



Stories from the

HISTORIC EAST

A Tapestry of Colours and Traditions



Identity Corridor Guide



A historical map of Singapore, showing the island's urban layout and natural features. The map is overlaid with a grid of red lines representing Identity Corridors. The word 'SINGAPORE' is visible at the top left of the map. The background of the entire page is a solid orange color.

Stories from the Historic East:

A Tapestry of Colours and Traditions

This series of **Identity Corridor Guides** was commissioned in 2024 to support URA's public engagement and co-creation efforts across the Identity Corridors, which were first introduced at the Long Term Plan Review of 2022.

A city without history and identity is a city without soul. Since the launch of the 2001 Concept Plan, URA has designated Identity Nodes and Corridors islandwide, so that these areas of significance and their unique characters can continue to be enjoyed by future generations.

Identity Corridors are longer stretches of urban fabric and natural spaces in the city that have special significance to Singaporeans. Found along old roads, rail lines, and waterways, they tell the story of the city's evolution.

It is envisioned that the research and stories unearthed through this documentation effort will help inform and inspire the placemaking strategies for each Corridor. It can also serve to guide the community in the co-creation of public realm enhancement projects and other initiatives along the Identity Corridors.

URA would like to thank all current and former residents and stakeholders, as well as historians and academics who have generously contributed their time, research, and insights to this publication.



Geylang Road



Geylang Serai Market



Masjid Darul Aman at 1 Jalan Eunus



Koon Seng Road

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The Red House



Block 1 Upper East Coast Road

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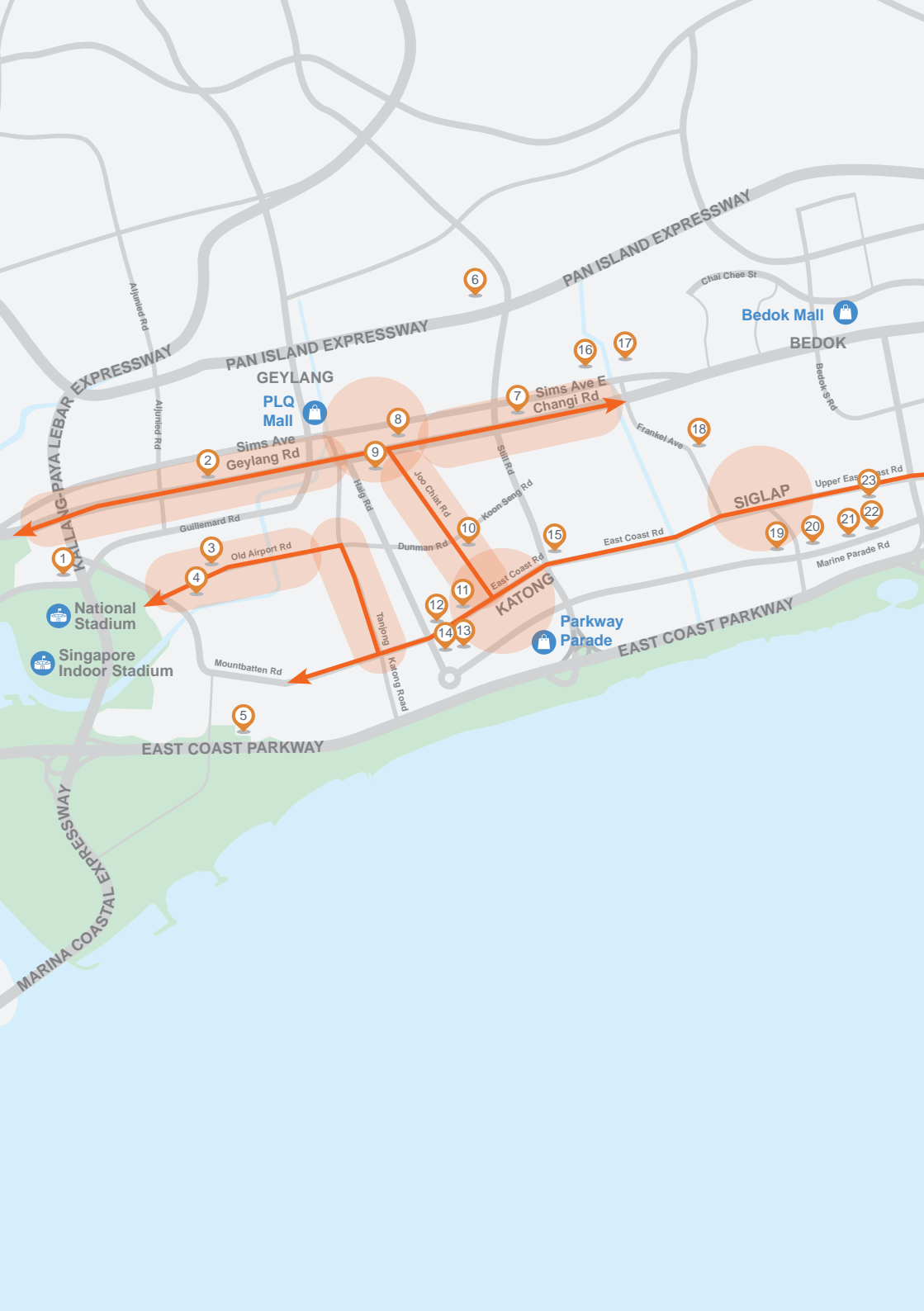
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SIGLAP

BEDOK

Bedok Mall

Bedok Mall

National Stadium

Singapore Indoor Stadium

Parkway Parade

EAST COAST PARKWAY

EAST COAST PARKWAY

KATONG

MARINA COASTAL EXPRESSWAY

Ajuntai Rd

Ajuntai Rd

Guillemard Rd

Old Airport Rd

Mountbatten Rd

Hill Rd

Tanjong Katong Road

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Dunman Rd

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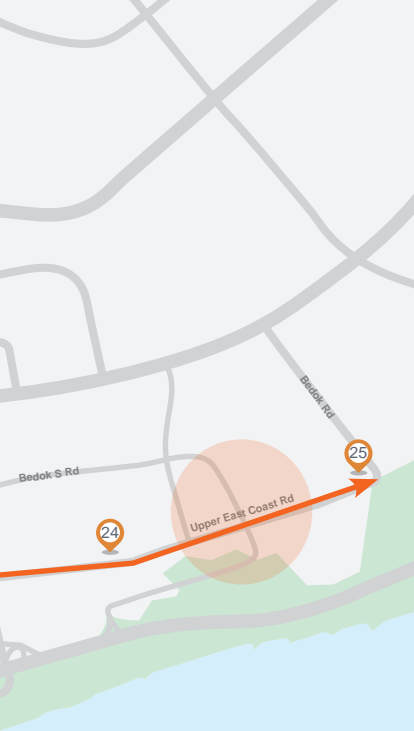
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INTRODUCTION

It is easy to understand why “Easties” take special pride in their unique neighbourhoods. From the rich heritage of Katong and Siglap to the colourful streets of Geylang Road and Joo Chiat Road, the East is a special blend of old and new that many have come to love and cherish.

This diverse urban tapestry, dubbed the “Historic East”, has undergone continual evolution over 180 years. Ever since the first trunk road was established along modern Geylang Road in the 1840s, the surrounding landscape has evolved from rural plantations into urban settlements.

Supported by extensive street block plans, conservation, and urban design efforts over the years, the network of old streets and precincts here have largely retained their historic charm over the years. The designation of the Historic East as an Identity Corridor in 2022 is the latest effort to involve local stakeholders and residents in shaping the identity of the area for more authentic and sustainable outcomes.

Geylang and Changi Road

Among the oldest trunk roads, Geylang Road and Changi Road formed the original corridor towards the East, linking the city to plantations and rural settlements. Rapid urbanisation in the early 1900s brought diverse communities together, resulting in the rich blend of cultures and traditions in the present landscape.

There are still many temples and clan activities within the *lorongs* (Malay for “lanes”) of Geylang, while Geylang Serai continues to thrive as one of the oldest Malay settlements. Amidst these vibrant districts showcasing Singapore’s rich multicultural legacy, young entrepreneurs are bringing fresh energy to these historic areas.



Chong Tuck Tong Temple

Further east along Changi Road, the spirit of *gotong royong* (Malay for “community cooperation”) that once defined the way of life in old kampongs is still strong. This is seen among the neighbourhood shops, businesses, and close-knit community.



Geylang Road



Geylang Serai

Old Airport Road

Before Kallang Airport was built, this area was a black tidal swamp that formed the meeting point of the Kallang, Geylang, and Rochor rivers. When the airport opened in 1937 on reclaimed land, it was celebrated as the “aviation miracle of the East”.

The expansive flat, open land paved the way for the National Stadium and Sports Hub. As major sports and entertainment centres, these landmarks shaped the area’s sporting identity. The former runway of Kallang Airport became Old Airport Road, where nearby Old Airport Road Estate is known for its strong community ties.



Dakota Crescent

Katong-Joo Chiat

An enclave of heritage shophouses with a thriving “hipster” culture, Katong-Joo Chiat was already a sought-after residential address of choice in the 1920s. Drawn to seaside living, wealthy families flocked to the area and built opulent homes and recreation clubs.

Today, the neighbourhood is often associated with the Peranakan and Eurasian communities. But in the past, it was also home to the Jewish, Ceylonese, Bawanese, and Arab communities who contributed to the area’s cultural legacy and urban identity.

East Coast Road and Siglap

Constructed in 1902 as a laterite road linking Katong to Bedok, East Coast Road ran along Singapore’s eastern shoreline linking the estates of Mountbatten, Opera, Frankel, and Telok Kurau.

In the 1970s and 1980s, land reclamation reshaped the shoreline, turning it into an inland corridor. However, its coastal association remains strong. Amidst lush greenery, former seaside villas and seawall fragments are still visible today. Meanwhile, park connectors provide easy access to East Coast Park.

Once home to fishing villages and coconut plantations, Siglap has also evolved with the times. This laid-back area belies a remarkable past that features a Sumatran prince and a Japanese fishing community. Siglap is a gem waiting to be rediscovered.

Upper East Coast

The “red cliffs” of Tanah Merah were once considered the island’s eastern edge before land reclamation. Not far away, Bedok Corner still serves as a popular dining spot for Singaporeans. This part of East Coast Road was once dubbed “the most famous seafood belt in Singapore”.

Here, and elsewhere along the Historic East, there are well-established eateries, each serving local cuisines and favourite eats that have become Singapore’s heart and soul.



East Coast Road



Geylang Road

Malay Burying Ground

Tanah Merah Road

Map dated 1846.

GEYLANG

FIRST ROAD FROM TOWN TO EAST

One way to tell the history of the East is to start with the story of Geylang Road. As one of the first trunk roads of Singapore, it connected the city centre to the eastern side of the island.

This route also facilitated transportation and development, capitalising on the flat, low-lying terrain along the watersheds of the Kallang, Geylang, and Rochor rivers.

Further east, Changi Road connected Geylang to Changi Village. Before the 1920s, it was a muddy track passing through coconut plantations.

Between 1911 and 1924, the road was renamed Changi Road and Geylang Road as part of broader developments. By the 1930s, it became central to Singapore's eastern corridor as suburbanisation took off in the area.

After Singapore became a British free trade port in 1819, land beyond Singapore Town, including Geylang, was cultivated for cash crops such as cotton, coffee, gambier, and pepper.

Perhaps Geylang's most notable agricultural venture was Perseverance Estate. It was owned by the wealthy Arab Alsagoff family who produced lemongrass and citronella from the 1860s to 1880s for the essential oils industry.

The estate's distilling factory further linked the name of Geylang to *kilang* (Malay for "factory"). When the essential oils industry declined, Malay and Chinese farmers on Perseverance Estate shifted to cultivating coconut, rubber, and vegetables, as well as poultry farming. However, Geylang continued to be associated with lemongrass, or *serai* in Malay.



Coconut plantation on the East Coast, 1890s.



Geylang Road, Singapore, 1920.

Geylang Serai Village

Geylang Serai has long been linked to Singapore's Malay community. An 1844 map, marking a "Malay Burying Ground" in the upstream tributaries of the Geylang River, is one of the first documented indications of a settled Malay presence.

In the early 1840s, the British dispersed the floating villages from the Singapore River, and the Malays and Orang Laut resettled at the mouths of the Kallang and Geylang Rivers, today known as the Kallang Basin.

Around this time, Javanese Muslims returning from Hajj were hired as contract labour on Perseverance Estate. Many of these pilgrims worked in Singapore in order to pay off debts incurred during their journey to Mecca. Some ended up settling down here. They established places of worship, strengthening Geylang Serai's Muslim identity.

From the 1920s, many Malay kampong communities were relocated due to the expansion of Singapore Town and the construction of Kallang Airport. Some families moved east of Geylang Serai to Kampong Melayu (later renamed the "Jalan Eunus Malay Settlement").

After World War II, the population in Geylang Serai grew quickly. The 1947 census confirmed that the majority of Geylang Serai residents were Malay.



Village in Kallang Basin before land was acquired.

