

Identity of a Conserved Housing Estate in Transition: The Case of Tiong Bahru, Singapore

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This paper seeks to explore how identity – the key input for conservation of historically and culturally valuable housing estates in Singapore - is perceived and valued by their residents and ‘outsiders’. Tiong Bahru, the oldest housing estate which was recently gentrified by influx of new businesses and residents and transformed into a hip enclave, is taken as a case study. Together with social and physical surveys, the paper looks at conservation from multiple approaches and levels including institutional, academic and grassroots. Upon comparison, perception gaps are observed between these levels, which call for a comprehensive conservation agenda towards a more socially and culturally sustainable Singapore.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC HOUSING IN SINGAPORE

Singapore has always been planned as a city. Since its founding in 1819, the island of 716.1 km² in the sub-region of Southeast Asia has undergone tremendous physical transformation from a British colonial territory to a young sovereign state. The urban evolution of the city-state can be divided into four stages: New Settlement (1819-1826), Colonial (1826-1955), Merdeka or Self-governance (1955-1965), and New Nation years (1965-present).¹ In the ‘New Settlement’ stage, major ethnic groups were segregated into various specifically demarcated areas along the Singapore River. By the turn of the 20th century, the downtown area of Singapore had become severely overcrowded and been faced with severe traffic congestions and uncontrolled slum growth. In 1927, Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) was established to address these issue by clearing up squatter zones and building public housing estates to shelter the

population, but its efforts were insufficient to cope with the post-war population boom. In 1960, the SIT's successor - the Housing and Development Board (HDB) - was established. In 1965, Singapore was granted independence from Malaysia. During the 'Post-independence' stage of the past four decades of nation building, new concepts and master plans have been continuously developed by the State and City Planning Office (SCP) and later, the Urban Redevelopment Board (URA) to adapt and suit different periodical needs of the growing nation.²

With the historic advancement into nationhood in 1965, it was necessary for Singapore and its government to construct a 'nation' with 'national identities'. The idea was then foreign to many people due to the colonial and immigrant roots of the society.³ One of the most successful drivers in the construction of a 'nation' is the public housing system. Today, the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation of 5.4 million (as of 2013) is densely accommodated in numerous public housing estates island-wide. The HDB - the dominant public sector in public housing provision - has played a significant historical, social, economical and cultural role in defining the Singaporean civic life as well as the development of a sense of belonging and place attachment among Singaporeans.⁴ The SIT built 22,115 units built over a period of 32 years, while the HDB built 30,906 units in just 3 years (1960-1963) to meet the urgent housing needs of the burgeoning population.⁵ After the independence, the subsequent introduction of the Home Ownership Scheme was highly successful in promoting a sense of place and communal identity.⁶ Today, the HDB continues to provide quality and affordable homes for 82% of the population.⁷

Among various public housing estates spanning island-wide, the oldest and most matured ones are located around the perimeters of the downtown or civic districts. Some of the notable estates include Tiong Bahru (the oldest housing estate developed by SIT in the 1930s), Kreta Ayer (adjacent to the Chinatown), Queenstown (the first satellite town built by HDB) and Bukit Merah. These mature estates distinguish themselves from the innumerable newer but ubiquitous high-rise and high-density public housing estates with their unique local historical identity as many of them are fondly remembered as 'heartlands'⁸ by generations of Singaporeans.



Fig. 1 Development of Development of public housing estates in Singapore from 1959-2005
(Source: Koninck et al, 2008)

CONSERVATION APPROACHES IN THE CONTEXT OF RAPID URBAN DEVELOPMENT

While older housing estates continue to be home to many Singaporeans, they struggle to find their foothold and relevance in Singapore’s ever-modernizing cityscape. The rapid urban development of Downtown Core area of Singapore, particularly at the turn of the millennium, has further increased the spatial disparity between the two. In recent years, some estates have been revitalized and thus regained part of their former glory along with the influx of the new and younger population, both locals and expatriates. While these estates still remain familiar in the mind and heart of their longtime elderly residents, their identity is slowly evolving with different changing ‘wants’ and ‘needs’ in terms of lifestyle of the younger and older population.⁹

Although conservation policies in Singapore were first legislated with the establishment of Preservation of Monument Board (PMB) in 1971 and URA in 1974, economic development yet took priority over urban conservation. It was not until the mid-1980s when conservation efforts became more tangible. After the first pilot project of refurbishing a terrace house at Emerald Hill in 1984, detailed studies for the ethnic quarters were subsequently compiled into Conservation Master Plan in 1986 and comprehensive conservation manuals and guidelines in 1988. Master Plan for Civic and Cultural District was also released in 1988, which provided physical framework for Cultural Master Plan for the adaptive reuse of

