

BUT WE HAVE NO LEGENDS :  
THE CONSERVATION OF SINGAPORE'S CHINATOWN

by  
Pui Leng Woo  
B.Arch.(hons.) University of Singapore  
1976

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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Department of Urban Studies  
and Planning  
May 5 1982

Certified by.....  
Funney Lee  
Associate Professor of  
Architecture and Urban Studies

Accepted by.....  
Langley Keyes  
Departmental Committee for  
Graduate Students

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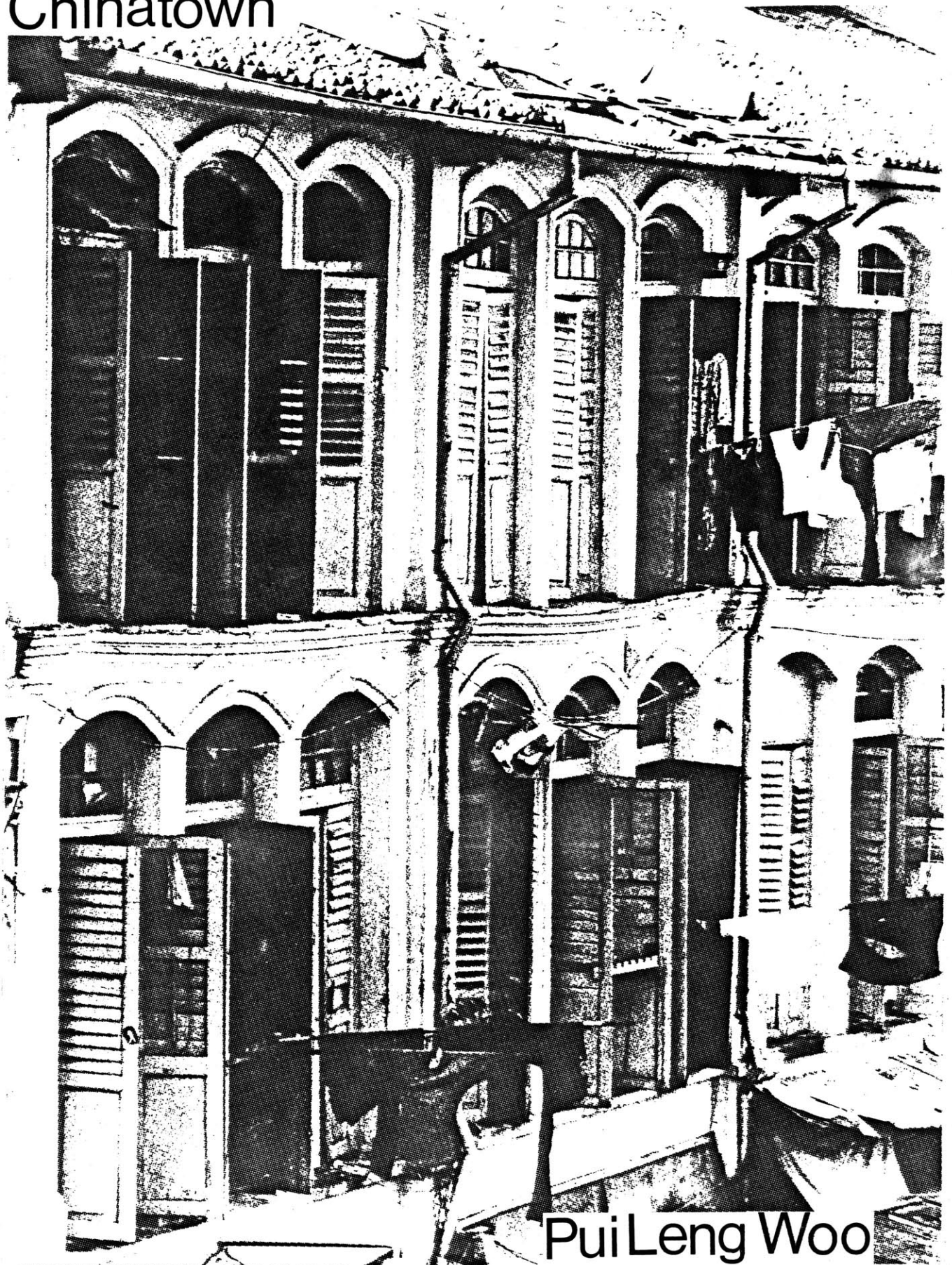
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But We Have No Legends :

# The Conservation of Singapore's Chinatown



Pui Leng Woo

Cover:  
Shophouses Along Banda Street

# Abstract

But We Have No Legends:  
The Conservation of Singapore's Chinatown

by  
Pui Leng Woo

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, and Architecture on May 24, 1982, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degrees of Master of City Planning and Master of Science in Architecture Studies.

This thesis advocates for social conservation, that is, monitoring social relationships and maintaining subtle changes to conserve Singapore's Chinatown.

Through the discussion on the activities, the people and their aspirations in Chinatown, the thesis demonstrates that conservation in Chinatown needs to be more responsive to the needs of the people in Chinatown, and the interests of outsiders toward Chinatown. Mere physical conservation has limitations in maintaining the set of social relationships in Chinatown. Social conservation, on the contrary, has social, touristic, historic, moral and physical benefits.

Through the discussion on the attitudes of society about economic prerogatives, environment, filial piety, and ambivalence in Chinatown, the thesis identifies the conflicts and contradictions surrounding Chinatown's conservation. The conflicts and contradictions are on issues of social differences, on economics, on established norm in the Singapore society.

The thesis suggests monitoring changes, promoting tourists and middle-income economy, maintaining the existing population and activities, creating an integrated working process, setting up a body in charge of Chinatown's conservation, developing innovative approaches, encouraging social consciousness among professionals as the actions for achieving social conservation in Chinatown.

Thesis Supervisor: Tunney Lee

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Market At Banda Street/Sago Street

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Trengganu Street

# Preface

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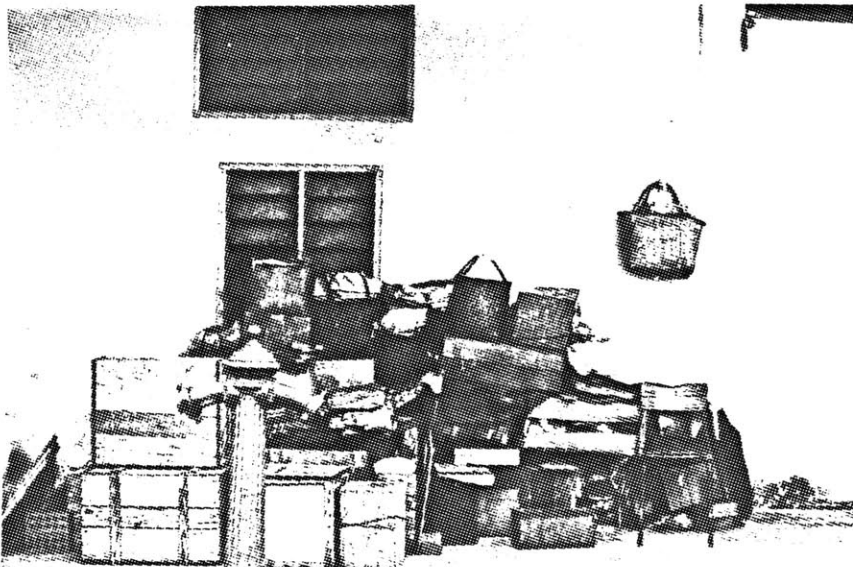
My interest in Chinatown stems partly from the richness of activities in it, and partly from Chinatown's contrast with the relatively bland urban environment. The interest gives rise to an anxiety that something ought to be done about Chinatown, especially when there appears a growing concern about conserving Chinatown in Singapore.

Yet as I delved into the study, I was struck by a sense of haplessness about conserving Chinatown's neighborhood. Everywhere on the island, development replaces the cues to the past. With the land reclamation at the Singapore's waterfront, even the familiar sounds of the sea are too far away. I find a poem by a local writer that depicts aptly the feelings about drastic changes undergone in Singapore, and I wonder about Chinatown's conservation.

But we have no legends,  
And even the sea is too far away  
To know our names, to call.

Only risings of hard whiteness,  
    uncaring,  
that have no voices, no sadness;  
and gray roads of hurrying strangers  
to swallow us, then forget when we  
are gone.

: Asha Devi  
But We Have No Legends





I spent quite a bit of time walking the streets of Chinatown in the summer of 81. On one of the evenings, I saw an elderly man scooping left over noodles from a bowl onto a piece of newspaper. He then hurried off before the stall holder got to clear the dishes. I didn't see what he did with the food but I was sure he didn't have a dog to feed.

While Chinatown appeals to the locals and tourists for its gaiety and variety, it also harnesses the darker and unfortunate side of reality that few wish to see. Beggars squat at street corners; garbage containers fill the back lanes; poor and elderly live in dilapidated shophouses; shredded vegetables litter the streets. Much of what goes on in Chinatown defies the model of the society around. Conservation or redevelopment touches a social, moral, and ideological view of who and what gets to be retained or removed.

But changes have always been drastic, and tolerance for non-conformity is low in the pragmatic Singapore society. I am skeptical that Chinatown's conservation will be subtle and sensitive to the needs of the people in Chinatown. But I feel the necessity to share my limited understanding about the people and the place, and about conservation with those who are concerned.

The three months spent understanding Chinatown was an interesting but nonetheless frustrating experience in the search for 'hard' information. I am grateful to those who have helped me 'out of the call of duty', and therefore I cannot acknowledge them as the sources of information.

# 1. Introduction



Preserved Food Stall

# 1. Introduction

We have reached a stage where conservation is becoming accepted as an integrated part of Central Area renewal. We do not have to tear the old city down. We have enough land to cater for all the projected demand for offices, shops, hotels and related. We have enough land for residential in appropriate locations. We need to focus our aims on creating a city which is rich in variety and scale. We need the new offices, shops and tourist projects but we also need the history of the city represented through its buildings.

: Planews, Journal of the  
Singapore Institute of  
Planners, July 1981



View of Chinatown

The latest vogue on urban development discussion in Singapore is conservation. Like it or not, everyone in the planning and designing profession talks about it. Yet conservation sounds almost cynical considering two decades of massive demolition and clearance of entire area in the city to date. In a young city of only one hundred and sixty three years old with none of the buildings dated before 1842, it does not take much effort and time to demolish and alter the entire cityscape.

Some architects and planners argue that Singapore has always been concerned about preservation

but constrained by developmental needs and the scarcity of land. After all, the Preservation of Monuments Board was formed almost ten years ago and had since designated more than a dozen buildings for preservation. But it certainly does not take much soul searching to admit that conservation has never been a major part in the urban development plan.

This emerging popularity and concern about conserving the 'remnants' of the city is shared by many architects and planners. First, the pressure for development in the old city is claimed to be reduced with the massive land reclamation at the Singapore waterfront. The land created can supposedly accommodate all the developmental demands, and the old city can be conserved to achieve a more balanced development. Second, many professionals and experts from abroad have criticized the massive demolition, and construction of 'faceless' skyscrapers, some of which they have helped created. Singapore is responding to these criticisms of demolition and reconstruction. The apparent outcome of these concerns is the declaration of Emerald Hill, a residential area of two story terrace houses situated adjacent to the tourist section of the city as a conservation site.

The latest focus of conservation is on Chinatown, a mixed-use neighborhood of two and three story shophouses in the densest and dilapidated part of the city. But Chinatown presents different and unprecedented problems to the planners. It is a poor neighborhood with a large elderly population; it is exciting in the interaction and intensity of street activities; it contains the type of dilapidation that Singapore has tried very hard to eradicate. Chinatown's conservation is also in conflict with the urban development plan, and national and social ideals. It raises social, moral, and administrative issues that few wish to deal with in Singapore.

This thesis attempts to put forward a way to conserve Chinatown. The thesis probes the conflicts and contradictions surrounding Chinatown's conserva-

