

HISTORIC DISTRICTS

The Historic Districts, first gazetted on 7 July 1989, comprised Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, Emerald Hill, Cairnhill, Boat Quay and Clarke Quay. The latter two, together with Robertson Quay, today form the Historic District called “Singapore River” while Emerald Hill and Cairnhill are part of the residential historic districts. These Historic Districts enrich Singapore’s city form. Their vernacular architecture is unique and contrasts well with the common international architectural style of 20th century modern developments. They offer variety through a sense of intimate scale, diverse façades and rich ornamentation, and project a charm not found in modern architecture.

It would be impossible to share within the pages of a single book, great detail about the heritage and memories associated with all the historic districts, much less do justice to their idiosyncratic charm, and at times, heart-wrenching human stories. Only a flavour of what they stand for can be captured here. Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India and Singapore River will be elaborated below, to offer a sense of the rich history and heritage, as well as the journeys to their conservation. These will be followed by a focus on three examples of historic residential districts (Blair Plain, Emerald Hill and Cairnhill).



Red roofs of Chinatown, with a view of the business district in the distance (above).

Opposite: An early map of Singapore shows some of the Historic Districts in place, including Kampong Glam, “Chinese Town” and Singapore River, 1822–23.

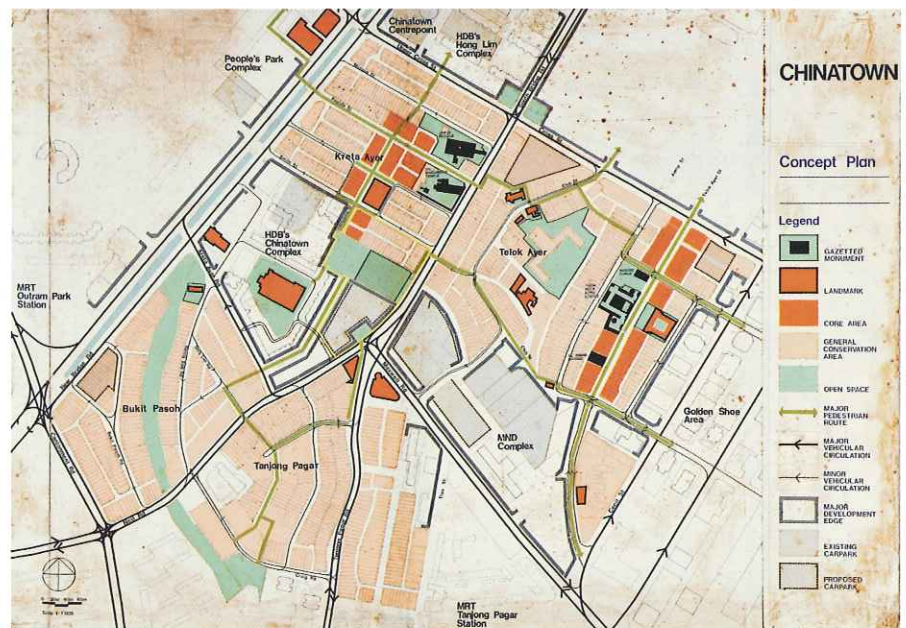
Chinatown

Chinatown is in many ways the first district-level effort at conservation in Singapore, and blazed the trail that future projects might learn from. The actual rehabilitation works transformed the area physically, but so too did the social and economic life of the district change. Public opinion in response to these changes has ranged from relief at the conservation efforts, albeit late, to concerns about authenticity and the viable continuation of a way of life. In 2010, Chinatown was voted the Best Heritage Street by readers of *Time Out Singapore*, a magazine specialising in introducing the best places to eat, shop, visit and play.

The Chinatown Conservation Area, south of Singapore River, comprises four sub-districts – Kreta Ayer, Telok Ayer, Bukit Pasoh and Tanjong Pagar. It was gazetted a conservation area on 7 July 1989. The principles underlying URA's conservation of historic districts, including Chinatown, were clearly articulated as follows: to retain and enhance the existing activities which are a part of the historical and cultural heritage; to restore buildings of historical and architectural significance; to improve the general physical environment; to retain traditional trades while consolidating the area with new, compatible ones; to introduce appropriate new features to enhance further the identity of the place; and to involve both public and private sectors in carrying out conservation projects.

The conservation plans for Chinatown were preceded by a period of uncertainty about its fate. In the early 1980s, there was much publicity about the impending "cleaning-up" of Chinatown. Street hawkers – some 740 of them – were to be resettled off the streets by September 1983, and housed in the Kreta Ayer Complex. Many of the hawkers complained of the small space allotted and most disliked the shift, having been used to the free space available on the streets. Some of the dilapidated shophouses

Map of the Chinatown Conservation Area, including the sub-districts of Kreta Ayer, Telok Ayer, Bukit Pasoh and Tanjong Pagar, 1985. Overleaf: Smith Street, which is also known as the "Food Street" of Chinatown.

