

ROOTS

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advocacy

Go Beyond *The Singapore Story*

Heritage Society Calls on National Museum: Showcase Alternative Views of Singapore History

The Heritage Society has called on museum officials to avoid presenting a single version of Singapore history in the new National Museum. Instead, it advocated exposing visitors to different views of our history, including the perspectives of those marginalized in historical struggles.

The call was made on 14 February, when ten Executive Committee members of the Society attended a presentation of designs for the future Singapore history gallery in the National Museum, which is under major renovation work.

The presentation, by Canadian gallery designer firm GSM, described a new museum experience, which emphasized the use of multi-media displays, partly to appeal to school children, who are a major target audience for the museum.

Another new feature is the presentation of social and artistic history alongside the history of major political events.

Heritage Society members were appreciative of these innovative aspects of the design, although they cautioned against excessive dependence on multi-media.

Members also called for the exhibits to deal with major historic monuments, such as the National Theatre or Singapore Conference Hall, which were of great architectural importance and also played important roles in our history.

The presentation and feedback session on 14 February was organised exclusively for the Singapore Heritage Society. It was a result of Society President Kevin Tan's suggestion to museum officials that they consult groups like the Society at an early stage about their plans for important national projects. In this way, feedback could still be incorporated into the design before it was cast in stone.

The suggestion for earlier consultations was made on 24 November, when museum officials unveiled their architectural plans for the redeveloped National Museum to invited architects, academics and Heritage Society representatives.

Held a day before the plans were made public, and after renovations had begun, that briefing thus functioned more as a courtesy to the invited parties, than an exercise to gather usable feedback. ■



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message

In his 1984 address at Wesleyan University, award-winning US historian and biographer David C McCullough made a strong case for studying and understanding our past. History, he said is 'a guide to navigation in perilous times' for it is 'who we are and why we are the way we are.' Contrast this to Henry Ford's flippant attitude towards history. In his 1916 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Ford argued history was 'more or less bunk.' He felt history was nothing more than tradition and that was useless. Instead, he urged us all to 'live in the present' make history ourselves: 'the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today.'

In Singapore, we have far more Fords than McCulloughs. It wouldn't be so bad if they actually made history instead of *making it up*. The Singapore Tourism Board's bid to attract visitors for their 600th anniversary of Zhenghe's voyage has resulted in a ridiculous plan to replace Berlayar Beacon at the edge of Labrador Park with a fake rock. This 'rock' is supposed to be one of two 'teeth' that formed what STB wants all and sundry to believe is *Longyamen* or Dragon's Teeth Gate. Historians disagree over the actual location of the *Longyamen* referred to in Chinese navigational charts, yet STB have seen fit to determine that the location of Berlayar Beacon is where it used to be.

Do we need to invent a past when the one we inherited is already so rich? Do we need to subject everything, including our heritage, to the vagaries of the market place? Is truth to be had for the right price? The historically-informed public must take it upon themselves to prevent mythology from ousting the truth. If we allow Gresham's law – bad money drives out good money – to operate within the realm of our historical experience, we might as well live in Disneyland. Then perhaps we can unashamedly trade old lamps for new, (beacons for fake rocks) and truth for fiction.

Dr. Kevin Y.L. Tan
President



Above: the National Museum, prior to redevelopment work. The old building will be retained and supplemented by a new rear extension.

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education

'Lost City' Lecture Draws Full-House

By Lim Chen Sian



Almost 200 people attended *The 'Lost City' of Kota Gelanggi*, a presentation organised by the Heritage Society on 2nd April at the Singapore History Museum auditorium.

The event featured researcher Raimy Ché-Ross, who made recent headlines with his claim of discovering a 'lost city' deep in the jungles of Johore. The hour-long presentation was based on his article of the same title published in the *Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Dec 2004).

In his talk, Mr. Raimy explained how, whilst studying Jawi and ancient Malay folklore, he became intrigued with references to a settlement called Kota Gelanggi (Black Stone Fort) - a fascination that "consumed the last 12 years" of his life.

Apart from slides of the jungle, manuscripts and their transliterations, Mr. Raimy presented folk tales of the in-

digenous Orang Asli people and events he encountered in his quest to find the fabled settlement, which he estimates to be "at least a thousand years old, older than the civilization of Angkor". He also showed Orang Asli illustrations which he thinks depict a complex series of temples and religious edifices in the lost city.