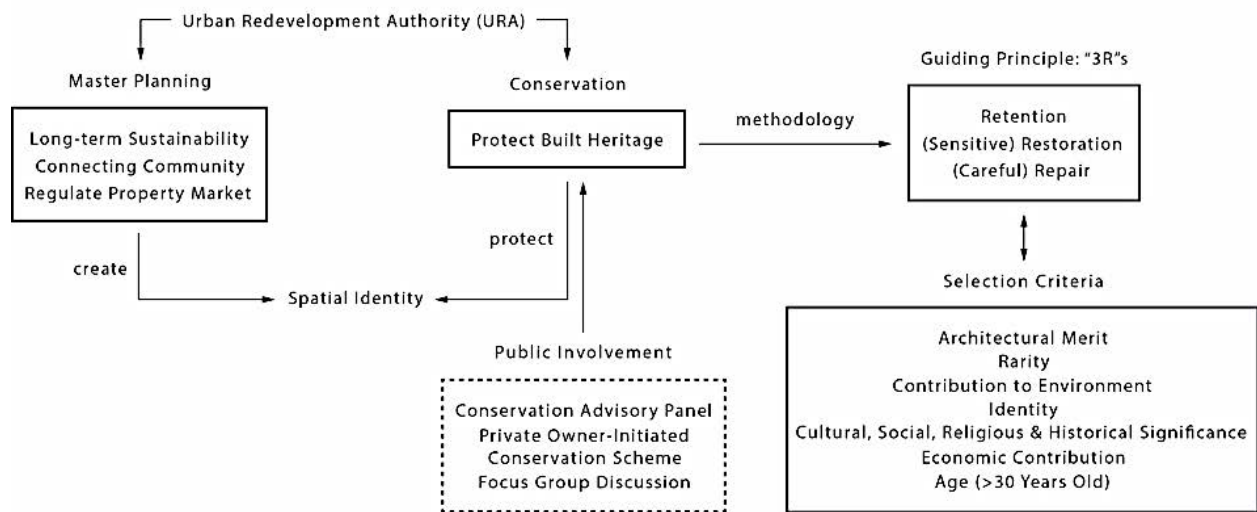


Fig. 2 Conservation approaches in the context of urban planning (Source: Authors)

heritage buildings. Planning Act was subsequently amended and URA became the state’s land use planning and conservation authority. Several factors resulted in such drastic transition from redevelopment to conservation during 1980s include the search for Asian roots and ‘national identity’

after the rapid industrialization and Westernization in the 1970s, the introduction of tourism during the 1985 recession to revive the economy, and the reconciliation of heritage conservation into new urban renewal framework for a more synergetic urban development. With the new conception of conservation fueled by economic pursue, the nation has gradually developed and adopted some major conservation strategies such as ‘public-private collaboration’ and ‘restoration and re-adaptation’ approaches.¹⁰

The government's view and approach on conservation can be understood through representative government agencies such as URA and the National Heritage Board (NHB), a statutory board established in 1993 under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. In a paragraph titled “Protecting Our Identity through Our Built Heritage” (published in URA’s website), the URA described their conservation work as follows:

*“Conservation of our built heritage is an important part of urban planning and development in Singapore. Historic areas like Boat Quay, Chinatown, Kampong Glam, and Little India as they add variety to our urban environment, stimulating visual interest and excitement within the city. The conservation of these buildings and areas in the city and elsewhere in Singapore, is testament to our rich architectural, historical and cultural heritage. Conserving and restoring our historic buildings also adds to the distinctive character and identity of our city. More importantly, they give us a sense of history and memory even as we move into the future.”*¹¹

From this statement, it can be clear that the URA focuses much on the historical and physical aspects of conservation, and targets much on non-residential and touristic areas like the ethnic quarters. The NHB also provides the government’s stance on conservation subject. However, it is seen to balance the physical aspects of identity for conservation with some extent of social values in the communities.¹² This is reflected in NHB’s statement on its mission and role:

*“...Its mission is to foster nationhood, promote identity building, and champion the development of a vibrant cultural and heritage sector in Singapore. As the custodian of Singapore’s heritage, NHB is responsible for telling the Singapore story, sharing the Singaporean experience and imparting our Singapore spirit. NHB manages the national museums and heritage institutions, and sets policies relating to heritage sites, monuments and the national collection...”*¹³

From the academic community, numerous papers have been written on Singapore's conserved built heritage, focusing on colonial buildings such as the renowned Raffles Hotel, as well as the ethnic quarters such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam.¹⁴ While these buildings or places have been conserved as historical heritage to boost tourism, some papers have raised questions regarding the overall effectiveness and impacts of the government's efforts.¹⁵ Studies on national identity have also been mostly approached at the conceptual level based on official governmental data,¹⁶ with a few exceptions. Yuen examined Singapore's attempt to search for place identity and recognized that there was a growing tendency to take into account of lay people's opinions when making plans for conservation areas.¹⁷ Loh collected extensive oral history from the elderly Singaporeans through their experiences of resettlement from an urban kampong (village) to emergency public housing after the great Bukit Ho Swee fire in 1961.¹⁸ While building national identity (most prominently during the 1970s-1980s) was part of the government propaganda to unite Singaporeans for economic development and national security reasons, it is equally important that the subject matter should also be conceived from the ground-up, as the transcending of governmental messages and the actual shaping of the society are interacted over time.

Complementing the institutional approach, in many heritage conservation projects around the world, community participation is increasingly seen as key to success. It helps to acquire more insights of the needs of the community, better adaptability to meet local conditions, and better cooperation spirit within the community itself as well as between the community and external stakeholders. A technical note titled "Conserving Heritage In East Asian Cities: Planning For Continuity and Change" by Getty Conservation Institute¹⁹ addresses the importance of understanding and respecting the public in all its social and cultural complexities. It also guides conservation practitioners on: how to engage the public in the complicated conservation processes, and how to map the assets of the community so that, ultimately, the community will be encouraged to participate more actively in heritage conservation for the benefit of all interest groups, or stakeholders. In Singapore, the concept of community participation in conservation projects is relatively new, little studied and practiced. Therefore, this paper views this issue as a critical research gap to explore, study and test-bed through a concrete case study of Tiong Bahru estate.

