

Place-making and Identity in Singapore: The Role of Integrated Planning and Our Built Heritage

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Imbuing a sense of identity and conserving memories

For a small country with a short history of nationhood, Singapore has done well in its efforts to build a sense of identity through conserving our built heritage. The history of modern Singapore's built environment chronicles the stories of settlers who came to these shores, marking the change and evolution of a nation and

its identity. The heritage of our built environment goes beyond visual richness or projecting a distinct multi-ethnic society; it also forges our city's memories and imbues a sense of history.

From the early days of national monuments to the conservation of districts and historic sites, the emphasis on identity and conservation of our built heritage is an integral part of urban planning. How did conservation become integrated into planning and how has our understanding of identity evolved?

The search for identity and the journey of conservation in Singapore began with small steps, through the efforts of many dedicated individuals from the public and private sectors. This brought about the transformation of a uniquely Singapore urban landscape, characterised by historic districts and refurbished shophouses as part of an overall city design objective to create a contrast to the new skyline and provide urban relief. Yet it was also

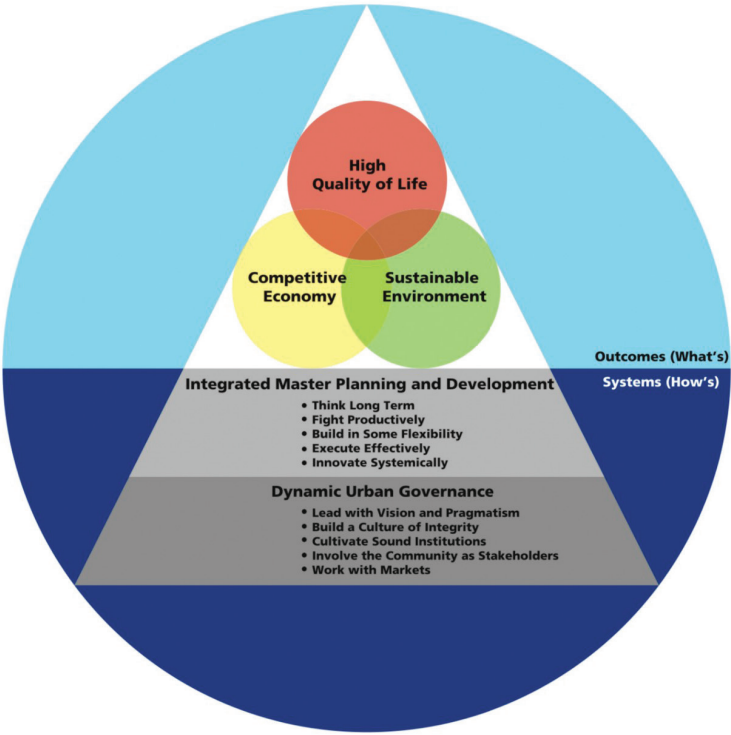


Figure 1. The Singapore Liveability Framework.

crucial that such efforts were guided by the public sector’s initiatives to allow building conservation to evolve in step with pragmatism and market considerations, hence ensuring its sustainability through the years.

As encapsulated in the Singapore Liveability Framework (see Figure 1), the key principles that have sustained this effort through the years include the ability to execute developmental plans effectively, working with the free market and engaging private developers, and involving communities as stakeholders. Developed by the Centre for Liveable Cities, the framework describes successful liveable cities as those that are able to balance the trade-offs needed to achieve the outcomes of a high quality of life, a sustainable environment, and a competitive economy. This is

based on strong foundations of integrated master planning and execution as well as dynamic urban governance. Within this framework, the built environment and architecture of a city provides character and identity for a sense of place and is a key factor in achieving the mentioned outcomes.

There are several milestones in the nation’s conservation journey as it pursues identity-building. Firstly, there was the launch of the Conservation Master Plan in 1989, backed by strong political support in the 1980s and 1990s. Secondly, there was the formation of the Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP) and the launch of the Identity Plan in 2002. Thirdly, the role of public engagement and place-making has been growing in recent years (see Figure 2 for a timeline of milestones).