Living Faith

The *masjid* (mosque), *surau* (small place of worship), and *madrasah* (Islamic school) have long served as key community institutions. Today, the main mosques serving the Geylang Serai community are Masjid Khalid on Joo Chiat Road, Masjid Wak Tanjong on Paya Lebar Road, and Masjid Darul Aman on Jalan Eunus.

From Geylang to Makkah: A Pilgrim's Path



Former Aminah Mosque at New Sims Avenue in Geylang.

Masjid Aminah was one of Geylang Serai's most significant mosques. Originally a boarding house owned by Hajjah Guldjan binte Dhagoo, also known as Mak Minah Palembang, it was converted into Surau Aminah in 1960. As the Muslim congregation grew, it was officially declared Masjid Aminah in 1964, with its opening officiated by the late President Yusof Ishak.

With the rise of air travel in the 1970s, Masjid Aminah's proximity to Paya Lebar Airport made it a popular stopover for Hajj pilgrims. Many performed their *subuh* (Malay for "dawn") prayers there before heading to the airport enroute to Makkah, home to the Ka'bah, Islam's holiest shrine.

The mosque held its final Friday prayers on 28 January 1988, making way for urban development. Two years prior, Masjid Darul Aman was built at 1 Jalan Eunus to replace the demolished mosque.



Masjid Darul Aman at 1 Jalan Eunus.

One of the focal points for Muslims living and working in the Geylang and Kallang area is Masjid Khadijah. It is named after Madam Katijah Binte Mohamed, a wealthy lady who donated her assets to build the mosque in 1915. She passed away before the mosque opened in 1920. The architectural elements of the building were influenced by the Nagore Shrine in Ajmeere, India.



Masjid Khadijah at 583 Geylang Road.

Trams, Trolleybuses, and Mosquito Buses

Geylang Road began its transformation in the 1910s with the introduction of Singapore Electric Tramways, connecting Geylang Serai to Tanjong Pagar. The improved transportation made Geylang Serai one of the first areas to be directly linked to Singapore Town.

The trams also marked the dawn of public transportation along Geylang Road and provided residents with an efficient alternative to slow-moving bullock carts.

However, tram rides were expensive compared to rickshaws and horse carriages. Commuters were also unhappy with the complicated fare structures and limited routes. Although ridership improved when fares were eventually reduced, tram operators struggled to turn a profit due to the high costs of replacing tracks and generators.

By the late 1920s, electric trams were replaced by quieter, more flexible trolleybuses, which operated until 1962. Alongside these, mosquito buses, small privately owned buses, served routes such as Tanjong Pagar to Geylang. They were popular with the working class until they were phased out in favour of more efficient bus networks.



Singapore Traction Company trolley bus servicing the route between Tanjong Pagar and Geylang, 1950s.



Electric Tramways Car on Geylang Road, 1905.

LORONGS OF GEYLANG

Overcrowding in Singapore Town and around the Kallang River, combined with improved access from the development of Geylang Road, attracted more settlers. In the early 20th century, *lorongs* (Malay for “lanes”) began to branch off Geylang Road.



Geylang lorongs as seen in 1913 map.

The network of Geylang *lorongs* were initially informal alleys made by residents. As Geylang grew more crowded, the colonial authorities widened some of the *lorongs* and made them public streets, starting with Lorongs 13, 15, 19, and 37. They also acquired land along Geylang Road for development to address Singapore’s urgent housing shortage.

Becoming increasingly unsanitary, Geylang was a breeding ground for disease. In response, the authorities intensified efforts in the 1920s to build back lanes in the *lorongs*.

The back lanes were retrofitted for fire access, sanitation, and space for water pipes and sewer lines. These lanes also supported nightsoil collection until 1987.



Drainage and sewerage works in progress at Geylang Road in July 1963.

Life in the Back Lanes

Ironically, Geylang's unsanitary back lanes were once home to some of the best food, with street hawkers setting up makeshift stalls. They were not the only ones plying their trade here.

Besides gambling dens and illegal peddlers, "streetwalkers" from nearby brothels would also solicit clients here. Geylang's even-numbered *lorongs* were known as Singapore's red-light district. Despite their association with undesirable and unsavoury characters, the back lanes were also where children played and tradesmen worked.

Today, long-time residents and business owners are relieved that the *lorongs* of Geylang and their back lanes have transformed into a cleaner, more controlled version, thanks to law enforcement efforts. Nonetheless, these back lanes continue to spark the imagination, evoking memories and fuelling ideas for creative community use of these spaces.

With their unique character, the back lanes of Geylang are where vibrant colours, textures, and surprises emerge amidst the quiet, often serving as a source of inspiration for avid photographers.

According to Chinese *feng shui*, Geylang is a good place for business because of how Geylang Road and its forty-something *lorongs* appear to form the shape of a centipede. In Chinese folklore, centipedes are considered a good omen and associated with luck, wealth, healing, and creativity.



(Top and bottom) View of back lanes in Geylang.

PEOPLE'S CHINATOWN

The early 20th century welcomed an influx of Chinese migrants to Geylang. Some set up businesses or settled in the western part of Geylang along the *lorongs*. They capitalised on the area's proximity to the Kallang River and Geylang River, which were hubs of trade and activity. The Chinese offered a variety of goods and services, including jewellery and pawn shops, bringing bustling businesses to the *lorongs*.

Chinese temples and clan associations emerged to meet the needs of the growing Chinese community. They offered support such as housing and employment assistance to migrants. Many of these temples and clan associations remain active in Geylang to this day.

Temples and Clan Associations

Huang Clan Singapore Association or Huang Shi Zong Hui (Singapore) was established in 1924. Famed Chinese painter Xu Bei Hong lived here for a while and produced some of his masterpieces here.



Former Huang Clan Singapore Association building at 16, Lorong 35 Geylang.



Soon Thian Keing Temple at 19, Lorong 29 Geylang, 2025.

Established during the reign of Qing Dynasty's Emperor Jiaqing, Soon Thian Keing is recognised in the Singapore Book of Records as the oldest Chinese temple in Singapore. It was first located at Malabar Street and moved to Geylang in 1994. The temple is dedicated to *Tua Pek Kong* but also hosts other deities.

Char Yong (Dabu) Association is one of the oldest Chinese associations in Singapore. It was founded in 1858 to help Hakka immigrants from Dabu, China. Its new building will take the form of a Hakka *tu lou*, or earthen building, a traditional fort-like communal Hakka residence.



Char Yong (Dabu) Association at 29, Lorong 22 Geylang, 1988.

ENTERTAINMENT FOR THE MASSES

While Geylang encompasses a larger, multicultural area, Geylang Serai is distinctly recognised as the heart of Singapore’s Malay community. Over time, the blend of communities formed a vibrant melting pot of cultures and shaped Geylang’s unique character – influencing its population, streetscapes, and building layouts.

As Geylang and Geylang Serai evolved into residential suburbs, a variety of activities expanded in the area to meet the needs of the growing population.



Happy World Amusement Park, 1940s.

Happy World Amusement Park

Opened in 1937 on a site between Geylang Road and Mountbatten Road, Happy World was one of Singapore’s top amusement parks. It featured a stadium, cabaret, cinema, and carnival booths. Renamed Gay World in 1966, it closed in 1978 due to frequent fires and the growing popularity of a competing form of entertainment – television.

Bangsawan

A traditional Malay opera, *bangsawan* combines music, dance, acting, and martial arts. It was a popular form of entertainment from the 1910s to the 1940s in Geylang Serai, and troupes would perform in Singapore and Malaya. Notable groups included Wayang Kassim, Nahar Opera Company, and Star Opera.



Union Star Opera Bangsawan Scene, 1925–1939.

Golden Era of Cinema

Cinema-goers flocked to popular theatres in Geylang and Geylang Serai for Malayan, Indonesian, Indian, Hong Kong, and Hollywood films. The late 1940s to the early 1970s was considered the “Golden Era of Cinema”. Cathay Organisation and Shaw Brothers dominated the industry and produced hundreds of made-in-Singapore films. Popular screening venues included Wembley Cinema (renamed Ritz in 1933 and Queen’s Theatre in 1939), Apollo Cinema (renamed Regal in 1935, then Garrick Theatre in 1936), and Taj Cinema, which became Singapura Theatre before it closed for good in 1984.



Queen's Cinema, 1982.

THE EVOLUTION OF GEYLANG SERAI

Geylang Serai: Behind the Name

Geylang Serai encompasses the areas around Geylang Serai Market, stretching from Paya Lebar Road to Jalan Eunus, including Geylang Road, Changi Road, Sims Avenue, and nearby streets.

Geylang is named after the Geylang River and early spellings such as “Gelang” can be found in 19th-century maps. It likely refers to an Orang Laut (sea people) tribe from the Riau Archipelago. The current spelling was formalised in the 1930s by the colonial government. Originally known as “Geylang Kelapa” because of its plantations, it became “Geylang Serai” in the late 19th century due to the agricultural success of the lemongrass (*serai*) and citronella crops grown in the area.

Great Eastern Trade Fair

Geylang Serai Market was once just a makeshift hawker shelter. Built before the 1930s, it mainly served residents who lived in the area. During the Japanese Occupation, the space was turned into an amusement park.

After the war, the hawkers returned once more to ply their trade. And by the 1950s, the residents of nearby Kampong Melayu also started visiting the market.

In 1952, the government transformed the market into the Changi Trade Fair. Later renamed the Great Eastern Trade Fair, the market showcased both local and regional businesses.

When the fair opened on 20 January 1952, it was reportedly the “largest trade fair Singapore has ever seen”. The first of its kind organised in Malaya, it featured 200 stalls showcasing Malayan and international products, two public canteens, and two cinemas.

Between 1952 and 1957, there was debate over turning the fairground into an amusement park. Some Geylang Serai residents welcomed the cheap entertainment, while others feared its impact on moral values. The plan was ultimately abandoned.



Geylang Serai during fasting month, 1983.

Geylang Serai Market

Under the 1962 Geylang Serai Redevelopment Scheme, a government initiative to modernise the area, the grounds of the Great Eastern Trade Fair were cleared. This made way for developments such as a new Geylang Serai Market in 1964. The market had three sections: a wet market for fresh produce, meats, and fish; a foodcourt for cooked food stalls; and an arcade for clothes, sundries, and services.

The market was demolished in 2006 and replaced by a new two-storey market in 2010. Geylang Serai Market remains the area's social and economic hub, and its wet market is the only one in Singapore where all products sold are halal.

Regional Trading Hub

Geylang Serai was the “Malay Emporium of Singapore”, renowned across the Malay Archipelago for its bustling markets. Visitors were attracted to the wide array of Malay

delicacies, handicrafts, and clothing, as well as the annual Hari Raya Bazaar. Its reputation was well-established among visitors from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. The 1970s marked the height of tourism from these countries.

Hari Raya Bazaar

The annual Hari Raya Bazaar is the highlight of Geylang Serai's business calendar. For a month during Ramadan, the area's lanes transform into a vibrant street market. Originally a convenient spot for last-minute shopping, the bazaar has since become a perennial tradition.

From 1985, new features were introduced, including street light-ups, fairground rides, and an expo showcasing Malay arts and culture. The bazaar is ever-evolving. Today it attracts the younger generation with Instagram-worthy “hipster” foods such as Thai iced tea, churros, and raclette.



Geylang Serai Market.

KEEPING TRADITIONS OF COMMUNITY ALIVE

“Geylang Serai has always been significant to the Malay community... The *gotong royong* spirit here has been strong since the old days.”



Mr Zailani Said, Volunteer and Chairman of MAEC (M³@Geylang Serai)

At first, the idea of volunteering never crossed his mind. But not because Mr Zailani Said did not have the heart for it.

He says, “Being a volunteer is not easy. You need passion, commitment, and the willingness to make sacrifices. Volunteering is not about what we want to do but what we can give.”

Today, the Chairman of the Geylang Serai Community Centre MAEC (M³@Geylang Serai) counts as one of its long-term volunteers. Although he is not a resident, Geylang Serai has a special place in his heart.

“Geylang Serai has always been significant to the Malay community. The market and surrounding shophouses give the place a distinct character and feeling. The *gotong royong* spirit here has been strong since the old days. It is also a leisure focal point where we meet friends.”

To many residents, the market is the heart of Geylang Serai. During festive periods such as Hari Raya, the place would be bustling with activity in every corner because it is the best place for festive shopping. People love the festive light-up, which surrounding businesses and homes take part in.

Mr Said says, “My late grandmother made a traditional peanut *kueh* and she would come here just to have the peanuts ground

into fine pieces. The market used to be small, compact, and a bit messy and chaotic. But many people would come here to buy festive clothing and special greeting cards. We also see many visitors from Malaysia and Indonesia!”

Today, the new cultural belt is part of the changing face of the area.

“I’m very proud of how the area is being revitalised. The arch in the centre of the junction is the new ‘icon’ that gives Geylang Serai’s identity a refresh.”

Mr Said is glad that the new development stays true to its past.

“If you were to go to Geylang now, you can see that the shelter area’s pitched roof mimics the kampong-style rooftop. I wanted to replicate some of my favourite kampong memories.”

He recalls that during the kampong days, there were benches in front of their homes.

