GIVING NEW LEASE OF LIFE TO SINGAPORE’S MODERNIST ICONS
TOO YOUNG TO DIE: GIVING NEW LEASE OF LIFE TO SINGAPORE’S MODERNIST ICONS
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INTRODUCTION

Three of Singapore’s most iconic and historically-significant buildings from the post-independence era — Pearl Bank Apartments, People’s Park Complex, and Golden Mile Complex, are currently at risk of collective sale and demolition. To date, no post-independence strata-titled modernist building in Singapore has received official conservation status. Given the historical and architectural significance of these buildings, the Singapore Heritage Society believes that it is timely for current land-use policies and regulatory frameworks to be re-evaluated to facilitate the conservation of modernist structures for adaptive reuse, and for private owners and developers to plan for a longer building lifespan incorporating evolving ideas for rehabilitation and regeneration.

THREE SINGAPOREAN MODERNIST ICONS

Pearl Bank Apartments, People’s Park Complex, and Golden Mile Complex are of great historical and architectural significance to Singapore. They are:

- outstanding examples of the earliest phases of the government’s successful urban renewal under the government’s Sale of Sites Programme during the era of nation-building - People’s Park Complex and Golden Mile Complex were the first public-private, mixed-use buildings on this scale in Singapore;

- visionary, innovative architecture which received international praise, based on cutting-edge urban design principles providing liveable solutions for dense urban centres;

- large-scale megastructures that have shaped the visual character of the downtown landscape; and

- designed entirely by Singaporean architects.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE CITY: THE SALE OF SITES PROGRAMME

All three developments, Pearl Bank Apartments, People’s Park Complex, and Golden Mile Complex, are important in the urban transformation of Singapore’s city centre as they were part of the earliest sites sold to private developers under the Sale of Sites Programme by the Urban Renewal Department (URD, the predecessor to today’s Urban Redevelopment Authority). The Programme was established to overcome the obstacle to comprehensive urban redevelopment of small land plots under separate private owners. URD assembled small plots into a single larger parcel of land, which was then sold by tender to the private sector, accompanied by conditions and concessions to ensure developments would be in line with larger urban planning objectives. This was a major turning point in transforming downtown Singapore from a landscape of shophouses to modern high-rise developments. Unlike today, where large-scale architectural projects in Singapore often hire foreign corporate professionals for their “international renown and brand name assurance”, Pearl Bank Apartments, People’s Park Complex and Golden Mile Complex were wholly the work of Singaporean talent. These Singapore architects did not merely copy foreign styles but drew on concepts from diverse international sources to “devise buildings that responded inventively to local conditions.”

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People’s Park Complex (1972)

FACTS AND FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEVELOPER</th>
<th>People’s Park Development Ltd</th>
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<tr>
<td>ARCHITECTURAL FIRM</td>
<td>DP Architects (formerly Design Partnership)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARCHITECTS-IN-CHARGE</td>
<td>William SW Lim, Koh Seow Chuan and Tay Kheng Soon</td>
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<td>USAGE</td>
<td>Retail / Office / Residential flats</td>
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<td>SITE AREA</td>
<td>10,358.6m²</td>
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<tr>
<td>LOCATION</td>
<td>Eu Tong Sen Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>COST</td>
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<tr>
<td>31 STOREYS</td>
<td>6 storey podium block for retail &amp; offices / 25-storey slab block for residential use / 56 offices / 233 shops &amp; 44 kiosks / 264 apartments: 98 one-room flats, 144 three-room flats, 18 four-room flats / 302 shops / 633 parking lots</td>
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The site was formerly the People’s Park Market (珍珠巴剎) which comprised makeshift stalls and single-storey shops selling food, clothing, and housewares. After a major fire broke out in December 1966, the government parceled the site for sale to a private developer in 1967, under the first round of the Sale of Sites Programme. The architectural firm responsible was the newly-established Design Partnership (now DP Architects Pte Ltd), led by William SW Lim, Koh Seow Chuan, and Tay Kheng Soon, then only in its first year of operation.5

The complex was divided into two zones, a public podium at ground level for retail and businesses, and a private residential block. Both were planned around shared public spaces. The podium was based on an innovative concept of the “city room”, as the architects called it — “an arrangement of scales (of spaces), levels and movement designed to invite the people in and to accommodate them at a variety of ways and speeds.” A three-storeyed atrium with a sunken plaza for events was accessible from all four sides of the building, with all shops visible at once, and the small stalls and shops on the ground floor were intended to evoke the bazaar market that had once stood on the site.6 The public atrium was intended as “the people’s living room”, open at all hours for Chinatown’s residents to interact, eat, shop, play, and carry out daily activities. Residences in the high-rise block were lined along “streets-in-the-air” and had a roof deck for community interaction.7

At the time, People’s Park Complex was the largest and tallest shopping-cum-residential complex ever built in Singapore and the atrium was the first in Asia.8 The developer, Ho Kok Cheong, described it as the “first and the grandest multiple complex in Asia, catering for everything under the sun in one roof”.9 Over a million people visited the shopping complex in the first month of its opening in October 1970.10

