

Notes on Preservation in Singapore

Historic Preservation is called conservation in Singapore and it has been tremendously successful.

Initially, there was a tourism rationale for conservation, but since the mid-1980s it has been a key component in national planning. It was initiated by the government through the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the national planning agency. The URA owned most of the buildings in the Tanjung Pagar district, the first successful conservation area. Lessons learned here were quickly transferred to the other designated Heritage Conservation Districts, Chinatown, Little India, Arab Street.

The success of the conservation work must be attributed to two very creative directors in the URA, Mr. Goh Hup Chor and Mrs. Koh Wen Gin. They had some doubting superiors, but beyond their own vision and determination their work was supported by a thorough building inventory and architectural documentation program.

The buildings are called shop houses—usually 25'-35' wide, two-story, common walls, no basement, a back lane, no garage, brick construction, wood beams, and floors. For each building, the URA had a full file that included a report on the existing condition with measured drawings and documentation. Items covered included facade appearance, hardware, surface materials and colors, all utility specifications, including a fire protection system, rear elevation, and roof design.

Buildings were put out for tender with this detailed information. Roughly speaking, the required work ran about S\$225,000 per building. The buyer had one year to complete the work. No exceptions, but once done, the owner was free of rent control which still existed in most parts of the city at that time.

The first buildings tendered were “empty shells” and sold for S\$150,000. Quickly the market rose to around S\$450,000. With the completed work, the owner might have S\$675,000 invested in the property. Market price today would be S\$1.75 million and higher depending on the location.

Conservation was melded into the broad urban planning goals. Obviously, for investors, a great paper profit has been made out of shop-house conservation in Singapore. In turn, Government had an acceptable and orderly process to begin lifting rent control and the exercise “created” a dramatic new tax base. The most important urban planning achievement was visual; visitors and residents now enjoy charming restored street-scapes and there is a softening texture in a city that is vibrant, wealthy, and very modern.

There were initial complaints that everything was too “done,” too clean, too neat. No neater or cleaner than the day they were built, I am sure, and anyway, in this climate it does not take long for a charming, lightly faded patina to develop.

One of the fortunate investor features of conservation in Singapore was that these three heritage districts were where the Chinese, Muslims, and Indians had traditionally lived and were located just inland from a long spine of new high-rise towers. This has meant the districts have a heavy foot traffic of office workers who use the restaurants and shops.

The Singapore Government has had great respect for the British heritage. The City Hall, the Supreme Court Building, the twin Victoria and Albert theaters, the Custom House, and the National Museum have all been rehabilitated wisely, respectfully, and successfully.

The restoration of Raffles Hotel is no doubt the most famous project in town. This was a commercial venture and included extending the service and shopping facilities for the hotel into the back half of its block. The conservation debate still whirls around Raffles. It does have a polish it never ever had in history, but it is now a posh expensive hotel with facilities for state visitors. It is fully air-conditioned, highly successful, and endlessly and happily photographed.

Raffles should be looked at as a lesson in what logically and inevitably follows when air conditioning is put into an old structure in the tropics. Ceiling fans become props and shutters, windows, and doors are no longer thrown open to the sea breeze. If that relaxed, old-shoe quality of old Raffles is missing, it was a conscious trade-off to create an important and famous national symbol. Study it if you must, but accept it on those terms and enjoy your Singapore Sling!

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Shop houses on Emerald Hill Road in Singapore, c. 1920.

