



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

27 February 2019, Wednesday

Seminar: 9.00 am - 1.30 pm
NUS AS7, #01-16/17/18 Seminar Room
B 5 Arts Link, Singapore 117570

Optional guided tour: 1.30 pm - 5.00 pm
Dakota Crescent/Cassia Crescent



NUS
National University
of Singapore

Faculty of Arts
& Social Sciences

Synopsis

The issue of built heritage, especially the collective sales of post-independence landmarks such as Pearl Bank Apartments, has gained prominence in recent years. At the same time, activism and public engagement of various sites such as Bukit Brown Cemetery and Dakota Crescent SIT flats reflect growing interest in the issue. Even as more buildings and landmarks are being conserved and repurposed, questions surrounding the meaning, purpose and process of built heritage conservation have become more salient.

Beyond fostering a sense of national consciousness among Singaporeans, built landmarks and sites are considered an important tangible element of the Singaporean national identity. Conversely, the loss of old buildings can weaken one's sense of place and contribute to a sense of displacement.

This seminar will explore perceptions and practices pertaining to built heritage from the lenses of civic activism, policy planning, business undertakings and broader perspectives of Singaporeans. How can we be sensitive to diverse attitudes towards built heritage, and improve the processes of evaluation, planning, discussion and decision-making that go into heritage work? What factors and dynamics must be taken into consideration when exploring conservation, redevelopment and repurposing? These questions will be addressed through two panels and a guided tour.

The first panel focuses on heritage as a process of meaning-making. It introduces the factors that commonly guide the evaluation of heritage sites, examining how knowledge, lived experiences, memories and the discernment of the senses intertwine to constitute perceptions of built heritage. In turn, built heritage can influence the sense of national identity. The translation of perceptions into action requires proponents of conservation to consider the challenges that different types of land ownership pose.

The second panel explores the assessment of built heritage in conservation and redevelopment. It considers the imperatives of market forces, legal and bureaucratic systems, and the interests of diverse stakeholders that guide the management of heritage. Drawing on their experiences of heritage management, the speakers will offer insights on the value of assessment to policymakers, corporate organisations and civil society.

In partnership with *Dakota-Cassia Adventures*, we will end with a guided tour of Dakota Crescent and Cassia Crescent, which offers experiential insights to social impacts associated with conservation and resettlement. Participation in this tour is optional, and limited to 30 persons, on a first-come-first serve basis, at \$35 per person payable directly to the tour provider.

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Programme

9.00 am – 9.20 am

9.20 am – 9.30 am

9.30 am – 10.35 am

10.35 am – 10.50 am

Registration

Opening Remarks

Professor Lionel Wee
Provost's Chair Professor
and
Vice Dean of Research
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
National University of Singapore

Panel 1 Thinking and Doing Heritage

Chairperson

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong
Head
IPS Social Lab

Speakers

**1. “Is That Site ‘Valuable’ to Me?” – An
Exploration of Cohort Differences in
Perceiving Heritage Sites**

Ms Paveena Seah
Senior Research Analyst
IPS Social Lab
and
Dr Natalie Pang
Senior Research Fellow
IPS Social Lab

**2. Far East Plaza as Heritage? Conserving
Singapore’s Malls**

Dr Liew Kai Khiun
Assistant Professor
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and
Information
Nanyang Technological University

3. Ground-up Action in Conservation

Mr Jonathan Poh
Principal, Provolk Architects
Founder, Save Dakota Crescent Campaign

4. Panel Discussion

Tea

10.50 am – 12.00 pm

Panel 2 Assessing Built Heritage

Chairperson

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser
Department of Sociology
Chair, Social Science and Policy Cluster
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
National University of Singapore
Academic Adviser, IPS Social Lab

Speakers

1. Deciding the Fate of “Old” Buildings

Dr Yeo Kang Shua
Associate Professor of Architectural History,
Theory and Criticism
Architecture and Sustainable Design
Singapore University of Technology and
Design

2. Social Impact Assessment – A Case Study

Mr Cai Yinzhou
Founder of Dakota-Cassia Adventures
Co-Founder of Betweenwohomes.sg and
Cassia Resettlement Team

3. Conservation of Singapore’s Recent Past: Planning Dilemmas, Heritage Values and Market Tensions

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

4. Panel Discussion

12.00 pm – 12.10 pm

Closing Remarks

Ms Paveena Seah
Senior Research Analyst
IPS Social Lab

12.10 pm – 1.30 pm

Lunch

1.30 pm – 5.00 pm

Dakota-Cassia Adventures

On 25 July 2014, HDB announced that Dakota Crescent would be slated for redevelopment. By December 2016, residents have moved out of this

place they used to call 'home'. Consisting of a majority ageing population, some struggle with small things like taking the lift, remembering their way home, or making friends with new neighbours. Others struggle with bigger things like keeping their house clean, getting regular meals and staying healthy. The relocation of an entire estate calls into question Singaporean's idea of home. What are the impacts of demolishing a site relatable to the population? Do people make the place, or does the place make the people? With these questions, we hope to open the discussion about how we care for different populations, activation of the community, and what a ground up response can look like.

