

CONSERVATION AND CHANGE – A SINGAPORE CASE OF URBAN CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Singapore underwent rapid redevelopment during 1960s and 70s. In the process of urban renewal and redevelopment, many old buildings were demolished to make way for new developments resulting in the abrupt disappearance of heritage buildings¹ and rapid transformation of the built environment. The fear for the loss of Singapore's unique characteristic of places and even the weakening of the nation's identity caught the attention of many, leading to a change in attitude towards historic buildings. As a result, the conservation of architectural heritage has gained impetus since the 1970s and in 1971, the Preservation of Monuments Board was established to protect historic buildings. During the 70s and 80s, the Urban Redevelopment Authority actively incorporated historic buildings and areas worthy of conservation in the urban planning and design of the city.

In Singapore, given the land scarce situation, it is essential to ensure that the retained buildings remain relevant in the new time and also to ensure a delicate balance between the protected buildings and the new development. Thus conservation has been an integral part of urban planning. The first effort was demonstrated in the 1987 Central Area Structure Plan, which proposed the conservation of several historic districts in the midst of redeveloping the surrounding areas. (Fig. 1) In the Civic and Cultural District Plan, the historic buildings in the central area have been recommended for conservation and adapted to culture-related uses. The Concept Plan 2001 aimed "to create a distinctive city alive with rich heritage, character diversity and identity. A city we can fondly call home".² This effort of strengthening our identity continued and led to the formulation of the 2002 Identity Plan which aimed to conserve districts that might not be of great historic interest but possessed the quality of "old world charm".

¹ "Heritage buildings" will be used as a general term to encompass buildings with significant value in transmitting our history and culture.

² Concept Plan 2001, Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore, p

To date, Singapore has gazetted 54 monuments and designated 71 conservation areas comprising 6,500 buildings of which many are shophouses/townhouses.

Architectural Heritage

We see Singapore's heritage buildings as comprising two main categories: (i) monuments and historic buildings as well as (ii) shophouses/townhouses. Monuments and historic buildings refer to all the individual buildings. All monuments are safeguarded under Preservation of Monuments Act. Shophouses/Townhouses, which are buildings in a contiguous row within conservation areas together with historic buildings, are protected under Planning Act.

Buildings are identified to be conserved based on their historical and architectural significance. Our heritage buildings³ serve as a vital link to our past and also represent our multi-racial and multi-religious society with a colonial background and immigrant society. They often assume the role of historic landmarks in the fast changing urban landscape and contribute to enriching the city's skyline with their unique silhouette.

Change and Genuine Cultural Continuity

Recognising the inherent values that the heritage buildings possess, the purpose of conservation is to keep the buildings alive, retain and reveal their cultural significance. Yet conservation always involves a certain degree of intervention. This intervention inevitably results in some form of change to the historic fabrics.

Another aspect of Singapore's approach is to ensure that every protected building remains in use and that most buildings, with the exception of religious buildings, remain economically sustainable. Therefore while heritage buildings

³ There are four main categories of monuments and historic buildings : 1) religious buildings 2) civic buildings 3) institutional buildings and 4) residential buildings

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have been protected, adapting the heritage buildings to new uses has been a common practice. Alongside adaptive re-use, the modification of the heritage buildings has been allowed to accommodate new uses. In fact, even for buildings that retain their original uses, modifications such as intensification of use and modernisation often take place. Singapore's government stresses the need to ensure these heritage buildings are not 'frozen' in time and continue to stay relevant. Heritage buildings need to be carefully restored and adapted to accommodate new uses in the 21st century.⁴

Under the URA conservation guidelines, conservation involves two processes. On the one hand, it is always our intention to minimize intervention and to control the change. The URA's principles of conservation are (i) maximum Retention, (ii) sensitive Restoration and (iii) careful Repair - the "3R"s. On the other hand, the guidelines allow new extension to meet contemporary needs.

Monuments and Historic Buildings

To meet the functional needs of the new use or even the existing use, it is common practice to allow changes to be made to monuments and historic buildings. Generally, buildings are subject to the change in context and changes in fabric that include intensification and modernization. Such interventions, if not appropriately handled, can dilute the cultural significance of the heritage – a challenge that many buildings in Singapore face.

