

rethinking chinatown and heritage conservation in singapore

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Published by Singapore Heritage Society c/o 179 River Valley Road # 05-06 Singapore 179033



ISBN: 981-04-2133-8

Distributed by Select Books Pte Ltd 19 Tanglin Road #03-15

Tanglin Shopping Centre Singapore 247909

Printed by

Genesis Typesetting & Publication Services Blk 51 Lorong 3 Geylang Road #07-07/08 Sims Avenue Industrial Estate

dedication

dedicated to the former and present residents of kreta ayer / niucheshui

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timeline

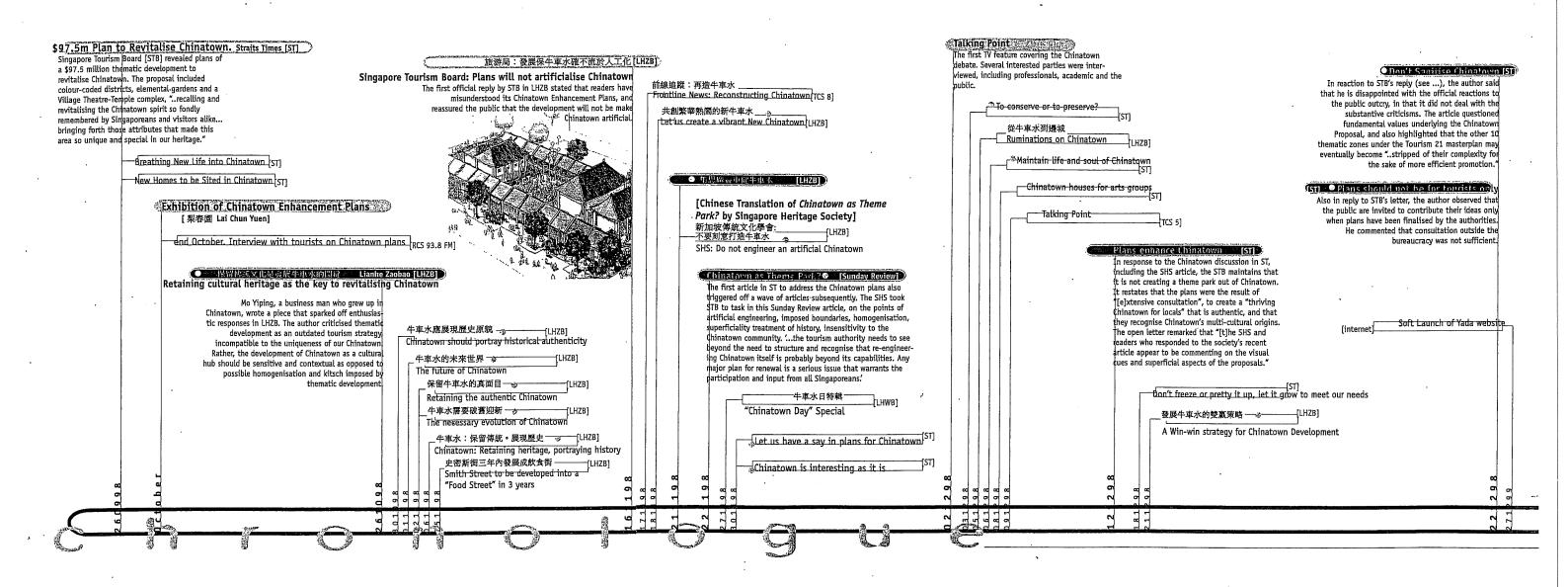
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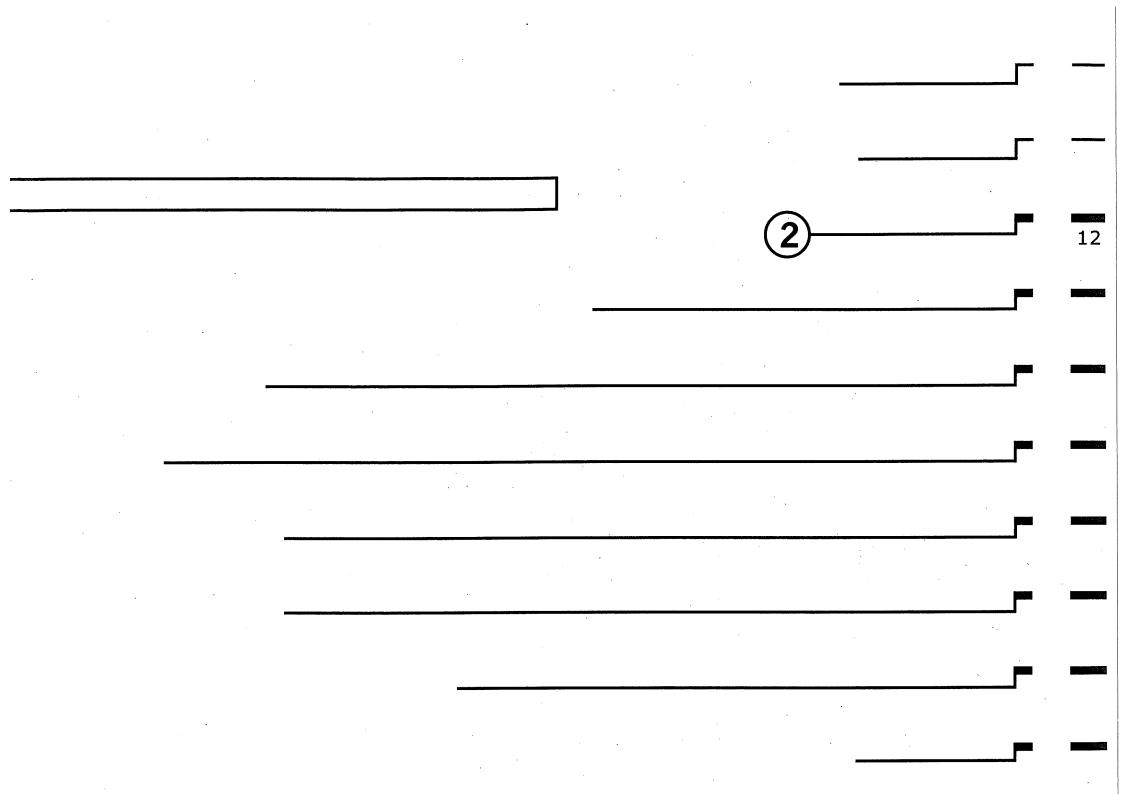


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Public Forum: The Chinatown Enhancement Plans [Kreta Ayer CC] This was the public forum held by STB to discuss its 要华事水恢复活力是大家共同出發點 A common intention: to rejuvenate Chinatown Enhancement Plans for Chinatown. This event stood out Rival bodies mend rift over Chinatown [ST] An interview and report on the STB Forum in which Director of for its frank and sometimes heated exchanges from an An authentic Chinatown for all . ISTI extrememly critical audience. The interest in this topic was so great that the forum's duration was extended by Thematic Development, STB, Kenneth Liang acknowledged that A lengthy second reply by the STB recapitulated the good intentions of its proposal to "rethe voices of criticism has been heard, but went on to say that people will eventually get used to and even grow fond of the new development. RCC Chairman Li Guoming expressed that more than 2 hours. More pertinent is the diverse energise Chinatown" in response to the "changbackground of the audience. ing times". It defended various aspects of the while some design elements in the proposal were not well-Pamphlet diseminated and presented at public forum NIIS students blans which were criticised, and sought to 旅游局將与傳統文化學會合作改進牛車水發展藍圖 [LHZB] received, the plans are legitimate in its own sense, as part of "clarify misconceptions and misunderstandings.." \$TB and SHS to collaborate in Chinatown Enhancement Plans Singapore's 'Tourism 21' vision. It revealed that public dialogues will be con-At the launch of *Chinatown Memories* by Geraldine Lowe, STB announced that it ucted in the near future. has established a common ground with SHS on the Chinatown issue. SHS President Kwok Kian Woon said that the impression from STB was that its Public Forum: The ChindLover Emiding ement of Architects ISIAI Newsletter 斯希牛車水一是無触的循環?電是不安的場份? IHZBI Ştrong feelings over Chinatown issue: consultative process is still ongoing, and opinions voiced include questioning of feature report of the STB public forum Old Spirit Soars ppeared in this internal publication of the a misunderstanding or an uneasy awakening? In this feature report, the author observed that the Chinatown issue unveiled the general dissent amongst Singaporeans regarding the - Watch out for falling crackers [ST] fessional institute. ArPiece of Chinatown destruction of built heritage due to rapid urban redevelopment. She remarked that while this signals a healthy sign of awakening civic consciousness, many criticisms directed at the STB were misplaced. Old friends missed at reunion meal [ST] Conserving Chinatown Chinatown furore 'shows rootedness'[51] In this report, Minister of Information and the -What's there to bring back to life in Chinatown? Bysiness Times [BT] Arts, BG George Yeo said that the recent debate 生車水發展藍圖交流會与會者問題尖鋭語氣強烈-__[LHZB] over plans to revamp Chinatown proves Singaporeans have "strong bonds to the land", Chinatown Forum: Strong views and rigorous questioning although creating "some inconveniences" for the from participants Revitalisation of Chinatown Committee [RCC] closed doo Will-Chinatown be less than genuine? 保留与重建之爭 consultation with Zaobao contributors The Contest between Conservation and Redevelopment closed door consultation organised by STB and chaired by RCC to collect views of LHZB readers, The Chinatown Debate predominantly from the Chinese-speaking commu-nity. A vast majority of letter writers submitted their articles to the LHZB as compared to ST. **_诱视天下** -史密斯街梨春園成為慈濟新會所 ——[LHZB] Limeliaht -牛車水區人口2010年將増40% -Lai Chun Yuen at Smith Street to house charity organisation Forum on Chinatown: Public invited to give views on facelift 這也是個"感情問題"──[LHZB] Chinatown population to increase by 40% by Year 2010 Also an "affair of the heart" Makeover Chinatown???!!!! 9 B B indicates articles and letters sent to the press by members of the public Title indicates key events file Source indicates key articles / letters views by members of the public Title Source indicates key press releases letters by authorities

introduction



"People as stakeholders of a city should have a greater say over the development of the city they live in. City planners have to involve city dwellers in the process of creating their dream homes within a safe, secure and pleasant living environment. Then, the city will not only be a place for work and business, but buzz with residential life as well."

[Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Opening Speech at "World Conference on Model Cities", 19-23 April 1999]

Prime Minister Goh's words appear to signal a new perspective in the history of city planning in Singapore. It is also in keeping with the thrust of new "Singapore 21" initiatives in encouraging civic participation and fostering a sense of belonging to Singapore as a home. Interestingly, his statement was made at a time when many Singaporeans have shown great concern for the future of heritage areas in Singapore.

In September 1998, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) announced a \$97.5 million plan to "revitalise" Chinatown as laid out in their document Enhancing the Chinatown Experience. Within months, however, there developed public debate on the STB proposal and the future of

Chinatown. In particular, many views were offered through the Chinese-language media, especially in *Lianhe Zaobao*. For some years, the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) had been following the development of Chinatown and other heritage areas. In November 1998, concerned members of the Society put together a newspaper article (in English and Chinese) examining the STB's proposal. This article, in turn, also stimulated further debate, which led the STB to hold a public forum in early February 1999.

The STB proposal has evoked a wide range of responses. Indeed, many individuals have spoken up with great passion – which sometimes could have been misinterpreted as venting anger at the agencies involved in the development of the proposal, with the STB as the spearheading authority. However, as Minister George Yeo has suggested in Parliament (March 1999), the Chinatown debate "shows rootedness".

Members of the SHS certainly share Minister Yeo's observation and PM Goh's subsequent articulation of the need for citizens to be involved in creating their urban environment. The Chinatown debate also dovetailed with other public expressions of concern for heritage conservation and national identity. For example, many Singaporeans were saddened by the announcement of plans to demolish the National Library building at Stamford Road. And the Merlion, the tourism symbol often regarded as a national icon, continues to evoke mixed reactions from people. Over the years, too, citizens - and even expatriates and visitors - have been critical of the increasing development of theme parks and the superficial "theming" of heritage areas.

At the outset, let it be said that SHS members are of the view that tourism and heritage are not two opposing concerns. Indeed, we are well aware that cultural tourism has become an increasingly significant phenomenon worldwide, not merely for the sake of tourist dollars but also for the pride that people have for their national heritage.