TIONG BAHRU: HISTORY, SIGNIFICANCE AND EMERGENT ISSUES

Before 1925, the swampy and hilly terrains of Tiong Bahru were once part of several Chinese burial grounds and an overcrowded squatter zone.²⁰ In 1925, the colonial government conceived plans to clear land, and roads were created and named after famous Chinese philanthropists. In the 1930s, SIT built some of the earliest and traditional shophouses and flats to help address housing shortage, which still

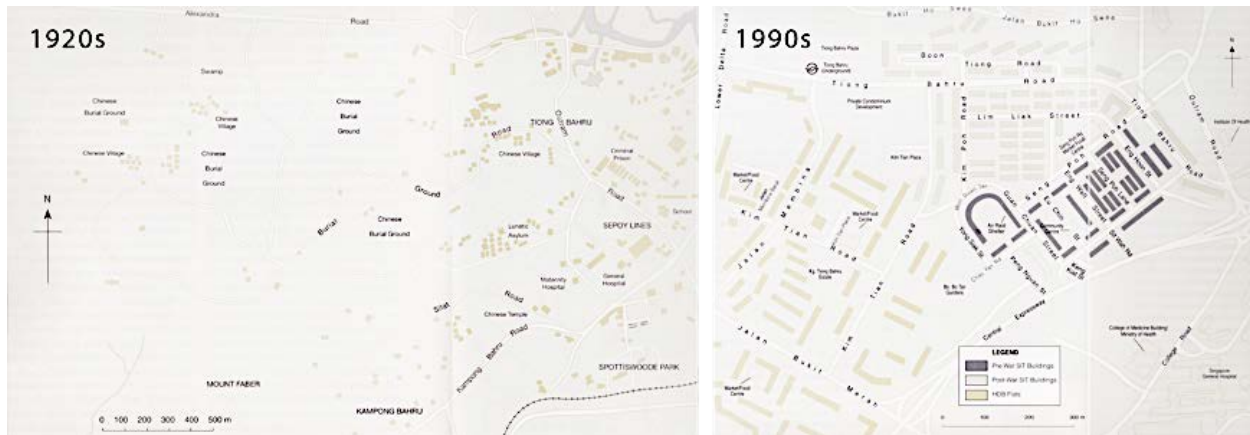


Fig. 3 Development of Tiong Bahru from an overcrowded squatter zone into mature public housing estate (Source: Yeoh, Brenda S.A. & Kong, Lily, 1995)

remain standing icons in the estate today. There were also ornamental Transitional-style shophouses and later on, the simpler and geometric Art Deco style shophouses. The Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) interrupted the development of Tiong Bahru, and only after the war, the SIT continued to build flats in the area.²¹ Following contemporary European concepts of modern social housing and community planning, Tiong Bahru estate marked a milestone in Singapore's public housing development, and introduced modern living concepts to the Asian population by that time.²² When the HDB took over in 1960, more flats were built,²³ and by the 1980s, Tiong Bahru had become an aging estate with its higher-than-average elderly population. When a Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station and a shopping mall were built in the 1990s, the area experienced its first wave of revitalization with the influx of new and younger residents. Residents and visitors of the estate enjoy its quaint quality despite its short distance from the city center.

Tiong Bahru is an exemplary model of first generation public housing in Singapore, demonstrating significant urban design and planning principles. For example, the blocks are clustered around open spaces to form small cozy neighborhoods. The estate was built with simple architectural language (e.g. the distinctive visually attractive rear staircases as part of the architectural identity), simple materials (e.g. reinforced concrete and fair-faced brickwork), variety of apartment sizes to cater for different family sizes and social groups. The flat layout was designed following Malaysian terrace-house pattern with an internal airwell. Overall, the estate is a modern reinterpretation of the traditional single-family urban terraces built with modern materials.²⁴ Tiong Bahru's architectural identity is visually defined by its distinctive architecture - a blend of pre-war 'Streamline Moderne' developments and post-war 'International Style' flats. These architectural styles also incorporated features such as the five-foot way,²⁵ the back stairwell and layouts to suit the tropical climate of Singapore, which are important stylistic predecessor of the HDB flats. The estate is also remembered by both its residents and other people in

Singapore for its expansive variety of fresh goods and local food fare at the well-known Tiong Bahru Wet Market and Food Centre. Tiong Bahru's low-lying streetscape forms a distinctive image that is increasingly disappearing in the middle of rapidly developed high-rise housing blocks. The development of the estate, with its old and new housing developments, is a standing evidence of different layers of different housing development periods in Singapore.

In 2003, a part of Tiong Bahru bounded by Seng Poh Road, Outram Road and Tiong Poh Road received official conservation status from the government. According to URA:

*“Tiong Bahru is dear to many Singaporeans. Its rich history, unique architecture and familiar streetscapes are an important part of our heritage. Altogether 20 blocks of pre-war flats as well as 36 units of shophouses have been conserved so that Tiong Bahru can continue to evolve with the assurance that the identity and charm of the area will be kept. This is possibly the only intact public housing scheme from the period to be found in South East Asia today.”*²⁶

Besides historical and architectural values, to most of Tiong Bahru's residents, the old estate is small but self-contained with a wide variety of retail outlets as well as food and beverage establishments to cater to the daily needs of its residents. This convenience is also apprehended in terms of familiarity where the older businesses in the estate are run by familiar members of the community.²⁷ This reflects the estate's good sense of community and social cohesion.