Chinatown

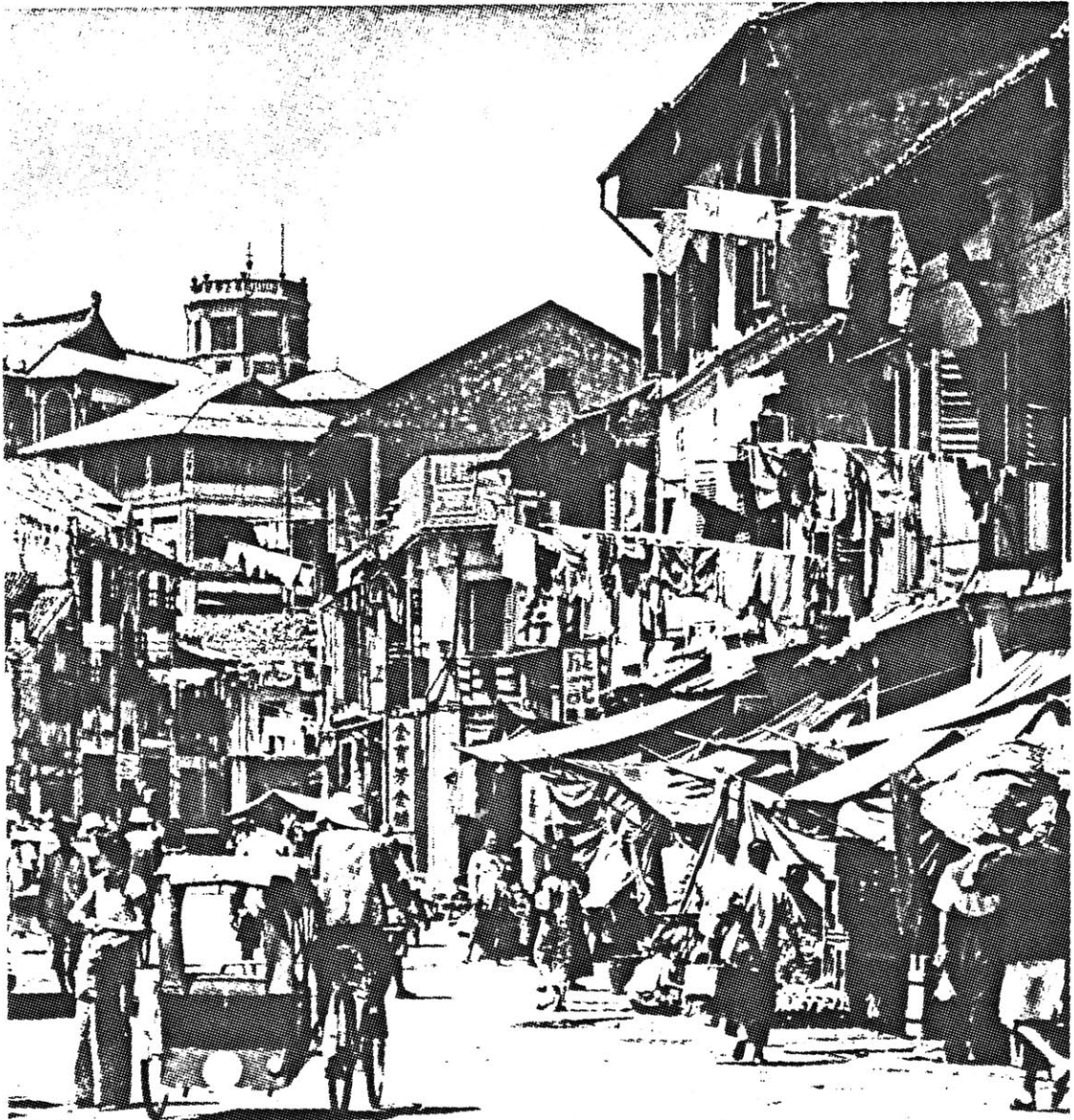
tion through the concerns of the people in Chinatown, and the attitudes of society toward conservation. It then put forward arguments and reasons for social conservation, that is maintaining the social relationships in order to retain the spirit of Chinatown. It concludes by identifying the conflicts and contradictions of social conservation, and by suggesting directions for achieving conservation.

The thesis is divided into six sections. Chapter one is the introduction. Chapter two describes the context of Chinatown, the planned conservation, and the agencies affecting Chinatown's future. Chapter three presents the people of Chinatown, and their concerns about conservation. Chapter four identifies the societal attitudes that affect Chinatown's conservation. Chapter five explains why and suggests how social conservation can resolve the dilemma of Chinatown. Chapter six is a brief summary of the thesis.



A Junk Collection Shop

## 2. A Living Past



Chinatown Demolished

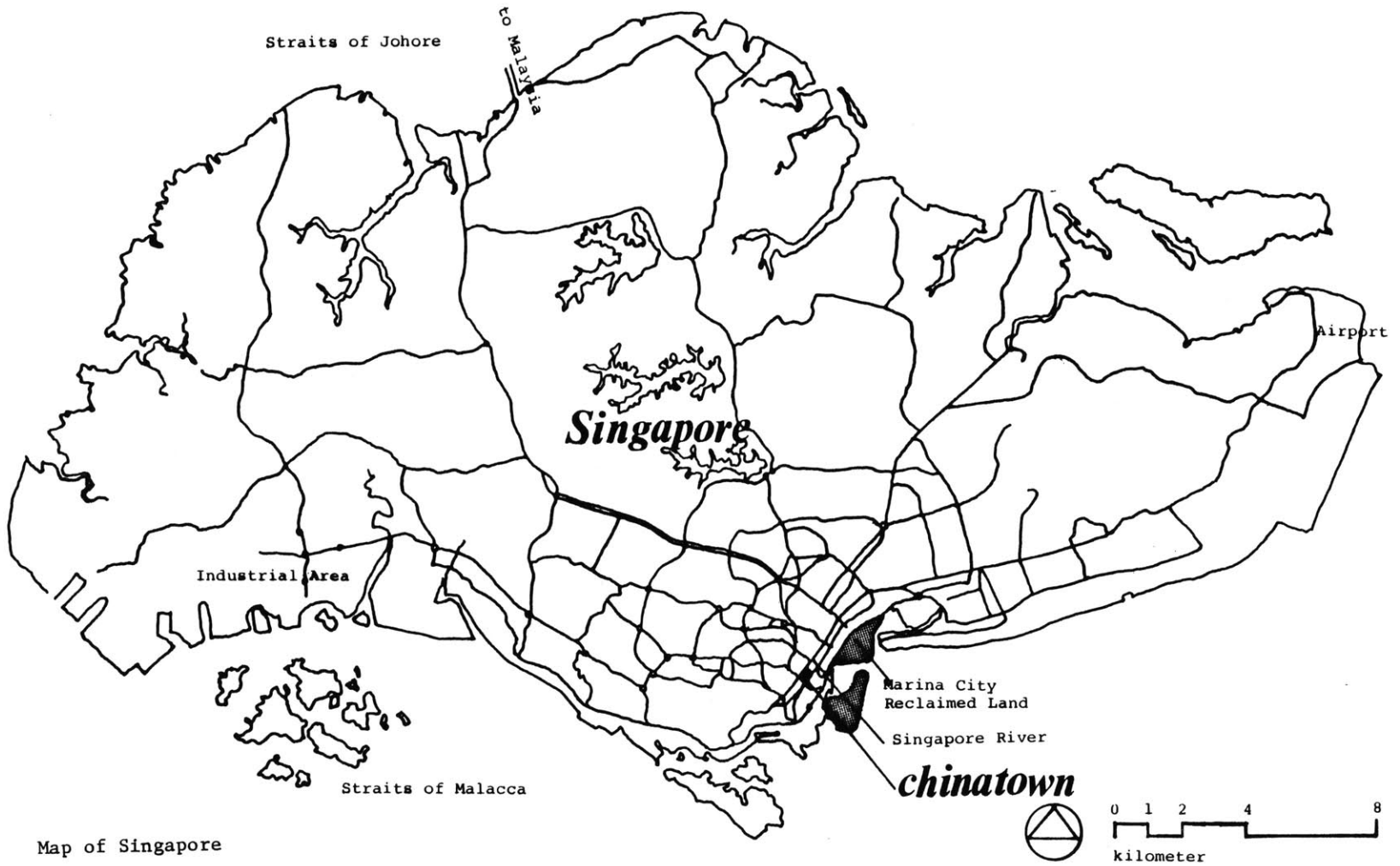
Source: National Archives, Singapore

## 2. A Living Past

There is something unique about Chinatown that differentiates it from the rest of Singapore. Beyond the regulated traffic pattern on New Bridge Road, the tiled sidewalk, and the middle class looking passersby, is almost a Chinese village in disguise. Provision shops sell, and smell of preserved foods; bric -and-brac of one's life long accumulation fill the cubicles; darkened staircases lead to even darker hallways; elderly men sip coffee in noisy coffee shops; hawkers holler at the top of their voices; beggars squat at street corners. Chinatown in essence lacks the kind of cleanliness and clarity so evident in the Singapore society. In some ways, it is the dichotomy that makes Chinatown appealing to many visitors.

Demarcated by Stamford Raffles, the British founder of Singapore as the Chinese quarter in 1822, Chinatown became the birth place of the Chinese migrant culture. Migrants came to Chinatown between 1820's and 1960's, and peaked in the mid nineteenth century. Many of them came as laborers and later expanded into other trades like merchant and artisan.

The original Chinatown had been referred to as the 6.5 square kilometer or 2.5 square mile of area to the south of the Singapore River, a water causeway for transporting cargo to the city. Godowns and merchant trading houses developed along the river have continued as the declining wholesale area for goods and food stuff. Away from the river, servicing, commercial, and residential uses have developed primarily in the form of shophouses. The core of these commercial and residential development, a 2.5 square kilometer or 1 square mile of two, three, and four story shophouses is the Chinatown discussed in this study. It is also the area focused as the conservation site by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA).



Map of Singapore

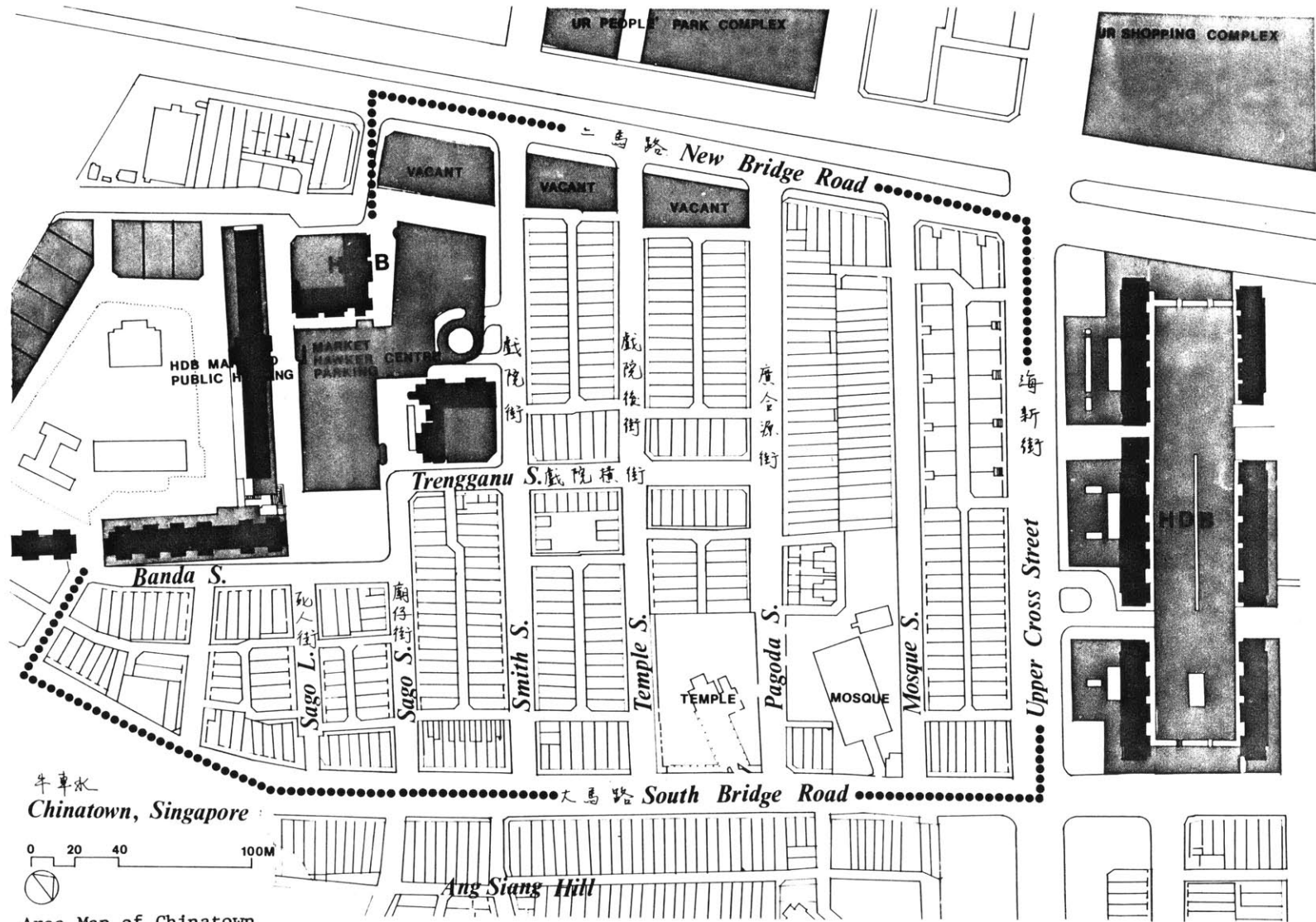


The site is shaped like a trapezium with a wedge attached to one edge. There are three major streets, New Bridge Road, South Bridge Road, and Upper Cross Street bordering the site. Surrounding the site on three sides are public housing and mixed-use commercial and residential development of sixteen to twenty-four stories in height. On the side abutting South Bridge Road are similar type of two and three story shophouses on Ang Siang Hill. Some planners have suggested extending the conservation site to include the quieter and winding streets on Ang Siang Hill to contrast with the more popular part of Chinatown. But URA has decided otherwise after 'careful study' and in view of the overall Central Area development strategy.

On the site, there are ten blocks of two, three, and four story shophouses of concrete and timber construction. There are three hundred and fifty shophouses. Many of them were constructed between 1830 and 1850. Simple rectangular plans of six meters by thirty to sixty meters with shop space on the ground floor, and residences on the upper floors typify most of the buildings. At the front of the shop is a 1.5 meter covered walkway; at the rear is often an air well. The air well abuts a three to five meters back lane constructed by the British in the 1930's to bring light and ventilation to the shophouses.

Architectural historians like to label the architecture of Chinatown as eclectic, of a mixture of Chinese, and European Baroque styles. The plan resembles the shophouse design from Guangdong Province in China with the long rectangular plan and air wells; the facade is decorated with architectural ornaments like Corinthian columns and Palladian windows.