1 Change in Context

As most of the monuments and historic buildings are located in the central district, which has through time been transformed into a densely built-up urban area, the new developments are often of high intensity. There are currently no specific guidelines to protect the context of heritage buildings, as a result many high-rise buildings are found around the historic buildings. Indeed, a sharp contrast between the modern high-rise buildings and conserved low-rise buildings is a common scene in Singapore. This is a contrast that will have to be handled sensitively, otherwise the new development will have negative effect over the heritage building. However, if they are carefully juxtaposed, the coexistence of the new and old is acceptable and desirable. At Boat Quay along the Singapore River, a unique

row of shophouses was revitalised in the early 90s. This row of 3- to 5-storey shophouses that is seen with the high-rise buildings of the Central Business District presents a dramatic and interesting contrast. The new buildings in this case do not detract from our appreciation of the shophouses. (Fig. 2) The silhouette of the monuments and historic buildings set against the urban skyline is often very distinctive and should be respected. Special effort has been made to ensure that they are not weakened by indiscriminate addition of new forms of development. The general practice is to control the height of the adjacent buildings so as not to overwhelm the historic building and allow it to remain unique.

Armenian Church (1835)

This is the oldest church in Singapore. It is a relatively successful example of change in context while still retaining the setting of the heritage building. The surrounding area has undergone a phase of redevelopment comprising low-rise developments in its immediate surroundings and some high-rise buildings further away. The sensitive control of building height coupled with the retention of the church ground has not caused any disruption to the significance of the heritage building. (Fig. 3)

Supreme Court (1939)

This colonial legacy is an important historic landmark in the urban landscape. Many accept that the significance and prominence of the building is well retained. The historic open space, the Padang, provides a good setting for the stately building. However, in the 1970s, the development of two high-rise buildings in the background has affected the unique skyline. (Fig. 4)

2 Intensification and Contemporization

Due to the prime location of most heritage buildings, they are often subject to the pressure for development and intensification despite the fact that they are gazetted. Monuments and historic buildings are in need of adaptation due to their obsolescence in meeting contemporary needs. In particular, functional obsolescence, location obsolescence and economic obsolescence are typically the more pressing issues.

While very strict control is imposed on gazetted monuments, it is less stringent in the case of historic buildings. In order to allow the historic buildings, while being conserved, to still remain relevant in a new economic environment, the idea of intensification has been permitted.

⁴ Speech by Dr John Chen, Minister of State for Communications and Information Technology and Minister of State for National Development at the 2001 Architectural Heritage Awards Presentation.

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This is normally in the form of extension and even reconfiguration of interior spaces. There are many successful examples of intensification to historic buildings that demonstrate that if handled with care, the extension would not necessarily have a negative impact on the conserved buildings, but instead can enhance the old.

Istana Kampong Glam (1840s)

The Istana building was the palace of Sultan Ali, the third Sultan of Singapore. It is located within the Kampong Glam conservation area, which is Singapore's first Malay settlement and an area of high social and cultural significance. The area comprises 2- to 3- storey shophouses, as well as several historic buildings, including the monument, the Sultan Mosque (1924-28).

The Palladian-influenced Istana building was recently restored and adapted as our Malay Heritage Centre. The historic building was faithfully restored with special emphasis on its setting. The compound, its walled enclosure and the road leading to the building have been retained. Due to functional requirements, two identical pavilions were added. The scale of the new pavilions was well-handled to maintain the dominance of the conserved building, while the identical form and placement of the two pavilions are considered by many to respond very well to the main axis of the building. (Fig. 5)

House at 733 Mountbatten Road (1927)

The Early Style Bungalow was restored with the main building retained and three new wings added. This original single-family house is now an extended family housing. The new buildings occupy the former out house at the rear and the open spaces at the two sides. The new buildings adopted a contemporary language and achieved a concept of "complementary contrast" between the new and the old. Another successful point is the retention of its setting - a large garden space that is required to appreciate the grandeur of the conserved building. (Fig. 6)

The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus now known as CHIJMES (1840 to 1903)

The street block comprises well-designed buildings within a walled enclosure. Originally a convent comprising a school, an orphanage and a chapel, this is now occupied by shops, pubs and restaurants. The site was released to a private developer for restoration and adaptive re-use through the URA sale of sites programme in 1990. To ensure a high

standard of restoration, a conservation specialist was engaged. The additional floor spaces required for the new use were accommodated in basement with a sunken courtyard. While the intervention to the fabric has been positive, the appropriateness of the new use has been a subject of heated debate. The main reservation is that the commercial use is a radical departure from the previous school use. Of particular concern is the fact that the chapel, a spiritual place, is now open for secular use. Some critiques feel that the cultural significance of the place has been substantially diluted. (Fig. 7)