The SHS is taking this opportunity to undertake a preliminary review of the STB Chinatown proposal. In this study, we aim to do the following:

1. Document the course of the public debate on the STB proposal and the future of Chinatown;

- Highlight certain perspectives and areas of concern that are relevant for the implementation of the STB plans; and
- Draw lessons from the Chinatown debate and reflect on future directions for the development of heritage sites in Singapore.

A few caveats are in order. First, this is hardly an exhaustive study; rather we hope that it can be a precursor to a detailed and thorough independent review of the STB proposal and of heritage conservation in Chinatown. Second, we make no claim that we have consulted all the relevant parties or interested individuals; indeed, this study cannot also claim to represent the views of all our members and supporters. We are aware that in offering our views and arguments, we also stand ready to be corrected and criticised so that they can be revised and strengthened. Third, the contents of this study are based on information that were gathered up to the time of writing; we are aware that the situation - and the implementation of plans - in Chinatown is still fluid and subject to changes. Fourth, whatever the changes, we hope that our study will stimulate further thinking on the future of Chinatown and other heritage areas in Singapore.

This study will be divided into four main sections:

1. Our Chinatown Heritage

Chinatown is examined, taking into account both historical and contemporary forces, and identifying its existing strengths. This serves to highlight certain directions of redevelopment that will capitalise on, rather than ignore or stifle, such strengths.

2. Challenges in the Revitalisation of Chinatown

Basic problems and their manifestations are discussed in relation to the strengths identified in the previous section. A consideration of the challenges involved will open up different possible avenues of redevelopment.

3. Opportunities for the Redevelopment of Chinatown

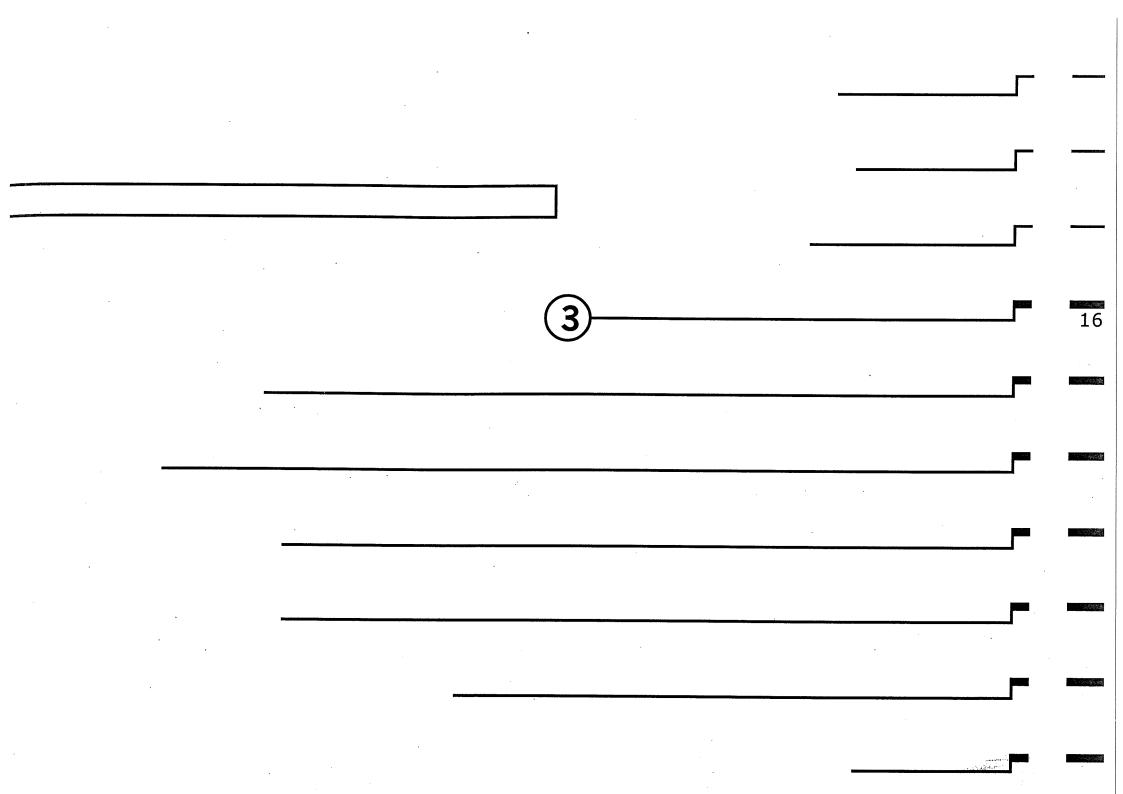
A community-driven approach is considered. This is in keeping with the evolutionary nature of heritage and community development. Bureaucratic interventions, when and where necessary, should be minimised and strategically undertaken. From such a perspective, cultural tourism can enhance heritage conservation, including the responsible representation of history and culture.

4. A Consideration of the STB Proposal

The rationale and thrust of the proposal are reviewed, especially in the light of the Tourism 21 report. Certain proposals are considered in terms of their impact on the inherent strengths of Chinatown.

our Chinatown heritage

building on our strengths



What is 'Heritage'?

At the Singapore Heritage Society, we have a shorthand definition for the term 'heritage': 'the living presence of the past.' The definitions in the dictionary expand on this idea:

noun **1** something that is inherited. **2** the characteristics, qualities, property, etc that one inherits at birth. **3** a nation's mark of history, such as stately buildings, countryside, cultural traditions, etc seen as the nation's wealth to be inherited by future generations

[Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, 1996]

The Value of Heritage

Heritage as "the nation's wealth to be inherited by future generations" is a form of capital – not just material capital but also social and cultural capital.

Heritage takes time to develop, and much of its importance lies in the cumulative build-up of habits, values, traditions, institutions and even social relationships. It depends on the uniquely human trait of memory, specifically a social memory that can span

generations.

Sustainability, therefore, is the key. Thriving commercial activities, vibrant cultural traditions, and strong residential communities – what many desire for Chinatown and other heritage areas - are not sustainable in the long term unless they are based on deeper foundations rather than on a single quick-fix plan.

The Heritage of Chinatown

Chinatown possesses a heritage - living traditions and communal spaces that continue and change up to the present day.

These traditions and spaces should be the focus of any redevelopment effort initiated by a tourism authority or other agencies. However, there is often an eagerness to develop new activities and facilities, implying a "clean slate" approach to development.

• The "clean slate" approach tends to treat heritage issues in a superficial way, and to stress the importance of new programmes, structures and identities. This strategy treats existing valuable resources as unusable and irrelevant.

• Besides failing to capitalise on existing strengths, this approach can be detrimental since, in its failure to understand the continuities and changes between past and present, it could work to hinder constructive factors already present.

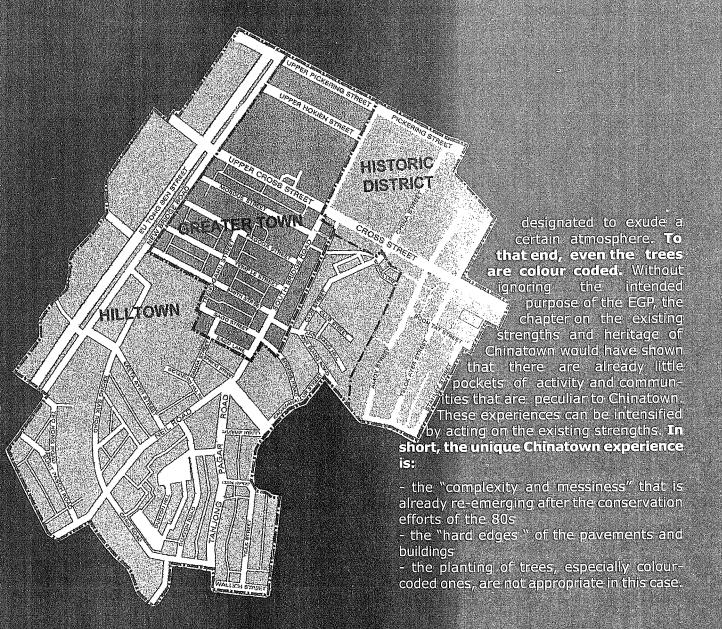
Taking Stock of Our Heritage Resources

The current proposals for the redevelopment of Chinatown do not take into account the existing "heritage assets" of Chinatown. A "stock taking" of these assets should be a precursor to any new developments. In the first place, how are the boundaries of "Chinatown" to be delineated? The boundaries of Niu Che Shui have always been fluid in historical and popular conceptions of the area. In light of the sharp delineation and sub-division of boundaries under the STB plan, the Board has shown concern about the dearth of certain kinds of activities, especially economic activities, in targeted parts. However, if "Chinatown" is not viewed as a fixed delimited spatial entity, we might then begin to appreciate the different living spaces that do exist as part of both the memories

Boundaries and Divisions

The STB drew up plans for a precisely delineated piece of land comprising mainly of the remaining old shophouses of the area. However, this does not correspond to popular or historical conceptions of Chinatown. A s a result, the densely populated and commercially thriving developments such as People's Park Complex and nearby buildings are not included in STB's plans. These places contain many old businesses and reisdents that were relocated from 'traditional' Chinatown, These places also provide a significant density of residences and activities that should be the key to any revitalization effort. Historically, Chinatown goes beyond the STB prescribed boundaries to include Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Riverside Point and other such areas. Many sigmificant historical sites, such as Thong Chai Medical Hall and Yung Cheng School whichare both milestones in the development of early Chinese migrant society here, are excluded from the official proposals. Should these be arbitrarily cut off, so as to contain and define the unique "Chinatown" experience? Surely, many benefits and opportunities will surface if further research is conducted to include these areas as part of a greater and loosely defined Chinatown.

Secondly, the three colour coded zones within the STB-demarcated Chinatown impose a heavy-handed division that ignores the intrinsic qualities of the area. This zoning is clearly an overblown extension of the Experience Guide Plan, where each area is



and activities of people from different walks of life.

The following is a preliminary overview of some of Chinatown's existing assets. This serves as a starting point for a more in-depth, commissioned study into the area's heritage strengths.

A detailed study would need to examine:

1.

2.

3.

4.



What are some of Chinatown's existing strengths? To what extent and in what ways are such strengths sustainable? How can these be further developed realistically and sensitively? How can such efforts be part of a larger strategy to develop the area in the long run?

Architectural Heritage

• Shophouses (dating from the early 19th century) are the primary feature of Chinatown's landscape.

The value of these shophouses lies not only in their individual architectural qualities but also in their contribution to the larger urban texture. The shophouses present a certain uniformity of scale while providing variety in detail, interior arrangements and usage.

These buildings and their surrounding built environment – the five-foot ways, narrow streets, back-alleys and small, square pocket parks – represent Singapore's early forms of intimate urban living spaces.

The decision to protect and preserve, en masse, the shophouses in Chinatown was, therefore, an act of foresight.

However, the STB's proposal to construct medium sized parks and a large-scale Village Theatre may disrupt the urban fabric of the area and dilute the spatial and visual qualities of the district.

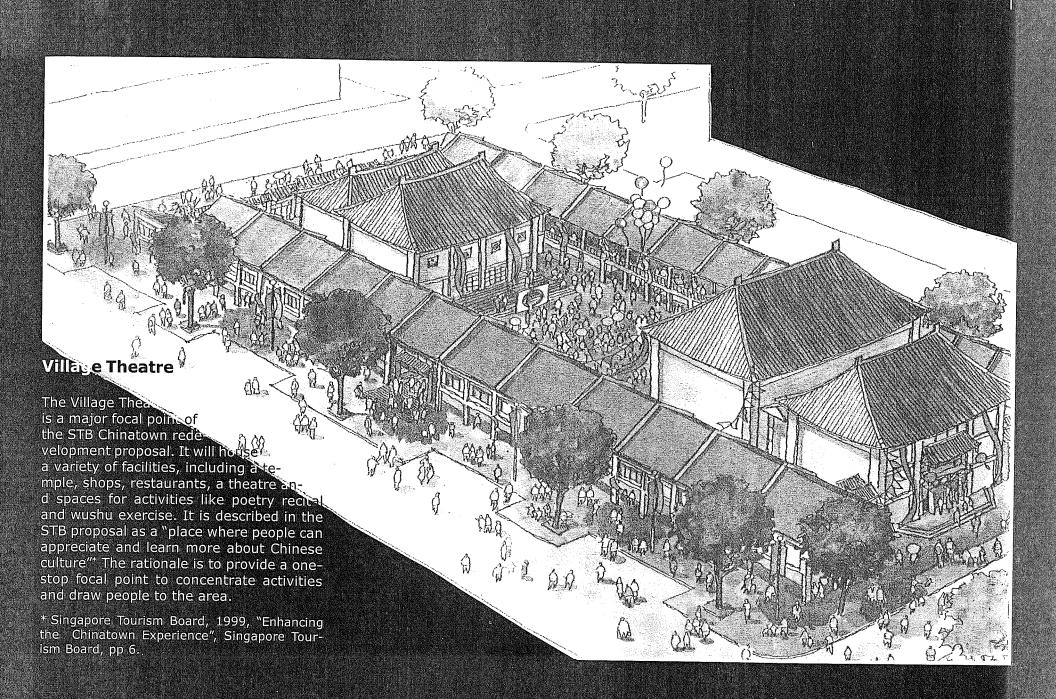
A detailed study should be commissioned to examine how the physical design of the new structures might affect the overall spatial and visual qualities of the shophouse district.

