

Building on the Past

If all the construction going on right now is a glimpse into our future, wouldn't that make historic buildings windows to our past? If so, shouldn't we be careful about smashing those windows? **Andrew Hedges** and **Zaki Jufri** investigate. Photography by **Richard Lee**.

A world-class city is more than just shops, restaurants and an imposing skyline. After all, one of the things that make New York, Chicago, London and Paris unique is the layering of history and modernity—from the Louvre to the Guggenheim.

There is indeed no denying that architecture is one of the most powerful physical reminders of the past, as architectural critic John Ruskin once said: "Without architecture, we cannot remember."

Urban theorist and architect William Lim calls them 'urban memories'—shades of the past, tangible and intangible, that will serve as intrinsic reminders and values of where we've been, much in the same way Singlish, kopitians and wet markets define Singapore's urban landscape. These "memories" help us discover and preserve interesting nuggets of information about our society, our technical achievements, aspirations and ambitions. And to lose them would be tragic for future generations to come.

In a 1995 speech, then Senior Minister Mr. Lee Kuan Yew remarked: "We made our share of mistakes in Singapore. For example in our rush to rebuild Singapore, we knocked down many old and quaint Singapore buildings. Then we realize we were destroying a valuable part of our cultural heritage that we were demolishing what tourists found attractive and unique in Singapore."

That said, kudos must be given to the authorities who have done a commendable job so far in conserving our architecture heritage, especially the Urban Redevelopment Authority which has been giving out awards since 1995 to promote and inspire quality restoration of monuments and conservation buildings in Singapore. The Screening Room in Ann Siang Road and Ascott Singapore in Raffles Place are recent award winners.

More could be done to save Singapore's architectural heritage though, especially the modernist buildings from the post-independence era. Architects say these structures document the evolution of building styles in Singapore, and are fine examples of the work of our pioneering local architects. Buildings like Golden Mile Complex on Beach Road, Pearl Bank apartments in Outram, Chinatown's People's Park Complex and Singapore Conference Hall are some prime examples of iconic architecture that have been lauded internationally for their groundbreaking and innovative designs.

Beyond their form, these buildings capture the mood and aspirations of a young nation as we made our transition from colonial to modern Singapore. Through their conservation, Singapore's symbols of modernization and industrialization can be safeguarded. But the buildings—especially those like Pearl Bank and Golden Mile Complex—are constantly under threat, particularly from the always-looming collective sale.

Property owners of the Beach Road icon, which some have dubbed as being a "vertical slum," have failed twice to get collective agreement to sell the property which is sitting on prime real estate, whereas some residents in Pearl Bank apartments have banded together to stifle en-bloc sale attempts.

"Our country is built on the foundation of constant reinvention in the name of economic survival. The unfortunate side effect of this is the cultivation of a small group of people who have placed economic progress above everything else. Also, we are driven with the message that 'nostalgic' is a vulgar word. Old is bad, new is good," laments Adib Jalal, co-founder of architecture portal fivefootway.com.

Architects and heritage buffs hope that more owners of buildings with historic and architectural merit will not be too quick to demolish and redevelop. "It is useful to think of the existing environment as part of the resources of the city," says architect Ling Hao.

Dynamic urban growth is a complicated evolutionary phenomena and a continuous dialogue between our past, present and future. So how do we reconcile our hunger for progress without losing our history?

In a recent talk at the Singapore Institute of Architects, William Lim proposed a theory on how to provide attractive working and living spaces for Singapore's new generation while dampening the effects of rapid modernization in our global city. Lim's proposal would provide rebates to builders who choose to preserve existing structures within their developments for the interest of the community.

This approach, Lim posited, would retain the old and the historically significant, and would prevent harmful demolition. It would also provide facilities for new and experimental activities. In the process, much of the historical urban environment and selected architecturally—important buildings can be saved from the wrecking ball.

Urban planning theories aside, architects and heritage buffs I-S spoke to agree that more must be done to create awareness and change people's attitudes toward our built environment. Many proposed architecture walks like the "AchiTours" organized during the ongoing ArchiFest 09 which, unfortunately, is a one-off event.

National serviceman and architecture buff HK Chew plainly puts it this way: "Buildings are monuments to the past, monuments to the memories of the generations that had seen them before, and reminders of the past for future generations to come."

