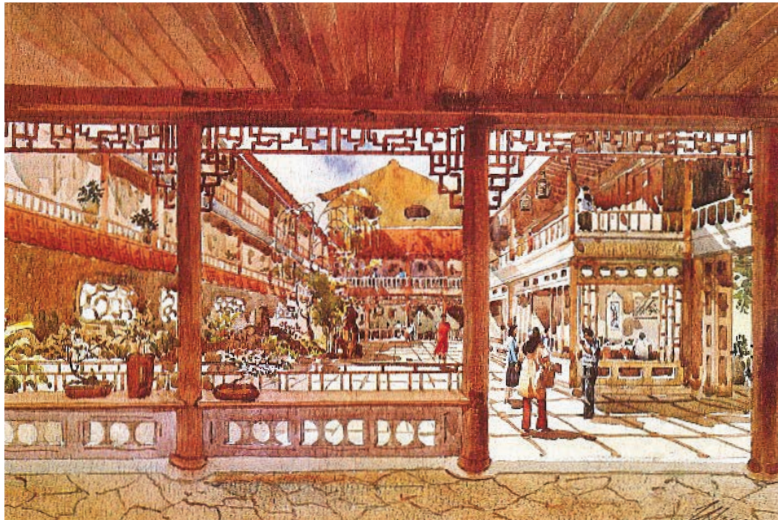
Yet, not all these projects were successful. One such case was Bugis Street, which was once a vibrant tourist destination based on its colourful reputation. It was originally located between North Bridge Road and Victoria Street until the whole area was acquired and redeveloped as part of urban redevelopment and construction of the East-West MRT line.⁷⁹ Though some of the old shophouses in the area were kept and new developments in the spirit of old Bugis were built, major parts of Bugis Street and its street life, which had been a major draw for both locals and tourists during the 1970s, were lost. An ill-fated attempt by the STPB to revive the former exotic atmosphere along the new Bugis Street felt too contrived and ultimately failed.

The charge of tourism efforts being too contrived ignited a number of debates on conservation, which are still relevant today. For example, despite the potential economic value attached to tourism, there was growing sentiment that conservation for the sake of tourism would reduce districts to being nothing more than theme parks. Such debates were most pronounced in the case of Chinatown. Who is conservation for? And beyond the hardware, how can conservation take into account the lifestyles and trades of an area?

DEBATES OVER CHINATOWN AND THE PUBLIC VOICE

With conservation of historic districts underway, non-government groups and members of the public were also making their passion for conservation known. A number of conservation-related projects and groups soon emerged.

In one example of public involvement in conservation plans, a number of early architects led by Goh Poh Seng, a notable Singapore novelist and an early pioneer of Singapore's art scene, worked on a proposal (entitled BuYeTian, which translates into “a place of ceaseless of activity”) in 1982, for the conservation of the Singapore River. This proposal, which included floating restaurants and a mix of activities along the river, called for the river to be turned into a cultural icon without letting it fall down the path of over-commercialisation.⁸⁰



An artist's impression of a proposed Chinese inn along the Singapore River. This illustration was part of the BuYeTian proposal.

Courtesy of Bu Ye Tian Enterprises Pte Ltd (now dissolved) and William Lim Associates.

In another example from 1984, the ad-hoc Singapore Coordination Committee, with financial support from the Aga Khan Programme of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), organised a seminar on the adaptive reuse of old buildings, which the seminal book *Pastel Portraits* was published for. The book had been a collaborative effort between architects and planners, and served as an indelible record of Singapore's vibrant built history. It also marked conservation's growing influence in urban planning.

Arguably, the most notable among these efforts was the emergence of the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) formed in 1987.⁸¹ William Lim, a pioneering architect known for his work with the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR), was also the founding member and first President of the SHS. He attributed the Society's origins to those who spoke out against the destruction of old buildings in the name of redevelopment. Previous attempts to start this society in the late 1970s had been unsuccessful. Mr Lim said:

During the boom years of 1978 to 1982, the rate of destruction to the old urban fabric took on crisis proportions. In the early eighties a small group of individuals met in an attempt to form a conservation society. While hearts and minds were ready, the political climate was not yet receptive.⁸²

In his own assessment, Mr Lim contends that despite the loss of much of the old urban fabric, civil servants and politicians were willing to support his efforts to raise awareness and educate people on the importance of Singapore's many old buildings.

Through the Conservation Master Plan, conservation gradually became a mainstay of urban planning, and the time was now right for the SHS to begin its work. Comprising heritage professionals and academics, its role was to "study and disseminate among the general public an appreciation of our [Singapore's] ecology, our built environment and our way of life in its various spiritual and physical manifestations".⁸³ Thus, members of the SHS focused their efforts on the "software aspect of conservation; that is the people involved, the users and the community".⁸⁴ They did so through research work, workshops and seminars that advocated conservation and preservation, not just for buildings but for national identity and social purpose as well. One of their more interesting public advocacy efforts has been in relation to the urban redevelopment and subsequent positioning of Chinatown as a tourist destination.

In 1997, the renamed STPB—Singapore Tourism Board (STB) introduced a S\$97.5-million plan to redevelop Chinatown. This plan proposed that Chinatown's numerous shophouses, streets and parks be brought together as one development, with the intent of enhancing the Chinese character of the area. The streets would be thematic, for example, bazaar street, food street, market street, and so forth. There would even be themed gardens to represent the various elements and Chinese-styled street furniture.

In response, the SHS published a paper entitled *Rethinking Chinatown and Heritage Conservation in Singapore*. In it, they argued for a more sensitive approach to Chinatown's development and that the original plan, if carried out, would have created a "sterile, static and ultimately uninteresting encounter with the past".⁸⁵ Among initial concerns was the lack of heritage "stocktaking"—various existing heritage assets of Chinatown seemed to have been ignored. Worse, the plan indirectly created artificial boundaries (in the form of the themed streets), with the assumption of there being a dearth of activities in the area. To counter this assumption, the SHS documented the existing networks, spaces and community life in Chinatown, as means of reflecting the rich heritage of the area.

In their documentation they demonstrated Chinatown to be a multi-ethnic area, with various dialect groups and ethnicities co-living and working in the same area, for example, Chinatown was home to a number of Malay and Tamil kampongs, Muslim mosques and Hindu temples.⁸⁶ They also found no sign of a Chinese monolith culture that the STB had intended to promote. So, rather than investing resources into creating a “Disneyfied” version of Chinatown, wouldn’t resources be better expended on the heritage of existing cultural traditions?

Consistent with the SHS’s philosophy towards conservation, the intangible cultural capital that thrives from the organic connections between residents, shop owners and visitors should be strengthened, rather than torn apart, through heritage preservation. The SHS asserted that while Chinatown had the potential to generate tourist revenue, its unique cultural features were part of everyday life of the community and should be prioritised over its tourism value.

In response, the STB organised forums to solicit perspectives from the relevant stakeholders. Opinions remained divided; some preferred the district to remain as it was and to allow it to organically develop, while others, like the STB, maintained that the district was in need of revitalisation. To overcome the impasse between the SHS and the STB, a number of principles were agreed upon: “Heritage and tourism were not diametrically opposed; Chinatown needed to be revitalised to help businesses in the area; and history could not be re-created”.⁸⁷

To facilitate the sharing of memories, the NHB and the STB set up a booth for the public to share their memories and stories of Chinatown, which would be housed in an eventual Chinatown Heritage Centre. The URA, rather than the STB, would now spearhead the redevelopment works and build pedestrian malls to facilitate vibrant street life for the area. However, the debate on the success of the “revitalisation” of Chinatown remains, with some remarking that the Chinatown after redevelopment lacks authenticity and has lost its actual lustre, while others cite its popularity amongst tourists and locals, especially during Chinese New Year.

Regardless the outcome, this story demonstrates the delicate path that conservation has to tread between relevant stakeholders. In this example, the government and civil society groups like the SHS differed in their perspectives on the economic value of conservation, but learned to work together in one of the earlier examples of community consultation.

INITIATING PILOT PROJECTS AND EXPERIMENTING WITH CONSERVATION TECHNIQUES AND APPROACHES

As such debates continued, government agencies spearheaded pilot projects and experimented with new conservation methods and techniques to demonstrate to a sceptical public that conservation was possible.



The row of refurbished shophouses along Neil Road in 1990.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

After the announcement of the Conservation Master Plan in 1986, the government’s first significant pilot was the restoration of 32 shophouses, which were part of 220 old shophouses that the government had acquired in the Tanjong Pagar area. Public response was mixed at that time. While conservationists welcomed the move, developers’ responses ranged from scepticism to cautious optimism. Some developers were concerned about the 30-year lease period. Others, like Rafiq Jumabhoy, CEO of Scotts Holdings, were concerned about commercial viability. Mr Jumabhoy suggested such plans needed to take into account trade-

mix and marketing plans. However, prominent architects Tay Kheng Soon and William Lim believed that there was enough public interest to make conservation commercially viable, but advocated for the lifestyles and trades of the area to continue to evolve.⁸⁸ Mr Lim was especially concerned that small businesses that add life to area would not have the resources to fund conservation efforts, instead choosing to tender their spaces out to the highest bidder to raise funds. Some public critics also advocated a more purist approach, where the lifestyles and trades of the area also be conserved.

As these debates continued, the successful restoration of the above shophouses showed all relevant parties that old shophouses could be restored and adapted to modernise Singapore's urban landscape (see Chapter 4 for more details on the improvement works). The remaining 188 shophouses were put up for sale in the first large-scale private participation in conservation.

After the restoration, the URA set up the Trade Allocation Committee to lease the shophouses at affordable costs to traditional traders, like clog makers. However, the changing tastes of Singaporeans made it hard to sustain traditional trades in a commercially viable way. Eventually the URA had to change its approach of preserving the character of historic districts. Now, instead of rent subsidies for traditional trades in the area, certain types of commercial establishments, for example, western fast-food chains, are not allowed in the core of each historic district.⁸⁹

This pragmatic approach focused on preserving the urban fabric, but allowed the character of the district to gradually evolve through adaptive reuse, thus making conservation a much more economically viable project; one that won the support of policymakers and private developers.

Conservation also provided opportunities to test-bed conservation techniques. While much of the construction industry grew with new methods for building and development, conservation remained a sensitive and onerous job that required skilled and delicate craftsmen. A case in point was the former Empress Place Building, which was originally the Court House when it was first built in 1867. It was eventually used

for various government offices until the 1980s. In the later years of the decade, the building underwent extensive renovation and was reopened in 1989 as the Empress Place Museum. The restoration team included the French conservation expert, Didier Repellin, who advocated the use of traditional lime plaster for the rendering works. While the use of lime plaster is an internationally accepted conservation technique, the high water table beneath the building quickly caused problems with the lime plaster façade. As a material, it had also not been used on a large scale in Singapore for many decades. Lessons had to be learnt with regard as to how lime plaster mixes could be adapted to specific local conditions and how damp course treatment in old buildings could be improved. The Museum was closed for a second round of refurbishment, which included the use of a new, more robust lime plaster mix, before reopening in 2003 as the Asian Civilisations Museum.

THE LOSS OF THE OLD FOR THE NEW

Yet the progressive conservation story of the 1980s is also one of loss. Though many of the shophouses along Boat Quay and Clarke Quay were saved through conservation efforts, other properties were lost through redevelopment, for example, the old buildings along Robertson Quay, the dozen or so warehouses at Alkaff Quay, and the early merchants' warehouses that lined the Singapore River. Many of these buildings were in bad condition and close to the high tide mark and thus could not be sustainably saved. There was also once an island known as Pulau Saigon, close to Magazine Road and Havelock Road that was merged with the rest of the island via land reclamation.⁹⁰ The losses of these historic places reflect the perennial quandary of which buildings merit saving, and the conservation story in land-scarce Singapore will always be one of balancing trade-offs with both "wins and losses".

All the above properties were redeveloped to intensify the land use. The sale of sites programme of 1967, which was a means for the government to "make available sites, sell the sites and use the proceeds to help do other social and other improvement schemes for urban renewal", became an important part of the redevelopment and intensification approach and was regarded as the "engine" of the success of urban renewal.⁹¹



Pulau Saigon in the 1990s was derelict and the buildings on it were close to the high-tide level.

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The sale of sites programme was particularly important in parts of the city with highly fragmented land ownership and rent control legislation that limited the redevelopment of prime land. Now, as the government acquired land, it could re-parcel plots to be large enough to be viable for redevelopment.⁹² This ensured the following: transparency and integrity, understanding market needs, a flexible and pragmatic approach to achieving development objectives, incentives for and the cultivation of trust and common purpose with the private sector, and the creation of a platform for innovation and design excellence.⁹³

INTEGRATING CONSERVATION INTO THE SALE OF SITES PROGRAMME

One of the URA's first sale of sites programme that integrated conservation guidelines into the programme involved four parcels of land spanning old Bugis Street and Albert Street and was launched in 1989. These guidelines had been part of the plan to breathe a new lease of life

to the city's north, where there were many hotels in disrepair. The area was generally in need of reinvigoration and it needed to be brought closer to the activities in the Central Business District.⁹⁴ The taken approach was to inject new commercial life into the area with a mix of activities through the sale of sites programme. Three of the sites were at Bugis Junction, bordered by North Bridge Road, Rochor Road and Middle Road. The fourth was located at Albert Corner.⁹⁵

As part of the conditions of the sale for Bugis Junction, the developer Bugis City Holdings had to maintain the old shophouses along Malabar, Malay and Hylam Streets, with the intention to keep the original street pattern. The entire site was intended to be a mixed-used development, comprising the Intercontinental Hotel and an office tower, along with Bugis Junction and the MRT station at its basement. However, the shophouses described above were deemed unsafe and thus the URA gave Bugis City Holdings permission to tear them down and the developer took the initiative to have the old façades rebuilt to retain the old scale and street patterns of the original precinct. Since all the shophouses were rebuilt, they were not gazetted as conservation buildings. The original streets between the rebuilt shophouses were eventually encased in a glass covering and air conditioning was introduced. This was to be the first air-conditioned "street shopping" experience in Singapore.⁹⁶

When Bugis Junction was opened in 1995, it became a catalyst for rejuvenation efforts in the larger Bugis area. This included a pedestrian area along the new Bugis Street and Albert Street, which had been part of an earlier masterplan for the area. Integrated planning through the master plan ensured that traffic was redirected so that the streets could be pedestrianised. Further plans included a budget hotel belt along Bencoolen Street and two new hotels on the corner of Albert Street Mall to form an architectural gateway to the area.⁹⁷

The extensive changes to the area were not without criticism, especially given the loss of the original fabric of Bugis. With its historic shophouses being rebuilt, questions were raised as to whether such conservation efforts merely created empty shells that could have been better preserved for authenticity. Debates over this continue till today, thus reflecting the challenging task of conservation. However, from the government's point of view, combining the need for redevelopment with bringing the private sector on board, the resulting mix of the old and new was a sustainable way to bring rejuvenation to the wider area.