Shophouses

The shophouses and townhouses are typically spaces between two party walls. Spatially, the shophouse is normally 4.5 to 6 metres in width, and 20 to 30 metres in depth. (Fig. 8) Shophouses as the name suggests, serve a commercial purposes, on the ground floor while the upper floor is for residential purposes. On the other hand the townhouses are purely for residential use. They are basically similar to the shophouses except that the shop space is used as a living room. The intensification of the buildings occurs to varying levels in shophouses and townhouses. The extension is often carried out within the buildings.

1 Intensification - Addition of attic floor

In order to improve the tight floor area of a shophouse, owners are allowed to add an attic floor to the top most floor, i.e. second storey or third storey. This often increases the floor area by 10 to 20 %. Many property owners welcome this flexibility, and of course this is implemented in most of the conserved shophouses. In order to meet the ceiling height standard, a jackroof is sometimes introduced over originally double pitched roof. The latter results in a minor alteration of the roof form.

2 Intensification - Rear extension

To further increase the limited floor space, an extension is allowed at the rear yard. (Fig. 8). The maximum height allowable varies from 4 to 10 storeys. While this addition helps to further improve the space constraint problems, the addition of the new block requires great sensitivity in the design. Firstly there should be a clear demarcation between new and the original. Secondly, the spatial quality of the back lane space should be respected. As the backlane was originally enclosed by a single storey wall, it is important that the taller extension be articulated to reduce the impact of the taller building on the spatial quality of the backlane.

Conservation Areas

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In Singapore, conservation areas⁵ are designated according to their architectural and townscape qualities. The shophouses and townhouses within the conservation areas are often faced with the problem of disuse due to functional obsolescence. In the selection of new uses and activities to regenerate the area, very often emphasis is placed on economical viability and appropriateness for the new context. There is generally less emphasis on the social and cultural character.

However, the three ethnic districts within Singapore's historic cores - Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam - are unique for both in the historic character of the buildings as well as the social and economic functions of the area. The former is concerned with the physical and aesthetic aspects made up of the urban patterns, spatial relationship, building appearance and floorscape etc, while the latter focuses on the occupants, uses, activities and traditions of the area. Both are important to the historic character of the place. Changes to or discontinuities in any of their inherent qualities will undermine the authenticity of the historic districts. Thus the main concern in the conservation of these ethnic districts is how to ensure their continuity by maintaining the intrinsic quality, inherent spirit and the original ambience of the area while serving contemporary needs.

While many of the conservation areas have been successfully regenerated or revitalised, the spirit of the places have often been altered. The reasons for the change are (i) the possibility that new use might not be appropriate, and (ii) the need to revitalize the area to suit the contemporary lifestyle, i.e. to not only enjoy the traditional ambience, but also be able to enjoy the cultivated lifestyle. Granted that change is inevitable, our priority is to ensure the change is gradual so as to allow the place to evolve and that the transformation is not disjointed. This requires the careful management of change.

In conservation areas, the addition of new buildings has been another concern. Guidelines have been set for the design of new buildings to ensure that they complement the historic area. Generally the approach is to limit the new buildings to the same height as that of the historic buildings. They also suggest that the new should be of a modern language so as to allow the historic building to retain its uniqueness.

⁵ The conservation areas in Singapore fall into four distinct categories, and the conservation guidelines vary for each of these categories. They include : 1 Historic districts 2 Residential Historic Districts 3 Secondary Settlement and 4 Bungalow areas.

