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# Conserving Singapore's built heritage: What it takes to keep the old while building the new



The Quadrant served as the former regional headquarters for the former Kwangtung Provincial Bank.  
(Photo: Dawn Kua)

SINGAPORE: It looks like any other old building, with office workers pouring out of the nearby train station exit on a weekday morning and passing it by without a second glance.

But The Quadrant at Cecil Street has a rich tapestry of stories to tell, woven into the fabric of the making of modern Singapore as the last surviving landmark of its banking beginnings.

The white, five-storey building housed the former Kwangtung Provincial Bank, which was first set up in 1920 in Guangzhou by T V Soong, the brother-in-law of Sun Yat-sen, as the first central bank in China. It later merged into Bank of China (Hong Kong) in 2001.

But with Singapore's growing infrastructural needs, more older buildings may soon disappear. In February, the iconic [Pearl Bank Apartments](#)

[\(/news/singapore/pearl-bank-apartments-sold-to-capitaland-for-s-728m-9954034\)](#) were sold for S\$728 million.

Other notable landmarks like the [Golden Mile Complex and People's Park Complex \(/news/singapore/golden-mile-tower-golden-mile-complex-people-s-park-centre-and-10027238\)](#) are also eyeing an en bloc sale.

For this reason, The Quadrant's main tenant Homestead Group Asia chose to spend S\$1 million to restore the old building to its former glory. In the process, its director Low Jeng-tek said he found a personal connection as he dug up more history about the building.

"We were digging and found there was such rich history about this building," said Mr Low. "It was quite an 'aha' moment as my great grandfather, a gentleman called Low Peng Soy, was a merchant. And he was one of the early shareholders in Sze Hai Tong Bank, which became Four Seas Bank.

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"The most famous Chinese entrepreneurs of that time – Lim Nee Soon, Tan Kah Kee, Lim Boon Keng – all their source of their entrepreneurial wealth, or their core start, came from the banks that funded them.

"Because these entrepreneurs couldn't get funding from European banks, so the Chinese had to start banks on their own."

Mr Low added: "So this I realise is somehow connected to my own family, and is basically today the last vestige of the great Chinese banks that started at the start of 20th century."



**"OLD BUILDINGS STOOD FOR POVERTY"**

Mr Low said he hopes The Quadrant will be gazetted for conservation, but such ground-up calls for conservation did not used to happen so much, according to cultural geography professor Lily Kong.

"In the early days – the 1960s and 1970s – there were calls for conservation, which were often by expat communities in Singapore," said Prof Kong.

"The local community very often would be silent and absent in all this, because Singaporeans were still grappling with poverty. They were grappling with living in quite abject conditions, and what the old buildings stood for for them was poverty, poor hygiene and poor living conditions."

As such, Singaporeans then had little to no thought of keeping "old dilapidated buildings" but "moving on to better conditions of modernity, good public hygiene and healthy living conditions", said Prof Kong.

But with rising affluence over the decades, more room for thought has been made to keep the old.

So far, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has awarded over 7,000 buildings conservation status, including 72 national monuments and buildings, many of which are located in historic districts, such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam.

Buildings with conservation status must also be retained and restored as far as possible, with careful repair and minimum replacement works unless necessary.

#### **RECOGNISING SENSITIVE CONSERVATION EFFORTS**

To recognise well-restored monuments and conserved buildings, the Architectural Heritage Awards were launched in 1995 to raise awareness of the need for conserving Singapore's built heritage.

Last year, the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd won the award for restoration, while the Warehouse Hotel was [re \(/news/singapore/cathedral-of-the-good-shepherd-warehouse-hotel-pick-up-awards-9362396\)cognised for its restoration and innovation efforts \(/news/singapore/cathedral-of-the-good-shepherd-warehouse-hotel-pick-up-awards-9362396\).](#)

One development that was also lauded for its sensitive conservation was SPACE Asia Hub at Bencoolen Street.

Extensive work was done to restore a cluster of old buildings, comprising of a villa and shophouses, with the S\$50 million investment transforming them into a furniture showroom. The 40,000 sq ft project bagged the Architectural Heritage Award in 2012.

"This building is very tastefully conserved. The buildings are part of the (new) development, which blends in without overwhelming the buildings," said heritage blogger Jerome Lim, who has documented Singapore's stories on his blog, The Long and Winding Road, for the past decade.

"There are cases where newer structures that go around conserved buildings tend to overwhelm the building. In this case it was done very tastefully and you immediately recognise the structures being old, being part of that streetscape."

