ADAPTING CONSERVATION APPROACH TO CHALLENGES IN SINGAPORE

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Singapore’s Conservation Programme

1. Conservation of built heritage is undertaken as an integral part of land-use planning in Singapore. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) is the government agency formally empowered to oversee this.

2. Due to its limited land size, URA’s programme in conserving Singapore’s built heritage entails a holistic approach to keep history alongside with where to fit in new developments and where to site green lungs. The history of a city is recorded not only in books, but also in its buildings. These buildings are a record of our ancestors’ aspirations and achievements. Given the nation’s relatively young history, conserving historically and architecturally significant buildings and areas not only provides a vital link to the past, it also strengthens our sense of identity and belonging as a nation.

3. To date, URA has conserved over 7,000 buildings in more than 100 areas across the island - from different eras and in different context, setting and backdrop. They embody the visual confluence of our multi-varied ethnic roots.

Early Years of Conservation in Singapore: A Central Government Approach

4. In the 1970s, URA was involved in modest conservation efforts to rehabilitate some state-owned properties for adaptive re-use. This grew in scale and scope after the critical urban ills characterised by acute housing shortage, traffic congestion and poor hygiene were largely resolved.
5. URA released a draft Conservation Master Plan in 1986. A public exhibition was held in conjunction with the release of this Master Plan to announce the government’s intention to conserve 3200 shophouses located within some 55 hectares. A key highlight of the comprehensive Conservation Master Plan was the designation of the Historic Districts of Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India and Boat Quay as conservation areas. These were the early settlement areas of the three main races living in Singapore.

6. In these Historic Districts, the predominant building form was the shophouse built on small plots under individual, and often fragmented, ownership. To press ahead with economic transformation, modernisation of infrastructure and provision of public housing, the years between 1960s to early 1980s saw massive land acquisition by the government for public housing and comprehensive redevelopment. At that time, owners received low monetary compensation for properties that were acquired. Hence, the 1986 announcement to designate the Historic Districts as conservation areas was welcomed by the owners as it meant that their properties were not to be acquired. URA confirmed their conservation with the gazette of the Historic Districts under the reconstituted Planning Act in 1989 as conservation areas.

**Boom Years of the 1990s:
Adopting a Market-Centric Approach of ‘Old-and New’ Developments**

7. In the 1990s, as Singapore’s economy grew, the island-State faced an increasing demand for more floor spaces for residential, commercial and other uses. The population became more affluent and property prices also rose. Market-driven intensive redevelopments were taking place all over the island, particularly in the city. To cater to such redevelopment needs and optimise the use of land, URA raised plot ratios for land in the city and elsewhere. Values rose sharply for land with potential for redevelopment to higher plot ratios. With the rise in property values, owners of conserved properties began to see conservation as an obstacle, and possible economic loss to the potential
redevelopment of their properties. This was because as conserved buildings could not be torn down and rebuilt, owners would be unable to reap the real estate gains from revised higher plot ratios.

8. URA realised that any proposal to conserve beyond the historic districts would likely meet with stiff resistance. Hence, it was necessary to re-engineer the conservation approach to align with the planning paradigm of raised plot ratios. Incentives would have to be formulated to make it more palatable for additional properties to be conserved.

9. After the Historic Districts, URA began to look at the next phase of conservation, namely the shophouses in the Secondary Settlements fringing the city, such as Geylang, Jalan Besar and Joo Chiat. These areas resulted from urbanisation pressure and the outward growth from the core of the city. Unlike the Historic Districts, the old shophouses in these areas were largely interspersed with newer developments.

10. However, the Master Plan had already designated higher plot ratios in these areas than the existing plot ratios of the shophouses. If the shophouses were conserved like those in the historic districts, the potential value of the land could not be realised. So, to face this new challenge of the boom years, URA had to come up with a win-win proposal which could achieve the twin objectives of keeping the shophouses and yet, enabling the property owners to achieve the economic value of the land based on the higher Master Plan plot ratios. The solution was the new conservation model of ‘old-and-new’ development, ie allowing new structures to be added on so that the floor area on the site could be increased while conserving the existing building.

11. The ‘old-and-new’ approach was introduced to assure owners in the Secondary Settlement areas that they could intensify their land use without being unduly penalised due to conservation. To support this, URA planners
carried out simulation studies of ‘old-and-new’ development for every building to be conserved. Only after ascertaining that there was no drastic loss in the development potential, URA proceeded to pursue the conservation proposal for the areas. The outcome of the exercise enabled URA to modify its conservation guidelines for the Secondary Settlements. Now, only the main building on each site needs to be retained while new and higher buildings can be added at the rear. Eventually, about 1600 buildings were conserved in these areas as most owners found it acceptable with minimal loss incurred.

12. Other incentives have also been introduced during this period to meet the demanding challenges of conservation. These included waiver of car parking deficiency charges and allowing changes of use from residential to commercial uses.

**Challenges of the 21st Century : Public Consultation and Engagement**

13. Entering the 21st Century, Singapore’s public service became more consultative in policy-making and, more open to diverse views and wider public participation in response to a better educated and informed population.

14. From 2000 onwards, URA increased efforts to garner greater public involvement in land use planning as well as heritage conservation through formation of various focus groups and subject groups to discuss critical planning dilemmas.