While the exterior was initially finished in exposed raw concrete associated with the Brutalist movement, the spatial design incorporated other schools of thought. In the words of Eunice Seng, “[People’s Park Complex] has been celebrated as an exemplary urban architectural model that is specific to its place and historical condition where the nationalizing moment intersected the architectural context of the 1960s.”11 People’s Park Complex was internationally-hailed as a masterpiece of 1970s experimental architecture. Inspired by the Japanese Metabolist movement, People’s Park Complex was a rare example of these concepts applied in practice. When Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, a founding member of the movement, visited the site during construction, he commented, “we theorised and you people are getting it built!”12 Two decades later, Pritzker Prize winner, Rem Koolhaas noted, “Ostensibly a brutal high-rise slab on a brutal podium, People’s Park Complex is in fact a condensed version of a Chinese downtown, a three-dimensional market based on the cellular matrix of Chinese shopping — a modern-movement Chinatown.”13

With a large covered overhead bridge connecting People’s Park Complex to the other side New Bridge Road, the building also embodied other contemporary architectural theories: CIAM 8’s emphasis on the needs of the pedestrian in the city, and the Team 10’s concept of urban reintegration by providing a continuous space from residence to shops to the exterior and rest of the city. This was the first such bridge in Singapore, gifted by the developer to the Singapore government.14

8 Wong, et. al., Singapore 1:1 City, pp. 158–161.
9 ‘Coming up fast, grandest complex in Asia’, Straits Times, 30 September 1969.
10 National Library Board, ‘Completion of People’s Park Complex, May 1973’, HistorySG.
11 Seng, ‘The Podium, the Tower and the “People”, p.221.
14 Seng, ‘The Podium, the Tower and the “People”, p. 226. Please refer to the Box Story on “Brutalism and Metabolism” (p. 23) for more on CIAM and Team 10.
Golden Mile Complex (1973)

FACTS AND FIGURES\textsuperscript{15}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORIGINAL NAME</th>
<th>Woh Hup Complex</th>
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<tr>
<td>DEVELOPER</td>
<td>Singapura Development (Pte) Ltd</td>
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<td>ARCHITECTURAL FIRM</td>
<td>DP Architects (formerly Design Partnership)</td>
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<td>William SW Lim, Tay Kheng Soon, Gan Eng Oon</td>
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<td>USAGE</td>
<td>Retail / Office / Residential flats</td>
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<td>SITE AREA</td>
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</tr>
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<td>S$18 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 STOREYS</td>
<td>first 3 storeys for retail / 411 shops 226 offices / 68 residential units / over 500 parking lots in the basement</td>
</tr>
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Originally named Woh Hup Complex, this was one of three sites along Beach Road developed under URA’s first Sale of Sites Programme, an ambitious plan to transform the city with 14 large redevelopment sites. Along Beach Road, “it was intended to raise a ‘Golden Mile’ of modern skyscrapers – hotels, shops and luxury apartments.”

Besides Woh Hup Complex, the sites included Golden Mile Tower and The Plaza. “We are convinced this stretch hitherto a squalid shanty area and dumping ground will become Singapore’s Golden Mile”, said Alan Choe, head of the Housing & Development Board’s Urban Renewal Department.

Golden Mile Tower was designed by Gan Eng Oon, William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon of Design Partnership (now known as DP Architects). Replacing a landscape of shophouses facing the sea, it sat on a plot situated between Nicoll Highway and Beach Road which was a major vehicular route to the city centre. Golden Mile Complex was designed as a high-density, vertical, “self-contained city”, combining everything needed for urban life, similar to People’s Park Complex. The lower three floors were dedicated to public, commercial uses with shops, kiosks, coffee bars, a bank, department store, supermarket and office studios, all located within a central atrium along the length of the building. Resembling a vault, it was intended to provide full visibility to the shopping on offer on each level. Rising above this were the residential units which was served by a public space on the 12th floor, a “garden in the sky” terrace for recreation and socialising.

Responding directly to site conditions, climate, view, sun orientation and circulation, the architects and a team of specialised technical consultants came up with the distinctive “stepped-back terrace” form, the first of its kind in Singapore. On one side, it gave offices and flats unobstructed panoramic views of the seafront and surrounding Southern Islands, terraces for small sunlit gardens, and on the opposite side of the building, the reversed tiers meant that each floor shaded the floor below from the midday sun. The shallow, staggered profile also allowed for better ventilation and natural lighting.

Just as People’s Park Complex gave much attention to how the building would connect with the surrounding neighbourhood, at Golden Mile Complex, a platform was designed with the possibility of being extended into a mile-long pedestrian walkway that would connect each building along the “golden mile”, acting as a parallel to the vehicular transportation network at ground level.

Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas said at a press conference when he visited Singapore in 2005: “These buildings [Golden Mile Complex and People’s Park Complex] were not intended to be landmarks, but became landmarks. Pritzker Prize-winning Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki said it was a prime example of an urban building where people can live, work, shop, and play - all in a single development.

Although Golden Mile Complex drew on the Brutalist and Metabolist movements in Britain and Japan, “its bold intentions, unique form, and complex spaces have seen it recognised as an important and original work in its own right.”

