

48 NORTH CANAL ROAD

Slice of History



Owner:
Maybank Kim Eng Properties Pte Ltd

Architect:
WOHA Architects Pte Ltd

Engineer:
CP Lim & Partners

Contractor:
Takenaka Corporation

The impassioned effort to retain the slice of history with the faithful reconstruction and precision to the original design of the two 1940s and 1950s conserved shophouse units beyond structural repair has successfully restored the visage of the heritage streetscape along North Canal Road. The contrasting new building, linked via a new rear extension, adds a refreshing link to modernity.

Back To The Future

This project is the first of its kind to be recognised for the old buildings that had to be rebuilt to original form after engineering investigation confirmed they were structurally unsafe to facilitate the preservation of unique heritage streetscapes in downtown Singapore.



Conserved shophouses faithfully reinstated

While the project team would have instinctively preferred to retain and restore the dilapidated buildings rather than rebuild them, an order for the demolition of the 3-storey Art Deco style and 5-storey Modern style buildings precluded this possibility. Given that the reconstruction was the only option, the project team's exemplary skill and attention-to-detail in their task deserved praise.

With the carefully documented data, measured survey drawings and post-demolition images, the project team revived the two shophouses with painstaking faithfulness to the originals. Definitive architectural elements like the mild steel windows, concrete canopies, rounded façade pediments and concrete flagpoles were reinstated.

Ushering In The New

The project team has also sensitively integrated the new rear building with the conserved shophouses via their added rear extension. The new building features distinct linear expressions to demarcate the number of storeys, echoing the language of the heritage buildings. Geometric designs applied to its façade contrast and yet relate to the conserved buildings' architectural typology. In colour and scale, the juxtaposition of new against old has also been well thought through. Bronze was chosen as the predominant colour while the use of mesh for sunshading eliminated the need for overhangs. They ensured the scale of the new would not overwhelm the old.

Enabling New Life

The original levels of the two shophouses have been updated into flexible and functional spaces to accommodate the needs of the modern offices. The original sky terrace at Unit 47 was restored to create a private garden for modern users to find reprieve on a busy day. The contemporary new wing at the rear doubles the original height of the shophouse units making way for more modern office floors and essentially elevating the value of the two conserved properties with renewed relevance.

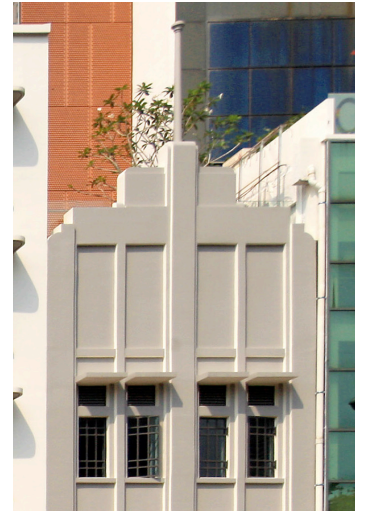
This project is a courageous effort that shows how the heritage streetscapes can be preserved against all odds.



Original sky terrace at unit 47 restored as private garden



Concrete flagpole and canopy of Modern shophouse



Streamlined pediment with flagpole of Art Deco shophouse



Urban pocket park carved out at first storey



Mild steel windows reinstated



Angled fractal first storey shophouse



Heritage streetscape along North Canal Road restored



image by ura

The history of a city is recorded not only in books, but also in its buildings. Buildings are a physical representation of lifestyles, predilections, technology and crafts. They are a document of our ancestors' aspirations and achievements, as well as a visual assemblage of our multi-cultural ethnic roots. However, many that have outlived their usefulness have also been demolished to build anew throughout history. This process thus gives new significance to older buildings as their numbers dwindle as they often provide an image and atmosphere which cannot be convincingly re-created in new ones; yet when maintained and cared for, they never cease to delight our eyes and enhance the sense of time and place unique to our city.

HISTORY & CONTEXT



North Canal Road

This historic road, also known as Kau Kia Ki (Chinese name for "the side of the little drain") was named after the adjacent Singapore Canal constructed in the early years to drain the swamps of where the financial districts are located now.

