01
Celebrating Singapore's conservation movers

08
Hotels, history and treasure hunting

14
How to create cities that last?
CONTENTS
01 Celebrating Singapore’s conservation movers
08 Hotels, history and treasure hunting
10 Singapore — an architectural powerhouse?
14 How to create cities that last?
18 New guideline ensures variety of housing sizes
20 Connecting the city underground

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Celebrating Singapore’s conservation movers
By Serene Tng
WINNERS OF THE 2012 URA ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AWARDS

CATEGORY A
101 Jalan Sultan
THE SULTAN
469 Bukit Timah Road
BUKIT TIMAH CAMPUS

CATEGORY B
32 Maxwell Road
MAXWELL CHAMBERS
77 Bencoolen Street
SPACE ASIA HUB
51 Joo Chiat Terrace
The 2012 URA Architectural Heritage Awards were given to dedicated owners, insightful developers, creative professionals and thoughtful contractors of five outstanding projects.

At a presentation ceremony on 5 October 2012, Acting Minister for Manpower and Senior Minister of State for National Development, Tan Chuan-Jin handed out the URA Architectural Heritage Awards (AHA) to five winners for their exceptional work in heritage building conservation and restoration.

The five winning projects exemplify the highest standards within the conservation movement and have gone beyond what is necessary to sensitively restore their heritage buildings for continued use.

They include: (i) a charming boutique hotel, called The Sultan, that was imaginatively transformed from a former printing press; (ii) a beautifully restored historic campus — the NUS Bukit Timah Campus; (iii) an impressively-refurbished International Arbitration Centre at Maxwell Road; (iv) a pre-war bungalow turned premium furniture gallery — the Space Asia Hub at Bencoolen Street; and (v) a traditional residential home at Joo Chiat Terrace with bold and literally “cool” internal spaces.

In his welcome address, Minister Tan reminded the community that “conservation buildings are only as good and meaningful as the people who cherish, restore, maintain and responsibly use them...Over the past 23 years, we have conserved close to 7,100 buildings and structures in over 100 areas within the confines of our island home of 714 square kilometres...this is no mean feat for a small and young nation.

However, conservation is not and cannot be just a numbers game. We are keenly aware that the process by which we conserve and the quality of conservation greatly matter too. Although it is not possible to conserve every old building that is memorable and meaningful...due to our limited land and space, we (the Government) will continue to explore ways to engage and partner the community to seek views on further protecting and enhancing what we have already conserved, as well as identifying buildings that are historically significant and meaningful to many Singaporeans for possible conservation in the future.”

He also shared the good news that the Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital and the Subordinate Courts will be conserved. They are good examples of how URA worked closely with partners and stakeholders to sustain the older buildings and the established uses that have made the sites important to the wider community. Although both buildings will undergo expansion and restoration works, they will continue to be used as originally intended.
101 JALAN SULTAN
THE SULTAN
a boutique hotel development
Category A winner

Ten outstanding specimens of ornate Late to Art Deco shophouse-style buildings, circa 1900 to 1940s, have been imaginatively transformed into a regal boutique hotel where vintage charm has checked in for a long-term stay.
469 BUKIT TIMAH ROAD
BUKIT TIMAH CAMPUS
a tertiary education institution

Category A winner

Sensitively adapted for reuse as modern classrooms and lecture theatres equipped with the latest technology, the historic Bukit Timah campus continues to inspire its present-day students.
32 MAXWELL ROAD
MAXWELL CHAMBERS
the International Arbitration Centre
Category B winner

Through an intriguing fusion of old and new, the former Customs House building, circa 1932, has been impressively refurbished for its new function as the International Arbitration Centre.
77 BENCOOLEN STREET

SPACE ASIA HUB
a premium furniture gallery

Category B winner

These pre-war buildings (Units 71 & 73: a former bakery and Unit 81: last used as a hotel) have been respectfully updated to meet their modern purpose as a singularly stunning, and commercially attractive upmarket gallery for premium furniture.
51 JOO CHIAT TERRACE
a residential development
Category B winner

The expert façade restoration of this Late-style residential terrace, as well as the bold reversal of its internal spaces, and retention of natural ventilation, makes this achievement something to flip over.
Skyline talks to the men behind two winning projects at this year’s Architectural Heritage Awards. There’s treasure to be had, they say.

When you are rooting around century-old Singaporean buildings, what are the odds that you will stumble upon forgotten treasures? Pretty good, if Mr Ong Poi Hwah, owner of The Sultan Hotel, and Mr Tan Kok Hiang, lead architect of the Maxwell Chambers restoration, are to be believed. “We found a very old safe box; I think it was over 100 years old,” says Mr Ong. “I wanted to keep it,” he says, “but we lost it (during renovation).” Disappointing, but in the end, the 64-room boutique hotel is the real jewel — nestled in the heart of Kampong Glam, The Sultan is a glittering tribute to the area’s past. The judging panel of the URA’s Architectural Heritage Awards (AHA) certainly felt the same way, praising Mr Ong’s “deep appreciation and respect for the inherent qualities of this development.”

