

# FORMER 17, 19 & 21 JIAK KIM STREET WAREHOUSES

Warehouses of a River's History



**Owner:**  
Fraser's Property  
Singapore Pte Ltd

**Architect:**  
P & T Consultants Pte Ltd

**Engineer:**  
KTP Consultants Pte Ltd

**Contractor:**  
Woh Hup Pte Ltd

**Conservation Specialist:**  
Studio Lapis Conservation  
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**Additional Team Members:**  
Mr Edwin Cheong  
(Heritage Interpretation Artist)

SCDA Architects Pte Ltd  
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Farmwork Pte Ltd (Interior Designer)

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Once an integral part of the bustling mercantile landscape along the Singapore River until the mid-1970s, 17, 19 & 21 Jiak Kim Street fell into disuse after the River ceased as an artery for trade. They were later reinvented as the famed 'Zouk' discotheque from 1991 to 2016. Gazetted for conservation in 2014, they are once again revived through restoration and reuse.

## Mercantile Past

These three warehouses, also known as 'godowns' locally, were part of an extensive landscape of trade that lined the entire Singapore River. As one of the earliest forms of the architecture of trade and once ubiquitous, they are now rare survivors from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with 17 Jiak Kim Street having a unique curved pediment.

## Deep Research

Comprehensive research was conducted on the extensive changes made to the warehouses driven by commercial and functional needs over the past century. These efforts uncovered valuable insights from archival maps, building plans, drawings, and newspaper records, shedding light on the buildings' ownership, past functions, and architectural significance. These information guided the restoration process.

The conservation strategy focused on preserving the defining features of the godowns, such as their distinctive gable-end facades, timber works, and original brick walls. Although the steel columns and roof frames were not part of the original 'godowns', they marked the transformation of the site into Zouk, a significant chapter in the buildings' history, making them elements worthy of retention.



Restored warehouses now reveal Singapore's maritime history

## Rediscovery and Repair

One aspect of the restoration approach was the reinstatement of the cut-up interior from its previous use as a discotheque. This uncovered the original lofty interiors that are a signature of this building typology. With this spatial recovery, the steel columns and roof frames of its discotheque days also become visible.

For the historic building fabric, a full suite of conservation treatments was applied methodically to address rising damp and salt damage to brick and plaster, and to prevent future damage in a site with a high water-table.

## Repositioning and Reuse

Sensitive and meticulous attention to detail has allowed the warehouses to be adapted for modern use while meeting regulatory requirements, without compromising their original architectural character. A creative flood prevention solution, using discreet removable flood gates, preserves the building's attractive proportions. Additionally, an elegant and understated foreground, along with finely detailed new glass canopies at the drop-off area and river promenade, has enhanced both the commercial and visual appeal of the historic buildings, creating a cohesive and well-presented ensemble.

## Stories to Reconnect

Beyond the physical restoration, this project excels in how it presents the site's history. A diverse range of carefully designed interpretive tools - plaques, storyboards with engaging visuals and writing, 3D models, and contextually relevant artworks - are seamlessly integrated. This creative approach draws the public into understanding the site's unique characteristics while connecting them to the broader social and architectural history of the transformed Singapore River. By linking the past with the present, the project ensures that the legacies of Singapore's riverine and maritime trade will continue to flow into the future.





Edwin Cheong's artwork spotlights Robertson Quay's historic geography



Elegantly designed information panels engage users with the site history



Exposed roof trusses crown the expansive internal spaces



Sensitive additions and meticulous restoration breathe new life into historic warehouses



Judicious repair of plaster by craftsmen

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## 2024 Award for Conservation

A testament to Singapore's history as a key 19<sup>th</sup> century maritime trading hub, and later as the home of the iconic 'Zouk' discotheque, the former warehouses along the upper reaches of Singapore River have been rejuvenated to re-establish its presence and value to the surrounding community and residential development.

Extensive research, thorough site investigation and inventive conservation have brought the long-overlooked facades at both frontages into focus. Internally, the once cut-up spaces have been recovered to showcase the original lofty interior with exposed roof trusses which typify this typology.

Sensitive and immaculate attention to details has enabled the warehouses to be adapted for new uses in compliance with current regulatory requirements without detracting from its original architectural character. Creative flood prevention solution was adopted with the addition of removable flood gates is discreet and skilful. New glass canopies at the drop-off area and secondary fenestration glazed panels co-exist harmoniously with the historic architectural features and increase the commercial appeal of the revamped space.

The project is an affirmation of effective synergy between conservation and intervention, and between nostalgia and modernism. Together with a thoughtful and well-executed heritage trail of art installations and illustrative information display boards, it is a delightful demonstration of how creative storytelling can help to raise public appreciation of the important socio-economic history of Singapore River and the once prevalent godowns.

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