The three-hour tour consists of a walk in the estate of Dakota Crescent, following the story of relocation to Cassia Crescent with a stop at Old Airport Road Hawker Centre in between. In addition, participants will get to understand the efforts of ground up initiatives through Cassia Resettlement Team as well as possibly visit residents who have relocated to the new estate. The tour will also include a discussion with several panel speakers about the trade-offs between conservation and redevelopment.

Maximum number of participants: 30

Cost: \$35 per person (cash payment to tour provider)

Note: Travel light, bring a water bottle and umbrella. Tour continues rain or shine, with possible variation to the route in event of bad weather.

Tour provider

Dakota-Cassia Adventures

5.00 pm

End

Panel Abstracts

Panel 1: Thinking and Doing Heritage

“Is That Site ‘Valuable’ to Me?” – An Exploration of Cohort Differences in Perceiving Heritage Sites

(Ms Paveena Seah and Dr Natalie Pang)

Growing interest in the issue of built heritage conservation and redevelopment has attracted scholarly attention in recent years, but a pertinent question remains: how do different communities perceive the meaning and value of built heritage? In this presentation, we explore how different cohorts of Singaporeans perceive 53 buildings and landmarks, using data collected from 1,500 Singapore citizens from various backgrounds. Differences are observed in terms of: a) knowledge (how much people say they know about a site), b) memories (how much people say they remember), c) aesthetic appeal (the extent to which a site is appealing), and d) perceived importance (how important a site is to them). We found that cohort differences may be meaningful in explaining how heritage sites resonate differently, especially in the ways these different cohorts come into contact with each site, and their socio-cultural contexts. These findings allude to how sites are appraised as a whole, taking into account the history and context of each site, as well as how people encounter and experience the sites.

Far East Plaza as Heritage? Conserving Singapore’s Malls

(Dr Liew Kai Khiun)

From the street bazaars and departmental stores of the colonial era to the theme-based contemporary mall complexes, retail and shopping culture has been a ubiquitous aspect of Singapore. However, as shopping centers have come and gone, the historical significance and heritage value of these buildings and places, alongside with their collective memories, have yet to be systematically acknowledged. While popularly remembered, many of these privately-owned sites are often subjected to property developments and redevelopment, and as places associated with entertainment and leisure, most do not immediately possess the symbolically recognized political and cultural criteria that qualify for official recognition as “national monuments” and “conserved buildings.” As part of the National Heritage Board Research Grant examining the cultural heritage of shopping malls in Singapore, Dr Liew Kai Khiun will discuss his research findings and put forth recommendations for the acknowledgement of these mall spaces as sites of memories worthy of conservation and documentation.

Ground-up Action in Conservation

(Mr Jonathan Poh)

The success stories of the conservation of parts of Queenstown and Dakota Crescent have been looked upon as a benchmark for how ground-up efforts should be made for areas or buildings that face similar issues of redevelopment. Recent efforts to save the old Singapore Chinese Girls School at Emerald Hill and Farrer Park have since taken similar approaches. However, when it comes to privately-owned buildings with heritage significance, such as Pearl Bank Apartments, Golden Mile Complex and People’s Park Complex, the challenges and complexities for ground-up conservation effort differ dramatically. In this presentation, Mr Jonathan Poh will share about his experience in saving Dakota Crescent and Pearl Bank Apartments as well as the lessons and takeaways in dealing with issues of ground-up efforts and how land ownership affects the type of outcome one can expect.

Panel 2: Assessing Built Heritage

Deciding the Fate of “Old” Buildings

(Dr Yeo Kang Shua)

Despite having two pieces of legislation that deal with the designation of built heritage – the Planning Act and the Preservation of Monuments Act – existing legal frameworks are not necessarily effective in safeguarding our heritage. Who defines what is heritage? How does a building become heritage? This presentation will provide an overview of why Heritage Impact Assessment might be a good heritage management tool to adopt for Singapore.

Social Impact Assessment – A Case Study

(Mr Cai Yinzhou)

In 2014, a Straits Times article announced the impending demolition of the Dakota Crescent SIT flats in 2016 and the resultant relocation of its residents. This sharing seeks to unpack the arguments behind the question: "Does the place make the people, or do the people make the place?" Specifically, the speaker will share his views on how people remember old places and the value of individual narratives in the age of social media. He will also share his experience about how ordinary citizens can respond and reach critical mass through collaborations and documentation.

