

URA brings back street bazaars to Chinatown

by May Goh

A million dollar plan is underway to turn Pagoda and Trengganu Streets at the heart of Chinatown into pedestrian malls to bring back street bazaars and colourful street life.

URA started construction work on part of Trengganu Street in early June. Work on Pagoda Street, to be undertaken by the Land Transport Authority, will commence in late June.

The next Chinese New Year will be especially vibrant and colourful in Chinatown. But we need not wait for the new year celebrations. In six months' time when the malls are completed, shopkeepers will be able to parade their wares on the streets, while shoppers and visitors will enjoy a car-free thoroughfare to shop and browse to their hearts' content, or simply enjoy sumptuous meals under the night sky. Bazaars and activities on the malls will be encouraged throughout the year.



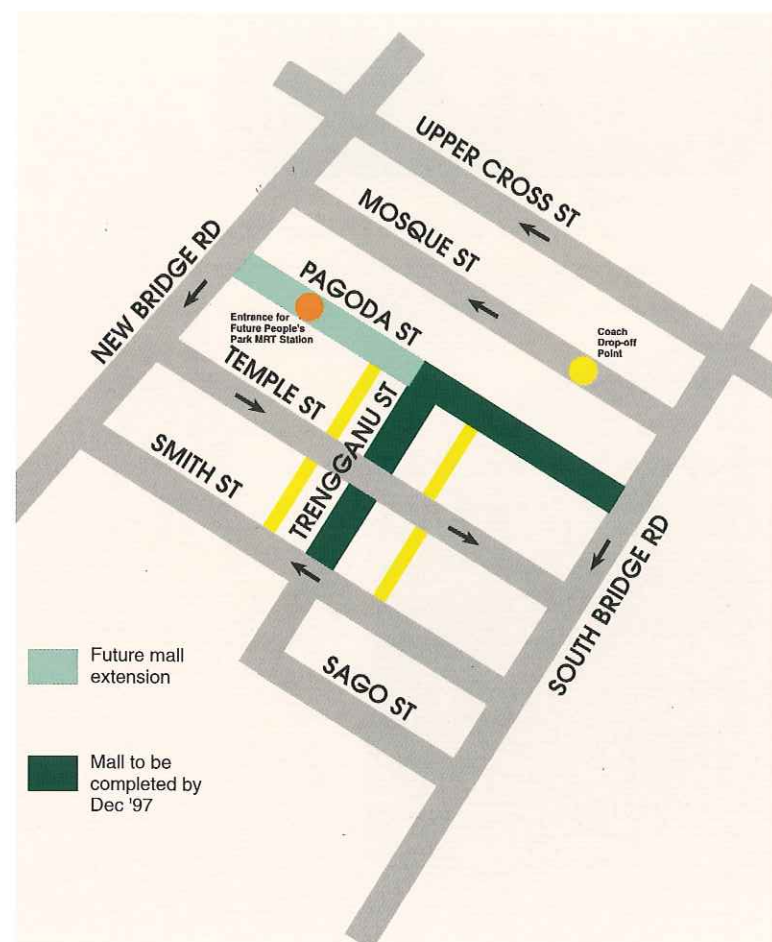
Work at Trengganu Street started in June '97.

Many of the shopkeepers and businessmen interviewed by the Straits Times and TCS News generally welcomed the move to attract more people to the area.

Lamenting that the present day Chinatown bustles like its old self only during Chinese New Year festivities, many of the shopkeepers are pleased with URA's plan to bring back more streetlife throughout the year. Vibrant streetlife of old Chinatown was one of its characteristics. Some shopkeepers in Chinatown today suggested having regular night activities, like night markets, Chinese opera and street shows to keep the crowds coming in.

They also look forward to the People's Park MRT Station to be built in a few years' time, which will make it even easier to get to Chinatown. A station entrance will open right onto the mall on Pagoda Street, bringing more people to the area.

Let us take a closer look at URA's plan which marks a new milestone for Chinatown.



Marking a new milestone

The conversion of Trengganu and Pagoda Streets into pedestrian malls marks a new milestone in URA's efforts to revitalise Chinatown since 1989 when URA first announced its Conservation Programme.

Chinatown is the traditional hub of the Chinese community in Singapore. It is Singapore's largest Historic District. It comprises four areas, namely Kreta Ayer, Telok Ayer, Bukit Pasoh and Tanjong Pagar. Each of these areas has its distinctive character.

Trengganu and Pagoda Streets are located in the Kreta Ayer area. When completed, the malls will form part of a longer pedestrian network stretching from Kreta Ayer to Telok Ayer, China Square and across New Bridge Road.

"After eight years of gradual change, you could say Kreta Ayer has reached its first major milestone which has been to save the crumbling buildings, resist property pressures for all the shophouses to be turned into office units, and keep it an ethnic Chinese retail area," said Mrs Koh Wen Gin, URA's Deputy Chief Planner (Development Strategies).

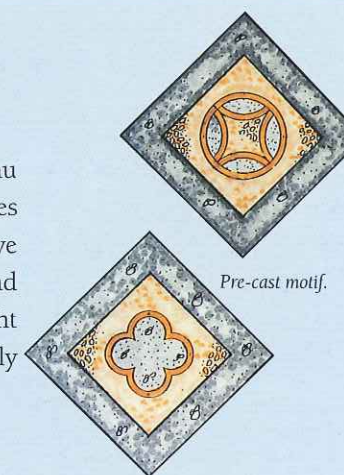
It is timely to develop the malls now. Mrs Koh added: "The buildings are restored. The shops are being filled and occupied by a good mix of viable traditional and new businesses. Now, the action is ready to move onto the streets. The new malls will allow the return of the traditional street bustle and festivities, but without the chaos and without the hair-raising misses between cars and people, carts and trucks."



