New assessment tool to help conserve post-65 landmarks

Findings from NUS study will guide policymaking to preserve heritage

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International Plaza, People’s Park Complex, and the Pit Li Show Complex were constructed after independence, these buildings may have a special place in Singapore’s history. Now the question of whether they and other “modern, post-65 heritage” buildings are worthy of conserving may be more objectively answered with a new assessment tool being developed by a team from the National University of Singapore’s OCSD Centre for Sustainable Asian Cities.

The project will also determine the qualities the structures should possess to warrant state protection. Findings from the ongoing two-year study, now at its mid-way mark, will help guide policymaking as Singapore looks to better acknowledge and embrace local architectural landmarks. To date, shopouses and black and white bungalows from the colonial era make up a large proportion of the 7,200 buildings conserved by the authorities.

Speaking to The Straits Times, the team noted the island’s lack of a formalised institutional approach to address the multiple challenges related to the potential conservation of mid-century mega-structures, many of which are multi-strata and privately owned. Battles over a building’s fate can be bitter, such as the one over the now demolished 1976 Pearl Bank Apartments designed by architect Tan Cheng Siong. A collective sale prevailed although the Urban Redevelopment Authority had deemed it worthy of conservation.

Architectural conservation specialist Ho Weng Him, the study’s team member, said: “To prevent another Pearl Bank style loss, we’re developing a framework and methodology such that when another similar case comes up, we have qualitative and quantitative indicators to draw from and a panorama we can immediately converge.”

The study’s research adviser and former director of the centre, Dr Lai Choo Maleke-Lee, said the task was urgent. She said: “We’re working towards preserving the historical continuum of our landscape from the 60s to the 80s, in this future city of ours. We can’t preserve everything but it’s important that we select the right representations.”

The assessment tool being developed could include:

- A formal roundtable and jury with representation of all ends of the development and conservation spectrum where pre-defined criteria will be tabled for discussion.

- An economic evaluation tool to assess the costs and long-term viability of conserving such structures.

In addition, the team will compile an inventory of buildings largely regarded by the architectural fraternity as worthy of evaluation and consideration.

The study was awarded a heritage research grant from the National Heritage Board last year. Mr Yeoh Kian Siang, NHB’s director of heritage research and assessment, said they hope that the project “will help inform the work of NHB and other public agencies by providing us a deeper evidence-based understanding of the issues related to the conservation of post-independence buildings.”

The team, which also compiles heritage conservation experts Joanne Wabobo, from NUS Depart-}

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Singapore’s missing chapter

These often overlooked buildings, as highlighted by a team from the National University of Singapore’s Centre for Sustainable Asian Cities, each have a role to play in the Singapore story.

1972 TANAM JURONG’S “DIAMOND” 63-66 Yang Kuang Road

Architect: Jurong Town Corporation (JTC)

The 21-storey blocks 63 to 66 in Yang Kuang Road were once the tallest flats in Tanam Jurong. The blocks and their “diamond-shaped, inward-facing common corridor” — designed to encourage community interaction — collectively form the shape of a diamond.

1975 APSN TANGLIN SCHOOL 443 Alexandra Road

Architect: Public Works Department (PWD)

Most of the nation’s classrooms are rectangular, so a primary school with hexagon-shaped classrooms is pretty rare. It was a product of a competition organised by the Ministry of Education and PWD to select school building designs from civil servant architects in 1975.

1978 PANDAN VALLEY CONDOMINIUM 2 Pandan Valley

Architect: Archurban Architects Planners (Tan Cheng Siong)

The condominium, with its distinct red-brick masonry, was one of the Republic’s first private condominiums to be constructed after the authorities introduced guidelines for condominium developments. Mr Tan’s design has been compared with that of Italian hill towns because of the lay of the blocks.

1973 GOLDEN MILE COMPLEX 5001 Beach Road

Architect: Design Partnership (Tay Kheng Soon, William S.W. Lim, Gan Eng Oon)

The multi-use development, famed for its stepped terraces, was conceived as a way to supplement the nation’s shophouse style of shopping and community interaction in Singapore. The complex was originally meant to herald a new era for the Beach Road area, with the authorities intending to have a “golden mile” of hotels, shops and luxury apartments.

1973 PEOPLE’S PARK COMPLEX 1 Park Road

Architect: Design Partnership (Tay Kheng Soon, William S.W. Lim, Koh Soo Chuan)

The complex, an example of Brutalist and experimental architecture, put the Benjamin’s architectural world map. To pay homage to the area, the architects worked to re-introduce the country’s energetic public spaces within the complex’s spacious atria.

1975 THE FORMER WING ON LIFE OFFICE BUILDING 150 Cecil Street

Architect: James Ferron & Partners

Originally the Wing On Life Building, the structure is now known as the AXA Building. Its pioneering design, among other things, features a column-free space internally its first storey is also home to a public thoroughfare — a feature now required for buildings in the Central Business District.