“We would sit in a sheltered area away from the house and have tea. So, what we have now is inspired by that kind of community interaction. Now, we are happy to see people using the space, surrounded by greenery, to rest or meet their friends.”

For Mr Said, despite the changes, there will always be a strong sense of community in Geylang Serai.

Modern Satellite Town

The transformation of Geylang Serai from farms, open-air markets, and kampongs into a modern satellite town began with the 1962 Geylang Serai Redevelopment Scheme, aimed at modernising amenities to better serve the community. This plan resulted in the construction of iconic structures such as Blocks 1, 2, and 3 Jalan Pasar Baru (since redeveloped), Geylang Serai Market, and a vocational school.

The second phase of the plan spanned the 1970s and 1980s. Besides new Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats, Tanjong Katong Complex and Joo Chiat Complex expanded shopping options for residents living nearby.

Joo Chiat Complex, opened in 1985, housed shops, offices, and more than 200 HDB apartments. Built on the site of the former

Changi and Joo Chiat Markets (demolished in 1979), it marked the introduction of HDB flats to Joo Chiat.

Meanwhile, Tanjong Katong Complex, which opened in 1982, became HDB's first fully air-conditioned shopping mall. It housed Yokoso, the first 24-hour departmental store.

In the 1980s, the completion of the Pan Island Expressway to the north of Paya Lebar Road, along with the extension of Sims Avenue to Jalan Eunus, improved connectivity. In 1989, the East-West line of the MRT system arrived in Geylang Serai with the opening of the Paya Lebar Station.

Since the 2000s, Geylang Serai has continued to see further improvements with new HDB residences, amenities, and community services.



Street scene during Chinese New Year and Hari Raya Puasa, 1965.

Preserving Malay Culture and Heritage



Wisma Geylang Serai offers a wide range of modern amenities.

Wisma Geylang Serai

In 1989, the Malay Village was built next to Geylang Serai Market. Besides preserving and showcasing Malay heritage, culture, and traditions, it also promoted products and services commonly used by the Malay-Muslim community.

The Malay Village operated for 23 years, offering amenities such as a museum, food court, and a hall for cultural performances and wedding receptions. By the time of its demolition in 2012, the Malay Village had become a focal point for Malay activities, serving as a home for various performing arts and cultural groups.

Today, Wisma Geylang Serai, a civic centre, stands in its place. It serves as a one-stop service hub for the community

while also catering to residents of the wider district. Part of a broader initiative to keep the precinct culturally distinctive, Wisma Geylang Serai supports cultural activities in nearby open spaces and street junctions, ensuring Geylang Serai's significance to the community.



Singapore Food Festival At Geylang Serai Malay Village, 1994.

Geylang Serai Cultural Precinct

In 2024 a rejuvenated Geylang Serai cultural belt was launched. A new arch spanning the junction of Geylang Road and Joo Chiat Road is now a key landmark of the area.

Besides improved aesthetics in the form of road paintings inspired by traditional weaving, there is also a new shared path for pedestrians and cyclists at Geylang Serai Market.

Meanwhile, Joo Chiat Complex has a new glass entrance canopy, a playground, bicycle parking spaces, as well as an upgraded drop-off point and pathway.

A design competition was organised to generate the best ideas for the public realm enhancement works, which was won by BDP Architects (South East Asia) Pte Ltd. Their concept was for a kampong living room that wove elements of traditional Malay culture into the design of public realm elements, such as weaving patterns and pitched roof forms.

These enhanced communal spaces provide more opportunities to highlight the area's rich cultural heritage, ensuring that Geylang Serai remains a vibrant blend of modern amenities while preserving its distinctive Malay identity.

Popular Culture

Geylang Serai holds deep social and personal significance for the local Malay-Muslim community. Their experiences and memories are immortalised through photographs, oral histories, novels, poetry, and popular music.

For instance, composer Ahmad Jaafar's *Kisah Geylang Serai* (The Story of Geylang Serai), also known as *Di Waktu Petang di Geylang Serai* (Geylang Serai in the Evening), paints a lively picture of the area bustling with hawkers, shops selling the latest fashion, and people from all walks of life gathering for movies and meals.

Another composition by musician M. Nasir titled *Bas No. 13* or *Bus Number 13* reflects the feelings surrounding Geylang Serai's redevelopment in the 1970s. The poignant song tells of a man eager to reunite with old friends, only to find that the stalls and people he remembers are gone.

These songs not only evoke strong emotions but also preserve cherished memories of Geylang Serai for the community, ensuring its legacy endures.



Ahmad Jaafar

The Taste of Geylang



Geylang is one of the best places in Singapore to discover local food. Its bustling *lorongs* are packed with Chinese eateries and late-night supper spots, serving up everything from savoury frog porridge and silky smooth beancurd to *zi char* (cooked fried) dishes.

Just a short walk away, Geylang Serai Market and Food Centre offers a different culinary experience rooted in Malay heritage. This vibrant hawker centre is renowned for *nasi padang*, *briyani*, and traditional desserts. The food here is not just delicious but tells stories of generations, with many stalls run by second- and third-generation hawkers who continue to preserve and share cherished family recipes.

Geylang Road

- 1 Mongkok Dim Sum
- 2 Geylang Famous Beef Kway Teow
- 3 Leong Kee Bak Kut Teh
- 4 Eminent Frog Porridge & Seafood
- 5 No Signboard Seafood
- 6 JB Ah Meng Restaurant
- 7 L32 Handmade Noodles

Geylang Lorongs

- 8 Yong He Eating House
- 9 Swee Guan Hokkien Mee
- 10 Sean Kee Duck Rice
- 11 Sin Huat Eating House
- 12 Rochor Beancurd House

13 Geylang Serai Market and Food Centre

- a. Cendol Geylang Serai
- b. Hainan Kaya Stall
- c. A. H. Rojak and Mee Siam
- d. Iqbal Soup Kambing
- e. Sinar Pagi Nasi Padang
- f. Kacang Phool Mustafa
- g. Geylang (Hamid's) Briyani Stall
- h. Otak Otak Kampung

FROM UTILITY TO URBAN COOL

The post-World War I building boom transformed lower Geylang Road, Sims Avenue, and the connecting *lorongs* with shophouses and low-rise residential enclaves of bungalows. Geylang Road became a commercial hub, while the *lorongs* grew into residential areas.

As a major urban district with historical character and rich architectural heritage, Geylang's development dates back to the 1840s and its evolution echoes that of Singapore's growth.

Reflecting Singapore's architectural heritage, Geylang's wide range of shophouses of various styles and a selection of bungalows give the area its rich character. It was designated as a conservation area in 1991 to recognise the heritage of the area and protect its historic streetscapes.

The conserved buildings here are subject to secondary settlement guidelines, which require the main buildings to be retained. However, the rear of the buildings can be redeveloped, providing flexibility to cater to changing business and lifestyle needs. Buildings that are not conserved can be redeveloped but are subjected to prevailing urban design guidelines to maintain the character of the streetscape.

Many of the low-rise shophouses have been conserved, standing as charming reminders of the area's past. Today, Geylang Road houses traditional eateries, family-owned businesses, and modern ventures, blending the old and the new.

The area has attracted a new wave of creatives. Among them are Terra and Ember, a husband-and-wife pottery duo. Meanwhile an indie music scene has taken root, with several local studios lining Geylang Road. Once a utilitarian thoroughfare defined by

its early public transport network, Geylang Road is evolving into a lively, culturally rich enclave with an eclectic mix of uses, including associations, clans, places of worship, shops, offices, and residences.



Terra and Ember Pottery Studio, 2025.



Geylang Road.



Hari Raya Bazaar.

ART AND SPIRITUALITY IN GEYLANG

“Geylang is very vibrant and bustling. So, I wanted to create an artistic and spiritual space that inspires visitors to feel the opposite.”



Mr Alan Chong with his mother Madam Khoo Hiang Lee, Residents of Geylang

Most people are surprised to learn that Mr Alan Chong lives in a Buddhist temple. With a rich history that began in the early 1900s, the Chong Tuck Tong Temple in 477 Geylang Road is a well-known landmark in the area because of the statue of Guan Yin (Goddess of Mercy) on the roof. The temple, which is run by his parents, has been Mr Chong’s home since he was six years old.

“People have always associated this place with vice activities. But I guess it is what makes Geylang, Geylang. Despite the drunken fights and colourful characters I saw growing up, it was still relatively safe. But as a kid, I did not wander too far from home. I spent a lot of time in the back alley, playing badminton, or catching insects.”

These days, besides helping his parents with the day-to-day running of the temple, Mr Chong is also the co-founder of Terra and Ember – a pottery studio connected to the temple. It is one of the new businesses that is changing the face of the neighbourhood.

“Geylang is very vibrant and bustling. So, I wanted to create an artistic and spiritual space that inspires visitors to feel the opposite. I hope anyone who comes here will experience a sense of tranquillity.”

In a way, the studio mirrors the temple – a sanctuary that offers reprieve from the

frenetic energy outside. Madam Khoo, who grew up in the temple, is regarded by temple devotees as a pillar of the community. She is someone that many turn to for advice and comfort.

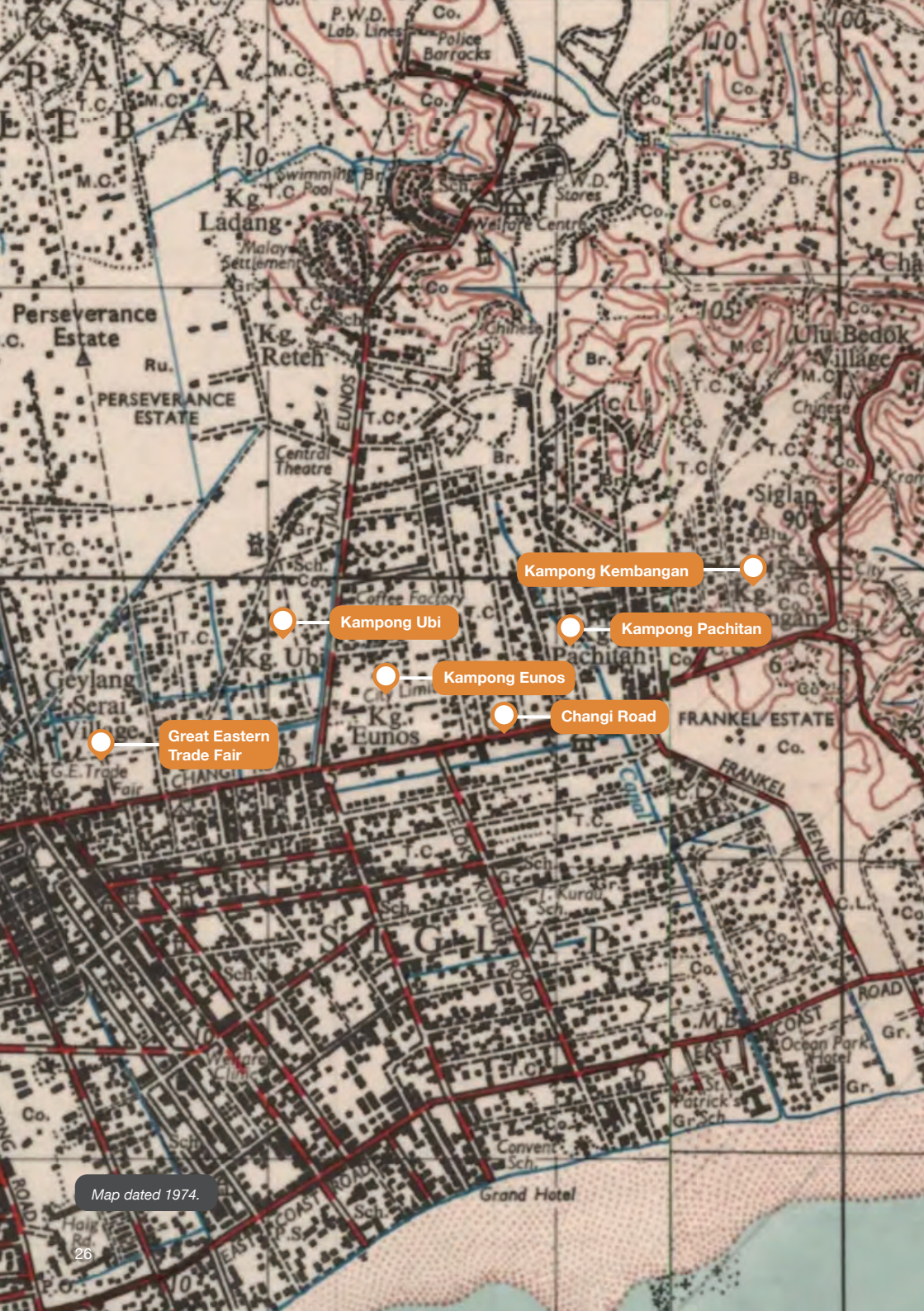
“My mother’s role is much bigger than the temple’s. Over the years, she has counselled devotees and visitors, and they always return,” shares Mr Chong.

Being in the neighbourhood for so long, they have witnessed how the surrounding areas have evolved.

Madam Khoo remembers how people in the kampongs helped each other. During the harrowing racial riots in 1964, she recalls how the local Malay community from Geylang Serai got together to protect the Chinese community.