The following five sites—pre-war and modernist, some famous and some forgotten—remind us where we stand on historical conservation. Perhaps collectively, they also show us how to move forward.

Golden Mile Complex

5001 Beach Road

Year built: 1974

The history: An imposing sloping structure greets you as you go along Nicoll Highway. Designed in the early '70s by architects William Lim, Gan Eng Oon and Tay Kheng Soon of Design Partnership, the 16-storey Golden Mile Complex is a stepped terraced building that provides offices, shopping, entertainment services and apartment living (with killer views of the ocean back in the day) within its unique structure. It is an early example of integrating multiple operations into one complex.

What state it's in: Once described as an exemplary type of "megastructure" by architectural historian Reyner Banham (it still is), Golden Mile is now languishing in its former glory. The stepped residential areas up top may remind some of the many *favelas* in Rio by the indiscriminate retro-fittings done by residents. The bottom half has evolved into a popular meeting spot for Singapore's Thai community.

What the experts say: "This building is an architectural masterpiece and was one of the most avant-garde buildings in Singapore at that time. It was an



Close up of Golden Mile Complex interior



Golden Mile Complex

advancement of the many ideas that were being explored by the Metabolists in Japan and also manifested the megacity concept with its vertical zoning. Again, beyond its architectural merit, the stepped balcony form gives a hint at where Singapore's coastline used to be before the massive reclamation works in recent times. This is a case of a building being able to tell us more about our own country than we realize."—Adib Jalal, fivefootway.com

What's next: Attempts to "en-bloc" it have failed (twice!). A group of owners are proposing a 108-storey building in its place with a cosmetic and plastic surgery hub, sex-related disease and fertility research hospital, and legal professional topless bars. Righhht...

People's Park Complex

1 Park Road

Year built: 1967

The history: Just ask any Singaporean about Chinatown and People's Park Complex will surely pop up in the conversation. Like Golden Mile Complex, People's Park is one of the earliest examples of large-scale, mixed use developments here—a precursor to many of the modern versions you see today. Hailed as a masterpiece of 1970s experimental architecture from the Japanese Metabolist movement, People's Park Complex was designed to revitalize one of the most populated and traditional enclaves in post-independent Singapore. Its main shopping atrium, with its many layers, stairs and escalators, still awes first-time visitors.

What state it's in: Its once-original exterior finishing of exposed raw concrete is now

a garish coat of orange and green. Its bustling shopping area boasts many outlets hawking an extensive range of products including electrical and electronic goods, luggage and textiles, bargain-priced clothes and cosmetics, and even antiques. Residents living in the housing block on top have called the building "People's Park Hostel" as some enterprising residents have converted their units into workers' quarters.

What the experts say: "Another avant-garde piece in Singapore. The complex pioneered the podium block-plus-tower typology of buildings and is an important part of architectural history with many design ideas manifested in it. Just like the Golden Mile Complex, this building's significance is more than just about Singapore but rather part of a larger architectural historical discourse."—Adib Jalal

What's next: Although People's Park is still a hive of activity, from street level to it housing facilities, property developers and architects we spoke to say that it's possible that this "people's shopping centre" might be on the chopping block in the near future.

Pearl Bank Apartments

1 Pearl's Hill

Year built: 1976

The history: Standing in towering isolation in Pearl's Hill is the Outram Park landmark that is Pearl Bank Apartments. Designed by Tan Cheng Siong in the late '70s, the 38-storey structure was once the tallest residential block in all of Southeast Asia. The horseshoe-shaped condo is a fine example of early modernism (high-rise/high-density) and was built at a time when the only private housing options that existed were shop houses and walk-up apartments. The complex arrangement of each apartment gives every occupant a unique experience. Some have different views of the city depending on the floor and location, while the opening in the horseshoe faces west and minimizes direct penetration of heat and light from the afternoon sun.

What state it's in: Up-close, one can definitely see signs of wear and tear while mismatched windows and air-conditioning units mar its unique façade.

What the experts say: "This is one building that was ahead of its time back in the '70s. Very dense and extremely complicated in design, Tan Cheng Siong's enduring work still remains relevant today and represents our endeavors in providing sound housing solutions back in the day."—Tang Guan Bee, TANGGUANBEE ARCHITECTS

What's next: Put on en-bloc in 2007, Pearl Bank Apartments still stands today as less than 80 percent of residents voted for a sale. But for how long?

