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## SINGAPORE HERITAGE SOCIETY: A BRIEF HISTORY

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The Singapore Heritage Society is a non-governmental organization which aims to raise awareness of the need to engage with and preserve Singapore's heritage. The society's constitution defines heritage broadly to include not just the built environment, but also ecology and ways of life. In the two decades of its existence, the society has played a variety of roles. It has served as an advocacy group, corresponding with the government and statutory boards on relevant issues, and at times attempting to widen the space of public debate by bringing these issues to general public attention. In addition, the society has engaged in research and documentation, organizing public forums and producing a variety of publications (both in print and online) concerning Singapore's heritage. The society's small but active membership has thus played a crucial role in articulating independent yet informed views on heritage issues in Singapore.

Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) was founded in April 1987 by a group of concerned citizens and residents, including architect William Lim (who would serve as its first president), Sharon Siddique (who was to be vice-president), Kwa Chong Guan and Geraldene Lowe. Driven by his concern for heritage in a postmodern city, William Lim started SHS with one intention in mind -- to alert the government to the need to preserve heritage (Kwa, Interview'05). The rest of the founding members shared Lim's vision. The group's motivation for the setting up of the Society was largely due to a vacuum that existed at that time in public discourse regarding conservation. The rapid pace of urban development in the 1980s had sparked off a debate about whether there would be any historic Singapore left by the end of the period of modernization. Efforts to transform the Singapore landscape from a series of kampongs and squatter camps into a modern metropolis meant that historic buildings, notwithstanding their value and memories embodied within them, had to be demolished in the name of progress. Someone had to step forward and take up the challenge of negotiating with the authorities, in hope of slowing down the pace of development, and reevaluate the importance of urban space. The Society's founding members got together to answer this call to conserve the built environment of Singapore.

In his 1988 President's message to members published in the inaugural issue of the society's Roots newsletter, William Lim recounted the background to the formation of the society. Singapore's rapid development over the previous two decades since independence, he noted, had resulted in rapid and increasing destruction of the old urban fabric, reaching a crisis during the years 1978 to 1982. Concern on the part of politicians, civil servants, private citizens and residents had led to an International Seminar on Adaptive Re-use of Old Buildings held in Singapore in 1984. In collaboration with the Aga Khan Programme of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the meeting, Senior Cabinet member S. Rajaratnam, one of the leading actors in Singapore's achievement of self rule in 1959 and independence in 1965, spoke passionately of the need to preserve the urban built environment as an embodiment of the multicultural roots of all Singaporeans. The meeting prompted organizations such as the Singapore Tourist Promoton Board and the Urban Redevelopment Authority to take a greater interest in heritage. Independently, it also prompted the formation of the Heritage Society as a non-governmental organization concentrating on the "software" of conservation, raising awareness of the importance of heritage in the wider community (Lim, "The President's Message" 1-2).

When it was first conceived, the Society faced many problems relating to perceptions of conservation efforts. The Land Office was then the official body dealing with conservation affairs, and heritage awareness was very low. The AWPNUC (Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation) had not yet been formed, and hence no heritage network existed regionally as a reference point for Singapore. Heritage as a notion potentially involves a number of aspects, and was perceived as ambivalent by state institutions. In 1980s there were few independent non-governmental associations engaged in advocacy work in

Singapore, and the Society's focus was looked on with some suspicion. Without the government's support, the task of promoting conservation fell solely on the Society, creating a heavy burden. Notwithstanding this, the Society succeeded in getting registered largely due to fortunate timing.

The downturn of the property market 1984-1985 provided the impetus for a change in governmental attitude towards conservation efforts. This had to do with the government 'waking up' and realizing the economic value of heritage. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Singapore government planned to demolish the Tekka and Chinatown areas for the development of new housing estates. A desire to overcome problems associated with population density took precedence over cultural, historical and sentimental places. Things took on a different direction in the late 1980s, however, when the authorities received feedback from the tourism board that fewer tourists were coming to Singapore because Singapore was perceived as "too modern". This news was a surprise, and prompted a reconsideration of urban planning. Thus conservation efforts began to both draw the benefits of tourism and thus ensure the economic survival of Singapore, and to preserve the heritage of Singapore for Singaporeans. The authorities broadened their scope of conservation to include less grand local building (as opposed to major landmark buildings). This move took into account the architectural, emotive and aesthetic value of elements of the built environment.

