

# 30 MOHAMED SULTAN ROAD

The Phoenix Rises Again



CATEGORY A

**Owner:**

Singapore Lam Ann Association

**Architect:**

Archi-Theme Partnership

**Engineer:**

STL Consultants

**Contractor:**

Vantage Construction Pte Ltd

*The 100-year-old Hong San See Temple, also known as The Temple of Phoenix Hill, has been passionately and faithfully restored. Through sheer determination, thorough research and investigations, exemplary teamwork with the consultants and experts, and community spirit, the owners have returned the shine to this rare and important 1913 national architectural treasure, richly influenced by early Chinese immigrants from Southern Fujian.*



Restored Main Hall with double-eaves gable and hip roof

## Keeping The Faith

The inexhaustible passion and dedication of the temple's owners anchored the success of this project from the very start. They turned to the experts, engaging both local and overseas consultants such as the Beijing Palace Museum and assembling a group of craftsmen and artisans from China who have honed the techniques and aesthetic nuances of Minnan architecture.

Before work began, protective measures were put in place in the form of a temporary roof over the temple. Referring closely to historic evidence, the team adopted the "Top-Down" approach and observed the 3R principles. Timber beams were carefully inspected. Where damaged, they were repaired and spliced with new timber segments. Previous insensitive interventions were delicately removed. The temple's many intricate wood carvings, and marvellous Chinese lacquerwork and gold leafings were painstakingly repaired and reinstated. Green glazed roof tiles that were previously added to the secondary buildings were replaced with traditional clay tiles to match that of the main temple building.

The disagreement between the owners and the consultants over the colour of the original tiles on the overhanging eaves was resolved after delving into the temple's century-old accounts books to confirm they were unique to the traditional Chinese architecture found in Singapore and the Malaysia Peninsular. From photographic records, the front wall of the temple was confirmed to be originally finished in plaster. The granite tiles were later add-ons and were removed until the dado level in the current project.

All these works stressed the importance of research and documentation into the past.

## Old Ways, New Solutions

The attention-to-detail and the care taken to restore this national monument are as impressive as they are inspirational.

To recover the patina of age of the gold leaf coating on the temple's timber members, the artisans from China used their saliva to clean them. This is a traditional restoration technique unfamiliar to local craftsmen. All

the decorations on the roof were restored with new broken porcelain pieces that came from some 40,000 pastel-coloured rice bowls. The discovery during the restoration that the dragons' fins were of plastic led the decision to take on the Chinese expert's advice on the appropriate design of the dragons.

The original spatial quality of the temple's front entrance was reinstated with the removal of the two concrete columns added in 1976 to prop up the roof but this previous treatment was aesthetically and historically insensitive. An I-beam encased in timber was inserted into the sagging roof structure instead as the new support.

## Engaging The Community

The project revived the community spirit thanks to the owners' innovative fundraising technique where members of the public purchased un-reusable old bricks from the building. The owners' holistic, informed and integrated approach and vision to restore the temple as a religious site and important monument of shared heritage is a success to emulate.

Today, worshippers and the public alike can admire the temple's stunning original carvings, adornments and the signature ornamentations unique to Minnan architecture. The Temple of Phoenix Hill has indeed risen again, standing proud as an outstanding example of Chinese architectural heritage, art and culture for generations to come.





*Roof decorations composed with broken porcelain pieces*



*Original spatial quality of front entrance reinstated*



*Original roof with natural clay tiles and green glazed eaves and dragon motif finials*



