CELEBRATING OUR URBAN HERITAGE

STRENGTHENING URBAN HERITAGE IN SINGAPORE: BUILDING ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS AND CIVIC IDENTITY

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1. Introduction

There is much in the research literature to suggest that urban neighborhoods are a key domain for the transmission of shared values and norms. Such environments offer a wide range of familiar and historical landmarks that may be important in creating and sustaining a strong sense of belonging and attachment to urban life. In a rapidly urbanizing and globalizing world, these familiar landscapes hold opportunities for valuing community and enhancing the city's cultural heritage and unique competitive edge.

A number of European cities have used cultural heritage as a strategy to improve their future prospects. One of the key challenges of global urban development is to preserve structures and sites that promote identity and continuity of place. Preserving the cultural landscape can help generate civic pride and foster a sense of empowerment. From a social dimension, cultural heritage is about society's capacity for self-reflection. From an economic perspective, heritage conservation offers opportunities for cultural tourism, which is among the fastest growing segments in the international tourism market and a motor for economic development.

According to the Travel Industry Association of America, visitors to historic and cultural-attraction sites spend more and stay longer than the other types of US travelers; they spend US $631 and 4.7 nights away from home per trip compared to the average US traveler's spending of US $457 and 3.4 nights. Several cities have begun to invest in place-identity and heritage tourism. Philadelphia, for example, is investing US $12 million in private and public funds to make heritage tourism a lynchpin in its economic development strategy. Many cities in Europe have also started to include heritage resources on their urban regeneration agendas.

The aim of this article is to explore the notion of cultural heritage from the perspective of Singapore. As a city-state with the goal of becoming a world-class city, Singapore has increasingly included conservation of its urban fabric as an important part of its strategic planning. In the most recent 2001 review of its long-term Concept Plan, a new focus on place-identity is introduced, with the focus on developing Singapore into 'a dynamic, distinctive, and delightful city'. Its search is for identity in familiar places as manifested in the diversity of the city-state's multi-ethnic people and cultures. The task of achieving this objective is not restricted to planners but presented as an opportunity to engage a wide range of stakeholders in communities. The public is invited to share and discuss ideas and possibilities of how cultural heritage assets in their neighborhoods can be enhanced and retained. Empirically, this community planning process offers enormous opportunities to take stock and reveal the heritage assets in neighborhoods that define the collective memory, or in the words of local poet Koh Buck Song 'are gifts to a lived memory'. It is the local milieu which is fundamental in people's everyday lives. Singapore's neighborhoods are vital in offering new bases for city 'branding' and place-identity in the global urban world. From a theoretical perspective, Singapore's community engagement emphasizes heritage issues as part of the public agenda and integrates participatory conservation programs within the planning process, adding empirical substance to the broader theoretical discourse on how public policy helps shape landscapes and their meanings.

This article is structured in three broad parts. The first section provides a contextual overview of the purpose and development agenda of urban conservation in Singapore. The second section is a detailed examination of the Singapore development plan, the myriad of heritage attractions and resources in its neighborhoods, and public attitudes towards those assets. It also discusses the potential of anchoring such cultural landscapes in the heritage inventory, and the challenges to date. The final section summarizes the main contributions to reinforcing and pursuing the sense of place-identity and heritage conservation in urban development.

2 . Committing to urban conservation

Many rapidly modernizing cities are unwittingly demolishing their heritage resources and character to nourish modern development, in the misguided belief that urban development and heritage conservation are incompatible. This need not be the case, as Singapore's urban redevelopment illustrates. Modern Singapore started its history as a British colonial trading port in 1819. Growth of the port and liberal colonial immigration policies soon attracted traders and migrant laborers from China, India, and neighboring countries, and encouraged the settlement and development of multi-ethnic neighborhoods (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Arab, European), several of which remained after decolonization and independence in 1965. Rising prosperity during those years saw the construction of many buildings for government, commerce, and housing, from bungalows to the ubiquitous Chinese-style rows of "shop houses" that combine workplaces, retail stores, and residences in single small structures.