North Canal Road was part of the larger settlement around the Singapore River where the early trading commerce flourished. Shophouses, typical of mixed use building typology, emerged rapidly, spreading from along the river banks towards the designated Chinese area, present day Chinatown. Shophouses along this road were home to a multitude of wholesale trading of fruits, vegetables, dried seafood.

Across the road, Hong Lim Park, one of the earliest public parks in Singapore, was used as a recreational ground by the Straits Chinese Recreation Club which started in 1885.

Image extracted from "Over Singapore 50 years ago: An Aerial View in the 1950" by Brenda Yeoh & Theresa Wang



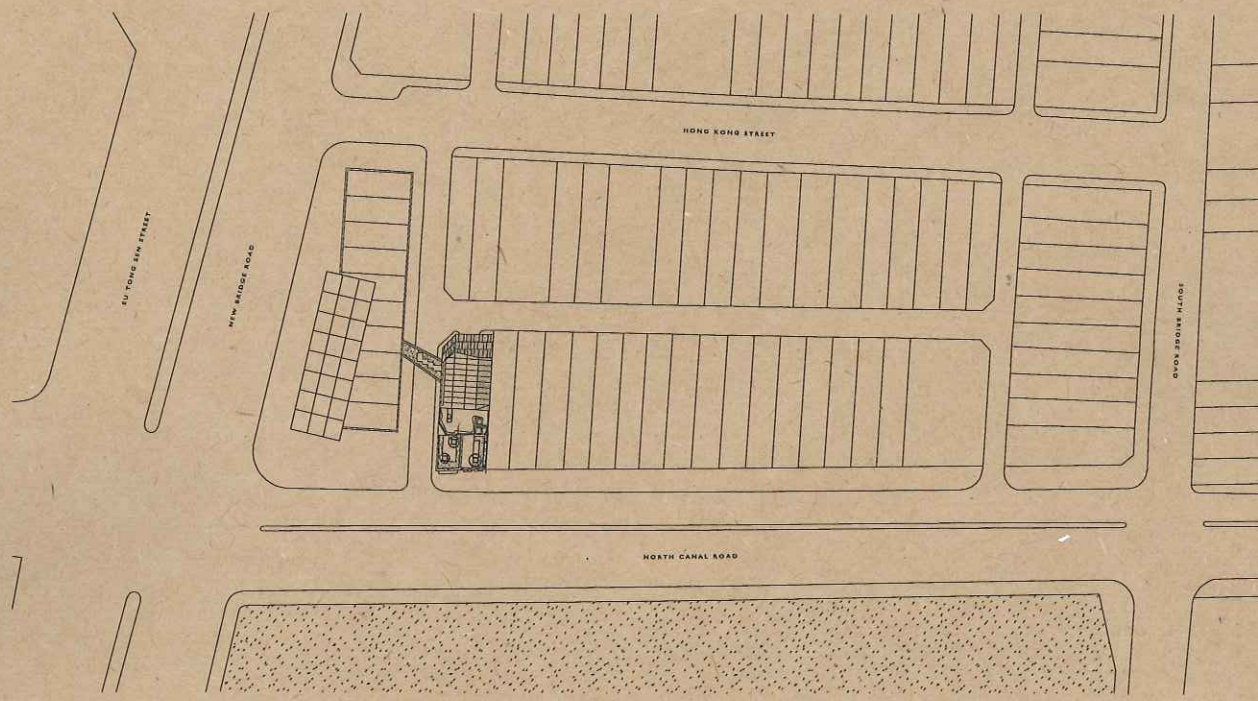
Around North Canal Road

With the wet market along Eu Tong Sen Street, and the Thong Chai Medical Institution located a stone's throw away, the row of shophouses along North Canal Road were nicely situated in the heart of the activities.

With the rapid development of Singapore and the relocation of wholesale trading of primary produce to Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre, the use of these shophouses of 3 to 5 storeys were readapted for commercial use, though trading of luxury items like shark fins and bird's nest still remain in some quarters.

The shift to a finance-centric economy meant that the centre of activities was shifted to the present day Shenton Way. The Singapore Canal was subsequently filled up for the widening of the road as a thoroughfare leading to the present day financial centre, leaving the shophouses along this road isolated and forgotten today.