*Intricate wood carvings repaired*



*Gold-gilded dou-gong*



*Marble stele kept*



*Restored Main Hall*



*100-year old Minnan-Style Chinese temple passionately and faithfully restored*



*Chinese lacquerwork on main doors*



## ▪ **Historical background**

Hong San See temple, or *Temple of Phoenix Hill* was established in 1836 with the original site on Tras Street, within the present day area of Tanjong Pagar. Due to a road widening project, the land where the temple was originally sited was acquired by the colonial government in 1907 and a sum of \$50,000 paid to the temple as compensation. A site on Mohamed Sultan Road was acquired and the relocation and construction of the new temple complex at its current site ensued. The relocated temple sits on the side of what is also known as Institution Hill (behind Fort Canning Hill), a name that is derived from the fact that the Trustees of Raffles Institution once owned the hill. On the other hand, the Chinese referred to this area colloquially as 水廊头 (*shui-lang-tou*) or *head of the water factory* (in the Teochew and Hokkien Dialect), after the famous Whampoa Hoo Ah Kay's Ice Works Factory that used to stand in Clarke Quay, which is referred to as 水廊内 (*shui-lang-nei*) or *within the water factory*, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, this temple is also known as 水廊头凤山寺 or *Temple of the Phoenix Hill at the head of the water factory*.

Overlooking Mohamed Sultan Road and facing the Singapore River, the temple occupies an area measuring 3,447.2 square metres. Its elevated location on the side of a hill had once provided a view of the Singapore River, which has since been blocked by the construction of high-rise buildings around its vicinity. The construction of the temple took place between 1908 and 1913 and was undertaken by Lim Loh, a well-known contractor who hailed from Nan-an (Lam Ann) County in China, and father of World War II hero Lim Bo Seng. Prior to the recent restoration, the temple underwent four renovations, in 1934, 1962, 1976 and 1994.

## ▪ **Present context, condition, use of the property**

Built in accordance to the traditional Min-nan architectural style, the temple retains its charms through its axial planning, courtyards and walled enclosures, making it a rare and important example for the study of local Chinese architecture.

The entrance hall and the main hall are separated by a courtyard and this courtyard is flanked by additional courtyards on either sides. The main hall and entrance hall are richly decorated, with light being used in a significant way to reflect the beauty of the timber carvings. These, together with other timber artifacts and statues of deities were imported from China. While the three sets of double-leafed timber doors at the entrance hall bears wondrous images of the auspicious, the magnificent prancing dragons on the roof ridges are intricately pieced together using ceramic shards.

Hong San See temple is also unique in that it is the only known temple insofar in Southeast Asia (outside China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) that retains documentary proof, as evident from its historical accounts books, of a construction method involving two teams competing against each other, known as 对场 (*dui-chang*) for traditional Chinese buildings.

This method is also called the rival building method. In this approach the building under construction is divided by central lines into two parts, either left-right two-team construction or front-back two-team construction. The two parts of the building are completed by two teams of competing craftsmen working simultaneously using their own methods, techniques and designs while conscious effort is made to integrate the final form. The approach adopted in this instance is that of left-right two-team construction by three master craftsmen, Yang Yuanxing 杨元兴, Wang Yaosi 王瑶司 and Yang Shixian 杨仕仙. Historical research is currently underway to determine the leader(s) of the two competing teams.



Part of the temple had also briefly functioned as a school when the Nan Ming School was started within the grounds of the temple complex in 1915. The school catered for students from Bukit Ho Swee and other nearby villages until its closure 10 years later due to financial issues.

The temple which is located within Singapore's River Valley Conservation Area, is managed by a board of trustees from the Lam Ann Association and draws worshippers from different dialect groups. The temple has served as a meeting place for early immigrants from Nan-an County, China and continues to perform this function today.

- **Heritage/protection status of the property**

In recognition of its rich heritage and long history, the temple was gazetted as a National Monument on 10 November 1978. As a National Monument, apart from the normal regulatory framework for construction industry in Singapore, the temple is also subjected to the regulatory requirements of the Preservation of Monuments Board [[Preservation of Monuments Act 2009](#)] should any work be carried out on the building.

All gazetted National Monuments are issued with a set of Preservation Guidelines (2 volumes) specific to the said Monument. The Preservation Guidelines is a control document, which essentially acts as an audit of the building and its contents. This document also serves as the reference point on which the annual visual inspection of the building by the Preservation of Monuments Board's Inspectors is based upon. Apart from this annual inspection, the temple is also required to engage a Professional Engineer to conduct a Periodic Structural Inspection once every 5 years.