Chinatown

Chinatown, designated in 1988 as a conservation area, involved a large-scale adaptation of the shophouses. In the process, it has transformed an area that used to be full of life and vibrancy into a clean and sanitised place. The new uses of restaurants, offices, boutiques etc. are not generating the desired street activities. As the former vibrancy was due to the shopping and street activities, many feel that the original spirit of the place is now so diluted. There has been a concerted effort to revive this bygone spirit. Singapore is mindful that it should not result in an artificial revival. For example, while we are keen to revitalise the area, we should resist the temptation to turn it into a theme park for tourists. We look for genuine continuity that grows out of the needs of people just like the way it evolved originally. Today, the newly constructed food street is attracting both tourists and locals, Similarly there are also some shops that are patronised by locals. We are beginning to experience a newly evolved sense of place. (Fig. 9)

Far East Square

Comprising a mesh of shophouses, Far East Square's adaptive re-use approach was to revitalise the area to suit contemporary lifestyle. It was considered essential to provide a shelter over the streets to improve the use value of the streets and to strengthen the sense of place. This however raised the question of the appropriateness of the shelter over the streets. Furthermore, the heavy structural system for the shelter affects the appreciation of the shophouses. Another objection is that the roof over the street has changed the quality of the space and ambience of the place. Besides physical change, the spirit of the place is also changed. The robust streets, for traffic in the past, are now delicate atriums for outdoor cafes. This is perceived as a transformation in the character of the place from a place for residential and trading purposes to one for leisure and entertainment. (Fig. 10)

From commercial standpoint, the conservation of Far East Square is certainly a success story. However, from a conservation perspective, many see the project as merely retaining the tangible aspects and less so in terms of its cultural significance of the place – a less ideal situation. This is an important issue to be addressed as it is a common problem faced by in conservation of historic districts in Singapore where the original use has been completely phased out. The approach in the adaptive reuse in Far East Square illustrates how the new use is selected based on the retained fabric, the tangible. As the tangible is the result of

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intangible, we can see the indirect relationship between the new use and the original use as both are related to the retained structure, the common tangible. According to the “Burra Charter”, the new use is a compatible use as there is only little impact on the cultural significance. The changes to area in this case the addition of the shelter over the street is reversible. From the experience of Far East Square, we can appreciate the cycle of change, a change that can regenerate and a change that evolves into a “new spirit”.

Conclusion

Ultimately, our aim in conservation should be to retain our valuable and rare heritage buildings to serve as a constant reminder of the diverse background and early stages of development of our nation. In our conservation effort, we are faced with the challenge of making heritage buildings relevant in the new social and economic environment and keeping them in use. Due to the fact that many of our monuments, historic buildings and shophouses /townhouses are functionally obsolete, they need to be adapted to new uses. It is critical to identify appropriate new uses and activities so as to minimise the need for change to the existing fabric. While adapting to new uses, it is our goal that the cultural significance of the buildings is not affected. This requires sensitivity in handling change and making modification to the historic fabric. It has been established that success in the retention of the cultural significance depends largely on our sensitivity in interpreting the historic value and identifying the critical elements that needed to be retained. When making changes, ensure that they are reversible.⁶

As a result of intensification and contemporization, new buildings may have to be erected. Under such circumstances, new buildings have to relate to the conserved buildings with respect and allow them to continue to enhance and enrich our urban experience.

Judging from Singapore’s examples of conservation and development, in many cases with intensification and contemporization, cultural continuity has not been overlooked. As S.Cantacuzino says, “Preservation in the old sense is an act of embalment, conservation in the new sense has become a creative act which aims at enhancing the life of the people.”⁷ Indeed, it is accepted that heritage buildings should continue to retain their cultural significance

and be prominence. At the same time conservation should allow for new life and activities to be introduced.

The process of conservation and change should be treated under a new cultural setting that suggests evolution rather than for the entire place to be frozen in time. In tangible terms, when introducing new buildings, they should be designed to be of their time while respecting the old. A serious attempt should be made to strike a complementary yet contrasting stance so as to achieve a constructive relationship where the new respects the old. In intangible terms, heritage buildings should be able to accommodate new life and activities without much modification to the historic fabric.

⁶ Burra Charter Article 15

⁷ Cantacuzino, Sherban, *Architectural Conservation in Europe*. London, Architectural Press. 1976, 3p

References

Abstract

In land-scarce Singapore, the conservation approach adopted is to integrate conservation with urban planning. Thus, while historic buildings have been protected, these buildings have been allowed to be modified to accommodate new uses; while preserving historic districts, new activities have been introduced to revitalize the districts. Such intensification and contemporization interventions, if not appropriately handled, can dilute the cultural significance of the heritage. This would certainly be a cause for concern. This paper examines the conservation approaches in Singapore and the issue of genuine cultural continuity. It considers whether the new intensive development in the surrounding areas has significantly impacted the character of the historic place, and whether the various forms of massive extension to the historic buildings have affected their architectural value. The paper also examines whether the characteristics of a historic district have been retained in the process of revitalization and contemporization. Has its social meaning in Singapore's multi-racial social context been lost or can it still be experienced despite the changes made? Finally, the paper discusses positive approaches and techniques adopted to retain cultural significance in conserving heritage. It also attempts to define 'cultural setting' in both tangible and intangible terms.

