

A Historic Heart:

How Heritage Districts Can Make Cities More Liveable

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Singapore Skyline showing the unique juxtaposition of old and new.
Source: Erwin Soo @ www.flickr.com/photos/erwin_soo/8463911183

A sunny afternoon with friends, lounging on a cosy balcony or in the garden; cycling or walking along tree-lined malls and streets; strolling in a public square or by the waterfront; breathing fresh air in broad green parks; catching a tram to visit museums filled with art and artefacts, browsing quaint shops in historic quarters; admiring street art, artists and buskers; taking in the beauty of the city skyline.

When we think of people getting away from the daily grind of urban life to relax and enjoy themselves, such images come to mind, against which the city itself seems to serve merely as a scene backdrop. But a city's built environment – its architecture, buildings and layout – plays a key role in shaping its character and identity, and are part of what gives it a distinct sense of place.

In the course of urban renewal, old streets and buildings are often razed for the sake of modernity; in the name of productivity and progress, green fields are frequently redeveloped as concrete structures. But such a view of urban development risks stripping a city of its soul and identity: the streets become mere thoroughfares,

and urban centres become mere stepping stones, with always a better, newer one to move on to. Can we instead take the view that a city's historic character is the X-factor that contributes towards making it a unique place in which people want to live, work, play and spend their lives in?

A city with a historic heart: guiding principles

For historic districts to contribute to making a city more liveable, some principles may be useful in guiding their conservation, planning and integration into urban life. Singapore's own urban development experience is a good illustration of these principles brought to life.

First, we need to recognise that historic buildings help make a city's urban landscape distinctive. Singapore's conservation buildings and national monuments reflect our history and identity as a city with a diverse heritage that includes

Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian and European influences. These older conserved buildings, juxtaposed with newer, still-evolving areas in the city, manifest our unique identity as a progressive young nation that is nevertheless still rooted in its history.

Second, we need to provide physical and social spaces within historic districts for people to gather. Such spaces can be interwoven among conserved buildings to become an integral part of everyday urban life, community spaces that are well used by a wide range of people for a variety of activities.

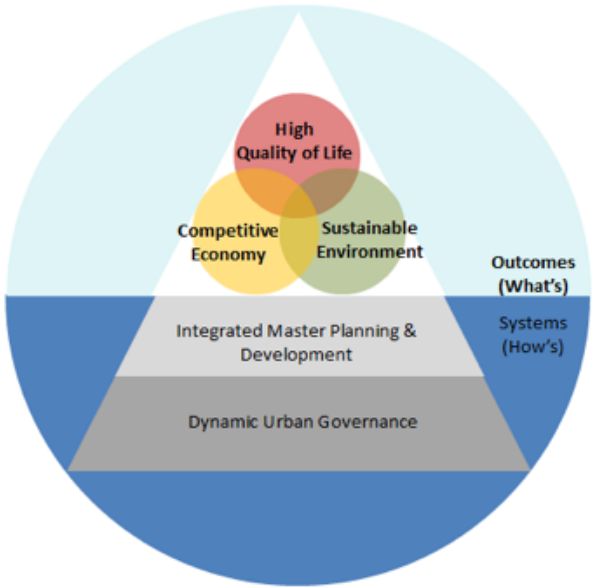
Third, historic districts need to be supported by integrated, long-term planning and appropriate programming in order to stay relevant and to help nurture inclusive neighbourhoods and communities.

Shaping a unique cityscape

Singapore’s mix of modern and heritage buildings creates a unique cityscape that anchors us to our vibrant and plural history. The signature image of the Singapore River – with conserved warehouses at Boat Quay in the foreground and tall modern office towers rising dramatically right behind them – has characterised our Central Business District (CBD) at Raffles Place for decades. It attests to our economic progress from a colonial outpost to a thriving global financial and business hub. Similarly, the Chinatown historic district, framed by modern offices along Shenton Way and Cecil Street, is yet another image of this dynamic blend of old and new, East and West.

The Singapore Liveability Framework

Developed by the Centre for Liveable Cities, a knowledge centre for urban liveability and sustainability, the Singapore Liveability Framework describes successful liveable cities as those that are able to balance the trade-offs needed to achieve the three key outcomes of: 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 these outcomes.