17 Urban Redevelopment Authority, A Pictorial Chronology, p.30.
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<td>USAGE</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAPACITY</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF STOREYS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF RESIDENTIAL UNITS</td>
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</table>

The horseshoe shape of Pearl Bank Apartments maximises panoramic views for each unit.

The interior-facing side is shaded from the sun by the curved design.

The interior-facing side is shaded from the sun by the curved design.

The horseshoe shape of Pearl Bank Apartments maximises panoramic views for each unit.

Split-level apartments in Pearl Bank are cleverly interwoven with each other.
Located on Pearl’s Hill, next to Pearl’s Hill Park, this site enjoyed privacy and quiet which made it ideal for residential development. Rather than following the standard model of shorter tower blocks clustered together, architect Tan Cheng Siong created a single 113-metre skyscraper which would have panoramic views and greater privacy, at a height comparable to Singapore’s highest peak, Bukit Timah Hill.  

The distinctive ‘broken cylinder’ horseshoe-shaped form was driven by efficiency and functionality. Compared to a slab block, this shape had the smallest wall-to-floor ratio, meaning greater economy in terms of building materials. The opening in the C-shape cylinder allowed for better ventilation and mitigated against the afternoon sun. Another innovative feature was the interlocking, split design apartments which maximised the number of apartments and allowed for a variety of two, three and four-bedroom split-level maisonettes. In the words of architectural historians Ho and Chang, ‘Its monumental courtyard frames dramatic vistas and is among Singapore’s most spectacular spaces.’

Remarkably, Pearl Bank achieved extreme urban intensification of 2,000 people in 288 units, whilst providing a high-quality living environment aimed to appeal to the growing middle-class of the time. In comparison, a similar density was found in the shophouses of Kreta Ayer, a stone’s throw away, but which were overcrowded and unsanitary.

Pearl Bank Apartments chalked up a number of Firsts in Singapore:

- First all-housing development built on a URA land parcel
- Highest density for a residential development
- Tallest apartment block in Southeast Asia

Consequently, Pearl Bank has been studied and heralded as a intelligent solution to urban challenges, as well as for its striking modernist aesthetics, by architects, planners, urbanists, architectural historians and heritage enthusiasts. In May 2015, the Urban Redevelopment Authority also acknowledged that there was merit in conserving Pearl Bank Apartments.


Brutalism in architecture, is a subset of the modernist architectural movement that began in the early 1950s. The word Brutalism originates from the French word for “raw” where Swiss-French architect, Le Corbusier, described his choice of materials as “béton brut” meaning raw concrete in French. One of his best known proto-Brutalist architecture is his work of Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, France, that was completed in 1952 and Secretariat Building (Palace of Assembly) in Chandigarh, India, which was completed in 1953.

The architecture of Brutalism is often expressed as a megastructure in a form of office towers, residential blocks and shopping podiums. The architecture is expressed with exposed concrete construction and rugged concrete details, and has a tendency to express the circulation graphically.

English architecture critic, Reyner Banham (1966), posited Brutalism as an expression of the atmosphere of moral seriousness rather than an architectural style.²⁸ Brutalism represents honesty in the materials, sculptural quality of the architecture and an uncompromising anti-bourgeois nature of the style. Banham solidified the status

which suggested that architecture megastructures should model themselves after nature and that designed buildings and cities should emulate living beings with a continuous cycle of growth and change rather than being mere static entities. Metabolism promoted a dynamic city and flexible architecture that could meet the needs of an ever-changing environment. Metabolist architects felt that the static postwar structures created after World War II in Japan had a limited lifespan.

Metabolism had its first international exposure in the final Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Modern (CIAM, International Congress of Modern Architecture) in 1959 when CIAM invited Kenzo Tange to attend. Le Corbusier and his contemporaries founded CIAM in 1928. It ended in 1959 when a splinter group Team 10 was created. Many of the ideas of Brutalism more than a decade after its emergence in the 1950s, the period when English architect, Peter Smithson, was believed to have coined the term “Brutalism”, and as such, the term may not be used consistently by architect and critic. Brutalism gained momentum in the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries due to its inexpensive low cost construction and design methods in the context of economic depression arising from World War II.

**Metabolism**

Metabolism (Japanese: 新陳代謝, an idiomatic expression which means “replacing the old with the new”) was an architecture movement originating in Japan in the late 1950s,
were tested by Kenzo Tange’s students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and many Metabolist architects studied under Kenzo Tange in Tange’s Laboratory at Tokyo University.

Subsequently, in the Tokyo World Design Conference in 1960, a group of young Metabolist architects and designers, including Kisho Kurokawa and Fumihiko Maki, published the Metabolism manifesto which challenged European ideas about static urbanism. The manifesto, presented in a series of essays and designs, was influenced by a wide variety of ideas and philosophies including Marxist theories and biological processes. Despite the international exposure of metabolism, many ideas were never realised and remained theoretical as they were considered too futuristic.

However, a few were built, one of them being Kisho Kurokawa’s Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo, Japan. Nakagin Capsule Tower had over 100 prefabricated cell-capsule units individually bolted onto a single concrete shaft. Kurokawa had an idea of a Helix City modelled after the structural metaphor of DNA - building around a spine-like infrastructure with prefabricated, replaceable cell-like parts which are easily attached and readily removable when their lifespan is over.