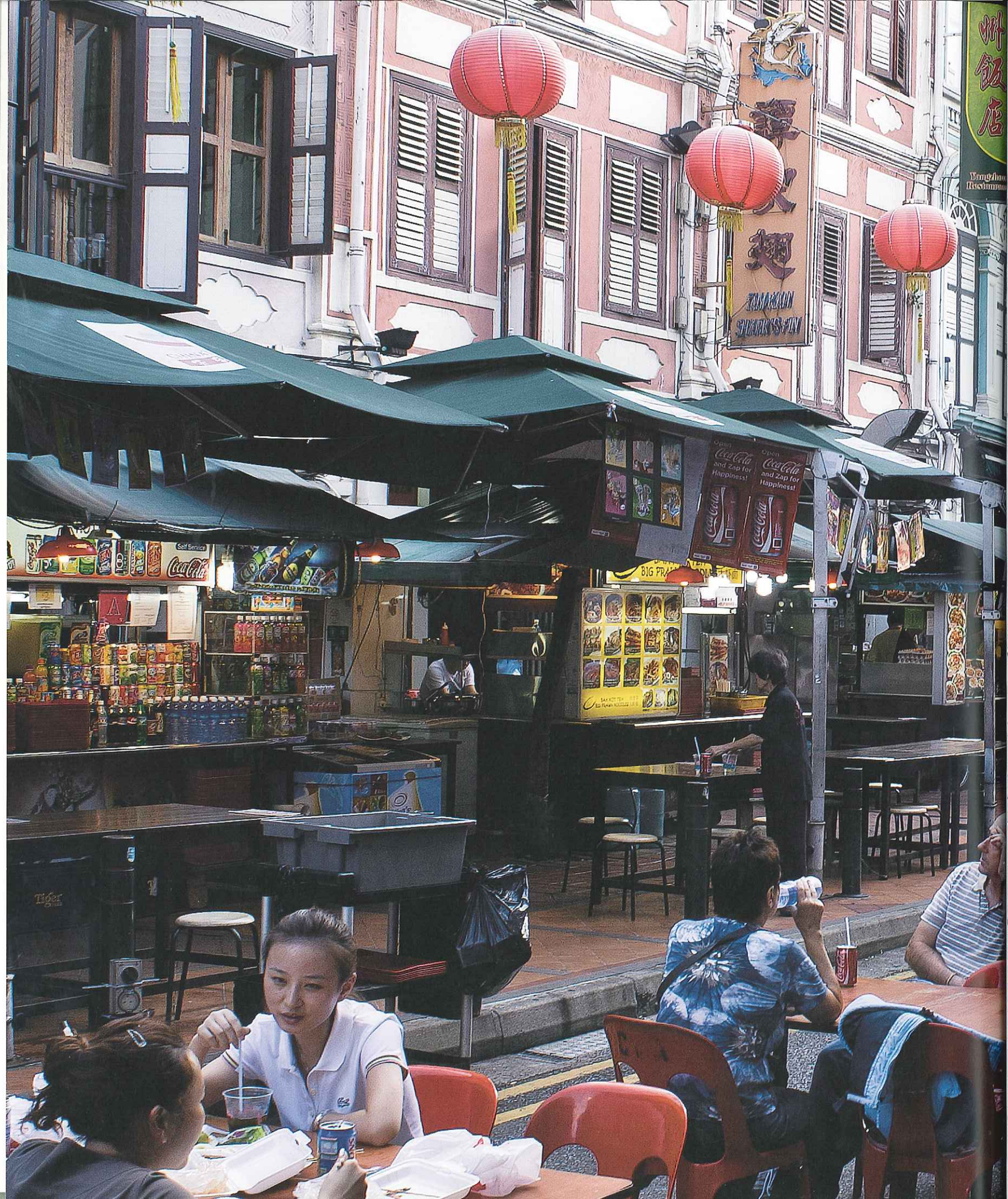


had already been demolished, and there was widespread speculation, indeed, expectation, that the bulldozers were going to move in with a vengeance.

The proposed rehousing of hawkers and demolition of shophouses elicited much public feedback. Visitors and residents alike lamented that Chinatown would not be Chinatown without the bustle of street life. Nevertheless, a certain sense of fateful resignation was palpable, as the sights and sounds in Chinatown during the Lunar New Year season of 1983 were captured with poignant words and moving pictures in the press, seemingly for the last time before complete eradication. At the same time, concerns were expressed that demolition of the shophouses would rob the city of its history. Those who contributed to public discourse were not debating whether Chinatown should be conserved, but rather, how it should be done. In order to avoid creating a contrived landscape, members of the public variously suggested retaining hawkers, encouraging their continuation in newly identified areas, pedestrianising streets leading to and from these activity nodes, and reinforcing existing activities in the area, solutions which were seen as important in retaining the spirit of the place. Others suggested that Bukit Pasoh and Teo Hong Roads in Chinatown, which house more than ten clan associations, should be closed to traffic, and the clan associations encouraged to refurbish their buildings and take their activities outdoors, which could attract participants, and safeguard their continuity and enhance their efforts at self-renewal.

Another dimension of the public debate focused on the level of government involvement in the entire exercise. On the one hand, some argued that the government should only be minimally involved, providing only guidelines and advice while leaving any conservation or preservation entirely to the occupants. On the other hand, others believed that the government should be fully engaged, acquiring land and buildings and providing the financial resources and expertise for conservation.

Uncertainties about Chinatown's fate persisted for several years in the early to mid-1980s. Concomitant with cleaning up Chinatown, resettling the streets of hawkers and demolishing some shophouses, the government





Yummy Việt
Authentic Vietnamese Cuisine



FAMILY KTV KARAOKE
KARAOKE 家庭式
OK

Da Dong restaurant

ROSE

30 Smith Street

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Old Chinatown streets filled with the ubiquitous pushcarts and plywood stalls under umbrellas to shelter the vendors of market produce and cooked food. Inside the shophouses lining the streets, people lived in even more congested conditions, circa 1970s.

