

Report on Seminar on “Thinking, Assessing and Doing Built Heritage in Singapore”

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Seminar Room B, Shaw Foundation Building, National University of Singapore

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On 27 February 2019, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab and the National University of Singapore (NUS) Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Social Science and Policy Cluster, held a seminar titled “Thinking, Assessing and Doing Built Heritage in Singapore”. Supported by the Heritage Research Grant from the National Heritage Board, this seminar explored various aspects of built heritage practice from various perspectives and discussed the legislative, commercial, and social challenges in heritage advocacy efforts. The seminar featured two panels, comprising four and three distinguished speakers for Panels 1 and 2, respectively. A panel discussion was conducted at the end of each panel. Close to 80 participants from academic institutions, government agencies, corporate associations, and other non-profit organisations and societies attended the seminar. After the seminar, participants then went on a walking tour to the Dakota-Cassia neighbourhoods, in collaboration with Dakota-Cassia Adventures.

Panel 1 – Thinking and Doing Heritage

The first panel sketched the built heritage landscape in Singapore, and focused on how Singaporeans perceive built heritage sites, what they consider as “built heritage”, and ground-up initiatives towards the conservation of different sites in Singapore.

Ms Paveena Seah, Senior Research Analyst, and Dr Natalie Pang, Senior Research Fellow, both from IPS Social Lab, discussed the criteria that laypersons would use to appraise heritage sites in Singapore, based on the first large-scale public opinion survey of 1,515 respondents, on a set of 53 heritage sites. For each site, respondents rated their level of knowledge and memories associated with it, the aesthetic appeal of its physical attributes, and its perceived importance. The presenters contended that this research approach is significant because heritage sites are not always perceived in isolation, but relative to each other, and the findings serve to complement expert perspectives that are more prominent in existing research. The presenters pointed out how key phases of national development such as the introduction of the Land Acquisition Act in the 1960s, rapid urban development and building of post-independence modernist landmarks between 1970s and 1980s, and the introduction of the

URA Conservation Master Plan and conservation gazette between the mid-1980s and 1990s, might engender differing perceptions of heritage sites. Correspondingly, the sample was split into three age groups to reflect differences in time perspectives.



Dr Natalie Pang explaining differences in how various groups evaluate built landmarks in Singapore.

The presenters also highlighted that the notion of “the public” is multiple; there are sites that resonated quite differently with respondents of different age groups. One of the age-specific effects that the presenters found was that the evaluations of the youngest group of respondents are shaped by concepts of “play” and learning about the sites via social media, and that the current functions of these sites are important in appealing to younger generations. For instance, the youngest group gave higher ranking to sites such as the Singapore Art Museum and The Cathay on several measures. Finally, the presenters emphasised the importance of promoting heritage sites in various ways that appeal to diverse groups, while striking a balance between existing preferences and encouraging Singaporeans to appreciate heritage sites in more varied ways.

Using the case study of Far East Plaza, the second presentation was about shopping malls as an oft-overlooked category of heritage sites, by Dr Liew Kai Khiun, Assistant Professor, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, at the Nanyang Technological University. The presentation highlighted that although the retail culture has been a ubiquitous aspect of everyday life in Singapore, and shopping malls are popularly remembered as places of entertainment and leisure, they rarely meet the political and cultural criteria officially used to assess heritage sites. The reasons for this, he posited, are that malls are not considered as unique, endangered ways of life, or rich with “traditional” cultural and religious symbolism. Despite the lack of official recognition as “conserved buildings”, Dr Liew argued that malls are

significant sites that marked Singaporeans’ lifestyle, especially between the 1970s and 1980s. He explained that in this period of early proliferation of malls, malls became the embodiment of the moral panic over youth cultures that were perceived as subversive and undesirable. This sense of unease coincided with David Bowie’s *Ricochet*, partly filmed in Far East Plaza, which became a symbol of urban dystopia.

Dr Liew pointed out that today, patrons still take notice of and value these sites, but the landscape of malls such as those along Orchard Road — and even their interiors — has been changing rapidly. Malls, he noted, are becoming increasingly similar to one another across the region and even the world, and require constant re-designing to remain attractive to consumers. In the context of struggling malls, Dr Liew called for a consideration of ways to breathe new life into these sites, while sustaining their built form and the memories associated with them. One suggestion is to re-purpose these malls as potential incubators for small businesses. To facilitate greater research on the socio-cultural significance of shopping malls in Singapore, Dr Liew raised the need for a more systematic documentation of mall histories and archives.



Dr Liew Kai Khiun sharing that sites must have some significance to the broader community before they can be conserved.