Such low-rise historic districts also provide urban respite from a landscape otherwise dominated by high-rise skyscrapers.



View of Boat Quay and the Civic District with its old conserved shophouses, colonial government buildings and modern skyscrapers.

Source: Miguel Bernas @ www.flickr.com/photos/timberwolfstudios/2544935298/

By day, these historic districts attract office workers; at night, visitors both local and foreign throng to a diverse offering of cuisines, sights, sounds and smells that present a different, softer face to the city and provide a high quality of life.

Vibrant economic activity continues apace in these historic districts, ensuring their continued relevance. Many small-medium enterprises, start-ups, entrepreneurs and creative professionals prefer locating their offices in the historic districts because of the colourful and stimulating environment they provide. Shared co-working spaces further boost the dynamism and variety of productive activities situated in these districts and contribute to Singapore's economic competitiveness.

The distinctive rows of traditional shophouses¹ prevalent in historic districts from Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Little India to secondary settlements such as Joo Chiat and Geylang form a

distinctive architectural backbone. Their facades, combining elements of different cultural building styles – such as the wooden frieze under the roof eaves derived from Malay kampong houses and Chinese green tiled roofs above covered walkways² – are physical reminders of our multi-ethnic heritage.

On a city-wide scale, national monuments – including historic places of worship, former colonial government buildings and public institutions – have become civic icons and a source of pride. With more than 7,000 historic buildings gazetted for conservation, Singaporeans have a concrete sense of place and heritage to call our own, strengthening our social resilience.

The way forward for our post- independence built heritage

During the 1980s, when Singapore was undergoing a rapid and sweeping transformation, some members of the public and heritage non-governmental organisations (NGOs) felt that the city risked losing its soul if it continued to demolish the old built landscape at a relentless pace; that it could end up as a generic modern city.³ On the other hand, others felt that scarce land could be better used for the high-rise expansion of the CBD or downtown public housing.

Singapore's planners and tourism officials at the time were conscious of these concerns, and considered the trade-offs very carefully. Through an ongoing process of discussions amongst institutions, different options were weighed. Eventually the integrated

master-planning process ensured that there would be enough land to sustain future development, and the conservation of heritage districts in the city centre became viable. The Singapore Government's 1988 Committee on Heritage explained the value of historic buildings and districts to a fast-changing urban landscape: "It is clear therefore that the conservation of buildings, structure and other districts which provide the signposts from the past to the present is critical to the psyche of a nation."⁴ Singapore's first conservation areas were gazetted in 1989.⁵

Singapore's conservation efforts have since come a long way. The city's vibrant historic districts and secondary settlements are well-frequented and hold a special place in Singaporean hearts and minds.

Efforts have also been made to conserve some of our modern buildings, including the Asia Insurance Building (Southeast Asia's first skyscraper at its completion in 1955) and the Singapore Improvement Trust's art-deco apartments in Tiong Bahru from the 1930s. Iconic post-independence buildings such as the Singapore Conference Hall at Shenton Way and Jurong Town Hall have also been preserved as national monuments, reflecting milestones from the early days of nation building and the challenges and triumphs of independent Singapore's formative years. Are there other buildings in Singapore that also commemorate our pioneering years as a nation?

In accordance with guidelines by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), buildings over thirty years old can be considered for conservation. This guideline suggests that we can consider more of Singapore's unique post-war buildings for conservation: for example the Toa Payoh Town Centre (the first satellite town centre to be built and designed solely by the Housing and Development Board in the mid-1960s), or the Singapore Indoor Stadium, which opened in 1989.

Many buildings of global distinction have also come up in Singapore over the past twenty years, some of which have been recognised by international architectural accolades. Will such buildings, which include the distinctive Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, which opened in 2002 and whose Concert Hall was listed as one of the "World's 15 Most Beautiful Concert Halls" in 2014, merit conservation in the future because they reflect Singapore's aspirations and ongoing evolution as a city-state? Can our way forward as a city be one that ensures the Singapore cityscape remains unique and expressive of our story, representing the different stages of growth as we moved from Third World to First?