#### **NEWER ARCHITECTURE "ONLY ABOUT PRETTIFICATION"**

But not all buildings have been conserved as tastefully, according to Tay Kheng Soon, Golden Mile Complex's architect, and someone who is known for his strong views on Singapore's changing architectural landscape.

"Golden Mile Complex is an old icon – it symbolises a period of Singapore's history where we were daring to do, we dared to challenge conventions and we tried to be as honest as we possibly can," said Prof Tay.

"But that has changed. Today it's only about prettification – making things nice-looking and pretty and comfortable and cosy."

When asked about his thoughts on [Golden Mile Complex heading towards an en bloc sale \(/news/singapore/golden-mile-tower-golden-mile-complex-people-s-park-centre-and-10027238\)](/news/singapore/golden-mile-tower-golden-mile-complex-people-s-park-centre-and-10027238), Prof Tay said he had "no feelings" about it.

"Not about the building as such but my regret at the passing of an age which is much more truthful, and replacing that with kitsch and prettification, which I don't respect," he said.

He cited the example of South Beach, a much newer kid on the block a stone's throw away from the Golden Mile Complex.

The project, which opened in 2015, is one of Singapore's largest mixed-development projects, housing two towers, a hotel, retail and office spaces, as well as four conserved buildings. This includes the former Non-Commissioned Officers' Club, and a cluster of three blocks, which served as the venue for the first national service enlistment in 1967.

But Prof Tay said this particular attempt at blending the old with the new may not have worked, calling the project an "unsympathetic design response".

"You have a historical building in the front which harks back the 1950s, and then you have this new building behind it, which is maybe late 20th century, and they're not talking to each other," he said.

"The newer one is very mechanistic and aggressive, whereas the old building has a certain kind of charm – with its roof, sunbreakers, brick walls."



A rare iron-traction gate lift in the Quadrant. (Photo: Dawn Kua)

### **BALANCING BETWEEN SENSITIVE CONSERVATION AND SUCCESSFUL REJUVENATION**

But arriving at the right balance between keeping the old while making way for the new is not always easy, according to Prof Kong.

Apart from the Government needing to consider the desires of private developers and owners, as well as the need for public infrastructure, there are also voices from the ground, calling for buildings to be conserved due to their historical and heritage value, said the author, who wrote *Conserving Urban Heritage: Remembering the Past in a Developmental City-State*.

"When there's a shortage of space, the balance becomes very tricky and needs to be considered very carefully. Balancing all these views is an art, not a science. There is no formula that says 'under these exact conditions, we must conserve or tear down'. Because every specific instance is different in the balance of history, architecture, of development potential and so forth," Prof Kong said.

"To balance sensitive conservation and successful rejuvenation, each building and site has to be considered in relation to its history and past."

One possible solution could be to tender and develop sites using a dual-envelope system, with bids evaluated based on both prices as well as concept proposals. According to one property analyst, such a method may become increasingly used, as old buildings and infrastructural needs cross paths.

"The dual-envelope system helps to protect the precinct outlook (where) you need not conserve any buildings, but you must make new buildings to be constructed and developed doesn't kill off the surroundings," said Desmond Sim, Research Head for Singapore at CBRE.

"But we've also seen some dual-envelope tenders that involve conserving the existing built environment, such as South Beach. I think that's a modern strategy for adaptive use ... to conserve the built environment, the brick and mortar, but at the same time you can use it for a modern way."

Meanwhile, The Quadrant seems to have been successful on both counts, being both sensitively conserved and successfully rejuvenated. It currently houses The Black Swan, a 1920s-styled restaurant, and a co-working space, which takes up three storeys.

"Creatives love co-working spaces and they love to have it in old places largely because it's in a place that's creating new from old, so it gives them inspiration," said Mr Low. "We've got a number of fintechs here, so a friend of mine from the banking industry said the fintechs in this 80-year-old building will probably be the ones who will disrupt the new guys in the new buildings - in this old space they'll come up with the best new ideas."

But the quest to move with the times while remaining sensitive to the past will continue to be a challenge faced by modern Singapore.

"Sometimes the outcome of a conservation project will have multiple voices which lean on the side of the positive and negative," said Prof Kong. "The challenge for us as a society and people is to try and find the balance so many more projects have voices that lean on the side of the positive."

"It will be very difficult to hope or aim for projects that will always have 100 per cent people happy with them. That's just in the nature of a democracy."

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