Mr Chong shares, “She says that they came to warn us to quickly close our doors. Because of them we were safe.”

“My mother also has memories of dressmaking shops stitching nyonya-style clothing alongside old-fashioned laundromats, and shops selling charcoal. The Peranakans living at Lorongs 25 and 25A would drop by to see her, some transported by horse carriage! Now, besides new developments by Meir Collective, there are also cafés and restaurants taking hold here.”



Great Eastern Trade Fair

Kampung Ubi

Kampung Eunos

Changi Road

Kampung Pachitan

Kampung Kembangan

Map dated 1974.

CHANGI ROAD

MEMORIES OF OLD SETTLEMENTS

Further east of Geylang Serai Market and the former Great Eastern Trade Fair, Geylang Road turns into Changi Road, where, in the past, the urban landscape gave way to a variety of notable kampongs and rural settlements.

First Official Malay Enclave

The area around Changi Road, or Eunos, was originally hilly with vegetable farms and coconut plantations. It later became one of the last Malay settlements in Singapore.

Originally called Kampong Melayu and later the Jalan Eunos Malay Settlement or Kampong Eunos, it was founded with the support of Mohamed Eunos bin Abdullah, the first Malay representative on the Legislative Council and the president of the Singapore Malay Union or Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS).

Gazetted in 1928, it became Singapore's first official Malay enclave. The road leading to Kampong Eunos was named Jalan Eunos in 1930. By 1960, the settlement expanded to include Kaki Bukit.



Bungalow-type houses of the Malay Settlement at Jalan Eunos.



Rural Road near Jalan Eunos, 1964.

Inspired by Kampung Bahru in Kuala Lumpur, the KMS proposed setting aside land for an exclusive Malay kampung. Mohamed Eunos and his peers saw this as essential to preserving authentic Malay life and realising the vision of a “Malay nation” or *bangsa Melayu*. Kampung Melayu was self-sufficient, with its own mosques, schools, youth club, and co-operative.



Kampong Melayu Co-operative Society.

Mohamed Eunos Bin Abdullah

Born into a wealthy family, Mohamed Eunos’ father was a Minangkabau merchant from Sumatra, Indonesia.

Mohamed Eunos was educated at the Malay school in Kampong Glam and later at Raffles Institution. He was one of the few Malay students to be admitted to the prestigious school.

After graduating, he joined the government service, working in the Master Attendant’s office at Singapore Harbour before becoming harbour master in Muar, Johor.

Eunos had a distinguished journalistic career. Appointed editor of *Lembaga Melayu* in 1914, he remained committed to improving the Malay community’s socio-economic standing through his editorials. Under his leadership, the Malay press flourished for 25 years, earning him the title “Father of Malay Journalism”.



Eunos Abdullah, 1930.

Kampong Ubi



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew touring Sin Sheng School at Kampong Kembangan, 1963.

Many kampongs expanded from existing villages or emerged in the Eunos area following World War II. These changes were driven by wartime displacement, increased immigration, and the post-war baby boom.

After Singapore gained independence, then President Yusof Ishak and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew frequently visited these kampongs.

By the 1980s, the kampong residents resettled in new Housing and Development Board flats.

During the Japanese Occupation, the agricultural landscape of nearby Geylang Serai changed drastically. Coconut and rubber plantations were replaced with tapioca (*ubi kayu* in Malay), which became a staple food substitute for rice.

The Japanese offered each family in Geylang Serai an acre of land, on the condition that they cultivated *ubi kayu* as a cash crop. This area became known as “The Malay Farm”. As more people settled here, the village began to take shape — marked by the construction of small sheds used as toilets. The crop also left a lasting impression, and the area eventually became known as Kampong Ubi.



Children playing with water from a standpipe in Geylang Serai, Singapore, 1960s.



1969 map showing Kampong Ubi, Kampong Eunos, Kampong Pachitan, and Kampong Kembangan.



Village folks gathering outside Kampong Kembangan Community Centre during Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's tour.

Kampong Eunoes

Kampong Eunoes, or Kampong Melayu, was primarily a Malay village but also home to Chinese families. Its main religious centre was the Alkaff Mosque, which was demolished in 1980 and its new mosque built near Bedok Reservoir Road.

Kampong Pachitan

Before World War II, a group of immigrants from Pacitan City in East Java, Indonesia, settled in Singapore, forming communities in areas such as Kampong Java, Bukit Chermin, Palembang Road, Bukit Timah Road, Amber Road, and Changi Road.

After the war, 17 Javanese settlers rebuilt their homes on a former rubber estate on Changi Road, which was previously occupied by the Japanese army. The settlers cleared the land, built roads, and created amenities. In 1950, the village officially registered as Kampong Pachitan.

Electricity was supplied in 1955, and the kampong grew, with small huts evolving into larger wooden houses through the spirit of *gotong royong* (Malay for “mutual cooperation”). The kampong also had a mosque, Surau Kampong Pachitan, built in 1947 and rebuilt in 1960. Many villagers spent their lives there and were buried at Kubur Kassim, a Muslim cemetery on Siglap Road for the Javanese, Bugis, and Baweanese communities.

Kampong Kembangan

Kembangan, meaning “expansion” in Malay, likely reflects the growing community in the area at the time. It was primarily a Malay village, with some Chinese families also residing there. The community’s educational and social needs were served by Sin Sheng School and the Kampong Kembangan Community Centre.

Many streets in Kembangan are named after prominent figures in the Malay community and use the Malay terms *lorong* and *jalan* instead of “street” or “avenue”.

The Spirit of *Gotong Royong*

Kampong dwellers led autonomous and dynamic lives. Children played together, housewives shared food and helped to take care of the children in the village, and adults indulged in mahjong on weekends.

More significantly, kampong residents often came together through *gotong royong*, to develop village amenities. *Gotong royong* embodied collective effort for the community's benefit, fostering a selfless approach that helped build cultural identity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the government launched various "gotong royong projects", where factory workers, residents, youths, and National Servicemen gathered to clear paths, repair roads, and improve drainage.

Though kampongs no longer exist, the spirit of *gotong royong* endures, and is a cherished aspect of Singapore's heritage.

A New Era

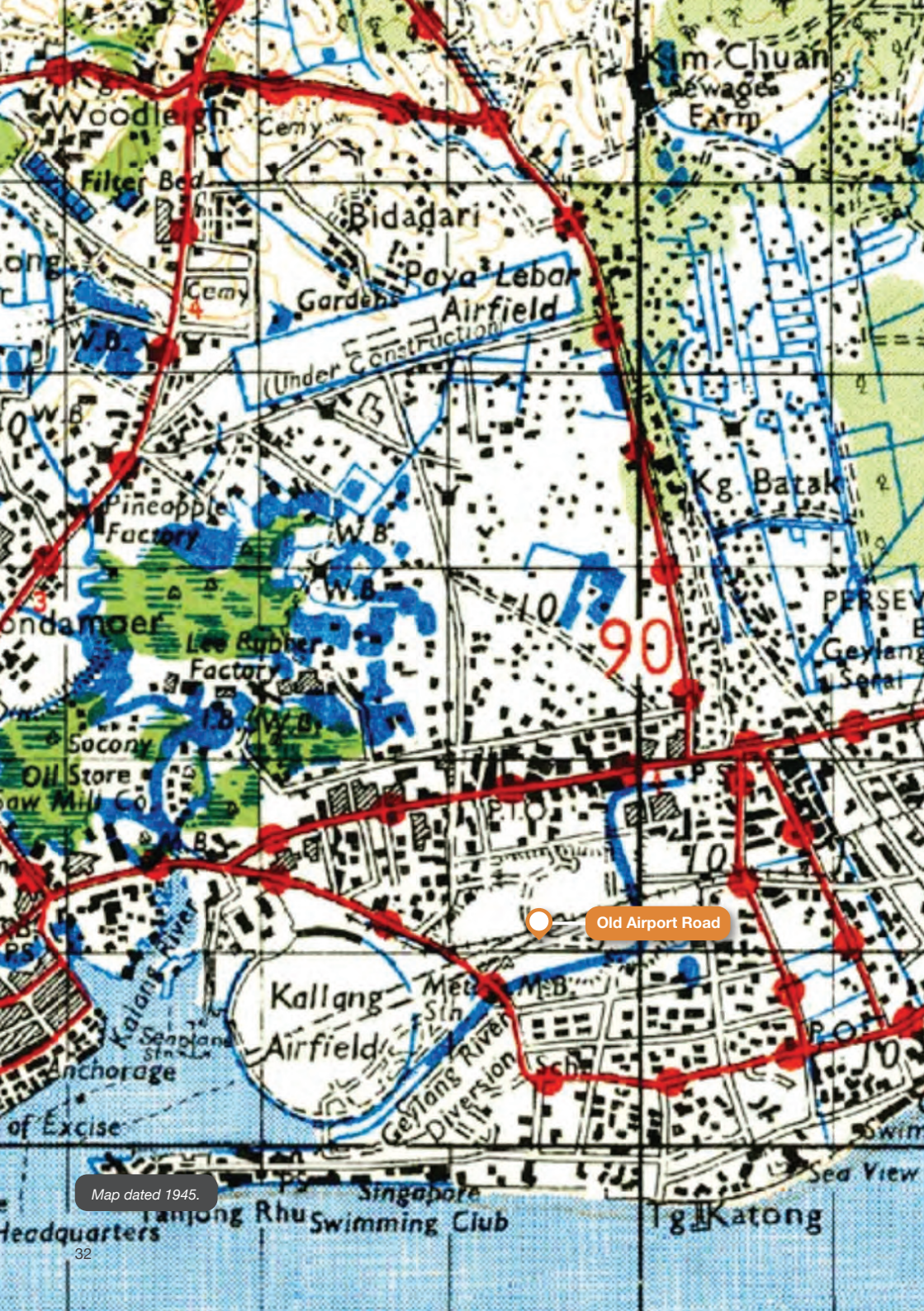
The landscape around Changi Road changed significantly from the 1980s, as kampongs made way for the Pan Island Expressway (PIE). When the eastern section opened in 1981, the PIE stretched from Jalan Eunos to East Coast Parkway.

Public housing in Ubi in the late 1970s and Eunos in the 1980s replaced crowded kampongs. The Eunos MRT Station opened in 1989, along with eight other MRT stations along the East-West Line.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Eunos Industrial Estate and Kampong Ubi Industrial Estate were developed, allowing the government to revitalise the town. These industrial estates later became hubs for automotive workshops and businesses.



Residents participating in a *gotong royong* project, 1960s.



Old Airport Road

Map dated 1945.

OLD AIRPORT ROAD

THE FIRST PURPOSE-BUILT CIVILIAN AIRPORT

Before the development of Kallang Airport, the site was a black tidal swamp formed by the confluence of the Kallang, Geylang, and Rochor rivers. Governor Sir Cecil Clementi, who envisioned Singapore as a major global aviation hub, announced plans for a new aerodrome in the Kallang Basin in 1931. The location was chosen for its proximity to town and its ability to accommodate both land and seaplanes.

Kallang Airport opened in 1937, boasting modern facilities such as floodlights for night landings. Designed by Frank Dorrington Ward for the Public Works Department, the architecture of the building reflects early modernist British design, with interiors adorned with Art Deco details on railings and columns.

Considered the crown jewel of the British Empire in Asia, Kallang Airport was hailed as the “essence of modernity”. Famed pilot Amelia Earhart even described the airport as an “aviation miracle of the East”.

During World War II, the Japanese converted the airport’s grass landing into a concrete runway, extending it to 5,500 feet. By the mid-20th century, Kallang Airport struggled to handle the increasing air traffic and larger aircraft arriving in Singapore. Despite expanding the runway, it became clear that a new airport was needed. In 1955, Paya Lebar Airport began operations.



Indian labourers at work on the runway at the Kallang Airport, 1950.

Kallang Airport Terminal Building

Architect: Frank Dorrington Ward

Organisation: Public Works Department

Year: 1937

Status: Conserved in 2008



Pre-independence Era

After Old Kallang Airport ceased operations, its large size and central location made it a prime venue for major events.

One such event was the 1956 Merdeka Rally, led by then Chief Minister David Marshall. Around 20,000 people gathered to hear fervant speeches from political leaders calling for full internal self-government for Singapore.

However, the event escalated into a riot, with crowds attacking the police and attempting to break into the terminal building while shouting “Merdeka”. The unrest resulted in at least 50 people being injured.



Chief Minister David Marshall arriving for the Merdeka Rally in Kallang, where the British Parliamentary delegation was also in attendance.

Singapore Constitution Exposition

In the late 1950s, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce planned a million-dollar grand fair, the Singapore Constitution Exposition, at Old Kallang Airport to celebrate Singapore’s attainment of self-government. Given the colony’s trade-dependent economy, the organisers saw a trade exposition as a fitting way to mark the milestone of self-government. The exposition aimed to attract a million visitors, including international guests.

Opened on 31 January 1959, the month-long event featured trade booths, performances, and celebrations. Government departments showcased various initiatives. Hundreds of commercial exhibitors, including 400 from overseas, also took part in the event.