Since its political independence, Singapore has thrived as a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual society comprised of three major ethnic groups: Chinese (79%), Malay (14%), and Indian (6%), along with a residual category of 'others' (mainly Europeans and Eurasians). As a nation, Singapore has rapidly grown from a developing to a newly industrializing country, transforming itself from an old colonial port to a modern city-state. Its present goal is to become a world-class city. As with many other rapidly urbanizing post-colonial cities, Singapore has demolished many of its historic buildings to make way for new modern skyscrapers. Its oldest boys' school, Raffles Institution (built in 1837-41), for example, was bulldozed and on its site now stands Singapore's tallest hotel and mega-shopping mall, Raffles City (1986). Other traditional buildings such as the Chinese-style two- to three-story "shop houses" in Chinatown were similarly demolished to accommodate high-rise residential towers to house a growing population. Urban conservation was not explicitly emphasized as redevelopment took precedence. Making a point about the overriding demands of degraded built infrastructure, poverty reduction, and unemployment, the chairman of Singapore's National Heritage Board recounts the priorities:

> There was simply no time to rearrange the furniture in the sitting room while pressing matters have to be attended to in the kitchen. Indeed on quite a number of occasions there were fires in the kitchen that had to be put out promptly. In the 1960s and 1970s it was not surprising that conservation did not feature highly, if at all, in our national agenda (quoted in *Roots, A Newsletter of the Singapore Heritage Society*, 1994, p2).

However, on entering a period of rising economic globalization, there are increased efforts to reinforce and integrate past heritage with present developments in Singapore. As with many other cities, the influences of globalization have fostered the rise of heritage conservation as a growing need to preserve the past, both for continued economic growth and for strengthening national cultural identity. According to a *Foreign Policy* magazine survey of countries in 2000, Singapore is the world's most global country. This fact has prompted the government to emphasize urban heritage to promote a sense of national identity. As early as 1988, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister C. T. Goh made this point:

> We are part of a long Asian civilization and we should be proud of it…We should be a nation that is uniquely multiracial and Asian, with each community proud of its traditional culture and heritage.

There is greater appreciation that the buildings and traditions of Singapore's multi-ethnic communities add to the visibility of its cultural roots and territorial identity. As the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) stated in 1994, the built heritage represents 'our history, captured in brick, plaster, wood, and stone…to lose these architectural assets would be to erase a living chapter in our history'. History and territorial identity are important for establishing "place specialization" in a rapidly urbanizing and globalizing city. The URA recently argued that

> …we need to create a sense of place, to enable collective memories and vibrant communities to thrive, to tug at the heartstrings of our traveling companions. These days, more than 200,000 Singaporeans work overseas. And many more travel frequently…

In the postmodern era, leading urban policies are now pronouncing that heritage and identity can play an important role in Singapore's efforts to construct a modern city, while still preserving 'the distinctive Asian identity in Singapore'. More and more urban researchers worldwide are arguing that culture is the business of cities — the basis of their competitive advantage. Sir Peter Hall, in a recent analysis of the cultural economy of cities has described 'culture…as the magic substitute for all the lost factories and warehouses, and as a device that will create a new urban image'. Besides strengthening the city's symbolic images, heritage conservation opens a new perspective for Singapore's economy. As the Singapore Tourism Task Force Report concluded, 'to woo tourists back to Singapore, Chinatown and other historical sites would have to be conserved'. The tourism value of heritage conservation is amply illustrated in analyses of heritage tourism in Europe. Culture and tourism are interdependent; cultural resources can be developed into new tourist products.

Tourism is one of the growing pillars of Singapore's economic growth. Tourism receipts for 2002 are estimated at S $9 billion (SGD) and the long-term goal is to grow visitor arrivals and tourism receipts by 8% per annum. The latest travel brochures have begun to describe Singapore as a city where "east meets west" and ancient traditions blend with modernity. The search for citizenship identity, and the economic pragmatism of product development for competitive advantages are powerful persuasions for a new emphasis on conservation. Both factors provide greater definition to and implementation of heritage conservation in urban growth.

3. Discovering neighborhood heritage assets

To empower urban conservation efforts the Planning Act was amended in 1989. In the same year, for the first time a Conservation Master Plan for Singapore was prepared, stressing the place of conservation in Singapore's urban planning and halting the further loss of historic buildings to urban redevelopment. Parallel efforts have since been launched to recover the built heritage and place identity. By the early 1990s, dozens of "shop houses" in historic neighborhoods were saved from the fate of demolition, and instead were renovated and conserved. Thus far, more than 5600 buildings are preserved and 0.2% of Singapore's land area is under conservation protection, primarily neighborhoods with colonial, early period, and formal architecture such as Chinatown, Little India, and Kampong Glam.