**Brutalism & Metabolism in Singapore**

Back home in the 1960s, the Singapore government recognised the important relationship between architecture and nation building, and architecture was a key criterion for the government in selecting urban redevelopment projects. The government took reference from projects such as those in Chandigarh and was familiar with CIAM’s philosophy, ideas, urban design and architecture.

In March 1963, Singapore put up an exhibition on loan from the New York Museum of Modern Art on visionary architecture and housing showing unbuilt architecture and urban design proposals by thirty architects from the early to mid-twentieth century, including Metabolist projects. This exhibition defined the spirit of the time when the government brought in private sector individuals to collaborate as part of the nation-building endeavour.

In 1967, William Lim co-founded DP Architects with Koh Seow Chuan and Tay Kheng Soon. Lim attributed the design influence of People’s Park Complex to modernists such as Le Corbusier and Team 10. While studying at the Architectural Association, Lim was influenced by Peter Smithson (Team 10) and Otto Koenigsberger, who was part of the UN Team assisting in creating Singapore’s first concept plan in 1971. Lim observed the last CIAM meeting where debates took place regarding the ideological shift in modern architecture towards a systematic approach in designing cities. This created a lasting impact on his architectural philosophy.

These respective events planted the seeds for the Brutalist and Metabolist influence found in the People’s Park Complex, Golden Mile Complex, and Pearl Bank Apartments. Metabolist architect Fumihiko Maki visited the construction of People’s Park Complex and commented, “We theorised and you people are getting it built!” Star architect Rem Koolhaas has described People’s Park Complex as “a brutal high-rise slab on a brutal podium.” These modernist icons embodied the preoccupation that CIAM, Team X, and Japanese Metabolism had with designing public spaces, having been built in a specific time and place when architecture sought to meet urgent post-independence needs for nation building, as well as the desire for social integration.

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30 Seng, “The Podium, the Tower and the “People”, p. 229.
31 Housing “a dream come true” – Raja, Straits Times, 19 March 1963.
32 Seng, “The Podium, the Tower and the “People”, p. 229.
33 Seng, “The Podium, the Tower and the “People”, p. 229.
WHY THESE ICONS ARE ENDANGERED NOW

There are two main reasons why the pressure for collective sale is particularly pressing now.

i. Debt financing for older properties

At this point in time, all three buildings have about 50 years left on their leases, which has led to a sharp drop in their property value. In terms of debt financing, the CPF Board has stricter rules for properties with remaining leases of less than 60 years.36 Banks follow suit and are reluctant to give loans for the major repairs, upgrading works, or lease extension of older properties.

ii. Maintenance issues

However, most buildings require major repairs after 40 to 50 years, and these modernist icons have suffered from poor upkeep over a long span of time. Their relatively run-down condition has led to a decline in their status and this has changed the character of the businesses, residents and communities that occupy them. People’s Park Complex and Golden Mile Complex have become well-known as centres for the migrant mainland Chinese and Thai communities respectively. As a result, negative public perception has overshadowed the value and potential these buildings still hold.

These factors have stimulated owners to see collective sale as the best way forward, whilst also bringing a financial windfall.

In February 2018, it was reported that Pearl Bank Apartments has been sold for S$728 million to CapitaLand through a private treaty collective sale, its fourth attempt at en bloc sale. CapitaLand announced that it intended to redevelop the site into a high-rise residential development comprising about 800 units.37 Soon after, it was reported that Golden Mile Complex had formed a collective sale committee on 7 February and appointed marketing agent, Edmund Tie and Company, whilst People’s Park Complex had formed a collective sale committee on 5 March 2018 at an extraordinary general meeting with “unanimous consensus”.38 Golden Mile Complex obtained the approval of owners comprising 80.83% total share value on 3 August 2018.

Under Strata Title Board rules, [o]nce a Collective Sale Committee has been formed, the sale committee should propose a reserve price in the Collective Sale Agreement (CSA) and collect signatures to the CSA from owners agreeing to the en bloc sale. The requisite majority consent by share value and strata area (80% or 90% majority depending on the age of the development) must be obtained within one (1) year before the sale attempt can proceed further.39 Hence, by March 2019, it will be clear whether People’s Park Complex will proceed with the collective sale.

In the event that these buildings are sold en bloc in the near future, within a short span of time, we stand to lose all of these major landmarks, along with their communities and the sense-of-place identity that have developed and evolved around these sites over the last 40-odd years.