Following its success, Old Kallang Airport was considered for possible use as a permanent trade fairground, although the idea was eventually dropped. However, expositions such as the Transport and Communications Exposition in 1969 continued to be held there. This cemented Old Kallang Airport’s role as a venue for trade fairs and a forerunner of modern exposition halls such as venues managed by Singapore EXPO.



The Singapore Constitution Exposition at the seaward end of the former Kallang Airport.

FROM KALLANG PARK TO SPORTS HUB



Aerial view of the National Stadium.

Kallang Park was one of the first large-scale amusement parks in pre-independence Singapore. Opened on the grounds of Old Kallang Airport in 1959, it featured a kart racing circuit, roller coaster, ferris wheel, bowling centre, and ice skating rink. Kallang Park closed in the 1970s to make way for more exciting recreational developments, including the National Stadium and Indoor Sports Stadium.

The National Stadium was Singapore's first Olympic-standard stadium. It was designed by the Public Works Department under chief architect Tan Beng Kiat. Built in a barebones Brutalist style with a concrete structural frame, the open-air stadium was lauded for its state-of-the-art features at the time.

The grand opening in 1973 featured the launch of an Olympic torch into the night sky, trumpets, and a 1,000-strong choir singing for the crowd. The National Stadium became the site of sporting triumphs and losses, 18 National Day celebrations,

SEA Games 1983 and 1993, and international concerts. It was also where sporting legends were made, and where the euphoric Kallang Roar and Kallang Wave were born.

It closed its doors in June 2007, marking the end of what was once Southeast Asia's largest stadium. The Singapore Sports Hub, with modern world-class facilities, was constructed in its place, and began operations in 2014.



Go-kart racing at Kallang Park, 1963.

Parks and Recreation

Before television and shopping malls, Singapore's nightlife flourished in amusement parks from the 1920s to the early 1990s. These parks featured variety shows, cabaret dances, Hokkien and Malay performances, rickety rides, and wrestling matches.

The three major parks in Singapore were New World (now City Square Mall), Great World (now a shopping mall with the same name), and Gay World (site of the Housing and Development Board's upcoming BTO Verandah@Kallang).

As the popularity of the three "Worlds" waned, Wonderland Amusement Park opened in 1969. Kallang Park became a popular venue for children and adults, as well as festivals and corporate events, including "Family Day".

Wonderland was famous for its cup-and-saucer carousel. With its colourful umbrellas, kiddy train rides, and roller coasters, it was a beloved destination for children in the 1970s before it closed in 1988.



New World amusement park at the junction of Serangoon Road and Kitchener Road.



Children enjoying the Ovaltine cup ride at Kallang Wonderland Amusement Park during an annual party organised by the Social Welfare Department, Ministry of Social Affairs, 1977.



The Globe Theatre at Great World Amusement Park, 1962.

OLD KALLANG AIRPORT ESTATE



Public flats in the Old Kallang Airport area built by the Singapore Improvement Trust, 1962.

Old Airport Road

Old Airport Road was constructed in the late 1950s as the main road leading to Old Kallang Airport Estate, and connects to a small network of minor roads. It was developed from the former runway of Kallang Airport.

New Building Blocks

Singapore experienced a significant population boom after World War II, creating an urgent demand for housing. In the late 1950s, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) selected Old Kallang Airport for development into a residential area known as Old Kallang Airport Estate.

SIT launched 17 blocks of flats in the late 1950s. These blocks came in a variety of designs: the distinctive seven-storey “butterfly” blocks, where each block had two wings extending from a central core, resembling the shape of a butterfly; seven-storey slab blocks; three-storey walk-up apartment blocks; and a two-storey shophouse block.

Many of these SIT flats housed fire victims of the Kampong Tiong Bahru and Bukit Ho Swee fires that occurred in 1961.

To honour the estate’s aviation history, new roads and streets were named after aircraft models from the era. Dakota Crescent was inspired by the Douglas DC-3 “Dakota” aircraft, which frequently landed at Kallang Airport in the past.

The central cluster of six blocks – 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 Dakota Crescent – alongside the iconic “dove playground”, are designated for conservation and refurbishment, preserving the area’s heritage for community and civic use.

The area was taken over in the 1960s by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which accelerated the construction of homes to meet demand. As a result, the estate features a diverse mix of public housing types, reflecting the evolving landscape of public housing over time.

Sweeping Awards for the Cleanest Estate

The search for the cleanest HDB block began in 1968 as part of the Keep Singapore Clean campaign. The Cleanest Block Competition and Cleanest Estate Competition eventually became an islandwide initiative from 1995 to 2003.

In 1968, Old Kallang Airport Estate secured second place in the Cleanest Block Competition, with residents actively sweeping and washing corridors and staircases. The Dakota blocks later won the contest in 1995, showcasing the estate's strong community spirit.

Old Airport Road Food Centre

Many street hawkers were once scattered around Kallang Airport Estate. The government created markets to house them, but these were insufficient. To address this, Old Airport Road Food Centre was opened in 1972 as part of the Kallang Airport Estate Redevelopment Scheme.

The centre combined an emporium and hawker centre, with 176 food stalls on the ground floor and 136 shopping units above. At the time, it was considered the most modern hawker centre, incorporating the latest architectural designs.

The hawker centre gained a reputation as one of the best places for affordable food, attracting both locals and tourists. In 1973, Khoon Kee Chicken Rice won the first “Cleanest Cooked Food Stall” competition. The food centre underwent upgrading between 2006 and 2007.



Old Airport Road Food Centre.



Balloting of market stalls at Old Kallang Airport Estate — Parliamentary Secretary to Ministry of Health and Ministry of Law, Buang Bin Omar Junid, conducted the ballot, 1963.

REMEMBERING THE COMMUNITY AT OLD AIRPORT ROAD

“Back then, the estate had a reputation for being unsafe... Still, the residents never locked their doors since few outsiders dared to venture into the estate.”



Mr Ng Soon Hock, Former Resident of an SIT Flat at Jalan Dua

Mr Ng Soon Hock spent much of his schooling years at his aunt’s flat at Dakota Crescent. It was routine for him to head there after he finished school at Kong Hwa School at Guillemard Road.

“There was a coffeeshop where my friends and I would go to play Chinese chess. I remember that there were many small makeshift stalls along Old Airport Road selling tea, desserts, and snacks. A big pot of *teh O* (Hokkien for “tea with sugar”) only cost 20 or 30 cents!”

He recalls that most of the families living at Dakota Estate in the 1950s and 1960s were mostly low-income and living hand-to-mouth. Back then, the estate had a reputation for being unsafe. Across from his aunt’s flat was an illegal gambling den frequented by secret society members. Still, the residents never locked their doors since few outsiders dared to venture into the estate.

He says, “Many residents worked in boatyards. Some owned small vessels and ferried things to large ships to sell. They would climb up a rope ladder at the side of the ships to peddle tea, coffee, and bread. There were boatyard owners too – some of the wealthier ones moved to big houses in Katong. There were also residents who were former workers at Kallang Airport.”

One event that brought the community together was the Singapore Constitution Exposition at Kallang Park. Mr Ng still remembers the bright lights at the Expo.

“There were many stalls selling all kinds of things including furniture, housewares, and snacks. There was also a playground and rides for children.”

He was 12 years old when he moved to the SIT flats at Jalan Dua, where the hawkers’ centre now stands.

“When I left school in the 1960s, jobs were hard to come by. It was a turbulent time and my school and Chung Cheng High School were sites of students’ protests. There was a time we had to cut the fence to get into our school to take our exams!”

Mr Ng says, “After independence, life got better. Before Mr Lee Kuan Yew became prime minister, crime was rampant and there were strikes, riots, and even fights with the police. Under his government, more homes were built, and there were fewer illegal activities. Foreign companies set up factories here and people found stable, better-paying jobs. When life improved, quite a few residents moved elsewhere to bigger homes.”



Map dated 1966.

KATONG-JOO CHIAT

A POPULAR SEASIDE RETREAT

The Road by the Sea

Although East Coast Road and West Coast Road appeared in The Jackson Town Plan in 1828, East Coast Road was only constructed in 1902.

It remained a coastal route until land reclamation in the 1960s reshaped the shoreline. Today, East Coast Road begins at the junction of Tanjong Katong Road and Mountbatten Road. After Siglap Road, it continues as Upper East Coast Road before curving into Bedok Road.

A Modern Transportation Corridor

New modes of transportation, such as mosquito buses, motor trolleys, and trams, emerged along East Coast Road in the early 20th century, transforming life and businesses along the coast. In 1938, Singapore's first electric street lamps were tested on East Coast Road between Katong and Siglap.



Changi bus company Ford bus at Siglap, 1956.

Behind the Names

The name Tanjong Katong, which comes from the Malay language, means "Turtle Point". "Katong" refers to a now-extinct species of sea turtle once found in the area and also describes the rippling effect of a sea mirage seen along the shoreline.

In the early 20th century, Chew Joo Chiat had acquired significant land in the area. As a prominent landowner, his name gradually became associated with the neighbourhood. The market, post office, and police station were also named after him. Until then, Joo Chiat was considered part of Katong rather than a distinct area.



Fishing off the coast of the Chinese Swimming Club, 1945.

Commercial and Recreational Fishing

East Coast was once a hub for fishing, which was both a commercial activity and a popular recreational pastime in the area before land reclamation.

During the 1947 Southeast Asia Fisheries Conference, delegates toured the East Coast, passing *kelongs* (Malay for “offshore platforms”) from Tanjong Rhu to Changi before concluding near the Chinese Swimming Club.

In the Tanjong Katong area, Hainanese settlements blended seamlessly with Malay kampongs, where Chinese fishing techniques such as drift netting were introduced to Malay fishermen.

Compared with Malay artisanal fishing methods such as near-shore traps and lure fishing, vertical drift nets enabled fishermen to increase their catch significantly. These nets could be deployed further from the shore and kept in place by bamboo poles or with floats and weights.

Joo Chiat Jetty

This was built in the late 1950s and also known as Marine Parade Jetty. It extended from the end of Joo Chiat Road into the sea and functioned as a jetty by day and a seafood restaurant by night. The jetty was demolished in 1966 to make way for the East Coast Reclamation.

Swimming Clubs

Chinese Swimming Club

The club was established in 1905 by a group of Chinese men who were excluded from the predominantly European swimming clubs in Singapore. In 1951, the club was rebuilt with a full-sized Olympic swimming pool to serve its growing membership.

Singapore Swimming Club

Founded in 1894 at Tanjong Rhu by a group of European men, who would travel regularly from Johnston’s Pier to bathe at Fort Tanjong Katong. After long swims and picnics, they envisioned how the area could be improved with amenities and serve as a watering hole and a bar, leading to the club’s establishment.



Singapore Swimming Club, 1906.

Waterfront Villas

Sea Breeze Lodge

East Coast Road's proximity to the sea made it a prime location for the wealthy to build seaside bungalows, one of which was Sea Breeze Lodge.

This 113-year-old villa between East Coast Road and Marine Parade Road was built in 1898 by Choa Kim Keat, a prominent Malacca-born businessman who made his fortune in tin trading. Kim Keat Road was named in his honour. The waterfront villa served as a resort-like home for the Choa family for generations before being sold. It was once just 5 metres from the sea before the East Coast Reclamation.



Sea Breeze Lodge

Sea View Hotel

The Sea View Hotel, housed in a grand colonial bungalow, opened in 1906 on Meyer Road, an area that was then by the sea. Unlike most early hotels situated in town, Sea View Hotel was established in Tanjong Katong – considered the countryside at the time. It promoted itself as a tranquil retreat with the island's freshest air, seaside bathing, picturesque ocean views, and a surrounding grove of coconut trees.

The Grand Hotel

Kadir Sultan, who owned the Straits Cattle Trading Company, was known in town as "The Cattle King" in the early 20th century. He built a grand palace in the 1920s with a miniature lake by the seaside at the end of Still Road, naming it Karikal Mahal after his birthplace in India. However, his business eventually collapsed, leading to his bankruptcy. After World War II, the seaside mansion was renovated into a residential guesthouse called The Grand Hotel.

Sea View Hotel.



Katong Park

One of Singapore's oldest parks, opened in the 1930s at the site of the former Fort Tanjong Katong, was a British defensive fortification used from 1879 to 1901. At the time, the British were concerned about the possibility of attacks by European powers such as Netherlands and Russia.

The park was a popular spot for families, offering a seafront view before the East Coast Reclamation. It was the first public sea swimming enclosure in Singapore.



Katong Park, 1950s.

Early Tanjong Katong

Tanjong Katong marked the eastern boundary of the British settlement established by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. In early colonial maps, its boundaries stretched along the coast from Tanjong Rhu to Upper East Coast Road.



Tanjong Katong, Singapore

View of Tanjong Katong, 1920s.

Agricultural Beginnings to Desirable Suburbs

From a small settlement in 1819, the larger Tanjong Katong area (including present-day Katong-Joo Chiat) expanded rapidly and soon became dominated by European estate-style agriculture focused on popular cash crops.

One of the largest plantations, Grove Estate, comprising dense coconut groves, stretched from Tanjong Katong Road to the former Grove Road (now Mountbatten Road). It was owned by Thomas Dunman, Singapore's first Superintendent of Police.