Bugis Junction Shopping Centre with its restored shophouses, as part of the new glass-encased air-conditioned shopping mall in 2007.

Courtesy of shadeofmelon on Flickr.

The Raffles Hotel, which was gazetted as a national monument in 1987, is another example of a successful conservation sales site. It had been built in 1887 and was thus in need of restoration. In 1989 the hotel was closed for large scale restoration works. At that time DBS Land owned Raffles Hotel. The URA put up a piece of state land at the back of Raffles Hotel, along North Bridge Road for public tender. Dr Liu, who chaired a Supervisory Design Panel (SDP) to guide the restoration of Raffles Hotel and the new development, recalled that in the original tender for the vacant state land, one developer proposed erecting a tower at the corner. But this would have created a major discord in terms of scale and architectural language to the integrity of the existing hotel. Fortunately, this proposal was not accepted by the government.

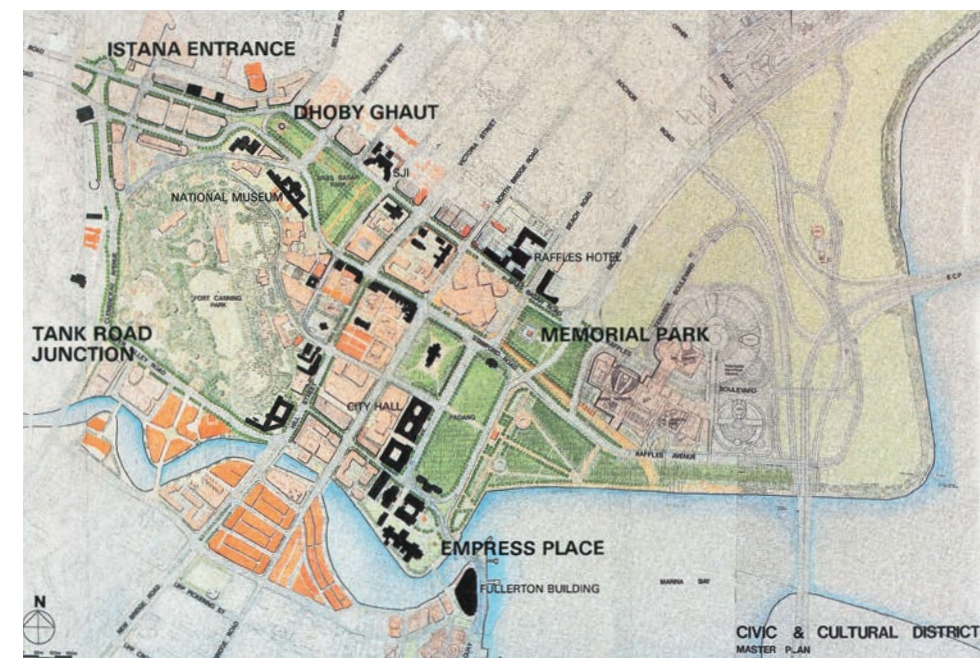
Instead, DBS Land, though not the highest bidder, was awarded the tender for the vacant state land for three main reasons: (1) It owned Raffles Hotel, (2) the proposed new building was sympathetic to the scale and architectural style of Raffles Hotel, and (3) the new development seamlessly blended in with the original hotel as one integrated development. With the new addition on the vacant state land, Raffles Hotel was gazetted again in 1995 along the new boundary. This commitment to upholding the architectural quality of Raffles Hotel has made it the iconic landmark of the city.⁹⁸

THE CIVIC DISTRICT MASTER PLAN

Another major plan was crucial towards the acceptance of conservation. Coinciding with urban redevelopment works in the city during the 1980s, the Civic District, which was once the colonial epicentre of Singapore, underwent a facelift in 1988. With the rise in popularity of areas like Orchard Road and Marina Centre, the district became underused over the years and was thus in need of revitalisation.

As part of a systemic masterplanning process, the URA first undertook a comprehensive review of the whole Civic District and identified its key strengths and weaknesses:

Besides its rich built heritage, the district was already a centre for cultural and recreational activities, with open spaces and landscaped parks and a network of roads and trains servicing the area. However, this was marred by issues including inaccessible landmarks, disjointed routes, and weak landscaping, where the grandeur of historic buildings was obscured by greenery. There was also a lack of good urban design.⁹⁹



The Civic and Cultural District Master Plan, 1988.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

As a result of the evaluation, the URA divided the district into eight identity zones through a network of links, which included a heritage trail linking Fort Canning Park to the Bras Basah area. Funds for the restoration of the historical area came partially from the STPB's S\$1-billion Tourism Product Development Plan. The URA spearheaded infrastructure works to align the streets and lanes in the Civic District, standardised the light fittings and chose a pinkish grey granite material for all the sidewalks in the area. The private sector also played an important role in restoring major landmarks in the district like Raffles Place and CHIJMES.¹⁰⁰

This was to be one of the URA's high-profile public engagement exercises. For example, for the refurbishment of CHIJMES, consultations took place with former students of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ), a Catholic convent school for girls in the Central Area. At that time, CHIJMES was part of CHIJ and schools in the area were in the process of being relocated outside the city centre to help ease traffic congestion and increase the land value for the plots they would vacate.

Yet, conserving CHIJMES was not an obvious option, although the chapel and school compound was certainly a unique architectural site worth conserving. Through a public engagement process, the sales documents were crafted. The awarded tenderer's original plan proposed a sunken garden at the rear of the chapel with a fountain flowing down from the ground level. Dr Liu, who chaired the SDP for the development of CHIJMES, worked with the URA and the architects to regularise the shape of the sunken plaza and also allow shops and restaurants around it. This created a unique concept of dining with a view of the chapel on a "hill" and optimised the land value.¹⁰¹

THE FORMER NATIONAL LIBRARY

The URA's public consultation exercise was not without controversy, especially with regard to the former National Library at Stamford Road. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was announced that the Library would be relocated (and the building that housed it, demolished) in order to create a clearer view of Fort Canning Hill from Bras Basah Park, and to construct a tunnel that would redirect heavy traffic away from the

Marina area to the Orchard Road area. This move would also ease heavy traffic along the Stamford Road segment of the National Museum and help beautify the museum district. In 2000, the Singapore Management University (SMU) unveiled plans for a new city campus in the area.

Public sentiment for most part was opposed to the Library's relocation. The building it was housed in, with its red-bricked façade, had been part of the growing-up years of many from the 1960s to 1980s, as evident from the well-publicised debate that revealed the memories of generations of Singaporeans who held the building close to their hearts.

As an alternative, local architect Tay Kheng Soon proposed rerouting the tunnel by sinking Bras Basah Park and keeping Stamford Road as it was. Other proposals included expanding Stamford Road. To balance the trade-offs, each alternative was carefully studied, but in the end demolition still seemed the most feasible option—expanding the Road would not necessarily help to improve traffic and involved cutting into the Park, while digging a deeper tunnel (and thus leaving the National Library intact) was infeasible as the Road was too short and required a steep drop, thus posing a safety hazard for traffic.¹⁰² Thus, despite public opposition to the demolition, it was announced in March 2000 that the National Library at Stamford Road would be demolished.

In the government's defence, it had spent 12 years carefully exploring the various alternative proposals and had engaged extensively with the public. In the end, the benefits of improving the traffic flow in the Civic District and the SMU's development plans won out. With the new tunnel and SMU campus, the area would overall be more pedestrian-friendly and bring back the vibrancy that it had been known for in its earlier days.

This difficult decision highlights the hard choices that the government had to contend with in deciding what to conserve and the importance of public engagement in its decisions. On 31 March 2004, the National Library at Stamford Road closed its doors for the last time. To bring some of the old library into the new, a number of the iconic red bricks were preserved in the new National Library on Victoria Street.¹⁰³

APPLYING SYSTEMIC INNOVATION TO CONSERVATION

The sustained efforts of urban planners and tourism officials throughout the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated how systemic innovation could be applied wisely:

- (1) By comprehensively studying and making plans for possible conservation areas,
- (2) Piloting demonstration projects,
- (3) Drawing on experts and international experiences to make the case for conservation, and
- (4) Adopting a pragmatic approach to conservation by allowing for adaptive reuse and the mix of old and new.

These approaches allowed the relevant agencies to capitalise on shifting urban development priorities, which ultimately culminated in the Conservation Master Plan. The timing was important: it would have been immensely challenging to gain wider political and community support for conservation had there been greater urgency for redevelopment needs.

THE TURNING POINT

“ We made our share of mistakes in Singapore. For example, in our rush to rebuild Singapore, we knocked down many old and quaint Singapore buildings. Then we realised we were demolishing what tourists found attractive and unique in Singapore. We halted the demolition. Instead, we undertook extensive conservation and restoration of ethnic districts such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam and of the Civic District, with its colonial era buildings...The value of these areas in architectural, cultural and tourism terms cannot be quantified only in dollars and cents. We were a little late, but fortunately we have retained enough of our history to remind ourselves and tourists of our past.”¹⁰⁴

.....
Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister (1959-1990)

THE URA BECOMES THE DESIGNATED CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

Following decades of preparation, the time had come for the emergence of the necessary governance structures after forward-thinking planners had capitalised on opportunities at the right time to push for conservation. In 1989, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) was appointed the formal conservation authority, though this move was met with some scepticism.

Mr Khoo Teng Chye, who was then a director with the Ministry of National Development's Strategic Planning Division, recalls the internal considerations on why the URA had been the most appropriate conservation authority. He said:

Not every development authority makes a good conservation authority. But there was this direction and commitment from a young URA that they were interested in conservation. They showed that this is an agency that is committed to conservation, but at the same time they are the agency in charge of development and so the agency had to sort out the contradictions within itself and balance out when to demolish or preserve, and because they are strong in wanting to preserve they will come up with good ideas about how to preserve, which is what happened.¹⁰⁵

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the URA had demonstrated a thoroughness and commitment to conservation, focusing on the historic districts unique to Singapore's history rather than just individual buildings. Its practical and balanced approach to conservation, for example, in getting the private sector on board, further strengthened the case for them. The culture and tradition within URA showed innovative thinking: redevelopment was not just about tearing down and building anew, but rather, conservation of the historic fabric of the city should be an integral part of development. This convinced policymakers to appoint the URA as the conservation authority.

With an amendment to the Planning Act, the URA was now granted the authority to designate conservation areas and create and enforce detailed conservation guidelines.¹⁰⁶ This expanded role allowed it to adopt a flexible approach to conservation, an approach that would be adaptive to changing economic conditions and land needs but yet able to maintain high architectural standards. This resulted in 5,200 conserved buildings being protected by 1993.

The Conservation Master Plan, which was finalised in 1989, gazetted the seven conservation areas—Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Emerald Hill and the Heritage Link—identified in the Central Area Structure Plan of 1986. Five new areas were also included: Blair Plain, Beach Road, River Valley, Jalan Besar and Geylang.

Once these districts were gazetted, a number of key decisions were made to ensure that conservation would be rolled out smoothly. These decisions revolved around:

- (1) Allowing high-intensity and high-rise development around the district,
- (2) Phasing out the various stages of conservation, and
- (3) Adopting a different set of guidelines for buildings that were to be conserved outside the city centre.

MIXING THE HIGH AND THE LOW

Unique to Singapore's conservation efforts is the sight of high-rise developments around the historic district. In most cities new buildings near an historical area are stepped up gradually. In Singapore, it is the converse, where the choice of erecting a tall building right next to an historical building is deliberate. Former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chief Planner of the URA Liu Thai Ker said:

So we did not do what the Europeans did. In Europe any new building near the historical area will have to step up gradually. We actually let the tall building kind of stand next to the historical building. We have to do that partly because we are short of land. Partly because if I wanted to do it in the European way, the government might even want to refuse to accept my conservation proposal because it would waste too much land. So I didn't want to do that. Just felt that one should be thankful, one should be thankful that we even managed to conserve the buildings.¹⁰⁷

Robertson Quay, which sits along the Singapore River and takes up about 50 per cent of its planning area, is one good example of the mix in heights between old and new structures.



Low-rise shophouses juxtaposed against modern skyscrapers along Mosque Street during the 2010s.

Courtesy of Lily Banse on Unsplash.

FLEXIBILITY WITH CONSERVATION POLICIES

Pragmatism and flexibility in guidelines are equally important to allow for innovation and quality restoration to take place.¹⁰⁸

Teh Lai Yip, Senior Director, Conservation, Urban Redevelopment Authority

The Conservation Master Plan consisted of five phases (see Exhibit 2), with each phase focusing on different areas and building types. This ensured the Plan's comprehensiveness, geographic reach and range of styles. This also meant that there would now be one policy for properties within the Central Area and different guidelines for properties in areas outside of it. For example, state-owned properties were left till the last phase, since the government could easily devote additional safeguarding measures to protect these buildings. However, for privately owned buildings, it was more urgent to get the private sector on board sooner rather than later, especially given concerns that the uncertainty of a building's status would prevent owners from unlocking the economic value of the land.