37 ‘Pearl Bank Apartments sold to CapitaLand for S$728m’, Channel NewsAsia, 13 February 2018.
38 ‘People’s Park Complex, People’s Park Centre, Golden Mile Complex and Golden Mile Tower attempting collective sales’, Business Times, 7 March 2018; Aequitas Law LLP, ‘Notice: Proposed En-Bloc Sale under section 84A of the Land Titles (Strata) Act for the development known as Golden Mile Complex at 5001 Beach Road Singapore TS 15 Lot no. 359T’, 3 August 2018
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

i. Environmental cost & ethics of demolition

From an environmental and ethical perspective, these buildings have not yet outlived their intended lifespan and there is an unjustifiably heavy environmental cost, calculated in terms of embodied energy, which is the labour and energy consumed in a building’s lifecycle, including the extraction of natural resources, transportation, construction, refurbishment, maintenance, and eventual demolition and disposal of the debris. Research has shown that in the construction process, embodied greenhouse gas emissions of concrete and reinforced steel account for 94–95% of such emissions for all building materials, this being emissions due to energy consumption for the manufacture of building materials before transporting to construction sites.\(^\text{40}\) To demolish and rebuild these huge concrete megastructures before the end of their lifespan, and erect a new building of equal capacity, would result in a massive carbon footprint, due to the loss of embodied energy and carbon cost of the new structure.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has noted that the building sector represents 30% of global carbon dioxide emissions. Hence at the UN Conference of Parties 21 held in December 2015, 20 countries — including Singapore, and over 60 organisations jointly launched the Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction to work towards climate-resilient solutions for the industry.\(^\text{41}\) Already in 2013, Singapore’s Building and Construction Authority demonstrated its commitment to combating climate change with the BCA Centre for Sustainable Buildings, embarking on a partnership project with the United Nations Environment Programme, for “The Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Action Development for the Building Sector in Asia”.\(^\text{42}\)

ii. Knock-on effect on other strata-titled, individual-owner malls

Once sold en bloc to developers, each of these iconic buildings is likely to be demolished and replaced by a new development. People’s Park Complex, Golden Mile Complex, are strata-titled malls known for a unique and diverse organic collection of small enterprises. They are likely to be redeveloped as centrally-managed malls, quite possibly by real estate investment trusts (REITs). The successful collective sale of these major strata-titled malls will also trigger more en bloc sales. Other commercial and mixed-use developments currently in the process of attempting en bloc sales include Goldhill Centre, Katong Shopping Centre, People’s Park Centre, Sim Lim Square and Tanglin Shopping Centre.

While more glitzy with a curated range of shops, professionally-managed malls tend to have the same generic chain stores, which are the ones able to afford the high rentals of REITs malls. The disappearance of individual-owner malls is therefore likely to result in


a less diverse and interesting retail scene, and fewer opportunities for smaller local enterprises.

iii. Impact on sense of place and community

These are not merely lifeless buildings, but megastructures designed to accommodate communities of people in the myriad functions of living. Over the decades, a community of residents and users have built up an attachment to the place, and relationships with people and businesses there. In turn, these communities and activities have given each of the buildings an intangible place identity. An important consideration is then the intangible assets of the buildings. Even if lease top-up and conservation were to take place, the question is whether the primary intention is to allow continuity for the residents, or to have adaptive reuse via collective sale to a property developer, with the accompanying eviction of current residents. The solution need not be either/or, but some negotiation between these two perspectives.
The repair and rehabilitation works that must accompany any attempt to conserve a large modernist structure often requires rethinking the function of the building, within the context of development of the entire site. The most important example of this is the Pearl Bank regeneration plan developed by its original architect, Tan Cheng Siong, and his firm, Archurban. They first presented this proposal to the Pearl Bank Apartments Management Corporation in September 2013.

The objective of Tan’s proposal was to give Pearl Bank Apartments a new lease of life by unlocking its value through voluntary conservation, with a lease extension up to 99 years, alongside upgrading of the development with new amenities. He saw that Pearl Bank Apartments had strong inherent value which justified this:

- prime location in the CBD, next to three MRT lines (2 existing, 1 in future)
- panoramic views
- iconic architecture
- strong structure
- high potential rental returns
- 53 years remaining lease in 2013 (with proposal to extend to 99 years)

Tan pointed to examples of Tiong Bahru and the Asia Insurance Building as highly-successful examples of rehabilitation and conservation, resulting in strong financial yield.43 Tiong Bahru experienced skyrocketing prices for HDB flats, pushing up land prices in the area, and in April 2013, for a site in Kim Tian Road, Keppel Land offered the highest ever price per square foot for a Government Land Sales site in Singapore at $1,162.9 psf ppf.44

While costs would be incurred to pay for lease extension, upgrading and addition of new facilities, as well as for construction, professional services and other expenses, Tan came up with an innovative solution to fund these costs. With extra Gross Floor Area (GFA) allowance to be obtained from URA, he proposed a new, additional block which would be attractive to investors and developers. This would be ‘Vertical Gardens’, a 27-storey residential block on top of the existing low-rise carpark block. There would be additional facilities on the ground floor, as well as an expanded community sky deck on the 28th floor.

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43 ‘Saved... but it's a numbers game’, Straits Times, 7 June 2008.
CURRENT OBSTACLES TO VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

An alternative future for these buildings is to gazette them as conservation buildings under URA’s Planning Act, upon which Conservation Guidelines and the Specific Facade Restoration Guidelines (SFRG) must be complied with, and Conservation Permission granted, for all additions and alteration works and operations of new use. URA’s approach to conservation is based on the “3R” Principle of maximum retention, sensitive restoration and careful repair, so as to retain the inherent spirit and original ambience of each building.