Green glazed roof tiles were removed and reinstated with unglazed clay tiles, green eaves tiles were retained as documented in the archived accounts books

Auxillary building's gable wall is constructed in a similar architectural design to harmonise with the rest of the temple

Wall colour scheme was changed to maroon for external walls and white for internal walls

Circular windows were removed and reinstated with rectangular windows

Granite wall cladding removed and reinstated with granite dado with plastered wall above

Orange glazed ceramic floor tiles removed and reinstated with granite slabs

Reinforced concrete columns were removed, sagging timber beam reinforced with metal

Insensitive ceramic roof ornamentation was reinstated with traditional ceramic roof ornamentation

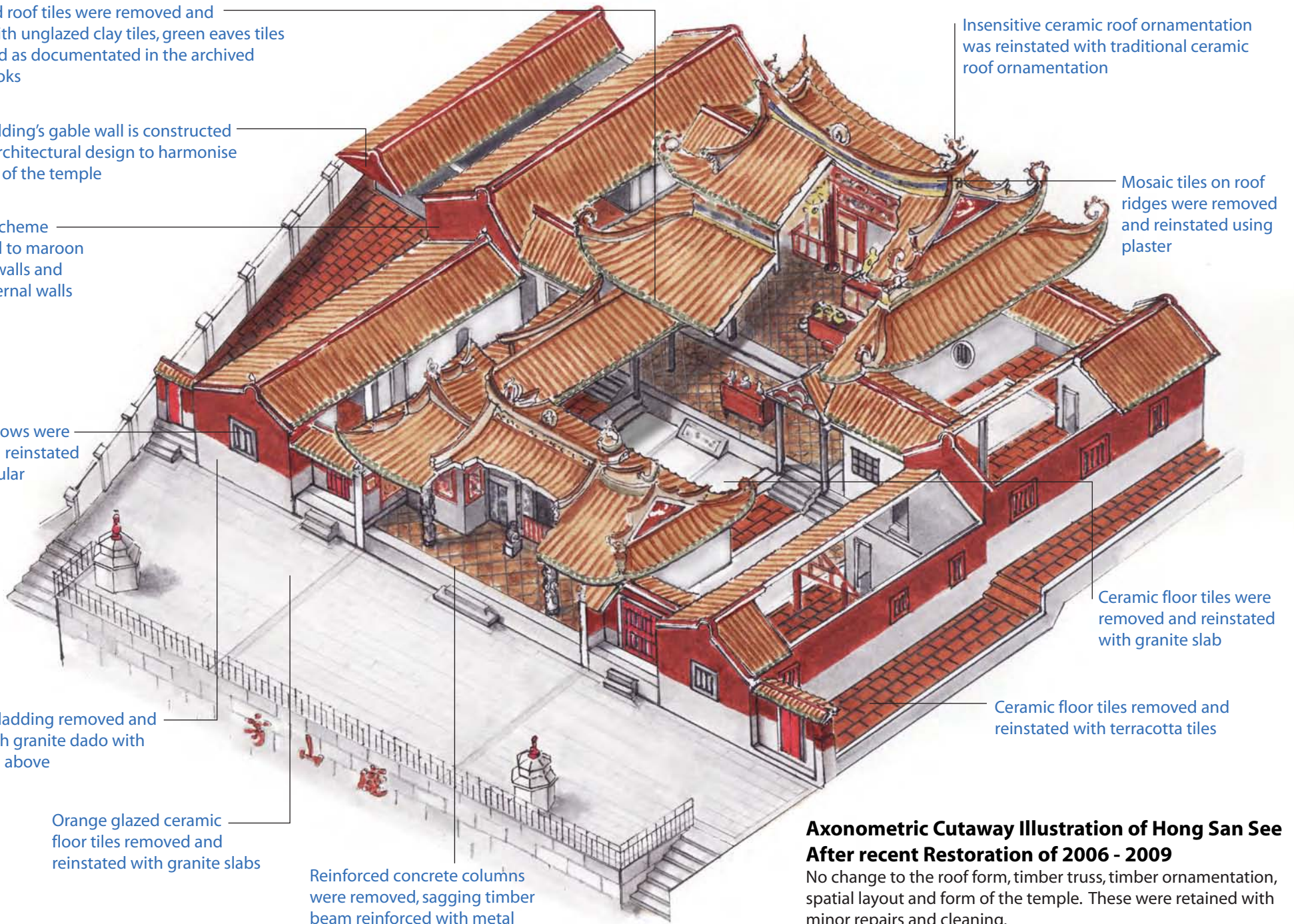
Mosaic tiles on roof ridges were removed and reinstated using plaster