As conservation develops, the planning process is increasingly focused on balancing two important considerations: a) the need for new development to position Singapore as a modern 21st century business city, and b) the need to conserve Singapore's built heritage. The challenge is to create a thriving world-class city where Singapore is not just a workplace but also a home.

This has generated a renewed policy commitment to heritage conservation for emphasizing place identity, articulated as a key element in Singapore's Revised Concept Plan 2001, which states:

> Identity will become an important aspect in our planning process. We will continue to look into conserving more buildings in order to retain the collective character and memory of places.

The Concept Plan is the long-term strategic development plan for Singapore. It has guided Singapore's physical development since 1971 and is revised every 10 years. Beyond sustaining economic growth, the 2001 Concept Plan dwells on vernacular buildings and places (collective character and memory) in making Singapore a dynamic, delightful, and distinctive city. In emphasizing vernacular building design, Singapore joins with many postmodern urbanists in acknowledging that conservation should go beyond the monumental relics of church, state, and monarchy to include the process of celebrating the more familiar and beloved cultural heritage in our everyday lives.

In pursuit of a sense of the familiarity of urban places and their cultural heritage, Singapore's planners have increasingly tapped the city's population for suggestions and views when searching for places to conserve. This participatory planning process provides a conduit for residents to express their memories of places and identify the living culture in everyday spaces and neighborhoods. As unfolding in the current review of the Singapore Master Plan 2003, the next step in Singapore's development planning cycle, local communities are invited to help establish strategies for identifying and conserving cultural assets in the city's development.

The Singapore Master Plan — Identity Plan

The Singapore Master Plan is a short-term development plan, revised once every five years within the framework of the long-term Concept Plan. Public feedback gathered from focus group discussions and civic dialogues on Concept Plan 2001 have indicated that people highly value place-identity and community heritage. According to the URA, they would like to make heritage a national issue, like health and education.

More importantly, they are for conservation to go beyond the physical dimension to include cultural expression:

> The Concept Plan should conserve more of the built heritage and nature areas in Singapore…conservation should embrace not just buildings from the colonial and other early periods but also more recently developed areas which are rich in culture and character. (*The Straits Times*, 24 Nov 2000)

Among the various approaches to the issue, the draft Identity Plan released in July 2002 as a preliminary input to the Master Plan 2003, emphatically pointed to enhancing and retaining familiar places. It proposed include conserving local landscapes of collective memory that are part of the Singapore that citizens love, including to:

- Retain the old world charm of familiar neighborhoods: Balestier, Tanjong Katong, Jalan Besar, Joo Chiat/East Coast Road;
- Retain and reinforce the existing character and scale of the built environment;
- Recognize and allow existing community activities to continue and thrive.

A central issue is how to preserve a sense of place and belonging in the context of growing demands for land uses (the population of Singapore is projected to grow from the present 4

million to 5.5 million people within the next half century). What can we do to retain the history, character, and vitality of older urban spaces as they continue to grow and evolve? These are not uniquely Singapore's dichotomies. Cities around the world face the same dilemmas in heritage conservation: 'what to include and what to exclude?' 'Well loved by whom?' Too often we are reminded of government-driven conservation becoming no more than artificial replicas of the past, managed landscape spectacles designed to impress, emptied of life and with cultural memory lost.

In the framework of place specialization and participatory planning, opportunities for allowing ordinary people's interpretations and recommendations to be voiced offers encouragement to greater community-based processes in urban conservation. Citizen participation allows the images and meanings of places to develop from the bottom up. This is a primary method for enhancing local ownership and tolerance of urbanity. As Singapore's Minister for National Development explains:

> All of us who have a stake here ought to have a say in how we want this place to develop. The more we are involved in the planning, then the more aware we are of the constraints we face and the trade-offs we need to make this little red dot [Singapore] livable and comfortable. (*The Straits Times*, 21 Jul 2001)

A salient emphasis is on partnerships where the public planning authorities are willing to listen, engage and work jointly with the community in conservation efforts. As expressed by the URA in the draft Identity Plan exhibition brochures:

> We need you (the public) to play your part. Please share your views, opinions and ideas to help refine the plans. Based on your feedback, we will refine and develop the…Identity Plan further. The implementation of the ideas and possibilities will require the joint partnership of public and private sectors with the community.