Exhibit 2

The Five Phases of the Conservation Master Plan

Phase 1A	Historic Districts and significant areas.
Phase 1B	Good Class Bungalows and their fringes.
Phase 2A	Additional Monuments in the Central Area.
Phase 2B	Additional Monuments for Preservation in the rest of the island.
Phase 3	Secondary Development Areas.
Phase 4	Buildings of outstanding architectural and historical value in pockets in the rest of the island.
Phase 5	State-owned properties worthy of conservation.

Next, the URA staff combed the entire island to survey all potential conservation buildings and came up with a different set of policies for areas outside the historical city centre.

Mrs Koh-Lim explains the decision-making process that they adopted:

So we looked around and we say they are on Street Block basis, like if you look at Purvis Street, Liang Seah Street, Tan Quee Lan Street, or Beach Road between Beach Road and North Bridge Road. Because the surrounding are high-rises, so that's where we advocated only the front building to be conserved and the back can go up to five or six floors. We look at the human scale approach. Walking on the street on the opposite side of street, what do you see? You look up, you see the front, the back is not so noticeable. So we used that approach and we managed to get approval. But to arrive at the approval we almost have to check through all the 2,000, about 2,000 buildings, you know. Building by building, do a simulation to see whether they can achieve the full GFA [gross floor area] potential that the master plan stipulated so to convince the decision maker there's no loss of potential, no opportunity cost. So it was a lot of hard work and perseverance.¹⁰⁹



An in-fill building added to a row of conserved shophouses, built in accordance with envelope control guidelines.

In areas outside the city where there was no pressing need to redevelop the area for economic use, development was delayed to protect the buildings there from demolition. These areas became known as secondary settlements, because they were urbanised after the First World War when the city centre was overcrowded. In many of these areas, redevelopment in the 1960s and 70s meant that many of the post-First World War shophouses there were already next to high-rise buildings.

Envelope control guidelines provide guidelines on non-conserved buildings and sites in conservation areas. These published guidelines, which are made available to the public, provide parameters for a range of standards, including building heights, setback, the roof, front façade, the sidewalk and signages. They provide flexibility for new developments to be creatively integrated into conserved areas, for example, in having a flat roof.

This flexible approach shaped the guidelines for all the major secondary settlements, from Joo Chiat, which was designated a conservation district in 1993, to the pre-war flats in Tiong Bahru in 2003. This flexible approach allowed building owners in these areas to make modifications to their properties, for example, changing their timber floorings to concrete.¹¹⁰ Owners could also make rear extensions to the back of their buildings to help increase its value based on the Master Plan, gross plot ratio and envelope control guidelines. This was significant because it brought more private owners on board.

GOOD CLASS BUNGALOWS

During the revised 1980 Master Plan, protection status was given to certain areas containing bungalow houses. These areas became known as the Good Class Bungalow (GCB) areas and the houses there are generally associated with the iconic black-and-white stand-alone bungalow, which is unique for its veranda, tall ceiling, timber flooring, steep roof and elevated levels.¹¹¹ Bungalow houses also feature vast gardens and compounds. A number of such homes across the island were eventually gazetted for conservation in 1993 because of their unique architecture and place in Singapore's architecture history.



A new extension of a Good Class Bungalow built next to the original conserved building at 2 Cable Road.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

In 1991, when GCBs were gazetted, owners were concerned that the value of their plots was locked in since they were restricted from knocking down the buildings. To mitigate this, these owners could choose between conserving their entire property and subdividing it into new developments. Some of these homes in the GCB areas have been restored with striking new extensions, bridging the old and new.

As for bungalows outside GCB areas (and where the Master Plan allowed private residential developments), they could be strata-subdivided into apartment units or clubhouses. This helped to optimise land usage and promote conservation at the same time.

An example of this approach involves present-day condominium Spring Grove. The condominium had originally been a 19th-century bungalow that was granted conservation status in 1991, before being privately acquired. As it lay outside the GCB area it was allowed to become part (i.e., the clubhouse) of the new condominium there today. While some may argue that a “conservation status” only benefits the owners of the development, without this flexible approach, the development may well have been demolished, with its surrounding area’s potential, lost.

GALVANISING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Throughout the 1990s, the URA refined their role by focusing on raising conservation standards and skills, and simultaneously enabling the private sector to lead the way with conservation efforts and raising public consciousness about conservation. This was done in two ways: (1) creating conservation guidelines and manuals via demonstration projects (see Chapter 1), and (2) providing the necessary infrastructure to improve areas around historic buildings/districts. The latter will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

In 1991, the URA launched the “Conservation Initiated by Private Owner’s Scheme”. This scheme sought to encourage private owners to volunteer their architecturally and historically significant homes for conservation in return for additional developments, for example, bonus gross floor area. The scheme was successful, in that it saved a number of older buildings from demolition. In some cases, the initiative taken by private owners through the scheme led to the URA gazettement additional buildings in the same area for conservation. For example, gazettement the former Mayfair Hotel on Armenian Street led to a number of old shophouses at the junction of Loke Yew Street and Armenian Street being gazetted as well.¹¹²

Government agencies also used these years to raise the standards of conservation. In 1993, the URA together with the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) published a book called *Objectives Principles and Standards for Preservation and Conservation*, which explained the overall philosophy for the preservation and conservation of districts and monuments. It also suggested appropriate methods for carrying out restoration work sensitively¹¹³ and outlined the various principles and criteria for conservation. Dr Liu shared how this approach to conservation took into account not just the façade of the building, but also the spatial quality. He said:

Because every time somebody tries to conserve a building, they must comply with the ten principles. Why? The idea behind it is that if you comply with the ten principles, the buildings thus conserved will be accepted by anybody anywhere in the world, conservation lovers, that what you conserve is genuine antique. If you go below that, you actually destroy the authenticity of the architecture flavour. That of course covers façade, the decoration and also spatial quality. I mean quite often in many cities the conservation effort is to keep the skin and demolish everything behind. But we didn't allow that to happen. The spatial quality must be retained.¹¹⁴

The publication came out around the same time when concerns were raised over the safety of construction methods. In 1991 to 1993, several shophouses undergoing renovation works collapsed, killing and injuring a number of workers. After these accidents, the URA, which had previously required private home buyers to only submit the architect’s building plans without an engineer’s evaluation, now made it mandatory for buyers to produce both documents. The URA also organised workshops and seminars conducted by international conservation experts for developers and engineers.¹¹⁵ This raise in conservation standards signalled the URA’s commitment to guiding the private sector to make sure that conservation did not compromise the integrity of the architectural heritage and was up to modern building standards.

To further incentivise the private sector, the URA worked with the then Public Works Department Roads (PWD Roads), to change the requirements for the road reservation line in conservation districts. During the 19th and early 20th century when many shophouses were built, streets were narrower. However, modern standards dictate a proportion of the road be reserved for tree planting, sidewalks and other urban design features. By waiving the road reservation line in historic districts, this ensured that no part of a conserved building in these districts had to be demolished, effectively ensuring that owners could get the highest land value for their properties.¹¹⁶

The URA also relied on the rule of law to enforce conservation standards. During her time as URA's Director of Conservation & Urban Design, Koh-Lim Wen Gin, leading by example, used to spend her weekends checking buildings undergoing redevelopment works, to ensure that nothing had been torn down by mistake or violated conservation standards. Such detailed enforcement acted as useful deterrence against those who intended to flout the rules. Of course, the close attention that URA officers paid when they did their rounds also meant that no one could get away with flouting conservation guidelines.

In one such example, First Choice Properties, a subsidiary of Orchard Parade Holdings (what is now Far East), demolished by mistake seven shophouses slated for conservation at Albert Corner. It claimed that it had been an oversight by its contractor, Seng Eng Transport and Civil Engineering. Nonetheless, to uphold the integrity of the system, the URA was firm and fined First Choice and Seng Eng Transport a sum of S\$711,200 and S\$2,000, respectively.

In a separate incident that occurred in the same development, the developer was allowed to demolish a separate row of shophouses because they were structurally unsound. However, the wrong shophouses were demolished, with the contractor claiming that the houses protected for conservation were not marked, and thus mistakenly demolished. The contractor also claimed that he was unable to read English and he was not given any plans, but only lot numbers with no addresses.¹¹⁷

After an investigation, then the URA's CEO, Khoo Teng Chye, announced that the developer would be held accountable.¹¹⁸ The developer was ordered to rebuild the demolished buildings. Additionally, it was barred from participating in any government tenders for a year.

For national monuments, rules on changes and adaptations are stricter because they have to be maintained as close as possible to their original state. In 2003, the Tan Si Chong Su temple, a gazetted national monument since 1974, was found with a series of unauthorised changes—the temple's roof had been raised, the colour of the original roof tiles had been changed and some of its original ornaments, simplified. Upon further investigations, the temple official found to have ordered the changes was fined. Other aspects of the case are still pending.¹¹⁹

These examples of holding the private sector accountable emphasised the importance of the rule of law, the integrity of the conservation and preservation programme, and the weight that authorities and officials place on maintaining Singapore's built heritage.

Fortunately, the above examples were more an exception than the norm—the private sector tended to demonstrate an astute appreciation of heritage buildings. The Bank of China, for example, when upgrading its premises in the late 1990s, chose to retain the original building built in 1953, which was considered to be one of the first skyscrapers in Singapore. The original building marked the presence of the bank in the region and that was reason enough to maintain it. To accommodate its need for larger premises in the late 1990s, they chose instead to build a sliver of a new building behind the original in a style sympathetic to the old style.

CHINA SQUARE: MIXING THE OLD AND NEW

The China Square story demonstrates the government's flexible approach to conservation without compromising on conservation standards. China Square, situated at the edge of Chinatown at the border of the Central Business District is today a bustling part of the city with skyscrapers interspersed with refashioned shophouses.

This area dates back to the Hakka and Cantonese settlers along the south of the Singapore River, and it was one of the first parts of Singapore to be urbanised. Over time, it became overcrowded and rundown. While the bulk of the homes then were built in the "Early Shophouse Style", more elaborate Art Deco-style shophouses were built concomitantly when the economy improved. Given its historical significance, the URA included China Square in its proposal for conservation in the early 1980s. However, with the constraints of limited land, complete conservation of the entire district was never going to be of great likelihood. Because of this, an innovative solution was found: integrating the "old" of conservation with the "new" of new developments.¹²⁰

By the mid-1990s many of the businesses and residents in the Central Area had been resettled as part of its redevelopment. In 1997, China Square too began to undergo transformation.

As China Square was strategically located between the main financial hub at Raffles Place and Chinatown, URA architects and planners worked out the ideal gross plot ratio to accommodate the right mix of conserved shophouses and new developments. Two hundred buildings were eventually identified for conservation and the remaining area was to be cleared for new intensive commercial development.

However, choosing what was to be retained or cleared highlighted the trade-offs that had to be made. The URA's vision was clear: the original urban pattern of buildings, streets and open spaces were to be retained, alongside the high-rise edge periphery of China Square. The low-rise spine of conserved buildings would be connected through a pedestrian mall that would also connect People's Park and Hong Lim to Raffles Place. Future buildings had to be built close to the edge of the road, in order to create a border around the Square. In addition, these conserved buildings would have activity-generating uses, such as outdoor eateries along the public promenade, which would bring vibrancy to the Central Business District (CBD) at night.

Through the sale of sites programme, the URA subdivided the large plot of land into seven parcels for sale to the private sector in phases through an open tender. As part of the programme, those successful in their bids were required to include old shophouses in their redevelopment plans. At the same time, the government demonstrated its flexibility to the changes that the private sector requested for, while maintaining the principles and standards of conservation. For example, in the original tender conditions for one of the parcels, the URA had stipulated that parts of the street had to be kept open, but the developer proposed a retractable roof structure instead, to factor in bad weather conditions. The URA agreed to it because the design and engineering ingenuity of this structure created a "weather-proof" atmosphere that not only naturally ventilated the space below, but allowed people to be outside even in inclement weather. This seminal solution reflected both the commitment of the developer and flexibility from the URA to find solutions that could bring conservation and redevelopment together to suit the modern landscape.



CHINA SQUARE: MIXING THE OLD AND NEW

Continued...

Another such example was when the URA turned down an appeal from the developers of two of the parcels. The developers, who engaged three experts (two from Harvard University and the other from the University of Hawaii), had originally wanted to tear down the conserved shophouses (to create a large open square) and build a large basement carpark to attract more visitors. However, this plan was rejected because: (1) a large plaza would have been contrary to the overall fine-grain feel of the area, (2) small open plazas that were part of the URA's original design guidelines under the tender conditions were already preserved in one of the other parcels, (3) a large carpark was not in line with the overall "car-lite" approach to the CBD, (4) Hong Lim Park was close by, and (5) the developers were aware that conservation of the shophouses was a requirement in the tender. With this in mind, the appeal was rejected, although a compromise was reached—the developers were allowed to demolish a number of shophouses to create a smaller, but still sufficiently open plaza that was in keeping with the overall typology and urban design of the area, thus demonstrating the URA's flexibility.

An interesting observation with regard to the China Square experience was the need for a residential population to bring vibrancy to the area especially after office hours and weekends. The URA's original vision was for a mixed-use area comprising hotels, restaurants and offices creating a round-the-clock buzz. However, none of the developers chose to include hotels and residential uses because office, F&B and retail uses commanded the highest value. In recent years the construction of a nearby MRT station has improved access and developers are now adding a hotel and service apartments to enliven the place.

More than just the retention of shophouses, the URA's approach to conservation had to ensure that some aspects of the historic character of the area were also preserved. Thus, the urban design of that area was of great importance since it had to have a mix of old and new elements. Urban design elements such as the streetscape, building form and roofscape had to be carefully considered. The mixing in of new high-rise buildings created a unique architectural juxtaposition that intensified the land use and thus made conservation possible.



Restored shophouses that are part of Far East Square, one portion of the China Square Development.