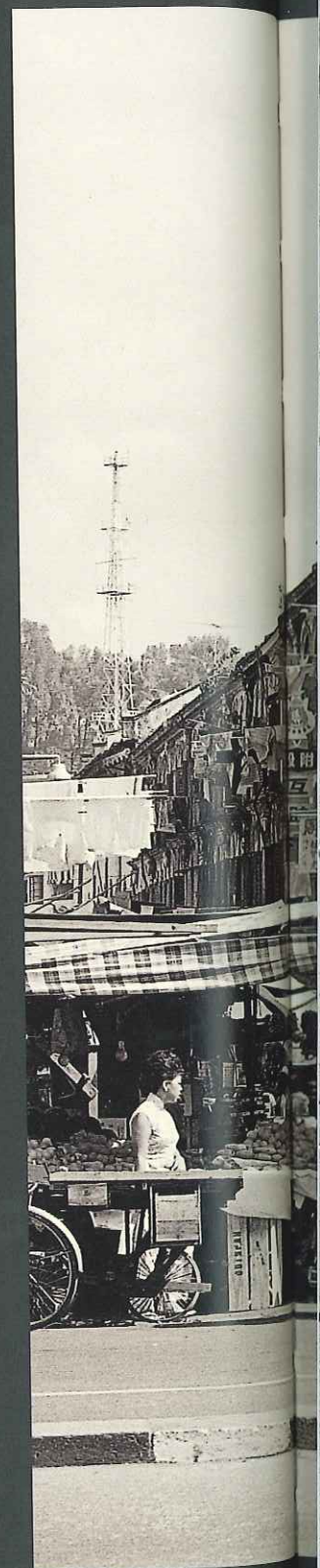
OLD CHINATOWN

Chinatown may be said to have started with a gathering of some 1,125 Chinese, making up about 25% of the population in 1821. A plan of 1822, just three years after Raffles' landing, shows "a Chinese town" south of Singapore River, around today's Boat Quay. The area to its south, which is Chinatown today, consisted largely of hillocks with a pair of roads running along the coast – the predecessors of today's Telok Ayer Street and South Bridge Road.

This plan was laid out according to instructions issued by Sir Stamford Raffles to the Town Planning Committee in November 1822. The culmination of these "instructions" was the Jackson Plan (1823) which designated residential areas to various communities. One area to the southwest of the Singapore River was allocated to the Chinese communities. Known as "Chinese Kampung", it was inhabited predominantly by the Chinese although a large number of South Indian migrants and Muslims lived there as well. This is evidenced by the presence of the Sri Mariamman Temple, the Nagore Durgha Shrine and the Al-Abrar Mosque in Chinatown. This Chinese Kampung came to be colloquially called *niu che shui*, as we fondly know it today, literally meaning "bullock carts carrying water", because of the bullock-drawn carts that were used to fetch water from wells in the days when there was no tap water.

By the 1860s, the Chinese population had expanded to 50,000. They soon spread into Kreta Ayer, building shophouses around the Sri Mariamman Temple and the Jamae Mosque along Temple Street and Mosque Street. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 brought further growth to Singapore and the increase in trade led to the construction of new docks with the reclamation of the Telok Ayer Basin. By the turn of the century, Chinatown had expanded to include the Tanjong Pagar and Bukit Pasoh areas, and various clans and recreational organisations were set up and schools built. The population had numbered some 164,000 and the noise and congestion in Chinatown drove the more affluent out of the area.

As the population expanded, living conditions continued to deteriorate with overcrowding, congestion and pollution. Many of the inhabitants were coolies and labourers who shared the same sleeping space in cubicles with little sanitation, sagging walls and damp floors, facing poverty, rat infestation, malnutrition and no access to proper medical facilities. In addition, secret societies, gang crime, opium smoking and prostitution were rampant. Conditions deteriorated even further after World War II and the Japanese Occupation when parts of the town were badly bombed. Living conditions were appalling and the government was committed, after attaining independence, to raising the living standards of the population with public provision of better housing a key objective.







Tanjong Pagar before restoration, with the shophouses vacated and boarded up, circa 1980s (above).

Below: A Tanjong Pagar shophouse, as visualised after restoration.



also seemed to be asking developers to exercise special care with other shophouses. A commercial developer seeking to put up a new development in the Bukit Pasoh area, for example, was informed that plans for a new development would be approved only if the façade of the old shophouses and storey heights were kept. It was only in 1986 that conservation plans for Chinatown were announced, and specifically, in 1987, efforts at restoration in Tanjong Pagar led the way.

The conservation plans for Tanjong Pagar targeted the restoration of 220 government-owned two- and three-storey pre-war terrace houses, with URA taking charge of the first 32 units. The restored houses would be rented out to the public in an effort to bring life back to the area, which had become increasingly deserted after the shophouses were acquired to make way for public housing and the residents began moving out in 1981.

URA's involvement in the conservation of the 32 units was partly spurred by the fact that it already owned the buildings, and partly because many of the buildings were in urgent need of repair. The government also wished to boost confidence and demonstrate its commitment to conservation, showing that old buildings could be beautifully retained and restored, and that conservation could be an economically viable undertaking. It was the intention that the rest of the 188 units would then be offered on lease to people willing to restore and repair them within the government's guidelines.

Outlining the rationale for keeping Tanjong Pagar, URA explained that the purpose of designating conservation areas was to retain entire old districts with their unique architectural style and ambience. This was in recognition of the value of keeping a balance in the city centre where some areas would be high-rise and high density (best exemplified by Pinnacle at Duxton Plain today), and others would be lower density, permitting the conservation of old low-rise shophouse buildings. Decisions about what and where to conserve were based on criteria such as the historic significance of the area, the architectural value of the group of buildings, their building condition and the size of the area. After restoration, the shophouses would have uses that complemented the character of the area,



URA led the way in conservation by restoring the first 32 units in Tanjong Pagar to preserve the unique architectural style and ambience of the district, 1987.

and it was envisaged that traditional trades such as Chinese medicinal and antique shops would have a place in Chinatown.