With such a strong endorsement, it is no surprise that public consultation represented by far the most extensive level of pre-draft consultation on conservation plans. More significantly, it marked a significant improvement over the government's usual way of making plans. As the Minister of State for National Development stated during the opening of the public consultation and exhibition of the draft Identity Plan on July 23, 2002:

> Instead of pre-determining how a place should shape up according to our plans, we are now looking at how what is already on the ground…can be enhanced.

The sites presented in the Identity Plan were consolidated with help from community leaders, government officials, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). According to reports in the local media, 'the feedback has been rolling in' with crowds coming mostly around lunch time to look at the Identity Plan. Such self-conscious identification engenders pressure to recognize, support, and leverage the energy and ideas of people to enhance the cultural assets of their neighborhoods and sustain the continuing quest of identifying whose and what heritage to conserve. It indicates that people are interested in voicing their views, sharing their suggestions, and fully expressing themselves in public dialogues. More than 20,000 people from different areas and walks of life — students, professionals, business people, housewives — have given feedback through URA's website, exhibition feedback sessions, and other public discussions in the first two months of the plan's exhibit, including suggesting additional places and identity nodes for potential heritage conservation.

By the end of the three-month public exhibition, more than 35,000 people had visited the exhibits, of which about 13,400 were online visitors. About 4,200 of these visitors submitted their feedback through survey forms, emails, and letters, with 97% of them endorsing the proposals in the plan. A large majority of respondents (87%) indicated that more should be done to retain certain trades

and businesses that characterize their neighborhoods. There appears to be a general excitement and desire to retain place-identity, lending legitimacy and support to the urban planners' quest for enhancing and expanding conservation efforts.

The planning authorities were urged to act fast and prepare a comprehensive list of buildings for possible safeguarding. They have proposed to study the recommended areas in greater detail and collaborate with relevant public agencies, the private sector, and the community to work towards complete plan implementation by 2015. The challenge is to keep alive familiar neighborhoods and enhance their unique heritage quality as the city continues its widespread and fast-paced development. The reality is an increasing need to identify and situate these traditional places within the modernizing world. Such conserved areas can provide the architectural grammar of local culture and history, a certain magic of permanence and of keeping the past alive in the present and future. A further challenge is the place-bound economics to ensure that the conserved neighborhood as a destination for tourists does not destroy what attracts residents in the first place. Some observers have described tourists as 'landscape eaters' and the tourism industry as an essentially exploitative process.

From the viewpoint of urban conservation, there is strong impetus to suggest that investing in distinctiveness cannot be the lone result of statutory action. Any 'endeavor of identity' must embrace the community. It is widely understood that on an individual level, the richness of places and people's attachment to them grows from their everyday use of these spaces. The richness of places in familiar neighborhoods constitutes opportunity for a new definition of heritage assets in the conservation inventory. Each neighborhood has its place-identity. This heritage presents active, living cultural resources familiarized with social meanings invested in them by the workers and residents. These are important ingredients of collective sentiments, of the feeling that 'this is our place'.

4. Conclusion

Singapore's growing conservation activities, despite its unique conditions of development, raises wider issues in heritage conservation and participatory planning. Singapore clearly demonstrates that heritage conservation and modernity are not necessarily in opposition. Rather they are inseparably linked in what Clifford Geertz describes as the dialectical relationship between the 'search for identity' which looks back to the past, and the forward-looking modernity of 'demand for progress'. With increasing globalization, the 'search for identity' may be expected to play a larger role in urban development, bringing both economic growth and empowerment. The appropriation of economic benefits from conservation is a long-standing representation of the heritage conservation movement.