15. Under this approach, in 2002, one of the subject groups comprising professionals, interest groups and laymen, deliberated on new proposed conservation clusters as part of the ‘Old World Charm’ studies. These studies focused on areas settled by rich merchants in the 1900s to 1960s when they moved away from the city core to the new ‘suburbs’ such as Balestier, East Coast and Tanjong Katong. These new affluent ‘suburbs’ were known for their
characteristic low-rise shophouses with unique architecture, charming streetscapes and rich history.

16. The subject group conducted dialogue sessions with stakeholders and gathered public feedback. The group’s involvement helped URA to fine-tune the conservation proposals. They also increased owners’ buy-in, smoothing the process to conserve some 600 shophouses in these areas, some of which were to be integrated with new developments.

17. From 2005 onwards, URA further improved the process of public consultation by communicating directly with the owners of buildings proposed for conservation by undertaking the practice of sending letters to the owners’ registered addresses. Previously, letters from the URA explaining the rationale for conserving the properties, were dropped off at the properties and, as many of them were occupied by tenants, they did not reach the owners as intended.

18. URA now also includes a return slip for owners to arrange a meet up session with URA officers to discuss the conservation proposal for their properties. At these sessions, owners are able to gather the details of the conservation proposals and give URA feedback as well as to seek clarification.

19. At these consultative meetings, URA is able to explain to the property owners how URA sees the architectural and historical significance of their building, as well as its contribution to the streetscape and neighbourhood in preserving a sense of place and identity for the nation.

20. For some cases, the engagement process is intense and prolonged when the sites pose constraints to increase the floor areas while conserving the existing buildings. Examples include 42 Cairnhill, 124 St Patrick’s Road and 23 Amber Road where URA shared how the development scheme could be composed to capitalise on the conserved bungalow as an asset. Where necessary, URA
also gave concessions in terms of boundary setback waivers and higher building height for new blocks to be added on the site. This facilitated positive outcome from the owners.

**Greater Outreach through the Conservation Advisory panel (CAP)**

21. Another important initiative was the setting up of the Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP) in 2002. CAP is an independent heritage conservation body comprising 17 members who are appointed by the Minister for National Development. The members come from diverse backgrounds including the building industry, arts and heritage, education and journalism, and tourism services. With its diverse representation, CAP help URA to reach out to more people to disseminate and gather views, contribute to a more transparent process in gazetting buildings for conservation and raise the general public’s appreciation of built heritage.

**Championing Public Education and Recognition**

22. URA also embarked on a slew of educational and promotional initiatives to increase the level of buy-in among important stakeholders. These include exhibitions, specially-made television programmes and seminars on conservation.

23. For every building gazetted for conservation, there are facade restoration guidelines and conservation guidelines to assist owners and their architects to refurbish the building. URA officers also carry site inspections before supporting the issuance of a permit for users to occupy the building. This is to make sure the architectural details of these old buildings, embedded in their facade design, features and decorations are faithfully restored. To ensure that conservation guidelines remain relevant to the market and are sufficiently flexible to allow for creativity and innovation, URA work with the Singapore
Institute of Architects and other relevant groups to jointly review the conservation guidelines at regular five-year intervals.

24. To recognise owners of conserved properties for their important role in the Singapore’s conservation story, an annual national award, the Architectural Heritage Award, was created in 1995. This highly coveted award also serves to set a high standard for others to follow. Today, more owners seek to win this award as it enhances their property values. To-date, 107 projects have been conferred this Award.

Promoting Conservation

25. Every conservation area has a story to tell. Heritage storyboards are thus installed at strategic spots to tell the heritage stories to both locals as well as visitors to Singapore. They act as both markers for the conservation areas and as explanation to highlight significant buildings/landmarks of interest.

26. To complement these heritage storyboards, URA also produced walking maps in collaboration with organizations such as the Malay Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board, Singapore Tourism Board, National Parks Board and Singapore Community Development Councils for the various conservation areas.

27. These walking maps serve to instil a greater sense of excitement and appreciation for an area’s history and conservation. They also cultivate a sense of ownership and empowerment for the stakeholders and the community in directly helping to reinforce the area's history and identity of place. These maps are available online as well as at key tourist attractions.

28. To help give everyone an easy to understand overview of how conservation plays a role in the Singapore built environment, URA set up the Singapore City Gallery, located in URA building. This further boosted the conservation
outreach efforts particularly to school groups. The gallery showcases Singapore’s planning and conservation efforts, and demonstrates how the city evolved through the decades. The exhibition also presented the trade-offs between conservation and development to achieve optimal land use for Singapore, and the challenges involved in striking a balance between the interests of the affected parties and the national good.

**Moving Forward : Challenge of Social Media and Co-Creation**

29. Recently, the public, in particular, special interest groups, have shown a strong desire to play a more active role in planning the physical environment using the platform of social media. Many views were posted on topics which have implications on redevelopment of land. They include the disused railway line which runs 26 km across Singapore, the Bukit Brown Cemetery which occupies about 86 hectare at the fringe of the city and the former Methodist Girls’ School located in a residential area and near to Dhoby Gaut MRT station. The consultative, market–orientated and flexible approach towards conservation will now have to include engaging these interest groups in the social media arena.

30. It is clear that the new challenge is now managing public expectation. In the early years, it was the government who insisted on conservation, but as Singapore matures and conservation’s value in Singapore’s built environment is being felt by the people, it is now the public who wants to have a voice to ensure that conservation is part and parcel of their built environment. URA acknowledges that it is not possible to conserve every building and area put forth by any member of the public much as we may want to. Hence, we are entering a new age where co-creation with interested members of the public for conservation is a certainty. This is a new challenge and URA is open to it.