KEY CONSERVATION MILESTONES IN IDENTITY BUILDING

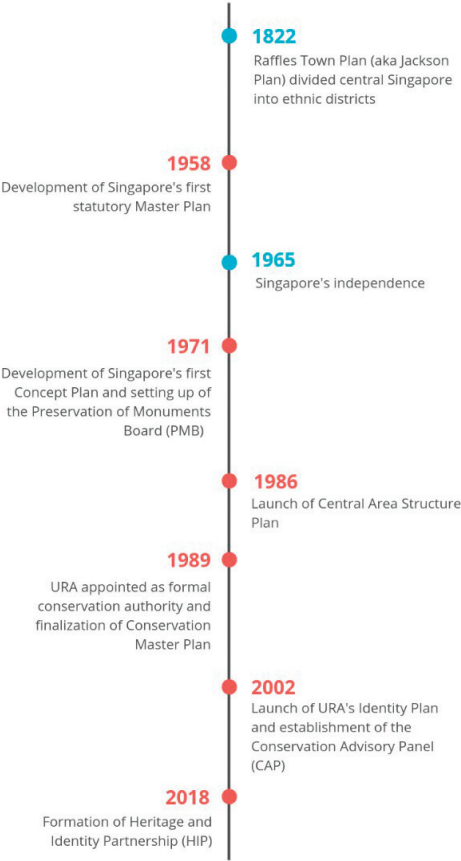


Figure 2. Timeline of conservation milestones in Singapore’s identity building. Adapted from CLC Urban System Studies “Past, Present and Future: Conserving the Nation’s Built Heritage”.

Setting the trajectory for conservation in Singapore

To understand the origins of conservation, one needs to go back to the 1822 Raffles Town Plan (also known as the Jackson Plan), which detailed the allocation of land to ensure orderly growth and created a grid for the road network on both sides of the Singapore River. The plan also divided Singapore, primarily its central area, into ethnic districts. Each of the ethnic districts had its own unique architectural style that would come to define the settlement's urban design. This distinction in style left its mark on conservation efforts a century later, and the unique architectural elements of the shophouses would also come to feature in modern conservation.

Under Singapore's first statutory Master Plan in 1958, 32 buildings were listed as historic buildings and monuments. This was the first listing of sites for future preservation by a state agency, which was then the Singapore Improvement Trust.

At the point of Singapore's independence in 1965, the government had approached the United Nations to address the need for long-term planning, resulting in Singapore's first Concept Plan in 1971. In this plan, the case for conservation was proposed by experts and highlighted as part of the overall urban renewal efforts, despite the dominant economic imperative for urban redevelopment and resettlement of residents. The Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) was set up in 1971 as the authority to recommend sites and monuments for protection and to respond to the growing consciousness of the value of conservation in

safeguarding the history and forging the identity of a nation. One of the first tasks was to identify and place the first eight national monuments under PMB's protection. The choice to protect religious and public buildings was deliberate, as these were less contentious buildings that represented different but important parts of Singapore's religious and cultural history.

While the city was not ready for large-scale conservation, there were successful demonstration projects spearheaded by the Urban Renewal Department [now Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)] and the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (now Singapore Tourism Board), to refurbish selected state-owned properties, including the shophouses along Cuppage Road, Murray Terrace and Emerald Hill Road. Although they were not gazetted for conservation, the foundation for conservation had been laid.

Conversations and debates began to centre on expanding the preservation of monuments to the conservation of districts. The first breakthrough came in the form of the 1986 Central Area Structure Plan, which provided an avenue and a systematic approach for integrating conservation into future land use planning (Figure 3).