THE SHOPHOUSE THROUGH THE YEARS

The shophouse, one of Singapore's architectural icons, reflects the country's multicultural heritage and is influenced by architectural styles from around the world. Its design has also been continuously evolving. The shophouse originated from the Guangdong and Fujian provinces, where a large number of early settlers came from. Dating back to the 1840s, these homes typically housed commercial activities on its ground floor and they had a pitched roof with common party walls. Until the 1960s, it formed the bulk of the urban fabric of the old city centre. Generally, shophouses can be classified according to six major architectural styles—Neo-Classical, Malay, Baroque, Chionoshire, Rococo and Shanghai—and each was influenced by the architectural styles of the times (see below).



The Early Shophouse Style (1840–1900)



The First Transitional Shophouse Style (early 1900s)



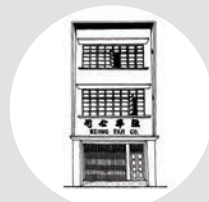
The Late Shophouse Style (1900–1940)



The Second Transitional Shophouse Style (late 1930s)



Art Deco Shophouse Style (1930–1960)



Modern Shophouse Style (1950–1960)

Shophouse drawings courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AWARDS AND ACKNOWLEDGING RAISED STANDARDS

The challenges with getting the private sector on board during the early days soon began to change as interest in the conservation scene grew, and even more so when the URA refined the information and support they provided to interested private owners and/or developers. Various programmes were also created to further support the burgeoning conservation scene. By the mid-1990s, conservation was also becoming more popular with the general population as both the commercial and historic values of the historic built fabric were more palpable.

In 1994, the URA launched the Good Effort Award, which celebrated good examples of successful restoration works. Inspired by the response, they launched the Architectural Heritage Awards the next year. These awards helped to further raise the standards for quality restoration and conservation work. It also helped to recognise the best practices in the industry, not just for architects and owners, but also for those in the construction industry, especially engineers, who came up with good conservation techniques and work. These award ceremonies eventually evolved to include innovation and new design in heritage contexts. It also took into consideration efforts made by communities to restore community buildings, for example, churches and mosques.¹²¹ Director of the URA's Conservation Management Department, Kelvin Ang, while reflecting on the evolution of the URA awards over the past two decades, shared:

Legislation is an important tool but legislation is not the only tool. I think the most important tool is the kind of moral suasion, peer support, you know that kind of a shift in value system. Having forms of award recognition that are non-monetary in nature can play that role because you really celebrate the best practices, you create role models for the rest to follow.¹²²

AN ORIGINAL RESTORED TERRACE HOUSE

One of the six winners of the first Architectural Heritage Awards in 1995, Dr Richard Helfer, was among the first terrace house owners in Emerald Hill to painstakingly restore their conservation homes. The house had been built by Low Koon Yee, a Chinese towkay, in 1923 and remained in his family's hands until Dr Helfer purchased it in 1989.

The family had originally used the house as a holiday home for special occasions like Chinese New Year. When Dr Helfer and his wife first purchased the home, almost all of its original features were still maintained (though they were covered in many coats of paint and showing wear and tear); there was a charcoal cooking stove, a Kelvinator refrigerator and even a water sluice for bathing!

This combination of original features coupled with the need to modernise the infrastructure inspired Dr Helfer to approach the restoration of his house with creativity and attention to the historical architectural detail. Inspired by his work on various conservation projects during his time in the hospitality industry, he preserved and enhanced almost all of the original features of the house. He hired an architect who had a keen interest in old craftsmanship.



The restored façade (left) and interior (right) of Dr Richard Helfer's Emerald Hill home.

Courtesy of Richard Helfer.

At the time of his house restoration works, most of the other houses that had been purchased along Emerald Hill were themselves undergoing modern renovations, but more in line with the modern design palettes of the era. Dr Helfer recalls walking the streets and finding discarded wall/floor tiles that matched those in his home. He immediately retrieved them for reuse, and as for those tiles that were damaged, he found other ways of using them to help restore his house. He also travelled to Melaka and Penang to source for tiles that he wanted but could not find in Singapore.

Many of the other features of the house, i.e., the doors, floor and fans, were in relatively good working condition, but covered with paint and grime after years of neglect. He recalls hiring an old craftsman and his assistant, who painstakingly removed the paint from the floors and doors. To introduce modern plumbing and electricity without hacking and destroying the original flooring and walls, he built ledges to conceal the plumbing pipes and used art work to creatively blend in the affected sections of the house. The end result? A beautifully restored home fit for modern living.



PERIOD OF REFINEMENT

The 1990s represented a unique period of refinement and helped to clarify the government's role in conservation efforts, which included guiding and incentivising the private sector. The government also played a crucial role in planning and facilitating the infrastructure development around historic districts/buildings. This ensured that as urban development took place, these historic districts could also move on with the times without losing their architectural value. This will be dealt with in the next chapter.¹²³

CHAPTER 4

DEVELOPING THE NECESSARY INFRASTRUCTURE

“It was not just about identifying which buildings to save. We had to fit in all the elements that can support a ‘living’ conservation district—water, sewer, electricity supplies and the general improvement of the district. And how should we design the electric substation to fit unobtrusively into the conserved area? We went to great lengths to select the right materials that we should use to complement the areas. We went down to details such as minimising steps and smoothing out walkways to create a more pedestrian-friendly environment.”¹²⁴

Cheong Koon Hean, Chief Executive Officer (2004–2010), Urban Redevelopment Authority



Back lanes in the past (1952) and present (2019). In the photo on the left, back lanes were where night soil was carried off from. The right photo shows upgraded and redesigned back lanes.

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives Singapore.

RETROFITTING INFRASTRUCTURE TO MODERNISE HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Infrastructure may not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about conservation. In the case of Singapore, however, where land constraints and development needs are high, innovative planning for the infrastructure development of historic districts is a story full of ingenuity and forward planning.

The historic districts in Singapore were designed in the late 19th and early 20th century, primarily for horses, rickshaws and walking. As many of the shophouses in these districts were eventually homes to numerous poorer families in close quarters, modern sanitation was almost non-existent for most households. Fast forward six to seven decades later: with Singapore's Central Area undergoing rapid redevelopment, modern-day issues like electricity and lighting, sewerage, flood control and road use were now of central concern. In the case of conservation, how could the existing districts be retrofitted with modern infrastructure without disrupting the integrity of the conservation area and its “entire envelope”? The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), which was by now Singapore's official conservation body, thus took the lead to systematically study how infrastructure improvements should be done.

To begin with, many of the shophouses in the various historic districts did not have back lanes for servicing and fire escapes, as they were built back-to-back. In the case of the shophouses in Tanjong Pagar, the conservation team at the URA consisting of engineers, architects and planners had to find a way to introduce a back lane without compromising on the architectural quality of the shophouses and the surrounding area. Tanjong Pagar is on a hill, meaning that the shophouses were not evenly levelled across the district. Other challenges were: (1) building a uniform back lane in spite of the shophouses' non-uniform heights and building designs, and (2) ensuring that this back lane, when built, would be large enough for relevant water supplies, utilities and sewerage lines to run through, and also function as a fire escape. The team thus systematically studied the area and worked with various government agencies to build the necessary infrastructure to ensure these shophouses would be liveable and a valuable asset. The URA would then put in the request for funding to create the back lane.¹²⁵ Softer aspects like street signage and sidewalks were also redesigned to increase the attractiveness of the districts.¹²⁶ Even the bus stop in the area was designed in a traditional "Chinese" style to suit the character of the district.

Another infrastructural issue that reflected the approach of effective execution was planning the accessibility of historic districts through carparks and its surrounding road use. In the late 1980s, city planning was still centred around cars, and as part of development guidelines, developers had to build carparks for new developments. For historic districts, the URA wanted to ensure that historical buildings would not be demolished for carparks, but yet incentivise businesses to set up shop there. So, it carefully studied how neighbouring modern buildings could be planned with extra holding capacity for cars in the conservation districts and what extra public carpark spaces could be built around the district without upsetting the urban fabric.

Liu Thai Ker, who was then the CEO and Chief Planner of URA, when recalling how carparks were introduced, explained that the URA would pick sites around the historic district about three or four hundred metres apart to build parking lots, so that pedestrians and patrons would only have to walk a maximum of 200 metres to get to their destination.¹²⁷ This approach to creating spaces for additional carparks, which the

government bore the cost of, created extra incentives for the private sector—businesses could now locate themselves in conservation districts without having to pay extra for parking space for their clients. In one example at Craig Road, Michael Koh, who was then the URA's Head of Urban Planning, recalls that as part of the URA's comprehensive study of the Duxton Hill area, a new integrated condominium development that would provide extra parking lots was sold. A staircase pedestrian walkway would connect Duxton Hill to Neil Road down below. With a central parking station where people could now park their cars, Duxton Hill could be pedestrianised, thus contributing to the public experience in the historic area.¹²⁸

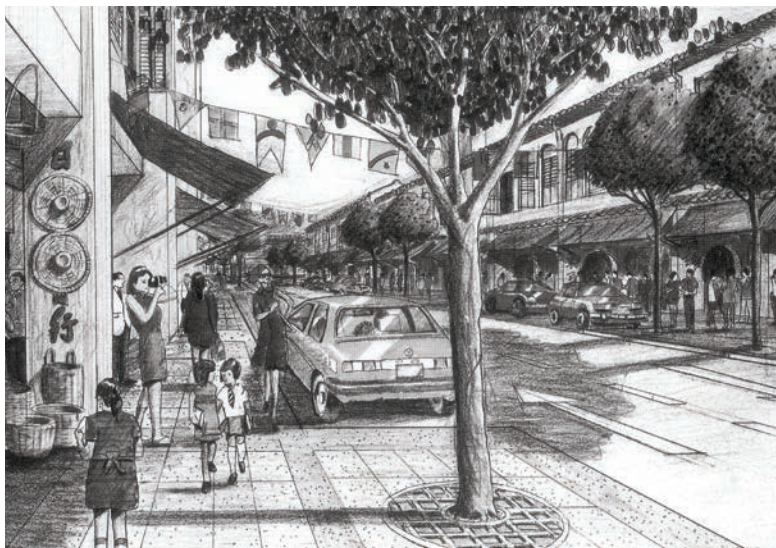


The parking station part of the integrated condominium development at Craig Road, viewed from Duxton Hill.
Courtesy of John Siow.

INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORIC DISTRICTS

In the 1990s, when Joo Chiat was being conserved, the URA adopted an integrated urban systems approach to bring in “road calming” measures and greenery that would enhance the historic character of the area. This coordination role was crucial to the development of historic districts, as the URA would first put up the request for funds and then spearhead the planning for the whole district. In the case of Joo Chiat Road, it was narrowed to only two lanes and trees were introduced to slow down traffic. The URA also worked closely with the National Parks Board (NParks) and the then Public Works Department Walkways (PWD Walkways) in choosing the correct types of trees that could be planted in between shophouses, without blocking their façades.¹²⁹

In another example, the URA worked with the Land Transport Authority (LTA) and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to pedestrianise Terengganu and Pagoda Streets in Chinatown to create pedestrian malls, covered walkways and food streets. This collaboration sought to enhance the district and provide pedestrian connectivity from the MRT to Chinatown’s historic core.¹³⁰



An artist's impression of a pedestrian-friendly Joo Chiat road, taken from the original plans for the area in 1997.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

BALANCING TRADE-OFFS AND ELECTRICAL SUBSTATIONS



The substation (left of picture) along Tras Street, with its façade carefully designed to fit into the surrounding area.

The URA had to balance the trade-offs between forgoing the potential value of redeveloped shophouses and the need to supply electricity to them. The challenge then was to find a place to locate the electric substation and construct them in a way that would not distract from the aesthetic quality of the district. Ler Seng Ann, then a young engineer, reflected on how the URA would work with Singapore Power to find creative ways to house the substations throughout the district to be as unobtrusive as possible. He said:

We cracked our head[s] and cracked our head[s]. Finally, we have managed to work with Singapore Power. We, in cases where it's possible, what we did was actually, we sacrifice[d] the back part of the shophouse, to house the substation.¹³¹

In Boat Quay, for example, two shophouses were sacrificed to house a substation. So while the potential value of what these two shophouses could have offered was lost, it did allow the substation to be housed without affecting the streetscape. However, if no existing building could be used, a well-designed substation would have to be built with height restrictions and blended with the conservation buildings of the area, like the one at Magazine Road.

Beyond the hard infrastructure, the URA also created detailed guidelines for other urban design elements, such as tree planting, the renovation of sidewalks and the customisation of lamppost designs for each district. For example, the URA would urge relevant agencies to forgo tree planting in areas where there were historically no trees, to prevent the façades of conserved buildings from being potentially blocked. Even the type of terracotta tiles used for the upgraded sidewalks was specific. From the macro of infrastructure to the micro of the design, various government agencies worked together in tandem to create accessible and modern historic districts for businesses to locate themselves in.

Today, most historic districts have uniquely shaped back lanes that follow the contours of the design of each shophouse. These back lanes are also functional in that they create space for municipal services. Some of these back lanes, especially in Kampong Glam, have funky urban design elements, a unique draw of historic districts. These shophouses have also evolved over time. From primarily residential and F&B use, many shophouses are now home to creatives and start-ups.

FIRE CODE SAFETY, MAINTAINING FLEXIBILITY AND ARCHITECTURAL INTEGRITY

Throughout the 1980s and prior to the Conservation Master Plan, the process of combing the island to document and study each potential conservation building, as described in Chapter 2, was crucial towards refining the guidelines on conservation and building safety. One challenge many historic buildings face is maintaining modern fire code safety regulations without compromising the architectural features of the building. In cities like Paris, historic buildings have adapted unique and specific requirements on fire safety to ensure that the historic features of buildings are not lost.¹³² In the case of Singapore, the late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of “productive fights” between the Fire Safety and Shelter Bureau (FSSB) and the URA on the right guidelines for historic buildings.