Forum Architects’ Mr Tan, who worked on refurbishing Maxwell Chambers as an International Arbitration Centre, was also praised at the AHA. And yes, he found treasure of sorts, too. At a roughly 16-month timeline, Mr Tan explains that the restoration was a complex and difficult project. “You’ve got to keep your eyes open all the time, because you get these little wonders,” he says, his own eyes shining with enthusiasm.

Wonders like uncovering the original trusses in the Chambers’ fourth-storey ceiling space. Working carefully, Mr Tan’s team restored several old trusses, prominently displaying one in the room. The find exemplifies the architect’s feelings about preserving the past: “It’s not the most beautiful thing in the world — I think it’s actually uglier than what we had designed for the space, but it is important, so we kept it.”

The challenges of change

Mr Tan added that one has to be constantly vigilant on a conservation project. “In a job like this you’re thinking, ‘Okay, what’s the stuff I shouldn’t touch?’ The main thing for us was that we didn’t want to change anything facing Maxwell Road.”

Sitting in the resplendent lobby of The Sultan, Mr Ong explains that they did not change any of the building’s exterior either. “It’s an old building,” says Mr Ong simply, “and it is here to preserve the memories of Singaporeans.” As a developer who owns two budget hotels, both preserved buildings, Mr Ong is not in it for the profit — it is a labour of love. For The Sultan project alone, he put in roughly $17 million. “Plus furnishings and so on, it amounted to about $30 million,” he reveals. But the result of such difficulties, says Mr Ong, is a building that functions as a hotel, museum and piece of art. Gesturing at the little touches around the lobby — the period floor tiling in the lobby, the intricate sculptures on
the exterior pillars — he explains why he and the architect, Mr Tan Kay Ngee, worked so painstakingly to create an authentic piece of history: “It’s important that tourists don’t just see areas like Orchard Road everyday, where the buildings are all the same. They should have a chance to see old buildings like this.”

Guide to the future
For Mr Tan Kay Ngee himself, URA’s guidelines on conservation were a constant help. Comprehensive and detailed, Mr Tan explains that “they serve almost as a ‘rules of the game,’ so that conservation work can be checked at all stages. At the same time, they allow for creative interpretation.”

Moreover, Mr Tan says he is grateful for the AHA — and not just because he nabbed one of the awards. “They set a high standard for preserving old buildings that could otherwise have gone unnoticed, or worse,” he sighs, “replaced by new commercial developments.”

A sense of the past
Statements like that show just how much passion drives the men and women who meticulously reshape and refresh Singapore’s landscape. And they consider details an ordinary person could easily miss. Forum Architect’s Mr Tan Kok Hiang has an example: the interior lighting of Maxwell Chambers. A small facet to some, it is one of his favourite details of the now world-famous arbitration facility.

From the beginning, his team decided on a very low light level. “We believe in creating a calm space for the hearings. People are nervous, edgy, not always the happiest of people.” The solution, he says, was to create a dim, almost hotel-like feel. He is pleased with the calmer atmosphere, because it is not just about the building. “It is about the attitude towards the use of energy,” he notes. “That one sensory change affects everything.”

Change is an important issue in a small country like Singapore, but with architects and owners like these taking up the URA challenge of conservation, we can be sure that it is always tempered with respect for the past. Before he handed out the AHA awards, Acting Minister for Manpower and Senior Minister of State for National Development, Tan Chuan-Jin, had this to say: “In my view, the tangible aspects of our past — be it our nation’s conserved buildings, or your personal heirlooms — are in our hands for only this short period of time. Borrowing a phrase from a famous watch advertisement, we do not own these conserved buildings, but merely take care of them for the next generation.”
Singapore — an architectural powerhouse?

By Iliyas Ong
The World Architecture Festival made its Singaporean debut in October 2012, but what does that mean for our city?

For the first time in its five-year history, the World Architecture Festival (WAF) moved out of Europe — and onto our shores. The annual event, held this year from 3 to 5 October 2012 at Marina Bay Sands, is one of the architecture industry’s most prestigious. And with it, the suggestion that Singapore’s architecture scene could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the world’s elite.

Mr Paul Finch, Director of the WAF, certainly thinks we’re headed in that direction. “Singapore has demonstrated a real belief in the power of design to transform people and places for the better,” he says. The decision to move WAF here, he adds, was partly because of the country’s intensive promotion of architecture and design among local and overseas architects alike.