The NHB works on heritage spaces in the heartlands by drawing on the area's physical and social identity through community engagement.²⁸ For Tiong Bahru estate, the board has conducted an extensive

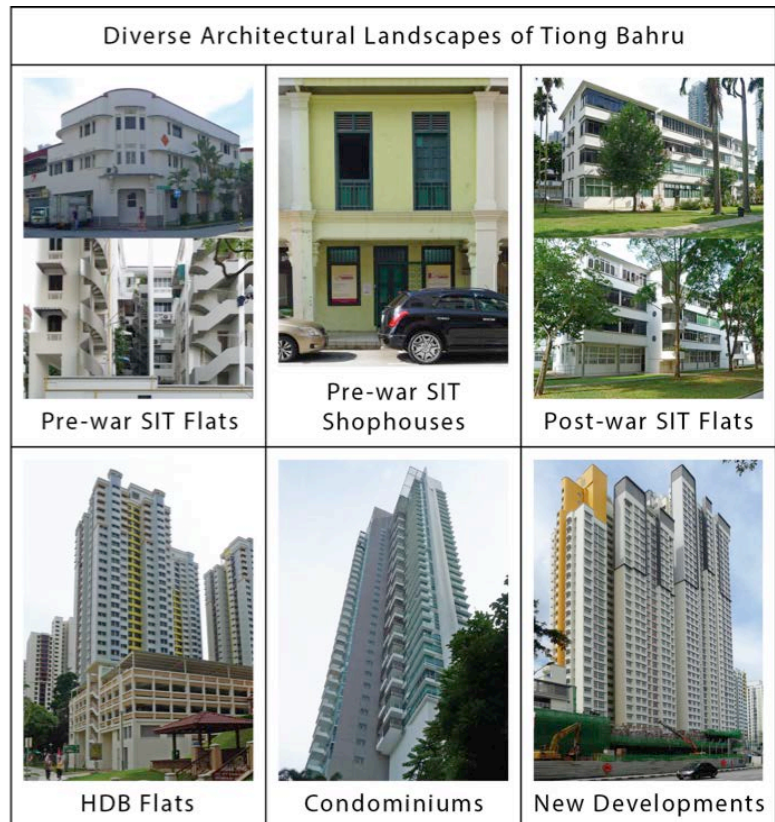


Fig. 4 Diverse architectural landscapes in Tiong Bahru, some of which date back to the 1930s (Source: Authors)

coverage of the public's personal stories and developed a heritage trail to connect not just the residents, but Singaporeans at large.²⁹

In terms of physical built environment, while the conserved buildings are in relatively good conditions, their narrow corridors and unsheltered walkways are below standards of housing estates today. New business establishments are spread out mainly among conserved pre-war SIT flats, shophouses and a few privately owned buildings like Yong Siak court as there are housing units at the first storey of post-war SIT blocks. There have been significant transformation processes in form of adaptive reuse in the estate. As the charm of Tiong Bahru lies in the blend of old and new elements, it is important to observe how the estate transforms and whether people still value the area when these old businesses fade away. Since the late-2000s, non-mainstream commercial activities and services such as upscale cafes with art galleries, boutiques and lifestyle shops have started popping up on the ground floor of many housing blocks in the estate. The thriving businesses of these establishments have allowed the old conserved estate to stay relevant in today's milieu, and brought in compounded effects. First, they have attracted large crowds of young working adults and expatriates, which in turn, not only caused traffic congestion during the weekends but also slight disturbances at late hours, as some of the venues serve alcoholic drinks. Second, the success of this new business model has reinforced more businesses to flock into the area, raising the rental rates significantly. The revenues of many older, traditional businesses and coffee shops (or kopitiam in local term) have suffered and some of them had to close down as a result. However, measures have apparently been done by authorities to issue less F&B (food & beverage) permits to prevent the over influx of new cafes, pubs, bakeries, etc. to retain some 'authenticity' for the estate. Lastly, some elderly residents have moved to either an estate closer to their children or that with better elder-friendly facilities. This relocation trend has given way for an influx of younger residents and expatriates into the centrally located neighborhood, and as the result, the longtime social connection has changed substantially. Despite this demographic change, the senior resident rate in the estate still remains high with 27.9% of residents at 55 years old and above. This percentage is slightly higher than the national average of 22.6%.³⁰ On a smaller scale of each individual block, small but explicit transformations mostly occur at the shop-front passage. As each business establishment expresses its brand philosophy through its interior decoration, a visual belt of myriad spatial expression is created. This carefully curated expression of shopfront space results in a spatial-identity division that starkly contrast itself with the unadorned shopfronts of the older businesses. Furthermore, the active appropriation of corridors and back alleys by the residents and business proprietors further adds on to the eclectic dimensions and spatial division of the estate.



Fig. 5 Diversity of different shopfronts of various styles and periods (Source: Authors)

These waves of urban regeneration has revitalized the once-forgotten old estate and transformed it into one of the most highly sought after address for residences and businesses. Its transformation has received substantial news coverage both locally and internationally,³¹ generating debate as to whether such change is positive or negative towards Singapore's cultural developments and preservation.³² The iconic Tiong Bahru Wet Market and Food Centre has undergone two years of redevelopment and the new building was designed with elements that paid homage to the Art Deco architecture of the surrounding pre-war shophouses. In order to understand these trends, we aim to investigate the physical and social transitions that Tiong Bahru has experienced over the past years.