Ellison Building

Selegie Road.

Year built: 1924

The history: This unique architectural gem is conveniently perched on the left bank of the Rochor Canal, situated at the far end of Selegie Road. It is believed to have been built for a Jewish woman by the name of Ellison in 1924—a belief that would

be hard to refute, since it is backed up by a Star of David at the top of the building, bookended by the numbers 19 and 24. It boasts a pair of semi-circular domes at each end (making it the tallest building in Singapore back when it was constructed in the early 20th Century), from which the British governors at the time would watch the races on Sundays at the nearby, and aptly named, Race Course Road.

What state it's in: Regardless of the slightly grimy look to some of the higher parts of the building, Mrs. Ellison would hopefully be pleased to see that her old house still sees a fair amount of use. There are a string of various shops along the front, and the foot traffic in, out and around it is constant. The two domes, however, seem generally inaccessible now.

What the experts say: "My first impression is that it does give the street a sense of human scale that strategically marks the start of Little India, and also the end of Selegie Road. When compared to the other ones you cross at the junction—the Tekka HDB, the Tekka Mall and the Selegie hotel—it really shows a lot of history about the place, by just looking at the over-painted walls and the urban qualities. It is still relevant as the shop below provides a good respite from the weather with its five foot ways. It is a good reminder of what an urban planner needs to consider without going too much into a text book exercise."—Randy Chan, Zarch Collaboratives.

What's next: The fact that the Colonial Bar—established in the same year that the Ellison Building was built, and poignantly situated directly underneath one of the domes—is closed, does not instill huge amounts of faith in the future of the building. However, the shops and kiosks, though probably not in keeping with the original purpose of the structure, do provide a bit of security to its existence. Its position right on the corner of a major junction means that it would be missed if it was gone; so here's hoping it makes it to its 100th birthday!

Singapore Badminton Hall

100 Guillemard Road.

Year built: 1952

The history: The Singapore Badminton Hall was commissioned to be built in 1951 for the second Thomas Cup Tournament to be held in 1952. Construction was finished a little too late, however,

and after it was declared officially open by the Governor of Singapore (Sir John Fearn Nicoll) it was forced to wait until 1955 when the third

tournament was finally held there. Apart from the numerous sporting events that it has played host to in its time, it also served as the vote counting station for the only referendum to be held in Singapore History in 1962 (regarding a merger with Malaysia), as well as being the venue for a one-night-only performance by the Rolling Stones, in which the crowd reputedly got so wild that a wall collapsed.

What state it's in: Not the best—though definitely not the worst either. The choice to have an all-white exterior has invariably led to a bit of a dirty look, especially 57 years down the road. You will smell it before you see it now, however, as a Durian Party kiosk has been set up on the premises right next to the building.

What the experts say: "Bernard Tschumi, the famous architect and theorist advocates that events make architecture. Based on this theory, the conservation of the Singapore Badminton Hall, which was conserved due to three historical events that took place there ... rather than architectural merits, is befitting to be considered a historical site worth conserving.

"On another note, the facelift given to the conserved Singapore Badminton Hall does not seem to pay attention to the historical provenance that is central to the conservation of the building. Clumsily and thoughtlessly executed, this is treated like a cursory change-of-use job done by a contractor and looks far from being the conserved historical architecture it should be. Every conserved building, which is about preserving our heritage, should be treated with pride and respect. Architectural and heritage conservation is an issue that needs to be more sensitively treated in Singapore."—Kelley Cheng, Editor-in-Chief for the *Singapore Architect*.

What's next: Well, this one surprised even us. There is currently construction going on; not to the outside, but on the inside. Upon its completion (reputedly in a couple weeks), this building—marked as a historical site by the National Heritage Board in 1999 mind you—will play host to a 24-hour prawn-fishing restaurant and beer garden, complete with a BBQ, kids corner and a fish spa. Even fishier is the fact that local notices state the address of the building as the "Former Singapore Badminton Hall."

Hmmm. ■



People's Park Complex



Ellison Building



Singapore Badminton Hall



Pearl Bank Apartments