Conservation planning is increasingly used to justify the appropriation of historic buildings and revitalization of urban neighborhoods as products for generating economic growth, investment, and tourism. The attractions of communities are an increasingly significant factor in the spatial development of heritage tourism in many cities. Empirically, the familiar neighborhood offers enormous opportunities to take stock and reveal the heritage assets that define the collective memory. Singapore's conservation efforts to retain the identity of neighborhoods and other familiar places have revealed the wide appeal of heritage conservation, both to the government and the citizens.

Despite an initial lack of emphasis, conservation is today an integral aspect of Singapore's urban planning. The need for the conservation of Singapore's local heritage sites is as important as the need to maximize land development potential to position Singapore as a modern 21st century business city. The Singapore Master Plan 2003 — Identity Plan demonstrates that locally based identities are still highly important to most people. Perhaps, as many theorists have recognized, collective historical memories play a strong role in people's sentimental attachments to places and community identity. This role will only grow with the advance of globalization. In an

increasingly placeless and uncertain world, urban neighborhoods can play an important part in people's personal and social identity.

Investigating the sense of place-identity within communities, Singapore's conservation planning lends support for citizen participation in the search for local heritage. Partnership and open communication are important components. The URA view of the planner-community partnership in Singapore reinforces this sense of collaboration:

> The process will demand weighing conflicting factors very carefully...Having these open channels of communication, more than ever, is vital as we write a new chapter on conservation. Together.

People in any community consist of diverse groups representing a host of interests that may lead to conflicting opinions on issues, whose views should be heard and taken. These are tough issues with no ready answers, calling for adequate preparation and building of mechanisms to deal with constraints and risks. There is a wealth of literature on strategies for community participation, including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 1997 *Guidebook on Participation*. The Singapore search for identity in conservation underscores a common first principle of participatory development: the primacy of citizenship. It is one key strategy in the making of a distinctive city, making use of not just quantitative analyses of the urban fabric but also people's personal views and feelings, to identify the underlying qualities of the sense of place and attachment to locality.

The possibility of being involved in the conservation planning process opens new perspectives for strengthening the social fabric that allows ordinary people to become citizen-activists and community leaders. It is the starting point for working together to improve urban quality of life for all, especially when the public's feedback is considered and being incorporated in the draft Singapore Master Plan 2003. Closer consideration, however, raises an important issue inherent in heritage conservation: that what is considered to be of heritage value is subjective and very much temporally and contextually bound. This is because heritage has the power to stir emotions and reinforce group identities. Consequently, those who hold the power will often seek to shape the landscapes and their meanings. They are able to define what constitutes heritage and what elements of the past should be conserved.

Notwithstanding the great potential of heritage conservation in generating new social solidarities among the population, economic prospects and urban branding and "place marketing" cannot be ignored. Singapore in its effort to construct a modern city has given increasing emphasis to conservation of urban places and familiar neighborhoods, promoting participatory planning as a way to identify and strengthen the city's distinctiveness. Against the widening process of globalization, community participation in heritage conservation is one way of reinforcing residents' and workers' feelings of belonging to and identifying with the city. The URA's current commitment to enhancing heritage conservation in Singapore reflects an invitation to build local places together, a basic element in the making of cities in which people truly desire to live, work, play, and visit, and that promotes prosperity and improves the quality of physical and cultural life.

Planning Process of Singapore Master Plan 2003

Concept Plan 2001
Two focus groups were formed and public feedback was solicited through dialogues and surveys
Public response reflected that people value identity and built heritage which help to bind them to Singapore emotionally

23 July-22 October 2002

Identity Plan (Draft)

Parks and Waterbodies Plan (Draft)

Public Consultation

1. Subject groups

Three subject groups formed to study proposals under the Parks and Waterbodies Plan and Identity Plan to give more ideas

2. General public

Feedback channels opened up for the public to give ideas

3. Stakeholders

For selected areas under the Identity Plan, discussions with stakeholders will be held to discuss ideas and issues in greater detail

February to June 2003

Master Plan (draft)

Ideas from the public consultation on Parks and Waterbodies Plan and Identity Plan will be incorporated into the draft Master Plan

Draft Master Plan will be exhibited on a regional basis for further public comment from Februarv – June 2003

November 2003

Master Plan 2003

Target to gazette Master Plan 2003 by November 2003

Source: Urban Redevelopment Authority, Draft Identity Plan 2002 exhibition brochure

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