Ceramic floor tiles were removed and reinstated with granite slab

Ceramic floor tiles removed and reinstated with terracotta tiles

### **Axonometric Cutaway Illustration of Hong San See After recent Restoration of 2006 - 2009**

No change to the roof form, timber truss, timber ornamentation, spatial layout and form of the temple. These were retained with minor repairs and cleaning.





▫ **1908:** Purchased land (43,825 square feet) at Mohamed Sultan Road; building of new temple under supervision of Lim Loh

▫ **1907:** Land acquired by colonial government with compensation of \$50,000

▫ **1892:** 2nd renovation (purportedly paid for by Gan Eng Seng)

▫ **1868:** 1st renovation

▫ **1913:** Completion of temple at current location

▫ **1926:** Establishment of Lam Ann Association

▫ **1934:** 1st renovation at current location

▫ **Feb 1973:** Lam Ann Association, under Mr Ng Aik Huan, chairman of Hong San See Board of Trustees, took custody of the temple

▫ **May 1976:** 3rd renovation at current location (duration: 6 months, cost: \$400,000)

▫ **1994:** 4th renovation at current location (duration: 15 months, cost: \$850,000)

▫ **2006:** Commencement of latest restoration

1830

1850

1870

1890

1910

1930

1950

1970

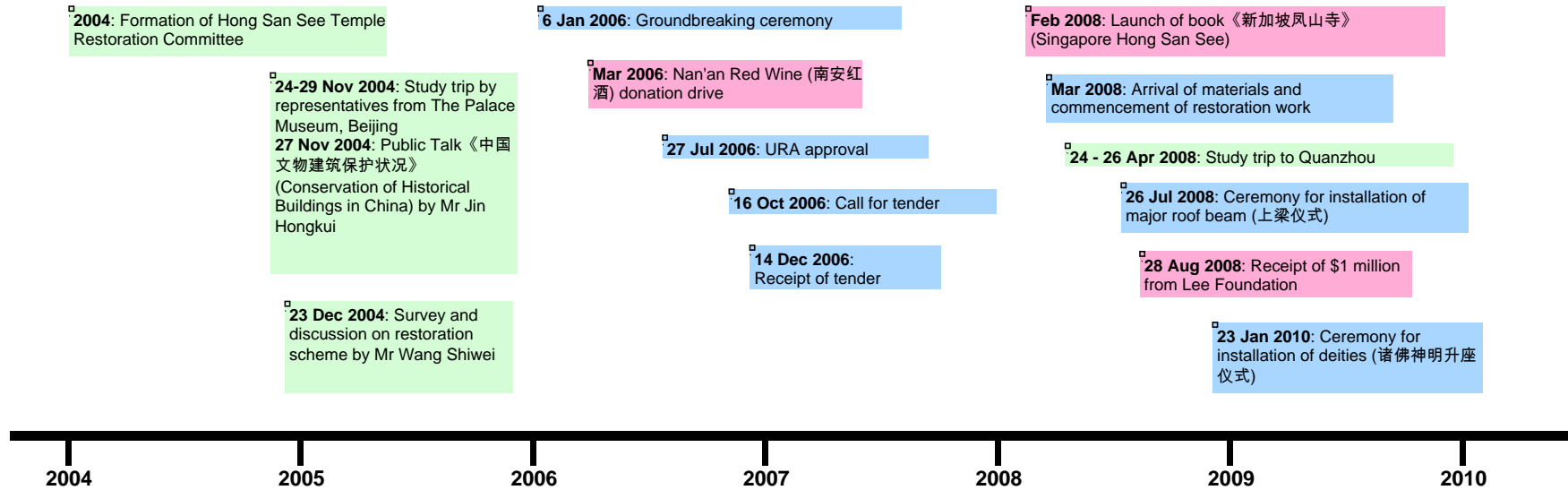
1990

2010