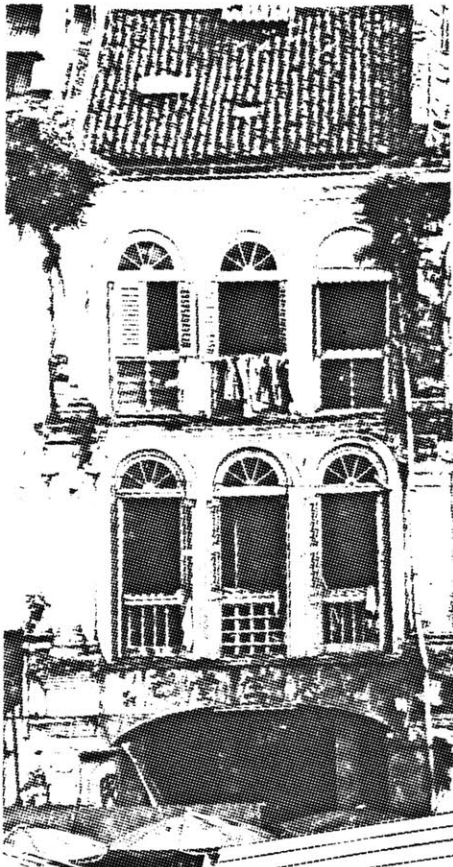
Some architects and planners criticize the physical environment as unhygienic, deteriorating, and occasionally 'dangerous to human life' or as 'the breeding ground of disease'. Originally planned with a single storey, almost all the shophouses have added



Area Map of Chinatown

one or two floors on top to cope with the influx of migrants in the 1870's. On the upper floors, the interior has been subdivided into cubicles, some with no windows, for subletting as tenements. Sanitary and cooking facilities are often shared among ten to fifteen families on the same floor. They are kept rather clean and in order.

The most serious environmental problem of these shophouses is the deteriorating structures of decaying timber columns and beams, and crumbling walls and partitions. The neglect in maintenance by the absentee owners for reason of rent control, and by the public sectors for reason of anticipated demolition have aggravated the conditions of these buildings. Gut rehabilitation will probably be necessary to retain most of the buildings in Chinatown.



Shophouses



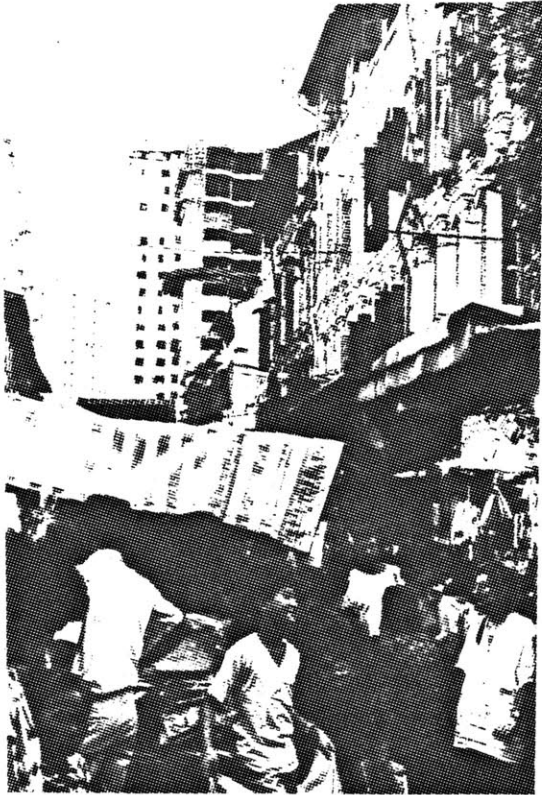
Market at Banda Street/Sago Street

Chinatown is perceived as the pinnacle of Central Area slums; something Singapore has tried very hard and has been rather successful in eradicating. Replacing most of the slums are often high-rise public housing of twelve to twenty-four stories. In the past twenty years, public housing has accommodated almost seventy percent (70%) of the nation's population. In Chinatown, the construction of public housing began in early 1970's with the building of a twenty story project along Sago Lane by the then Urban Renewal Department of the Housing and Development Board. The public housing offers self-contained sanitary and cooking facilities, and slightly larger floor area. But these advantages are tradeoffs made against the low rents of the tenements, and the opportunities for close interaction and mutual help among the many single tenants.

Public  
Housing

The disparity between public housing and the tenement housing has widened significantly in recent years. Most of the recently constructed housing represented by those along Upper Cross Street reflects some of the major improvements in public housing. More two bedroom flats are constructed and preferred over the efficiency units; there are more amenities like open space and play area. Above all, public housing offers to many residents of Chinatown, the proximity to work, and the sense of security against demolition. Public housing is however becoming more of a middle-class affair with improved economic means of most Singaporeans. Inflation, increased labour cost, and rising expectations have added costs to the public housing. In spite of public subsidy, low-income groups have to pay more for the better housing provided like everyone else.

Swarms of people mill around, and work on chores in Chinatown everyday. In some ways, people and activities in Chinatown are synonymous with the place. People in Chinatown can be separated into four groups, the hawkers on the streets, the traders and craftsmen in the shops, the residents, and the passersby. The interactions of these groups bring to Chinatown a



Trengganu Street



Pagoda Street

pulsating and intense atmosphere that fascinates many visitors.

#### Hawkers

The hawkers as a group is the source of intense street activities. Their concerted operations from the morning market along Sago Street, the noontime cooked food stalls along Smith Street, to the evening bazaar along Pagoda Street give a temporal feeling to the place. During Chinese New Year or special festive days, hawkers and shoppers form the festivity not found anywhere else on the island.

#### Traders and Craftsmen

The traders and craftsmen working in three hundred and fifty shops are considered by conservationists as the 'treasures' of Chinatown. They operate in business and services from junk collection stores to death houses, from tinpail making to letter writing, from joss-sticks making to flowered wreaths decorating. While trades and crafts are cited as unique and vital to conservation, many traders and craftsmen experience declining demand and the difficulties of passing on skills to the next generation in the modern society.

The low rents, shared facilities, and convenient location tend to attract a low-income, working class and single population. Forty percent(40%) of the population live in single households. Many of the families aspire to move to public housing if circumstances and economic means permit. The migrant past of Chinatown is reflected in the concentration of elderly population. There are one thousand and one hundred elderly residents representing about twenty-eight percent(28%) of the area's population. Many of the migrants have aged and remained after retirement. A more recent group of resident is the Malaysian temporary worker who has come to fill the construction, servicing, and manufacturing jobs in Singapore. The resident population in Chinatown has declined by fifty percent(50%) in the past twenty years. The decline is a reflection of the rising economic means of the population, urban development plan, and the aging population. Many who have remained are stranded by their inabilities to afford better accomodation, and by the economic and emotional support found only in the area.

Residents

Finally, there are the pedestrians. Estimated twenty thousand of them go to Chinatown daily for different reasons. The locals go for the cheap goods and food; the tourists go for the quaint, old things; the office workers move through Chinatown to get to the public transportation bordering the area. Pedestrians bring to Chinatown a 'city-wide' economic rupport that few places experience.

Pedestrians

Public discussion on conserving Chinatown is a rather recent matter. Although there were articles written about the uniqueness of Chinatown prior to 1980, most did not go beyond lamenting the inevitable fate of demolition. In 1980, an article in the local newspaper, Straits Times titled "Preserve or Demolish, A Dilemma of Chinatown" indicated a growing concern to the alternatives to demolition. But conservation is not an obvious urban development alternative despite the URA's rhetoric that conservation, rehabilitation, and rebuilding are the three elements of urban redevelopment strategy

Conservation  
Talk

in Singapore. After two decades of demolition and rebuilding in the city, Chinatown has had its share of 'redevelopment'. Replacing the shophouses are shopping centres, apartment complexes, and public housing. More recently, active urban redevelopment has brought about hotels, more offices, and more shopping centres in and around Chinatown.

Chinatown's conservation is administratively placed in the hands of one agency, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). But there are many agencies that have vested interests in the future of Chinatown. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) is constructing a twenty story public housing project to relieve the housing pressure in the Central Area, and a hawker centre and market to accommodate all the street activities. The Public Works Department (PWD) intends to bring major vehicular route through Smith Street as part of a plan to relieve traffic congestion in the city. The Planning Department sets forth the Master Plan for development according to broad governmental goals and objectives. The Tourists Promotion Board (STPB) and the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) have different reasons but shared goal in preserving Chinatown. Finally, there is the Economic Development Board (EDB), a sort of overlord. Apart from its main objective in promoting Singapore's economic development through industrialization and its supporting activities, the EDB has the power in overriding urban development strategies.

The focus of these varied and vested interests is a celebrated slum called Chinatown. Seeing Chinatown as it is, no one can believe there are serious concerns about conserving the place. Bit by bit, Chinatown is chipped away by the sledgehammer. The twenty story public housing project is under completion; a row of shophouses along New Bridge Road has been boarded up ready for private redevelopment. There is a plan to pedestrianize some of the streets, a plan to build a resettlement centre and parking garage to resettle the population affected by a proposed preservation scheme, a plan to demolish

some shophouses for road widening, and a plan to clear the buildings on Ang Siang Hill. Between these proposals and the realities in Chinatown is a gap that the conservation plan has so far failed to bridge.



### 3. The People of Chinatown



Elderly Man, Banda Street

We like to believe in the egalitarian goals of conservation in providing tangible linkages to history and culture, in benefiting future generations, in enhancing the physical environment, and in achieving economic gains through tourism. However, conservation in reality often benefits some sectors of society more than others. The question is who. This chapter aims to explore the likely impacts of conservation on the people in Chinatown, as a basis of understanding for a more equitable form of conservation.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first describes the hawkers; the second describes the traders and craftsmen; and the third and longest section describes the elderly residents. Implicit in the discussions is the resident of Chinatown, comprised mainly of the groups mentioned above and some families and migrant workers.

#### Hawkers

There are about nine hundred hawker stalls in Chinatown, the largest concentration of hawkers in Singapore. In business sense, the hawkers are probably the most diverse group of operators. They sell everything from pirated cassette tapes, clothings, to vegetables, meat, and cooked reptiles; they operate in a concerted fashion through the day and night; they intermingle with one another in a manner that lacks the supermarket clarity. It is exactly this form of operation that gives Chinatown an unique sense of variety and excitement.

The diversity of hawkers' activity is reflected in the shifting focus. In the morning, market stalls apread out between Sago Street and Smith Street selling fresh and cooked food. A large number of stalls are run by women and elderly people. 'Illegal' hawkers are also prevalent in the morning selling a few cubes of tofu, some rotten tomatoes, or a few tubes of tooth paste. By eleven o'clock, the market folds up leaving behind empty stalls.

#### Hawkers

Cooked food stalls are then set up along Smith Street and Temple Street catering for the lunch time crowd from nearby offices. In the mid afternoon at around three o'clock, more stalls are set up between Temple Street and Pagoda Street either preparing food or displaying goods like clothings and shoes for the evening market. The night market closes around midnight.

Admist the different operations and patterns, hawkers exhibit a homogeneity about their interaction and participation. Hawking represents a generic set of informal activities from operating a street restaurant to selling modern gadgets. Isolating the problems and concerns of one type of hawkers can provide an useful understanding about the trade. The following is a discussion on food hawking in Chinatown.

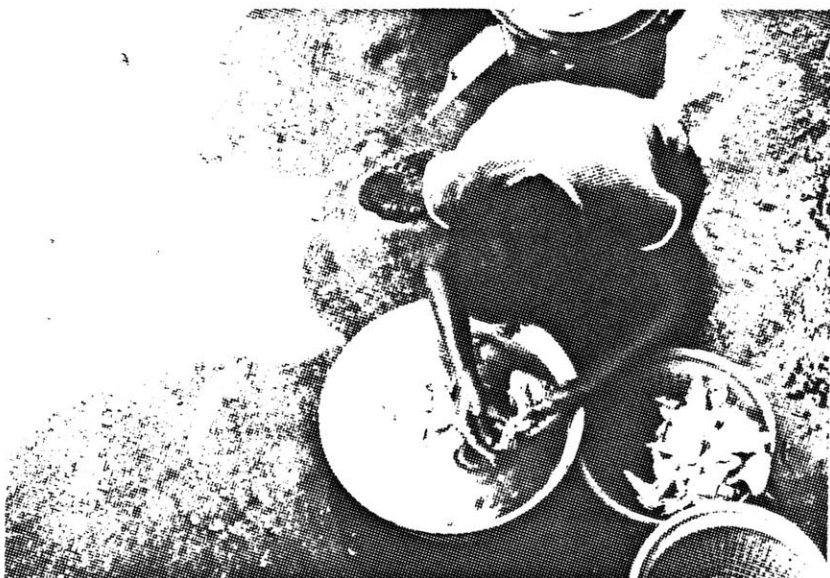
Food hawkers often present a predicament to the Singapore government. Food hawking is a popular form of business in Chinatown and in Singapore. With improved economic means, eating out among Singaporeans has become a way of life. Singaporean eats his lunch, meets his friends, and holds family outings at the hawker stalls. In recent years, hawking has become such a profitable business that even the government talks about it. The government believes that hawking is basically a non-progressive enter-



A Hawker Stall



Market At Banda Street/Sago Street



Cleaning Chicken Wings

prise and displeases with the fact that many young people forego hard and laborious work in construction and in factories to work as hawkers and stall operators. The government is unhappy with the proliferation of hawkers, but is refrained from overly condemning a popular national pastime. On one hand, there is the policy to limit the growth of the trade through licensing. On another hand, the Tourists Promotion Board built the most celebrated hawker centre "Rasa Singapura" and assembled the best cooked food hawkers among all cuisines.

Hawkers have in recent years represented another problem to the government. Hawkers used to paddle the streets selling cooked food, and sometimes vegetables, meat, and sundries. Since the set up of the Ministry of Environmental Health in the 1960's, street hawkers have been gradually restricted from paddling. A license is necessary; health inspection is enforced; street hawkers are designated to assigned locations usually along streets or back lanes. The hawkers in Chinatown are 'grounded' for the same reason.

In the past five to ten years, the ministry has found an efficient, and effective way to enforce stringent environmental health control. Incorporated with public housing construction are the building of large single or double story hawker centres and markets. These structures have ample storage, proper sanitary and food preparation facilities, and good lighting and ventilation. Street hawkers are gathered and relocated to these centres. The ministry seeing the 'success' of these centres, has made the public commitment to accomodate all street hawking activities into hawker centres and markets.