 Started in 1991, URA has the “Conservation Initiated by Private Owners’ Scheme”, in which owners may voluntarily offer buildings of architectural or historical merit for conservation, in exchange for development incentives such as an increase in the Gross Floor Area (GFA) and waiver of Development Charge.45 Successful cases under this scheme include seven buildings at the junction of Armenian Street and Loke Yew Street, Spring Grove bungalow, 43 Amber Road, and 26 Still Road South.46

In the case of a multi-strata private development volunteering for conservation, Pearl Bank Apartments’ application in 2015 was the very first, and was unsuccessful. Neither has there been a residential development which has been approved for a lease top-up. The government regulations do not provide clear answers on the conditions for voluntary conservation, or for lease top-up.

The relevant legislative acts are:

- Land Titles (Strata) Act (Chapter 158, 2009 Revised Edition) (https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/LTSA1967), and

i. Lack of clarity in conditions for voluntary conservation

This is demonstrated most clearly in the case of Pearl Bank Apartments management committee’s attempt to propose their building for voluntary conservation to URA in 2015. Prior to this, they had already failed three times to achieve a collective sale. Pearl Bank’s original architect, Tan Cheng Siong and his firm, Archurban Architects Planners, spent six months drawing up plans to build an additional 27-storey residential block of about 15,000 sq m on the area now occupied by a five-storey carpark. With an increase in GFA allowed under the “Conservation Initiated by Private Owners’ Scheme”, capital would be raised by selling the extra development quantum to external developers, then using the funds to pay for upgrading and lease extension, without imposing on existing residents to pay more.47

By May 2015, the Pearl Bank Apartments management committee had received a positive


reply from URA, which was prepared to consider a maximum 15 per cent increase in GFA over and above the existing approved GFA of 55,102 sq m, subject to a cap of 430 units in all, including the 280-unit existing block. A URA spokesperson told the Straits Times that URA welcome[d] the ground-up initiative by the management committee to conserve Pearl Bank Apartments as there are merits for its conservation. When the distinctive horseshoe-shaped building was completed in 1976, it was the tallest residential building in Singapore and had the highest density for residential development. The spokesperson also stated that ‘as the proposal affects the entire development and interests of subsidiary proprietors, all of them must be aware of the plan and agree’.48

In October 2015, it was reported that the liaison committee of Pearl Bank Apartments had received approval from about 90 per cent of owners for the voluntary conservation proposal. This fell short of the 100 per cent required by URA. The committee was granted a six-month extension to get the required approval from all owners and to submit its conservation and development plans.49 The liaison committee had also appealed to the National Development Ministry to review the approval criteria, to be on par with the 80 per cent required for en bloc sales of buildings over ten years old. The Straits Times reported committee chairman, Dr Lee Seng Teik as saying that, “no matter how hard we try, in any project, it is not possible to get 100 per cent approval”. Some of the owners were very old and not in a capacity to give consent, and one owner in this situation also did not make a lasting power of attorney.50 Dr Lee also said that they had received support for the appeal from the Member of Parliament for the area, Dr Lily Neo.51

It was only much later, in a letter to the Straits Times Forum Page on 16 March 2018, that URA explained that while it did not object to conservation per se, the proposal included the addition of new residential units which would change the percentage share of each owner in the property, requiring the formation of a new management corporation (strata title) (MCST). To dissolve the existing MCST required the consent of 100 per cent of owners, which had not been attained.52 These rules thus tend to prioritize demolition over conservation, and need to be urgently reviewed. It also remains unclear what percentage of owners consent is required to qualify for URA’s voluntary conservation scheme.

ii. Lack of clarity in criteria for lease top-up

The Ministry of Law states that “[f]or residential uses, the Government may allow lease extension if it results in land use intensification, mitigation of property decay and preservation of community.”53 In 2011, Arcadia, a condominium completed in 1983, applied for a lease top-up but was rejected.54 To date, successful cases of lease top-up have been for tabula rasa redevelopment, which is permitted even before half the lease has expired. Furthermore, in the case of these high-rise,

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49 Eileen Poh, ‘Pearl Bank Apartments get extension to secure approval for conservation’, Channel NewsAsia, 22 October 2015.
51 Poh, ‘Pearl Bank Apartments get extension’.
52 Chou Mei, ‘100 per cent owners’ consent not needed for building conservation’, letter to Straits Times, 16 March 2018.
54 Whang, ‘Pearl Bank owners bank on conservation order’.
high-density modernist structures, further land use intensification should not be a priority.

Currently, none of the criteria for lease top-up includes heritage value, even though we may now find leasehold buildings that merit conservation under the Planning Act. Without lease top-up, and the threat of collective sale, we risk having most leasehold buildings never reaching “heritage age”. A review of the criteria for lease top-up is timely.
MODERN ARCHITECTURE AS UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE

There are international precedents for recognising the value of exemplars of modern architecture, with numerous examples of modernist architecture around the world designated by UNESCO as World Heritage sites. As shown in the table below, there are 11 UNESCO listings, some of these include multiple buildings, with one site — Brasilia — being the entire historic core of the fourth-largest metropolis of Brazil, housing over 200,000 residents. Of these, the vast majority retain their original function, and the remainder have been adapted to related uses, as museums or maintained as historic sites accessible to the public.