▫ **1836:** Establishment of Hong San See temple on Tras Street in Tanjong Pagar

▫ **1962:** 2nd renovation at current location

▫ **1 Nov 1978:** Gazetted as National Monument



**Feb 2005:** Investigation for measured drawings by staff of The Palace Museum, Beijing

Former CEO of National Heritage Board, Mr Lim Siam Kim as Honorary Consultant; Mrs Goh Chok Tong as Honorary Patron

**7 May 2005:** Singapore Chinese Orchestra concert 《潘秀琼音乐会》

**Jul 2005:** Study trip to Zhangzhou and Nan'an, China

**19 Jan 2007:** Interview of shortlisted contractor

**30/31 Mar 2007:** Singapore Chinese Orchestra concert 《细说梁祝》, conducted by Mr Choo Hoey

**2 Apr 2007:** Decision for Vantage Construction Pte Ltd and Quanzhou Citong as contractors

**16 Apr 2007:** Commencement of work by Vantage Construction

**9 Apr 2007:** Launch of "One Brick, One Tile" (一砖一瓦) donation drive

**17 Sep 2007:** Agreement with Quanzhou Citong and arrival of craftsmen from China

**Oct 2007:** Disassembling of timber structure components (落架) and craftsmen's return to China for fabrication of timber structures

**18 Mar 2009:** Gift of historical bricks to donors of \$5,000 and above

**24 Oct 2009:** Public Talk 《南国飞凤 - 从凤山寺到南安会馆》 (From Hong San See to Lam Ann Association)

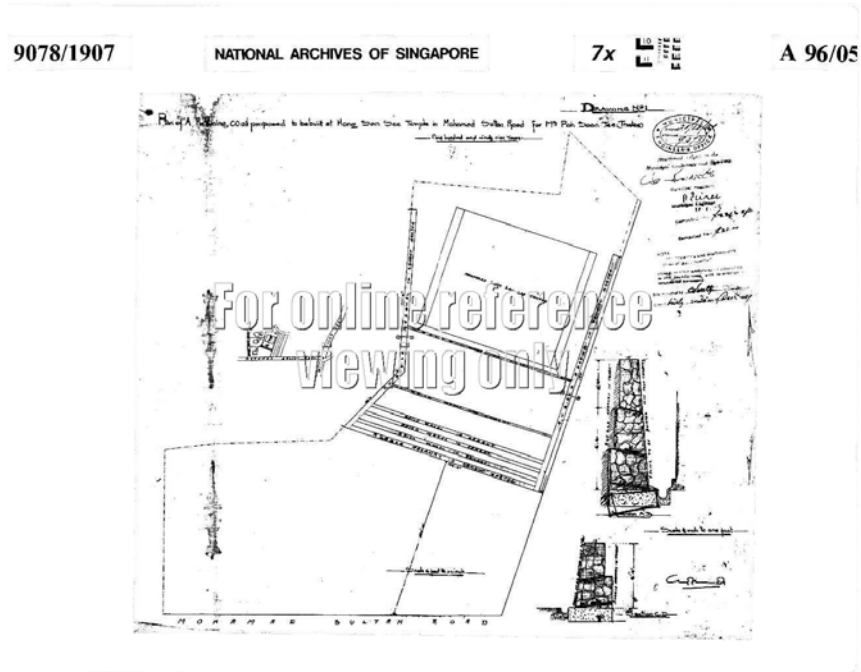
- Preparatory Studies and Outreach
- Fund Raising
- Restoration Work