After years of staging the ground, the time had come for necessary governance structures to sustain the path of conservation. In 1989, URA was appointed the formal conservation authority. Khoo Teng Chye, who was then director with the Ministry of National Development's Strategic Planning Division, summed up why URA was the most appropriate conservation authority:

"Not every development authority makes a good conservation authority. [URA] is an agency that is committed to conservation, but at the same time they are in charge of development and so the agency had to sort out the contradictions within itself

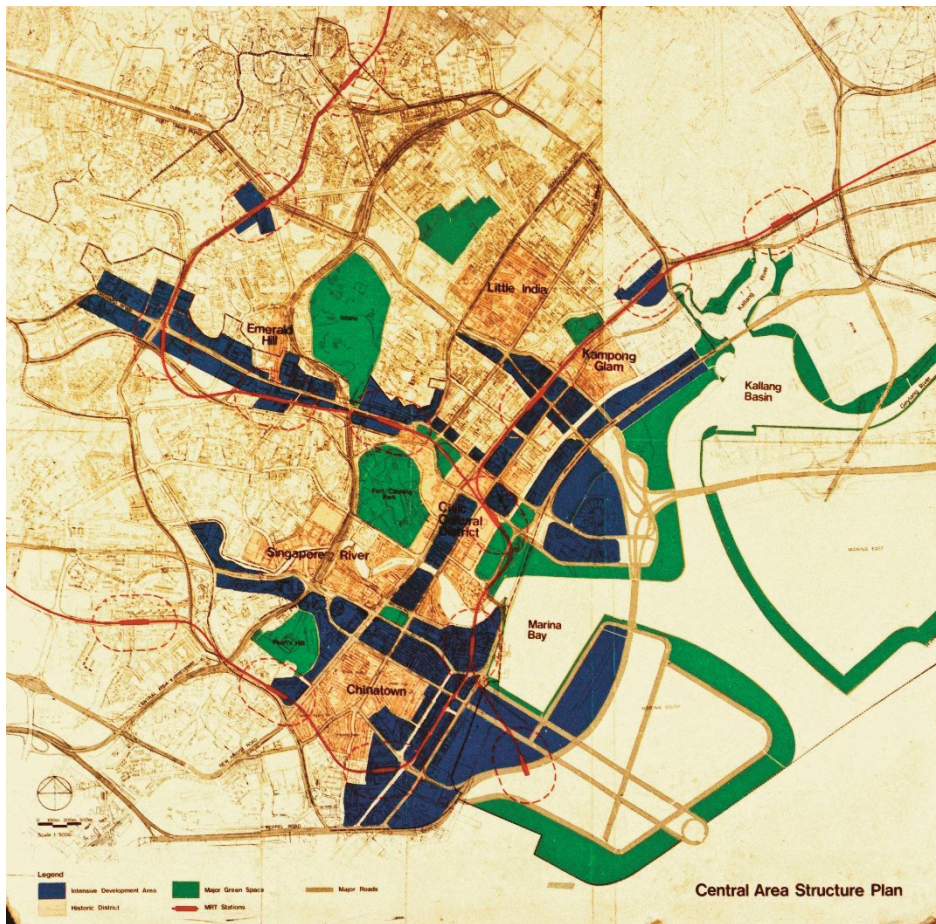


Figure 3. 1986 Central Area Structure Plan detailing conservation areas (light brown) and intensive development areas (dark blue). Image courtesy of URA.

and balance out when to demolish or preserve, and because they are strong in wanting to preserve, they will come up with good ideas about how to preserve, which is what happened.”

With an amendment to the Planning Act in the same year, URA was granted the authority to designate conservation areas and to create and enforce detailed conservation guidelines. The Conservation Master Plan was finalised in 1989 and seven conservation areas were gazetted—Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Emerald Hill and the Heritage Link, which were also identified in the Central

Area Structure Plan of 1986. Five new areas were included—Blair Plain, Beach Road, River Valley, Jalan Besar and Geylang. This resulted in 5,200 conserved buildings by 1993. Today, the number of conserved heritage structures has grown gradually and steadily to over 7,200 buildings, 72 national monuments and 99 historic sites.