The conservation project at Tanjong Pagar was divided into four phases, with URA restoring the first 32 plots in phase 1. In phases 2 to 4, the shophouses (including the Jinrikisha Station) were sold by tender to private developers. The sale of the unrestored shophouses was to provide an opportunity for the private sector to participate directly in the conservation effort. The lease tenure was 99 years. Rent control was lifted to facilitate the process, and tenders showed a jump in prices. The successful tenderers included DBS Land, and Goldhill and L&B Holdings. Between 1987 and 1989, prices of the conserved properties increased by more than 60%.

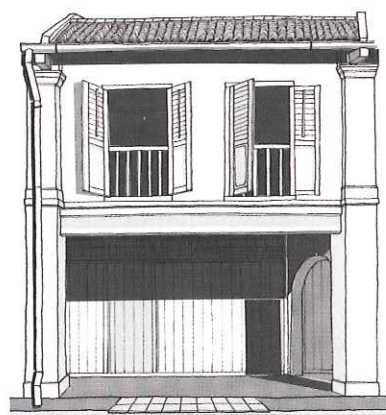
In order to attract owners to the cause of conservation, government assistance may also be given to owners of conserved buildings as follows: the development charge payable for any building or part of the building

THE ARCHITECTURAL STYLES OF SHOPHOUSES

Six shophouse façade styles have been identified: Early, First Transitional, Late, Second Transitional, Art Deco and Modern. The six styles are roughly chronological in development, though there are some overlaps. They are the result of changing economic and technological circumstances, tastes and fashions.

EARLY SHOPHOUSE STYLE

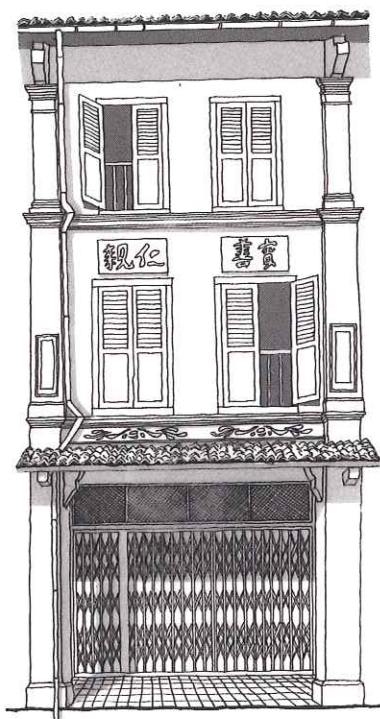
Shophouses of this style are low, squat, two-storey buildings with one or two windows on the upper floor façade. The rectangular doors and windows are timber-framed with shutters of boards, panels or louvres. There may be rectangular or circular vents between or above the windows or doors. Ornamentation is minimal, but where used, it is usually derived from ethnic sources, reflective of the origins of the immigrants who built them.



1840-1900

FIRST TRANSITIONAL SHOPHOUSE STYLE

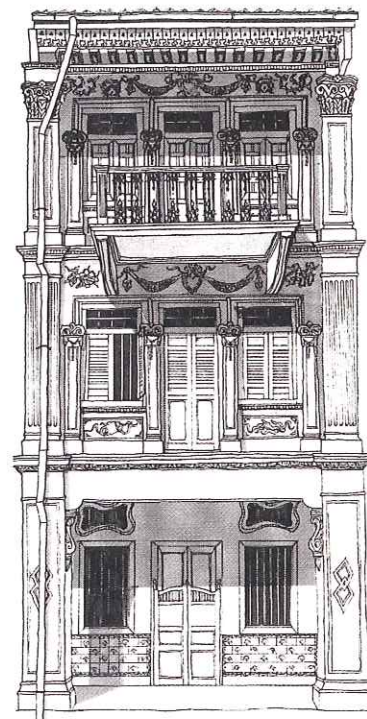
A general lightening of expression can be discerned in this style due to the greater height of each storey. Windows and doors are usually timber-shuttered although small plates of glass in the shutters became increasingly common over time. There are often two windows on the upper storeys, and there are transoms (windows above doors), which are usually flat-arched, semicircular or rectangular, and infilled with timber-framed glass, cast iron or carved timber panels.



EARLY 1900S

LATE SHOPHOUSE STYLE

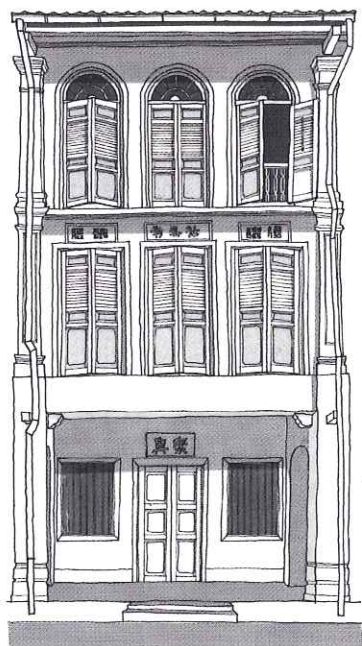
This is the most spectacular style, particularly in the use of ornamentation. The tripartite arrangement of windows on the façade reduces the wall space to a minimum and provides maximum ventilation. In later examples, the "wall" surface is replaced by columns or pilasters framing the windows. The reduced wall space led to more ingenious façade designs that borrowed freely from the various ethnic traditions. Brightly coloured ceramic tiles and plaster bouquets, festoons, plaques and other elaborate ornamentation are evidence of the builder's artistry.