Turning historic districts into car-lite shared spaces

In its conservation efforts, Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has made the historic districts more pedestrian-friendly and accessible to shared public use. The historic districts, which were gazetted for conservation in 1989 and represent some of the oldest quarters in Singapore, are Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India and Boat Quay. Pedestrianised streets, such as Pagoda Street and Terengganu Street in Chinatown, are now bustling social and commercial spaces, particularly during festive periods such as the Lunar New Year. In the Little India historic district around Serangoon Road, selected side streets lined by traditional shophouses and trades have been designated as car-free zones on Sundays since 2014. Open spaces such as the urban square at Kreta Ayer Complex in Chinatown and the lawn at Istana Kampong Glam (former residence of Malay royalty in Singapore) provide welcome breathing space amid tight streets in the historic districts.

Streets in historic districts have become urban assets for people to enjoy and explore, instead of spaces that favour or privilege vehicular traffic. For example, periodic weekend road closures of Club and Ann Siang Streets in Chinatown has allowed al fresco dining activities to spill over onto the street, so patrons can dine in car-free safety amid colourful

historic surroundings. Some historic streets have also become spaces for community events and gatherings, and nodes for social bonding. Having vibrant activities at street level means Singaporeans and visitors alike can have more diverse options for leisure, creativity and even shopping beyond the usual malls or major commercial complexes in

Saving the skyline in New York and Chicago

Cities such as New York and Chicago have taken decisive steps to conserve buildings from different periods: buildings that represent milestones in urban development and which contribute to the unique character of each city. New York's high-rise Lever Building in midtown, built in 1952, was designated a city landmark in 1982. The towering 28 Liberty Street, formerly One Chase Manhattan Plaza (completed in 1962), was gazetted as a landmark in 2008.⁶ Chicago has also preserved some early modern skyscrapers in the Chicago Loop (the city's downtown commercial centre), such as the Inland Steel Building (completed in 1957) and the Richard J Daley Center (completed in 1965).⁷ Such buildings testify to the physical and social transformation of their respective home cities, and form part of their distinctive skylines.



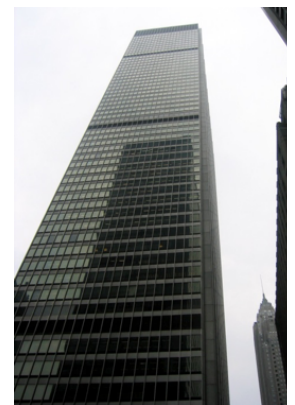
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1. Daley Center.

Source: Chicago Architecture Today @
[www.flickr.com/photos/
chicagoarchitecturetoday/6308234200/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/chicagoarchitecturetoday/6308234200/)

3. Inland Steel Building in Chicago.

Source: Teemu08 @
www.flickr.com/photos/teemu08/7183857941/

2. Lever House in New York.

Source: Gabriel de Andrade Fernandes @
www.flickr.com/photos/gaf/15726775064/

4. 28 Liberty Street in New York.

Source: Wally Gobetz @
www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/172955806/

the city. Such experiences, shared with family and friends, can help Singaporeans nurture important memories and a greater sense of rootedness.

As more Singaporeans appreciate and visit our historic districts, other public spaces can be created. Our historic districts feature narrow streets flanked by unique clusters of buildings, reflecting the flow of urban life in the past. Such spaces could be preserved or adapted to enhance the experience of these districts, bringing together a vibrant range of commercial, social and civic uses: a microcosm of the city in a small space. Cities around the world have experimented with pedestrianised streets and squares with promising success. As Singapore goes increasingly car-lite, such people-oriented spaces can become key features in our urban landscape, contributing towards an even more sustainable environment.

Looking ahead, can we find new ways to expand our current network of pedestrianised streets in Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam, into more fully realised, car-free, people-oriented districts full of life at street level?

Building inclusive communities and neighbourhoods

The integration of historic districts into the everyday fabric of urban life is fundamental to nurturing inclusive communities in these areas. Little India for example, is often cited as the most authentic of Singapore's historic districts: its temples and shophouses, its vibrant, bustling street atmosphere, and the variety, value and relevance of its businesses draw visitors and locals

alike. Little India offers unique trades and services not commonly found in other parts of the city. Likewise, the traditional shops on Arab Street in Kampong Glam are renowned for their wide array of textile offerings, which differ from shop to shop. At the same time, nearby Haji Lane now teems with small “indie” retailers and food and beverage outlets.