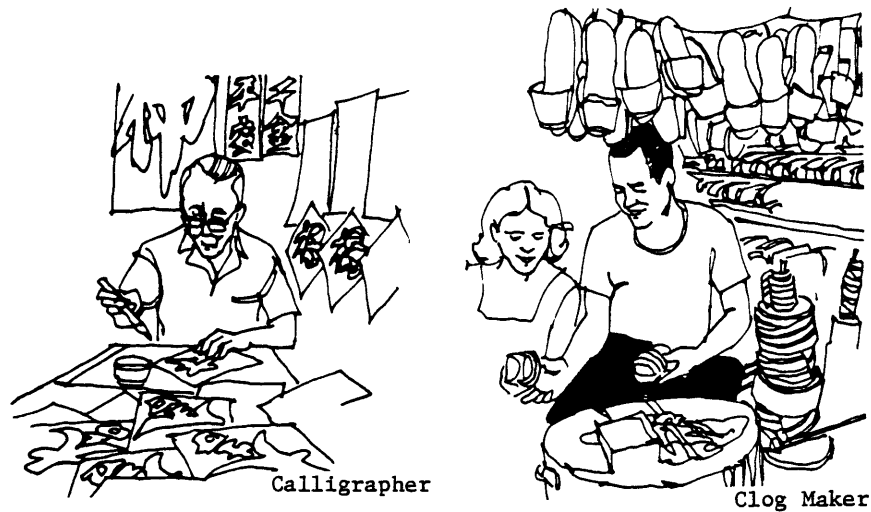
In Chinatown, a super complex is under construction to accomodate all the hawker stalls. Spread out in two stories of a twenty story public housing project, the hawker centre and the adjacent market will be the largest of its kind ever built in Singapore. Planners in URA see the construction of this complex and the relocation of street activities as the major hinderances to the conservation program. They feel that retaining the atmosphere of the bustling street activities will be difficult when the hawkers are relocated. The planners 'hope' that the hawkers can be retained, but believe that the construction of the centre is inevitable because of political support, the ministry's commitment, and the implementation by another public agency, the Housing and Development Board (HDB).

What are the issues of conservation that affect the hawkers?

First, the purpose of conservation is to maintain a set of relationships among people in place. The interaction between the customers and hawkers in Chinatown creates a pattern of activities, a set of social and economic exchanges at a less mechanized level, and a temporal feeling which are the intangible environmental cues. Relocating the hawkers satisfies one aspect of the environmental improvement but threatens the human relationship with the place. Moreover, it is questionable that hawker centre is the only means for achieving hygienic objectives. Conservation has to seek beyond the physical improvement of hawker stalls, for the enrichment of the tangible and intangible relationships between people and place.

Second, many hawkers appear ambivalent toward conservation, or for that matter relocation. The ambivalence is the reflection of mixed feelings, and the subservience for authority. Many hawkers like to maintain the familiar mode of operations, the low rents and convenient location; they also like to improve their amenities and environmental conditions. But above all, they understand the adamant attitude of the government, and the futility of resistance. For that matter, the popular argument that hawker centres worked in Singapore is an over simplification of the problem.

Third, the 'illegal' hawkers are impacted by all planning decisions. Conservation or relocation can both threaten to displace them. Their marginal activities, low capital, old age, and illegal status deem them incompetent in the formal structure. It is however not clear that their operations can be upgraded to allow them to compete in the formal structure given the societal imperfections. The issue is therefore to find ways to allow this 'illegal' activity to co-exist with the formal operations until it vanishes with the dying population.



Calligrapher

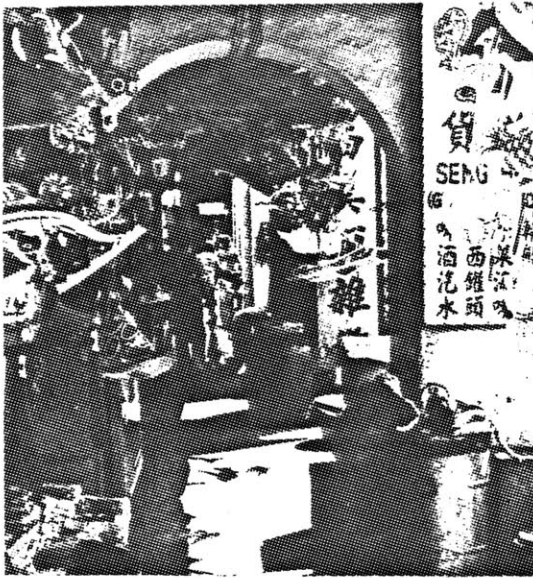
Clog Maker

Source: Chinatown, Tourist Promotion Board

### Traders and Craftsmen

There are about three hundred and fifty retail and servicing shops in Chinatown. Like hawking, trades and crafts in Chinatown are the agglomeration of very diverse types of operation. There is the S\$2000 (US\$1000) monthly-rented goldsmith shop selling glittering jewelry to the wealthy; there is the S\$3 (US\$1.50) monthly-rented shoemaker shop underneath a staircase serving the local population. Some shops like the restaurants have booming business all year round; some shops like the tailors have seasonal business near the Chinese New Year. It is difficult to generalize about the operations except that they serve a wide range of clientele from the local elderly woman to the modern secretary.

There are two types of business operators in Chinatown, the trader and the craftsman. The craftsman like the calligrapher or the clogmaker is considered as unique to Chinatown; the trader like the tailor or the grocery stall operator is thought to be common in Singapore. The distinction between them is however a subtle one because the traders' existence also bring about a similar feeling of quaintness. The trader like the grocery stall



Grocery Shop



Street Vendor

operator sells a collection of rather authentic Chinese foods such as dried fish, meat, and preserved vegetables demanded by the surrounding elderly population; the tailor makes suits for the seamen who come to Chinatown for cheap goods; the junk collection shop for cardboards and bottles is the source of employment for many elderly men and women in Chinatown.

Traders and craftsmen are claimed to be vanishing. The case of the letter writer may provide a better understanding of trades and crafts. Letter writing had been a busy operation during the early 1900's with the mass immigration from China to Singapore. Most of the migrants were illiterate. They would engage the service of the letter writer. Today, the letter writer still serves the elderly population in Chinatown. But letter writing is no longer a busy operation. More of the nation's population is literate; more elderly people have died off; and English is the medium of communication in Singapore. So the letter writer performs calligraphy of good wish and new year's greetings for the curious tourists, and the devoted housewives. However, not everyone can manage to adapt to the changing demand by attracting a different clientele.

Letter Writer



Many of the traders and craftsmen who make, sell, and service the utilitarian products like tin pails suffer from a diminishing demand; many of them do not wish their children to pursue the labourious, menial, and socially less respectable career in the more affluent society.

However, trades and crafts have appeared to thrive in Chinatown for two reasons. First, Chinatown's centralized location makes it very attractive for business. Second, Chinatown's controlled rents protect many of the low-profit business from being phased out in the competitive economy. The Rent Control Act of 1947, aimed to curb the speculation of rents after the Second World War has kept the rents in Chinatown very low in many properties. Many business pay a monthly rental of S\$70 (US\$35) or less, when a similar size shop space in a public housing project costs in the range of S\$300-\$500 (US\$150-\$250).

To the traders and craftsmen, conservation or otherwise implies some form of governmental or private action. Rents will be revised, sometimes very high through the bidding system. Many operators feel that they cannot afford the market rate rental; some prefer cheaper resettled properties else where; some plan to consolidate their business; some plan to forget about business and retire. A man I talked to, summed it up, "The best thing that can happen is nothing will happen." But he knew that would not be the case, and he hoped only for a high resettlement compensation.

Issue

The central issue is that can trades and crafts be conserved. In this case, the conservation of trades and crafts touches the very definition of the term. Defining society's needs become an important task in conservation. As Bernard Frieden writes in "The Environmental Protection Hassle":

Conservationists are concerned with the wise use of resources and of technology to provide for society's needs. Preservationists are likely to call for society to reform itself by reducing its material wants.

Some trades and crafts are becoming 'obselete' in the social process. Many of the traders and craftsmen are getting in age; their children are unlikely to pursue their work; the demands of the society work against their services and products. Then some trades and crafts continue to serve their purposes in society. Many of the traders and craftsmen seek a different clientale among tourists and the growing middle class population; the interests in 'antiquity' and hand crafts harness the demand for their work.

The issue of conservation is to seek that meaningful link between the past and present. Conservation provides the support for trades and crafts to continue to adapt to society's needs, and assists society to dispend and replace the unwanted uses and services. This is easier said than done because the issue is overlaid with human considerations, and economic realities that demand discretion and fair treatment. The balance of these actions is the task of conservation.

#### Elderly Residents

There are about two hundred welfare recipients in Chinatown representing about 2.4 percent of the area's population. They are the 'official destitutes'

Elderly  
Residents



Elderly Residents

of Chinatown. 'Destitute' is defined as someone with absolutely no means in earning a living due to incapacitation, age, or the lack of any form of assistance from relatives. Many of the 'destitutes' turn out to be single elderly people. Elderly people with children who refuse to care for them generally have difficulties in obtaining public assistance.

But the impact of the elderly population in Singapore is often ignored. First, the problem of the elderly population exerts little pressure in a 'young' country in which fifty percent (50%) of its population is below eighteen years old, and only eight percent (8%) is above sixty years old. Second, the level of impoverishment is low compared to most Third World Countries. As one social worker puts it, "No one starves in Singapore." But above all, the plight of the 'destitutes' are probably diffused in the halo of economic success of the country. New York Times describes Singapore as:

Unemployment and inflation are lower than the world average, education is universal and health care and pensions are comparable to those in the West..... There is a television set for every seven people and a telephone for every four..... Begging is unknown.  
: NYT September 24 1980



Beggar

The following discussion aims to provide an insight of the elderly residents in Chinatown whose livelihood and living standards are contrastingly different from the surrounding population.

There are about two thousand elderly persons living in Chinatown. They represent about thirty percent (30%) of the area's population, a marked difference from the national average of eight percent (8%). The concentration of single elderly population in Chinatown derives from two reasons. First, Chinatown had been the landing point for many migrants from Chinatown especially those from the Guangdong Province until 1960. Like most ethnic communities, Chinatown provided the necessary transitions between the familiar past and the new surrounding for the migrants. Cubicle type of tenement housing was set up to cope with the influx of migrants and their families. Jobs and connections for work were available. Shops and services flourished to cater for the needs of the migrants. For many of the elderly migrants, Chinatown has become their eventual resting place. Second, Chinatown's low rents and convenient location have always attracted many low-income groups. However, with the growing success of the public housing program, and the rising economic means of the population, many families have moved out. The residents who remain behind consist of a growing proportion of elderly residents and singles.

Elderly  
Population

Living in Chinatown is far from a respectable affair. The building structures are deteriorated; facilities are scarce; the streets are cluttered; and living space is tight. To many elderly residents, continuing living in Chinatown simply imply their inability to move to better accommodations. Those who have married 'well' and those who have made their 'fortune', have left the place. Many who stay behind feel that they are indeed the 'destitutes' in the society.

Living

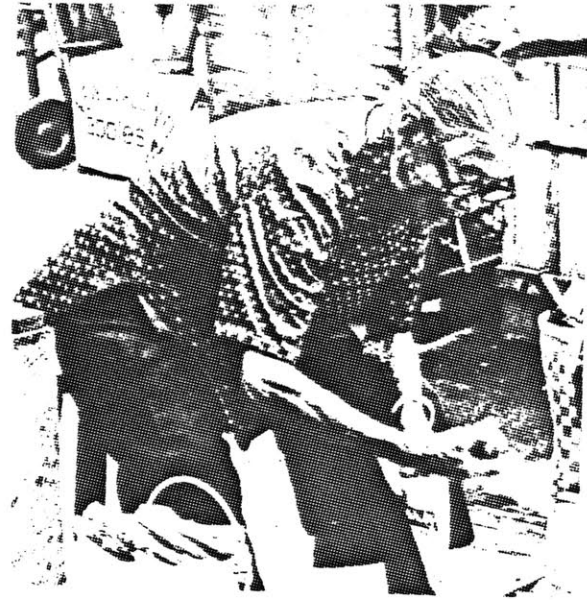
Moving out of the shophousing is an option. Between 1970 to 1980, the number of elderly residents have decreased. Some of them passed away; many have moved into public housing. Public housing is

an affordable form of housing for many Singaporeans; moving into one is however not an easy task for many elderly people. The demand for public housing within the Central Area of which Chinatown is part of, is high; and renting one is not without difficulties. Very often, four or five elderly persons have to share an efficiency unit. Compared to the S\$5-\$10 cubicle, the monthly rental of S\$26 plus utilities is stiff. Apart from the availability of modern and self-contained sanitary and cooking facilities, the size of the efficiency unit is tight. Many elderly people end up having a bedspace within the apartment. One also has to seek compatible friends to share the apartment. Most important of all, the feeling of moving can be quite traumatic for the elderly men and women who have spent their life in the same place. The transition from a two or three story shophouse to an elevated sixteen story apartment is not entirely an easy adaptation for a sixty-year-old.

Therefore, many elderly people stay behind despite poor living conditions. And after all, many residents spend little time in their cubicles. Participation in the streets is a way of life in Chinatown. Many elderly people spend the day in the streets conversing with friends and neighbors, working on small chores, and watching the world goes by.



Elderly Street Vendor



Elderly Street Vendors

Working

Working among the Chinatown's elderly population is common. The proportion of working elderly population of ten percent (10%) is high compared to the national average of three percent (3%). The reasons are the relatively high elderly population and the inadequate and limiting public assistance. The per capital income of an average Singaporean is about S\$700 (US\$350) per month in 1979. The Social Welfare Department claims that the 'subsistence' level in Singapore is S\$110 per month. Yet the average amount of social welfare assistance for the elderly 'destitute' is only S\$60 per month. The Social Welfare Department does not expect welfare recipients to hold permanent jobs, but to be 'self-supporting' by finding other means to supplement their income. Some elderly residents receive aid from distant relatives, or neighbors; some live on their life savings; some work; and some beg.