• Apart from the shophouses, there are also other buildings, built at a later period, that also possess architectural value. These, however, lie just beyond STB's delineated Chinatown area. Singapore's architectural heritage does not only include buildings from a single period.

For example, the apartments built by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) at Tiong Bahru (1936 - 1954) and the People's Park Complex (1970) are important milestones in the development of modern architecture in Singapore. They represent significant landmarks from the nation-building phase of our development.

These buildings symbolise the historical evolution of the Chinatown community. They offer us the opportunity to trace a more complete narrative of Chinatown's history.





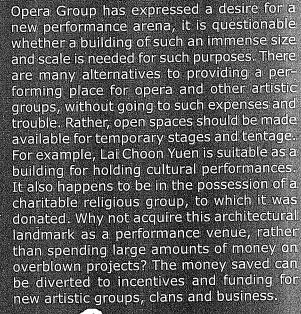
The activities are displaced from their logical and natural context, turning them into objects on display for visitors. Wayang performances, gigong sessions and eating dinner are activities which are embedded in residential communities themselves. Duxton Plains is already a popular spot for the daily qigon and taiji practices. These existing activities nodes need not be concentrated in one place just so as to create an intense "Chinese" experience. This is obviously a "consumer" or even "tourist" mentality applied to the (mis)representation of Chinatown's contemporary situation. Given the high rental costs expected in Chinatown, one also questions who will be able to afford the kind of entertainment that would be held in the Village Theatre, especially in the air-conditioned indoor theatre.

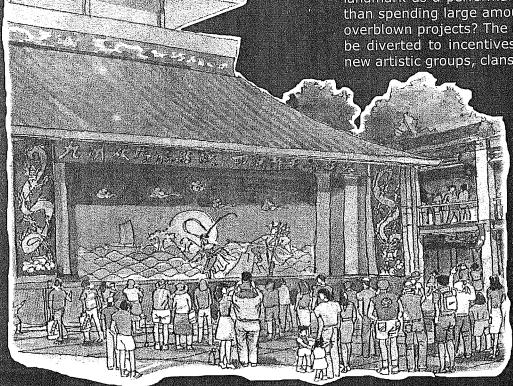
In its drive to centralise activities in a single complex, all things "Chinese" are selected for inclusion. This explains how poetry recitals, which has no history in Chinatown, have found a place in the Village Theatre. Likewise, the Seng WOng Beo temple (or the old City God Temple) is in danger of demolition while a new temple will be erected in the Village Theatre. This is meaningless and a total waste of funds.

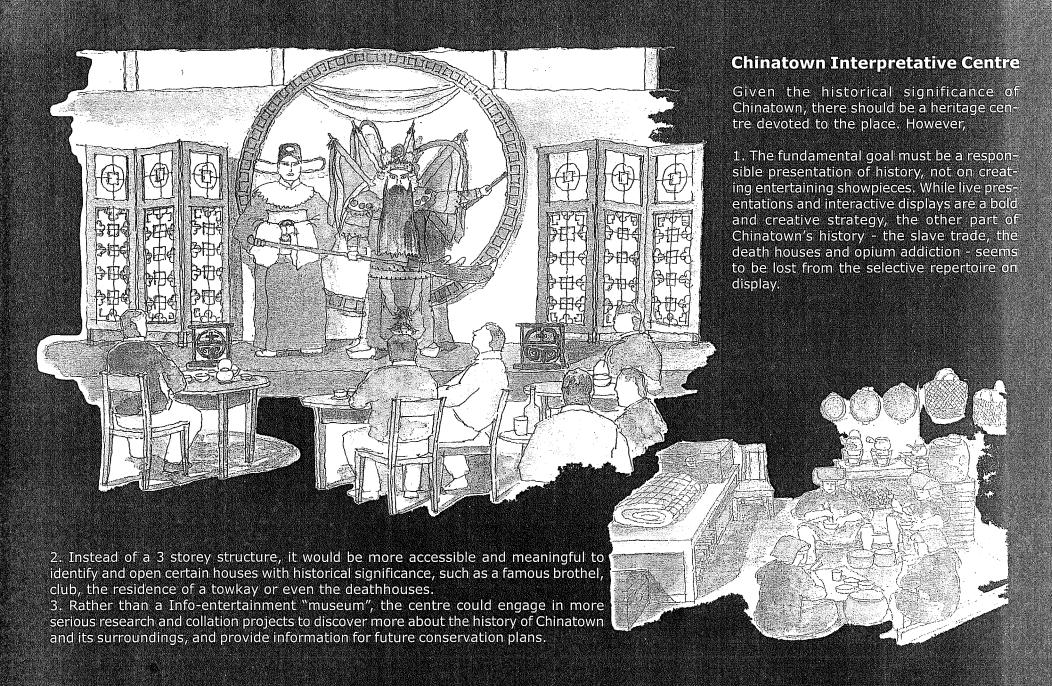
It is doubtful whether a cultural tourist wants another "Instant Asia" spectacle, while other similar themed attractions like Malay Village and Tang Dynasty has failed. Even if it were appealing to tourists, it would be totally meaningless to Singaporeans. The tourists should be encouraged to mingle with the local crowd and observe the **living patterns**

of the Chinatown population. Therefore, instead of trying to capture everything Chinese in this complex, let the population and resident groups decide what should be included in this communal building.

The concentration of activities that STB has planned for needs a large complex to house them in. However, the scale of the building and its activities is incoherent with the character of Chinatown. While artistic groups and clan associations like the Kreta Ayer







Residential Community

There remains a residential community in Chinatown. Many residents had moved into the nearby flats built by the Housing Development Board (HDB) when they were relocated from the shophouses in Chinatown. This community, therefore, provides continuity with the past and they are a rich source for our collection of oral history.

Despite relocation to modern flatted buildings, many residents have maintained their social networks as well as established a sustainable commercial sector. These strengths need to be further analysed so that policies that enhance the area's residential life can be developed. Surrounding communities also need to be considered.

E.g.: Tiong Bahru (which does not appear in STB's list of thematic developments) is a milestone in Singapore's public housing programme. Many of the residents used to reside in the shophouses and slums around Chinatown. A significant landmark of this area is the small Chinese temple, We Tin Beo, reputed to be over 150 years old. The hawker fare at Tiong Bahru is also famous in Singapore, and people are known to travel from Changi or Woodlands simply to buy food from the local hawker centre. These have all contributed to the area's well-established local identity and community life

The area would, thus, be of interest to cultural tourists, given its unique cultural, social and aesthetic qualities. For example, the phenomenon of bird-singing sessions and competitions has already started to draw curious tourists to the area.

These are precisely the types of cultural resources and experiences that we can share with our visitors.

Current redevelopment proposals have excluded these nearby residential communities from the Chinatown district. We must identify and better understand the strengths to be found in these living communities. Radical transformations tend to disorientate and alienate residents while disrupting established patterns of life, and this is true for both residents living within STB's delineated "Chinatown" as well as in the immediate outlying areas.

Residential life in areas that constitute a more widely and fluidly defined Chinatown should not be neglected. The possibility of introducing these areas to visitors as part of a more comprehensive tour of Chinatown also needs to be studied.

Prior to urban renewal, many Singaporeans either lived in or had relatives who lived in Chinatown's shophouses. The significance of Chinatown in their personal memories and in their family histories has led many to identify strongly with Chinatown. They constitute a concerned group of former residents and citizens who feel that they have an interest and, more importantly, a stake in the future of Chinatown. Following the STB's exhibition on their plans to enhance Chinatown, many wrote to the Chinese press to criticise the inappropriateness of the design approach and they urged the relevant authorities to reconsider the development with the interests of the people from Chinatown in mind.

E.g.: "Chinatown has its own unique historical features and it will not work to use the conventional approach of thematic tours. We have to reconsider the concept of tourism and start from a fresh perspective with Chinatown in order to usher tourism in Singapore into the third phase."

[translation, Mo Yiping, "Preserving traditional culture is the key to Chinatown development", Lianhe Zaobao, 26 October 1998]

"What Chinatown needs is funding and support, and not superficial decoration, packaging or artifice; what we want is a real Chinatown. There is definitely a large market of the lower-middle classes for this and it is necessary to cater to the needs of this neglected group."

[translation, Xiao Fan, *Lianhe Zaobao*, 2 November 1998 "Preserving Chinatown's Authenticity"]

Their emotional attachment to the area is perhaps testament to Chinatown's role as a heritage area in Singapore. Care must be taken not to alienate this group, which has been particularly vocal in its criticism of the redevelopment plans.

Emotional ties must not be misconstrued as sentimental nostalgia that is frivolous and impractical. Without doubt, former residents do not wish to return to the living conditions and lifestyles of the past, however fondly they may recollect those times today. Many support the call for the redevelopment of the area, but they take objection to the specific details presented so far.

Policy makers and planners must find ways to engage with groups of former residents and concern citizens, appreciate their perspectives, and involve them in the growth of the area.

Parks and Community Spaces

• The larger Chinatown area possesses several well-utilised green spaces. At present, they are generally well-integrated with the area's patterns of residential community life.

E.g.: The "old men's square" near Sago Street is one such area that remains popular with the older residents. They gather here to relax, exercise and interact with one another. Such spaces take time to develop and to acquire this kind of social capital and value.

Major physical and social transformations, such as the proposed Village Theatre and the previously suggested "Fire Garden" at this site, would not only disorientate the community of users but also disrupt the existing established patterns of use.

E.g.: Hong Lim Park is a one hundred and thirty-three year old public park, built on land donated by Mr Cheong Hong Lim. A gift to the people, the park stands as testimony to the

early civic spirit of our forefathers as well as represents the people's physical heritage. This historic park was also the site of some of the first rallies of the People's Action Party, when it sought to win support in the crucial Chinatown area.

E.g.: Other examples include the pocket parks of Telok Ayer Green, Telok Ayer Park, Duxton Park, Vanda Miss Joaquim Park, Pearl's Hill City Park and the open plaza at People's Park and Havelock Square.

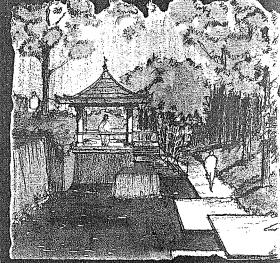
These places not only provide shady spots for people to relax, but also constitute important sites for community life, where residents can gather and interact with each other.

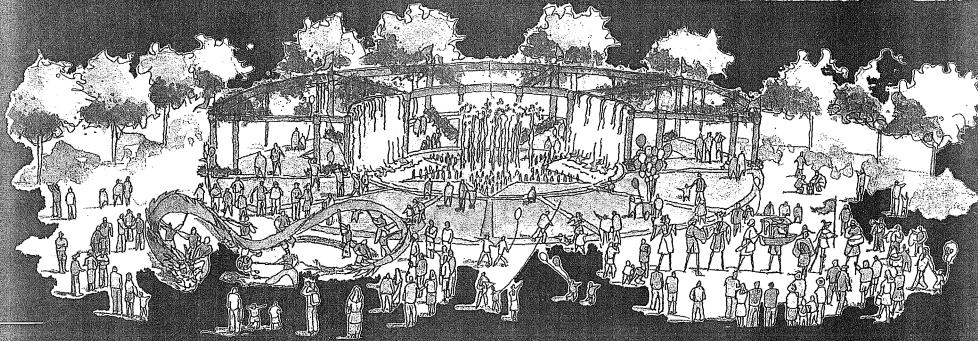
Expenditure on the previously proposed Element Gardens would have been unnecessary. Instead, we should focus on keeping existing gardens and parks attractive and relevant to residents and other users. Some of these spaces require specific physical improvements but not radical touristic makeovers. It is heartening to learn that the STB now realises the value of these spaces. The Board has informed the Society that the idea for the Element Gardens have been dropped and that efforts would, instead, be taken to examine ways to upgrade and maintain the existing green spaces.