By the early 20th century, the first generation of European planters had sold their estates – partly due to challenges like pest outbreaks – to a younger group of landowners, including prominent Peranakans and Jews.



View of stream at a coconut plantation in the eastern part of Singapore, 1920s.

The completion of East Coast Road in 1902 paved the way for the Tanjong Katong area to develop. By the 1920s, taxis, trishaws, and several bus companies began serving Tanjong Katong. As transport facilities improved, old roads were widened and new ones constructed to accommodate the expanding population.

The prevalence of seaside villas in the area influenced the toponymic heritage of Tanjong Katong. Roads such as Boscombe Road and Poole Road were named after English seaside towns.

The European presence in the Katong-Joo Chiat area also left its mark on local road names. Dunman Road, for instance, was named after Thomas Dunman, while Crane Road honours Thomas Owen Crane, a contemporary of Dunman who cultivated coconuts in the district.



Seaside villas along Tanjong Katong. The Foreshores Act required seaside houses be built at least 15 metres from the shoreline.

TAPESTRY OF CULTURES

Jewish Community

Meyer Family

Meyer Road is named after Sir Reuben Manasseh Meyer, a Jewish businessman and philanthropist from Calcutta, India, who owned the Sea View Hotel at Tanjong Katong. Meyer established the Manasseh Meyer Trust, owned several properties in Singapore, and built the Chesed-El Synagogue at Oxley Rise.

Meyer is also believed to have built some of Singapore's earliest flats, including Crescent Flats in 1909 and Meyer Apartments in 1928, both located in Tanjong Katong. These buildings were among the first luxury, beachfront apartments in Singapore, with the crescent-shaped design of Crescent Flats inspired by similar terrace houses in Bath, United Kingdom. Meyer also constructed a private power station in 1912 at the end of Tanjong Katong Road to provide electricity and fan power to the Sea View Hotel and his nearby flats.

Elias Family

Amber Road was named in 1921 after the Amber Trust Fund. It was established by the mother of Joseph Aaron Elias, a successful Jewish businessman from Calcutta, India, who was active in early 20th-century Singapore. The fund supported the education of poor Jewish youths in Singapore. Elias and his brothers owned several estates along Amber Road, which once stretched from Grove Road (now expunged) to Tanjong Katong Road. The most impressive of their properties was the Elias Mansion.

This two-storey Neo-classical bungalow, conserved since 2004, was part of the Sea View Hotel in the early 20th century and now sits within The Sea View condominium. As part of its restoration, the colourful nautical-themed stained glass panels on the first floor were reinstated, reflecting its past as a seaside home. The restoration efforts earned the Architectural Heritage Award in 2008.



Three-storey Meyer Apartments built in 1928, taken in 1982.

Japanese Community

In 1934, Tamagawa Gardens opened on East Coast Road, less than a kilometre from the Sea View Hotel. It was known for offering the best sukiyaki in town.

Tamagawa Gardens was also famous for its geisha performances. It became a popular spot for the Japanese to unwind after office hours, enjoying Japanese beer and watching geisha dances.

The Japanese had a fondness for Katong that few people at the time fully understood. The coastal area was of significant interest to the Japanese Imperial Navy, as it was seen as a potential landing site in the event of a seaborne invasion of Singapore.

Near Tamagawa Gardens, the Japanese also operated one of the best geisha houses in the country. These two venues were where the Japanese entertained foreign journalists and guests, but the geisha house also doubled as an espionage hub, where Japanese spies gathered.



A gathering at the Japanese restaurant "Tamagawa", 1930s.

Ceylon Community

Ceylon Road was named after the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) due to the large Ceylonese Tamil community that settled in the area during the 19th century. The first Ceylonese immigrants arrived after the Straits Settlements became a Crown colony in 1867.

Many came between the 1880s and 1890s, attracted by job opportunities in the Straits Settlements government and higher wages in Malaya. They settled around Ceylon Road, Marshall Road, Haig Road, and Tanjong Katong Road, taking up clerical, technical, and administrative roles.

Kampong Amber

Between Amber and East Coast Roads, there was a fishing village called Kampong Amber, which existed from the early 1900s to the 1980s. This multicultural village was home to Chinese, Indian, and Malay residents. It also hosted several Baweanese families, migrants from Pulau Bawean in Java.

Residents often remembered how the villagers lived alongside wealthy Chinese towkays. Kampong Amber was also well-known for its hawkers selling *mee rebus*, *nasi lemak*, and *lontong*.



An attap roof home in Kampong Amber, photographed in 1957.

Eurasian Community

In the late 1800s, wealthy Eurasians began building bungalows and villas in Katong as holiday homes. James Scheerder, one of the first to purchase land in the area, developed a coconut plantation.

After World War I, he donated part of his land to the Roman Catholic Church, which built a chapel dedicated to the Holy Family in 1923.

As the Catholic population grew, the original chapel was replaced by the Church of the Holy Family in 1932. In the 1930s, CHIJ Katong Convent and St Patrick's School were established in the area.

Eurasians were drawn to Katong because of the attractive homes and the Catholic institutions in the area. This led to the establishment of Eurasian communities in Katong, particularly around Tanjong Katong, Haig Road, and the area between Tembeling Road and Telok Kurau Road.

After World War II, when the Dutch forces left Singapore, their former camps along Haig Road were repurposed to house 22 Eurasian families, forming the beloved Kampong Serani. "Serani" is derived from the Malay word and the Arabic "Nasrani", meaning followers of Jesus the Nazarene.

As the Eurasian community in Katong continued to grow, they moved into nearby areas, including Kampong Siglap and Frankel Avenue. Today, the Eurasian Heritage Gallery, located along Ceylon Road, preserves and highlights the rich history of the Eurasian community in the area and beyond.

Arab Community

Masjid Khalid, located along Joo Chiat Road, was built in 1917 on land owned by philanthropist Haji Abdul Khalid bin Haji Mohamed Tyed. He constructed the mosque after a group of food peddlers requested for a place of worship. The mosque's first imam was Syeikh Osman Bin Syaikh Omar Al-Ganus, an Arab from Palembang, who also served as Joo Chiat's head qadi and officiated many Muslim marriages.

The Arab community's influence in Joo Chiat is also reflected in The Red House, which was previously known as Katong Bakery & Confectionery. Located along East Coast Road, the bakery was popular for its iconic curry puffs and swiss rolls.

The land it stood on was designated a wakaf asset in 1957. Philanthropist Sheriffa Zain Alsharoff Mohamed Alsagoff was a descendant of Hajjah Fatimah (who built the Hajjah Fatimah Mosque). She placed the land in trust to fund her grandchildren's education and a free clinic for the community.



Although it was popularly referred to as the "Red House Bakery", its actual name is Katong Bakery & Confectionery Company. The gap to the right of the bakery leads to another former shopping Katong landmark "Tay Buan Guan Supermarket".

A SENSE OF HOME

“The history and the architecture give this place a certain vibe that can’t be found elsewhere.”



**Ms Debbie Woodford,
Former Resident of Joo Chiat**

Growing up in Katong, Ms Debbie Woodford has fond memories of going to the Tay Buan Guan Supermarket with her family. It was just behind another one of her family’s favourite haunts – Katong Bakery & Confectionery.

She says, “We would also go to Chin Mee Chin for our sugee cake because it is a traditional dessert in Eurasian cuisine.”

Although she no longer lives in the area, she always feels a sense of home when she is there.

“Of course, it has something to do with the good food in Katong! But I also remember visiting my granduncle and grandaunt at 9 Chapel Road, which was right by the sea before the east coast reclamation. The history and the architecture give this place a certain vibe that can’t be found elsewhere.”

Another place that has great significance for her is Holy Family Church, which is near Chapel Road.

“Most Eurasians are Catholics, so the church is the community’s focal point. We usually get together to celebrate sacraments such as baptism or a child’s first communion. It is such a small and close-knit community. Whenever I meet another Eurasian, I usually ask for their family name, which usually reveals their ties within the

community. But these days, Singapore Eurasians are so multicultural that some of our traditions are getting lost. But one thing I hope to preserve is Eurasian cooking!”

The Woodfords were one of the earliest Eurasian families to settle in Singapore. Ms Woodford’s great-great-great father was James Isaiah Woodford, an apothecary who has a plaque at the Church of Good Shepherd dedicated to him for his community work.

“My dad grew up in Chapel Road. During World War II, he was on the second floor of the house when a bomb tore through the roof. Shortly after, he and my uncle were sent to the Bahau Catholic Camp in Bahau, Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia to avoid becoming the targets of the Kempeitei (Japan’s military police).

He was about 15 years old and his brother was 16 years old at the time. Life was harsh and they had to learn to grow crops, build a house, and fend for themselves. But at least they had each other.” Ms Woodford shared.

The close familial relationships left a big impression on Ms Woodford.

“Seeing how close my dad and his siblings were when they were growing up inspired me to create the same dynamic in my family. I hope this is something I can pass on to the next generation!”

Peranakan Community

Katong-Joo Chiat's ties to the Peranakan community trace back to the early 20th century, when several prominent Peranakans purchased land in the area to grow cash crops and build seaside villas.

At the same time, as the town became increasingly crowded, many Peranakan families sought to relocate to quieter, more spacious suburban areas. With its ample land and proximity to the sea, Joo Chiat emerged as an ideal residential enclave.

Many Peranakan families previously lived on Neil Road and in Tanjong Pagar. After relocating to Joo Chiat, they established businesses such as food stalls and shops selling furniture, clothing, and art that reflected their heritage.

As the community grew, they built the distinctive Transitional-style shophouses now iconic to Joo Chiat. The finest examples can be found along Joo Chiat Place, Everitt Road, and Koon Seng Road. Today, Peranakan influence in the area remains vibrant, with numerous restaurants and shops continuing to honour the community's traditions.



Shophouses along Joo Chiat Road.

Zubir Said's Home at Joo Chiat Place

Zubir Said, also known as Pak Zubir or Mr Mari Kita, was the composer of Singapore's national anthem, "Majulah Singapura". He lived at 190A Joo Chiat Place from the 1950s till his death in 1987. The building has been conserved since 2003.

In the 1950s and 1960s, he was a film music composer for Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris Studio.

Despite not having formal music education, he wrote more than 1,500 film and national songs. He received numerous awards for his contributions to music and Malay culture in Singapore.



Composer of Singapore's National Anthem Zubir Said playing the piano at his home in Joo Chiat Place.

WHERE PAST MEETS POSSIBILITY

“I would like to see Joo Chiat develop more organically and retain the laid-back, charming vibe that cannot be found elsewhere in Singapore.”



Mr Alvin Yapp, Resident of Joo Chiat and Owner of The Intan

Mr Alvin Yapp has many fond memories of Joo Chiat. He remembers the annual visits to his grandmother’s house at Langsat Road during Chinese New Year, trips to the seaside, and food excursions for *tau kwa pok* (deep-fried bean curd puffs) and Katong laksa.

“For me, Joo Chiat is like a time capsule. There is both a physical and emotional aspect that I am drawn to.”

One of the key memories he has of Joo Chiat is attending the Peranakan Chinese Catholic mass at Holy Family Church on Chinese New Year’s Eve with his family.

“This was a cherished tradition for many Catholic Chinese Peranakans families. The late Father Alfred Chan was Peranakan and he incorporated elements of our culture into the mass. He created a nice blend of culture and religious practice that the Peranakan congregation felt connected to.”

Mr Yapp recalls that a Chinese altar with pineapple and *huat kueh* stood in front of the Catholic altar, hymns were sung in Baba Malay, and ladies dressed in *sarong kebaya*.

“Even though I did not understand Baba Malay, I felt comfortable being there and hearing the language during mass.”

As the owner of The Intan, a home museum dedicated to all things Peranakan, Mr Yapp is drawn to Joo Chiat because of its culture.

He explains, “It was never my intention to be the ‘custodian’ of Peranakan culture.

The museum just took a life of its own because more people become interested in Peranakan heritage.”

When he moved to Joo Chiat in 2003, the area was just transforming.

“In the past, this was another Chinatown or Geylang Serai and somewhat seedy. While there were remnants of old businesses such as funeral paper offerings makers, furniture and upholstery shops, and *kebaya* dressmakers – new businesses were also emerging.”

The proliferation of pet shops, cafés, wine shops, artisanal bakeries, butcheries, and Pilates studios, reflect how the demographic has changed. Mr Yapp observes that there are more businesses promoting Peranakan culture these days.

He says, “It would be interesting to see how, these businesses become ... I wouldn’t say traditional, but I guess a bit more soulful. I would like to see Joo Chiat develop more organically and retain the laid-back, charming vibe that cannot be found anywhere else in Singapore.”

For Mr Yapp, this “vibe” is a combination of things.

“It is similar to what makes us Singaporean. It is not because of a single reason but a combination of our outlook, behaviour, language, preferences, fashion, style, and so on. But the main reason I want to stay here is because I am Peranakan and Joo Chiat is Peranakan!”