Within the economic set up of Chinatown, elderly people except the seniled and physically impaired

## Suicide verdict

A VERDICT of suicide was yesterday recorded on the death of Go Gek Po, 70, who hanged himself with a rope from a gas pipe in the kitchen of his Upper Pickering Street home on May 10.

Go, who left a suicide note, was a fruit seller in Hong Lim Food Centre until a year ago when his licence was revoked.

Source: Straits Times

can actually find some form of partial employment. An elderly person can pluck the roots off bean sprouts at the rate of Singapore forty cents every pound. A day's work can probably earn enough for a day's meal. There are a number of such kind of menial, time consuming, and low paid jobs in Chinatown like wrapping wantons, cleaning vegetables, and sorting out odds and ends for the hawkers. Some of the elderly people collect junk like cardboards and bottles from garbage bins and sell them to junk shops for recycling.

#### Illegal Hawking

Those elderly people with a little capital set up stalls selling produce or cooked food. Sometimes, a few of them may work in a sort of cooperative effort. Depending on the nature of the stall, business can be good and income can be substantial. Those without much or any capital can also set up stalls. They are the illegal hawkers. Some of them put up marginal goods such as discarded vegetables for sale. Half or rotten tomatoes or potatoes, a few leaves of greens, and peeled shallots and garlic are some of the produce 'picked' from the vegetable wholesalers' or hawkers' garbage bins. Some elderly people put up a few tooth brushes, combs, and shoes for sale. Illegal hawking is subjected to raids by the authorities, and condemned by the Social Welfare Department. The department has the dilemma of aiding the underprivileged and of discouraging welfare dependency. So in practice, the department adopts a 'close-an-eye' attitude towards illegal elderly hawkers.

#### Begging

Some elderly residents become beggars. It probably takes a lot of perseverance and humiliation to become a beggar. The fact that begging is condemned by law is one thing; the fact that begging is condemned socially by the close-knitted and traditional community is a more serious matter. The resilient nature of the elderly migrants also works against begging. Many elderly people prefer to work in spite of hardships and poverty than to subject to the 'degrading' experience of begging.

Few elderly residents think about conservation. Many are puzzled by this interest in conserving the place that they have tried to abandon. Like migrants before them, the elderly residents in Chinatown are concerned about having a place to live, having enough to eat, having someone to take care of them, and having enough savings for a good death. Some feel attached to friends and neighbors, and the environment. Some have no second thoughts about leaving Chinatown if a 'better' life is promised. It can be an elderly home or an apartment in the public housing. Since these options are not available often, many elderly people just stay on.

" I bet they won't demolish this place. Why cause us trouble? We're all old anyway. Just give us a few more years", said an old man.

: Changing Landscape:  
Chinatown, SBC TV  
Documentary Film,  
September 11 1981

Many elderly people live in Chinatown out of circumstances. The circumstances are limited by their age, single status, the inadequate public assistance, and the low paying jobs. On one hand, Chinatown allows for the compromises in life for the entranced elderly people. On another hand, Chinatown helps to maintain a social problem neglected by society.

The issue that affects the elderly residents is about their future in Chinatown. Conservation always improves the environment making it more attractive to many people; and Chinatown's housing is appealing to a growing professional class. Although gentrification is not an evident phenomenon in Singapore, its threat on the elderly residents nonetheless exists. Given the fact that the elderly residents existence does not hinder the long term plan of Chinatown, the question is whether conservation has to respond only to market demand or it can provide the humanity in the last years of the aged by improving the physical, social, and emotional support in Chinatown.



# 4. Attitudes About Chinatown



Shophouses along Upper Cross Street

Many conservation projects can be dealt with within the physical confines of the project site. But in a city state like Singapore, in which every developmental decision is often a reflection of the political beliefs and public sentiments, this focused approach is inadequate for making sound decision.

This chapter aims to delve into an understanding about the broader national and social attitudes that appear to have impacts on the direction of conservation. The issues are on economic development, green and clean environment, filial piety, and ambivalence. These issues are preceded by a description on the political leadership in Singapore to provide an understanding of the background for decision making.

Enacted as a democratic socialist government, the political leadership in Singapore reflects the practice of Confucianism. While one is quite 'free' and comfortable within the realm of his life, the man in Singapore has to conform to a set of social, and moral values determined for him by the government. The Far Eastern Economic Review explains Confucianism.

Confucianism

The Confucian theory of government envisages an upright ruler acting according to Li (the rules of proper conduct) and Ren (benevolent love). The ruler's responsibility was thus to give his subjects security, peace, efficient administration, low taxation, the framework for progress towards prosperity. In return, his people owed him obedience as the bamboo bends before the wind. They owed the just, benevolent ruler total acceptance of his authority.

The Confucian society envisaged either total acceptance of the ruler or total rejection. There was no halfway house; no such concept in the West, of a loyal opposition. The society benefits from the stability inherent in the reciprocal set of duties, beginning with the filial piety of the family extending upwards through officialdom to the leader who is the modern day inheritor of the modern day inheritor of the Confucian emperor.

For the past twenty-two years, Lee Kuan Yew has ruled Singapore. The country has prospered under him. The 611 square kilometer, or 243 square mile of city state with 2.3 million people and practically no natural resources, no landscape, and no indigenous culture has managed to double the people's living standard in ten years to Asia's second highest after Japan. However,

In return of the ruler's protection, for the stability and prosperity which his role has brought them, the man in the Singapore streets is required to respond with loyalty, and conformity to the country's customs whether that means refraining from dumping litter, visiting the barber regularly or facing a prison cell as punishment for attempting to propagate a violent change in the accepted way of life. It is a society in which individual human rights are sacrificed for the greater good of the community.

: Asia Year Book 1980

Accepting the Confucian concept of the ruler and the ruled, the people believe in the right of the government in making decisions for them. It



*Living could be a treat  
If people are awfully sweet  
Courtesy could be our way of life.*

*It's rude to be abusive  
Just to prove we are right  
Instead we could be nice about it  
If we tried*

*Make courtesy our way of life.*

Message of Courtesy Campaign



Financial Times

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew

means evacuating from properties that the government has interests in, living in government built housing, and altering lifestyles and changing jobs if necessary. The individual is expected to amend his wants and wishes to serve the interests of the majority, and in return his needs can be satisfied. Yet such subservient behavior is not to be taken that people are utterly unhappy. Most people, the middle class majority, are quite pleased to go along with the government's decision. But it is not to be construed that everyone is not hurt by such decision based on the fact that few voice their mind.

While government's responses convey a lot about tentative policies in Singapore, ideas about conservation have remained rather vague at the national level. The Minister of National Development spoke on the conservation of Chinatown in an article "Chinatown and Emerald Hill May Be Preserved". He said,

Conservation

In the debate over the preservation of Chinatown, the significant issue of the building structural soundness has been overlooked. Unfortunately, in Chinatown, most of the building structures are of very poor conditions. The columns are tilting, the beams are bending, the floors are collapsing, the roofs are leaking. It is not practical to preserve these buildings because they are in such poor conditions.

: Straits Times,  
December 6 1980

Many politicians have not shown particular concern over the demolition of shophouses, and some have actually conducted the construction of the twenty storied complex to accomodate all of Chinatown's street activities.

On the other hand, conservation in Singapore seems to reflect the political concerns over growing materialism and the reexamining of old values. The New York Times wrote:

There is a growing doubt here about whether national achievement necessarily leads to human happiness and the enrichment of cultural and spiritual values. The government

shows increasing signs of sharing the concerns of many of Singapore's intellectuals that the emphasis (on economic development) has produced a society whose majority cherishes only material aims.

: New York Times,  
September 24 1980

The awareness of affluence and materialism on society seems to provide the impetus to examine some of the pro-growth policies, and to create a response through conservation. The declaration of Emerald Hill, a residential area adjacent to the tourist section of the city as a conservation area in 1981 by the government has injected the sense of hope and exhilaration among many conservationists. Yet within the existing political structure, reforms are top-down. Concerted effort towards conservation has to evolve out of political response. And so far the response is not evident.



Public Housing Along Upper Cross Street  
and Chinatown

In Singapore, economic development represents the focus of policy making. Economic development permeates every aspect of life, from the number of kids one has, to the place one lives. Many people believed that without the successful economic program, this little island of 2.3 million people would have become one of the poverty ridden and overcrowded place in the world. Instead, economic development in the past two decades has brought to Singaporeans a material life surpasses that in many Asian and Third World Countries.

Economic  
Development

In the land stricken city state of Singapore, economic prerogatives are reflected in the active public land development such as urban renewal, public housing and industrial development, and in the stringently controlled land policies such as compulsory acquisition, and rigid developmental regulations. The government has put all development questions in the hands of a single official agency, the Economic Development Board (EDB). Below which the Housing Development Board (HDB), Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), Public Works Department (PWD), and the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) operate. The impact of economic development on Chinatown's conservation is reflected in three aspects: urban renewal, public housing, and tourism.

#### Urban Renewal:

Urban renewal is probably one of the most visible form of development in the Singapore city apart from the public housing program. Since the enactment of the Urban Renewal Act of 1973, skyscrapers have replaced low-rise shophouses, streets have been widened into one way arteries, parking lots and urban parks have sprouted in the city. In the span of ten years, urban renewal plan has altered the cityscape in Singapore. The most visible component of URA's work is the sale of land parcels in the city to private developers for development. By 1978, urban renewal has created S\$181.5 million (US\$90M) worth of development projects. The objec-

Urban  
Renewal

tives of URA are similar to most urban renewal rhetoric. The ex-general manager of URA wrote:

Urban renewal would provide opportunities for participation by private entrepreneurs which would in turn provide the necessary funds to off set the cost of non-revenue generating public projects such as public housing and other social amenities..... The role of the government would, therefore, be to acquire and assemble land, clear land of encumberances, comprehensively plan the area and provide the essential infrastructure including public housing.

: Alan Choe,  
Modern Singapore

The latest urban development interest in Singapore is focused onto the reclaimed land at Singapore's waterfront. Totalling 638.3 hectare, or 1,575 acres of land and estimated 6.4 million square meter of developmental floor area, the Marina City is expected to provide adequate developmental needs for Singapore until 1992. Some professionals have argued that the old city can be conserved with the new area created. Others believe that the intensity for development on other parts of the island can be increased to saturate the market, thereby releasing the pressure off demolition in Chinatown.

Invariably, URA is also responsible for conservation plans in the city. The same general manager spoke on Singapore's demolition and conservation with the same rigor.

All the breaking of eggs is to make an omelette. .... When we kick off our preservation scheme, it will put other cities to shame. It's too easy to just select a few buildings. We will preserve whole area. Ours will be a scheme which will please historians, attract tourists, and also generate economic activities. It wouldn't be self-financing otherwise.

: Alan Choe,  
Far Eastern Economic  
Review, August 11 1978

The new general manager of URA has a modified view towards private participation.

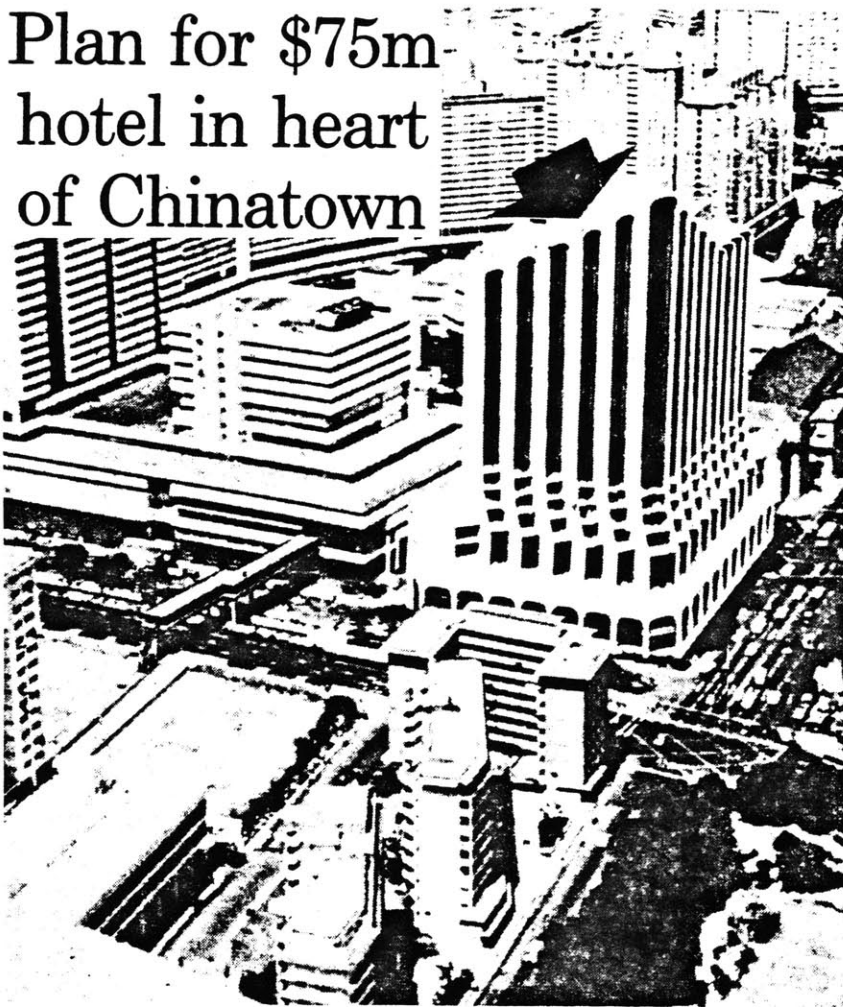
The public sector..... invite the private sector to join in the preservation exercise.

It is when both the owner and the tenant fail to respond to a call by the public sector to preserve an area based on a set of guidelines, that the public sector should move in as a last resort to ensure that implementation is effected.