Many shophouses were built with timber features, which included the floors, structural members and windows. The floors in particular posed a fire hazard. From as early as 1983, the FSSB had wanted restored shophouses to have concrete floors instead, but given that original timber floors were an essential part of the historic quality of shophouses, the URA pushed and came to a compromise of (1) different guidelines for conserved buildings in historic districts¹³³ and secondary settlements, where the guidelines for shophouses in the former would be stricter, and (2) besides the entire building envelope, the original floorings of conserved buildings cannot be replaced with concrete. In secondary settlements, however, the above is permitted.

All in all, it took about ten long years from 1983 for both agencies to finalise the fire safety guidelines for conserved buildings, and the timber flooring issue was one of the biggest concessions that the FSSB had to make. For shophouses in historic districts, in order to protect the timber floors from fire, residual timber could be used on the underside since charred timber is fire resistant. Owners could also impregnate the timber floor boards with flame retardant chemicals.¹³⁴ This resolution helped to ensure that timber floors remain a key feature of shophouses, while also satisfying modern safety requirements.

Ler Seng Ann, who still works in the URA as the Group Director of Development Services, described these discussions and engineering ingenuity as important parts of the guidelines that had to be sorted out among all relevant government agencies before conservation could be made possible.¹³⁵ Through discussions with the various stakeholders, the fire safety guidelines that were finalised were reflective of the consultative approach of the government.

THE REDEVELOPMENT OF CLARKE QUAY

The story of how Clarke Quay, historically a warehouse district, came to be part of the redeveloped Singapore River demonstrates how infrastructure can be adapted to a historic district's modern positioning as a clubbing and night-life district. In the 1980s, Clarke Quay had been acquired for urban renewal as part of the Singapore River clean up, with the change in direction towards urban conservation. It was identified as a future "festival village" that would bring the nightlife to the riverfront and had been part of the larger plan to help attract more tourists and preserve the unique architecture of the riverfront. Clarke Quay was thus gazetted for conservation in 1989 and then tendered out for sale.¹³⁶

At the time, the whole area was divided into five parcels, but sold as a single site to allow for better coordination between the URA and DBS Land (today known as CapitalLand), the developer that had won the bid.

However, Clarke Quay did not attract large crowds after its re-opening, in part attributed to many factors: the hot weather, nascent heritage tourism sector and its inaccessibility, which made it difficult for patrons to access the area and enjoy its outdoor entertainment venues. There were also criticisms that the area's tourist slant betrayed its history.¹³⁷



Clarke Quay's unique and iconic umbrella structure.
Courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board.

In 2000, when DBS Land merged with Pidemco Land to form CapitalLand, the area was repositioned. The renowned British architect Will Alsop was hired, and a host of proposals, which included a roof structure over the area, were brought up as possible solutions to spice up the tenant mix. The last proposal, in particular, evoked debate within the URA about how and whether modern structures should be introduced to historic districts without compromising conservation principles.

In this proposal, a light canopy roof-like structure (likened to a giant umbrella with the wings of an angel) was proposed to be erected higher above the conserved buildings; its purpose being to shelter patrons from the elements, without touching or modifying the conserved shophouses, yet representing the architecture of the time in which the canopy was built.

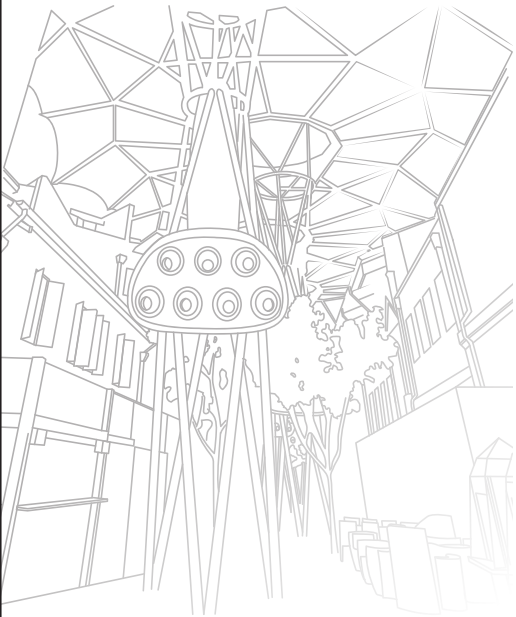
THE REDEVELOPMENT OF CLARKE QUAY

Continued...

The URA considered the proposal by first juxtaposing the district's historical background and planned purpose—a warehouse district versus a vibrant night-life hub along the Singapore River. It then carefully considered whether the structure would violate international conservation norms. To ensure proper ventilation, the architects had also proposed a blower as part of the structure to help with air circulation. Given these considerations, the URA agreed to the developer and architect's plans for Clarke Quay. It was also designated as an entertainment zone. Today, Clarke Quay is a vibrant conservation district known for its restaurants and clubs that spill over onto the covered pedestrianised streets.¹³⁸

The ingenuity and foresight of conservation planners to go beyond the conservation of individual buildings, by improving the hard and soft infrastructure of historic districts, demonstrates the efficacy of integrated planning. The success of the conservation programme was underpinned by an approach to infrastructure that saw the government spearhead the development of whole districts to support a burgeoning conservation private sector and build confidence in conservation. It was also a story of balancing flexibility with high conservation standards to create the vibrant historic districts in Singapore today.

INTANGIBLE HERITAGE AND GREATER PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



“The Singapore of the new millennium has sometimes been characterised as one of greater openness and a more consultative style, in keeping with a more education population, wise to other cultures and social mores... It is a citizenry searching for a sense of collective past and a shared identity, seeking to make a difference to the future through individual and collective roles. This evolving society and community with a more involved citizenry, characterises a nation coming of age.”¹³⁹

Lily Kong, Author, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore*

PLACEMAKING, SOCIAL MEMORY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

By the early 2000s, the critical mass of historic buildings had been conserved, restored and adapted for modern use. Attention now turned to the softer aspects of conservation. At the same time, larger factors were taking place that impacted the shift towards the softer aspects of our built heritage. This included a greater connection to the ancestral and geographic origins of Singapore's diverse population, to places like India, China and the rest of Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁰

As historic districts became an integral part of the Singapore landscape, there was also greater public awareness of the value of conservation as a process that gave “soul” to Singapore. This led to a desire to see the conservation programme expanded.

This resulted in a more concerted effort from the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) to engage more productively with the public on what they felt constituted built heritage, and how they could integrate software programming into conservation. The gathered feedback included:

- (1) A focus on placemaking, programming and the software of historic districts,
- (2) Integrating the social and historic memory into the conservation value of buildings and places, seen especially through the conservation of community landmarks and sites across the city,
- (3) More expert involvement in assessing architectural heritage value, and
- (4) Harnessing wider public interest in how the built environment is linked to our heritage as a nation.

BEYOND THE HARDWARE OF HISTORIC DISTRICTS

As historic districts became more imprinted in public consciousness and formed a distinctive part of the Singapore landscape, programming activities in these districts has also risen in importance. The URA ran two lifestyle surveys in 2004 and 2009 to better understand the changing lifestyle needs of people living in Singapore for better planning purposes. From the results of these surveys, the software aspects of conservation emerged as an important factor.

Director of the URA's Conservation Management Department, Kelvin Ang, summarises the public's evolving expectations of the conservation programme:

*People expect us to be more involved in the software issues but, of course, with the outcome of the lifestyle surveys that were run two or three times, we're also clearer as to what is the public's expectation of the conservation programme. And people expect high-quality restoration, people expect high-quality maintenance, people expect more programming in conservation areas, and people expect both more traditional trades and more modern trades.*¹⁴¹

One way that the softer dimension of historic districts manifested itself was in the greater desire to have local character and identity brought out through landmarks, and that conservation should allow the local value of a place to naturally evolve into becoming more community and place-centred. This led to a greater emphasis on placemaking and programming. For the URA, this evolving role led to it working with partners, including community groups and stakeholders in various districts, to bring out the activities and distinctive identities of each district.

Now, permanent and temporary road closures to facilitate such programmes held in the various historic districts are a common phenomenon. Road closures and festivals that breathe local flavour into districts spearheaded by community groups and organisations that work closely with the URA and the Land Transport Authority (LTA) are common sights. Such community groups include “Urban Ventures” at Keong Saik Road, “One Kampong Gelam” in Kampong Glam and “Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association (LISHA)” in Little India. This has also raised the profile of the non-government groups involved and accorded them with a rising voice and role.



A street closure along Keong Saik Road.
Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

KAMPONG GLAM: WHEN OLD IS ALSO HIP

Kampong Glam had been the site of a new palace for Malay royalty in 1824. The surrounding area urbanised rapidly with the construction of two major trunk roads, known today as Victoria Street and North Bridge Road. The residential population increased quickly with the influx of settlers from the Malay Archipelago, traders from Hadramaut, and many other ethnic groups.

For the next century, the district grew around its residents. The influence of each group's specialised trade—spice trading, textiles, publishing, basket weaving, sandal making, copper crafting and tombstone carving—soon began to emerge on different streets. These businesses were run from two-storey shophouses that have defined the district's landscape till today. Kampong Glam also became an important centre in Southeast Asia for the Malay intellectual world and print industry.

In 1989, Kampong Glam was gazetted as a conservation area due to its rich architectural and cultural history. However, with the resettlement of the residential population, the area became rundown and quiet, with most activity centred on textile trade and the Sultan Mosque. Thus, the challenge that the URA faced was not just to conserve Kampong Glam's architecture and history, but to also make the area lively and integrated with Singapore's modern landscape.

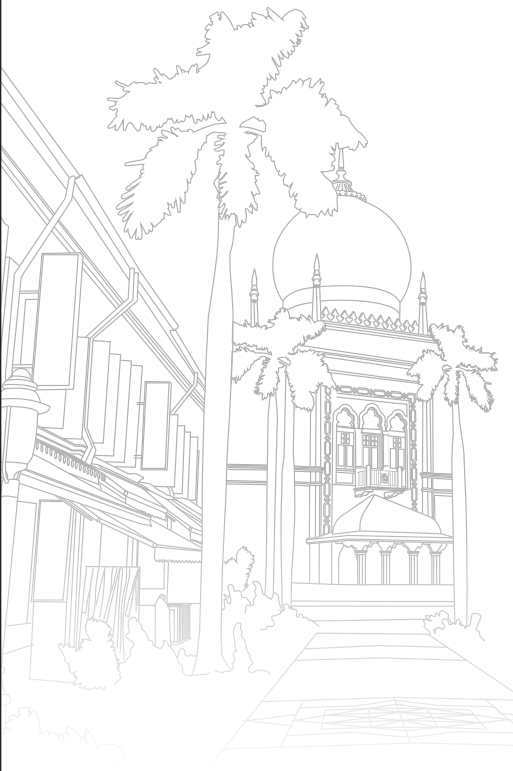
The URA soon came up with and implemented a conservation plan of seven aspects for intervention: (1) conservation of the entire area, (2) designation of a core area, (3) creation of a heritage park and festival street, (4) pedestrianisation, (5) infrastructure development, (6) improvements to street furniture and signage, and (7) adaptive reuse of conservation buildings.

Under the second aspect of the plan, "ethnic-based activities" in buildings of architectural and historical significance near the iconic Sultan Mosque and Istana Kampong Glam were clustered together. This also involved the selection of certain trades that could remain in this area, such as batiks, sarongs and carpet shops. Textile businesses were to be 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 gradually phased out from and disallowed in the core area (centred around Arab and Bussorah Streets).

To increase walkability and street life, the area around the Sultan Mosque—including Bussorah Street and Muscat Street—was pedestrianised. The Bussorah area soon 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 footfalls into Kampong Glam and the appropriate type of vibrancy remained. Some business owners and visitors described Kampong Glam as being so quiet that one could even "go bowling down the lanes at night".

To liven up the district, the URA put up additional shophouses for sale from 2003 to 2004. A more open approach to market forces was also adopted for the use of buildings away from the historic core. This led to businesses that catered to young and diverse patrons



KAMPONG GLAM: WHEN OLD IS ALSO HIP

Continued...

moving into the area, which created an interesting juxtaposition with the traditional trades already there. Haji Lane, parallel to Arab Street, became home to trendy cafés and independent boutiques. These, plus new commercial, residential and hotel developments around Kampong Glam, helped attract more office workers and tourists to the area. Other interesting new developments, like two private museums (the Children Little Museum and the Vintage Camera's Museum), enhanced the district's offerings.



A traditional Wayang Kulit show in Kampong Glam.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

However, as a result of market forces, the increasing number of bars and clubs around the fringes of the district raised concerns from long-time businesses, former residents and the Sultan Mosque community over the erosion of the area's cultural integrity. Considering these perspectives, the URA and Police Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU) of the Singapore Police Force introduced a freeze on new bars, pubs, nightclubs and karaoke outlets 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 students and 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 and organise festivals (together with the Malay Heritage Centre and the Aliwal Arts Centre). These festivals highlight the district's characteristic traditional arts and crafts and combine them with modern performances.

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

However, there is still some criticism. While newer F&B establishments have benefited from the above changes, some traditional retailers have lamented that they have been left behind; efforts to increase footfall did not improve business for some shops on Arab Street, forcing a number to close down over the past three years.

KAMPONG GLAM: WHEN OLD IS ALSO HIP

Continued...

Reflecting on these tensions, Kelvin Ang, Director of the URA's Conservation Management Department, 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."¹⁴²

One such example is the Kampong Gelam Working Group set up in 2013 by the URA, for stakeholders to discuss and collaborate on 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 can thrive together.

THE SOCIAL AND HISTORIC MEMORY OF CONSERVED BUILDINGS

Besides the conservation of major historic districts, the new millennium saw a few significant community landmarks being put up for conservation. These landmarks were significant in that they captured the memories of Singaporeans (especially in the post-independence years) and demonstrated the government's concerted efforts towards preserving parts of Singapore's history beyond its colonial past.