Lee Family

Lee Cheng Yan, a prominent businessman from the Peranakan community, built Mandalay Villa at Amber Road by the seaside in 1902. After his passing in 1911, his son, Lee Choon Guan, took over the family business and lived at the villa with his wife, Mrs Lee Choon Guan. The villa, known for its elegant design and ornate facade, became famous for the parties hosted by Mrs Lee. These gatherings brought together the Chinese and British communities, who seldom interacted at the time.

Following Lee Choon Guan's death in 1924, his wife became the sole owner of Mandalay Villa. Mrs Lee continued to host popular annual birthday parties at the villa, attracting prominent figures from Singapore's elite and Malay royalty. The fishermen of Kampong Amber also held a yearly parade on her birthday. Mandalay Villa was sold and demolished in 1983.

Telok Kurau

Telok Kurau Road is named after a fishing village, Telok Kurau, on East Coast Road. *Telok kurau* means “mango fish bay” in Malay. In the pre-war years, Telok Kurau was home to many Indians who reared diary cattle, allowing the cows to roam freely on public roads. The cows were taken from house to house for the sale of fresh milk.

By the 1960s, Telok Kurau became a popular middle-class residential area due to its proximity to Katong. In the 1990s, many new low-rise apartments and condominiums sprung up in the area, further attracting young couples and small families looking for affordable homes.

Mandalay Villa

Architect: Lermott and Westerhout

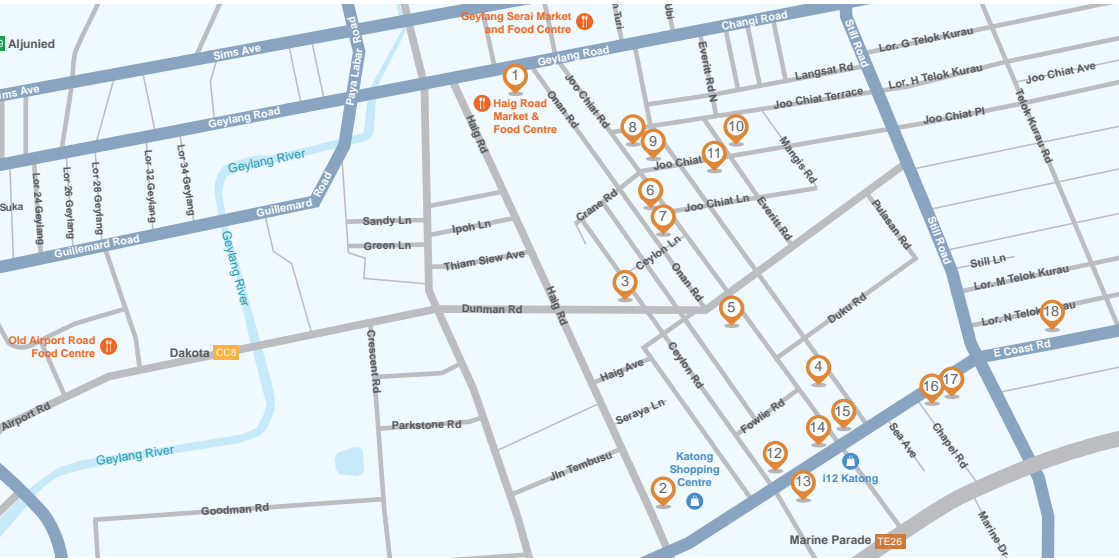
Year: 1902

Status: Demolished in 1983



Mandalay Villa at No. 29 Amber Road, 1950.

The Flavours of Katong-Joo Chiat



At Katong-Joo Chiat, the blend of old and new flavours mirrors the neighbourhood's rich history and ever-changing character.

Discover fragrant Malay dishes, punchy Peranakan food, or hearty Eurasian fare served in cosy eateries that have been here for generations. Trendy cafés with artisanal coffee, traditional Chinese kopitiam offering kaya toast, and old-school bakeries selling kueh exist side-by-side. A wave of Vietnamese eateries is also making its mark in Joo Chiat.

Haig Road Market & Food Centre

- 1 Putu Piring
- Warong Sudi Mampir

Katong Shopping Centre

- 2 Katong Mei Wei
- Katong Yong Tau Foo
- Dona Manis Cake Shop

Ceylon Road

- 3 Quentin's the Eurasian Restaurant

Joo Chiat

- 4 Sin Heng Claypot Bak Koot Teh*
- 5 D'Bun*
- 6 Guan Hoe Soon Restaurant*
- 7 Vietnamese Food
- 8 Kway Guan Huat Joo Chiat Popiah*
- 9 Chilli Padi Nonya Restaurant
- 10 Joo Chiat Fei Fei Wonton Noodle House*
- 11 Kim Choo Kueh Chang*

East Coast

- 12 328 Katong Laksa
- 13 Janggut Laksa
- 14 Birds of Paradise
- 15 Awfully Chocolate
- 16 Chin Mee Chin Confectionery
- 17 Peranakan Inn & Lounge
- 18 Beach Road Prawn Noodle House

*Part of the National Heritage Board's Street Corner Heritage Galleries: Katong-Joo Chiat

LEISURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

As the population of Katong-Joo Chiat grew, leisure options expanded. Between the 1950s and 1970s, Katong saw a cinema boom, with several theatres thriving in the area. By the late 1960s, one-stop shopping centres gained popularity, significantly changing consumer habits.

Cinemas

Hollywood Theatre (1959–1995), on Tanjong Katong Road, was once famous for screening Chinese blockbusters and hosting Hong Kong stars such as Fung Bo Bo and Siao Fong Fong. The cinema screened its last film in 1995 and was turned into a church, which later became a supermarket.

Odeon-Katong Theatre (1960–1993), on East Coast Road, was owned by Cathay Organisation. It screened both Chinese and English films. Between the 1960s and 1980s, it was part of Katong's well-known trio of cinemas, alongside Roxy and Paradise. The building was later repurposed as a church.

Paradise Cinema (1965–1992), at the junction of East Coast Road and Brooke Road, was also known as Palace Theatre or Palace Centre. In 1989, the cinema was selected to screen a top-grossing Taiwanese film featuring several Golden Horse Award winners as part of the Taiwan Film Festival.

By the 1990s, it ceased movie screenings and was converted into Sin Kim Kok Theatre for live performances. Today, the Eastgate Building occupies its former site.

Roxy Cinema (1930s–1978), on East Coast Road, opened opposite the Red House Bakery. It was the first cinema in the east of Singapore and a popular spot for Eurasian students from St Patrick's

School. Acquired by Shaw Brothers after World War II, it continued screening a mix of English, Chinese, Malay, and Indian films until its closure in 1978. The site was later redeveloped into Roxy Square in 1984.



Paradise Theatre, East Coast Road, 1994.

Katong Post Office

Katong Post Office was established in 1933 and is still housed in a two-storey colonial house along Tanjong Katong Road. It remains one of the oldest neighbourhood post offices still in its original location. Over the years, it has undergone renovations, including an extension that altered its original colonial appearance.



Katong Post Office at Tanjong Katong Road, 1970s

Katong Shopping Centre

Katong Shopping Centre was Singapore's first air-conditioned mall. With a seven-storey podium and five-storey annex, the shopping centre once housed 250 shops and numerous offices when it opened in 1973.

Before the East Coast land reclamation, it used to be a beachfront mall and was often referred to as the "Chinatown of the East" due to its high foot traffic.

Designed by Design Partnership, which comprised legendary local architects Koh Seow Chuan, William Lim, and Tay Kheng Soon, its architecture features circles and straight blocks, reflecting the 1970s Singapore Modernist style, which prioritised function and simplicity.

Katong Shopping Centre

Architect: Koh Seow Chuan, William Lim, Tay Kheng Soon

Organisation: Design Partnership

Year: 1975

Tay Buan Guan Shopping Centre

Tay Buan Guan Shopping Centre was opened in 1967 by Tay Leck Teck, an entrepreneur who settled in the Joo Chiat area in 1937. It was the first one-stop shopping centre in Katong. It quickly gained popularity, attracting regular patrons, including Peranakans, Eurasians, and English-educated Chinese. Though considered an upmarket destination, the centre offered competitive pricing, making it a beloved spot for locals. Today, a condominium occupies the site.



An advertisement by Tay Buan Guan, 1971.



Katong Shopping Centre at Mountbatten Road, 2019.

SIRANGOON

Payah Lebar

Mr Fisher

Dr Jattle

SIGLAP

Tannah Merih

Kitchil

Powder Magazine

Camp

Mr Armstrong

Jetty

*F. Station
N^o 14*

anjong Katong

Map dated 1873.

SIGLAP

FISHING VILLAGES BY THE SEA

Behind the Name

One oral history account credits the founding of Kampong Siglap to Tok Lasam, a Minangkabau prince from Sumatra, who is said to have arrived in Singapore in the early 1800s and built the village by the sea.

He nicknamed the area *Si Gelap*, meaning “the dark one” in Malay, after a solar eclipse in 1821, when the sky suddenly darkened, frightening the villagers. Amateur historian Sarafian Salleh later wrote to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to confirm the occurrence of a solar eclipse that year.



Malay kampong at Jalan Hajjah, 1995.

Seaside Kampongs

Until the 1980s, four seaside kampongs existed before land reclamation reshaped the coastline. Kampong Siglap and Kampong Hajjah were Malay villages, and Kampong Lim Choo and Kampong Goh Choo were Chinese villages. Many residents were fishermen, a tradition passed down through generations in their families.

Grave of Penghulu Tok Lasam



Tomb of Penghulu Lasam at Jalan Sempadan, 2025.

Today, the graves of *Penghulu* (Malay for “chieftain”) Tok Lasam, his wife, and his *Panglima* (Malay for “commander-in-chief”) stand at the end of Jalan Sempadan. The graves are marked with yellow cloth to denote royalty.

Valley of Tears

One of Siglap’s darkest secrets lies in the wartime atrocities committed in the area during the Japanese Occupation. In the early 1940s, dozens of Chinese men were taken by Japanese soldiers in several lorries to the hills of Siglap, where they were executed.

In 1951, mass graves containing the remains of around 1,300 victims were discovered near present-day Bedok South Avenue. A decade later, in 1962, 40 more mass war graves were uncovered off Evergreen

Avenue, and the area was dubbed the “Valley of Tears” by the media.



Mass graves at Siglap burial site, 1962.

SIGLAP'S FISHERFOLK

A Vanished Trade

Before land reclamation, the East Coast Road area – including Siglap – was very close to the sea, allowing many fishing villages to thrive. Chinese, Malay, and even Japanese fisherfolk once used Siglap as a base for their fishing activities.

By the late 1970s, the fishing industry in Siglap waned as land reclamation pushed homes further inland, and the more educated younger generations sought new career paths.

The kampongs were demolished, and the residents resettled in public housing flats. Once a bustling fishing village where fishmongers and residents gathered to buy the catch from the fisherfolk, Siglap transformed into a serene residential area.

Okinawan Fishermen in Siglap

In the early 20th century, Japan expanded into Southeast Asia's fishing industry to ease overpopulation in its fishing villages and gain access to new markets. Many Japanese fishermen in Singapore came from Itoman, Okinawa, migrating here since 1921.

In 1936, around 20 Japanese fishermen were believed to have lived in Siglap along East Coast Road. Their homes had poultry yards, where they raised fowls, ducks, and geese. This community also ran small businesses, including a sundries shop and a barber's salon.

Despite being outnumbered by local fishermen, Japanese fishermen dominated Singapore's fishing industry. Using advanced offshore methods, they were able to contribute 50% of the colony's fish supply by the 1930s. They also contributed to the local industry by training some residents on fishing techniques.

Their strong presence in Malayan ports gradually raised British security concerns, as Malaya was a key naval station. In response, the British imposed restrictions from 1937 to curb Japanese control over the industry.

FRANKEL ESTATE AND OPERA ESTATE

In the 19th century, the areas that would later become Frankel Estate and Opera Estate were primarily coconut, rubber, and nutmeg plantations. Abraham Frankel, a Lithuanian immigrant, purchased the land in 1912. The Frankel family were prominent Jewish merchants and philanthropists who lived in Siglap until World War II.

When Albert Einstein was travelling to Tokyo in November 1922, he made a stopover in Singapore. He was warmly welcomed at a reception at Belle Vue hosted by the wealthy Jewish businessman, Menasseh Meyer. Einstein and his wife also visited Frankel's home and was said to be impressed by the beautiful trees in the estate.

Around 1947, the land was sold to *Crédit Foncier d'Extrême-Orient*, a Franco-Belgian developer, for approximately \$1.1 million. The company divided the land and sold plots to various developers, who undertook different housing projects. The name "Opera Estate" and its street names inspired by European operas and *bangsawan* (traditional



Family Photo of Yusof Ishak and Puan Noor Aishah at Opera Estate Home.

Malay opera) – were likely suggested by one of the developers.

Opera Estate was once described by *The Straits Times* as Singapore's San Francisco because of its hilly terrain and the relatively affluent nature of its residents.

A notable resident was Yusof Ishak, Singapore's first president, who lived on Aida Street when he was a journalist.

Old Siglap Valley (Opera Estate) at Siglap Road, 1993.





View of one of the blocks at Siglap Housing Estate, 1963.