: Fan Kai Chang,  
Planews, July 1981

There are however adequate private participation and urban renewal projects in and around Chinatown that make the thought of conserving Chinatown a joke. People's Park Complex is a eighteen storied commercial and residential project on New Bridge Road. More urban renewal activities are underway surrounding Chinatown, such as the construction of a twenty-four storied delux hotel, and

## Plan for \$75m- hotel in heart of Chinatown



Picture shows a superimposed drawing of the hotel (arrowed) at the junction of New Bridge Road and Canal Road. Straits Times



a commercial project only two blocks away. On the site, a number of smaller parcels of land along New Bridge Road have been sold to private developers for redevelopment. For these, the authority has imposed a six-storied height limit. There is also a plan to build a resettlement centre and parking garage after demolishing some shophouses along South Bridge Road.

#### Issues

URA has always claimed the lack of private interests as the major hinderance to conservation. The issues of conservation are more complex than attracting private interests.

First, there are fundamental conflicts within URA regarding its role in conservation. There are strong vested interests in clearing slums and in generating economic gains through redevelopment, and there are objectives in conserving Chinatown. These conflicting interests of the URA are manifested in the vague policies, and contradicting plans for conservation.

Second, private participation always seeks to maximize economic gains, not social benefits. Conservation limits the size and uses of development and restricts the profit; pro-growth policies in Singapore encourage development. So unless there are distinct tangible gains, private participation will always find the economically most convenient course. To entice private participation, public actions have to target tangible gains for the private sectors apart from specifying developmental guidelines. Public actions are necessary to maintain the objectives and the desired outcome by balancing different interests; it is not merely a backup system for private failure.

#### Public Housing

##### Public Housing:

"One wife, two kids, three rooms, four wheels, and a five-figure salary" is a rhyme among Singaporeans for describing their aspirations for a comfortable, materialistic, and similarly patterned life style. Three-room flat is in fact a two-bedroom apartment flanked by corridor or staircase in an

elevated twelve or sixteen storied public housing high-rise. "Everywhere on the island, public housing stand out of the embracing greenery, row on row, clean and hygienic" by the 'Economist' is an apt description of the image of public housing in Singapore.

While it may be difficult to accept the stereotyped solution to housing, one has to recognize the government's determination and 'success' in rehousing its bursting population. When the People's Action Party (PAP) took office from the colonial ruler in 1959, they were faced with the problem of a growing population living in one of the densest area in the world with a population density of 100 persons per acre. Charles Abrams described the acute housing problem as:

No house in all of slumdom compare with  
(Singapore) in the human crowding and  
dinginess, airlessness, and lack of privacy  
: Charles Abrams  
Man's Struggle for Shelter

In 1960, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was enacted to tackle the housing problem, a high priority for socio, economic, and political reasons. Twenty years later, almost seventy percent (70%) of the population live in public housing, and fifty-four percent (54%) of them own their units.

Financing the public housing is through government's loans backed by the country's social security contribution: the Central Provident Fund (CPF). Since the CPF represents almost forty-two percent (42%) of the wage bill through contributions by both employer and employee, public housing has become an effective tool for economic management in Singapore.

The government promotes savings (forced contribution) and provides housing. It can directly control the main domestic industry by manipulating either the supply or the demand for housing, or both at once; the supply, by controlling the rate of granting of building permits, the demand by adjusting either rents or conditions of access to CPF by would be house purchasers. It is an instrument of economic management that most government would be proud to possess.

: Nicholas Harman  
The Economist, December 79'

Operating the public housing program is solely through the Housing and Development Board. Given a large measure of autonomy in terms of policies, administration, and finance, the HDB monitors the entire housing process from land assembly, resettlement, planning and design, allotment, management, to the supply of essential construction materials. Through the public housing plan, other social, educational, commercial, and industrial programs are controlled within the projects. And since eighty five percent (85%) of the population is anticipated to live in it, public housing becomes an effective tool for social and political control as well.

Public housing in Singapore grew out of an intent to solve a socio-economic problem, but has become an effective management instrument for achieving desired political ends. Although conservation needs not contradict the goals of providing decent accommodation, and of achieving economic gains, conservation as a development alternative threatens the political control of the government, and the role of a powerful public housing agency.

Issue

The issue of conservation is to demonstrate the compatibility of conservation and public housing construction. Conservation should aim to alleviate the antagonistic feelings surrounding the two public agencies, the HDB and URA, and to modify the mind-sets of these agencies about ideal urban environment.

Tourism

Tourism:

In 1977, tourists spent about S\$786 million (US\$393M) in Singapore contributing to about four percent (4%) of the Gross Domestic Product. According to the most conservative estimates, the trend should continue for the next five years with at least a ten percent (10%) growth in the number of arrivals. Most tourists spend about an average of 3.5 days in Singapore 'sandwiching' it between trips to surrounding countries. They spend about sixty percent (60%) of their money in shopping while the rest is divided between hotels and entertainment.

The worry confronting the Singapore Tourists Promotion Board (STPB) is the saturation point of tourists arriving in Singapore by 1982. By then, the task of STPB will be to extend the stay of each tourist in order to boost the income from tourists. But some of the comments from Western tours agencies on Singapore heighten the STPB's worry.

Clean, clinical, and classic..... Visit Singapore the old fascinating Orient, before it disappears..... A city without hearts

: Planews, July 1981

Part of the problem is that Singapore has undergone massive demolition in achieving its social and economic goals; and part of it lies in the fact that Singapore has launched itself on the tourist market more than a decade ago as an 'instant Asia' package. The Far Eastern Economic Review writes:

The slogan drew comparisons with instant coffee ..... Like instant coffee, much of Singapore today is a thoroughly modern creation.

In the height of this 'instant Asia' movement, the URA and the STPB created the Handicraft Centre. Located in the tourists' belt of the city, this conglomeration of four storied buildings has devoted the upper floors for craftsmen's residence and the lower floors for display and demonstration. A central court, a beer garden garnished the design. The idea was to entice and persuade craftsmen from neighboring countries to practise arts and crafts. The housing and rental were subsidized. In the words of the ex-general manager of URA, "All they had to do in return for us was to demonstrate arts and crafts." The project failed miserably. Neither the locals nor the tourists feel the urge to visit the Handicraft Centre. The centre has remained a dismal conglomeration of 'instant' Asian crafts.

Instant Asia

Apart from this 'instant Asia' motif, much of the tourists' attractions in Singapore is manmade. There is the largest manmade bird park in the world, within which there is the world's highest manmade waterfall (30 meters, 100 ft). There are the artisan transplanted Japanese and Chinese gardens

Manmade

in the industrial estate. But STPB is finding increasing difficulties in marketing this instant Asia or manmade image to tourists. More tourists want to experience something more 'authentic' than to see the Instant Asia cultural show, or to take a ride on the trishaw, or to have a snake slinging around the neck to take snap shots with.

To the shock and surprise of STPB, tourists take to the city's past well. Places like Chinatown are drawing tourists. Many locals, like the hawkers, the traders and craftsmen welcome the tourists in boosting their income. The STPB is probably not entirely 'comfortable' with this trend. It has the dilemma of supporting the way of life in Singapore and in preserving the 'authenticity' that Singapore rejects. The STPB published a little brochure on Chinatown and in someways reflected the paradoxical 'see it before it's gone' message.

Singaporeans stroll this unique section of the island, believed to be the world's most densely populated at one time. To be a part of its life, you should try it too.

Walk up the streets, and peer up dark wooden staircases that lead to little cubicles each occupied by a family separated from noisy and nosey neighbors only by flimsy board walls or curtains.

The problems of crammed rooms, and inadequate communal facilities and kitchens will soon be a thing of the past as the residents move to better homes in new housing estates.



Street Display

But conservation is not the objective of the STPB. Its objective is to have adequate quaint and old things to attract tourists who will hopefully spend money in the new and modern establishments like shopping centres and hotels. The average spending of a tourist of S\$20(US\$10) in Chinatown hardly justifies Chinatown's conservation. Yet without Chinatown, tourists may not even spend time in Singapore purchasing thousands of dollars worth of camera and electronic equipment.

Tourism through conservation raises two issues.

Issues

First, conservation has become very desirable, and in some ways badly needed to boost tourism in Singapore. For the STPB, the critical issue is to promote the feeling of 'oldness' and 'quaintness' of Chinatown within the government's ideal of a good and clean society. The result may have to be a compromise of the diverging interests in Chinatown by maintaining the feeling of 'authenticity' among the tourists and upgrading the living environment of the residents.

Second, the balance of touristic and less touristic activities is important to retain the diversity and interests unique to Chinatown. While tourism is desired for economic reasons, it often has undesired impacts. One reason is that touristic oriented conservation tends to create a middle-class homogeneity like the cases of Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, and Fanueil Hall in Boston. As Appleyard explains:

These places are delightful, intimate in scale and at first appearance, rich and diverse, all those attributes that new development lacks. But as more of them appear they exhibit the same middle-class veneer of boutiques, exposed bricks, ferns, tasteful signs, and exotic imports.

: Appleyard,  
Conservation of European  
Cities

The other reason is that tourism can alter the character of a place and the attitudes of people through its demands.

Tourism is also a frivolous activity. As an escape from everyday life, it demands more entertainment and relaxation than education. And since contacts are fleeting and limited, tourist perceptions and attitudes are often superficial and romantic, colored by nostalgia. . . . . Tourists do not leave a city untouched by their presence. A classic instance of the observer affecting the observed, the tourists, through his demands, subtly and sometimes drastically changes the character of a place.

: Appleyard,  
Conservation of European  
Cities

The miracle of Chinatown is its capacity to respond to the complex demands of society in a modest and simple manner. The danger of tourism is the negative impacts on people and place through the pursuit of economic objectives. Tourism through conservation has to maintain the diversity in clientele and demands, in order to retain the richness of Chinatown and to dampen the impacts of tourism.

#### A Clean, Green Environment

#### Keep Singapore Clean

In 1970, Singapore launched its "Keep Singapore Clean Campaign". The outcome of the campaign message included a S\$500 (US\$250) fine for littering, garbage bins at lamppost interval, moral education in schools, media broadcasting, and many S\$500 fine stickers all over. Police was deployed to enforce the no littering law, and a number of initial offenders were fined say S\$50 as the deterrent to the public. The campaign was a success, and Singapore has transformed from a not-so-clean city into one of the cleanest in Asia. Singaporeans have also changed their attitudes toward littering. One correspondent wrote:

Keeping Singapore clean has so penetrated the consciousness of the republic's citizens that one hears of their inability to step on a cigarette butt in the streets of Hong Kong or discard orange peel in the wilds of Nepal.

: Far Eastern Economic  
Review, August 11 1978

The significance of the "Keep Singapore Clean Campaign" stretches beyond keeping the garbage off Singapore's streets. The campaign has brought to

many Singaporeans higher expectation about cleanliness in the environment. After all, most people agree that it is a good thing to be cleanliness conscious. The campaign has also become the model for future campaigns, with the use of punishment and social discipline. There are S\$500 fines for smoking, for jay walking, for not wearing safety helmet on moving motor cycles, and so on. Some of the campaign messages have filtered to neighboring countries, and some Singaporeans are actually proud that they have spearheaded these examples among other countries.

In 1973, the Prime Minister launched another campaign. This time, the "Tree Planting Campaign" aimed to turn Singapore into a 'garden city'. Trees are planted by politicians on a tree planting day every year as a gesture; trees and landscaping are required to be planted in new development; the Parks and Recreation Department directed under the Prime Minister office is empowered to plant trees at 10-15 meters interval along public roads. Most of the trees planted, nic-named 'instant tree', can grow to a matured height of 15-20 meters within a few years after transplanting.

Tree Planting

In contrast, Chinatown is far from fitting into this green and clean ideal. Honking traffic and unruly pedestrians, filled garbage bins, and clogged drains, dilapidated structures, and darkened cubicles, slippery floors and smelling stench, are very evident in Chinatown.

Singaporeans, architects and planners in particular have always criticized the deplorable physical conditions of Chinatown. During the 1970's, urban renewal rhetoric linked social decay with physical decay. The ex-general manager of URA wrote:

The Central Area slum of modern Singapore are the breeding grounds of disease and crime. The incidence of tuberculosis is higher here than anywhere else on the island, as is the incidence of crime and gangsterism.

: Alan Choe,  
Modern Singapore



During the 1980's, the activities of the place are appraised, but the living conditions are deplored. The new general manager of URA wrote:

We know that Chinatown is one of the most densely populated area in Singapore. A large percentage of the population is living in small cubicles not acceptable by the modern living standards. The hawkers along the streets are not served with proper sewerage facilities. Other urban amenities are also comparatively inferior to newly developed areas in the suburbs or in other parts of the Central Area.

: Fan Kai Chang,  
Planews

### Issue

The two campaigns in a sense alter the visual image of Singapore. In urban design, street furniture like benches, garbage bins, bubbled lights, and bus shelters are put in; sidewalk are tiled or paved; lampposts and pedestrian bridges are covered with vines; and the concrete city is overlaid with landscaping in impeccable order. The campaigns, more importantly, redefine the average Singaporean's expectation about environment. The politicians and the people like to think of Singapore as green and clean.



*Dayvilles —  
32 flavors all  
untouched by  
human hands.*

It is therefore not unusual to find conservation in Singapore assuming a clean-up tone. In the first conservation project in Emerald Hill, conservation meant planting trees, pedestrianizing the streets, banning all traffic, and installing bubbled lights and benches. These physical improvements seem to raise the questions of the overwhelming concern with physical amenities, and their sterilizing effects.

The central issue of improving the environment through conservation is on this single-minded approach towards the 'better' world. On one hand, this approach represents an equitable distribution of improvements for a larger population; on the other hand, it represents improvements through a machined order. If the hawkers are to be relocated into the new complexes, the streets are to be pedestrianized, and landscaped with bubbled lights and Angsana trees, and the poor and elderly are to

be relocated into the clean, sanitized public housing, Chinatown may lose all the social and physical cues that one relates to. It seems that conservation need not be an uprooting and scrubbing exercise for both the people and setting. It can accept some amount of 'natural vulgarity' and lingering decay. The redefinition of the clean, green environment, the tolerance for variety and non-conformity, and the innovative approach to improve environment are necessary.

