

THINKING, ASSESSING
AND DOING BUILT
HERITAGE IN SINGAPORE

A Joint Seminar by Social Lab, Institute of Policy Studies;
and Social Science and Policy Cluster, NUS Faculty of Arts
and Social Sciences

**Conservation of Singapore's Recent Past:
Planning Dilemmas, Heritage Values and Market
Tensions**

Lai Choo Malone-Lee, PhD
Centre for Sustainable Asian Cities
School of Design and Environment
National University of Singapore

27th February 2019

'The preservation of significant works of art, presents a demanding economic and physical problem. The continued life of both the icon and the ordinary as elements of an economically driven world depends first on a shared recognition of their cultural and social value and second upon their continuing economic viability. The reconciliation of these two key facts lies at the core of the international crusade'.

Hubert-Jan Henket, founding Chair, Docomomo²

Urban Renewal in Singapore

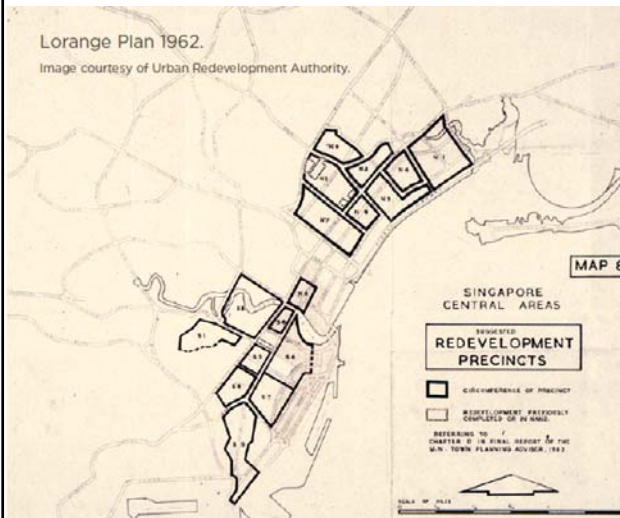


Image Source: Centre for Liveable Cities, 2016, Urban Systems Studies, Urban Redevelopment: From Urban Squalor to Global City, p. 14

Erik Lorange's recommendations laid out a strategy for systematic redevelopment of the Central Area. He divided the entire area into 21 precincts, with precinct being accorded development priority based on availability of land, possibility of clearance, stage of deterioration, demand for land for development, and potential of the site as a catalyst for economic development.

Emergence of Modernist Icons



Image Source: Centre for Liveable Cities, 2016, Urban Systems Studies, Urban Redevelopment: From Urban Squalor to Global City, p. 22

Precinct N1 consisted mostly of shophouses, temporary workshops, etc in dilapidated condition

By 1967, about 75% of the land area in the precinct was made available for urban renewal through the Sale of Sites programme.

Coined the "Golden Mile", the precinct was the first to accommodate some of the most significant comprehensive, large-scale private development commercial podiums with residential towers, including Golden Mile Complex, one of the earliest modernist architectural icons.

Emergence of Modernist Icons



Image Source: Centre for Liveable Cities, 2016, Urban Systems Studies, Urban Redevelopment: From Urban Squalor to Global City, p. 23

Precinct S1 was situated adjacent to the heavily populated area of Chinatown which consisted of overcrowded slums overrun with squatters. Outram Prison occupied a significant portion of the precinct, and was a prime prospect for redevelopment. New buildings that emerged in this entire area north of the CBD included Pearl Bank and People's Park Complex.

The entire Golden Mile area became a repository of some of the most significant buildings (architecturally and historically) that emerged in the post-independence era.