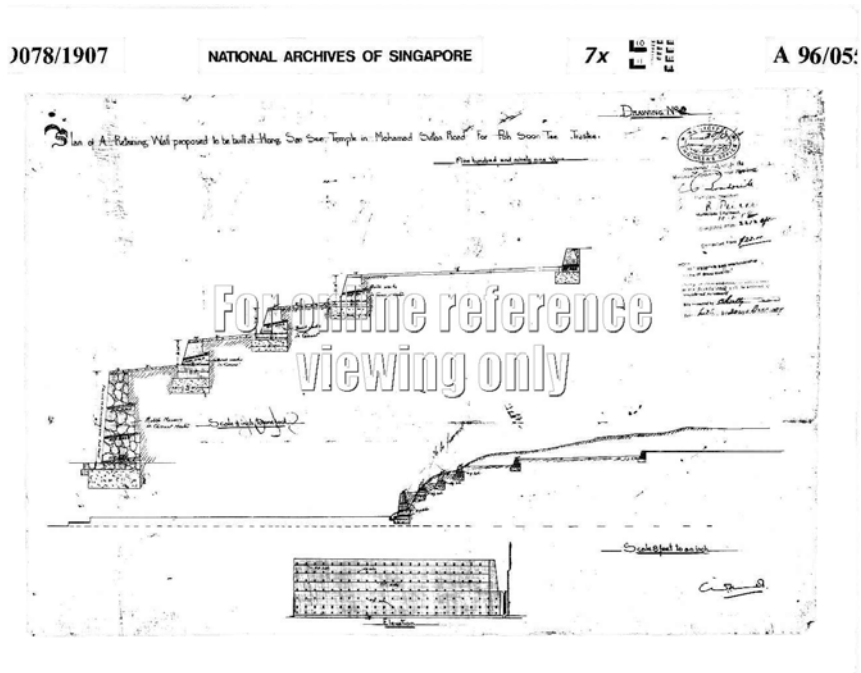
2013 URA ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AWARDS

Hong San See Temple Conservation Project

Selected Archival Drawings and Documents



Retaining Wall at Hong San See Temple, Mohamed Sultan Road,  
dated 1907  
Collection of National Archives of Singapore



Retaining Wall at Hong San See Temple, Mohamed Sultan Road,  
dated 1907  
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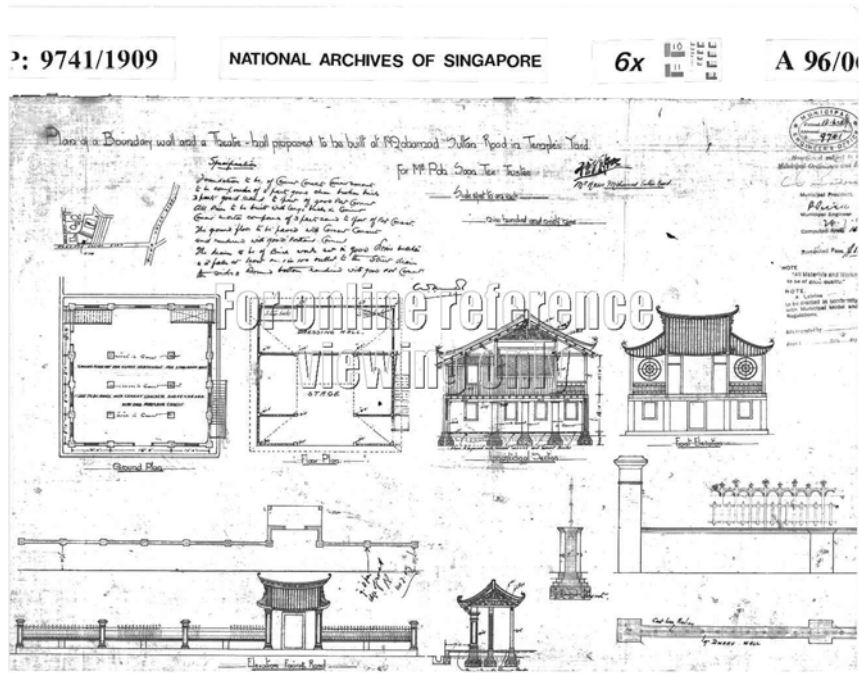