To be inscribed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage, a site must be of “outstanding universal value” and meet at least one of ten criteria. Examples of modernist architecture which have already been selected by UNESCO all appeal to one or more of the following four categories of outstanding universal value:

i. to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;

ii. to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;

iv. to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;

vi. to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.55

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>INSCRIBED</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>CURRENT USE</th>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>BRASILIA</td>
<td>Brasilia, Brazil</td>
<td>Retains original use as urban centre</td>
<td>(I)(IV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>RIETVELD SCHRODER HOUSE</td>
<td>Utrecht, Netherlands</td>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>(I)(II)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>VILLA TUGENDHAT</td>
<td>Brno, Czech Republic</td>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>(II)(IV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>WHITE CITY OF TEL-AVIV – THE MODERN MOVEMENT</td>
<td>Tel Aviv, Israel</td>
<td>Retains original use as residential &amp; commercial urban centre</td>
<td>(II)(IV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>LUIS BARRAGÁN HOUSE AND STUDIO</td>
<td>Jalisco, Mexico</td>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>(I)(II)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>WROCLAW CENTENNIAL HALL</td>
<td>Wroclaw, Poland</td>
<td>Exhibition &amp; convention venue</td>
<td>(I)(II)(IV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE</td>
<td>Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>Retains original use as opera house</td>
<td>(I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>STOCLET HOUSE</td>
<td>Brussels, Belgium</td>
<td>Retains original use as private residence</td>
<td>(I)(II)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>FAGUS FACTORY</td>
<td>Alfeld, Germany</td>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>(II)(IV)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>UNITE D’HABITATION Marseille, France Retains original use as private residences</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>MAISON GUITTÉ Antwerp, Belgium Retains original use as private residences</td>
</tr>
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<td>10.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>CAPITOL COMPLEX Chandigarh, India Retains original use as government buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART Tokyo, Japan Retains original use as a museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>WEISSENHOF-SIEDLUNG ESTATE Stuttgart, Germany Historic site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>MAISON CURETCHET La Plata, Argentina Retains original use as private residence, ground floor office space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>DOMINICAN MONASTERY OF LA TOURETTE near Lyon, France Retains original use as a convent</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>VILLA SAVOYE near Paris, France Historic site</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.10</td>
<td></td>
<td>NOTRE-DAME DU HAUT Ronchamp, France Retains original use as a chapel</td>
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<td>10.11</td>
<td></td>
<td>MAISON LA ROCHE Paris, France Historic site</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.12</td>
<td></td>
<td>VILLA LE LAC Corseaux, Switzerland Historic site and exhibition space</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.13</td>
<td></td>
<td>IMMEUBLE CLARTE Geneva, Switzerland Retains original use as private residences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>IMMEUBLE MOLITOR Paris, France Historic site</td>
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</tbody>
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### Table 11

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>THE FORMER SCHOOL OF ART Weimar Retains related original use under Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism and the Office of the President, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>THE HOUSE AM HORN Weimar Exhibition hall and venue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>BAUHAUS BUILDING Dessau Office of Bauhaus Dessau Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>MASTERS’ HOUSES Dessau Under restoration as a museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>HOUSES WITH BALCONY ACCESS Dessau Retains original use as residences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>THE ADGB TRADE UNION SCHOOL Bernau Retains related original use as residential training skilled crafts and trades</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B.: Italicised items retain original, or related, function
INTERNATIONAL REVIVAL OF INTEREST IN MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE

Beyond the internationally-recognised UNESCO World Heritage sites, countries have also recognised modernist architecture as protected heritage buildings at the national level. The United Kingdom began listing such structures for protection in 1989 despite mixed public opinion, with some viewing them as “concrete monstrosities” and symbols of the underclass. In recent years, there has been a marked revival of interest in Brutalist buildings, partly driven by their bold, Instagram-friendly aesthetic. For architects and cultural thinkers today, it is Brutalism’s honest and pure, egalitarian architectural ethic that appeals. Major exhibitions such as English Heritage’s Brutal and Beautiful in 2013, Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955–1980 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2015, or the 2014 BBC documentary, Bunkers, Brutalism and Bloodymindedness: Concrete Poetry, also demonstrate the current revival. There are even tourist maps of Brutalist buildings in various cities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is of critical urgency now that serious efforts be put into exploring how our nation's significant modernist landmarks can avoid demolition. Proper care and consideration to extend their lifespan requires action from different parties, as laid out in our recommendations below.

i. Maintenance responsibilities of building Management Corporations

The poor condition of buildings like Pearl Bank Apartments after 30 or 40 years is not an inevitable state. A proper long-term preventive plan is needed, rather than the piecemeal maintenance which is common in private apartment blocks. In contrast, old Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) and Housing Development Board (HDB) estates continue to be functioning, highly-liveable homes with strong resale prices, thanks to good management by HDB and Town Councils for periodic overhauling of lifts, pipes, waterproofing and so on.