The third presentation was about the relationship between built-heritage and civil activism, by Mr Jonathan Poh, Principal at Provolk Architects, and Founder of Save Dakota Crescent Campaign. Positioning the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood and Pearl Bank Apartments as two contrasting case studies, Mr Poh shared his experiences in campaigning for the conservation of both sites. Specifically, he noted that while the former is publicly owned, Pearl

Bank Apartments is a privately owned building. Hence, advocates faced a different set of challenges pertaining to each site.

Using the example of the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood, Mr Poh identified two critical factors that aided the advocacy process: raising public awareness about the neighbourhood’s impending redevelopment through social media, and political will to save the site. In addition, because plans to redevelop the neighbourhood were announced relatively early, advocates had sufficient time to gain the support of academics and professional practitioners, and to secure approval from local politicians, grassroots leaders, and the National Heritage Board. For instance, following the submission of a conservation proposal to the state, Mr Poh and his team of activists had several rounds of dialogues with government officials, to advocate the protection of the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood. These ground-up efforts and discussions were a key part of the movement and might have contributed to the state’s eventual decision to retain parts of the neighbourhood — specifically, the central cluster of buildings around the courtyard area and the iconic “dove” playground.

In contrast, advocates only had a short time frame to work with for the conservation of Pearl Bank Apartments. In addition, Mr Poh identified several other crucial factors that hindered the advocacy process: poor maintenance of the building, uncertainty around the criteria for topping up the building lease, preference for demolition and rebuilding among developers and residents, and dearth of technical knowledge around the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the building. Mr Poh explained that, given this scenario, there was no political will to retain the building, and thus, the developers made the eventual decision to redevelop the site. Finally, Mr Poh offered a few policy recommendations such as mandating preventative maintenance of private properties, introducing planning incentives to encourage conservation, reducing the percentage approval needed to redistribute shares, and greater documentation and public education to encourage appreciation of post-independence landmarks.

In the panel discussion chaired by Head of Social Lab Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, issues regarding the role of the citizenry and the future of heritage advocacy work were discussed. Dr Liew emphasised that in advocating official conservation status, it is insufficient to use personal memory as a reason for conservation; instead, there is a need to demonstrate the significance and resonance of a site across the broader community and over time. Mr Poh expressed optimism in relation to the future of heritage advocacy work, drawing upon his experience of advocating the conservation of Golden Mile Complex, where he engaged Singaporean pioneer architects to petition government agencies and the developers to consider adaptive reuse, over demolition and rebuilding. Dr Pang also highlighted the importance of documenting heritage sites — not just of the past, but also what is seen as significant at present — because what is remembered years from now depends very much on what is documented now.



Chairperson and speakers for Panel 1 — (L-R) Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Ms Paveena Seah, Dr Natalie Pang, Dr Liew Kai Khiun, and Mr Jonathan Poh — who shared about how Singaporeans perceived built-heritage, and ground-up initiatives towards the conservation of different sites in Singapore.

Panel 2 – Assessing Built Heritage

The second panel discussed the various factors of considerations in the conservation-redevelopment decision-making process and methods of assessing built-heritage, as well as the roles that various stakeholders play in facilitating the conservation and repurposing of “older” buildings.

Dr Yeo Kang Shua, Associate Professor of Architectural History, Theory and Criticism, Architecture and Sustainable Design at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, pointed out that there is no consensus among Singaporeans on when a building should be classified as “heritage”, especially with post-independence structures, which may sometimes be considered too recent (young) to be considered heritage. As a result, the conservation of such sites often reflects what authorities deem as important or valuable. Unfortunately, even with legislations that empower the gazette of sites and structures for preservation and conservation, as well as the state’s belief that conservation is part of planning with the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s Master Plan (mid-term trajectory) and Concept Plan (long-term trajectory), Dr Yeo noted that advocacy for built-heritage in Singapore is often reactionary, following announcements on impending demolition of a certain structure deemed to possess heritage values by heritage advocates. He reasoned that this is because the authorities, especially those working at the executive-level, may not always be conscious of the heritage value of buildings and sites.



Dr Yeo Kang Shua reiterating that the first and most important step of Heritage Impact Assessment is to provide a platform for all stakeholders to have transparent discussions about what is significant.

As a solution to this gap, Dr Yeo advocated a more systematic way of conducting Heritage Impact Assessments (HIA), starting with providing a platform where all stakeholders can have transparent discussions about what is significant. This ensures that due diligence is done to determine the cultural and heritage importance of a building before decisions are made. For HIA to be effective, Dr Yeo said that sufficient time is needed as well as proper management of the mitigating factors during the HIA process. He also cautioned that HIA assessors must be independent actors, with no stakes in the site. Despite these concerns, he remains optimistic about the state of heritage in Singapore as he feels that people are becoming increasingly concerned about issues related to heritage and conservation. It is therefore a good time to implement proper policies to facilitate the transparent dialogues necessary for effective HIA.