Image extracted from "Over Singapore 50 years ago: An Aerial View in the 1950" by Brenda Yeh & Theresa Wong

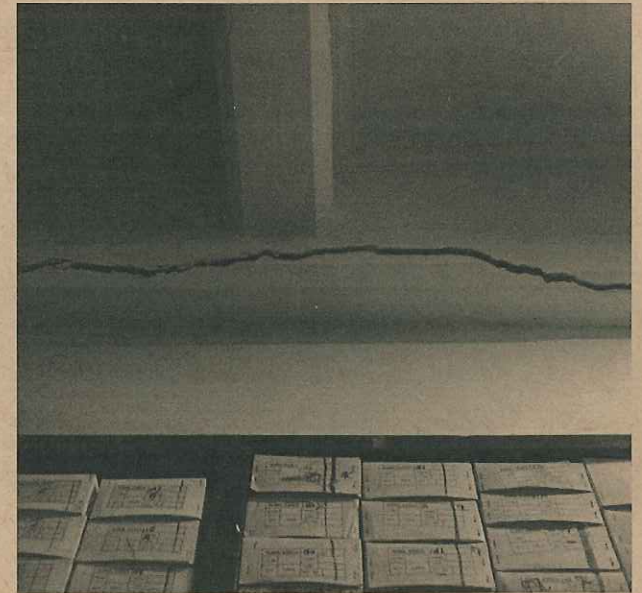
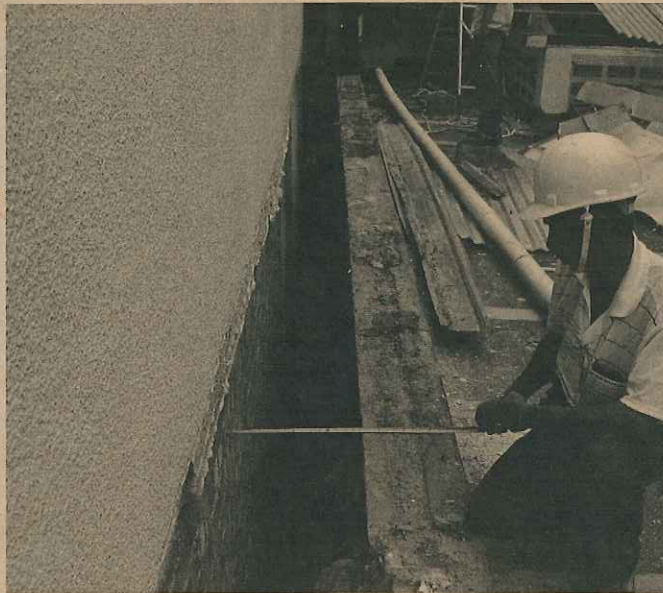


Context

Unit 46 and 47 sit at the end of a row of surviving shophouses lining this historic road. Built between the 1940s and 1950s modern post-colonial period, these shophouses were part of the Upper Circular secondary settlement area that was officially gazetted for conservation in November 2004.

WOHA was commissioned only after the demolition of Unit 46 and Unit 47. There were extensive cracks along the structural beams and columns of the shophouses caused by abnormal differential settlement of the buildings on a raft foundation. With the entire building tilted up to 425mm at the top, the Building & Construction Authority "is of the opinion that the cracks at the beams and columns... is in such a condition as to be or likely to be dangerous."

RECALLING THE OLD





Remains of Unit 46 & 47

WOHA inherited a site with the shophouses gazetted for conservation already demolished. Thorough research on the history of the shophouses were conducted to shed light on the building typology, architecture elements, original structural design.



Streetscape

A conscientious effort was made to study the North Canal Road streetscape. A distinct feature was that this row of mixed dominant Modern and Art Deco style shophouses were relatively untouched.

It was decided that the reconstruction of Unit 46 & 47 must maintain this streetscape and not altered by the rear extension



Unit 46 & 47

Unit 46 was a 3 storey shophouse built in the 1940s with an Art Deco style façade characterised by the art-deco pediments with moulded edgings. Mild steel framed latticed windows, together with the concrete canopy forms accentuates the geometric design. Façade pediments with moulded edgings stepped towards the roof topped with a concrete flag post gave the façade a streamlined appearance

Unit 47 was a 5 storey Modern styled shophouse. Built in the 1950s using modern construction techniques of reinforced concrete structures, this 5 storey shophouse was designed for functionality with truth to materials and construction – a modernist movement. Large mild steel framed windows, concrete louvers and canopies not only maximised natural light and ventilation. The top of the façade featured minimally designed concrete mouldings top with a flag pole.