1900-1940

SECOND TRANSITIONAL SHOPHOUSE STYLE

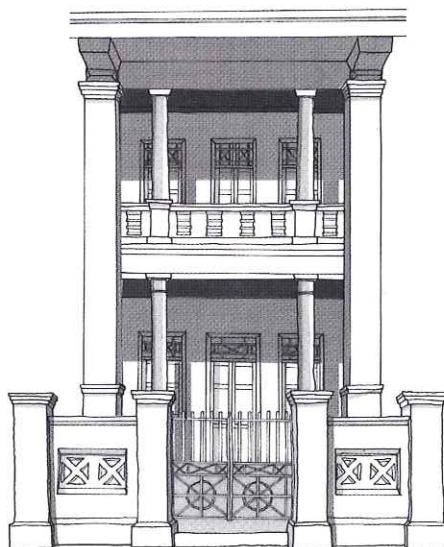
This style has a streamlined design as the designers and builders began to simplify the ornamentation. This simplification may have been a reaction to the exuberant spirit of the Late style or may have been purely due to economics. Late style motifs such as ornately carved transoms and colourful ceramic tiles are often combined with Art Deco elements such as cross-braced glass window panels and simple geometric balustrade designs.



LATE 1930S

ART DECO SHOPHOUSE STYLE

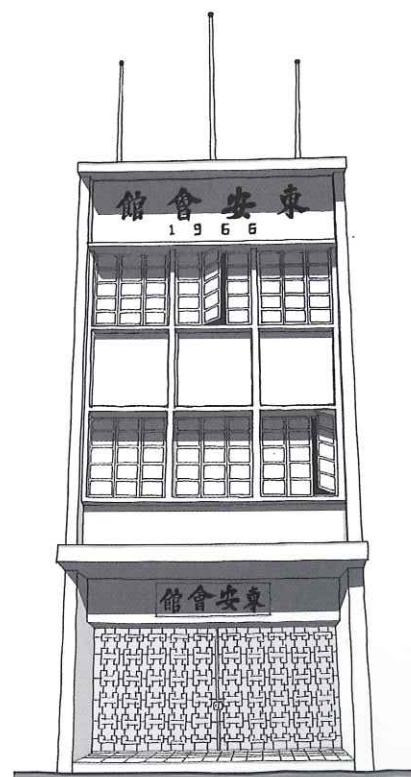
Buildings of this style are typified by the streamlining of classical motifs, such as column orders, arches, keystones and pediments, into geometric design. Decorative wall tiles are rarely used. Greater attention is given to the proportional beauty and elevational composition of the whole row of shophouses, with special emphasis on street corners. A common feature of this style is a strategically placed plaque bearing the date of the building's construction.



1930-1960

MODERN SHOPHOUSE STYLE

This style features the innovative use of very thin concrete fins and air vents on the building façade that are both functional as well as decorative. The windows are well-proportioned to complement the geometric design of the façade. This style is in line with the International Movement towards functionalism, less ornamentation and the use of modern materials. The style reflects the post-war economic situation and the needs of the middle-class for modern facilities.



1950-1960

that is conserved will be waived if conservation guidelines are fully complied with and the conservation work is completed in accordance with approved plans; the provision of carparks and payment of carpark deficiency charges for the conservation building or part of the building that is conserved will be waived if conservation guidelines are fully complied with; owners can apply to the Tenants' Compensation Board for assistance to recover their tenanted rent-control buildings; and owners with difficulty in finding alternative accommodation for their old single person tenant may approach the HDB for assistance.

In the end, the government was right to take the lead, for shophouse owners saw little incentive, direct or indirect, to refurbish and restore their shophouses. How would owners recoup their outlay, especially if rent control was not lifted? And if that control was lifted, tenants would move out, so how would the local colour that came with vanishing trades such as clog-makers, funerary paper artists and herbalists, continue in the shophouses with rental hikes? Previous residents who had relocated to other areas believed that they would not be able to afford the rent after reconstruction. These former residents reminisced about the area as a "gateway to adventure" and described it as a place where "labourers, craftsmen, gamblers and prostitutes mingled". Above all, they spoke about the low rentals (some \$25 to \$75) paid to the Arabs who owned but never lived in the area. Without government leadership, conservation and adaptive reuse would be dead in the water.

In order that the restoration work would return the shophouses faithfully to their original styles, URA officers scoured the National Archives for original floor plans, and searched out craftsmen with traditional skills to help in the restoration process. The restoration work included reinstatement of casement windows with timber louvres and replicas of originals such as timber staircases. The broken decorations of ornate walls were also to be reconstructed. Modern plumbing and fire safety measures were incorporated, and proper drainage was effected to ensure that rainwater did not further weaken the foundations of the already dilapidated shophouses.

In order to maintain the ambience and character of the Tanjong Pagar area, URA required that the conserved shophouses be tenanted to those engaged in traditional trades such as clog-making, antique shops, calligraphy and Chinese medicinal products while the upper floors were to be used as offices, dwellings or light trades such as tailoring. While the intent is laudable, many businesses felt that this was not economically sustainable and noted that the government should provide incentives such as lower rentals to encourage such trades. To attract niche shops such as antique and craft shops and art galleries, many also felt that the right tenant mix, sufficient car parking and reasonable rent would be crucial for a successful conservation project. Unfortunately, things did not go the way the public expected.