Beyond conservation: The search for identity

In the new millennium, a Concept Plan Review was initiated by URA in 2000 which led to two significant initiatives launched in 2002 for identity building and heritage conservation in Singapore.

Firstly, the Minister of National Development announced the formation of the Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP). Its two-fold role was to recommend buildings for conservation and to promote greater public education and understanding of gazetted built heritage. The panel consisted of members from varied backgrounds, including educators, developers, architects, journalists and doctors with a keen interest in conservation. Between 2002 and 2010, CAP convened 39 meetings and evaluated over 2000 buildings.

Secondly, the Identity Plan was launched by URA. It was a significant move for two reasons. The first was that the plan reflected the shift in thinking with regard to the importance of history and identity in Singapore. Since the critical mass of buildings to be conserved had been met, the attention now turned to the unique qualities of various areas around the city and how best to retain their characters and activities, including green and nature spaces. The Identity Plan was unique in that it pushed conservation and planning to consider the identities, overall charm, character and activities of each identified area. Going beyond conservation, there was a need to review the development strategy to examine what could be done to retain the charm and character of places that had evolved over time and which held a special place within the hearts of the local communities. The aim was to ensure that such

places would be safeguarded in tandem with development and progress.

The second significant reason was that extensive public consultations were carried out through focus groups (known as Subject Groups). These groups comprised professionals, representatives of interest groups and laypeople who were tasked to study the proposals in the plan, conduct dialogue sessions with stakeholders and consider public feedback, so as to form recommendations such as amenities people hoped to see in the areas. The exercise engaged 35,000 visitors to the exhibition at the URA Centre and received feedback from 4,200 people.

The Identity Plan proposed 500 shophouses for conservation study, many of which were built in the 1950s to 1970s and reflective of a more modern style. As a result of this process, areas of Balestier, Joo Chiat, Tiong Bahru, Lavender, Syed Alwi and Jalan Besar were conserved with public support. Following a public consultation exercise, URA finalised the proposals to be incorporated into the 2003 Master Plan.

Creating new memories for the future: Public engagement and place-making today

Starting from the early 2000s, historic buildings had been conserved, restored and adapted for modern use. As historic districts became an integral part of the cityscape, there was also greater public awareness of the value of conservation as a process that fosters the collective memory

of a nation and a shared identity. As Lily Kong succinctly puts it, “This evolving society and community with a more involved citizenry, characterises a nation coming of age” (Kong 2011). The result is a focus on placemaking and the integration of social and historic memory into the conservation value of buildings and places, especially for community landmarks and sites. In this way, the local value of the place is able to naturally evolve into becoming more community- and place-centred, leading to distinctive identities for each district. Now, for instance, permanent and temporary road closures to facilitate community programmes and festivals are commonplace and enhance the local flavour of districts. Increasingly, these efforts are spearheaded by the private and people sectors, including community groups and organisations such as Urban Ventures at Keong Saik Road (Figure 4), One Kampong Gelam in Kampong Glam and Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association (LISHA) in Little India, working closely with URA and Land Transport Authority. This has also raised the profile of non-governmental groups involved and accords them with a growing voice and role in the forging of their own local identities through place-making efforts.

Greater public engagement and involvement in conservation planning resulted in more universal participation in the discussions on conservation plans. The National Heritage Board has also embarked on various significant initiatives such as the 2015 Heritage Survey, the formation of a Heritage Advisory Panel and Our SG Heritage Plan, which is Singapore’s first master plan for the heritage and museum sector. URA and NHB have since worked closely on large-scale public engagement conservation efforts. This also runs parallel with other public efforts and initiatives such as those of the Singapore Heritage Society and heritage enthusiasts.