Mr Finch compares the WAF to a “layer cake” made up of awards, a seminar programme, exhibits, and a student charrette, all aligned along this year’s theme of “Rethink and Renew”. Acclaimed architects from across the globe, such as Thomas Heatherwick and Moshe Safdie, who is responsible for Marina Bay Sands itself, came together to discuss issues including climate, smart cities and the way we think about architecture today.

And, unlike other architecture events, the WAF is more democratic, notes Mr Finch. “Awards are not defined by geographical or other limiting factors, for example by looking only at particular building types or material,” he explains. “We look at everything.”

Over 500 entries, both built and future projects, were submitted to WAF this year, with a record number of Asian designs. Winning Singaporean projects this year included Gardens by the Bay as World Building of the Year, and Kallang River Bishan Park as Landscape of the Year. Praising the Gardens by the Bay, Mr Finch commended its “radical and technical examinations” and “lines of enquiry that will be immensely useful to the profession.”

The festival will be in town for at least three years, and Mr Finch appears excited to take it to new heights from its Singapore base. “We would like to expand the WAF audience, strengthen our awards programme and reinforce the role of the festival as the must-attend annual global architecture event,” he says.

“I think too much emphasis has been placed on style. We need to correct this imbalance.”

— Theodore Chan

WAF: THE DIGITS

3 DAYS

30 AWARDS

40 INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED SPEAKERS

60 COUNTRIES REPRESENTED

527 EYE-CATCHING GLOBAL PROJECTS DISPLAYED IN THE WAF FESTIVAL GALLERY

5000 DELEGATES HAVE ATTENDED SINCE THE FESTIVAL LAUNCHED IN 2008
Beautiful city

The question still lingers: What does the WAF mean for Singapore, a city whose urban design was once derided by the renowned architect Rem Koolhaas in his book *S,M,L,XL*?

The answer is change. Since Koolhaas’s barb, thrown over a decade ago, Singapore has evolved into a much different city with a much different skyline; take the School of the Arts and The Pinnacle@Duxton as evidence of local architecture’s growing quality and maturity. It even led the eminent New York Times architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff to proclaim, in 2007, Singapore’s cityscape as one of the best in the world. The WAF is the icing on that cake.

To Mr Theodore Chan, President of the Singapore Institute of Architects, the WAF also means recognition for the “good work that Singapore architects have done.” Having the festival here, he explains, can only raise our profile and make the rest of the world stand up and take notice of what he calls “our beautiful city.”

Mr Finch is one of those who has already gaped at the citadels of our skyline. In fact, he considers us “pretty lucky” to have the standard of architecture we do when compared to other regions, the Gulf for instance.

Of particular interest to the WAF Director is the new Gardens by the Bay. “It’s absolutely fascinating as a story,” he enthuses, “because it combines nature with the man-made in a very definite way: reclaimed land, sophisticated natural ventilation systems, complex geometries and structure. All to house plants and trees that would not survive in Singapore’s climate. Amazing!”

For the moment, Mr Chan singles out government projects — schools, amenities, MRT stations — as significant measures of Singapore’s architectural development. URA’s Architecture & Urban Design Excellence programme is one initiative that proactively promotes well-designed buildings and spaces through exhibitions, seminars, workshops and design competitions. “These will only serve to fuel our architects’ creative passion,” Mr Chan affirms.

More to come

But those superstructures do not mean Singapore has already clinched it. Mr Chan does not think the city is an architectural powerhouse at the moment, but believes it is only a matter of time before that becomes a reality: “I think at this point, we’re more a city that cannot be ignored. We show great promise of better things to come.”

And they will come. More buildings that are as innovative as they are visually stunning are due to sprout up, such as the new regional headquarters of Lucasfilm. Designed by Aedas and modelled after a popular Star Wars vehicle, “The Sandcrawler”, as the property is called, has already won several awards — and its doors have not even opened.

Mr Chan believes more can be done. As a first-world city in the equatorial belt, Singapore is in a prime position to lead the world in climatic response architecture and sustainable technologies in buildings — both also key themes in the WAF. “We ought to arrest the lead in such technologies for an updated architecture that suits our climate,” says Mr Chan. “I think too much emphasis has been placed on style. We need to correct this imbalance.”

“We’ve only just begun, really.”

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3 names to look out for (and their projects)

1) Moshe Safdie (Holocaust History Museum, Jerusalem; Marina Bay Sands, Singapore; United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C)
2) Wolf Prix (Great Egyptian Museum, Cairo; SEG Residential Tower, Vienna)
3) Ma Yansong (Art and City Museum, Ordos City, Mongolia; Absolute Towers, Mississauga, Canada; Hutong Bubble 32, Beijing)
How to create cities that last?