Riding on a wave of civic engagement, the Society seized a golden opportunity to apply for official status as a registered society. Although the entire process took considerable time, negotiation, and effort, the payoff was tremendous. A further reason for the Society's successful registration was its first publication, Pastel Portraits. Prior to its formal registration, the Society decided to push ahead with the book's publication. Pastel Portraits, according to Geraldine Lowe-Ismail, "made everyone sit up and realize that we still had many gems that should be preserved" (interview, 05). The book was so well-received at a coach tour conducted by Geraldine for delegates and participants in a conference that she was asked to repeat the tour three times more for URA staff. The expatriate community to whom Geraldine had publicized the book to during her heritage tours, also supported Pastel Portraits. The publicity and strong reception of the book's publication gave the society the desired public recognition and legitimacy which helped facilitate its registration.

Membership quickly grew from 15 pro-tem committee members to around one hundred ordinary members. The Society was founded on the working principle of total democracy. There was freedom of entry and exit, no member was under any obligation to the Society. Anyone who expressed interested in conservation and heritage issues was encouraged to join. No firm hierarchical structure was in place to avoid organizational costs for secretarial staff, rent and the likes. Decision-making power was distributed amongst all the members, and the executive committee's role was purely functional. It took on the responsibility of organizing the Society's official meetings so as to facilitate exchange of ideas between members and to assist in the execution of different projects its members had agreed to take on. Many of these projects were bottom-up initiatives, ad-hoc and issue-driven. Successful execution of projections relied mainly on the Society's funds. Much of its funding came from membership fees, project grants and royalties from publications. A small proportion was derived from consultation fees with government agencies (excluding consultation with focus groups such as URA Identity Plan focus group) and donations in kind. Most of the time, SHS had sufficient funds to carry out projects in accordance to its members' wishes. In effect, SHS acted as a "resource-centre" or "middle-man" for interested parties who wished to pursue conservation efforts. It sought grants on their behalf from foundations because many of these foundations had clauses that preclude grants to be given to individuals. Hence, the Society received a lot of support from architectural and academic circles.

One of the society's first major activities was the organizing of a one day conference entitled "Unity in Diversity" in March 1988. The conference illustrated the capacity of the society to enlarge the space of public debate. It concentrated on minority communities in Singapore obscured by the "Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other" state management of ethnicity, and involved presentations on 17 minority communities, including the Dawoodi Boras, Jews, Parsis, Arabs, Syrian Christians and Chinese Muslims. The conference attracted some 150 participants, and featured as its guest of honour David Marshall, Singapore's first Chief Minister and himself a member of a small Iraqi-Jewish minority group. In addition to organizing talks and tours in its early years, the society also held dialogue sessions with the Ministry of National Development over the master plan for the civic and cultural district of Singapore, and lobbied the Urban Redevelopment Authority on issues such as the Kampong Bugis redevelopment plan. Finally, the society attempted to raise public awareness on issues such as the preservation of the last working "dragon kiln" at the Sam Mui Pottery works in Ang Mo Kio through letter-writing and conducting tours.

In the 1990s, the society began publishing monographs, the first being Lee Geok Boi's Pages From Yesteryear (1990), looking at the history of Singapore's publishing industry. The second publication, Syonan: Singapore under the Japanese was produced in 1992 as part of commemoration of the 50th anniversary of British Surrender of Singapore. Designed and produced by Goh Eck Kheng of Landmark Books, an active committee member, it won a 1992 Best Book Design Award, and was subsequently translated into Chinese and Japanese. The society continued to publish topical material, launching What If? ... The Choice of Post-War Singapore to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the end of Word War II in 1995. In 1994, the Society together with the Substation arts centre published the book 'Urban Landscape: concrete realities'. The volume dealt with themes such as history, heritage and shared experience that created the Singaporean identity, in an effort to discover its place in time and space. However, its most significant publication was Robert's Powell, Living Legacy: Singapore's Architectural Heritage in 1994. Produced with the help of a grant from Mobil, the publication highlighted and celebrated heritage buildings in Singapore which had been restored and renovated, and its sales success helped to place the society on a firm financial footing. As illustrated, SHS publications were regarded important as they recorded salient issues and significant events for posterity, and Kwok Kian Woon, the society's second president, considered the function of documentation as one of the key roles that SHS fulfilled in Singapore society. (interview, '05)