First HDB Flats in Siglap

In 1962, a fire destroyed around 50 attap houses in Kampong Siglap, leaving more than 500 people homeless. The blaze was believed to have been sparked by firecrackers set off during the Chinese New Year celebrations. The strong sea breeze spread the flames quickly through the kampong.

The Housing and Development Board responded swiftly, constructing new flats for the fire victims. By 1964, four five-storey blocks were completed, which included

shops and a clinic. Of these, Block 1 East Coast Road will be retained for community use to serve surrounding residents.



Block 1 East Coast Road.

Cathay-Keris Studio

Formed in 1953, Cathay-Keris Studio was one of the two main film producers in Singapore during the 1950s and 1960s, alongside Shaw Brothers. Located at 532-D East Coast Road, the studio later inspired the naming of the Jalan Keris estate.

The studio produced numerous black-and-white Malay films, including *Mat Tiga Suku*, filmed along East Coast before the land reclamation, making it a valuable historical record of the area. In 1960, Cathay-Keris

released Singapore's first Chinese-language film, *The Lion City*. It ceased film production in 1973.



Cathay-Keris Studio, 1960s.

WHERE HISTORY MEETS HEART

“Siglap is still a place where history meets heart – a unique blend of cultures, generations, and kindness.”



**Madam Patricia Campbell,
Resident of Siglap**

Madam Patricia Campbell’s family has lived in Siglap for more than 70 years. She still stays in the same house that she grew up in and remembers when the beach was just 150 metres from her home.

Back then, the area was home to a diverse, tight-knit community. Neighbours were more like extended family, and the sea was part of their everyday lives. One of her favourite childhood memories is of her *amah* (domestic helper) feeding her dinner by the beach while her mother collected seaweed to make *agar agar*.

“My father loved the sea. He would swim and dig for cockles by the bucket. We would see fisherfolk repairing their nets along the beach. Sometimes, at 1 or 2 am in the morning, we would all run to the beach to buy fresh fish from the fishermen. I also remember watching elephants walk along the beach. It was very surreal!”

Her house was close to Kampong Siglap whose residents were mostly in the fishing industry. Madam Campbell recalls being one of the children in the neighbourhood who helped to pound coconut husks, which were processed into ropes and sold to ships for anchors.

“There was a very strong kampong spirit in the neighbourhood. We connected through food!”

She recalls how her mother and neighbours would feed the children in the neighbourhood – from milk to eggs to curry rice balls.

In the estate, everyone knew everybody.

“It was common to go in and out of each other’s homes like family – borrowing eggs, sugar, and even cooking pots! My mother would organise an open house to celebrate Christmas and Chinese New Year. We also celebrated Hari Raya, and even the Hungry Ghost Festival in the kampong.”

During the reclamation, the physical landscape started to change and fewer people went close to the sea.

“I remember the noise and how the fine grains of sand got everywhere! My father worked for *The Straits Times* and one of the stories he covered back in the day was the East Coast reclamation project.”

The neighbourhood has changed a lot over the years with modern developments and new and younger residents moving in. But for Madam Campbell, Siglap is still a place where history meets heart – a unique blend of cultures, generations, and kindness.

“Although it feels different, the spirit of community still lingers. We should document and celebrate the stories through the memories, photographs, and the oral histories of those who lived here,” Madam Campbell says.

“Community spaces should be preserved, and we should continue traditions that bring people together – open houses, market culture, and makan culture as Siglap is also known for good food!”

¹ William Campbell, “Making Our Beaches to Order...” *Straits Times*, 24 September 1974



Map dated 1975.

UPPER EAST COAST

ONCE AT THE ISLAND'S EDGE

“The Red Cliffs”

The name Tanah Merah, translates to “red cliffs” in Malay and refers to the reddish clay cliffs once located along the coastline before the East Coast Reclamation landlocked the area. In James Horsburgh’s 1806 map of the Strait of Malacca, they were marked as “Red Cliffs” at the island’s easternmost point in his perspective.

These cliffs served as a lookout for spotting approaching enemies and a navigational reference for sailors. Colonial-era maps differentiated between the Large Red Cliff and Small Red Cliff, which later became known as Tanah Merah Besar (near Terminal 3 of Changi Airport) and Tanah Merah Kechil (around Parbury Avenue).

Military Fortifications

A powder magazine and jetty were built in Tanah Merah Kechil in 1869 as an ammunition depot by businessmen Tan Seng Poh and Cheng Tee. Before this, gunpowder was stored on ships and boats, a risky and costly practice. The magazine’s opening drew a large crowd, with *The Straits Times* calling it the biggest gathering in Singapore at the time.

From the 1920s, the British military built pillboxes in Tanah Merah, including near Kew Drive and along the beach. These small concrete forts were intended as the first line of defence, allowing soldiers to fire at enemy ships and troops attempting to land.



Strait of Malacca Map Sheet II, 1806.



Historical map of the East Coast, 1975.

A CHANGING COASTLINE

Before the East Coast Reclamation began in the 1960s, East Coast Road and Upper East Coast Road ran along the coastline. However, extensive land reclamation shifted the shoreline southwards, the roads are no longer along the coast. The 1975 map above shows the extent of the reclaimed land. Marine Parade Road had also been built alongside East Coast Road.

Old Seawalls

The surviving fragments of old seawalls along the East Coast reflect the evolution of the area's character and landscape. Today several stretches of seawalls remain including Elliot Walk and Nallur Road. Once coastal defences, they now stand landlocked.

East Coast Reclamation

The East Coast Reclamation, or "Great Reclamation", was planned to meet the growing demand for land due to housing and industrialisation needs. Led by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the project added 1,525 hectares along the southeastern coast, using earth from Bedok's rolling hills.

Work began in 1966 and spanned 30 years. It covered areas from Bedok to Tanjong Rhu and eventually Marina Bay and commercial centres. East Coast Park, a linear park and beach, was developed to connect the housing estates.



East Coast Parkway

Built in 1981 on reclaimed land during the East Coast Reclamation, the East Coast Parkway (ECP) is a 19-kilometre expressway that connects the city centre to Changi Airport in 20 minutes. It links residential areas such as Marine Parade Estate, Katong, Siglap, and Bedok New Town along the route.

Flanking both sides of the 8.2-kilometre approach road between Changi Airport and the ECP is a lush and green canopy of raintrees. It reflects former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's vision of transforming Singapore into a garden city.

The lush greenery creates a striking first impression on international visitors arriving via Changi Airport and provides a cool and comfortable drive along the highway.



East Coast Parkway, 2006.



(Left) Artist's impression of the view across the new reservoir towards 'Long Island' from East Coast Park. (Right) The view across the new reservoir from 'Long Island'.

'Long Island'

'Long Island' is a national project and integrated solution that will span across a few decades. It will address several strategic needs such as protecting the low-lying East Coast area from sea level rise and strengthening Singapore's flood resilience; enhancing our water resilience with a new reservoir; and creating additional land to meet future development needs.

'Long Island' will involve the reclamation of around 800 hectares of new land off the East Coast and the creation of a new reservoir. It will provide opportunities for housing, new waterfront parks, and recreational spaces. Public engagement for the 'Long Island' project commenced in 2024.

Kampong Bedok or Bedok Corner

Upper East Coast Road curves sharply into Bedok Road at a spot affectionately known as Bedok Corner – once a coastal junction before land reclamation. Home to Kampong Bedok Laut and Kampong Bedok Darat in the 1850s, the area evolved from fishing and farming villages into a vibrant Malay community.

From the 1940s to the 1970s, hawkers lined the beachfront. In 1971, Bedok Food Centre was built to house them. It was upgraded with Minangkabau-style architecture, with roofs and a central courtyard, reflecting the communal spirit of Bedok's kampong past.



Entrance of Bedok Food Centre.



Long Beach Seafood Restaurant at Bedok Rest House, 1986.

Former Bedok Rest House

Bedok Rest House was once located by the sea at Bedok Corner. In 1946, Long Beach Seafood opened its first outlet there, introducing the iconic black pepper crab dish.

By night, the area buzzed with diners enjoying al fresco dining on the sandy beach with ice-cold beer and delicious seafood. Both the building and restaurant became beloved landmarks of Upper East Coast.



Long Beach Seafood signboard.

Fisheries Department Depot

During the colonial period, the Fisheries Department operated a 10-ton cold store at Upper East Coast (now Temasek Secondary School), chosen for its coastal location and fishing heritage. The department also ran a school where youths learned to handle fishing vessels, mend nets, and preserve seafood through canning and curing.

Notable educators included Ishak bin Ahmad, father of Singapore's first president, and Justice of the Peace A. Karim bin Embi Abdullah. There was also the Bedok Fisheries Centre, located closer to the sea, which eventually moved to Punggol after land reclamation.



Staff of the Fisheries Department servicing a motor at the beach, 1954.

A SEAFOOD HAVEN

The eastern section of East Coast Road was renamed Upper East Coast Road in 1953 to prevent confusion caused by the duplication of house numbers, which led to delays in mail deliveries. The duplication occurred because the road was long and passed through both rural and urban areas.

Birthplace of Chilli Crab

Before the East Coast Reclamation, Upper East Coast Road ran along the beach and was home to numerous popular seafood restaurants including Kheng Luck Seafood, Palm Beach Seafood, Bedok Seaview, Chin Wah Heng Seafood, and Red House.

Some of these notable establishments are no longer in operation but from the 1950s to the 1970s, Upper East Coast Road was considered “the most famous seafood belt in Singapore”.

Palm Beach Seafood is credited with creating the iconic chilli crab, making the area the birthplace of this beloved dish. Many of these restaurants operated with temporary permits, as their premises were originally designated for residential purposes.



Chilli crab is one of the most beloved dishes among foodies in Singapore.

The popularity of the restaurants led to complaints about traffic congestion. In 1977, the Singapore government offered sites at the upcoming East Coast Park for the restaurants to relocate. By 1985, the East Coast Park Seafood Centre became the new home for seafood establishments.

Today, Hua Yu Wee is the only restaurant still at its original location on Upper East Coast Road, serving as a reminder of the area’s past.



Diners at East Coast Park Seafood Centre.

NEW COMMUNITIES

Bedok New Town

Bedok was first mentioned on cartographer Manuel Godinho de Eredia's 1604 map as "Sunebodo", referring to what is now Sungei Bedok. On colonial maps, Bedok stretched from present-day Siglap to Changi, where coconut plantations once ran along the coastline.

The origins of the name remain debated. It could be a reference to *bedoh*, a wooden drum used for the Islamic call to prayer or, it could be linked to *biduk*, a Malay riverine fishing boat, tying it to Sungei Bedok.

In the 1960s, as land was reclaimed along the East Coast, HDB developed the area east of Siglap into Bedok New Town, transforming Bedok's landscape of fishing villages and cemeteries into an urban town.

Marine Parade

Marine Parade was the first housing estate built on reclaimed land. Envisioned as a self-sufficient town that integrated commercial and recreational facilities, its seafront location and amenities made it a desirable place to live.

Bayshore Estate

In 2023, HDB revealed the master plan for Bayshore Estate. The 60-hectare site, located on reclaimed land and bounded by Upper East Coast Road, Bayshore Road, and the East Coast Parkway, is expected to be fully developed by the mid-2030s.

Bayshore Estate, planned as an extension of Bedok New Town, will include approximately 7,000 HDB flats. The estate's design aims to incorporate its proximity to East Coast Park, with features such as waterfront homes, new parks, and green spaces.

It will be a car-lite estate with walking and cycling paths, and a new linear park will preserve heritage elements like the old seawalls marking the coastline before the East Coast Reclamation.

Artist's Impression of Bayshore Estate.



EYE ON THE FUTURE



Busy streets at Katong-Joo Chiat.

The Historic East Identity Corridor forms part of Singapore's rich and diverse cultural landscape, beloved for its historic architecture, charming streetscapes, and unique traditions.

As a heartland of diverse cultural heritage, from Malay to Peranakan to Eurasian heritage, the East continues to meld food, stories, beliefs, and customs into a living culture.

Building on Past Efforts

The designation of this area as an Identity Corridor builds on a long history of

conservation and urban design efforts. Starting in the 1990s, Geylang, Joo Chiat, and Tanjong Katong were designated as Secondary Settlements. Then, as part of the 2002 Identity Plan, Tanjong Katong and Katong-Joo Chiat were designated as Identity Nodes while Paya Lebar Central was marked as an Urban Design Area in 2015.

Over the years, various plans and policies were introduced, all focused on preserving character while facilitating new developments that inject vitality to the East, thus allowing the area to evolve with the times.



Weaving a Communal Tapestry

From August 2024 to May 2025, the Urban Redevelopment Authority held a 10-month long public engagement exercise that involved local residents and stakeholders in visioning and co-creation efforts.

The resulting plans and proposals of the exercise built on existing activities on the ground, creating new threads in a communal tapestry.

Shaping Public Spaces Together

The Lively Places Fund will continue to spark and support myriad community projects such as the creation of public spaces, furniture, and artwork around the Historic East to create delight and anchor emotional connections to place.

It is hoped that this collection of stories and recollections of life in the Historic East will inspire Singaporeans to discover and create their own memories of the area in years to come.

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