The second speaker, Mr Cai Yinzhou, Founder of Dakota-Cassia Adventures and Co-Founder of BetweenTwoHomes.sg and Cassia Resettlement Team, shared his experiences of documenting and assisting the elderly residents of the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood in their resettlement process. Citing his late grandmother as an example, Mr Cai explained that the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood was important to its elderly residents, as it housed a community that had lived in for several decades. In 2014, after the news to redevelop the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood was announced, Mr Cai started organising tours of the estate, to raise public awareness about its history and community of residents. Five local residents served as speakers on his tour, offering insights to the neighbourhood, from the residents' perspectives.

Two years later, he was part of the Save Dakota Crescent Campaign that advocated the conservation of the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood. At the same time, Mr Cai started a website to capture the residents’ thoughts and experiences about their relocation from Dakota Crescent to Cassia Crescent. Through this documentation process, he learnt about the lesser-known issues related to relocation, for instance, how the news of relocation was communicated to the residents, and the concomitant changes in their living environment, as well as the loss of familiar faces. Mr Cai and his team responded to these issues by serving as befrienders to the elderly residents and offering assistance when necessary. In his conclusion, Mr Cai highlighted the need to ease elderly residents into their new homes following relocation, and to help former neighbours reconnect with one another. This would facilitate the rebuilding of the elderly residents’ social network and sense of community, albeit in a new location.

The final speaker, Dr Lai Choo Malone-Lee, Director of the Centre for Sustainable Asian Cities, School of Design and Environment, National University of Singapore, discussed the conservation of post-independence landmarks such as Golden Mile Complex, and the perspectives of the stakeholders involved. Dr Malone-Lee noted that Singaporeans today are not well-equipped to handle the conservation-redevelopment debate surrounding these sites as there is no clear institutional framework on how these buildings should be assessed. On one hand, these buildings are considered both locally and internationally to be modernist icons of our nation building years. On the other hand, these megastructures are constructed in the 1970s (i.e., relatively recent), and their historical, architectural, and socio-cultural values for conservation may not be well appreciated by some Singaporeans. Dr Malone-Lee also emphasised the dominant role that economic concerns play in this debate. For one, property developers whose priority is economic viability are less concerned with the conservation of such developments, as it can be costly to restore and maintain old buildings. Similarly, strata property owners are keen to monetise their investments. Hence, although government agencies such as the Urban Redevelopment Board have expressed support for conserving these post-independence landmarks, they have thus far only conserved institutional buildings rather than commercial or residential ones.

In relation to the planning dilemma between land use regulations and private property rights in the context of built-heritage conservation, Dr Malone-Lee reviewed some public policy concepts and argued for the middle ground between extreme perspectives — the so-called “accommodation power” — which advocates the cooperation between government regulatory bodies and markets. She noted that this approach is not new in Singapore and will likely continue to be the way for Singapore to grow as a liveable and sustainable city. Dr Malone-Lee concluded her presentation by stating her belief that old buildings contribute to the architectural diversity of our urban landscape. Hence, she called for the government to offer strong incentives to encourage owners of heritage properties to pursue conservation voluntarily.



Dr Lai Choo Malone-Lee emphasising that sites must continue to be physically and economically accessible after conservation.

The panel discussion chaired by NUS Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser addressed important considerations regarding the assessment of built heritage. A participant observed that some heritage buildings become inaccessible to the public after conservation, especially if they have been repurposed into private establishments. Expressing his concern, he asked how this issue could be communicated to policy-makers and property developers. In response to this question, Dr Malone-Lee noted that there is inadequate discourse on what happens after a building has been designated for conservation. She agreed that there is a need for new guidelines and partnerships amongst stakeholders to ensure that these conserved sites remain accessible and relevant, both economically and physically, to the traditions and communities that had a tie to them.



Chairperson and speakers for Panel 2 — (L-R) Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, Dr Lai Choo Malone-Lee, Mr Cai Yinzhou, and Dr Yeo Kang Shua — who talked about the various factors for consideration and the perspective of different stakeholders in the decision-making process for the conservation or redevelopment of built landmarks.

Another interesting question was raised by a participant who saw a possibility for the process of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) to be incorporated with that of Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA), which could result in a more holistic framework to assess heritage sites. Addressing this question, Mr Cai referenced Dr Yeo’s presentation and noted that similar principles can be applied to both HIA and SIA — for instance, assessors of HIA must remain independent of parties who may have vested interests in the site, and the same principle applies to SIA assessors. Drawing from his own experience in the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood, Mr Cai said that in assessing the social costs of relocation, he and his team of volunteers strived to see the issues from the residents’ perspectives, emphasising that accountability to the residents was their utmost priority.

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Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the speaker(s) and author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Heritage Board, Singapore.

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