Elemental Gardens

The Elemental Gardens are a symptom grown out of a fundamental imperative in the redevelopment of Singapore's Chinatown - Chinatown must be "Chinese". But Singapore's Chinatown is multi-ethnic. It is not a minority racial enclave. It is , therefore, also not a destination of exotic oriental culture. The "Five Elements" theme has no precedent and is chosen simply because it would make the place more "Chinese". To this end, it is grossly inappropriate and ignorant of the unique quality and history of Singapore's Chinatown.

While STB has decided to drop the idea of the Elemental Gardens, further studies and surveys need to be done to integrate existing parks into the redeveloped urban fabric. This must be done with the recognition that these parks are for the residents and workers of the area, and that some of these pocket parks are already beginning to attract certain groups of people and thus developing their own character and activities.







Diversity of Chinatown's Commercial Sector

- Diversity in Chinatown's commercial sector reflects the evolution of the local economy over the last three decades. Such evolution went hand in hand with the changing geographical distribution of Singapore residents, as well as their changing lifestyles and consumption patterns.
- Traditional patterns heterogeneity in the commercial life of the area still persist. Commercial activities, serving diverse interests and needs, have developed according to changing market realities. This is not to say that every business in the area is thriving. Some traditional businesses have found a longstanding niche in Chinatown. Some are out of synch with changing modes of consumption. Still others, newer businesses, are either struggling or managing well as part of the commercial development of the area.

A detailed study should identify the thriving or dying commercial activities in the area, without excluding trades that fail to comply with preconceived notions of an "essential" character of

Chinatown. The area is large, and there is room for different businesses to compete and co-exist.

Cultural Diversity in Chinatown as Heritage

• As with commercial activity, Chinatown has long drawn strength from the variety in its cultural traditions. This diversity stems from the presence of various sub-groups (in terms of, for example, dialect groups) within the Chinese community as well as other non-Chinese groups. Cultural practices evolve in response to the lives and interests of people. Therefore, redevelopment proposals should demonstrate a healthy respect for and even a celebration of Chinatown's diversity.

Sites of Cultural Heritage: Artistic

• Rather than invest resources in the creation of new cultural spectacles that are kitsch, attention should be paid to the heritage of existing cultural traditions in the area. As with the development of social community, cultural traditions draw strength from their evolution over time. This cultural capital is vital to the social, psychological, intellectual and even physical well being of the nation.

• Chinatown does indeed possess the capacity to generate tourist revenue. But its cultural features are genuine outgrowths of people's lives and not just products for the tourist market. Indeed, cultural tourists all over the world are becoming increasingly sophisticated and many do not wish to spend their money experiencing manufactured productions. Singapore should invest in sustaining existing cultural practices and artistic groups and venues, which have grown out from its soil, rather than in creating new but artificial tourism products.

E.g.: Consider the People's Theatre at Kreta Ayer. This site was selected for the theatre and community centre because it was then a popular meeting place for residents. The theatre, built in 1973, is still being used for film screenings and stage performances and it has developed a well-established pattern of usage and community of users. It is particularly embedded in the residential community of the area, and is an important point of social interaction. We should study how this theatre can be improved to keep it suitable for its various cultural activities.

E.g.: Another example relates to the Lai

Choon Yuen building at Temple Street. The social significance of this building is perhaps best attested by its history as the reference point for the streets surrounding it. Then, Temple Street was referred to as "Front of Theatre Street", Trengganu Street as "Side of Theatre Street" and Smith Street as "Back of Theatre Street". This architectural landmark in the heart of Kreta Ayer possesses an interior that is suitable for cultural performances. The building is now privately owned and donated to a charitable religious group. However, its use as a performance venue should be explored in light of the existing cluster of Chinese opera groups along Smith Street, a few meters away.

In this way, we might be able act on existing synergistic opportunities for the development of cultural life in the area. Such a pattern of development requires greater effort, patience and creativity, but it also saves costs and is more likely to develop the cultural traditions of the area in the long term.



Investigations need to be undertaken to identify our cultural heritage sites in Chinatown. Several of these are already under threat. In addition to protecting and conserving these places and traditions, we need to, where appropriate, enhance and build on our existing heritage to keep them relevant to us.

Sites of Cultural Heritage: Religious

As with commercial and artistic communities, religious traditions gain strength from their rootedness in the communities that they serve. They develop their own set of users and patterns of activity, which take time to evolve but are easily demolished through careless interventions by outside authorities. People draw spiritual and emotional strength from their immersion with religious traditions, and these traditions form an important part of the wider life of the community. In different ways, these devotees contribute to the social, cultural and economic life of the community. Most of these places are also of great personal, social and historical importance to people.

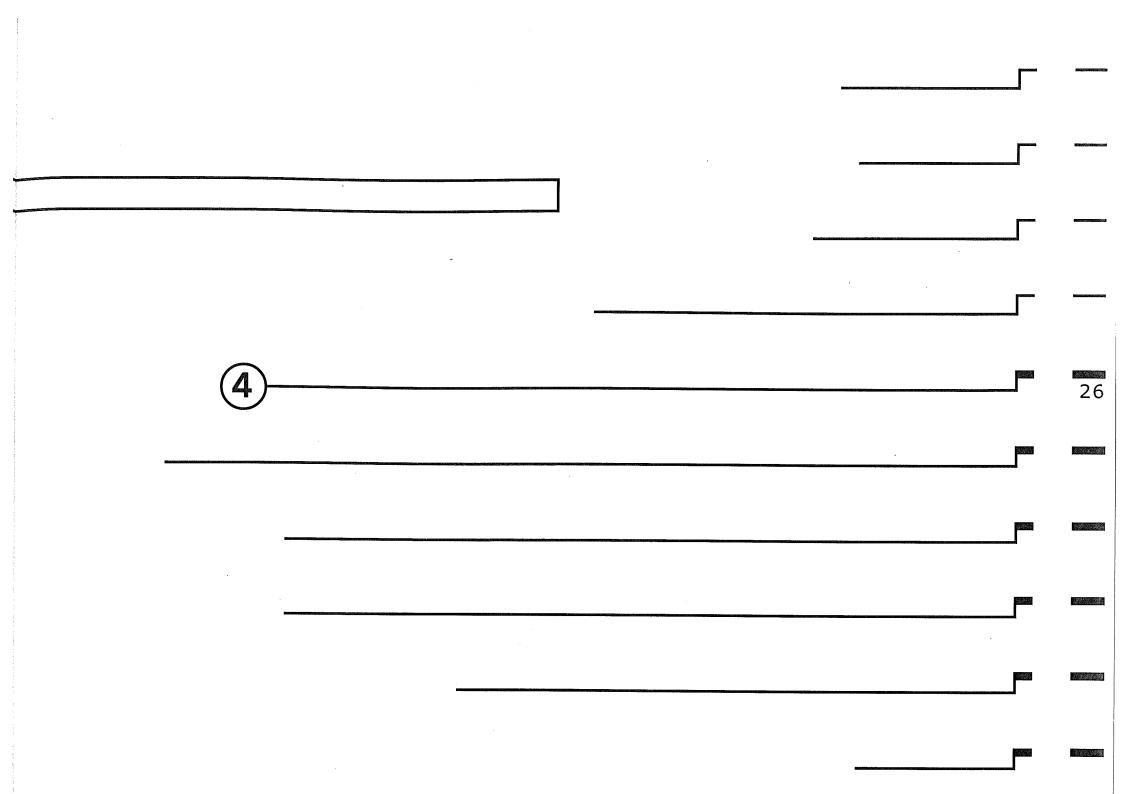
In addition, many of the religious buildings are architecturally significant in their own right. This, together with their role as prominent sites of local forms of worship, makes them potential places of interest for cultural tourists. However, the promotion of these sites of worship as places of interest need to take into account the cultural and religious sensitivities of the devotees who use these places.

E.g.: The Fuk Tak Chi temple at Telok Ayer Street is now left with its façade, without functioning as a religious site. At the same time, it appears that the Seng Wong Beo temple at Peck Seah Street is also in danger of demolition. In the light of this type of redevelopment, it becomes hard to justify the devotion of resources for a new temple to be constructed in conjunction with the Village Theatre at Sago Street, when we are unable to see the value of existing ones. Temples are community institutions. They cannot be relocated without due consideration of the community of worshippers.



Sites of religious significance in Chinatown need to be identified and studied in terms of their changing needs. These places need to be recognised as being part of the cultural core of the area. This recognition as well as respect for their various religious sensitivities need to be integral to any tourism plan for the area.

challenges in the revitalisation of Chinatown understanding the context



Challenges in the Revitalisation of Chinatown

Throughout the course of its history, Chinatown's physical, social and commercial composition have been altered significantly. Notably, the clearing of street hawking and backlanes, and the relocation of residents have had tremendous impact on the physical and social fabric of Chinatown. These measures were implemented to address what were then identified as chronic problems, namely, hygiene, crime, fire hazards and over-density.

As discussed in the previous section, the identification of the existing strengths and heritage of Chinatown requires a critical eye. Similarly, the common perception of what Chinatown's problems are today need to be carefully reviewed so that appropriate strategies can be adopted and implemented at a sensitive scale and pace. Indeed, the "problems" should be identified in relation to an assessment of their negative effects on the area's existing strengths.

The challenges faced by Chinatown' cannot be viewed independently of each other. The call for re-development plans stems in part from perceptions that

Chinatown is no longer "bustling" with people, that it is failing commercially and that it is losing its "soul" and "heritage". Each of these deserves to be analysed more critically.



The Problem of Dying Businesses

This problem is examined using the following parameters:

- Which are the failing businesses? Do they belong to a particular trade? Are the problems faced by landowners or by retailers?
- How did the decline come about?
 How did the businesses begin to die?
 Are the causes temporary or inevitable?

Here, we undertake a preliminary analysis of the situation by placing Chinatown within an island-wide context. This, however, should not be taken to be exhaustive discussion.

One of the causes has been attributed to the fall in Chinatown's residential population which has inevitably resulted in a smaller clientele for the businesses and services. This has, at the same time, been compounded by wider socioeconomic forces such as a drop in tourist figures, disruptive infrastructural projects, as well as a nation-wide retail glut.

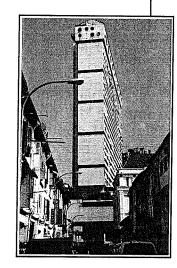
In the 1980s, the government undertook a massive conservation plan. Kreta Ayer, Chinatown and a section of Tanjong Pagar, were classified as a conservation zone. Given that the land prices of these conservation areas were very high, due to its location in the central district, the major part of the precinct was zoned for commercial purposes. As such, incentives were given generously to private investors and entrepreneurs to either acquire land or put buildings up for commercial purposes. This strategy allowed conservation to be quickly and successfully carried out via private money and initiative.

Given the overriding focus on commercial activities in the area, as well the high land prices, the trades and retail shops that developed have catered mainly to an upmarket and transient population - mainly tourists, expatriates and yuppies. Such a development has made the area very susceptible to wider economic forces. The fall in tourist numbers and the economic crisis, for example, have translated into long stretches of empty shopping arcades in these areas.

It is perceived that the traditional trades are currently being squeezed out of their "rightful" niches. However, if we were to examine this from an islandwide context, these traditional trades

may be said to have relocated; most of them have found new niches elsewhere on the island, especially in the periphery of Chinatown, such as the People's Park Complex. While these trades can be encouraged to return, it is essential to plan with a bird's eye view and avoid a romantic notion of what Chinatown should be. In addressing this problem of dying businesses, it is important to ask:

- In view of the existing strengths in contemporary Chinatown, what traditional trades can return and still be economically viable and commercially relevant?
- Should these trades stay where they can be found now and not be uprooted again so as to "return" to Chinatown?
- If we do identify certain trades which should continue to have a presence in Chinatown, how can they thrive in the face of market forces?
- What is the mix of activities (e.g. shopping, dining and entertainment) that will draw people to Chinatown?