### Filial Piety

The Prime Minister in Singapore, a leading proponent on filial piety often advocates for the caring of elders by their children. Commenting on an elderly home built, he said:

It is not something to be proud of. It must not be encouraged. An old folks club for the elderly to meet each other by all means, but not a place for old parents and grand parents to be abandoned. Sons and daughters must shoulder their responsibilities and duties toward their parents.

: Straits Times,  
February, 7 1981

Filial piety is a Confucian ideal embodying a set of moral attitudes and obligations toward our parents. In practice, filial piety seems to have far reaching implications. At the family level, filial means the almost sacred devotedness, respect, and caring for the elders by young people. At the state level, filial strengthens one's respect, patriotism, and obedience for the country. In practice, the politicians in Singapore find filial piety an appropriate and useful concept. Filial piety is in fitting with the social discipline that Singapore has tried very hard in retaining in face of Westernization. It promotes the respect and obedience in authority among the people. It also relieves the state from assuming the responsibility and financial burden in elderly caring. Filial piety is therefore a concept well endorsed by the state.

The reflection of this concept on policies is the laissez faire attitude towards elderly assis-

### Filial Piety

tance and public endorsement about elderly caring within family. The building of elderly homes is restricted and discouraged; public assistance is low and limiting. On the other hand, schools have persistent moral teaching about elderly caring; the HDB gives priority to parent-children joint application as neighbors in public housing.

#### Elderly Homes

Since the Prime Minister spoke about filial piety, many politicians have echoed the message. Mandatory caring of elders by children was suggested. But mandatory caring did not appear as a pragmatic approach to the problem because few parents would prosecute their children. The suggestion was subsequently forgotten for the time being. And although elderly homes may not appeal as the ideal abode for the aged in Singapore, they provide shelter, food, medical services, and the feeling of security for many elderly people. Commenting on the elderly home, an elderly woman said:

Fate has brought me here, may last resting  
place till I die.

: Straits Times,  
February 7 1981

So, elderly homes have continue despite poor public opinion and low public subsidy.

The elderly residents in Chinatown are in somewhat of a lurch. Although many of them are in many ways different and worse off than the average elderly person in Singapore, they are similarly affected by the stringent elderly caring policies. They do not receive more public assistance, do not get preferential treatment in public housing, and do not have kinship to turn in for help.

#### Issue

The problem of the elderly residents in Chinatown is a question of survival, and in someways not entirely the question of survival. Many elderly residents will be housed and fed through elderly homes if circumstances demand. The issue of the problem is the moral question about whether we want to provide the emotional, social, and economic support for a group of elderly men and women, when we are so rhetorically concerned about filial piety. Retaining

the elderly people in Chinatown challenges the objective of filial piety that elderly people ought to live with their children. Yet given the fact that many of the elderly residents in Chinatown are childless, conservation that displaces the elderly people from their familiar setting is an irony. And given the fact that the elderly people will eventually die off, actions that lead to displacement seem unnecessary.

#### Ambivalence

One of the most contradicting belief surrounding Chinatown's conservation is the argument that people in Chinatown do not care if they get to go or stay. Many hawkers, traders, craftsmen, and residents appear as interested only in making a living, be it in Chinatown or elsewhere. And given the fact that options are available for many of them in Singapore, social conservation has subsequently little meaning since people are ambivalent about their future in Chinatown. The newspaper reports:

Many of Chinatown's people would move out like a shot if they could be sure that livelihoods would not be affected. It was the standard reply to the same question asked of young and old..... Many residents don't give a hoot for the old buildings. So why bother?  
: New Nation, August 10 1980

The ambivalent attitude to remain in Chinatown can be understood for at least two reasons.

First, public opinion have always portrayed living in Chinatown as a stigma of the underclass of society. In 1970's, urban renewal rhetoric linked social decay with physical decay. In 1980's, physical deterioration is often contrasted with the cleanliness and greenness of the surrounding environment. Many people are mindful to be perceived at the 'bottom' of society, in a place of strong public pride. Implicit in many discussions on conservation is also the group of local residents who fail to appreciate their setting.

#### Ambivalence

People can be resited, and old livelihoods resurreated but these unique buildings, once gone, can never be replaced..... They see no more charm in the Corinthian columns and Palladian windows than in the stench of fish and fowl.

: Straits Times,  
October 22 1980

Commenting on the rehabilitation of Cuppage Road, a preservation project, the ex-general manager of URA said:

The original concept here was to put in antique shops and uses related to the activities of the period. But unfortunately, URA was faced with the pressures to rehouse the people we had to relocate and these were dealing with refrigerators, light fittings, and so on. Overnight, you find them selling motor cycles and refrigerators in a building that is not meant for them.

: Alan Choe,  
Planews, July 1981

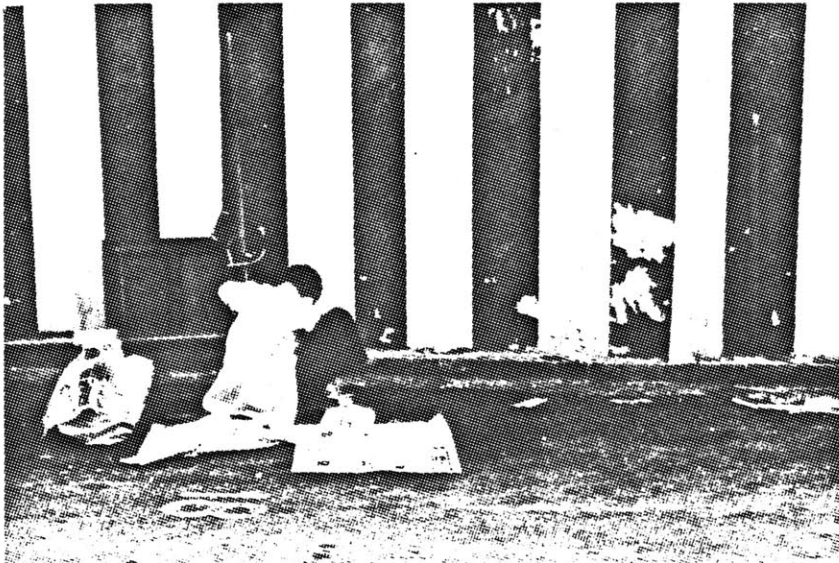
Second, the rigor of urban renewal and success of public housing has helped prepared a nation's of people very subceptible as well as subservient to resettlement into public housing. The politics of urban development have moved quite a long way from resistance to resettlement in the early 1960's to the present enthusiasm towards public housing. Many Singaporeans have accepted the housing ideal of elevatored highrise, hawker centres, and landscaped garden. Some of Chinatown's residents are more than willing to move out of the 'condemned' slum to the more popular public housing estates. But there are people who care to stay. Many of them are old and poor, and are weary about living in unfamiliar social and physical setting.

I like Chinatown because it's so easy to get around..... We came here a long time ago. Now we're too old to work so we just stay.

I haven't worked for so many years. So what good is there to say about anything..... I haven't worked for so many years. How can I get enough money for food.

: Changing Landscape:  
Chinatown,  
SBC TV Documentary Film,  
September 11 1981

But resistance to resettlement is rare. It is dealt through administrative or juridical means, and if necessary through police actions. Within the Confucian society, nothing can be more fearful for the elderly and poor people than having to challenge the right of the authorities. Ambivalence is a product of the reaction to general improvement of living standards and the futility about challenging governmental decisions. The issue of ambivalence is not on the matter that people do not care, but on the need to raise the social consciousness of the planning professionals.



Elderly Vendor in Pagoda Street

# 5. Social Conservation



Grocery Shop and Covered Walkway

Physical conservation grows out of the reaction to extensive demolition and rebuilding in Singapore, and the interests to respond to the popular conservation movement in the West. But mere physical conservation encounters limitations in retaining the vivid and varied social experiences we find in Chinatown. Many people in Chinatown need the set of informal social interactions to sustain their livelihood. Many people outside Chinatown relate to the place through this set of social relationships. Conservation in Chinatown needs to maintain this set of social relationships apart from improving the physical environment. I like to call this integrated process of conserving the social and physical aspects of the environment as social conservation.

A narrower definition of social conservation is to retain the people and activities. But given the fact that changes are rapid and inevitable in the Singapore society, retaining people and their operations fail to respond to societal needs. Social conservation demands a broader definition about retaining social relationships instead. There are three aspects to retaining social relationships. First, we want to maintain the access of various groups in society to Chinatown, so that Chinatown can continue to retain its diversity and interests to many people. Second, we want to maintain the options for the people in Chinatown to determine changes by themselves and not by externally imposed authorities, so that changes can be more subtle and responsive. Third, we want to protect the existing social and marketing arrangements by providing compatible level of tangible supports in Chinatown as in other parts of the city.

Definition

The likelihood that Chinatown may never be the same is the price we have to pay to conserve the place. Monitoring the rate and direction of change is the process of conservation. The following two sections aim to demonstrate the directions for achie-



ving social conservation in Chinatown. The first section presents the arguments and purposes for social conservation. The second section clarifies the issues of conflicts and contradictions for achieving social conservation, and suggests ways of resolving these issues.

Purposes  
and Arguments

Physical

Purposes and Arguments for Social Conservation

First, many architects and planners like to think of the major problem of Chinatown's conservation as the controversy between preserving atmosphere and improving environment. The popular conception is that preserving atmosphere hinders environmental improvement. The assumptions underlying this predicament are one, it is necessary to reduce the population density and the number of hawkers to improve the sanitary conditions, and two, the atmosphere is lost when the intensity is reduced. There are some obvious faults with this line of deductive thinking. It is not evident that sanitary condition cannot be improved without reducing the density; the relationship between intensity and atmosphere is more complex, subtle, and less definitive. But above all, the architects and planners tend to forget the reason for conserving Chinatown.

The concerted activities of different groups interacting contribute largely to Chinatown's uniqueness, vitality, and exciting atmosphere. They subsequently prompt our interests in conserving Chinatown. One objective of Chinatown's conservation is to raise the amenity level to facilitate and to perpetuate the functioning of these activities. Improving the physical amenities help to enhance the environment so as to maintain the special qualities we liked. Physical improvement is not the reason why we want to conserve Chinatown. The Pike Place Market in Seattle seems to offer an useful understanding to a similar problem. Conservation is described as:

Not only a restorative process to salvage the physical, it is a way of maintaining the meaningful social interchanges..... conserve the physical structures in order to preserve the poignant, and personal aura of a market place.

: Pike Place Design Report

What identifies Chinatown is something more than the confines of the physical structures. In order to conserve the spirit of Chinatown, we have to search for the social interactions among people beyond the physical attributes.

Second, Chinatown is often recognized for its historic and cultural significance. It was one of the earliest migrant settlements in the city; it had been the focus of social, cultural, and economic activities among the early settlers in Singapore. Chinatown together with the surrounding area is symbolically the birthplace of a population who now enjoys the stable, and 'comfortable' life in a multi-racial society. Chinatown's conservation will be an irony, if it fails to retain the people who have in the course of their lives helped shaped Chinatown, and if it fails to perpetuate the trades and crafts whose conglomeration represent the flourishing of a culture and economy. Moreover, Chinatown also symbolizes the hardships, endurance, struggle, and aspiration of a migrant group. Many of these qualities are found 'lacking' in the younger generations of Singaporeans who have grown up in a material filled and 'comfortable' environment. Social conservation can serve as a reminder of the poignant history of Chinatown. More importantly, it is a reminder of the perseverance and dedication of the migrants, the kind of social ruggedness sadly missed by the present government.

Historic  
and Cultural

Third, Chinatown's greatest economic potential is in tourism. Everyday, twenty thousand pedestrians go through the streets in Chinatown bringing with them enormous economic opportunity. For the tourists, the experience of going through Chinatown is like partaking and watching a staged performance at the same time. The ambiguity between the observer and the observed simulates the feeling of participation in a way of life, even if the feeling is unrealistic. In contrast, the dismal appearance and the failure of many planned tourist attractions like the Handi-

Tourism

crafts Centre seems to imply poor planning decision, and the search in the wrong direction.

Social conservation serves two purposes in tourism. One, it attracts tourists to participate in an urban experience of human interchanges at a less mechanized level. Two, it maintains the diversity, balances, and mixes otherwise missing in the more homogenized society. There is however a paradox in promoting conservation through tourism. On one hand, tourism offers economic benefits that justify conservation. On the other hand, this set of economic activities, frivolous in its demands threatens to displace the low economic activities which attract tourists in the first instance. Yet if tourism is desired for economic reasons, social conservation helps to maintain the diversity needed to balance the negative effects of tourism.

Social  
and Moral

Fourth, social conservation attends to a set of social and moral obligations not achieved by physical conservation. In Chinatown, the residents are portrayed as uninterested to remain; their activities are condemned as unhygienic, and incompatible with societal trends; living in Chinatown is a stigma. These are not the indicators that social conservation is undesirable socially. It shows that societal pressures have always worked against social conservation. As Appleyard explains

Social conservation of working class and poor neighborhood is in conflicts with landuse changes, gentrification, physical conservation, and environmental improvement programs.

: Conservation of European  
Cities

Since conservation always improves the environment making it more attractive to many groups in society, the politics of conservation raise the question of who can benefit from such improvement. Given free market conditions, conservation always takes the economically most advantageous course. People who are economically and socially less competitive tend to loose out in a competitive situa-

tion. Public commitment and intervention are necessary to balance the market interests in conservation. Social conservation can achieve social and moral objectives by assuming the responsibility of assisting the less privileged groups in society, and by demonstrating that humanity exists beneath the materialistic and affluent image in Singapore.