Local business associations such as the Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association or Chinatown Business Association have invested much effort into making festival occasions a lively time for their respective districts. But activities organised by independent operators are also playing a greater role. In Chinatown's Keong Saik Street, Urban Ventures (a ground-up placemaking initiative) has organised regular street closures, attracting people to the conservation district with fun events and F&B offerings.



Street closure along Keong Saik Street spearheaded by Urban Ventures

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Cultural institutions, by organising festivals, art markets and heritage trails in the historic districts, also help to build up awareness and a sense of community. The Indian Heritage Centre or the Malay Heritage Centre have injected life into the streets of Little India and Kampong Glam

respectively through their active programming, which features exhibitions, events and festivals that are closely related to the history, communities and stories associated with their respective historic districts.

On another front, the National Arts Council's Arts Housing Scheme has enabled state-owned buildings

within the historic districts to be adapted for arts and cultural activities ranging from performing to the visual arts. These buildings, such as a row of historic shophouses at Kerbau Road in Little India's Arts Belt and another row of shophouses in Chinatown's Smith Street, now host cultural groups such as dance, drama and musical associations, and host activities ranging from workshops and

Creating car-lite historic zones

Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, has a comprehensive pedestrian network that is often cited as a model example of a car-lite city. Having evolved over time from a few streets in the historic core, this network now consists of some 99,770 sqm of walkable paths and bicycle lanes.⁸ Visitorship to Copenhagen's historic downtown has since increased substantially. Historic cores in other European cities such as Vienna (Kärtnerstrasse and Graben) and Munich (Kaufingerstrasse and Neuhauserstrasse) are also successful examples. With easier access and greater space for interaction, more people are drawn to visit the historic districts and their attractions. This also helps to enhance public awareness of the city and its place in history, society and the hearts and minds of the people.

Renowned Danish architect and urbanist, Jan Gehl (b. 1936) explains: "We can see that in city after city where conditions for life on foot are improved, the extent of walking activities increases significantly. We also see even more extensive growth in social and recreational activities... better conditions for bicyclists invite more people to ride bikes, but by improving the conditions for pedestrians, we not only strengthen pedestrian traffic, we also – and most importantly – strengthen city life."⁹



Copenhagen's pedestrianised streets in the historic downtown forms a total network of 99,770 sq m.

Source: Adriana @ www.flickr.com/photos/adrimcm/7397045600/



Vienna's famous pedestrianised street in Graben.

Source: Szilveszter Farkas @ www.flickr.com/photos/szilveszter_farkas/251250344/

performances to the visual arts, providing unique opportunities for artists, audiences and visitors to interact, within these culturally important historic areas of the city.⁹

As these examples highlight how and varied programming, from the simple to the sophisticated, can bring vibrancy to community life in these districts, attracting visitors of different backgrounds and interests. Indeed, the vibrant historic districts of cities such as George Town, Penang, and New Orleans, USA have become well known destinations in their own right as well as for landmark events such as the George Town Festival and Mardi Gras, which are popular with locals and visitors alike.

Towards an integrated local planning approach to historic districts

How can we bring together historic buildings and public spaces, with both contemporary and traditional uses, in ways that nurture inclusive communities and vibrant neighbourhoods? Planning is crucial: how these districts, and their immediate surrounding areas, are planned for the long term will make a difference. Both hardware (e.g. buildings and infrastructure) and software (e.g. programming and social value) factors will determine how liveable and sustainable these districts remain. One key consideration is that historic districts thrive when there is a resident population within and around them. Initiatives that encourage more people to live in these districts may need to be introduced.

In Singapore's historic districts, the traditional mix of uses no longer exists: at present, they are geared mainly towards retail and commerce. The second floor of shophouses, historically used as housing, could yet be opened up to a new generation of younger residents. One possibility might be to introduce student housing into these areas, particularly in the vicinity of educational institutions. Land parcels zoned for residential use could also explore new housing typologies that integrate residents into the day-to-day fabric of these districts. Some cities also locate government offices in heritage buildings, ensuring that the uses of these buildings are not left entirely to market forces.

The injection of such newer developments into historic districts can also enhance liveability by providing more options for housing and job opportunities. This can reduce distances travelled between work and home, strengthen the neighbourly character of the district, bring new life into surrounding areas, and render the district as a whole, more walkable and pedestrian-friendly.