Publications produced by the society were complemented by a range of activities for both members and non-members. In the society's early years of existence, a series of heritage hunts both increased public awareness of heritage issues, and resulted in valuable additions to the collections of the National Library and the National Archives. The hunts had many participants, and

were thus successful in raising the society's profile in Singapore, as well as involving a significant number of the general public in heritage issues. In addition, the society plated a key role in organizing commemorations of the anniversaries of political events, such as 50th anniversaries of the British and the Japanese surrenders in World War II in 1992 and 1995 respectively. These anniversaries could not be marked officially by the Singapore government because of diplomatic sensitivities, and thus the society was able to organize commemorations which reflected the important places of these events in the history of Singapore and in social memory. Finally, the society's Culture and Lifestyles Committee organized popular gatherings to mark festivals such as Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Hari Raya, and there was a regular programme of walking tours, demonstrations, and public talks.

From its earliest days, the society also made regional connections with other similar NGOs in Asean. In March 1991, society representatives attended a meeting in Jakarta with heritage organizations from Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand which signed the Jakarta Declaration expressing concern at the loss of buildings and environments of historical interest under the force of rapid urban development. In the same year, William Lim traveled to Malaysia to discuss the impact on historical landscapes of the repeal of the rent control act. Representatives from the society also attended the First Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation Symposium in Penang in 1992, welcomed the symposium to Singapore in 1994, and continued to send delegates to the symposium's meetings in other parts of Asia in subsequent years.

From the 1990s onwards, the society participated in and organized several important forums and conferences on heritage in Singapore. In 1992, William Lim and Kwa Chong Guan represented the society at an Institute of Policy Studies closed door forum on Heritage and Contemporary Values, and members participated at a larger public forum held at the National University of Singapore the following week. Later, the society moved to taking amore active role in organizing such events. The first of these was the conference "Our Place in Time," held at the Substation in September 1994, bringing together artists, academics, educators, professionals and concerned individuals to discuss the meaning of heritage, and the ways in which it might be thought of as an 'active process of conserving and transforming, remembering and reinterpreting' the past (Kwok vii). Another more specifically targeted event was the public forum entitled "Memories and the National Library: Between Forgetting and Remembering" in March 2000, conceived as an intervention in public debate about the future of the National Library, which was threatened by demolition because of road realignment to accommodate the new downtown campus of Singapore Management University. Although the building's prospective demolition was confirmed in Parliament before the forum itself took place, the event provided a chance to review the issues involved, and also a means of commemoration and memorialisation of a building of great importance in the lives of generations of Singaporeans. Also, it demonstrated that "even if people can only make a little difference, the effect of that little bit of difference will equate to more than a sum of its parts." (Kwok in interview '05)

The largest event organized by the society was a three-day conference in 2000 entitled "We Asians: Past and Future" jointly organized by the society, the National Archives of Singapore, and the Japan Foundation Asia Centre, which brought together a number of internationally prominent Asian intellectuals and arts practitioners. Held to mark the beginning of the new millennium, the conference explored Asian experiences of modernization in the twentieth century, focusing in particular on how Asia itself had been imagined in various national and regional contexts, and how it might be re-imagined in the future. Collections of papers from all three meetings were subsequently published by the society.