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## Hong San See Temple Conservation Project

### Selected Archival Drawings and Documents



Boundary Wall and Theatre Hall, Mohamed Sultan Road, dated 1909  
Collection of National Archives of Singapore

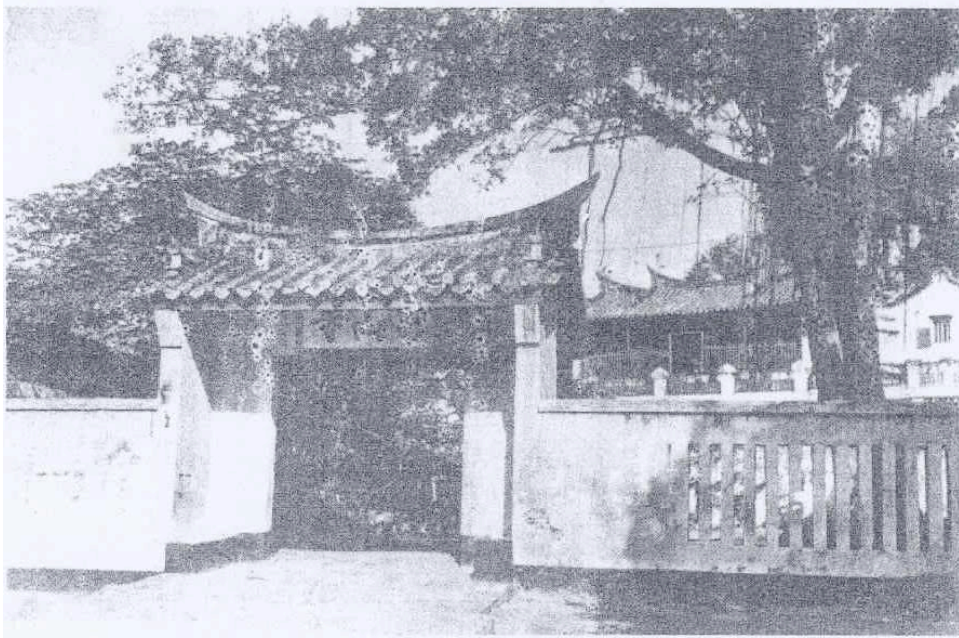


7 Volumes of Historical Accounts Books of  
Singapore Hong San See Temple, circa 1907-1959



## 2013 URA ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AWARDS

### Hong San See Temple Conservation Project Selected Documentation Photographs



Hong San See temple from Mohamed Sultan Road, dated early 1900s



Pre 1994-1996 Restoration Entrance Hall Elevation  
Selected Pre-Restoration Photographic Documentation, dated early 1990s  
(Photo Credits: Dr Yeo Kang Shua)





**2013 URA ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AWARDS**

**Hong San See Temple Conservation Project  
Selected Documentation Photographs**



Pre 1994-1996 Restoration Entrance Hall Elevation  
Selected Pre-Restoration Photographic Documentation, dated early 1990s (Note the auxiliary building  
on the lower left of photograph)  
(Photo Credits: Dr Yeo Kang Shua)



Pre 1994-1996 Restoration Entrance Hall Elevation  
Selected Pre-Restoration Photographic Documentation, dated early 1990s





2013 URA ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AWARDS

Hong San See Temple Conservation Project  
Selected Documentation Photographs



Pre 2006–2009 Restoration Entrance Hall Elevation  
Selected Pre-Restoration Photographic Documentation, dated 2004  
(Photo Credit: Patrick Goh)



Pre 2006–2009 Restoration Overall View  
Selected Pre-Restoration Photographic Documentation, dated 2004  
(Photo Credit: Patrick Goh)



**2013 URA ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AWARDS**

**Hong San See Temple Conservation Project  
Selected Documentation Photographs**



**Post 2006–2009 Restoration Overall View**  
**Post-Restoration Photographic Documentation, dated 2010**  
(Photo Credit: Neoh Kee Leng)