On the whole, the heritage sector in Singapore was developing in maturity, which paved the way for more significant conversations within and outside of government. The URA gradually expanded the number of conserved buildings to 7,200, including a significant number of community landmarks of the more recent past. Examples of such landmarks include the former Jurong Town Hall and former Kallang Airport. The former is known for its unique modern nautical-themed architecture and the latter for its 1930s style of reinforced concrete, steel and glass.

To complement the URA's efforts in conserving major districts around the city, the NHB played an important role in developing a vibrant cultural and heritage sector in Singapore. The NHB was formed in 1993, as part of a merger of the National Archives, National Museum and Oral History Department. Under the guidance of former Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, the NHB took important steps to preserve and enliven selected buildings, not just for their architectural merits, but also for their historic significance and potential in promoting cultural diplomacy.

One such building was the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, originally a villa, that Sun Yat Sen, the founding father of the Republic of China, stayed on four occasions between 1906 and 1910. It was during these stays at the villa, with the help of the local business community, that he planned three of his uprisings in China. The villa was gazetted as a national monument in 1994, given its unique architecture and history.¹⁴³ In 2009, the NHB signed three memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that sealed a framework of enhanced support for three heritage institutions, including the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, where it assists in offering management and professional expertise. The other heritage institutions are the Malay Heritage Centre and the Indian Heritage Centre. These three centres were to serve as spaces to preserve memories and be cultural anchors for their respective communities.





The Indian Heritage Centre (top), Malay Heritage Centre (middle) and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (bottom).

Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

MOVING BEYOND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Two more heritage sites that demonstrate how physical structures are significant for social memory are Reflections at Bukit Chandu and the former Ford Factory. During the Second World War, Bukit Chandu had been where one of the last battles was fought before the British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese. It is particularly remembered for the valiant last stand of the soldiers from the 1st Infantry Regiment, who under the command of Lieutenant Adnan bin Saidi, held off the enemy for 48 hours.

Built in 1941, the Art Deco-styled Ford Factory had been the first motorcar assembly plant in Southeast Asia. It was also the location where Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival surrendered Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 after the Battle of Singapore. The factory was then used as a servicing depot for Japanese military trucks, but resumed car production (after the Japanese withdrawal) until Ford closed it down in 1980. Ownership then passed over to the Hong Leong Group, which initially wanted to redevelop the plot of land into condominiums. Talks were held between the Group, the former Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) and the URA, with a view of preserving the building. As a compromise the front portion of the factory was made a national monument in 1996 and then handed over to the MITA and the NHB in 1997.¹⁴⁴

Given the historical significance of both these locations, the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), then part of the NHB, spearheaded efforts to create interpretive centres to preserve the memories of what transpired then. In 2006, the NHB converted a conserved colonial-era bungalow into Reflections at Bukit Chandu, a museum commemorating the valiant last stand of the 1st Infantry Regiment. In the same year, the former Ford Factory was redeveloped into an exhibition gallery and repository named Memories at Old Ford Factory (which has since been renamed the Former Ford Factory).

HOMES FOR ARTS, HISTORY AND CULTURE

Being a home for the arts has been a feature of historic buildings, though a strictly economic approach to urban redevelopment would have seen many of these buildings torn down for higher density uses. But thanks to the right leadership and champions, many found a new lease of life, in the form of creative non-commercial uses.

When Liu Thai Ker was Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the URA, its conservation team, led by Mrs Koh-Lim Wen Gin, approached him: they wanted to find a use for a series of unused bungalows along Waterloo Street, which was on the fringes of the business centre. These bungalows though not conserved were kept out of redevelopment plans. When Dr Liu became the Chairman of the National Arts Council soon after, one of his main concerns was the lack of affordable accommodations for artists. He remembered these bungalows and offered them up to artists—who often cannot afford the high rentals to practice their trade in the city centre—for rental at affordable rates, thus bringing the culture and the arts to the commercial district.¹⁴⁵

A separate initiative by the heritage sector has been the conversion of old government and school buildings into museums. By the 1980s many government agencies and schools in the Central Area had moved out to newer areas around the city. Many of the now abandoned buildings, however, possessed unique architectural and historical qualities dating back to the early 19th century. Though some of these buildings—the former Tao Nan School, former Empress Place Building and former St. Joseph's Institution—were eventually preserved, government officials were uncertain of what to do with them: should their land value be maximised, or should they be used to place greater emphasis on Singapore's history? A few key decision makers who understood the importance of using these conserved buildings for museums to connect Singapore with its Asian ancestral roots, pushed for the latter. Former Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo recalls the value of his proposal to undertake the expensive renovation work for what would later become the first Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) at the former Empress Place Building, which had been gazetted in 1992. He said:

So we spent a lot of money to fix the building first, then convert it into a museum. There was a report in the papers, and one day, LKY [Lee Kuan Yew] said, is this the best use? Because you can turn [it] into a hotel too. So I said, "But it is a very strong heritage building." So he did not demur. In the end, when it was open, it turned out very well.¹⁴⁶

The ACM was to move on to new premises at the former Empress Place building and became a new addition to the civic and cultural district, which brought together the arts, culture and heritage in the city centre. In 2015, this district was revamped to connect the historic buildings along the waterfront with various other museums, such as the Singapore Art Museum, the National Museum of Singapore and the Peranakan Museum, which had taken over the ACM's former site. These museums are all housed in former state and educational institutions.



The night view of the new extension at the Asian Civilisations Museum and its floating impression.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Between 2012 and 2015, the ACM underwent extensive renovations to house new galleries in a new extension. Michael Koh, who was then Chief Executive Officer of NHB, recalls working closely with the Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM) to design this new modern structure, which was supposed to mark its presence as a modern addition, but still blend in with the existing historic architecture. The extension was eventually built above a slanted glass platform (which allowed the facades of the adjacent old building to be visible from either side), creating a sense that the new extension was floating and thus not imposing on the old façade. This preservation and creative adaptive reuse of conserved buildings demonstrates the leadership and ability of the former Ministry of Information Community and the Arts, the NHB and the URA to respond to the public's desire for a greater connection to the history and heritage of Singapore.¹⁴⁷

FROM PMB TO PSM

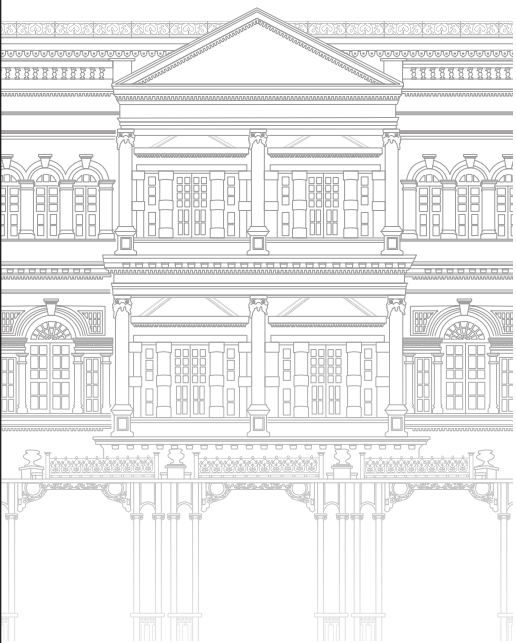
For over 40 years, the PMB was responsible for identifying, recommending and researching monuments for preservation, protecting them, and together with the URA, issuing guidelines ensuring the monuments' upkeep. In addition, they stimulated public interest and preserved records related to these monuments (or buildings).¹⁴⁸ To date, the PMB has preserved 72 monuments that represent Singapore's diverse multi-cultural history.¹⁴⁹

The PMB was originally part of the Ministry of National Development (MND), primarily because of the architectural significance of the monuments. Over time, as more and more of Singapore's historic buildings were gazetted as national monuments, the PMB's role continued to evolve. It was first moved to the Ministry of Information, Community and the Arts (MICA)¹⁵⁰ to focus more on the social historic aspects of buildings, recommending those that were socially significant. In 2009, the PMB was merged with the NHB, in part due to a larger government move to merge smaller statutory boards with larger ones for greater efficiency.

The move also reflected the government's intent on building up the entire heritage sector, of which built heritage formed a large part. Such monuments serve an important function in preserving not just the architecture of buildings in Singapore, but their historical and social history as well, hence its place with the NHB was more apt. The shift also highlighted the PMB's important educational and outreach role, which would be supported by the NHB's existing networks and responsibilities. Michael Koh, who was CEO of the NHB at that time, said:

The inclusion of PMB in the NHB family adds another dimension in our efforts to nurture and enrich the heritage ecosystem. NHB is already responsible for our nation's art, artefacts and historical documents. We offer an extensive array of educational and outreach activities such as the Singapore Heritage Fest, International Museum Day and Explore Singapore!, along with exhibitions, talks, workshops trails and tours. Having PMB as part of our family is a natural extension as we can easily integrate its activities [with] our many programmes and marketing initiatives.¹⁵¹

In 2013, the PMB was renamed the Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM) division under the NHB to reflect its expanded role of recommending historic sites for preservation. This name change came after the successful induction of the Singapore Botanic Gardens as Singapore's first UNESCO World Heritage Site.



MORE INVOLVEMENT OF EXPERTS

In 1999, the URA worked with the Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA), a professional association, to undertake a joint review of conservation guidelines. More significantly, the URA's consultation with a non-government body helped to allay some of the concerns that architects and private owners faced in their restoration and renovation efforts and the standards that the government set for conservation. The consultation results included relaxing guidelines on the design and materials used for new rear extensions to conserved shophouses in the secondary settlements, as well as removing controls on requirements on roof form and building materials for envelope control sites within historic districts.

In another significant milestone, during the Concept Plan review exercise in 2000, the URA made the bold move to invite interest groups, members of the academia, businesses, students and the grassroots to a discussion on how land should be used in Singapore. Two focus groups were formed to explore different planning dilemmas—the first “explored balancing our [Singapore's] scarce land resources among the competing land uses of housing, parks, industries and the second, how to retain identity in the context of intensive land use”.¹⁵² In a case for conservation, the results of the second focus group revealed the public's desire to feel a greater sense of place throughout the island and not just in specific historic districts.

Efforts to engage the public revealed important places of significance that may not have been known to the government beforehand, and thus helped to outline plans for conservation that were better integrated into the overall Concept Plan process—one of the outcomes of the above focus group discussions was the recommendation to set up an independent heritage trust. At the same time, former Minister for National Development Mah Bow Tan saw the value of an advisory panel in helping to bridge public expectation and expert opinion about conservation.¹⁵³ With the support of the Minister, the Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP) was set up.

Since its inception in 2002, the CAP's two-fold role was to recommend buildings for conservation and to promote greater public education and understanding of gazetted built heritage. Its first panel consisted of educators, business owners, government officials and members of the public with a keen interest in conservation. The first buildings that CAP put forward were reflective of Singapore's military history, attesting to half

a decade of nation-building. These included the old Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) Club, the old Drill Hall of the Singapore Volunteer Corps, and other related buildings of the former Beach Road camp. To further preserve the history of Beach Road, the old Beach Road Police Station was also included for conservation.¹⁵⁴ The first CAP Chairman, Dr James Khoo, while reflecting on the panel's diversity, said:

*We have teachers, academics, taxi drivers, doctors, architects, journalists and developers, representing different segments of society. The CAP's deliberations—focusing on the history and identity, aesthetics and rarity, and economic contributions of any site for potential conservation—will be taken into consideration before final decisions are taken on whether to conserve or preserve buildings/areas. The CAP is indeed happy and proud to be an independent partner of URA in this nation-building process.*¹⁵⁵

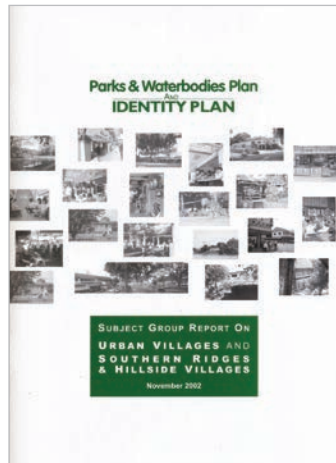


The first Conservation Advisory Panel in 2002.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Greater public engagement and involvement in conservation planning resulted in more universal participation in discussions for conservation plans. The URA and the NHB have since emerged as two significant government bodies that have embarked on large-scale public engagement conservation efforts. The URA has also continued to work closely with individual owners to educate and support conservation efforts. This runs parallel with other public efforts and initiatives (such as those of the Singapore Heritage Society and various heritage enthusiasts), through knowledge dissemination of the histories and untold stories of various sites and places across the island.

STIRRING PUBLIC INTEREST: THE PARKS & WATERBODIES PLAN AND THE IDENTITY PLAN



The Parks & Waterbodies Plan and Identity Plan Subject Group Report.

Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

attention to the activities there. Former URA's Chief Planner and Deputy CEO, Koh-Lim Wen Gin, recalled:

In 2001 we saw the need to take stock, and review our development strategy, going beyond conservation, to see how we can give a helping hand to retain the charm and character of certain places that evolved over time and which hold a special place within the hearts of the local communities. The plan is a land use plan "plus", it combines ideas and proposals on how to keep and enhance the special character of places and with land use planning as part of the 2003 Master Plan review. Our aim was to ensure that such places will not be unwittingly destroyed as we progress.¹⁵⁶

The second significant reason was the public consultation process over the recommendations in the Plan and how the government made use of specialised focus groups (called Subject Groups) to engage the public.

In 2002, the URA launched the Parks & Waterbodies Plan and the Identity Plan, which was significant for two reasons: the first being the way that the plans reflected the shift in thinking with regard to the importance of history and identity of places in Singapore. Since the critical mass of buildings to be conserved had been met, attention now turned towards the unique qualities of various areas around the city and how best to retain their characters and activities.

The Identity Plan was unique in that it pushed conservation and planning to consider the identities and overall charm and character of each identified area. This also meant paying close

The Plan had identified 15 areas (of "unique charm" based on the public's recommendations) around the city and grouped them into three clusters. A total of three Subject Groups were convened to study proposals made in the Plan under the following areas: (1) Parks and Waterbodies Plan and the Rustic Coast (Pulau Ubin, Changi Point, Pasir Ris, Coney Island and Punggol Point), (2) Urban Villages and Southern Ridges & Hillside Villages, and (3) Old World Charm (East Coast Road/Joo Chiat, Tanjong Katong, Balestier and Jalan Besar).