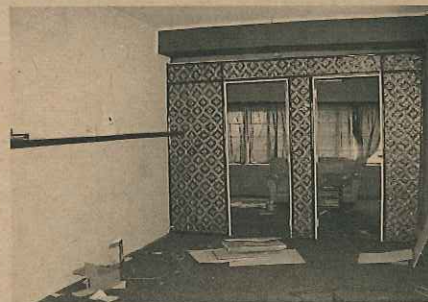
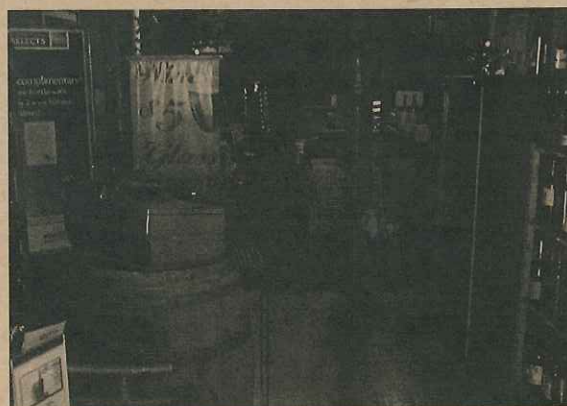


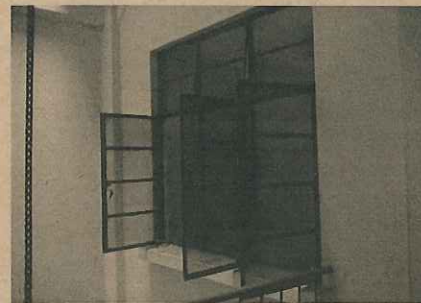
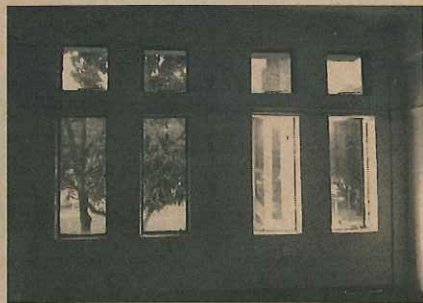
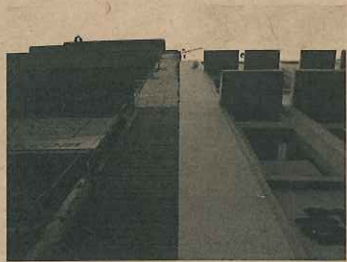
The Recent Past

Unit 46 housed a wholesale trader, Ban Chuan (Private) Ltd, for optical products - lens, spectacle frames. The upper floors were used as the back end offices for the business.

Unit 47 housed a wine retailer and bar at its ground floor. The lack of any openings at the gable end of the ground floor unit was typical of any shophouse - deep and dark interiors.

The upper floors housed the Teochew Chan Clan Association and the Singapore Sabah Importers & Exporters Association. Both associations were understood to be a primary meeting venues.