The Problem of a Residential Vacuum

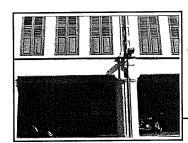
Retail centres require a sustaining local residential population to survive in the long run. Serving a transient population will make an area more susceptible to push and pull factors operating at the macro level. It is desirable, therefore, to increase the residential population so as to sustain the local businesses and services as well as to buffer the impact of forces external to the area.

However, Chinatown's residential population has decreased sharply with the relocation of people to the peripheral New Towns. It is now largely a commercial district. Without a sizeable community and a conducive residential environment in Chinatown, existing living patterns and groups will weaken and community-driven evolution will not be possible.

Several urban planning policies continue to impede the growth of Chinatown's residential population. For example, while the second-floor of many of the shophouses can be used for residential purposes, this is unpopular with the landowners. This is due in part to high land prices and in part to the large disparity between the rental costs for

commercial and residential uses; many landowners, therefore, cannot afford to lease these shophouses for residential purposes.

Several solutions can be applied to address this thorny problem. Leveling the disparity between rental prices for commercial and residential purposes can, for example, ameliorate this situation, and this is already taking place in Boat Quay. Conservation laws can also be relaxed so as to encourage more to take up residence in shophouses. The relevant authorities can, for instance, allow rear extensions beyond the first floor for residential uses. At the same time, government-owned buildings in Chinatown can also be converted to residential use.



Adaptive Re-use and the Problem of Gentrification

While we can actively preserve our physical heritage, that is buildings and landmarks, we also need to consider how we should go about managing these sites. Urban planning authorities have been guided by the philosophy of economic sustainability, and their preferred method has been that of adaptive re-use - heritage areas need to be self-sustaining, and sometimes, even profit-making, as in the case of Boat Quay.

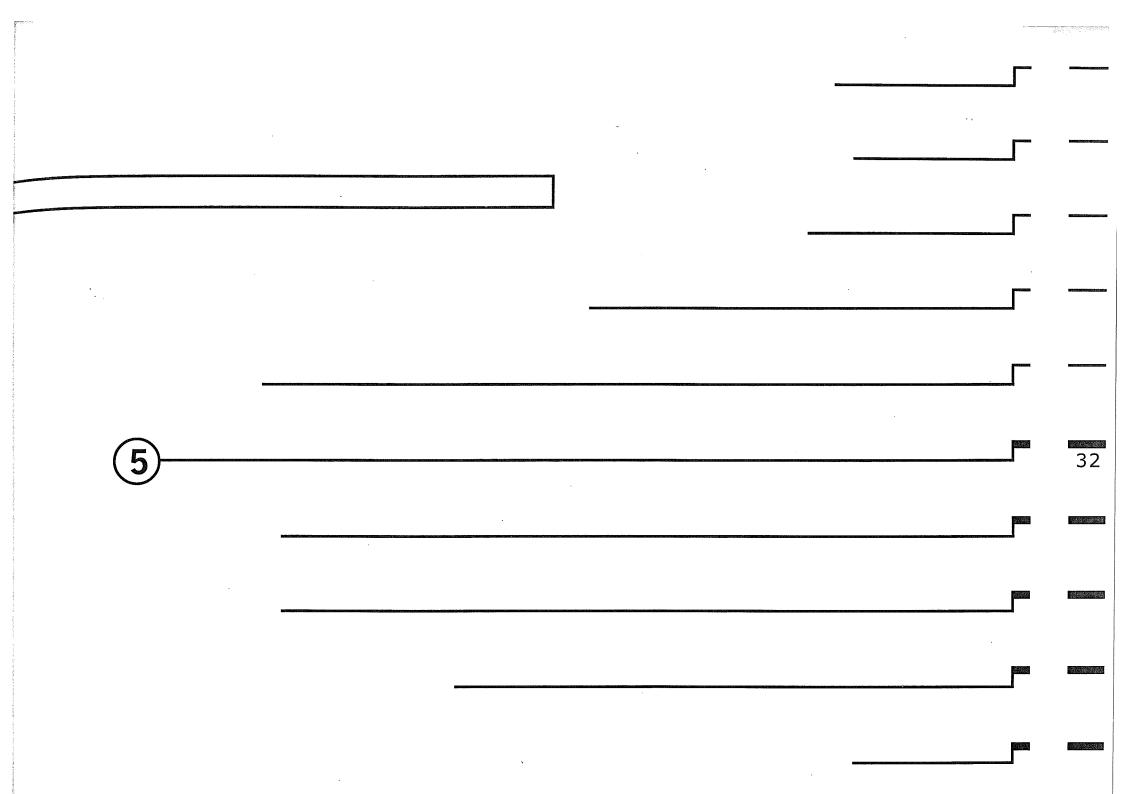
This approach inevitably results in gentrification, with the original occupants being removed and the value of land rising due to a shift towards more up-market enterprises. In debates concerning Chinatown, it has been the Chinese middle and lower-income classes that have demonstrated their rootedness to the area. Relevant authorities should, therefore, examine how best to redevelop the area while keeping in mind the desires and concerns of these groups of people. An upmarket "food and shopping" arcade will not only disregard a large number of Chinatown's stakeholders, it would give unneeded competition to surrounding areas like Boat Quay, Clarke Quay and Duxton Hill.

Defining the challenges faced by Chinatown on the basis of their effects on existing strengths can avoid the trap of being overly romantic about what Chinatown "should" be.

It is, therefore, crucial to examine land pricing policies, tax increment systems and incentives, and conservation guidelines, so that new development strategies can be formulated.

opportunities for the redevelopment of Chinatown

developing a community-driven approach



Collaboration with Local Community

Stakeholders in Chinatown, be they residents or businesspeople, all share the motivation and responsibility to develop their community into a sustainable and successful one. At the same time, the authorities and other concerned groups also have a role to play - they can provide or share resources, and engage the Chinatown community in consultation and collaboration.

One of the most promising elements of the STB proposals was the Chinatown Management Council (CMC), composed community local of many representatives. Unfortunately, this council is to be formed only after redevelopment has taken place; their role is to run the district thereafter. Rather than delegate implementation functions to the local community, there should instead be attempts to generate creative responses to problems faced on the ground. To this end, the CMC should be formed before the solutions are devised, especially since its responsibility is to ensure the success of the redevelopment proposals. With their role in decision-making process, the local community will be empowered to take charge of Chinatown's future.

This, together with the help and cooperation of other relevant bodies, can help ensure that programmes for the area are devised with the stakeholders' interests in mind.

Enlarged Residential Community

Official projections forecast a population of 14,000 people for the Chinatown area by the year 2010. This represents a modest increase from the present 10,000 residents ("Population inChinatown district to increase by 40% by 2010", Lianhe Zaobao, 19 February 1999). The STB has correctly pointed out that a larger local residential community is needed to bring about future growth in the area. However, the specific details of how to develop this residential community have not been discussed and it needs to be made clearer to the public.

Indeed, more studies should be undertaken to project the future residential development patterns of the area. It is important that we understand the implications of the differential scale and density of residential developments, as well as the different social and income groups they target.



Empowering Local Businesses

The authorities should avoid prescribing thematically consistent activities for specified zones, streets and markets. Civil servants cannot be expected to bear the responsibility should these business ventures fail to succeed. Commercial stakeholders are best placed to make their own decisions. Relevant authorities can then help offer these businesspeople the various resources they need to make their trades thrive.

For example, we should investigate the extent to which existing zoning restrictions, environmental health regulations and other bureaucratic restrictions act as obstacles to the growth of Chinatown's commercial activities. We may observe that the most dynamic and commercially lively districts in other Asian cities such as Hong Kong, Tokyo and even Kuala Lumpur, contain a startling variety of goods and services. To this end, we would need to examine the viability of more "white zones" in the Chinatown area, with less emphasis on the need for a unifying theme, general orderliness and predictability.

Another example of how we can

provide assistance to local businesses is by conducting market research and making the findings and professional advice more readily available to these entrepreneurs. However, the ultimate initiative and responsibility lie in the hands of the businesspeople themselves. Excessive direction from the authorities will only add to a sense of powerlessness and dependence on others.

Strategic Loading to Seed Development

The STB has proposed the creation of themed streets. In their suggestion of making Smith Street Food Street, they have correctly highlighted the increase in demand for street hawking and pasar malam in Singapore. This is indicated by the success of al fresco dining and pasar malam in the New Towns. Unfortunately, the Board has overdetermined the specific character and trades of each street, and seems to have included several potentially forced concepts, such as "Festival Street" or "Tradition Street". The dynamism and variety of street life become lost in the process of so-called "thematic development".

Instead of creating five thematically

defined streets, the emphasis should be on developing a couple of streets where a variety of vendors, including food hawkers, can return to ply their trades. This strategy of loading activities into two streets also avoids the danger of spreading the activities too thinly to a point where they loose the critical mass necessary for their success. The emphasis should be on allowing the vendors to take the lead in such matters as location, set up and decoration. This atmosphere of informality and spontaneity is a potential crowd-drawer. In the same spirit, the decision to readdress environmental health regulations for the return of street vendors is precisely the form of relaxation of regulation - and encouragement of entrepreneurship that is needed.

Understanding Chinatown's Role in Cultural Tourism

Culture has, in recent years, become an important tool in marketing destinations to tourists. For the STB, "cultural tourism lends itself well to creative concepts. It is a powerful means of helping Singapore stay competitive as a tourist destination." (Destination Singapore, 1996: 18) The SHS does not disagree with the

proposition that culture and tourism can share a mutually beneficial relationship. However, members of the Society caution that the development of cultural tourism needs to be handled with sensitivity, and with extensive collaboration amongst the various stakeholders involved.

Cultural Tourism: What does it mean?

The term "cultural tourism" has increasingly been used as an "umbrella term" for various types of tourism activities that relate to culture. It can be conveniently divided into:

- 1. Arts tourism which includes "experiential tourism based on being involved in and stimulated by the performing arts, visual arts and festivals" (Hall and Zeppel quoted in Zeppel and Hall, 1992, 48); and
- 2. Heritage tourism, also experiential tourism, involving the visiting of "historic buildings, archaelogical sites, monuments, and culture artefacts on display in museums", and the "experience of local cultural traditions" (Zeppel and Hall, 1992: 47-48).

Hence, our current analysis of the

opportunities open to Chinatown will be as much a discussion of cultural tourism as it is also of heritage tourism.

In 1996, the then STB Chief Executive, Dr. Tan Chin Nam stated the following:

What is cultural tourism? From the Singapore perspective, it embraces the full range of experiences visitors can undertake to learn what makes Singapore a distinctive destination - our lifestyle, heritage, arts and people. It means exposing visitors to our performances, visual arts and heritage. It is the business of providing and interpreting that experience to visitors. (Destination Singapore, 1996: 18; emphasis added).

While Dr. Tan has rightly pointed out a very important component of cultural tourism - that is, our desire to inform and the tourists' desire to learn about Singapore - the "business" of interpreting historical experience is serious business, involving the responsible representation of history, culture, and lifestyles. Hence, we suggest here an alternative direction for the development of cultural tourism in Singapore:

"(Cultural tourism consists of) customised excursions into other cultures and places to learn about people, lifestyle, heritage and arts in an informed way that genuinely represents those cultures and their historical contexts."

[Craik, 1997:121]

In other words, cultural tourism, while it is concerned with economic viability it must at the same time be guided by the principle of social and cultural responsibility. Thus, when a heritage area, such as Chinatown, is "revitalised" with the hope that it will become an attractive cultural tourism site, such a project must be guided by the principle of accountability to locals.

An early response in the Chinese press, written by one of the residents, also pointed out that the culture of Chinatown plays a pivotal role in its development and suggested that the authorities examine the everyday culture and living patterns of the community.

"The key to developing Chinatown lies in looking at the common folks' way of life. Once we succeed in preserving Chinatown's richness of tradition, its old and rundown food centres will continue to bustle with life, while its wet market will also attract many customers, both old and new, and regain its former charms."

[translation, Mo Yiping, "Preserving traditional culture is the key to Chinatown development", Lianhe Zaobao, 26 October 1998]

While this perspective may border on the nostalgic, the point is to give room to existing local practices and not drown them out in the barrage of new initiatives that would sanitise and gentrify the area beyond recognition.