By the early 1990s, Tanjong Pagar had begun to take on a life of its own – no bad thing in principle. Instead of clog-makers and Chinese traditional medicinists, restaurants and pubs took over the conserved shophouses. In

"MY MOTHER'S CHINATOWN"

Kelvin Ang, URA Head of Heritage Studies (since October 1999), never lived in one of the rat-infested shophouses on Smith Street, but he shares his mother's vivid recollections of her Chinatown:

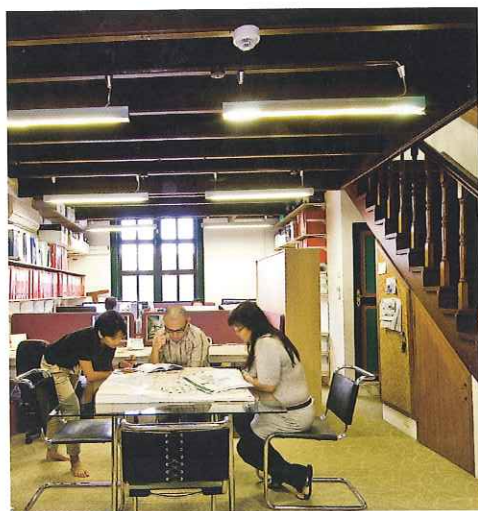
"I remember visiting, in the mid-1980s, the cubicle in a shophouse on Smith Street where my mother had spent several of her childhood years with her mother and sister. It was a 3.5m by 3.5m wooden cubicle, raised off the floor, with no windows. This was considered a "good" room as it was next to the air well and had some air and light! My mother shared that it was forbidden to use the iron as it would have risked overloading the electric supply. Every night, she could hear the scurrying of rats below their home. This was the kind of home that an entire generation looked to escape from, welcoming the opportunity that the new HDB flats presented! It made clear why few of that generation even thought of 'conserving' these shophouses."



A Chinatown slum of the early 1950s.



Restored shophouses in Chinatown now house fashionable shops and offices. Above: Style Nordic at Ann Siang Road. Below: Liu & Wo Architects at Duxton Hill. Opposite: A typically busy day at Smith Street.



order to ensure that they were well-patronised, the entrepreneurs banded together and offered promotions, competitions and other novel ideas to bring in the crowd. To ensure that there was life at night, URA also revised its guidelines in August 1991 to require all ground floor units to be used for retail, food or entertainment businesses only so as to encourage street activity and bring life to the area. This was done with the view that this central city location deserved to have a new lease of life.

A similar approach was undertaken in Kreta Ayer, just a stone's throw away. URA led the conservation efforts by restoring 45 shophouses in the Kreta Ayer area, bounded by Sago Street, Trengganu Street, Smith Street and South Bridge Road. Again, as with Tanjong Pagar, Kreta Ayer has also attracted a different kind of activity from those initially thought compatible. The area has now earned a name for drawing the creative types to the area – advertising agencies, public relations firms, design studios and the like – those who are attracted not just by the beautiful façades but also by the interesting spaces inside, which allow firms to tailor the space to suit their image. The air wells, French windows and high ceilings keep the buildings cool and lighted.

Duxton Road has had a good following of firms which have forsaken the bright lights of city offices for the old-world charm of restored shophouses. Such demand has spurred prices of shophouses in Chinatown to soar some sevenfold from \$150 psf in 1988 to over \$1,000 psf in 1994 and nearly \$2,000 psf in 2008.

This adaptive reuse in areas like Tanjong Pagar and Kreta Ayer has drawn debate, with advocates on both sides of the fence. Some argue that, realistically, lifestyles and trades have to evolve; past activities and trades cannot fossilise. As Koh-Lim Wen Gin put it: "The criticism was that we cleaned out the place. Yet it was all so rundown; there was no magic to it. There were rats; they looked like slums; it was unhygienic so we had to do the necessary work. Now the life is coming back. We allowed tables and chairs to go back to the roads. We had to clean up first so that all these features could return in a more hygienic way."

There is no argument against providing better hygiene. Detractors,



飲
酒樓

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昇達唐人街酒店
SANTA GRAND
HOTEL
CHINATOWN

匯款中心
MONEY
WORLD

Yong Po
Kong
Sum

牛車水夜市

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however, argued that conservation should not lead to historic areas being turned into theme parks for tourism. In this, another battleground of opinion emerged in the mid to late 1990s.

In 1995, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) launched Tourism21 to establish Singapore as a Tourism Capital. Eleven thematic zones were outlined. Ethnic Singapore was a key zone and Chinatown, Little India, Geylang Serai and the Katong/Joo Chiat enclave were identified as key assets in this category. In outlining its strategy, STPB formulated an "experience guide plan" which set out the kind of experience the visitor should have and an appropriate plan for the area. Chinatown's significance could be enhanced, it was believed, if the buildings and parks were integrated into a single themed development. This set the stage for STPB's multi-million dollar revitalisation plan for Chinatown.

Unveiled by the then Finance Minister Richard Hu in September 1998, the revitalisation plan of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), as the STPB was renamed in 1997, hoped to attract people to live and work in the area. Owners of existing shophouses were encouraged to turn their places into guest houses or boutique hotels. Several key features characterised the \$97.5m plan to turn Chinatown into an exciting place to eat, shop and visit. For example, a village theatre was envisaged to host a wide range of cultural performances from *wayang* to poetry readings. Themed streets were proposed, such as a Bazaar Street (at Pagoda Street where visitors can buy textiles, home decorations and curios), Market Square (part of Trengganu Street where wet market produce can be purchased), Food Street (at Smith Street which was imagined to be lined with old-style wooden chairs and itinerant hawkers) and Tradition Street (at Temple Street where craftsmen and merchants would gather). A Resource Centre was targeted, to be housed in three renovated shophouses, with a museum of interactive exhibits and live demonstrations. An initiative to green Chinatown was proposed, with five gardens, each embodying the elements of earth, fire, water, metal and wood, with adequate trees and flowering plants to give shade and colour. To round it off, the plan proposed the introduction of appropriate street furniture.



Keong Saik Road and Teck Lim Road, which runs off it, have seen more offices and boutique shops and hotels in recent years.

Implementation of STB's tourism plans in general, including Chinatown's plans, was interrupted by the onset of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. For some, this was hardly a disappointment. The Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), for example, criticised STB's plan for Chinatown as one that would produce a "sterile, static and ultimately uninteresting encounter with the past". It would simply re-engineer Chinatown into a superficial theme park serving the needs of tourism rather than the "economic, social and spiritual needs" of its residents.