Architecture in the Era of Nation - Building

- “These iconic landmarks demand more careful consideration as they are Singapore’s modernist icons which bear grand testimony to our nation-building years and are recognised as architectural masterpieces” [SHS]
- However, similar to other “recent past” buildings elsewhere, their consideration as “heritage” appears to be contentious
- Contemporary values, priorities and attitudes affect the thinking on their conservation worthiness (Henket and Heyman, 2002)



Modernist architectural icons of 1970s and 80s

Heritage Society and architects

regard them as -

- Outstanding examples of the earliest phases of the government's successful urban renewal under the government's Sale of Sites Programme
- Visionary, innovative architecture which had received international praise
- Designs based on cutting-edge urban design principles providing liveable solutions for dense urban centres
- Megastructures that have shaped the visual character of the downtown landscape
- Designed by Singaporean pioneer architects, that "responded inventively to local conditions" [SHS, 2018]¹

Rem Koolhaas: ".....these modernist icons embody a paradox of architecture for social integration with nation building agenda" [cited in SHS, 2018]

¹ Singapore Heritage Society, 2018, Too Young To Die: Giving New Lease Of Life To Singapore's Modernist Icons A position paper by the Singapore Heritage Society

Does the public want conservation?

- "what it means to me is much more than the architecture, it is the loss of community"
- It represents "architecture of its time: part of the Singapore narrative"
- "But, if we don't tear down, how do we get new – how to house the future?"
- "we are tearing down an era"
- "Conservation? Loss of investment in time, money and emotion" [Straits Times, various dates]

Issues associated with "the historicism of modernism"¹
- their historical, architectural and social-cultural values continues to be hotly debated

¹ Moss, J. 2016, Conservation of Buildings from the Recent Past: An Investigation into England's Legacy of Post-War Social Housing and its Heritage Value.

Property consultants/developers?

- “It’s complex...and there are no lack of sites out there — government land sales sites. Developers are capitalistic in nature, they don’t want fuss. They don’t care about iconic developments. The objective is to make money.”
- “(Conservation is) a rubber stamp to basically confirm the iconic status... that can be used as a marketing stunt for the future.”
- “...developers will have to decide is what parts of the building to keep”
- “...developers may have to spend quite a sum to repair and refurbish the building”

[Straits Times and other sources, various dates]

Economic considerations
seem to dominate the
debate

Government [URA 2018]

Supportive, but.....

- “Modern architecture, dating from our recent past, is a significant aspect of our built heritage, and we have selectively conserved a number of such buildings.
- Where there are strong support and merits for conservation, we will work with the relevant stakeholders to facilitate the process” [CNA, 31st Oct 2018]



Modernist architecture that have
been conserved -
institutional/religious buildings

Conservation of the Recent Past: the international arena

- Recent revival of interest in modernist architecture
- Many countries have begun to recognise them as protected heritage buildings
- The UK began listing similar structures for protection in 1989 despite mixed public opinion, with some viewing them as ‘concrete monstrosities’ and “symbols of the underclass”.
- Marked interest in Brutalist buildings, partly driven by their bold, Instagram-friendly aesthetic
- “For architects and cultural thinkers today, it is Brutalism’s honest and pure, egalitarian architectural ethic that appeals” [Moss, J. 2016]



Images courtesy of Ho Wing Hin

Underlying barriers largely economic in nature, but there are other concerns...

- Doubts on economic viability
- Restoration and maintenance costs
- Restrictions from conservation status affect property values
- Need freedom of usage to make the asset more attractive
- Negative image associations – migrant community - perceive to devalue buildings



For strata title owners

En Bloc Redevelopment the way to go

- In 1999, a radical amendment was made to the Land Titles Strata Act to facilitate “private sector-led redevelopment” in Singapore: allowed for majority consensus, rather than unanimity, for collective sales (“en bloc sales”) of strata developments.
- Most in prime areas
- Prices propelled upwards by developers keen to bolster their land banks

Tensions

Numerous stakeholders
High stakes
Strata owners keen to monetise their investments

For effective conservation strategies, need for “Accommodation Power”

- How these buildings can be conserved to keep their architectural and historical significance while ensuring they remain economically and socially viable to meet society’s current needs...
- Need for a **middle ground** between strict regulation [“police” power/ eminent domain power] and market-oriented thinking