These Subject Groups comprised professionals, representatives of interest groups and laypeople tasked to study the various proposals in the Plan,¹⁵⁷ conduct dialogue sessions with stakeholders and consider public feedback. These groups then had to make their recommendations to the URA on the Plan's proposals. Such recommendations included feedback on the type of amenities people hoped to see in the areas, like better accessibility to public transport and the creation of pedestrian overhead bridges. The exercise engaged 35,000 visitors to the exhibition at the URA Centre and received feedback from 4,200 people.

Then CEO of the URA BG (NS) Tan Yong Soon explained how the synergistic relationship developed between the URA, the Subject Groups and the public, and of the usefulness of having the Subject Groups coordinate the public feedback exercise. He said:

We put up the plans to the public for feedback from July 2002. We also formed focus groups (we called them Subject Groups) comprising professionals, laypeople, and interest groups to study the proposals in depth. The people in the Subject Groups were very dedicated and went about their tasks enthusiastically, visiting the sites and holding discussions during weekends and at night. They came up with a list of comments and recommendations to the Minister. We received very useful feedback. The Subject Groups strongly endorsed URA's efforts and made suggestions to improve them.¹⁵⁸

The Plan proposed 500 shophouses for a conservation study, many of which were built in the 1950s to 1970s, reflective of a more modern style. Thanks to this process, the areas of Balestier, Joo Chiat, Tiong Bahru, Lavender, Syed Alwi and Jalan Besar were conserved with public support. Following the public consultation exercise, the URA finalised the proposals to be incorporated into the major land use changes and ideas of the 2003 Master Plan.¹⁵⁹

The Plan also saw enhanced consultations with individual owners on conservation. For example, as part of the URA's comprehensive study of 228 proposed conservation buildings in Joo Chiat, letters were sent to the registered owners of these buildings to inform them of the plans. Owners were invited to send in their feedback or meet URA officers in person should they wish to do so, and the feedback collated from this consultation process was evaluated alongside the URA's traditional conservation assessment of a building's uniqueness, contribution to the environment, and architectural and historical significance. In the end, though the decision to conserve was not unanimous among the residents, 100 buildings thought to be essential to the historic character of the area were still shortlisted for conservation.¹⁶⁰

GREATER PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Such efforts have not been without its controversies, debates and contestations. There are ongoing debates about how much of the authenticity that conservation brings is lost to market forces, and how best to balance the economic potential and viability of a conserved district versus its conservation value. Singapore's urban development also placed greater demands for housing and transport infrastructure and there were resulting tensions over the sites and buildings that needed to be demolished to make way for such infrastructure.

The growing public voice over the fate of buildings earmarked for infrastructure development has also seen greater negotiation and dialogue between the involved agencies and the general public. In many cases, this led to at least a partial revision of plans, which in turn led to a number of agencies refining and expanding their roles.

One example has been the NHB's role in documentation and engagement efforts, as well as raising awareness of heritage with both the general public and agencies involved in tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Part of the NHB's roles has always been to bring to life the stories of Singapore's heritage, and in the case of our built heritage, the stories and shared memories of buildings and to connect them with the milestones of Singapore's nationhood.

Director of the NHB's Heritage Research and Assessment Division, Yeo Kirk Siang, shares his take on the NHB's role with regard to the built environment:

...NHB's role is to look at how do we bring these stories, these events to people, and make it relevant to them; excite them in a way, make them want to learn more because we see buildings as a way to tell the stories, because it's very powerful in a way that you can visualise all the things behind it, whether it's people, our pioneers, or historic events, major milestones of Singapore's history. It's a physical manifestation of our nationhood and development, our country's history.¹⁶¹

In line with this role, the NHB took a more proactive role since the 2010s to document the historic memory of different aspects of the built environment, not just of buildings but also of significant sites and their associated memories and history. The NHB also began to work with other agencies like the HDB and the URA to explore how these memories could be integrated into urban planning. One key catalyst for this shift was the Bukit Brown debate.

Bukit Brown was a cemetery in use from 1922–1973 as burial grounds for the Chinese Community. It had been known to have close to 100,000 graves at the site. In 2011, the LTA, the URA and National Parks Board (NParks) announced the government's intention to build a new dual-lane road that would run through a part of the cemetery, which would affect about 5% of the graves there. This spurred public debates. Civil society groups argued that the cemetery served an important role in keeping alive cultural traditions pertaining to burial and death, and that the site was a place of rich ecological and historical records. Agencies consulted and reviewed the design of the road to reduce the impact on Bukit Brown, engaging various associations and the civil society in the process. Eventually, the graves were still exhumed to make way for the road construction. The resultant extensive public debate and engagement resulted in closer collaboration between the involved agencies and civil society groups to commemorate the heritage of the site. Efforts included undertaking a first ever extensive historical research of the area, resulting in the creation of a walking trail, which features maps detailing individual tombstones and the major funeral and burial rites and rituals associated with the cemetery.¹⁶²

This active public interest in the heritage of such sites presented an opportunity for public agencies, especially the NHB, to think about how heritage and history could be factored much earlier into planning decisions. Following the Bukit Brown debate, the NHB and other agencies have made efforts to enhance the consideration of heritage in their

planning processes. These include more efforts to research and document Singapore's built heritage, with information being used in urban planning, as well as more engagement and consultation efforts. One example was the decision by the MND to retain several blocks and an old playground at Dakota Crescent, one of Singapore's earlier public housing estates, while redeveloping the rest of the area for new public housing. Questions remain on how agencies should assess the heritage value of sites and plots of lands. How can the impact of new infrastructure development be mitigated on historic places and sites? What flexibility is there in planning? And can the history of new estates be brought out through design? These are some of the questions for the NHB and other agencies to now ponder.

Another example is the Bidadari estate, the site of an exhumed cemetery where a new public housing estate will be built upon. With Bukit Brown in mind, the NHB worked with the HDB to identify important sites, events, buildings, etc., that could be developed into a heritage walk to enhance the design of the estate and capitalise on the existing greenery and rich heritage of the area.¹⁶³ The Bidadari Memorial Garden will also be relocated and integrated into a future park within the estate.

With greater public interest, new and expanded roles—citizen engagement and debates on conservation issues, and better messaging and communication with communities and the growing civil societies—have become an important part of agency work. Oftentimes, when development plans are shared with the public, there is a sense that not enough of the public's opinion has been taken into account. Yet many closed-door discussions were held prior to the announcement to explain why certain decisions were made. This was done with the intention to foster better understanding between the civic society, the public and the government.

One such example was the construction of the Circle MRT line extension along the Palmer Road area. Many of the historic buildings were retained while allowing the MRT construction to continue. These included the Masjid Haji Muhammad Salleh, the Keramat Habib Noh and the Fook Tet Soo Hakka Temple. However, Mount Palmer, Palmer House and part of the Bestway Building had to be demolished. Consultations with various groups took place behind the scenes to explain the challenges and consideration for the construction works. Care was taken to avoid several historic buildings and also share the mitigation measures taken, such as the documentation efforts that were implemented. Of course,

not all parties came out of the process satisfied, but this highlights how discussion, negotiation and engagement with the correct parties can help mitigate loss and bring the public closer to decision making.

With greater attention on processes and building up knowledge of Singapore's built heritage, the NHB saw the importance of mapping and surveying Singapore's built environment. In 2013, the NHB began to look at other cities for examples of such a repository. One such city was Los Angeles, which had begun a large study to document the evolution of the city's urban landscape, as means of guiding urban planning towards building the identity and character of each precinct.



The Our SG Heritage Plan, Singapore's first master plan for the heritage and museum sector. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

This research phase eventually led to the NHB's 2015 Heritage Survey, which would serve as a basis for a rich database containing the history of buildings and sites, especially oft forgotten ones that might not have been on the agencies' radar. Hopefully, this database will help guide future urban planning and development processes, as Singapore's landscape continues to grow and evolve to meet changing needs.¹⁶⁴

Complementing the survey was the formation of the Heritage Advisory Panel. Given growing public expertise in built heritage in both the academia and civil society, this Panel served several purposes: (1) bringing together various perspectives to inform how the survey should be conducted, (2) evaluating academic historical projects on buildings that the NHB could support, and (3) helping to develop a matrix (or a system) for evaluating the historical, social and architectural significance of buildings.

Another major initiative is the Our SG Heritage Plan, which is Singapore's first master plan for the heritage and museum sector. Spanning 2018 to 2022, it outlines strategies and initiatives for the sector. Built heritage features prominently under the second ("Our Places") of four pillars under this plan, which is guided by six main strategies: (1) incorporating heritage considerations into planning, (2) creating a tangible heritage inventory,

(3) strengthening research and documentation, (4) enlivening our historic precincts, (5) infusing heritage in public places, and (6) promoting greater awareness of public monuments. The last strategy boosts Singapore's built heritage by connecting people to the relevant buildings, sites, structures and districts across the island.¹⁶⁵



A Heritage and Identity Partnership meeting.
Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Parallel to these developments at the NHB, the CAP was replaced in August 2018 by the Heritage and Identity Partnership, which is supported by the URA. In addition to the CAP's role in providing advice on conservation, the Partnership also contributes ideas on how to sustain memories of buildings and places as the city continues to develop.¹⁶⁶ Even the term "partnership" emphasises the evolving way in which the wider community is engaged, thus signalling a more community-driven approach.

Today, the public dialogue, engagement and active involvement in conservation issues echo the early days of Singapore's conservation story, when the public's view was a catalyst for kick-starting seminal conservation plans. Significantly, this period reflects a modern shift in how the public can be engaged, the importance of public knowledge about buildings and sites, and how a building's history and social memory—and not just its architectural significance—can be part of redevelopment plans.

CONCLUSION

GLOBAL RECOGNITION OF SINGAPORE'S CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

The markers of success of Singapore's conservation efforts have undoubtedly reached global proportions. Through the collaborative efforts of various government agencies and community groups working together, Singapore's conservation efforts have thrust the country onto the global stage as a leader in heritage conservation. Amongst the country's various achievements in this regard, the Urban Land Institute's Global Award for Excellence and the designation of the Botanic Gardens as a UNESCO World Heritage Site are clear markers of this ongoing success.



Recently gazetted modern architectural icons (clockwise from left): the Ascott Raffles Place (former Asia Insurance Building), the Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House, and the State Courts.

Courtesy of Dickson Phua on Flickr (Ascott Raffles Place), National Heritage Board (Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House) and Chensiyuan on Wikimedia (State Courts).

Connected to Singapore's global recognition are the continuous conservation efforts that have expanded new frontiers for conserving Singapore's collective built heritage. Among these achievements include Singapore's post-independence sites such as the Asia Insurance Building, Jurong Town Hall and Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House, which have all become iconic landmarks worthy of conservation for the years to come.

GROWING ACCOLADES

Singapore's approach to conservation has strengthened from the insights emerging from the debate between the purist and pragmatist conceptions of success. Despite initial setbacks along the way, the Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) emergent approach has undoubtedly been successful, receiving international recognition for heritage conservation. Among its numerous awards, the URA received in July 2006 the Asia-Pacific Urban Land Institute (ULI) Award for Excellence for its conservation programme. The ULI's awards are highly acclaimed and go beyond design and architecture to recognise the process of a project and its leadership, its contribution to the community, environmental protection and response to societal needs, among others, in its selection process.¹⁶⁷ In presenting the award, the statement from the jury acknowledged Singapore's collaborative approach in conservation efforts that has preserved its rich heritage:

"In a rapidly modernising country, Singapore has established a model conservation program to preserve its rich heritage of vernacular buildings and colourful neighbourhoods. Using a collaborative approach involving government organisations, the public, and developers, the Island Republic's Urban Redevelopment Authority has achieved a balance between free-market economics and cultural conservation."¹⁶⁸

Singapore's conservation programme had been recognised by the ULI jury for taking a "balanced" approach to conservation, a clear testament to the positive outcomes of a robust discourse focused on preservation and progress. This recognition did not stop at awards. Beyond invitations to the URA for it to share its experience at conservation conferences, several countries throughout East Asia and Southeast Asia have also sent delegations on learning trips to Singapore to understand how to apply insights from its conservation programme.¹⁶⁹ Other governments have invited the URA to conduct training on conservation principles for their

officials, to which the URA has obliged. These achievements are in some ways the ultimate recognition for Singapore's conservation successes. It is the replication and evolution of positive conservation efforts that will ensure conservation approaches stand the test of time. Through training and continuous dialogue, advancement in heritage conservation is sure to continue in Singapore and spread around the globe.

UNESCO RECOGNITION

Among all the accolades that Singapore has received, the induction of the Botanic Gardens as a UNESCO World Heritage Site stands out as a significant affirmation of Singapore's conservation journey. The 0.74-square-kilometre-sized Botanic Gardens was designated as a site of "outstanding universal value" in 2015, joining the ranks of the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China and the Amazon Basin.¹⁷⁰ This recognition was based on UNESCO's assessment criteria, which include the following: exhibiting an important exchange of human values over a span of time, being an outstanding example of a place that illustrates a significant stage in human history, and the degree of authenticity to which the site is preserved.

Through the above process, the Botanic Gardens was eventually evaluated to be a suitable candidate,¹⁷¹ based on these reasons: the shared social memories of Singaporeans connecting them to the gardens, the historical relevance of the Botanic Gardens to the birth of Southeast Asia's rubber industry, and the fact that the Gardens possessed a trove of historical buildings, including several colonial-era bungalows.

The socio-cultural and historical importance of the Botanic Gardens could not be denied and the process by which the cultural treasures of the site have been preserved and cared for over time, amidst an ever-growing cityscape backdrop, led to the clear distinction of the Botanic Gardens and the acknowledgment of Singapore as a leader in progressive preservation and conservation.

