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That these historic shophouses continue to exist in modern-day Singapore is a result of efforts to conserve historically significant buildings and, more importantly, the historical and cultural meanings associated with these spaces. Cities are living repositories of the collective memories and cultural practices that continue to provide meaning and identity to their inhabitants, says the writer. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Singapore makes room for memories and heritage amid the jostle for space

Identity corridors help conserve the culture of a place in the midst of urban transformation.

Woo Jun Jie

In Victoria Street, the 16-storey National Library Building provides a sweeping view of the surrounding civic district. What often surprises visitors taking in the panorama is the large number of red-roofed shophouses in the area.

That these historic shophouses continue to exist in modern-day Singapore is a result of efforts to conserve historically significant buildings and, more importantly, the historical and cultural meanings associated with these spaces.

Such efforts are part of a more sensitive approach to urban planning that balances heritage conservation and urban development, reflected in the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Draft Masterplan 2025 unveiled in June. The URA announced a thematic framework that will improve the way it assesses buildings' significance – broadening the scope to consider what they mean in Singapore's story, and to Singaporeans.

Perhaps, some lessons were drawn from the controversy over the old National Library building in Stamford Road, which was demolished in 2005 to make way for the Fort Canning Tunnel. The red-brick building had been described by officials back then as having no special architectural value. But this ignored intangible aspects – the loss of a place that held special memories in the collective Singapore mind. The result was a public outcry.

This is understandable. Buildings and public spaces are imbued with memories and meaning for citizens who use these spaces.

At the same time, given its small size, Singapore also needs to set aside land for housing, industry, commerce and green spaces.

The reality is that not all of these needs can be fulfilled at the same time. Singapore often needs to weigh the intrinsic value of an existing site against the potential benefits of redevelopment. Sometimes, sentiment prevails.

For instance, public concerns over plans to redevelop Dover forest for residential use had prompted policymakers to adjust these plans such that only 11ha of the 33ha would be used for housing.

In other cases, current and future needs trump nostalgia. The Dakota Crescent estate was demolished to make way for new residential developments despite public campaigns to conserve the estate.

In both instances, our urgent need for public housing can come into conflict with other needs such as the desire for green and heritage spaces. While the former can easily be quantified in terms of families who benefit from being able to purchase their flats, the latter is much harder to quantify.

This does not mean that heritage spaces are less important than public housing or commercial spaces. They serve as physical anchors for our collective memories and markers of our national identity.

How then can Singapore ensure that its culture and history continue to be preserved in the urban landscape? And why is this important in the first place?

A CITY NEEDS BOTH BONES AND SOUL

When we think of a city, the image that comes to mind is invariably soaring skyscrapers and robust infrastructure – the "bones" of a city.

These bones are important for the functioning and success of global cities such as Singapore, with urban liveability and efficiency being important "pull" factors for businesses and financial institutions.

However, cities are more than just a collection of buildings and infrastructure. They are living repositories of the collective memories and cultural practices that continue to provide meaning and identity to their inhabitants.

Such meaning is intertwined with the physical environment where lives are lived out. Take the old National Library building – it holds memories for many as the place of their formative years, where they had spent time studying, hung out with friends, perhaps met their first girlfriend.

So it is inevitable for a sense of loss to emerge whenever a building or neighbourhood is redeveloped. This was also the case, for example, when Marina South was closed to become Gardens by the Bay, taking with it collective memories of steamboat sessions and kite-flying.

Identity corridors are designated stretches that highlight the unique identities and qualities of specific areas or neighbourhoods. For example, the Historic East corridor includes culturally rich and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods such as Geylang Serai, Joo Chiat and Katong.

Singapore's rapid growth has also accelerated the physical transformation of its urban landscape. Gone are the kampungs that dotted the island, their place taken by high-rise public housing, malls and offices.

In some instances, brand-new spaces were created to cater to socio-economic needs. The Marina Bay district was planned as an extension of the Central Business District, which struggled to accommodate the vast number of banks and businesses that sought to establish their headquarters and operations in Singapore.

THE GLOBAL MARCH OF CITIES

Such loss of heritage due to the needs of a developing society is not unique to Singapore. A 2024 report by the World Monuments Fund identifies rapid urbanisation and overtourism as top threats to heritage conservation.

In Hong Kong, a 19th century neoclassical building in Central, known as Queen's Building, was demolished in the 1960s as commercial development accelerated in the district. In London, the former Museum of London has been slated for demolition to make way for new office buildings.

In cities across the world, historical sites and buildings have been demolished and redeveloped to make way for other urgent socio-economic needs. The loss of these historical sites can sometimes come with a loss of identity, as collective memories are no longer anchored in physical spaces but relegated to rumination and reminiscence.

At the same time, cities cannot survive without economic growth and development. As Singapore continues to grow as a major economic and financial hub, it will need to preserve aspects of the city that reflect citizens' memories, identity and aspirations.

IDENTITY CORRIDORS – BEYOND PHYSICAL SPACE

This will require a sensitive approach to urban planning and redevelopment that preserves the essence of the Singaporean soul and identity that often resides in our buildings and spaces, while at the same time ensuring sufficient space for other land-use needs.

Singapore has already made significant headway in this regard. In its Draft Masterplan 2025, URA placed a strong emphasis on identity corridors, a concept that was first introduced in the 2022 Long Term Plan Review.

Identity corridors are designated stretches that highlight the unique identities and qualities of specific areas or neighbourhoods. For example, the Historic East corridor includes culturally rich and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods such as Geylang Serai, Joo Chiat and Katong.

By linking up these neighbourhoods and enhancing infrastructure for walking, cycling and public transit in these areas, the Historic East corridor provides a more cohesive and integrated experience of an area's heritage and identity. This, in turn, can generate greater interaction between visitors and residents, and interest in the traditional crafts and food that continue to be found in these neighbourhoods.

This latter point is particularly important. Efforts at heritage conservation can sometimes result in the conservation of a physical space, but not the activities that take place within them.

Observers have pointed out that the conservation of Hong Kong's Central Market building has come at the expense of its historical heritage. While the building itself has been conserved and refurbished, it is bars and restaurants that now populate this space rather than traditional food and crafts.

So a challenge is to ensure that heritage conservation encompasses the conservation of neighbourhoods, rather than standalone buildings, and highlights cultural practices rather than physical spaces alone.

THE ENCOURAGING GOLDEN MILE STORY

Public support showing the importance of a place's cultural meaning in tandem with design can be seen in the case of the Golden Mile Complex. The complex, built in 1973, was designed by Singaporean architects in the dramatic Brutalist style of the time. However, by 2006, it had fallen on hard times and there were suggestions to demolish it.

This prompted a petition by a group of architects and academics calling on the URA to conserve Golden Mile Complex. The petition received almost 1,400 signatures.

In 2021, Golden Mile Complex became the first modern large-scale, strata-titled development to be gazetted for conservation by the URA.

Certainly, some would argue that the rejuvenated Golden Mile Complex will not be the same as before, with medical suites, offices and retail shops taking the place of Thai establishments and indie cinema The Projector.

Nonetheless, this is a good first step towards preserving our heritage buildings. The next step would be to consider ways to preserve not just physical spaces but the unique crafts and activities that take place within these spaces.

Whenever I find myself in a heritage building, I've often thought: If only these walls could speak, what wonderful stories they would tell. Through sensitive urban planning, our built environment can highlight and enhance our rich cultural heritage, foster a sense of belonging, and honour the many life stories that have unfolded within them.

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