EXPLOITATION OF ADAPTIVE RE-USE
by Various Motivations
Under the Guise of Conservation
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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of adaptive re-use projects in Singapore today appears to validate it as a successful and relevant approach to architecture and urban planning. This idea of building re-use is not a new concept since historically, its motivation has been of convenience and sensible economics. Besides the purposes of function and finance, adaptive re-use has recently found increasing relevance (1) in conservation of the built environment, (2) in environmental conservation and, (3) as an architectural technique.

In this dissertation, adaptive re-use is explored within the Singapore context. In this case, the notion of adaptive re-use is very much associated with conservation. This attitude towards conservation is very much shaped by Singapore's brief history, from independence to its struggle to become a global city. Thus, only adaptive re-use for conservation and profit is widely accepted in Singapore.

The pertinent issues of adaptive re-use are hence (1) emphasis on economics, and (2) the notion of the façade or shell (either the buildings shell is very important or it is of no importance at all.) It follows that the problem with adaptive re-use is its misconstrued emphasis on the presentational value and visual impact of a place rather than its activities and content. This reduces the intentions of conservation to merely the retention of shells without consideration for intangible qualities of social ties, ambience, character of place, etc. This can be viewed as an exploitation of heritage and historical fabric for the purposes of commercial gain.

Due to Singapore's capitalist economy and a survivalist attitude, the Government takes calculated moves to ensure continued economic progress. In this light, adaptive re-use has proved itself advantageous because it emphasises change of use but retention of buildings shell. These conditions hence legitimises the use of the historical built environment for the purposes of (1) conservation without financial burden, (2) construction of an identity (new or otherwise), (3) altering the ambience and character of a conserved place in line with urban renewal strategies, and (4) creation of architectural landscapes for consumption. Conservation, which is itself a noble and justifiable cause, becomes tainted with the need to generate profit or in the least sustain itself economically.