Other buildings in Singapore including CHIJMES, the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, Yueh Hai Ching temple and a bungalow at 733 Mountbatten Road, have also received UNESCO nods for their sensitive and innovative conservation.



The Singapore Botanic Gardens, Singapore's first UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board.

LOOKING FORWARD

The challenging and important question that Singapore grappled with during the course of its heritage conservation process can be summed up in one sentence: how does a city maintain its heart and soul, while embracing modernity and progress? In addressing this question, the journey has not been easy, but Singapore has had to make crucial heritage conservation decisions along the way that prevented the city transforming into a generic urban sprawl, while recognising the scarcity of land and need for smart urbanisation.¹⁷²

During the 1980s, Singapore's planners and tourism officials were well aware of these trade-offs, where solutions were often found in dialogue between relevant stakeholders and governmental and non-governmental institutions. In time, a masterplanning process emerged that ensured that there would be enough land to sustain future development, while

conserving heritage districts in a sustainable and viable way. Such integrated, long-term planning successfully facilitated the building of inclusive neighbourhoods and communities that valued the heritage heart of the nation.

Since that time, and generally throughout the period after Singapore's independence, that same process of long-term planning and collaboration has come a long way. Today, vibrant historic districts in Singapore hold a place dear to the hearts of Singaporeans and the demands of modernisation have been able to keep course.

What is next for conservation, especially for our post-independence buildings?

Some notable efforts for the conservation of modern buildings include buildings such as the Asia Insurance Building, which had been Southeast Asia's first skyscraper at its completion in 1955, and the Singapore Improvement Trust's Art Deco apartments in Tiong Bahru, completed in the 1930s.

Post-independence buildings have also benefited from a long-term vision of built heritage conservation. The Singapore Conference Hall at Shenton Way and the Jurong Town Hall have now been preserved as national monuments.¹⁷³ These architectural treasures represent the early days of Singapore's nation building and are distinctive markers of Singapore's formative years as well.

Looking ahead, it is likely that the long-term, systematic process of conserving Singapore's heritage buildings will continue with the same social and economic considerations being navigated now. Undoubtedly, this will only be possible with the appropriate training, programming and modern technology to keep the process of heritage conservation relevant and broadminded. In this regard, it is possible that a number of other post-independence architectural (but not gazetted) gems around Singapore may also benefit from conservation in the future.

Guidelines from the International Council on Monuments and Sites suggest that buildings over thirty years of age can be considered for conservation. By those standards, it is not unreasonable to expect the preservation of historical buildings such as the Toa Payoh Town Centre, the first satellite town centre designed by the Housing & Development

Board (HDB) in the 1960s, or the Singapore Indoor Stadium, completed in 1989. It is safe to say that the consideration of such sites will be a part of ongoing conservation discourse in Singapore for years to come.¹⁷⁴

What will be important in such discussions is how preservation should be understood as more than just static categorisation. Indeed, the historic districts throughout Singapore, such as Little India and Kampong Glam, have galvanised the city, both economically and culturally. With the physical fabric of these districts saved, it now turns to communities to continue to keep these districts relevant.

The story does not end here, as there are new heights to traverse in Singapore's conservation story. Continuous improvements can be made to the existing historic districts. Further experimentation can be done to expand pedestrianised streets and realise car-free/people-oriented historical districts, which will surely transform the understanding of heritage building conservation and bring Singapore further conservation successes. Additional back lanes, specifically in districts like Little India could be revamped and serve as connection points to help with pedestrian overflow, especially on crowded weekends. How can the rich heritage of black-and-white homes across the island be better celebrated? Beyond Tiong Bahru and Dakota Crescent, how can Singapore's early public housing estates be conserved while at the same time taking into consideration the new housing needs of younger generations of Singaporeans?

Innovative new approaches such as the integration of commercial, social and civic sectors have been a mainstay of Singapore's approach to conservation and will likely continue in the future as we tackle these questions.¹⁷⁵

Amidst the backdrop of Singapore's built heritage conservation successes, the country's continuous commitment to conservation demonstrates that it does not rest on its laurels, but continues to reflect on how heritage conservation evolves in step with market considerations. This helps to keep historic districts vibrant and relevant for locals and tourists alike. In finding new avenues to successes in both pragmatic and cultural dimensions, Singapore continues to adopt its tried and tested collaborative and cross-cutting approach to ensure that built heritage strikes the delicate balance between the principles of free-market economics and conservation. In doing so, the country leaves a lasting legacy for the next generation, a legacy that will echo around the world.

POST-SCRIPT



“Our Heritage Is in Our Hands”: this was the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s (URA) message at the start of the conservation journey. After three decades, these words remain relevant today and in the future, as I will detail in the following paragraphs.

Many more hands are involved in the upstream planning process to consider heritage, sense of place and community belonging. The discussions go beyond conservation to include other ways to recall history and keep memories alive. Such consultative and inclusive efforts also address trade-offs when plans are formulated for future developments. This will ensure that Singapore can continue to develop in a sustainable manner to meet present and future needs within our limited land area.

The hands that take care of our heritage are also becoming more skilful. Across the island, many monuments and conserved buildings have been restored and given new leases of life. To take the protection of our built heritage to the next level, the URA has been recognising excellent restoration efforts through Architectural Heritage Awards, and recently commissioned ICOMOS Singapore—the local chapter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites—to produce a series of Conservation Technical Handbooks. These efforts will provide deeper insights into heritage attributes, historic materials and best practices in conservation. As the capacity and capabilities of the building industry grow, the safe passage of our heritage assets to future generations will be assured.

Finally, the outcome of the work of many hands transcends the building structure and extends to placemaking. Concerted efforts have to be made to organise programmes to celebrate and sustain the history of places. In this way, users and visitors will continue to value the legacy, keep cherished memories alive, and make new meanings for themselves and the future.

Just as a house is not a home, a country is more than its physical infrastructure: it is also about identity and sense of belonging. The journey of Singapore becoming a “home” has seen the evolution of priorities, from the shifting emphasis of “hardware” to “software”. This publication not just celebrates how far we have come, but also reminds us to make Singapore a place where its inhabitants can feel a sense of being “at home”.

Lim Eng Hwee

Chief Executive Officer
Urban Redevelopment Authority

TIMELINE: SINGAPORE'S BUILDING CONSERVATION HISTORY

1822

- ▶ Development of Singapore's first town plan (known as the Raffles Town Plan or Jackson Plan) under the British.

1958

- ▶ Development of Singapore's first Statutory Master Plan.

1963

- ▶ The UN's second technical assistance on urban planning to Singapore, which emphasised three indispensable aspects of urban renewal: conservation, rehabilitation and rebuilding.

1964

- ▶ Setting up of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) to promote Singapore as a tourist destination.
- ▶ Establishment of the Urban Renewal Department (URD) within the Housing & Development Board's (HDB) Building Department.

1966

- ▶ Implementation of the Land Acquisition Act.

1971

- ▶ Establishment of the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB), a statutory board under the Ministry of National Development (MND) that was responsible for identifying monuments worthy of preservation.
- ▶ Development of the First Concept Plan, which detailed the development of Singapore's long-term land use and transportation use.

1973

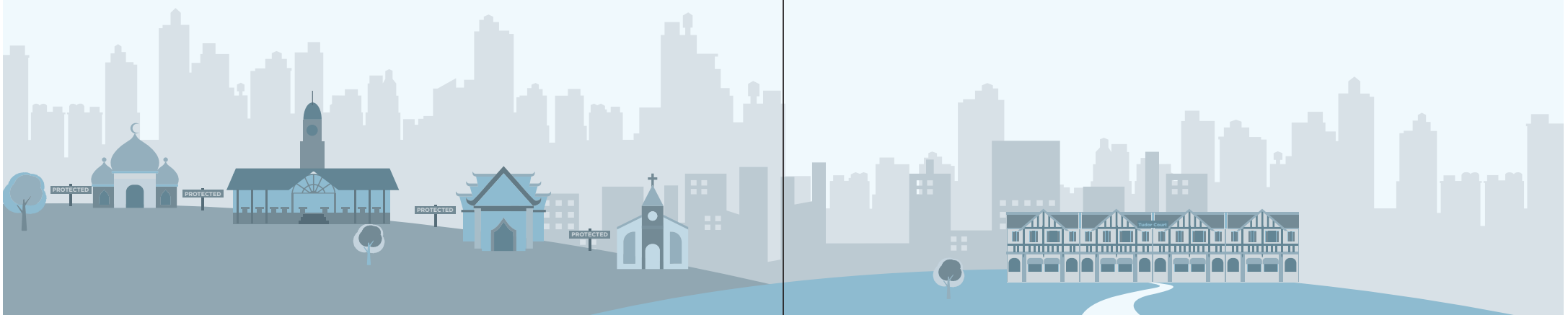
- ▶ Announcement of the protection of national monuments. Eight culturally representative buildings were marked for conservation:

- (1) Cathedral of the Good Shepherd,
- (2) Armenian Church,
- (3) St. Andrew's Cathedral,
- (4) Hajjah Fatimah Mosque,
- (5) Telok Ayer Market,
- (6) Thong Chai Medical Institution,
- (7) Thian Hock Keng Temple and
- (8) Sri Mariamman Temple.

Before 1960

1960s

1970s



1974

- ▶ Establishment of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA).

1977

- ▶ Restoration of 14 three-storey Art Deco shophouses on Murray Street.

1979

- ▶ Setting up of the Central Area Planning Team (CAPT), which had been tasked to coordinate the rapid urban developments in Singapore's Central Area.

1981

- ▶ Pedestrianisation of Emerald Hill and the restoration of the shophouses along it.

1984

- ▶ Setting up of the Tourism Task Force to look into how to boost tourism in Singapore.

1985

- ▶ CAPT completes the Central Area Structure Plan.
- ▶ Development of the Singapore River Concept Plan, which proposed the revitalisation of the prime waterfront, including major civic and cultural monuments.

1986

- ▶ Establishment of the URA Conservation Master Plan (through the Central Area Structure Plan), which proposed the conservation of 7 areas and 55 hectares of the Central Area, and the conservation of 3,200 shophouses.
- ▶ Development of the Tourism Product Development Plan, with part of it aimed at revitalising historic districts.

1987

- ▶ Commencement of URA's first shophouse conservation project of 220 units of old dilapidated shophouses in Tanjong Pagar. The URA restored 32 of these as examples, while the remaining were released for sale to kick-start Singapore's first large-scale private participation in conservation.
- ▶ Formation of the Singapore Heritage Society.

1988

- ▶ A Civic and Cultural District Master Plan Exhibition was held to bring out the distinctive historical qualities of the area and enhance its relationship with Orchard Road, Marina Bay and the Singapore River.
- ▶ Setting up of the URA Trades Allocation Committee.

1989

- ▶ The URA becomes the national conservation authority through an amendment to the Planning Act. The buildings included in the conservation master plan were gazetted.

1970s

1980s



1991

▶ Development of the Private Owners Scheme, where private home owners can volunteer their buildings of architectural and historical interest for conservation.

1995

▶ The URA launches the Architectural Heritage Awards to celebrate private efforts for good conservation.

1993

▶ Establishment of the National Heritage Board (NHB) through the merger of the National Archives, National Museum and Oral History Department.

1997

▶ The PMB becomes an independent Statutory Board under the Ministry of Information, Community and the Arts (MICA).

2000

▶ Setting up of the Concept Plan Review, which was open not just to specialist planners but to groups from all walks of life as well.

2013

▶ The PMB becomes the Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM) division under the NHB. It now has the authority to recommend not just buildings and monuments for preservation, but also sites that commemorate heritage.

2002

▶ Development of The Parks & Waterbodies Plan and Identity Plan, which outlined how citizens can retain places with local identity and history.

2015

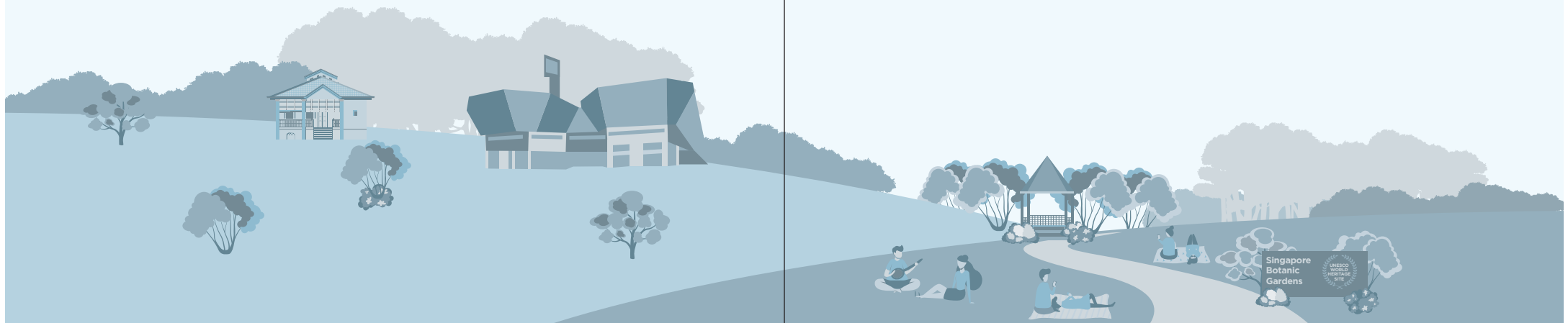
▶ Development of the First Heritage Survey, which led to the formation of the Heritage Advisory Panel.
▶ Singapore Botanic Gardens is inducted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

2006

▶ The URA receives the Asia-Pacific Urban Land Institute (ULI) Award for Excellence for its conservation programme.

2018

▶ Conclusion of the CAP, which was replaced by the Heritage and Identity Partnership under the URA.



1990s

2000s

2010s

ENDNOTES

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- 2 C.B. Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore: From the Foundation of the Settlement on February 6th, 1819 to the transfer to the Colonial Office on April 1st, 1867* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984).
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