- Culture and tourism can share a mutually beneficial relationship. 1.
- Cultural tourism is an "umbrella term" that refers to both arts and heritage tourism.
- 3. Cultural tourism must aim to genuinely represent the culture and heritage of the people and the built environment.

Urban Heritage and its Role for Tourism

One of the reasons given for "enhancing the Chinatown experience" has been the desire to "restore life and vitality" (Mr Michael Lim, Deputy Director, Marketing Communications of STB, Straits Times, 12 December 1998) to an area which is perceived to be bereft of life and vitality. Yet this raise some questions. If there is no interest in Chinatown as a place to visit, why are there heated debates over attempts to change its existing landscape? For Chinatown to be considered a part of urban heritage, must it be "bustling" and "full of life"?

We began this report with reference to a time line so as to provide a clearer idea of the development of the debates over the current Chinatown Enhancement Plan. More importantly, these debates in the media have helped to highlight the meanings and memories people have attached to Chinatown. As BG George Yeo noted, the debate "shows rootedness" and

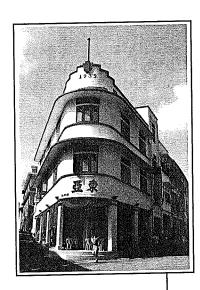
"...it showed that Singaporeans have strong emotional bonds to the land and are concerned about how what for them is sacred ground should be treated."

[Straits Times, 13 March 1999]

It is precisely because of a belief that Chinatown is part of Singapore's urban heritage that prompted citizens and even visitors to express their views. Thus, this is not so much an argument over whether Chinatown is or is not part of urban heritage, but how we handle such culturally important sites. In the 1980s, there was also furore over development plans in Chinatown, but these related to issues of urban conservation. At that time, the argument made by the Committee on Heritage in 1988 was that heritage inscribed in the built environment is particularly meaningful because without "visual landmarks",

"all other records of the past remain abstract notions, difficult to understand and link to the present...(and) it is clear therefore that the conservation of buildings, structures and other districts which provide sign posts from the past to the present is critical to the psyche of a nation."

[Committee on Heritage cited in Yeoh and Huang, 1996: 413]



On the one hand, the move to conserve Chinatown was guided by a belief that it will help retain collective memories and assist in nation-building. On the other hand, the process was also spearheaded at a time when Singapore experienced a sharp 3.5% fall in tourist arrivals in 1983 (Yeoh and Huang, 1996: 413). There was a call for an expansion of tourism projects as a means to revive the declining construction sector and these projects took the form of the preservation of historic sites. Impetus was given to preservation because it would enrich the cityscape and this was viewed as necessary because the fall in visitor arrivals was in part blamed on "the lack of colour in the increasingly antiseptic city-state" (Burton, 1993: 36).

More than ten years later, we are still debating over Chinatown and over the same issues - that of social memories, and on a more material level, that of Chinatown's attraction for tourism. However, as argued, the discussion has shifted from the issue of conservation to the issue of retaining a "genuine" Chinatown that is treated with cultural integrity. Its importance as a heritage area is nowhere more emphasised than in the public's worry that the existing Enhancements Plans will turn the area

into a theme park. The fear is that in so doing, our heritage then becomes a spectacle for consumption and this works against the integrity of its history and culture.

- 1. Chinatown is part of Singapore's urban heritage.
- The debates over the media have demonstrated the meanings and memories people have attached to Singapore.
- 3. Public concerns over Chinatown landscapes are not new. These concerns, like those in the 1980s, also center around memories, cultural heritage and the impact of tourism on Chinatown's landscape.
- There is at present a fear that Chinatown is being turned into a theme park.

From Heritage Landscapes to "Themescapes"

The current plans to re-vitalise Chinatown is perhaps a reflection of more general trends in Singapore's tourism development. There appears to be, at present, a move towards the creation of theme parks and in a similar strand, the development of "themed environments". In the existing Chinatown Enhancement Plan, the most obvious example of this process of "theming" has been STB's proposal for theme streets in the likes of Food Street, Market Street, Festive Street, Tradition Street and Bazaar Street. The Board has made some arguably tenable references to the past of these streets as reasons for why they have been so "thematised". Yet, such a move, no doubt to be supported by explicit signages to their themes, will ultimately compartmentalise Chinatown into functions, providing visitors a neat but simplified experience of Chinatown. There is, however, at the same time, a more fundamental problem with this issue of developing themed environments and it has to do with STB's attempts to provide an overarching theme to Chinatown. In so doing, it has ignored Chinatown's history and culture - it has conveniently

reduced the layers of meanings to one that over-emphasises an idealised or artifical kind of "Chineseness".

Whilst the STB may claim that Chinatown is not a theme park, Chinatown is undeniably undergoing a process of thematisation under their plans. This process of "thematic development" has not been restricted to Chinatown. The STB has put up a strenuous defense against criticisms that Chinatown is being developed into a theme park:

"In the case of our plans for Chinatown, perhaps the assumption that we are creating a theme park derives from the reference to the area as a thematic zone. We wish to clarify that this is a descriptive term used by the Board, an in no way suggests an intention to create theme parks out of Singapore's historical and cultural areas."

[Michael Lim, Straits Times, 12 December 1998]

"`Thematic development' is a descriptive term that provides a focus for our enhancement efforts and does not denote or connote any attempt to create an amusement or theme park out of Chinatown or any of Singapore's

historical and cultural sites."

[Michael Lim, Straits Times, 29 December 1998]

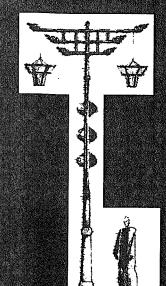
The question to ask here is: if "thematic development" is a "descriptive term" that provides a focus, then, what is this focus? Along what theme is Chinatown being developed? These are issues that the Board needs to explore because many have pointed out that Chinatown has no one unifying character nor theme, and neither can it be divided into themes because such attempts will not have historical veracity. In re-packaging Chinatown, the STB has inevitably reduced its diversity into a simple theme of "Chineseness". Such a thematic development has indeed provided a focus in its enhancements strategy, for all their various plans now centre around this theme and focus - from their previously proposed Elemental (Earth, Fire, Water, Metal and Wood) Gardens to their street furniture to the placement of road markers to the construction of the Village Theatre, complete with a Chinese temple and tea houses.

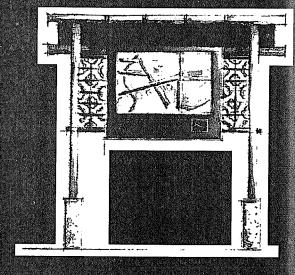
Street Furniture, Signage and the Soft-scape

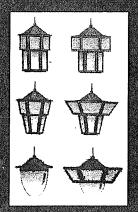
Chinatown needs to be conceived in terms of its local resident population and commercial groups. It must become a living town servicing the needs of residents if it is to be revitalised. As such, the services, infrastructure and street furniture need to be sensible and relevant to modern living. Excessive frills and Oriental kitsch freezes the place in a mood of perpetual festivity an inevitable result of theming and cultural commodification.

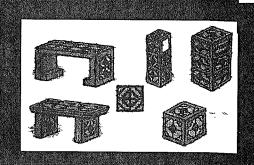
The furniture and landscaping is another extension of the theming and zoning exercise. Therefore, if one crosses the road from a normal LTA bus stop to an Oriental bus stop, one would suddenly land in Chinatown. This demarcation is a strategy used in Far East Square, Malay Village and even Sentosa. Given the historical and emotional significance of the Chinatown site, this strategy is totally inappropriate and even destructive.

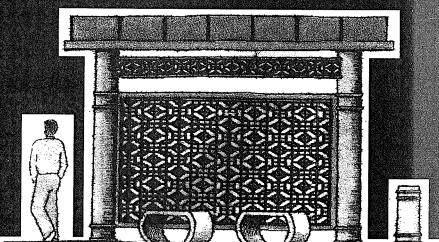
Storyboards are useful for both the local visitor and the tourists who can learn much about Chinatown as they travel around. However, the design should not be just "Chinese" with all its requisite elements, but rather, would be simple and show an understanding of Singapore's Chinatown.











Themed Streets and the Market Square

The STB brochure ackowledged that "certain streets are already developing a character of their own by a concentration of particular trades". However, knowing that, STB decides to intervene abortively by giving a theme to each of the five streets -Smith Street, Trengannu Street, Temple Street, Pagoda Street and the Market Square. The romantic notions of what these streets were in the past do not take into account the changes that have happened since then and also needs to be examined more critically from an islandwide perspective. Further studies on the residential density, the type of residential population expected, land tenure and conservation policies need to be conducted to understand the contemporary economic and social forces in Chinatown today.

Even while providing incentives and encouraging traditional trades to return, the authorities must be careful not to forcibly bring in obsolete trades, like letter-writing and street barbers that would in the end be nothing more than a museum showpiece.

There need to be a coordinated study on the economic viability of 5 streets of intense retail/ entertainment activities. The extrapolated residential population cannot sustain this density and thus the redeveloped Chinatown would compete unnecessarily with other existing areas like Clarke Quay, Boat Quay, People's Park and Chinatown Point.



There has been a general trend towards thematic development in STB's projects.

Although STB stresses that Chinatown is not being developed into a theme park, the Board nonetheless plans to thematise its environment so as to give it a unifying character. This theme has been one that over-emphasises Chinatown's Chineseness.

However, public sentiment is that Chinatown has no one unifying character nor theme, and neither can it be divided into themes because these not only compartmentalise Chinatown, they also do not have historical veracity.

Chinatown as a Cultural Tourism Site

As argued in the preceding sections, our current efforts at developing Chinatown should be directed towards improving our visitors' understanding of Singapore. It should not be an attempt to showcase a snapshot of a "Chinese" Chinatown, but to give insight to the historical development of this space and place.

Since Independence, Chinatown as designated by the colonial administrators was drastically affected by urban re-development plans. In the 1980s, these policies were reversed and there were attempts to preserve this area as an "ethnic enclave". The changes experienced by this space, now transformed into a "place", and popularly referred to as "Chinatown", means that its history and the changes experienced by the site as well as the people (who are not all Chinese) who inhabit it, are multi-faceted and multilayered. Thus, if cultural tourism is to adequately represent these layers of meanings, it needs to consider not only history, culture, the people and their practices, but also how these have invariably affected the landscape of Chinatown.

Here we return to our discussion on the need for local collaborative tourism policymaking. The latest report on Singapore 21 has called for more active citizenry, and the current ongoing debates on Chinatown show that Singaporeans do care. In the spirit of the report, our Society calls for more dialogue and cooperation between state agencies and the local community. Collaboration would allow for better coordination of policies as well "(promote) consideration of the economic, environmental, and social impacts of tourism." (Bramwell and Sharman, 1999: 392). In addition, there is value to be added because there is a shared pool of knowledge, insights as well as strengths and if we can tap into this store of resources, we gain a better understanding of the existing issues and the concerns of the various stakeholders and this can result in more sustaining policies. However, we need to consider the fact that the ability of stakeholders to influence and affect change may often be unequal and there must, thus, be concerted efforts to reduce such imbalances and make tourism policymaking inclusionary. (Bramwell and Sharman, 1999: 393).

Who are the Stakeholders of Chinatown?

- Those who have a direct and immediate stake in Chinatown, such as the residents, the shophouse owners, the existing businesses and presently, the STB and other national agencies committed to revitalising Chinatown.
- Those who have a less direct relationship with Chinatown but nonetheless do claim a stake in this area, namely, Singaporeans (not necessarily living or working in Chinatown) who have expressed interest in the developments of Chinatown, as well as expatriates and tourists.

