Enhancing the Social Landscape of our heritage

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ABSTRACT

Singapore is one of the pioneering countries in Southeast Asian to embark on the task of conservation. Precedences on conservation practices in European countries were studied during the development of local conservation guidelines and policies. From the preservation of individual buildings gazetted as heritage monuments to the designation of whole districts as conservation areas, a range of schemes has been laid out to retain the nation’s historical assets.

Besides institutional buildings in the Civic and Cultural District, consisting of former courthouses, government and religious buildings, the built heritage of Singapore does not possess great architectural value in most instances. Instead it is the social and cultural qualities, intrinsic to the traditional environment, which embody the character of a place.

Under Section 3 of the Planning Act (1990), objectives concerning these social values were: “the preservation, enhancement, or restoration of (a) character or appearance of a conservation area; or (b) the trades, crafts, customs and other traditional activities carried on in a conservation area”.

Conservation philosophy has placed biased emphasis on the physical characteristics of historical buildings while the social dimension is neglected. Relentless efforts devoted to the restoration of architectural attributes are commendable and many traditional buildings have been salvaged from decay and deterioration. Unfortunately, the disregard or lack of initiatives to retain residential communities has disintegrated the social fabric of historic areas. While URA has envisaged a certain amount of change from residential to commercial use in the districts, the decline has been more drastic than expected.

Social networks disrupted by the migration of residents away from their traditional dwellings entailed the closure of local businesses in the vicinity. This was aggravated by economic pressures and redevelopment plans. The loss of social vitality led to difficulties in creating a vibrant authentic Chinatown experience. Development of conservation areas resort to thematisation which perpetuated the problem of inauthenticity.
The historical context in Singapore for urban conservation is different from most European cities whose rich heritage assets comprise mainly of monuments and buildings with great architectural significance. It is necessary to develop strategies that are responsive to local needs and the importance of social conservation has to be acknowledged.

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