Upon reading the government's views on the rationale of the decision to conserve Tiong Bahru as published in the URA website, it has become clear that the decision has been primarily based on the historical and physical values of the estate. It is also understood that the government has taken the traditional institutional approach with experts' perceptions on a system of identity and values to be conserved, and this helps achieve certain successful results. However, as generally discussed earlier, it is also equally essential to gather complementary inputs from the Tiong Bahru residents as well as the visitors to the estate to gain new insights to feedback to the conservation plan. Moreover, in a conserved heartland estate like Tiong Bahru that has a large proportion of elderly residents, the rolling waves of gentrification³³ over the recent years have profound and yet-to-be studied effects on its longtime residents and other marginalized groups, which should not be neglected as Singapore is gearing towards an aging society in the near future.³⁴ Therefore, this paper would like to explore in what form the identity is actually perceived and valued by the residents, and how conservation has affected and related to the residents or users of the neighbourhood.

RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation process: This research starts off with *secondary data collection and analysis* in order to gain essential background knowledge and concepts as well as to derive useful information to guide and plan the field survey. It actively sought historical and statistical data, ranging from official reports to

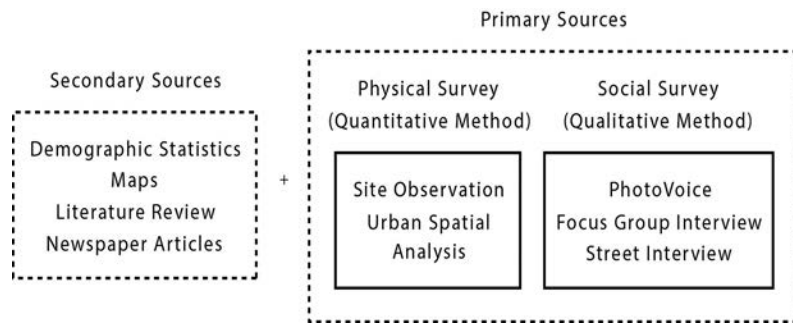


Fig. 6 Research implementation (Source: Authors)

The research adopts both *physical* and *social survey methods* for the fieldwork (in qualitative and quantitative dimensions). The *physical survey* includes *site observation* and *urban spatial analysis*. These methods offer insights into the estate and help to visualize the areas of interest from social, cultural and economical perspectives.

The *social survey* comprises of 3 components. The *Photovoice*³⁵ session is an effort to understand the transformation of Tiong Bahru from the perspective of its longtime elderly residents (aged 55 years and above with at least 15 years of residency). 9 longtime elderly residents were invited for PhotoVoice.³⁶ In the 90 minutes session, the residents were briefed beforehand that they can decide on any route to take and are encouraged to capture anything of significance to them in the neighborhood along the way. The images from the Photovoice session is shown to the elderly residents and used as the foundation and

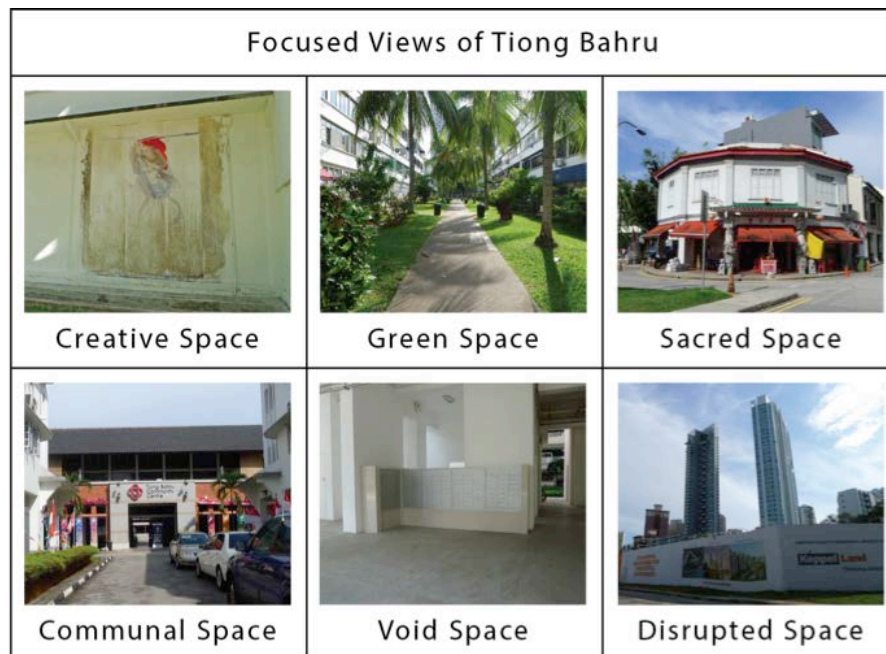


Fig. 7 Focused views of various sites within Tiong Bahru estate taken at street level (Source: Authors)

academic publications and newspaper articles, to investigate and analyze the development of public housing estate, particularly Tiong Bahru.