“Accommodation power” is not new in Singapore

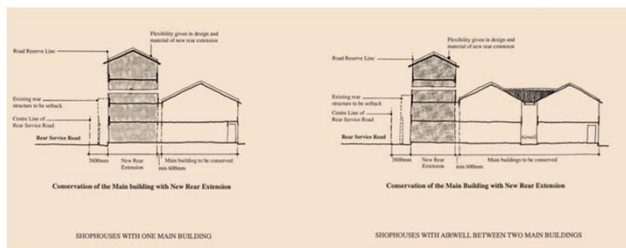
- “Working with markets has been a stable feature of Singapore’s development journey and remains a core urban governance principle underpinning the growth of a liveable and sustainable city” [Centre for Liveable Cities, 2017]
- Numerous incentive schemes to help attain “public goods” e.g. green buildings, community facilities such as libraries, urban greenery, night lighting, etc.
- Also widely practiced in other cities

For example:

- Incentive-based regulation is an effective method for a planning agency to achieve the advantages of a desired community benefit that provide a better quality of life and meet the needs of various community groups
- It is a market-based and voluntary approach

Current Incentives for Urban Conservation

- Development charge exemptions
- Car Park charge waivers
- Rent decontrol [for earlier years]
- Allowable extensions with GFA exemptions in “secondary areas”
- Allowable extensions / new development on large bungalow sites



Current Incentives for Urban Conservation

But, these incentives may not be applicable to /adequate for the modernist buildings:

- Residential buildings – unlikely for rezoning
- Commercial and mixed use buildings : what other uses can confer higher values? More GFA bonuses?
- GFA incentives seem to be most relevant, but how much?
- Need for some design flexibility especially for constrained sites

Pearl Bank Suggested for Voluntary Conservation



Images courtesy of Tan Cheng Siong [architect]

Golden Mile Complex Conservation possibility



Artist impression of a proposed new tower extension, occupying the existing carpark and swimming pool on the Nicoll Highway end, based on the assumption that there will be some bonus GFA incentives

Source: DP Architects

If URA were to gazette the building for conservation, land use efficiency can be optimized with additional GFA, owner can also “leverage on the history of the site to bring value to the sense of place and identity of the development“

Would the government be prepared to consider Development Rights Transfer?

Transfer of Development Rights

CASE STUDY: Grand Central Terminal, New York, N.Y.

When the Penn Central Transportation Co. proposed a 53-story addition for New York City's famed and historic Grand Central Terminal, the city worried that the addition would irreparably harm the character of the structure. In order to preserve the building's architectural integrity, New York allowed Penn Central to transfer the development rights to adjacent buildings, allowing the company to exceed height limits in place for the area.

Source: Ewing, R, Smart Growth Tools, An Analysis of the efficacy of state and local regulatory efforts, 2011

TDR is conceived as a somewhat more controversial concept of “accommodation power” where an aggrieved landowner whose development rights are suppressed because of conservation or other planning restrictions may be compensated, under a TDR scheme, by being allowed to transfer the unused development rights to another property for “reasonable beneficial use” value. Has been applied in New York, Sydney, Hong Kong and other cities

Conclusion

- The economic imperatives are quite compelling for owners of modernist buildings to demolish and rebuild, as the easiest pathway after an *en bloc* purchase
- Architects must proactively offer alternative models of conservation and viable revitalization designs for worthy buildings
- On the part of government agencies, a proper balance must be struck between pushing for heritage conservation and respecting the property rights of their private owners as these two diametrically competing objectives are legitimate goals in their own right
- GFA incentives are more positive conceptually, as they empower building owners to contribute to the public realms
- More controversial tools such as TDR, as a form of compensatory instrument, may set the stage for a land regime that compel assessment of property rights “loss” as-of-right, and may not an appropriate urban policy for a land constraint country
- The government may offer contextualized economic incentives but it is still ultimately for the owner of the heritage property to decide whether to conserve t

Without formalized and expressed institutional support mechanisms, there is no safeguard against the economic threats, given the age and condition of many of these buildings. Singapore would be poorer culturally given the architectural diversity and richness that these buildings could confer on our urban landscape

Thank You

The City is a continuum, it is neither new nor old – Lewis Mumford