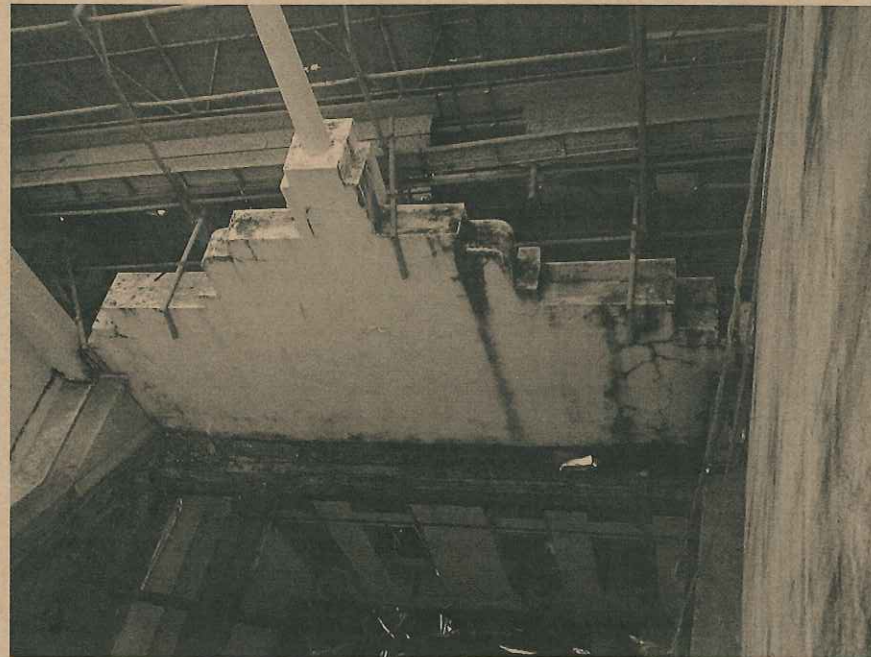
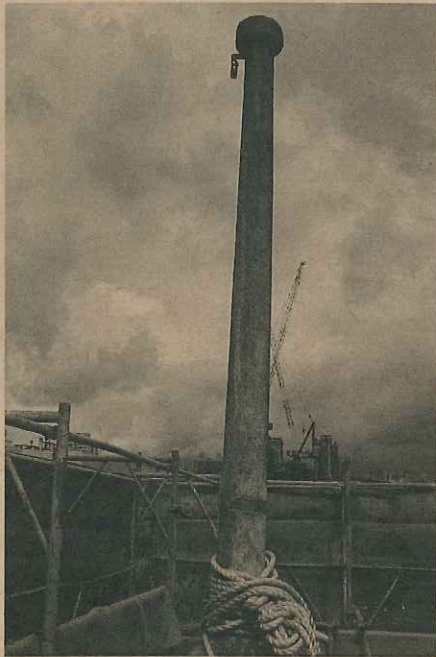
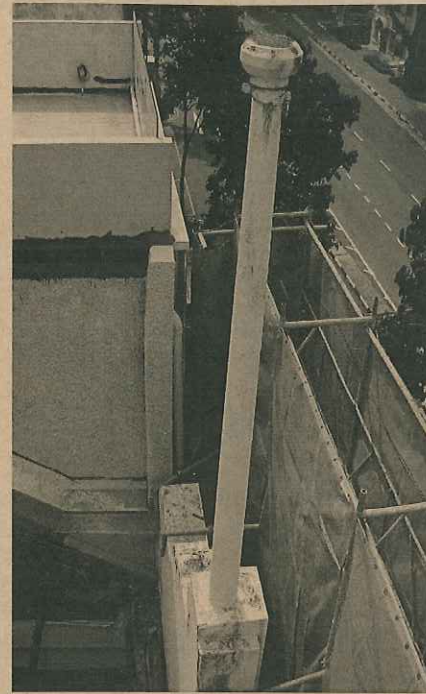


Windows

Unit 46 & 47 had very different designs of the windows when it was constructed. While windows of both units were made of mild steel frame with clear glass infill panels, those of unit 46 had a slightly more elaborate lattice design.

Another distinct difference was the design of the fenestration at the facade, Unit 47 having column to column windows. Being the gable end unit, Unit 47 also spots window openings to allow natural light into the deep plans of the building.

However, throughout the lifespan of the building, all the original windows were replaced with modern aluminum windows with tinted glass infill. The only surviving window of the original design was at the airwell, allowing for careful documentation and reproduction.



Architectural Features

Typical of most shophouses built at this era, these 2 units were designed with a concrete flagpole at the top of the facade.

Unit 46 facade was designed with a stepped concrete pediment that tapered with rounded mouldings to the concrete flag pole, truly reflecting the Art Deco influence.

Unit 47 facade was of a more modern design, with minimal decorative elements leading to the flag pole that sits on a pedestal. However, unique to this shophouse was the extensive open flat roof that was probably used for events and parties, evident in the beer crates photographed.