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catalyst to initiate a discussion during a *Focus Group Interview* session (semi-structured). This helps the team to understand their viewpoints on the transition that their once-familiar and tightly knitted neighborhood has been experiencing. The *Street Interview* (structured) is independent of the other research activities. Through a series of polar and multiple-

response questions, the purpose of the interview is to understanding the perception of different members of the public such as business owners, residents and visitors. The interview is designed to cover thematic questions on the interviewees' attitudes towards conservation in Tiong Bahru before going into more specific questions on their opinions of the presence of new businesses in the estate. A total of 43 residents have participated in this interview.

Results: The secondary data review has shown a significant amount of text written on Tiong Bahru's history, tracing its physical and social development back to its pre-SIT era. The long decades of physical development constitute to the estate's multi-layer landscape which the physical survey explores through the focused views of the different spaces within it. The variety of historically and culturally important architectural styles and their level of diversity in Tiong Bahru's built environment are distinctive and hardly found in other public housing estates. This was also reflected in a respondent's comment during the street interview: "Tiong Bahru doesn't look like Singapore. It has its own identity through the different elements of architecture and spaces in it, especially these small shops."

The data also highlight the significance of architecture and urban planning in the construction of identity and community: The built history inculcates 'a sense of human scale' and 'physical connectedness'³⁷ with the residents, constructing a strong sense of familiarity within the community.³⁸ The physical survey shows how the residents and businesses appropriate the spaces to connect and communicate with each other.

From the Photovoice session, while most of the images taken by the residents are focused on the built environment of the estate, specifically the SIT housing blocks and shophouses, there is a consistency in narrative which allow the research team to differentiate each set of images captured by the residents. This consistency of selected sights and sounds in the estate is not just in lieu with the daily lifestyle practices



Fig. 8 Selected PhotoVoice images taken by elderly residents of Tiong Bahru (Left: Madam H.; Right: Madam L.) (Source: Authors)

of the individual residents, but also reflects the sense of familiarity and belonging towards the older elements of the built environment. From the numerous sets of Photovoice results, two particular sets are singled

out as they explicitly illustrate the connection of the resident's relationship with the estate. The first set of Photovoice images were taken by an elderly resident - Madam H. - who has been living in the estate for the past five decades. This set of images strongly distinguish itself from the others as they only contain scenes of the Tiong Bahru Wet Market. The sole focus on this traditional shopping environment reflects her current personal lifestyle: she lives alone in the house she formerly shared with her family, and due to her advanced age, she limits her daily activities to only the wet market to purchase daily necessities to prepare her own meals. The market seems to be the primary external environment she exposes to besides home. The second set of Photovoice images were taken by another elderly - Madam L. - who has been living in the estate since her childhood. Her set of images also forms a strong narrative that distinguishes itself from the others as they were focused on the green spaces between the housing blocks where she frequently enjoys a slow stroll. The space is appropriated by her fellow residents for recreational purposes, namely al fresco dining, gardening and ball games. Madam L. has also captured several images of her friends living in the same neighborhood, depicting the close relationship and the active social lifestyle she partakes in since her retirement two decades ago.

The comprehensive social survey is completed with interesting results, which are represented in two key topics: conservation and identity.

In terms of *conservation*, the results show that 72.1% of the interviewees know that Tiong Bahru has been a conserved estate. Among them, 42.4% of them attained this piece of information from friends and families. Media is also seen to play an important role in disseminating such information (33.3%). While only a minority of interviewees quoted other sources, most of the responses were of two main categories - the unique architecture that informs the visitors, the information banner at the bus stop and heritage trail information boards erected at historically significant sites of the neighbourhood. From the interview findings, 86% of the participants agree that the estate is worth conserving. 46.2% of them cite the estate's unique architectural style as the motivation for conservation, which is aligned with the URA's viewpoint to make the decision on conservation. For those who agree to conserve Tiong Bahru, they believe that 'traditional' architecture like those in the estate is disappearing in Singapore and hence should be preserved as a reminder to Singaporeans about the nation's history. For participants who do not agree, their reason can be split into two categories. The first group of participants believe that the subject of conservation belongs on the bureaucratic level and therefore as an individual, it is not a matter one can interfere or influence on. The second group, however, thought that the architecture of Tiong Bahru is not that significantly different from other housing estates, citing the estate's high rise residential developments, in order to be conserved. Additionally, few of the dissenters (9.3%) have knowledge about

the estate's rich history or the significant role it played in public housing development in Singapore. There was one specific viewpoint from a respondent who has been working in the estate for several decades that left the survey team a strong impression. This respondent commented that:

“Tiong Bahru has not much attraction with its few public amenities - the lack of a public sports hall and small community center. These old houses don't really have much values in them and they have leakage problems. Residents here face problems such as leakage and the poorly executed housing layout blocks the circulation within the flat. Since the government conserved them, therefore they have become 'valuable'. Conservation benefits the residents only since their properties get better prices in the market. The government should build newer flats instead as they are more useful”.

From the focus group interview, all the elderly residents of Tiong Bahru are well aware of the estate's conservation status. Majority (50%) said their knowledge of this information came directly from URA as most of them frequently participated in the estate's grassroots activities. The print media as well as their friends/neighbors in the estate are also play an important role in disseminating these information within the community. For these residents, the conservation of the buildings helps retain the familiar streetscapes of their neighborhood, creating a 'bank of memories' and also evoke 'nostalgia'³⁹ in them. Nevertheless, there was a resident whose view of conservation left the research team another deep impression:

“Some old shops are still in existence. However, many traditional shops have to bow to time. There is definitely debate on whether they should stay on, but if it is only for the sake of conservation without serving the community, it should go. Change is inevitable. No one can overtake it. You either accept it or leave this place”.