Mr. Raimy concluded by advocating the development of a sense of our own heritage, amongst both students and the general public.

"If my work should make just one school student start reading up on the Malay Annals and thinking about the past," he said "I think it's worth it."

This event was the second to be jointly organized with Friends of the Museum, following last year's *Prostitution, Child Slavery & the Establishment of the Penang Po Leung Kuk* by Mr. Neil Khor Jin Keong and Dato' Khoo Keat Siew. ■

research

Uneasy Relationship Spaces of the Dead

By Kelly Fu

Three years ago, the authorities announced plans for a housing estate on the Bidadari cemetery site.

On one hand, this will yield many benefits to those in the area, as increased commuter traffic will justify opening Woodleigh MRT station and more shops. On the other hand, we will have lost a place of irreplaceable historical, cultural and architectural merit.

At the heart of these issues is an 'uneasy relationship' with cemeteries that makes them an easy target for removal.

Many Singaporeans find cemetery preservation inconceivable. While Bidadari Cemetery (pictures) took on the functions of a park and provided much needed 'green lungs' to an otherwise congested

urban belt, many saw it as 'dead' land - literally and figuratively. They believe it will be put to better use through 're-development'. Local 'taboos' also explain the positive response toward cemetery destruction and removal.

However, attitudes towards conservation can and do change. Shophouses, for example, were apparently of little value in the 1970s and early 80s. Today, successful conservation projects have convinced the public and planners of their value and endless capacity for reuse.

The Society believes attitudes toward cemeteries can similarly change. To encourage this, it held the forum *Spaces of the Dead: A Case from the Living* in September 2001.

Attended by 70 people, it was a lively exploration and discussion of cemetery conservation and re-use. The energies from the forum demanded a permanent record be kept of these debates.

The Society therefore launched a book project of the same title that will contain an extensive discussion of conservation as well as written and photographic accounts of specific cemeteries. The book will also have interesting stories of places like the unknown Chinese grave in MacRitchie Reservoir.

Dr. Kevin Tan recently finished editing the book, which should be launched this year, or in 2006 at latest. ■



Sneaking a Peek into Heritage Homes

Late last year, Heritage Society member and entrepreneur Jack Sim (better known as founder of the World Toilet Organisation!) suggested setting up a 'Heritage Homes' club.

He wanted to gather heritage homeowners to learn about their homes' history and architectural features, share restoration tips, promote their value as heritage properties and deal with public agencies as a group. The Society was also interested because it involved getting owners to open their homes up to small group visits by heritage enthusiasts.

A couple of months later, the Society launched its "Heritage Homes Group" on 25 February, with a visit to Mr. Sim's residence at 30 Meyer Road (right).

The house was built in 1936 by a Jewish family whose patriarch was Singapore's first optometrist. Mr. Sim bought the home from them some years ago.

Due to renovations over the years, the house contains a charmingly quirky mix of old, new, foreign and local elements. One of the interesting features of the house is the former servants quarters and horse stable, with a stable entrance facing the street for horses to enter and leave by. Mr. Sim has replaced the stable door with one similar to those used at the entrance to Hindu temples, complete with little brass bells.

An encouraging 20 members and their friends (right) turned up for the visit. The good turnout suggests a strong interest in heritage homes among members, and the heritage community in general.

The group will now focus on attracting more owners of heritage homes, to achieve the objectives of the group, and to let the Society to organise more such visits to unique, historic homes, for the study and enjoyment of others. ■



advocacy

Old Lamps for New

On 8 April, the *Straits Times* published an edited version of a letter from the Society concerning plans to replace Berlayer beacon (below) with a replica of *Longyamen*. Our original letter follows:



The Singapore Heritage Society is most concerned about recent plans by Singapore Tourism Board and National Parks Board to demolish the Berlayer Beacon in Labrador Park and replace it with a replica of the 'Long Ya Men' or Dragon Teeth's Gate.

This plan does not seem to be premised on any serious historical research and demonstrates a lamentable attitude towards heritage: a genuine heritage site will be erased and replaced by a 'replica' based on an invented past.

We do not know for sure that this is indeed the original *Longyamen*

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seen & heard

What Happened to Cuppage Mall?

In February, the Society was alerted to a new steel and glass canopy over a food court at Cuppage Mall.

While the decision to build a canopy over a conservation street is controversial, a lot depends on how it is designed. Unfortunately, the Cuppage structures detract rather than add to the quality of the street.