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

(Dr Malone-Lee Lai Choo)

The 1970s and 80s mark an extraordinary period of urban growth and development in Singapore and have provided the city with a remarkable built legacy of post-independence modernist architectural icons. While many of these buildings are regarded as visionary and representing innovative design thinking, their physical and social obsolescence have opened up new dilemmas for urban planning. Heritage conservation in the context of scarce land resources, market pressures and a vibrant development milieu is a highly contentious subject. The presentation explores the underlying tensions as the real estate market continues its relentless push for optimal economic outcomes, and discusses the need for contextualised conservation actions as planners navigate the extreme positions presented by the various stakeholders.

Speakers

Ms Paveena Seah is a Senior Research Analyst at the Social Lab, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), National University of Singapore (NUS). She graduated with honours in Sociology from NUS, and has a MSc in Ageing and Society from the Institute of Gerontology, King's College London. She has been working on the Social Lab's flagship Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics since it was launched in 2014. Her research interests are in population ageing, family relations, and heritage conservation, with a special focus on how the built environment and social relations influence the subjective well-being of older people. Paveena is the Principal Investigator of the Study on Perceptions of Singapore's Built Heritage And Landmarks, a research project supported by the Heritage Research Grant from the National Heritage Board, and conducted by the IPS Social Lab.

Dr Natalie Pang received her PhD in Information Technology from Monash University, Australia, where her research on participatory technologies in communities won her two awards — the Vice Chancellor's Commendation for Doctoral Thesis Excellence, and the Faculty of Information Technology Doctoral Medal. Her teaching and research interest is focused on community informatics, with basic and applied research of new media in various community contexts to support social, cultural and civic engagement in these communities. She has published in peer-reviewed journals such as Archives & Manuscripts, Computers in Human Behavior, Media Culture & Society, Online Information Review and New Media & Society.

Dr Liew Kai Khiun has been involved in the research and advocacy for Singapore's cultural and natural heritage for close to two decades. His research publications include that of conservation politics in Singapore, social media and conservation, and television and media archives. He also participated actively in documentation projects in Bukit Brown Cemetery as well as the former Malayan Rail Corridor. Kai Khiun's current project comes from the National Heritage Board Research Grant and is focused on the heritage of shopping centres in Singapore. He was a part of the executive committee for the Singapore Heritage Society and is currently a Council Member of the Nature Society of Singapore and an Assistant Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University.

Mr Jonathan Poh is a registered architect and member of SIA. He received his Master of Architecture from the National University of Singapore, and has been shortlisted for the inaugural Lookbox Design Awards in 2017 and 2018. He was also invited to design for Montana Furniture as part of their new collection in 2019. Following the announcement to redevelop Dakota Crescent in 2014, Jonathan led a team of architects and social researchers to produce a comprehensive conservation report, resulting in a motion in Parliament to conserve the area. He has since been invited to speak at Archifest and Noise Singapore about his ground-up efforts in conserving the SIT estate and has been actively involved in a working group to persuade stakeholders in saving notable buildings built during Singapore's formative years.

Dr Yeo Kang Shua obtained his BA (Architectural Studies), MArch and PhD (Architecture) from the National University of Singapore. He holds the inaugural Hokkien Foundation Career Professorship in Architectural Conservation at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. Kang Shua has published in both local and international journals on the theory of architecture, conservation and history, and has worked on the conservation and excavation of many sites in Singapore, namely Palmer Road (2006), Fort Serapong, and Sentosa Island (2006-2007). He was also a part of the team on three separate projects that have won the

UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation (in 2005, 2010, and 2014) and was formerly the inaugural head of the Monuments Inspectorate at the Preservation of Monuments Board, Singapore.

Mr Cai Yinzhou is a full-time tour guide offering tours of Geylang and Dakota Crescent. Through the tours, he raises awareness for social issues within these communities and seeks to change them through a slew of initiatives. Together with the heritage group "Save Dakota Crescent", Yinzhou wrote and submitted a report advocating for the conservation of Dakota Crescent, leading to the eventual announcement of its partial conservation. He also co-founded "Between 2 Homes" – a multimedia archival project documenting the impacts of the relocation of Dakota Crescent's residents – and the Cassia Resettlement Team – a volunteer group assisting residents with their new home. Through his efforts, Yinzhou hopes to bridge the gap between disadvantaged communities and formal structures, through the collaborative efforts of good people seeking to make the world a better place.

Dr Malone-Lee Lai Choo is Director of the Centre for Sustainable Asian Cities, School of Design and Environment, NUS. She is an urban specialist with an interest in city sustainability and resiliency, and their nexus with development, social wellbeing, economic growth and city culture. She is a member of the Editorial Board of Sustainable Earth, Springer Nature. Prior to NUS, she worked with the Singapore government on urban policies, strategic planning and heritage conservation. She is a consultant to UNESCAP and was a board member of Singapore's National Parks Board from 2011 to 2018.

The “Thinking, Assessing and Doing Built Heritage in Singapore” seminar is organised by Paveena Seah, Natalie Pang, Woo Yue Ting, Tan Ern Ser and Wai Thu Khin San Nwe.

Special thanks to our colleagues at IPS and NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, without whom this workshop would not have been possible.