With regards to *identity*, unlike the ubiquitous high-rise and high-density HDB towns, the low-rise SIT flats are a rare sight in public housing estates today. The residents' awareness of the estate's history also contributed towards the intangible repository of the estate's identity.⁴⁰ Some have expressed their pride to live in one of the nation's first housing estate. During the focus group interview, one resident even excitedly quipped Tiong Bahru as 'my dream home!' Although the residents agree that their neighborhood had undergone significant transformations, especially intensified in the past decade, there is a wide spectrum of views. Some cautiously welcome these physical transformation and influx of new businesses as long as they do not affect their existing lifestyles and the 'basic identity' of the estate. One elderly resident who moved into the estate two decades ago due to personal childhood memories of the place enjoys patronizing the new businesses:

“Besides trying out new experiences, I broadcast the good food to all my friends, including overseas ones. The estate has changed and is now more crowded, especially with tourists coming by. Some old shops have gone missing but at the end of the day, [the] most important is that people can still recall this place as a marketing hub and the essence of the old, wonderful corners of the neighborhood”.

From the street interviews, 55.8% of the respondents single out Tiong Bahru’s architecture as the most distinctive aspect of the estate’s identity. 27.9% of the respondents also consider the estate’s diverse streetscape as an important aspect of its identity. However, some felt that the estate, with its suburb shopping mall and newer HDB blocks and condominium, is not much different from other housing estates in Singapore. Different members of the public express the estate’s spatial identity differently. For the younger generation, expatriates and tourists, the non-traditional cafes and lifestyle shops are the neighborhood’s best attractions, making the estate is little touristy. One resident even commented that “there have been tour groups popping out of my windows these days”. To the older respondents, the Tiong Bahru Wet Market and Food Centre is the heart of the area. The iconic market within the local community as well as its position as a well-known public symbol to the rest of the public (e.g. being one of the largest wet markets in Singapore) adds further distinction to Tiong Bahru’ s identity as a place. Interestingly, the local food fare offered in the estate also constitute to its identity (7%). For some, architecture is only a shell and it is the people that makes the place special. One resident expressed that Tiong Bahru is “one of the few places in Singapore with a sense of neighbourhood and I’m friend with all my neighbors”. 11.6% of the street interview respondents expressed that the estate’s ‘less complicated’ local culture differentiates itself from other housing estates in Singapore. This can be attributed to the estate’s relatively low foot traffic, especially during the weekdays, in comparison to other housing estates such as Toa Payoh and Bishan.

Over the years, Tiong Bahru’s identity as a middle class estate⁴¹ has become increasingly ambivalent as the original residents moved out of the estate in the 1990s.⁴² During the focus group interview, the long time residents pointed out that the small expatriate community was growing in recent years. They also expressed a loss of community spirit with the lack of interaction between the elderly local residents and the younger expatriates given intrinsic language and socio-cultural barriers. One elderly resident commented that the expatriates “do not join us with the [community] events”.

Discussion: As a result of the multi-layer and architecturally distinctive built environment, the pedestrian walk-through experience in Tiong Bahru is significant. The distinction can be felt easily when one compares the focused views and pedestrian walk-through experience in Tiong Bahru with that gained in other housing estates, where the view on the street level is barely the endless void deck⁴³ corridor. As the ratio of void deck space on the ground floor in Tiong Bahru is significantly low (because much space are housed with numerous shops or flats), there remains much more ‘street life’ here than other estates, so the entire pedestrian walk-through experience is pleasurable and socially interactive.

The fact that a significant proportion of the respondents knew about Tiong Bahru’s conservation status reflects that people are informed of conservation efforts by the government. However, it can be revealed that conservation is perceived simply as a state affair. Specifically, for the respondents who did not support the idea that the estate is worth conserving, their most common reason is: “that is a matter that [we] should ask the government instead”. It is also worth to note that no respondents explicitly disagree with conservation efforts in the estate. Personal memory plays a significant role in the public perception of whether an estate is worth conserving (e.g. 23.1% of the respondents feel that Tiong Bahru is worth conserving due to the memories they have of the site). This is inadequately reflected in the government’s current conservation guidelines. While personal memories are subjective, the cumulative bank of shared community memories can actually play an important role in recording and retelling the nation’s history.

However, there is a gap of interaction between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ of the estate. While many ‘outsiders’ care about new upscale and carefully curated lifestyle establishments, a number of ‘insiders’ (particularly the longtime residents) concern about the diminishing sense of familiarity they have with their neighborhood due to the intensive external cultural and physical interventions in the area. In-between these two groups of stakeholders lies the third group: new residents of the estate. Given their relatively younger age and higher socio-economical and educational background, they tend to be more welcoming of transition toward gentrification, as it makes the estate more vibrant while retaining bits of its eclectic quaint charm and endearing the community spirit, which is widely lacking in other estates in Singapore nowadays.

While the public is largely supportive of conservation, albeit due to the different vested interest each stakeholder has, the recent revival of Tiong Bahru has triggered a contestation between what is *to be conserved* and what is *not to be conserved* of the architecture conserved a decade ago. Few social survey responses hint at the pragmatism and developmentalist attitudes⁴⁴ towards the estate’s transformations. The adaptive reuse of these conserved spaces by the new businesses have added their own uniqueness in

both tangible and intangible aspects into the overall identity, recognized widely by outsiders of the estate. However, there are also signs of burnout in the estate's development where these new establishments may hardly last long given high rental fees are driving both old and new businesses out of the area.⁴⁵

The recent efforts by local architects to appeal for the conservation of a private housing development built in the 1970s (although the cause is subjected to its validity) reflects a more vested interest from the public to participate in the decision making process to protect the built heritage and urban identity.⁴⁶ This contrasts with the developmentalist attitudes the nation is constructed with.