More about malls

On the 10 to 12 metres wide malls on Trengganu and Pagoda Streets, durable clay pavers and tiles will replace the present asphalt road. Attractive Chinese motifs on the tiles will add colour and texture to the malls. Ambience lighting for night activities on the malls will come from beautifully designed lamp posts.

Proposed lighting.



THE CHANGING FACE OF CHINATOWN



Kreta Ayer in the late 1970s.



Trengganu Street before construction works.



Artist's impression of Trengganu Mall in future.

Revitalising Chinatown : The Big Picture

To revitalise Chinatown, the shophouses were first restored. Now, malls are being built to bring back life and activities to the streets. These form URA's long term plan to enhance Chinatown Historic District. Pedestrianising Trengganu and Pagoda Streets is part of this overall plan.

When URA started the conservation programme in Chinatown in 1989, its first task was to identify historically-significant buildings and traditional cores of activities worth conserving. Since then, URA has guided and facilitated the restoration of the conservation buildings.

Of the 342 conservation buildings in Kreta Ayer, almost 75 per cent have been restored today. URA has paved the way for the area's conservation progress by making sure that basic infrastructure and utility services like substations and sidewalks, etc are put in place.



Future activities at Trengganu Mall.

To ensure that our conservation plans are pro-business and responsive to market needs, we sought regular feedback from shopowners, businesses and professional bodies. Conservation specialists were also appointed to advise on administrative, legislative, engineering and architectural aspects.

The efforts have led to practical and adaptive reuse of the restored shophouses, many of which now house viable traditional and new businesses. Traditional Chinese retailers like the herbs and dried foodstuff shops, medical shops, embrocation shops, frame-makers, noodle shops and air-conditioned new restaurants and eating houses operate side by side.

Together with other government agencies and the private sector, URA will continue to develop a unique Singapore, one with its own blend of history, character and charm.

Conservation Milestones

1982-83 : URA did a comprehensive review and study of the historic districts.

1986 : URA held an exhibition and seminar on the conservation proposal to obtain feedback from professionals and members of the public.

1987 : A second exhibition was held to explain the value and need for conservation.

1989 : URA completed the Conservation Master Plan. Four types of areas with conservation buildings were identified - Historic, Historic Residential, Secondary Settlements and Bungalows. The areas identified include Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Emerald Hill and Cairnhill.

For the three Historic Districts of Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam, concept plans were drawn up to identify not only the conservation buildings but also traditional focus of activities, landmarks, suitable sites for plazas, streets to be pedestrianised, sites for future development and open spaces.

1992 : Specialise conservation consultants were appointed to advise on the administrative, legislative, engineering and architectural aspects of conservation in Singapore.

How Chinatown was Born

Sir Stamford Raffles, founder of Singapore, first came up with the concept of a Chinatown for Singapore. This happened in 1822 when he decided to plan a new town according to ethnic groupings, for example European Town, Chinese, Chulia, Arab and Bugis Kampongs.

He identified an area for the "Chinese Town" south of the Singapore River, which is around today's South Boat Quay. A "Chinese Kampong" was also located at the nearby hillocks.

As the Chinese population grew rapidly during the mid 1800s, Chinese businessmen and immigrants concentrated in the Kreta Ayer area.

The Chinese immigrants came mostly from the south-eastern coastal provinces of China. Among them, Hokkiens formed the majority, followed by Teochews,

Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakkas and Foochows. Many were abducted or sold as labourers.

By the 1860s, the Kreta Ayer area of Chinatown was densely occupied and began to urbanise.

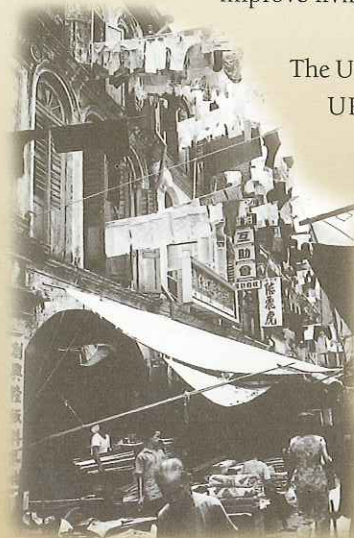
The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 brought increased trade to Singapore. New docks and wharves were built. The Chinese expanded their settlement to the Tanjong Pagar and Bukit Pasoh areas. Many recreational clubs, clan associations and temples were built. Schools were also set up for the Chinese children.

By the 1920s, the infrastructure of the area now known as Chinatown was in place.

After the 1920s, however, Chinatown became increasingly overcrowded. Behind the elegant facades of the shophouses were coolie quarters

divided and further sub-divided into small cubicles. Living conditions deteriorated. The situation became worse after the Second World War.

After independence in 1965, Chinatown became the focus of the Singapore Government's effort to improve living conditions.



The Urban Renewal Department, URA's predecessor, was put in charge to renew Chinatown. Gradually, slums were cleared and squatters resettled. The place was cleaned up. Traffic improvements were also made.



Finally, on 7 July 1989 the government gazetted Chinatown as a conservation area. URA has since led a pilot project to restore selected shophouses and carried out various environmental improvement works like tree planting and planning service lanes. @