SHS argued that the evolution of Singapore's Chinatown had been "truncated artificially" due to the massive relocation of street hawkers and itinerant vendors into the Kreta Ayer Complex in 1983. This had dislocated a lifestyle and drained the area of life and energy. STB's plans, with themed streets, elemental gardens and distinct districts and streetscapes, would also turn Chinatown into a "place more Chinese than



Once a Chinese opera house where the elite went for entertainment and yum cha (tea with dim sum), Lai Chun Yuen, an imposing three-storey building with brown shutters and a verandah running all around the topmost storey at the corner of Smith Street and Trengganu Street, awaits new tenants.

it ever was". The emphasis on the touristic dimensions would lead to a glossing over and discarding of what exists, as if Chinatown was an "empty physical structure to be re-engineered culturally", imposing "uniformity and superficiality" in the process.

Another criticism that SHS levelled was that STB's plan imposed sharp boundaries on Chinatown whereas these have always been fluid and defined by its proximity to Singapore River and dependence on the canals and waterways. SHS argued that STB's plan would cause the complex evolution of place to be lost. In fact, STB had "wrenched the place out of its context and 'framed' it for its own purposes".

SHS also took issue with what it saw to be the homogenisation of Chinatown – the presentation of a uniform history emphasising the Mandarinised Chinese aspects of Chinatown, rather than acknowledging the dialect groups and trades, and the multi-ethnicity that also exists with

Malay and Indian residents, businesses and places of worship.

Finally, STB was criticised for imposing a “freeze-frame” approach that reduced Chinatown to a mere theme park. The elemental gardens came in for special criticism: they had no relationship with Chinatown – the “Fire Garden”, for example, with its fountains, exoticised Chinese culture.

Fundamentally, SHS criticisms were targeted at STB’s privileging of the tourist experience as the basis for a renewal of Chinatown. On the other hand, the whole conservation effort should be about personal and collective memories of the individuals and groups who once lived and worked there, and those who would continue to live and work there. It urged STB to conscientiously consult interested community groups before embarking on such a project, or risk a re-engineered Chinatown that would lose its entire relevance.

Other critics also voiced their reservations about STB’s plans, many writing to the press. The Village Theatre idea was thought to be alien to Chinatown. Rather, open spaces should be reserved for *wayangs*, *pasar malams* and festival markets, more like the Chinatown of old. Rather than a Chinatown Interpretive Centre housed in three shophouses, it was proposed that certain houses with historical significance be identified and opened to the public, so that stories about rich towkays and indentured coolies would be recounted in their historical contexts. A suggestion was made to the effect that, rather than gentrified shophouses, priority should be given to developing low-cost medium-rise housing in the area which should be allocated to families of hawkers and residents of the area.

Members of the public applauded SHS’s stance and supported the need for greater consultation of key stakeholders in drawing up plans for Chinatown. Chinatown was better left alone, as it was still a thriving community. STB responded saying that extensive thought had been given to the plans, and consultations had been done with various agencies and stakeholders. Their response did not endear them to the public, for they were seen to be officious rather than genuine.

In acknowledgement of the tremendous public interest, a forum was



Chinatown Heritage Centre (at right) is a museum of Chinatown's history within three restored shophouses on Pagoda Street.

held in February 1999 at the Kreta Ayer Community Centre where some 200 people, including students, architects, academics and Chinatown businessmen, turned up to voice their views. When asked if Chinatown could be left alone, STB responded that it was in fact businesses that were calling for intervention and help as Chinatown was a ghost town after 6pm. Nonetheless, in a bid to close the rift, SHS and STB agreed to focus on several key principles in order to move ahead. They were: that heritage and tourism were not diametrically opposed; that Chinatown needed to be revitalised to help businesses in the area; and that history could not be re-created.

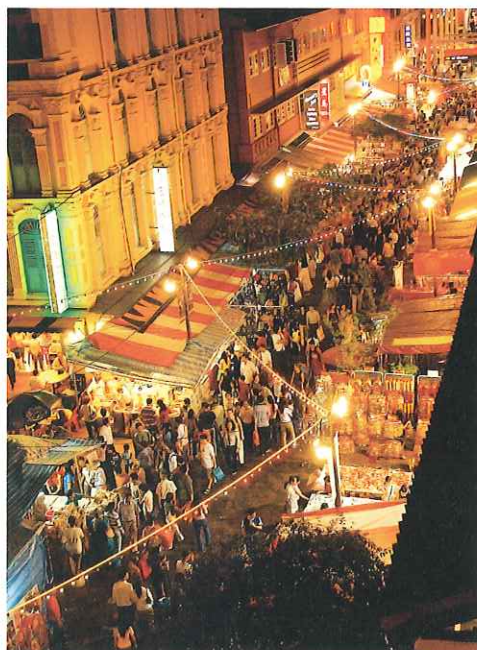
The public debate caused by STB's redevelopment plans for Chinatown again demonstrated clearly Singaporeans' strong emotional bonds to the place. The then Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, extrapolated from the debate and pronounced that Singaporeans cared

about their country's future.