As analyzed earlier, while the URA seems to focus much on the historical and physical values⁴⁷ of conservation (i.e. historical buildings and urban planning), the citation of the NHB materials such as the Tiong Bahru Heritage Trail in URA's website may hint some form of indirect advocacy on a more balanced view of both the physical and social aspects of conservation.⁴⁸ While the NHB is an influential body on conserving Singapore's heritage, it is not the authority for official conservation-related decision making. From our social survey with Tiong Bahru residents, it can be proven that the values of the physical environment has also been shaped by community spirit and cohesiveness, which somehow more aligns with the NHB's views.

While the increased property values⁴⁹ in the market as well as the presence of white collar expatriate community hint at signs of gentrification in Tiong Bahru, the survey shows a divided public opinion on the topic. When asked whether they feel that the estate is divided in any way, 41.8% feels that there is no division while 53.5% feels otherwise. A minority of 4.7% respondents was unable to respond on the subject, citing the lack of knowledge on the estate.

CONCLUSIONS

Public housing estates in Singapore - where 82% Singaporeans live and dearly call 'heartlands' - have always been the most dominant as well as one of the most significant architectural landscapes in Singapore. There is no doubt that SIT and its successor HDB have been successful in developing a good island-wide public housing system over many decades. The government has also made remarkable efforts in conserving selected significant mature estates like Tiong Bahru. The transformation of the oldest housing estate from an overcrowded squatter zone to a mature public housing estate demonstrates itself as an exemplary model where different periods of housing design and planning principles harmoniously coexist. The charm of Tiong Bahru is carried by its eclectic blend of old and new elements. Since the late-

2000s, its distinctive townscape has been transformed with the influx of non-mainstream commercial activities and services. These businesses have attracted large crowds of younger consumers, raising the rental rates significantly, at the chagrin of the older traditional businesses. These carefully curated new businesses create spatial and identity divisions from the older establishments. Concurrently, the out-moving trend of longtime elderly residents gives way for an influx of younger residents into the estate.

From the physical survey, it can be concluded that the diverse spectrum of focused view images of the estate on the street level offers pedestrians an interactive walk-through experience that defines and makes its spatial identity and quality distinctive. With the relocated residents often revisiting the estate, their presence helps retain familiar faces and mediate the negative impacts of the rapid transformations on its communal identity.

From the social survey, it can be understood that the Tiong Bahru Wet Market and Food Center serves as the heart of the estate. It is not just barely a conventional traditional market for the residents and non-residents from all over Singapore to get fresh daily groceries; the market actually a 'small world' for social interaction and cohesion in the neighborhood, which carries the *genius loci* (spirit of place) of Tiong Bahru. For elderly residents like Madam H. who participated in the Photovoice exercise, the market appears to be her only avenue to socialize and connect to the community at large. With the transition of Tiong Bahru as a housing estate, a 'mini city' with its subcultures (such as cafe culture) has emerged within the small community. At this moment, it is difficult for the respondents and others to tell when and how the new influences and transformations in the estate will exceed an acceptable limit.

Through the case study of Tiong Bahru, it is recommended that the development and/or redevelopment of historically important housing estates should be planned and implemented cautiously to ensure the continued harmonious duality of old and new elements in the estate. In overall, a more comprehensive conservation approach and agenda which incorporates both institutional expert approach and ground-up people-centric one should be considered. The perception gaps between these levels as observed in this paper thus call for a comprehensive conservation agenda towards a more socially and culturally sustainable Singapore.

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²¹ “Place-making: Collective Representations of Social Life and the Built Environment in Tiong Bahru.” In *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, edited by Yeoh, Brenda S.A. & Kong, Lily, 88-115. Singapore: Times Editions, 1995. (Can be shorten subsequently)

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Yong, Debbie. "New faces in old places." *The Business Times*, June 1, 2013.

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Student volunteers from the College of Alice and Peter Tan (CAPT) of the National University of Singapore (NUS) were involved to assist the elderly residents. Two to three student volunteers accompanied an elderly resident on a 90 minute walk through the neighborhood (The students should only ask the residents on their experiences and history of the site but should not intervene in the decision making of route as well as places or things of significance the resident choose to capture).

³⁶ The 9 elderly residents participating in the Photovoice session were invited through the efforts of the Seng Poh Residents' Committee.

³⁷ “Place-making: Collective Representations of Social Life and the Built Environment in Tiong Bahru.” In *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, edited by Yeoh, Brenda S.A. & Kong, Lily, 88-115. Singapore: Times Editions, 1995.

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³⁹ Nostalgia is widely defined as a complex emotion that has been historically conceptualized by scholars as a conflation with homesickness. In the past recent decades, it has been redefined as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past”. Scholars today view nostalgia as a reference to “fond, self-relevant, social memories”. For full account, the reader may want to consult Hepper, Erica G. et al. “Pancultural Nostalgia: Prototypical Conceptions Across Cultures.” *Emotion* (2014), Vol 14(4): 733-747.

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