

# Singapore's conservation programme bags prestigious award

By Carol Lim

More than twenty years' of visionary and strategic planning, detailed study and systematic implementation paid off when Singapore's conservation programme clinched the Urban Land Institute (ULI) 2006 Award for Excellence: Asia Pacific on 13 July 2006. Skyline goes behind the scene to bring you details of URA's conservation journey.



Signature image of historic Chinatown set against the modern skyline of Singapore's Central Business District.

ONE OF SINGAPORE'S signature images is that of our city skyline: gleaming modern office skyscrapers of Raffles Place cascading down to the Marina Bay waterfront. But just stroll through charming districts like Kampong Glam, Little India, Chinatown, Emerald Hill and Joo Chiat, and you can easily discover the quaint and historic side of our city.

Indeed, do you know that despite our limited land and a relatively short history of less than 200 years, we have about 6,560 conserved heritage buildings today, sitting cheek by jowl with modern developments? That these buildings can be kept for posterity did not happen by accident, but took more than two decades of

government's facilitation, with support from the private sector and the general public. Recently, these efforts were recognised when Singapore's conservation programme, implemented by URA, became one of the five winners of the prestigious 2006 Award for Excellence: Asia Pacific given by ULI, an international non-profit education and research and institute formed in 1936.

## Gaining strong endorsement

This award is significant for URA and for Singapore because the ULI is well-regarded and is recognised for championing best land use development practices. It is also the first time a public programme from Singapore has won the Asia Pacific award.

More importantly, the award is an endorsement of URA's approach and efforts in conservation. To create a special home for our people, our planners recognise that ensuring sufficient land for development nature areas and green spaces is important but not enough. Familiar buildings and places with identity that foster a sense of belonging and are dear to people's hearts also need to be protected. As URA's Chief Planner and Deputy CEO (Physical Planning and Conservation & Urban Design), Mrs Koh-Lim Wen Gin put it: "[the award] signifies that our hard work in protecting Singapore's built heritage in the past two decades amid development pressure and limited land has borne fruit."

## Why Singapore's conservation programme was picked

Begun in the early 1980s as an integral part of city planning, Singapore's conservation programme has resulted in the protection of about 6,560 heritage buildings in 86 areas in two decades. This covers 204 ha of land or 0.4% of total developable land. While other countries in the region protect major landmarks such as palaces and religious buildings, our comprehensive programme is the first large-scale urban conservation programme in South East Asia that protects

neighbourhoods, streets, settings and vernacular buildings of architectural and historical value.

The citation by ULI jury, comprising renowned land use development and design experts, states that "Singapore's model conservation programme preserves its rich heritage of vernacular buildings and colourful neighbourhoods, thanks to a collaborative effort among government organisations and the public that balances free-market economics with cultural conservation."

So how did we get here?

## Our conservation journey: in the beginning

In the 1960s and 1970s, although a period of awakening for conservation had begun, with some pilot studies for rehabilitation of old areas (eg. Chinatown) and State-owned Buildings (eg. Murray Terrace), the nation had other more pressing needs. Faced with limited land, overcrowded slums, rapid population growth, and the pressure to make economic progress, the priority was to re-house people to the new satellite towns in the suburbs and redevelop large tracts of our city centre into a modern and efficient business hub. Given the run-down condition of the old buildings then, many could not appreciate their significance. However, as URA recognised the intrinsic value of these heritage buildings, the historic districts in the city centre were deliberately excluded from the first phase of redevelopment.

With 'bread and butter' issues successfully resolved in the 1980s came the opportunity to review the plans for the city centre, to think how to distinguish our city from others and keep our history. By this time, land reclamation in

Marina South to cater for the long-term expansion needs of the city centre had also been completed and eased the pressure for redevelopment, thus allowing us to focus attention on conservation. URA officers combed through the entire island thoroughly, documenting old buildings in sketches and photographs. Large historic districts in the city dating back to the founding of Singapore in 1819 were identified, such as Little India, Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Boat Quay. Detailed façade restoration guidelines for each building were drawn up painstakingly to guide restoration.