In order to move ahead, a booth was set up by the National Heritage Board and STB to encourage the public to share their anecdotes and memories of Chinatown. Their contributions could then be showcased in the Chinatown Heritage Centre, which was to go ahead. Perhaps reflecting the continued bifurcation of views, civil society activists such as Sharon Siddique and William Lim took a different path in their arguments, suggesting that the government consider instead how to facilitate and encourage four groups of city dwellers to reside in the city centre, including Chinatown. These include: higher income singles or couples without children who can afford the higher rentals and prices of property, and who may prefer the higher levels of social interaction and accessibility to work places that the city centre provides; students and artists, who could inject young life into an ageing precinct and enable urban renewal through their active participation; retirees, particularly older former residents who could return to their familiar social nodes (such as temples and informal meeting places); and employees who work in the area, which would then avoid a nine-to-five atmosphere.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as is often said. A survey undertaken by academics Belinda Yuen and TH Ng published in 2001 shared the views and experiences of tourists about conservation areas in Singapore, including Chinatown. Tourists generally had a good impression of the conservation areas and most found their visits an enriching experience. The two most frequently mentioned experiences were their encounter with a different culture (20%) and a sense of character of the place (17.3%). However, a small proportion of the respondents were able to detect a sense of artificiality that detracted from their enjoyment. They were most concerned with the "artificiality/commercialisation" (10.7%) of these places; they evaluated the places as "not authentic" (8%), and "too touristy" (2.7%). Yet, these comments feature for such a minority of respondents that perhaps the historic district has once again found its own rhythm and character, and has secured its place as historic district and symbolic hearth of Chinese ethnicity in the tourist imagination. Certainly,

During the Lunar New Year season, Chinatown, especially Trengganu Street, is crowded with shoppers looking for traditional New Year snacks and decorations.





Chinatown is among the top three tourist destinations in Singapore even now (along with Orchard Road, Singapore's shopping thoroughfare, and the historic district of Little India). One Australian expatriate living in Singapore commended Chinatown thus:

I was around Chinatown with some visitors only a few weeks ago, and I think it's terrific, I mean I think all the old stalls and shophouses and everything in Chinatown work very well. I don't really see how cleaning something up takes away the character. Chinatown works really well for me, because it's clean and I don't think it has detracted from the feel of the place.

Chinatown's place in the national imagination now seems secure. A 2008 survey on heritage awareness among Singaporeans by academics Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang showed that an overwhelming majority favoured the idea of heritage preservation in Singapore for current and future generations, and gave the highest level of priority to the nation's

Chinese pastries, Chinese calligraphy (below) or a dramatic dragon dance (opposite) – there is something to appeal to all tastes in Chinatown.



historic and cultural districts such as Chinatown (compared, for example, to museums or natural sites). A significant minority remain critical of the over-commercialisation of heritage preservation in Singapore, but visitorship figures (for the primary purpose of appreciating history and heritage) are nevertheless the highest for historic districts such as Chinatown. URA's own survey of Singaporeans revealed that more than half of its respondents identified conservation areas (such as Chinatown) to be one of the three major features that make Singapore special to the respondents, and more than half – the highest proportion – indicated that Chinatown was special to them, among all conservation areas. Indeed, Singaporeans do not hesitate to converge on Chinatown during key Chinese festive periods such as the Lunar New Year, perhaps to experience a certain ambience associated with the authentic. The efforts of the Chinatown Business Association, STB and the local community organisations deserve credit in helping to make this happen. In 2009 and again in 2010, more than two million people visited Chinatown during the Chinese New Year festivities. Why would the district be packed with such crowds when essential New Year goodies can be found all over the island, in shopping malls and neighbourhood shops, if Chinatown has not succeeded in retaining a significant place in the national imagination? Unlike other countries where Chinatown is an island of Chinese activities in a sea of non-Chinese, Singapore's Chinatown is a spot of Chineseness within a larger majority Chinese community. To be able to retain a high level of identification as an interesting and distinctive heritage area among Singaporeans would need it to possess a certain quality and attraction, perhaps inchoate, probably indefinable.

The story of Chinatown is a complex one. It was slated for demolition – indeed, portions had already been bulldozed – when its potential as an asset was recognised. That did not happen overnight. It was the work of many – including those in the much vilified URA and STB – who did the research, made the case and drafted the plans. Conservation afforded the prospects of helping to revive a failing tourist economy and provided the opportunity for new trades and activities to replace old and dying ones.

In that sense, as the changing times made old trades and past lifestyles difficult to sustain realistically, conservation provided the chance to revise the complexion of the district. Certainly, there were critics who did not warm to the changes at all, arguing that the old should have been kept intact. Yet, no one would have argued that the poor hygiene, dilapidation and declining trades deserved to remain untouched. At the same time, it must be remembered that change was not total. Commercialisation in Chinatown was not a new phenomenon; only the trades were new, reflecting a realistic force against fossilisation. In the midst of continuity and change, Chinatown has come to be an anchor for a young nation in search of an identity. This constant search for an identity is what Singapore is about today, a modern-day city increasingly interested in its past and searching for its identity.

Kampong Glam

Together with Chinatown, Kampong Glam was also one of the first historic districts given conservation status in 1989. Kampong Glam was the seat of Malay royalty and traditionally a Malay residential area. Probably named after the gelam tree, Kampong Glam is bounded by Ophir Road, Victoria Street, Jalan Sultan and Beach Road. It consists mainly of two-storey shophouses in the Early and Transitional shophouse styles, and is the smallest of the three ethnic heritage areas. The post-independence landscape of Kampong Glam was characterised by many traditional businesses such as frame makers, tombstone carvers, textile wholesalers, sandal makers, Muslim eateries, and retailers in the gem, rattan handicraft and religious paraphernalia trade. Two major landmarks stand out in this area – Sultan Mosque, Singapore's biggest and oldest mosque, and Sultan Palace (Istana), though there are many other nodes and streets of significance, each of which marks a certain character and identity for the district. These include Gedung Kuning, Madrasah Alsagoff, Arab Street, Haji Lane and Bussorah Street, just to name the key ones.

Gedung Kuning (or Yellow House) was originally built in the mid-19th century and called Rumah Bendahara (house of the Prime Minister).