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Conservation is an Integral Part of Urban Planning

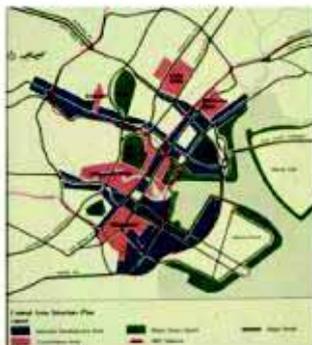


Figure 1.
1998 Central Area Structure Plan.
Source: URA.



Figure 2.
Shophouses at Boat Quay with
CBD high-rise buildings.

Setting of Monuments

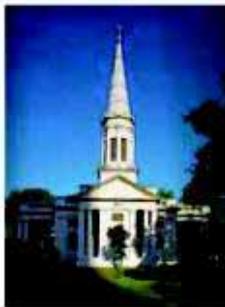


Figure 3.
(Left) : Armenian Church 1835.
(Right): The church ground together with the tombs is still intact.



Figure 4.
(Left) Supreme Court 1939.
(Right) The high-rise buildings affected the unique skyline.

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Intensification of Historic Buildings



Figure 5.
Former Istana Kampong Glam (1940s) adapted to Malay Heritage Centre.
(Left) : Istana building with its wall enclosure.
(Right): Restored building with the extension of two pavilions.



Figure 6.
House at Mountbatten Road (1927) with its modern extension.
Source: (Left) URA, Architectural Heritage – Singapore.



Figure 7.
The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (1840-1903), now known as CHIJMES.
Source: (Left) Liu, Gretchen, In Granite and Chunan.

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Intensification of Shophouses

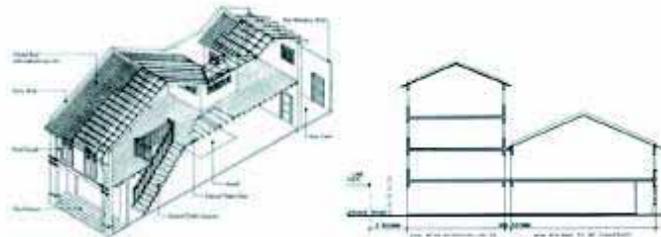


Figure 8.
(Left) : Traditional shophouse.
(Right) : 4-storey extension to the traditional shophouse.
Source : URA.

Revitalization of Conservation Areas

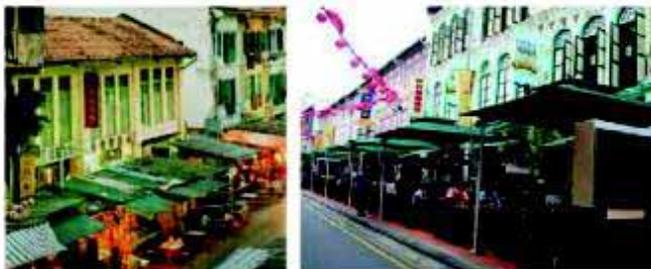


Figure 9.
Chinatown.
(Left): Street before Conservation.(Right): Street with new food stalls.

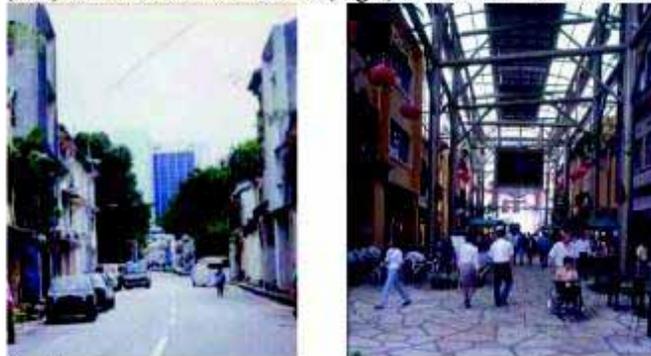


Fig.10.
Far East Square.
(Left) : Condition of one of the streets prior to conservation.
(Right): Street adapted for alfresco dining.