

## *Syed Alwi*

Like Joo Chiat, Syed Alwi Road Conservation Area, which is in the vicinity of the Little India Historic District and the Jalan Besar Secondary Settlement conservation area, has also been subject to the highly consultative approach with individual owners. From 2002 to 2004, URA studied the buildings in the area, revisiting conservation plans that had first been drawn up in the mid-1980s. Those plans had not been followed up because of various infrastructural proposals in the area, in particular the widening of Syed Alwi Road into a major thoroughfare. When the opportunity to revisit the area arose again in the early 2000s, URA lost no time in identifying 219 buildings for study. The same approach adopted in Joo Chiat was used here – letters were sent to owners, individual meetings were set up and communication facilitated to gather views.

The outcome of the consultation exercise in Syed Alwi was that the owners of 52 buildings supported conservation, while those of 21 buildings objected. The rest were silent, though the owners who did come forward reported that some of their non-responding neighbours were supportive as well. Media interviews verified this. As Alwi Alkaff, a descendant of Syed Alwi Abubakar whom the road is named after, said: “We ought to keep some of these places around, otherwise two or three generations later, no one will remember what Singapore was like in the past.”

In the end, after taking on board the feedback from the consultation exercise, the historical and architectural significance of the buildings, rarity and contribution to the environment, URA shortlisted 204 buildings for conservation; the rest were dropped from the list as they were assessed to be less critical in keeping the character of the area.

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Many changes in Singapore society and space have transpired since the early days of colonial rule, and then again since independence. No longer are there slums. Public hygiene has vastly improved, as have other public



*This house at 77 Syed Alwi Road retains its ochre colour, typical of buildings built in the early 1900s. Colourful glass was used in windows back then to cut the glare of the sunlight.*

infrastructures. A younger, more educated generation is now concerned not only with their material well-being, but is interested also in their sense of identity, their right to their views, and their right to asserting them. Different kinds of challenges now confront Singapore, including the need to balance the views of different groups and forces in society with different needs and expectations. Urban heritage conservation is one arena in which these forces are played out, but it will not be the only one. The ways in which a society allows for, and then resolves varied preferences and divergent expectations, demonstrate the maturity of its social compact, and point to its ability to relieve, if not resolve, tensions. So far, Singapore has managed to accommodate differences. With respect to urban conservation, market forces will continue to persist, even while conservationists persevere in their cause. The continuing act of balancing interests among divergent groups will remain the abiding task confronting the country.