In August 2018, URA announced a new Heritage and Identity Partnership (HIP) to support public-private-people collaboration in shaping and promoting Singapore’s built heritage and identity. HIP took on an expanded role from the Conservation Advisory Panel, which had ended its last tenure in May 2018. In addition to taking on the panel’s role in providing advice to URA on conservation, HIP will contribute ideas to sustain the built heritage and memories of places as the city continues to develop. The term ‘partnership’ in HIP emphasises the evolving way in which the wider community is engaged, thus signaling a more community-centric approach to conservation and fostering of identity.



Figure 4. Closure of Keong Saik Road for street activities. Image courtesy of URA.

The journey continues— what's next?

Today, vibrant historic districts in Singapore have a place in the hearts of Singaporeans while modernisation has at the same time been able to keep on course. It is time to ask, what is next for conservation, especially for our post-independence buildings?

Some notable efforts in the conservation of modern buildings include the 1930s Singapore Improvement Trust's Art Deco apartments in Tiong Bahru, and the Asia Insurance Building, which was Southeast Asia's first skyscraper when it was built in 1955. Post-independence buildings like the Singapore Conference Hall and the Jurong Town Hall have also been preserved as national monuments owing to their significance as distinctive symbols of Singapore's nation-building days and formative years.

Looking ahead, it is likely that the long-term, systematic process of conserving Singapore's heritage buildings will continue with the same social and economic considerations as today. Undoubtedly, this will require appropriate training, programming and the adoption of modern technology to keep heritage conservation relevant.

Guidelines from the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) suggest that buildings over thirty years of age can be considered for conservation. By those standards, it is plausible to imagine the safeguarding of Toa Payoh Town Centre, built in the 1960s, the first satellite town centre designed by the Housing Development Board (HDB), or the Singapore Indoor Stadium, completed in 1989, which assumed a symbolic significance for its sheer physical size and iconic architecture characterised by a diamond-shaped roof.

Even with this ongoing conversation, there is a need to ensure continuous improvements to the existing historic districts. Further experimentation to expand pedestrianised streets and to realise car-free and people-oriented historical districts, or the revamping of back lanes as connection points to help with pedestrian overflow on crowded weekends can be looked into.

We could also perhaps consider how to better celebrate the rich heritage of our black-and-white homes across the island. Beyond Tiong Bahru and Dakota Crescent, how can Singapore's early public housing estates be conserved while at the same time taking into consideration the new housing needs of younger generations of Singaporeans? With the physical fabric of these neighbourhood districts saved, it now falls upon communities to keep these districts relevant. Innovative approaches such as the integration of commercial, social and civic sectors have been a mainstay of Singapore's approach to conservation and such approaches will continue in the future as we tackle these questions.

Conclusion

Today, the public's dialogue, engagement and active involvement in conservation and identity issues echo the early days of Singapore's conservation story, when new perspectives and emergent mindshare formed the catalyst for kick-starting the seminal initiatives and plans. Significantly, this reflects a shift in how the public can be engaged, the rising importance of public knowledge about the buildings and sites that are close to their hearts, and reveals how site history and social memory—beyond architectural significance—is a key element of redevelopment plans.

In the journey of conservation and the search for identity, there are key decision points, trade-offs, players and enabling factors that pave the way for systemic innovation to make conservation an integral part of planning and a significant part of the Singaporean consciousness. Undoubtedly, a unique built environment and the community's attachment and memories of places are reflective of the history of the nation and the love it engenders in its people, which in turn are distinguishing contributors to identity.

There are still challenges ahead. How can we balance the right trade-offs so that conservation does not stop with the buildings of each generation's collective and social memory? How can we ensure that our historic and conserved districts continue to stay relevant, vibrant and close to the hearts of Singaporeans and visitors, in tandem with the ever-changing pulse of the city?

As we approach these future challenges, we are optimistic and confident that the same spirit of innovation and foresight that have characterised our conservation efforts so far will continue and result in a unique landscape that anchors the identity of Singaporeans and distinguishes Singapore's cityscape from other places around the world. □

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