## Championing conservation proactively

URA's efforts did not stop at the identification and planning stage. To demonstrate the government's commitment and that conservation was viable, URA proactively carried out pilot restoration and conservation projects (eg. Tanjong Pagar).

We also carried out environmental improvement works in selected conservation areas so that residents would be able to enjoy their historic neighbourhoods. Detailed conservation guidelines for different groups of conservation areas were drawn up to achieve quality restoration. Indirect incentives are also offered for existing building owners to encourage restoration.

## New ideas for old buildings

With the need to strike a balance between retaining historic streetscapes for the public and owners' needs to intensify their land, we also came up with new innovative ideas that would achieve the best of both worlds. One such innovative, win-win solution is the old-and-new approach to conservation that allows new and taller infill

developments in between old, conserved shophouses. An example of the successful realisation of this approach is China Square, a harmonious blend of old and new developments next to the Central Business District.

## Achievements through public-private partnership

Twenty years after our conservation masterplan, the majority of the formerly dilapidated conservation buildings and pre-World War II buildings have been fully restored to their former glory both by private owners and the government for new uses, while the rest have been maintained in good condition and enjoy a new lease of life in our city.

A win-win situation has been achieved for stakeholders. The unique character and beautiful architecture of our built heritage have been kept, creating a distinct image of our city that we can identify with and be proud of. Places for old trades to continue and thrive, as well as for our various cultures to sustained, have also been protected. At the same time, inspired by the built heritage, many owners and professional architects have also introduced innovative solutions and creative design to make full use of their properties for a wide variety of new uses such as residences, commercial outlets, cultural and civic venues, and



Bustling street activities along Kreta Ayer pedestrian mall in Chinatown during the festive season.





Clean and streamlined appearance of Modern-style shophouses in Upper Circular Road Conservation Area, the first post-war conservation district to be gazetted.

entertainment premises. Property values for heritage buildings have been enhanced through conservation. Moreover, heritage areas and buildings make popular, attractive destinations for our overseas visitors.


The conservation programme is a demonstration of a successful

public-private partnership and a market-oriented approach to conservation. It has raised public awareness and appreciation of our built heritage, and won public support, which URA garnered through actively consulting and working closely with owners, stakeholders, professional bodies like Singapore Institute of Architects and Real Estate and Developers' Association of Singapore, and the community – such as the residents and the local business. In 2002, URA also set up the Conservation Advisory Panel, made up of professionals and laymen, to give recommendations on its conservation proposals.

In this sense, the ULI award belongs to the people of Singapore, not just URA. Indeed,

Mrs Koh added: "We want to share this award with our partners in the public and private sectors as well as the general public who appreciate built heritage and support conservation. Without their partnership and support, we would not have been able to achieve so much within such a short period of time."

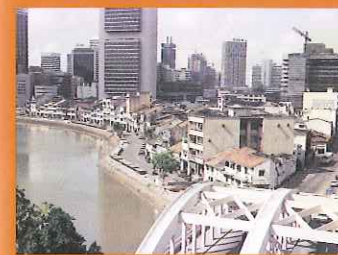
#### The road ahead

Conservation is an ongoing journey. The award has spurred URA to continue striking a fine balance between development needs and conservation. URA will continue to identify and study buildings with conservation merits to ensure continuity in the protection of our built heritage even as our young nation's history unfolds. 