The voices of these various concerned parties have been heard through their letters to the forum page, television forums, and the Chinatown forum held by the STB. Our report is interested in collating these different and at times disparate voices so as to better understand how the revitalisation project can be undertaken such that it will benefit the local community and at the same time be commercially viable and attractive for tourism. There are lessons that we can learn from existing tourism projects that have emphasised

on collaborative initiatives. (For example, see Bramwell and Sharman's 1999 study of Hope Valley and Edale in Britain's Peak District National Park)

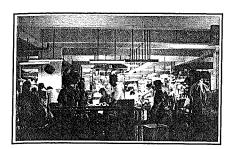
Stakeholders of Chinatown

Direct relationship

- Residents
- Shophouse owners
- Existing businesses
- National agencies

Indirect relationship

- Concerned Singaporeans
- Expatriates and tourists



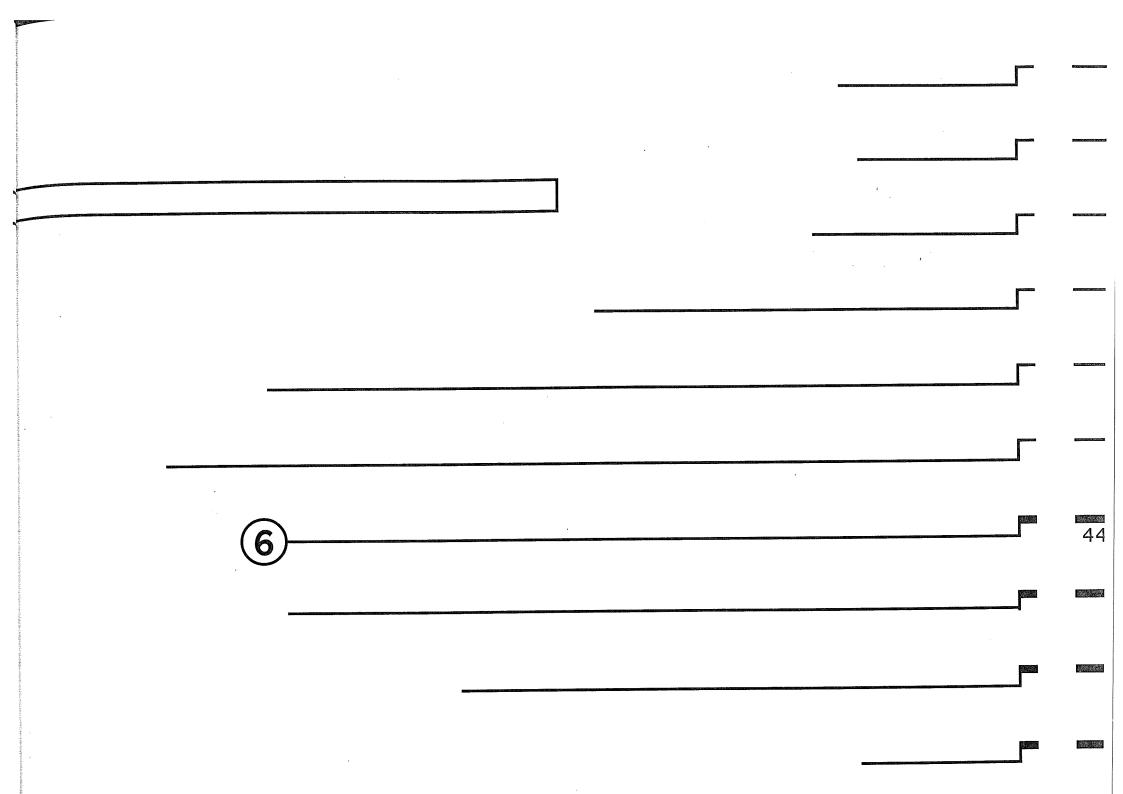
The Importance of Collaborative Initiatives

Collaborative initiatives open channels for dialogue as well as cooperation with the grassroot communities and this reduces the cost of conflicts among the stakeholders in the long term. More

importantly, it allows for more extensive discussions on the fundamental issues surrounding Chinatown and the consensus reached through these dialogue sessions would allow for a more coherent and accurate representation of Chinatown within cultural tourism. By giving our stakeholders more influence over policies that intimately affects their lives, the revitalisation plan will ultimately gain more legitimacy and support. Chinatown must be attractive not only to tourists but also to our own local population; and by allowing the latter an opportunity to play a role, we will be able to re-attract more local users to Chinatown. The STB has provided some form of dialogue through their engagement with some stakeholders in the initial stages of their plan development as well as during their Chinatown forum. However, there is potential for more collaboration from the ground and we believe that Singapore 21 has perhaps set the appropriate stage to begin an engagement with the local community. In so doing, we may then be able to create not so much a blueprint for cultural tourism but rather, tourism that is culturally sensitive and which benefits both the economy as well as the social and cultural aspects of our community.

a further consideration of the Singapore Tourism Board proposal

reviewing its rationale and thrust



A Further Consideration of the STB Proposal

First in their brochure *Enhancing the* Chinatown Experience and later in their letters to the press, the STB has provided various justifications for their intervention. Chinatown can almost be said to be experiencing a "crisis": the businesspeople are complaining that the fall in the number of residents has led to a decline in their client base; the shortage of parking spaces and the long walking distances from MRT stations are discouraging people from visiting Chinatown; and the supply of information for tourists is insufficient. The STB claims that "there is no major trade, service or activity in Chinatown that makes each area stand out" (Enhancing the Chinatown Experience, 1998: 4). They have further argued that

"if nothing is done, Chinatown will lose its soul and its unique and irreplaceable ability to serve as a fount of history, culture and heritage that enables Singaporeans to reach back into the past and connect with the dreams on the immigrants who made this country possible."

Their solution: "provide focal points which can focus attention and draw

people to the area". These people include new residents, tourists, street hawkers and other locals (*Enhancing the Chinatown Experience*, 1998: 28).

Before we address the validity of these claims as well as the value of the proposed solutions, we first turn to another document- Tourism 21: Vision of a Tourism Capital. This was a report produced by the National Tourism Planning Committee (NTPC) in October 1995. This committee had been formed to address the new challenges faced by the tourist industry. These challenges included the slowdown in visitor arrival growth, the fall in both the average length of stay and per capita visitor spending, and the growing competition from the region for tourists. The recommendations of the report, presented to the Minister for Trade and Industry by the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, were accepted in principle by the government in July 1996.

This report proposed six "Strategic Thrusts" that would help achieve the goal of "Tourism 21: Vision of a Tourism Capital". This vision was founded on three aspects: 1) Singapore as a must-see destination; 2) Singapore as a centre for tourism related businesses;

and 3) Singapore as a hub for tourism in the Asia Pacific region.

We highlight for the purpose of our study, the second strategic thrust: "Reformulating the Product". This strategy addressed the first aspect of the vision, that of making Singapore a "must-see" destination. Its goal was to make visitors' experiences of Singapore delightful and memorable. To this end, the following were some of the proposed recommendations:

- Develop a unifying character for existing products
- Create more and better events
- Promote concept of tourism workers as cast members

The first is particularly useful in understanding STB's rationale behind the Chinatown redevelopment plans. This recommendation was backed by references to several models from around the world, such as Times Square and SoHo in New York, Covent Garden in London and Montmarte and the Latin Quarter in Paris. The failure of Singapore attractions to be as successful was attributed to their lack of a unifying character. The argument made was that this unity should extend to "activity clusters, services, facilities and even

street furniture".

The report argued that while Singapore already has many good attractions, these needed to be enhanced by repackaging and by development around clear themes. To this end, 11 thematic zones have been identified, such as "Rustic Charm" and "Entertainment District". Chinatown falls under the theme "Ethnic Singapore", along with Little India, Geylang Serai and Katong.

The report highlighted Chinatown as an example of how a particular attraction can be developed under its guidelines. The suggested "hardware" elements included an interpretive centre, better outdoor lighting and informative plaques to mark sites of significance. The "software" elements included having "cultural trail" tour guides and collaborations with local cultural groups to co-ordinate year round activities.

In terms of the timing and pace of these thematic developments, the report notes, with "a word of caution", that

"no timeframes could be set for full evolution of these zones as they are designed to be naturally and constantly evolving under their own steam after the initial outlay."

The rationale for intervention in targeted areas, including Chinatown, is based on the perceived need for these areas to develop a unity of character. This would help bolster Singapore's position as a must-see tourist destination. The need to attract more tourists, to persuade them to extend their stay, to increase tourists' expenditure and to encourage repeat visits became the *raison d'etre* of the report.



The material basis of such a rationale was, however, downplayed by STB when it responded to public criticism that its proposals stemmed from a desire to increase tourist dollars rather than from a genuine concern for the social and cultural well-being of Chinatown, Instead, their letter to the Straits Times, "Plans Enhance Chinatown" (12 December 1999), highlighted that Chinatown "has lost much of its vitality and essence" and that locals and tourists have over the years "called for action to address the decline" of Chinatown. They argue that "it is against this backdrop that the STB is trying to bring back the life and vitality of Chinatown." The STB further emphasised the need for their intervention in their second letter to the Straits Times, "An Authentic Chinatown For All" (29 December 1998). Here, it claimed that

"passive acceptance of the status quo will allow what little is left of Chinatown to disappear altogether in time. This malaise – the continuing dimunition of the area's ambience and bustle, the dearth of communal and cultural activities – is the unintended and undesired result of change that has taken place over the years. Clearly, the Tourism 21 Report's cautionary advice for constant and natural evolution of sites has now been replaced with a sense of urgency and crisis."

There is, at the same time, a significant difference in the projected scale of between intervention the recommendations of the NTPC and the STB's redevelopment plans for Chinatown. Tourism, in the view of the Singapore Heritage Society, should not be seen as an adversary of urban planning and heritage conservation. Indeed, the forms of intervention as expressed in the Tourism 21 report, was meant to create a "subtle yet pervasive sense of place". Importantly, the specific recommendations for Chinatown themselves were relatively light-handed and non-intrusive. In contrast, the STB appears to have ignored this key idea in its effort to artificially create a starkly uniform and prescribed landscape, dotted with largescale new developments.

Problems with the STB Rationale for Redevelopment

The reasons proffered by the Board in its publicity brochure for the redevelopment plans have not been

adequately explained. Some of the problems mentioned, for example, the inadequacies of transportation and tourist information materials are hardly grounds for - or related significantly to - the actual scale and nature of the proposals. In any case, the problem of public transportation may be alleviated with the completion of the Northeast MRT line. The inclusion of this in a litany of "symptoms of decline" is therefore potentially misleading.

In justifying its reasons for intervention, the Board has identified two main points:

- 1. The first relates to the economic problems faced by some businesspeople in the area as a result of an absence of shopping traffic. The Board also claims that Chinatown lacks major trades and activities that make each area stand out. This was contrasted with references to the bustling crowds of yesteryear.
- 2. The second point is summarised in a statement quoted earlier: "If nothing is done, Chinatown will lose its soul and its unique and irreplaceable ability to serve as a fount of history, culture and heritage..." The implication here is that the STB's plans for Chinatown will save its "soul".

These various arguments may be seriously flawed. First, we need to reexamine the extent to which business difficulties faced by local businesspeople are peculiar to the area and are not part of a larger economic slowdown, slump in tourism figures, as well a national retail glut. Next, we need to factor in the poor public transportation infrastructure as well as the tremendous disruption caused by MRT construction works in the Chinatown area. With economic recovery in sight, and the construction of the Northeast line proceeding as scheduled, we may realistically expect businesses in the area to improve in the near future. Ironically, this is also when some of the proposed redevelopment works would have been completed, so their redundancy or even detrimental effects might be masked or moderated by improvement in wider conditions.

Even after factoring in the considerations mentioned above, we may still find that there are in fact businesspeople in some specific sectors of Chinatown who continue to face problems in attracting customers. While the Board has not released the details of its survey of local businesspeople, our observations are that the problems tend to be found in the small but

prominent Kreta Ayer area bounded by South Bridge Road, New Bridge Road, Mosque Street and Sago Street. Although it constituted the old heart of Chinatown, it appears especially deserted today, coming alive during the Chinese New Year period. For such localised areas, however, more specific strategies – instead of a one-size-fits-all solution - need to be found.

While some areas might be experiencing temporary slowdown due to the economic downturn, the general trend of their development over the last 5 to 10 years has in fact been a positive build-up of potentially sustainable communities. For example,

- 1. The Hong Lim Complex area is a centre for traditional Chinese medicinal goods and services.
- 2. The shophouses in the Duxton Plain area has a concentration of professional offices.
- 3. The wet market in Chinatown remains very popular with shoppers from all over Singapore, who come here to find the freshest foods or the most exotic meats.
- 4. Tanjong Pagar has developed a reputation as a lively centre for nightlife with its series of pubs and Karaoke bars.

- 5. The commercial belt along New Bridge Road serves nearby residents and is a thriving centre for cheap consumer goods such as clothes, music compact discs, electrical appliances and cooked food.
- 6. International cuisine is served at several successful restaurants in the Ann Siang Hill area. In the same area, the old clubs and associations along Club Street continue to occupy their erstwhile premises and to conduct their longstanding activities.