From its early years, the society has also lobbied or worked with the relevant authorities on conservation issues, working strategically either through private or public communication. In 1991 Society wrote to The Straits Times in opposition to the demolition of Eu Court for road widening. The campaign, however, was unsuccessful and Eu Court was demolished in 1993. In a similar initiative to save Kampong Wak Selat, one of the last kampungs in Singapore, involved cooperation between the Heritage Society and the Association of Muslim Professionals, but also failed in its object. Notwithstanding efforts to salvage it as one of Singapore's histoic sites, Haw Par Villa theme park was closed down much to the Society's despair. The society met with greater success, however in input given into the conservation of Clarke Quay, the Ford Factory on Bukit Timah Road, site of the 1942 British surrender to the Japanese, and the preservation of the Capitol Theatre. In more recent times, the Society has been less successful and vocal in heritage advocacy than in the past. It failed to mobilize its members to rescue the last kampungs in Kranji and Pulau Seking. Also, it failed to oppose the recent destruction of buildings such as the Singapore Improvement Trust Flats at Upper Pickering Street, also nicknamed the "suicide flats". Several of these sites were left empty for years without being developed; efforts, if taken, to save these old buildings might have succeeded.

Despite recent setbacks, the Society has largely been able to exert some influence over URA policies. For instance, SHS played a prominent role in the preservation of the original Changi Prison, which was slated for demolition to pave way for the construction of a new \$1 billion mega-prison complex in 2002. The prison was notoriously known for housing numerous British, Australian and Singaporean prisoners of war during the Japanese occupation. Kevin Tan (who is the current President of SHS) managed to persuade the land authorities to preserve the architectural structure of the prison as it provided the linkage between the present and the past. In June 2003, the Society made bid to save Sembawang Beach from being reclaimed. The beach, the Society argued, has a historically important jetty built by British in early 40s and completed by Japanese, hence it should be protected. By giving feedback to URA and raising the URA identity plan as a reminder of pledge by URA to root people to Singapore through physical landmarks, the Society still remains an important voice for the conservation of Singapore's heritage.

The Society's work, however, was never solely, or even primarily, reactive. In 1992, the Society produced a report on the establishment of Heritage Trust prepared at request of Minister for Information and the Arts. Willie Lim and Kwa Chong Guan visited the United Kingdom and Germany in 1992 to look at the models provided by the English Heritage and the National Trust. Their final report, to which Chua Beng Huat also contributed, formed the pretext for two short meetings with the Minister. The National Heritage Board was subsequently founded in 1993, bringing together the National Archives, National Museum and the Oral History Department of the then Ministry of Information and the Arts. In 1996, the society made a submission with partners Melbourne Chinatown Committee to the Singapore Tourism Board's project to enhance Chinatown.

Chinatown later was the subject of perhaps the most prominent intervention the society has made in recent years, in response to the Singapore Tourist Board's final proposal to redevelop Chinatown in 1998. A group of society members wrote a letter to The Straits Times decrying a redevelopment plan that seemed more focused on tourism than on residents, and attempted to transform Chinatown into a theme park. The plans, the letter noted, were based on a simplistic and Orientalist representation of Chinese culture, and also seemed to erase the multicultural history of an area which is home to the Sree Mariamman Temple and Jamea Mosque. The letter resulted in several months of discussions and dialogue, leading to the publication by the society of the book Rethinking Chinatown and Heritage Conservation in Singapore, documenting the controversy. In 2002, society members again wrote to the press about the lack of sensitivity to Singapore's multicultural heritage shown in the naming of MRT stations on the New North East Line. One concrete result of this is that the consultation process on names for the new Circle Line has been much more open and prolonged. Also, in 2002, the Society lent its support to a book that four women, Sally Oh, Scottie Oakley, Sue Williams and Liesel Strauss, compiled on the history of the now exhumed Bidadari Christian Cemetery.

In August 2003 the society held a strategic planning retreat in Malacca. While remembering the past successes of the society, members and office bearers also noted that it had never been a mass society, always maintaining a small membership, and that it faced challenges in adapting itself to a changing world. The smallness of the NGO sector in Singapore and the presence of well funded institutions such as the National Heritage Board made it unlikely that the Heritage Society could aim to grow in size to match organizations such as the Bandar Warisan Malaysia or the Australian National Heritage Trust. Yet the success of the heritage e-group perhaps indicated an avenue for the society to reinvent itself to appeal to new generations of Singaporeans. As a coordinating project to reflect this change in roles, current president Kevin Tan suggested that the society work towards evolving an online encyclopedia of heritage in Singapore, produced by contributors from all areas of society.

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