### Key milestones in Singapore's Conservation Programme

Year	Milestones	Year	Milestones	Year	Milestones	Year	Milestones
1970s	Gazette of national monuments and rehabilitation of 14 shophouses in Food Alley (Murray Street) and 17 shophouses in Cuppage Terrace in 1977.	1991	Launch of the voluntary conservation scheme, "Conservation Initiated by Private Owners".  Gazette of the Secondary Settlement conservation areas - Blair Plain, Beach Road, River Valley, Jalan Besar, and Geylang - and the bungalows in the Good Class Bungalow Areas (White House Park/ Nassim Road, Chatsworth Park and Holland Road/ Ridout Park).		Installation of heritage storyboards at various conservation areas to promote public awareness in our built heritage.	2002	Unveiling of the Identity Plan which identifies places with a sense of history and identity and suggests ways to retain and enhance their qualities and even activities found there.
1986	Unveiling of the Master Plan for conservation of Singapore's historic areas covering some 3,201 shophouses occupying a gross land area of 55 hectares of land.			1997	Gazette of China Square conservation area and the launch of the Conservation Website as an education and information tool for the public.		Setting up of Conservation Advisory Panel to give inputs to the government on Singapore's building conservation efforts.
1987	Staging of a three-week exhibition "Conserving our Remarkable Past" by URA.  Opening of pilot demonstration shophouse project at 9 Neil Road, restored by URA, for public viewing.	1992	Engagement of three overseas conservation specialists to critique and provide inputs on the legislative, architectural and engineering aspects of conservation and to carry out workshops.	1998	Release of Technical Supplements to conservation guidelines to guide owners and professionals on the best practices and techniques to restore the different architectural elements in conservation buildings.	2003	Gazette of the Old World Charm areas – Balestier, Joo Chiat, Jalan Besar, Mount Sophia, Tanjong Katong, Tiong Bahru and Jalan Jurong Kechil.
1988	Release of the draft Conservation Manuals to guide the restoration of shophouses in Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam. A two-day seminar on conservation techniques was also jointly organised by URA and Singapore Institute of Architects.	1993	Implementation of 3R and "Top-Down" Approaches (appropriate restoration methods) at the pilot conservation projects in Little India (16 units of shophouses along Kerbau Road) and Kampong Glam (13 units of shophouses bounded by Bussorah Street, Baghdad Street and Arab Street).	2000	Formation of a focus group on "Identity versus Intensive Use of Land" as part of the public consultation for the review of the Concept Plan 2001.  Release of revised conservation guidelines to give more flexibility and scope for innovative designs without compromising conservation principles	2004	Launch of commemorative book on "Architectural Heritage Singapore" and exhibition of 1994-2004 AHA-winning projects.
1989	Gazette of 10 conservation areas in the historic districts - Chinatown (Bukit Pasoh, Kreta Ayer, Telok Ayer and Tanjong Pagar), Little India, Kampong Glam, Singapore River (Boat Quay and Clarke Quay), Emerald Hill and Cairnhill.		Release of comprehensive conservation guidelines to facilitate restoration.	2001	Release of Concept Plan 2001, with one of the key proposals being a focus on identity and how we will continue to look into conserving more buildings and other landmarks in order to retain the collective character and memory of places.	2006	Refinement of Conservation Guidelines after joint review with the Singapore Institute of Architects and stakeholders.  Awarded the Urban Land Institute Award for Excellence 2006: Asia-Pacific for Singapore's conservation programme on 13 July 2006 in Tokyo, Japan.
		1995	Inauguration of the annual Architectural Heritage Awards (AHA) to recognise quality restoration efforts by owners, architects, engineers and contractors in restoring				

### Old places, new life



#### Boat Quay

Left: Boat Quay in 1984, after the 10-year Singapore River clean-up, before the construction of the waterfront promenade.

Right: Revitalised Boat Quay today, with lively alfresco dining along the river promenade.



#### China Square

Left: Before old-and-new conservation.

Right: China Square today, with sensitive integration of new buildings and public spaces within the historic fabric.



#### Kampong Glam

Left: Aerial view, 1987

Right: Aerial view today, showing the Malay Heritage Centre housed in a beautifully restored bungalow set amidst a lush landscaped garden with the Sultan Mosque beyond.