For one thing, the columns and beams are thickly proportioned and painted a stark white, tending to dominate the space rather than recede subtly.

Next, the structures are built very close

to the shophouses, crowding the area and leaving little room to step back and appreciate the facade.

The space is filled also with glaring white lights and festooned with large banners that further block the shophouses.

The end result is that the shophouses are overwhelmed and obscured by the large, bright and noisy new addition.

While it is too late to do anything about this development, the Society will monitor the development of similar canopies in future. ■



Internal Affairs

From January to March the Society welcomed six students on attachment from the National University of Singapore University Scholars Programme.

Godwin Tan, Anne Tng, Lin Sufei, Lin Huihui, Wang Zineng and Pearlin Tee were actively involved in a series of tasks supervised by President Kevin Tan, Vice-President Philip Holden and Treasurer Lim Chen Sian.

The archaeology component involved archival research for the Fort Tanjong Katong Project, excavation fieldwork and sourcing for South East Asian laws on archaeology and antiquities to compare with similar legislation in Singapore. Chen notes that while, "unfortunately the internship duration was extremely limited, we were very lucky to actually get them to work at all."

The interns have also been studying how we function as part of a course they are taking entitled "Civil Society: Theory and Practice." These are their comments about working with the Society:

Our attachment with the Society has been meaningful and enriching for us. In many ways, it goes beyond the expectations we set for first ourselves.

By participating in the variety of activities planned for us and studying the history of SHS, we have come to

L-R: Pearlin, Zineng (front), Sufei, Anne, Hui Hui & Godwin 'dig into the heritage we all share.'



understand how the socio-cultural dimensions of history have been under-explored and how the Society's work on making and preserving our history is how civil society recuperates history in ways that official records cannot.

Most fulfilling was our personal interaction with members. Attending the Exco Meeting, interviewing founding members and participating in the activities that members organize let us to realize how diverse heritage is and the passion and effort that goes into preserving it.

In our short stint, we learnt much about the country we live in and more importantly, about ourselves as we dig into the heritage we all share. Perhaps the most valuable lesson we have come away with is our responsibility to do our part in preserving our past, so that in time to come, we will all have common, fond memories to look back upon. ■

coming up

Next Stop: Penang

The Society is organising a major trip to another former Straits Settlement - Penang.

Modelled on our successful Malacca visit last October, this tour features visits to stunning heritage sites, specially arranged guides and meetings with the local heritage community.

Apart from visits and meetings, what would a trip to Penang be without the food? We are planning to eat our way

through a mix of new hot spots and trusted favourites!

Highlights of the trip will include the award-winning Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, old Protestant Cemetery (below, left), Khoo Kongsi (below, right) tiffin lunch at the stately E&O Hotel and a sumptuous dinner in a grand old mansion.

This trip is tentatively planned from Friday 10th - Monday 13th June 2005. Places on this trip are limited, so priority will be given to SHS members. More details will be announced soon. ■



(continued from page 3)

mentioned in Chinese texts from the Song Dynasty onwards. Historians have listed as many as five possible sites and there is little agreement as to its exact location. What we do know is that a rock (Batu Berlayer) - known to navigators as 'Lot's Wife' - existed somewhere in the channel until the British blew it up to widen the channel in 1848.

Even if we can accurately pinpoint Longyamen's location, the notion of a gate implies at least a second rock on the Sentosa side of the channel. A single rock or 'tooth' cannot be a replica of such a gateway.

The Labrador Park area has genuine and unrealized heritage value. Generations of Singaporeans have visited the park, and its genuine structures - a World War II pillbox and an older obelisk used to guide shipping - give us a much more accurate representation of Singapore's long and complex maritime history. This link to the past should be conserved and should not be erased by a historically dubious 'replica'.

Workers on site tell us that the replica will be constructed from a composite material using a mould impressed with the features of a nearby cliff face. Such 'replication' adds nothing in heritage value and furthermore detracts from the atmosphere of the park.

We strongly urge STB and NParks to reconsider their decision to demolish the beacon and replacing it with a fake 'dragon's tooth'. Instead STB and NParks should consult fully with stakeholders so our local heritage is sensitively preserved and made accessible to all in a meaningful manner.

Dr. Kevin Y.L. Tan
President
Singapore Heritage Society

Below: (L-R) navigation obelisk, World War II machine gun post & the beacon (partially obscured by tree). Photograph by Lim Chen Sian.