#### Issues in Social Conservation

Issues

If social conservation seems to offer environmental, historic, economic, and social benefits in Chinatown, it certainly does not appear as an obvious option to the architects and planners. The reason is that, apart from the difficulties of maintaining the people, activities and buildings, social conservation encounters societal, economic, and 'structural' constraints. The question is how to balance the level of 'old' and 'quaint' participation in a changing environment while responding to the broader social and national objectives. The following discussion identifies three major issues of conflicts and contradictions in achieving social conservation in Chinatown. They are on conflicts, economics, and norms.

#### Conflicts:

Conflicts

The social, economic, and physical differences between Chinatown and society at large seem to conjure up a set of conflicts which threaten the continual existence of the people and activities. The discussion here aims to verify these conflicts and suggests ways of resolving them.

First, many of the perceived conflicts, like that between the aging population and the 'young' society, and that between the vanishing trades and crafts and the changing demands, are part of the process that society undergoes. The 'old' constantly recedes into the past, and is replaced by the 'young' and 'new'. Since these changes in life and in society are unavoidable and even desirable, an important aspect of social conservation is to monitor the

change so that the past is not prematurely terminated, and the immediate past and present can co-exist under a dynamic circumstance.

Changes can be monitored through documentation, retention, adaptation, and replacement. One aspect of monitoring change may involve retaining the elderly population until they die, and replacing them with another group of residents. Another aspect may involve encouraging the arts and crafts through persuasions and demonstration to adapt to the changing demands, and documenting some as vanishing trades. There is probably no hard and fast rule of resolving the conflicts. The resolution will depend on one or a combination of the strategies to bring about improvements for the people in Chinatown, and subtle changes in the social relationships.

Second, conflicts also result from our expectations and biases. The residents' and society's expectations about Chinatown are often incompatible. Each group views the amenities and demands in life differently. To the architects and planners, Chinatown is dirty, dilapidated, overcrowded, and 'dangerous' to life. To the poor and elderly, Chinatown is a compromise in life. Then there are the biases that the traditional operations and life styles are 'obselete' and 'undesirable' because they serve the aged and underclass in society. The elderly woman who sells half or rotten tomatoes to other elderly like herself does not get a stall space in the proposed market in Chinatown; the junk collection business which offers employment to many elderly men and women is thought of as environmental hazard.

Resolutions to these conflicts involve the rethinking of assumptions, and the bridging of differences between individual and society. There is a need to rethink whether progress necessarily implies growing materialism, whether the lingering bits of legend, if any, are worth more than modernity, and whether non-conformity threatens the operations of the homogenous society. There is also the

need to bridge differences through improvement. Small stalls or table spaces can be rented out daily to the elderly men and women for selling their stuff; the junk collection business can be relocated when the elderly population are gone. Resolutions of conflicts mean that Chinatown cannot remain the same. At the same time, they also demand society to accept more differences and non-conformities.

#### The Economics of Conservation:

Economics

The economics of conserving Chinatown is an illusive problem because the appropriate level of financing to achieve social ends is not easily determined. Maximizing economic gains is detrimental to the social objectives of conservation; subsidizing Chinatown's conservation out of political sentiments is unlikely; supporting the conservation appears probable given the fact that the government has supported previous conservation projects.

Many planners in URA like to think of the problem of economics as a matter of self-financing. The notion of self-financing is appealing because it avoids the political question of subsidy, fulfills the agency's operative mode, and provides the impetus for future conservation projects. But self-financing is a myth because the ambiguity of developer and project boundary deem the idea irrelevant in Chinatown.

Self-  
Financing

Many planners like to blame the lack of private interests as the major hinderance to Chinatown's conservation. The absentee owners and private developers are unlikely to conserve Chinatown given the pro-growth developmental climate in Singapore, the restrictions of conservation project, and the dis-economies in retaining the low-income population. The residents are not in the economic position to rehabilitate the housing. URA has more than adequate resources to conserve many areas in Singapore using its income generated from urban renewal land sales but is weary in recovering the costs. Given the fact that many of Chinatown's residents have low income,

and private interests always seek tangible gains, self-financing as a goal may produce detrimental results by having to displace the residents. Public intervention is therefore necessary to achieve conservation objectives while seeking private participation. Self-financing may be a product of these public and private actions, and cannot be a goal in achieving social conservation.

On the question of boundary, the notion of self-financing is confounded by the ambiguity of the project site. The confines of the conservation site have never been established. Within the Chinatown discussed here, many properties have been acquired and demolished for public housing and urban renewal development. The remainder of the site is needed to maintain the scale of the project. Since governmental actions have significant impacts upon the project, public development like the public housing and urban renewal development ought to be part of the conservation site. In that respect, further demolition to achieve self-financing appears unnecessary considering the tangible gains from the redevelopment projects in Chinatown.

The question of economics is more complex than a matter of self-financing. Given the understanding that subsidizing Chinatown's conservation is politically unappealing, and self-financing is not conceptually and administratively resolved. The question of economics in conserving Chinatown is to optimize economic gains while retaining the population and activities.

The greatest economic potential of Chinatown is in retail, especially in tourism because vast number of pedestrians and tourists go through Chinatown daily. Touristic or retail development can be encouraged. At the same time, they have to be monitored because the dependency and over-specialization of one type of economy tends to threaten the diversity and balance in Chinatown. One strategy of resolving the problem is to maintain the diversity in trade and clientele by introducing middle-income

retail and tourist oriented trades while maintaining the low-income operations. Implicit within this strategy are the assumptions that the compromises between cleanliness and quaintness, and between poverty and interests are necessary. Tourist development can be tourists' shops to infill the vacant and storaged use premises in Chinatown, and can be hotels and commercial development on the fringes of Chinatown. Middle-income retail can occupy the lower levels of the new public housing project and in the proposed market and hawker centre. Some of the traders and craftsmen can be encouraged to adapt to the touristic demand by making and selling arts and crafts. The hawkers can be retained and their facilities upgraded. The low-income population can be maintained through the consolidation and improvement in the tenements. Some of the tenements can be assigned to moderate-income residents. The marginal operators can be provided with daily rented stall space among the hawkers in the streets.

The strategy of maximizing the economic gains is to increase the income from tourists and middle-income shoppers while upgrading the supports for the diverse low-income operations, to balance the old and new uses, and to monitor the fine-grained mix. It is not a simple matter of achieving 'self-financing' in the project. It is the balancing of the tangible and intangible improvements of the population with the touristic and commercial gains of the nation.

#### The norm :

One of the most challenging problems of Chinatown revolves around the issue of norm. That is the way problems are perceived and resolved in the Singapore society. Embedded within the norm is a political belief for achieving equality and equity in the socialist country. The manifestation of such a political prerogative is the norm about problem definition, mode of operation, and the measure of

The Norm



success. The results are often prototypical solutions which in aggregate bring to Singapore an efficient but rigid, pragmatic but narrow work approach. For example, the government wants to improve the environmental standards among the people. Public housing high-rise provides one answer to the problem. The 'success' of public housing has resulted in the belief that public housing represents the ideal housing type for the bulk of the population. The process suggests the desire to achieve some form of equity distribution among the population by providing everyone with the similar type of housing. At the same time , it depicts a single minded approach to effect action. Social conservation, on the contrary, advocates for retaining the resident population and the street activities while improving the environment. It demands changing the mindset about ideal environment. It also requires a more responsive and integrated process in bringing about subtle changes. Resolving the problems of social conservation becomes the rethinking of the norm in the Singapore society.

#### Innovative Approach

First, there is a need for a different and innovative approach to problems among the professionals.

One; a change of mindset about what represents equitable distribution in society is needed. Equitable distribution provides the access to resources in society. It is not the distribution of goods and services.

Two; the definition of problems often misses the real problem. For example, the problem of the hawkers in Chinatown is to find a way to upgrade their facilities and not to build larger or better hawker centres. In fact, upgrading the sanitary facilities along the streets is probably a more responsive, and cheaper approach to the problem.

Three; the fear, inability, and reluctance to deal with non-conformities restrict the solution. In Chinatown, housing and environmental policies are

designed to avoid the hassle of differential treatment, discretion, and exception, and not designed to resolve the conflicts and problems.

Four, professional apathy is prevalent in Singapore. While it is difficult to be radical in the existing political and administrative climate, many professionals simply evade and avoid their responsibilities in bringing about a better social and physical environment. There is the need to re-define problems, search for new solutions, and effect changes in order to achieve social conservation. In fact, this work approach which had been evident in the political process in the struggle for social and economic improvement in Singapore would have to be encouraged among the architects and planners in Singapore.

Second, there is a need to install an integrated working process in Chinatown. The single minded approach of each agency in maximizing its interests and competing with one another results in the fragmented planning decisions. The dividing interests within the agency, and the conflicts between agencies further reflect the idiosyncrasies and ironies surrounding Chinatown's conservation. One solution is to resolve these conflicts and contradictions through a single body. There are a number of considerations in the forming of this body.

Integrated  
Process

One; the strong tradition of Confucian politics enables and demands a top-down directive to empower a body to carry out the goals and objectives of social conservation. In fact, this 'heavenly mandated' form of directive is often used successfully in effecting changes and achieving implementation in Singapore. The task is to solicit political response towards social conservation in Chinatown.

Two; this body has to seek cooperation from existing public agencies. Public agencies in Singapore are powerful bodies within the political structure. Confrontation and competition with these agencies can create antagonisms, and conflicts that hinder a one-time project like Chinatown. One solution is to assign top officials of the HDB, URA,

EDB, STPB, Planning Department, and the Social Welfare Department as members of this body so that the process can be internalized to some extent within the existing agencies.

Three, this body has to be assigned the autonomy to act. A precedent for this form of organization in Singapore is the Central Area Planning Team (CAPT). The CAPT is appointed by the Minister of National Development, and consists of members from various governmental agencies. Its task is to develop a set of coherent and coordinated planning strategies to overcome the paralysis that hinders effective development in the Central Area. One perception of the CAPT is that participating agencies use the process to gain leverage and to delineate duties, the sort of competitive and fragmented process that Chinatown's conservation seeks to avoid.

The body needs to be entrusted with the autonomy to act, and the responsibility to achieve a visible and measurable outcome. Defining the boundaries of the conservation project is crucial; and including within the project site ought to be the public housing project under construction and the urban renewal parcels. Within the site, the body ought to have the power to seek subsidy from the Ministry of National Development, to acquire properties through eminent domain, to negotiate with other public agencies on issues of environmental and social conformance, to relocate the population, and to entice private participation by promoting touristic and middle-income economy. There are obvious contradictions of the body's role in seeking cooperation from other agencies, and in establishing autonomy. But given the fact that agencies in Singapore conform closely to political directives, the drive to achieve visible outcome can overcome agency's differences.

## 6. Summary



Hawker Stall Along Trengganu Street

Singapore's brand of conservation evolves out of a concern to enhance the physical image of the environment and of the reaction to massive demolition. When more modern and tall buildings mushroom among the skyline, architects and planners share a budding interest to preserve the historic and architectural artifacts in the city. Many 'old' and 'ugly' buildings suddenly appear as 'classic' and 'intricate' in the eyes of the professionals.

Physical concerns become almost inherent in the way architects and planners think of conservation. But physical conservation has its limitations in maintaining the feeling we cherished about Chinatown. People and their activities are synonymous with the image of Chinatown. Beyond physical improve-

ment is the need to achieve social conservation, that is maintaining the set of social relationships. The social relationships include the outsiders' 'access' to Chinatown and the residents' 'access' to options to change, and the social and marketing arrangements.

Social conservation is also desirable in Chinatown. It enhances the historic and cultural significance, promotes economic gains through tourism, and achieves social and moral benefits through the protection of a vulnerable group in the affluent society. But social conservation encounters many hinderances in the Singapore society. Economic prerogatives in urban renewal and public housing, national attitudes about cleanliness and greenness, social rhetoric about filial piety, and social pressures about ambivalence are the complexities hindering social conservation. But hinderances do not lead to contention in the Singapore society because there are no conflicting parties involved. Resolution through advocacy, confrontation, and resistance is difficult. Achieving social conservation requires resolving the conflicts and contradictions within the political and social systems.

The conflicts and contradictions in achieving social conservation are social, ideological, economic, and structural issues.

Social and ideological issues stem from the fact that societal changes are inevitable and even desirable. There are always people and activities 'out-of-tempo' with the rest of society. Social issues evolve in the way we decide who and what are 'obselete'. Ideological issues evolve in the way we think about when changes are desirable and the direction of change. The resolution requires the rethinking of assumptions, and monitoring social change while improving the physical and social environment.

Economic issue of Chinatown's conservation is the optimization of economic gains while maintaining other social objectives. Private actions always seek the economically most advantageous route; public interventions are therefore necessary to balance the

varied interests and to achieve desired goals. Self-financing is not the issue of economics without the consideration of context. While tourism represents a viable course for achieving economic gains and for promoting the interests in conservation, it requires the diversity of clientele and activities to protect Chinatown's image as a labyrinth of social interchanges.

The structural issue of social conservation is the way problems are perceived and resolved in the Singapore society. The single minded work approach evolves out of the desire to create a more equitable society; it also brings to Singapore rapid 'progress' and prosperity. But it is encountering increasing difficulties to solve problems in the more complex urban situation. This norm has created some of the inter agency's conflicts and intra agency's inconsistencies. Resolution comes in a change in the work ethic among professionals, and forming a body based on political directives. The body ought to be assigned with the autonomy to act. It has to seek cooperation from other agencies, coordinate an integrated work process, and achieve visible outcomes based on the goals and objectives established.

The conservation Chinatown appeared as a simple problem of preserving the physical image of an environment, involves the resolution of conflicts and contradictions between old and new, past and present, and memories and dreams. The resolution demands the aggregated actions of creating societal response, identifying societal interests, changing mindsets, and resolving structural constraints. And if we can do that, we will not have a legend still. We will have an experience that kindles a sense of belonging.

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