Building management corporations should be made to develop and implement better long-term maintenance plans. Under the Building Maintenance and Strata Management Act, the “Commissioner of Buildings may require building owners etc., to carry out repairs etc to maintain the building in a “state of good and serviceable repair”, and it is the duty of the management corporation “to properly maintain and keep in a state of good and serviceable repair (including, where reasonably necessary, renew or replace the whole or part thereof”, as well as maintain


58 ‘Love Brutalist architecture? There are maps for that’, Straits Times, 4 October 2017.

59 Ho and Chiang, ‘Adding Value without demolition, rebuilding’.


management funds and sinking funds for the purposes of carrying out its duties and liabilities.  

ii. Alternative models of urban regeneration for worthy buildings by the architectural fraternity

Considering that developers generally aim to complete redevelopment projects as quickly possible and to maximise profits, they are likely to choose the easiest path of wholesale demolition and rebuilding after an en bloc purchase. Architects should therefore step forward to propose alternative plans for building rehabilitation and possibly partial change of use — with careful consideration of the practicalities of implementation — to educate and convince property developers that conservation is a viable option. The regeneration plan for Pearl Bank Apartments developed by Tan Cheng Siong in 2013-2015 is one example.

iii. Government inter-agency deliberation and coordination to facilitate conservation and or regeneration of modernist landmarks

A. CRITERIA FOR LEASE TOP-UP OF LEASEHOLD PRIVATE PROPERTIES

Lease extensions are permitted for residential sites when the extension meets the Ministry of Law’s objective of ‘mitigation of property decay and preservation of community’.  

We recommend that the conservation and rehabilitation of buildings of high historical/ urban/ social/ architectural significance should be considered a valid means of achieving this objective, and hence the granting of a lease top-up.

B. LONGER TIMEFRAME FOR COMPLETION OF DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS OF PRIVATE LEASEHOLD/ STRATA-TITLED PROPERTIES PROPOSING CONSERVATION-REHABILITATION

Under the Stamp Duties Act (Chapter 312) Stamp Duties (Housing Developers) (Remission of ABSD) Rules 2013, upon the ‘conveyance, assignment or transfer on sale of residential property to a qualifying developer for the purpose of housing development by the qualifying developer’, additional buyer’s stamp duty (ABSD) is chargeable unless ‘the qualifying developer completes the housing development and sells all the units of housing accommodation that are the subject of the development within 5 years starting from the date of execution of the instrument’, upon which ABSD will be remitted. However, as of 6 July 2018, ABSD for developers was raised from 15% to 25%, plus an additional new 5% which is non-remittable.

Proposed development applications for private leasehold/ strata-titled properties which are premised upon conservation-rehabilitation should be given a more relaxed timeframe for statutory completion and properties sales, for example, 1.5 times longer than the current 5-year limit (after obtaining planning approval). This would take into account the additional time required for detailed survey, documentation, and investigation of the existing building condition; design feasibility studies; and the rehabilitation-construction process.

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C. MORE PLANNING INCENTIVES TO FACILITATE REHABILITATION-CONSERVATION BY DEVELOPERS/OWNERS

Through a whole-of-government approach bringing together different agencies, bolder planning incentives should be explored to facilitate and encourage developers/owners to conserve and rehabilitate their aging properties of high heritage significance. Some possible incentives are:

- re-zoning, e.g. to allow a change from residential to mixed-use;

- offering a higher quantum of bonus GFA, over the current 15% bonus GFA (10% GFA restricted for balcony use; 5% unrestricted use) given as an incentive for voluntary conservation by private owners;

- alienating and offering adjacent empty or underdeveloped sites for sale for a new, intensified building, not unlike many URA sales site that repackage conserved buildings with neighbouring plots.

D. INTRODUCTION OF PERFORMANCE-BASED BUILDING CODES

Dispensation from prescriptive, conventional “blanket rule” building regulations (eg BCA, FSSD, Greenmark) should be facilitated, in favour of performance-based building codes. This will enable new and innovative design solutions to be explored to achieve a good balance between environmental, public safety and health requirements, as well as conservation prerogatives. For example, in the United Kingdom, listed buildings have a separate set of Energy Efficiency guidelines.

E. LOWERING OF PERCENTAGE APPROVAL REQUIRED FOR REDISTRIBUTION OF STRATA TITLE OWNERSHIP SHARES

For private, strata-titled properties of high heritage significance, voluntary conservation schemes involving the redistribution of strata title ownership shares should be given selective dispensation from the 100 per cent concurrence currently required. Permission should be given when 80 per cent concurrence is met, on par with the percentage required for en bloc sale of buildings over ten years old. This was the technical issue that prevented the approval of Pearl Bank Apartment’s application for voluntary conservation in 2015. Such changes have a precedent: a similar change was effected to permit en bloc sale in 1999, when s 84A(1) of the Land Titles (Strata) Act was amended to reduce the unanimous consent requirement to majority consent, due to the near impossibility of obtaining unanimous consent in freehold and 999-year leasehold strata developments.65

There are precedents and parallels for these recommendations, which underscore their feasibility. Nevertheless, it requires initiative and action to revise existing standard procedures. These iconic landmarks demand more careful consideration as they are Singapore’s modernist icons which bear grand testimony to our nation-building years and continue to be recognised as architectural masterpieces. It is of critical urgency that we make the effort to give them the new lease of life they deserve.

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