One approach to be explored could be appointing a team of local planners dedicated to historic districts and their surrounds to provide a more holistic planning approach so that these districts thrive further as part of our urban landscape. Such a team can provide a deeper ground-up understanding of how best to nurture the social, economic and cultural life of these districts. Instead of treating a historic neighbourhood as just another niche in the city, can we consider bringing essential city functions into historic neighbourhoods for them to thrive and remain relevant to everyday life?

Residents add life to historic districts

Many cities have found that having an anchor population resident in historic districts helps ensure a varied range of commercial activities and street life after working hours. The historic districts of Lyon in France and Barcelona in Spain, for example, have schools, child-care facilities, clinics and other day-to-day shops catering to their live-in populations,¹¹ who hail from a range of economic backgrounds. These cities use a variety of policy

levers to provide affordable housing in or around historic neighbourhoods.

In New York City, an integrated local planning approach was taken around the High Line, which is an urban park connector on an abandoned elevated rail line. Through new zoning ordinances and community consultation, the historic Meatpacking District was rejuvenated with new residential units (across the price range), cultural institutions, and schools. At the same time, some of the original meatpacking industry buildings were retained and converted into commercial art galleries. This ground-up planning approach has succeeded in transforming the area into a dynamic, inclusive neighbourhood.¹²



View of New York City's Highline showing mixed use developments clustered around it.
Source: Michael Koh

Conclusion: a unique cityscape is our lasting legacy

A liveable city is one where a high quality of life, sustainable environment and competitive economy are made accessible to all its residents. Historic districts contribute towards the liveability, accessibility and attractiveness of a city. Conserved historic buildings and their related urban spaces help anchor a city's distinctive identity, providing residents with a sense of rootedness and civic pride, while also attracting visitors from afar.

Providing shared public spaces in these districts encourages interactions that nurture a thriving communal life and social integration. But all these outcomes call for the active and thoughtful participation of local planners and programmers, and effective partnerships between the public and private sectors, to ensure that the built environment can contribute to Singapore's liveability as a city, with authentic, thriving neighbourhoods and inclusive communities. We owe it to the generations of Singaporeans who have done so much to help build our city, to ensure that our unique cityscape becomes our lasting legacy. □

Notes:

1. Singapore's traditional shophouses represent a form of urban architecture with roots in the Raffles Town Plan of 1822, which stipulated that buildings in the settlement must be linked by an overhanging verandah that became known as the five-foot way. Traditional shophouses, which may be two or three storeys high, usually combined business and residential functions, with a shop or warehouse on the ground floor and rooms for the owner's family or tenants upstairs.
2. Urban Redevelopment Authority. *Conservation Guidelines*. Singapore, 2011. From www.ura.gov.sg/uol/uol/-/media/User%20Defined/URA%20Online/Guidelines/Conservation/Cons-Guidelines.pdf. Retrieved December 2016.
3. Lily Kong. *Conserving The Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore*. Singapore, 2011.
4. Ibid.
5. The first conservation areas, with a total of more than 3,200 buildings, to be gazetted as such in 1989 were: Chinatown (Telok Ayer, Kreta Ayer, Tanjong Pagar and Bukit Pasoh), Little India, Kampong Glam, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Cairnhill and Emerald Hill.
6. David Dunlap. "A Landmark From the Start, Now Getting Its Official Due" in *The New York Times*. New York. 19 March 2008. Accessed 30 Jan 2017.
7. Commission on Chicago Landmarks. *Chicago Landmarks*. Chicago, 2016. From www.cityofchicago.org/content/dam/city/depts/zlup/Historic_Preservation/Publications/Chicago_Landmark_Name_List_Oct2016.pdf. Retrieved January 2017.
8. Gehl Architects, *Public Spaces in Copenhagen*. Copenhagen, 2010.
9. Jan Gehl. *Cities for People*. Washington DC, 2010, p. 19.
10. Lily Kong, Ching Chai-ho and Chou Tsu-Lung. *Arts, Culture and the Making of Global Cities: Creating New Urban Landscapes in Asia*. Northampton, 2015, pp. 191 – 211.
11. Didier Repellin. Heritage and Sustainable Urbanism: Case Studies from France, Singapore and the Region [Lecture]. 5 May 2016.
12. Friends of the Highline. *About the High Line*. January 2017. From www.thehighline.org/about. Retrieved January 2017.