Far from having "no major trade, service or activity in Chinatown that makes each area stand out" (Enhancing the Chinatown Experience, 1998: 4), the district has been able to develop, over time and on its own accord, particular niche activities and communities in different areas. That these patterns are disorderly and do not fall into any thematic order should not be seen as a problem, but rather as the result of a slow evolution that is in

line with social changes and market forces.

The STB's second justification for intervention relates to the people's nostalgia for the old bustle of Chinatown and their desire to revive the liveliness and density of street activities. Given the large spread of Chinatown, the Board must be cautious not to present its visions based on unrealisable crowd sizes all over the area throughout the year. Much of the liveliness of the old street life could be attributed to the high density of residents in the area. Under crowded living conditions (and with high unemployment and underemployment), Chinatown residents tended to spend much time on the streets.

At the same time, recent efforts to develop retail and commercial centers within each of Singapore's New Towns (for example Junction 8 in Bishan and Tampines Mall and Century Square in Tampines) now means that people have a wider range of choices for shopping, entertainment and dining all over the island. It is difficult for any single commercial location to generate the type of large-scale festive crowds that are pictured in almost every illustration in the STB brochure. Many areas that do not draw crowds of this scale are viable and sustainable, such as Clarke Quay, Rochor and Siglap. These places

do face difficulties, partly as a result of the retail glut in Singapore, yet they have remained sustainable due to a moderate but steady flow of people to these areas. Therefore, the STB needs to be clearer about the size, density and location of these bustling crowds as well as how these crowds would fluctuate over time. We need to aim for a level of activity that is sustainable in the long term.

Finally, we examine the STB's argument that their redevelopment proposals will help safeguard against the loss of Chinatown's heritage and "soul". Moving away from vague and emotive declarations, we have suggested through a limited and preliminary catalogue of existing heritage assets that the situation may be nowhere as dire as suggested. More to the point, the living traditions of the area may be underemphasised by the STB in its publicity materials. Worse, the redevelopment plans might endanger some of these existing traditions, while promoting some newly "invented traditions".

Legitimate Grounds for Redevelopment Work

This rebuttal of the arguments put forward by the Board does not mean that Chinatown has no problems or does not need some form of policy response. However, the nature of the problems and the strategies for dealing with them are very different from those identified by the STB. The main problems include:

- localised areas of economic malaise
- inadequate scale of local residential community
- neglect of important heritage elements in the area

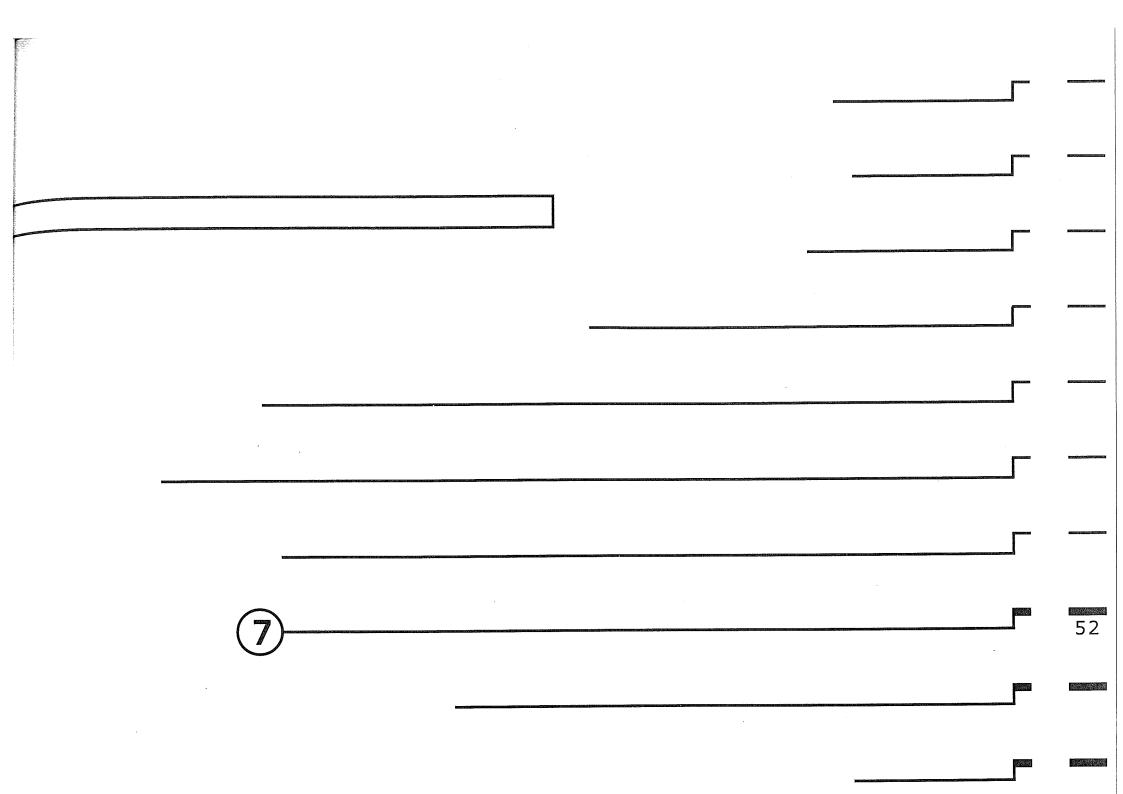
While the authority of the STB over tourism matters is accepted, its significant involvement in urban planning, economic management, residential development and heritage conservation needs to be looked at. The "revitalisation" of Chinatown is both an unrealistic and an unenviable task for any single authority to coordinate or undertake. The task involves an understanding of the complex interplay of many forces and, therefore, also requires a multi-agency approach. At the same time, members of the local

community must play an important role in the growth and development of their own neighbourhood.

The STB, working from the basis of sound recommendations, has misinterpreted or over-interpreted the recommendations of the Tourism 21 report and has overstepped its mandate and expertise abilities in its plans for Chinatown. In so doing, it may threaten the very heritage and community it purports to save.

conclusion

drawing lessons and directions from the Chinatown debate



Conclusion

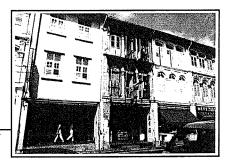
- Chinatown's redevelopment involves issues concerning urban planning, economic management and residential development. Issues of heritage, social memory and "cultural capital" further complicate this exercise. The capacity of STB, or any one body, to act singlehandedly within and across such diverse areas is limited.
- Chinatown's redevelopment, and of other conservation areas in Singapore, should be placed in an islandwide context. Such a perspective will allow a greater understanding of the historical and contemporary forces that has affected these historical sites and point to a more sensitive approach towards redevelopment.
- Acknowledging the complex nature of the project, it is essential that Chinatown's redevelopment be seen not as a discrete task, but as an openended evolutionary system. The most effective path out of this complicated situation is not to simplify it, but to share the responsibility of development with local communities.
- Chinatown's redevelopment should concentrate on the cluster of

streets (namely Mosque Street, Pagoda Street, Temple Street, Smith Street and Trengganu Street) that may be identified as "problem" areas. The redevelopment blueprint, however, attempts to revive the whole of Chinatown all at once. A project of such a scale and magnitude is unnecessary given the existing conditions in Chinatown now.

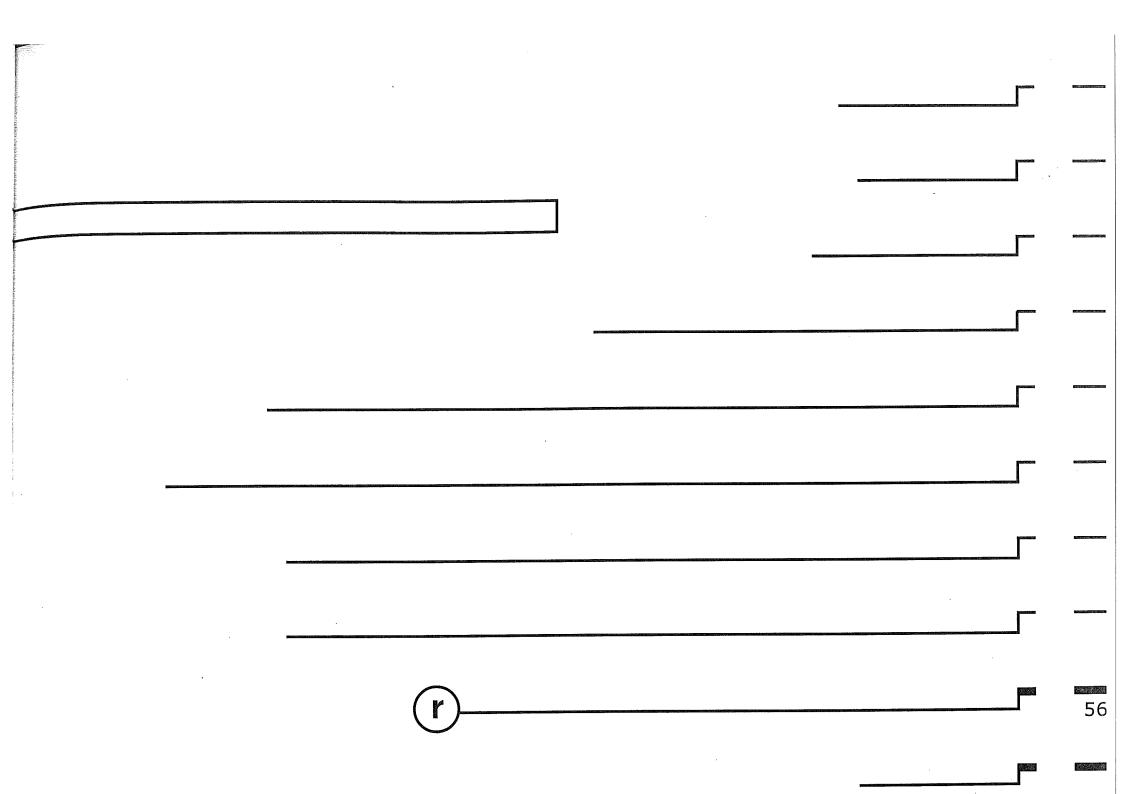
- At this point in time, it is crucial to rethink the strategies that are now being implemented in Chinatown. Changes brought about by heavyburdened intervention are irreversible and will not fade away in the near future. Also, Chinatown's redevelopment is significant as it is the first of the 10 thematic areas that has been targeted for redevelopment. As the pilot project, it is essential that the authorities proceed at a measured pace and take a step back to reassess some of the controversial issues.
- Suggested directions for further investigation include:
- The well-represented collation of views from stakeholders and the study of a mechanism to devolve power to these communities to encourage

ground-up initiatives and management.

- An exhaustive study of opportunities for re-introducing residential life into Chinatown.
- A study of the existing trades and businesses of the area and the review of land zoning / pricing policies to encourage and assist important trade patterns.
- A density and profile study of the projected population to ascertain the economic viability of the intensity of retail activities in redeveloped Chinatown.
- A critical study of the STB's understanding - and implementation of "thematic development"
- An inquiry into different approaches to heritage conservation and development of cultural tourism, and their implications for the future of heritage areas in Singapore



references and acknowledgement



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Acknowledgements

This report was made possible by the contributions of various individuals including members and supporters of the Singapore Heritage Society. Although they are not individually named here, we thank them for their generosity in offering their time and effort.

Cultural tourism is the 'in' thing today and anticipated to become an important growth sector in the new millennium. It is therefore not surprising that on September 1998, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) announced a \$97.5 million plan to 'revitalize' Chinatown.

The Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) is of the view that tourism and heritage are not two opposing concerns. Indeed cultural tourism is important as it expresses the pride that people have for their national heritage, as well as for the sake of the tourist dollar.

It is with this in mind that the SHS has taken this opportunity to undertake a preliminary review of the STB Chinatown proposal. This study aims to:

- 1) document the course of the public debate on the STB proposal and the future of Chinatown;
- 2) highlight certain perspectives and areas of concern that are relevant for the implementation of the

STB plans; and

3) draw lessons from the Chinatown debate and reflect on future directions for the development of heritage sites in Singapore.

The study is divided into four main sections:

- 1) Our Chinatown Heritage
- 2) Challenges in the Revitalization of Chinatown
- 3) Opportunities for the Redevelopment of Chinatown
- 4) A consideration of the STB proposal