By Arti Mulchand
Build with your heart as well as your head — American landscape architect Ms Martha Schwartz talks about what it means to create meaningful spaces, some of the challenges of America’s urban sprawl and how Singapore is on the right track in driving sustainability.

Ms Schwartz has some clear ideas about what makes for a well-planned, liveable city. Big, for example, is not necessarily better. She’s not a fan of the way American cities have sprawled themselves out. “More than half the downtown area of Atlanta is used up for parking and people go in to work and then get out to the suburbs. All that’s left in the centre at night is an empty city.” She adds that a lack of investment in improving public transport means car dependency is intense in American cities. And with urban flight goes the good schools, businesses that support day-to-day living and the overall vibe of a city.

So, what would she do if the reins were in her hands for a day? “I would restrict development, create financial hardship for car dependency and incentivise businesses to come back into the city. I would also figure out how to make the city attractive to live in — by creating open spaces and parks, or bringing back street performances and culture. I would take down a lot of highway infrastructure and get people on the ground. I would do what is right for more people in the long term... create a liveable city,” she concludes.
Softer side of sustainability

Some of the missing elements make up the “softer side of sustainability” which Ms Schwartz is a strong advocate of. Often the work of landscape architects goes beyond the technical aspects of creating a city, and looks at the softer elements — how people experience the city, get from one place to another, or imbibe a space with value.

“In many places, sustainability is only understood in terms of how to maintain the health of the ecological system or — and most often — technology, and how it can help us operate or live in buildings and drive our cars. When creating spaces, technology and linear thinking tend to take over.

“But the reality is that human beings’ emotions operate more forcefully than their intellects. So it is only logical that to make systems work properly, human nature, culture and values have to be acknowledged when thinking about how to create value in our living spaces,” she explains.
Part of the trick to designing for an “emotional world” lies in involving things like landscape design at policy and planning stages, as opposed to as an afterthought, explains Ms Schwartz, who studied art since she was a young girl and “wandered” into landscape architecture because she wanted to “build big art out of landscapes”.

“People are more comfortable relying on things that are quantitative and factual but may not be aware of how their environments affect them. We don’t often think about why something feels good, but beauty and design are more than the cherry on the cake. They create desire, pleasure and identity. It is an economic driver,” she says.

Spaces also need to acknowledge social issues: cities with high degrees of immigration demand social spaces where people can meet, creating a culture of integration. Similarly, Ms Schwartz, who has lived in London with her husband and youngest of three children for the last six years, was drawn by its culture, street performances and art.

Create spaces that people value, and they will maintain them, she adds. “People want to live in places of beauty, that offer a lifestyle that they aspire to or hope to have or can have. The issue of design is important — what does it look and feel like? Do you feel good or are you a cog in a giant wheel? We need to make places that people want to continue to be in. A sustainable city has the capacity to endure. Cities last when they are valued,” she says.

**Model for cities**

The commitment to and creation of that value is something that stood out to Ms Schwartz during her trip to Singapore in February 2012. She spoke on the softer side of sustainability at URA’s regular speaker series under the architecture and urban design excellence programme. During that time, she visited several of Singapore’s green spaces, including Gardens by the Bay, the Singapore Botanical Gardens and HortPark.

“Singapore is a magical place and is a leader in sustainability... a heaven of parks and landscapes. The agenda of greening the city and taking care of the trees, you don’t find that almost anywhere. The different organisations worked well together and were familiar with what others were doing, and it felt like everyone was on the same page.” It makes Singapore a model for cities that are early in their development and contemplating how to develop in a healthy, sustainable way — one that also promotes better ecological balance, she adds.

“Singapore may be motivated by money like everyone else, but there is a top-down structure that ensures public land and ecologies are protected. Singapore has invested in its open spaces as a way to attract people to live and work here. Why would people come if it were a nasty, ugly place? The leadership really understands that,” she says.

But even if the idea of sustainability and incorporating it into urban landscapes may not yet be universally understood, Ms Schwartz says she is encouraged by the gathering buzz around it. “People are just discovering how interconnected everything is and sustainability is new to us, so you can’t fault people for not knowing,” she says. “We must start to help towards a common goal of saving ourselves. They may be grasping for straws but that is better than not grasping at anything at all.”

Ms Martha Schwartz is a landscape architect and artist with a major interest in urban projects and the exploration of new design expression in the landscape. Her background is in both fine arts and landscape architecture. As principal of Martha Schwartz Partners in Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, UK, her goal is to find opportunities where landscape design solutions can be raised to a level of fine art. She has over 30 years of experience as a landscape architect and artist on a wide variety of projects with a variety of world-renowned architects.
New guideline ensures variety of housing sizes

To manage the proportion of small housing units in the suburban areas, URA has introduced a new guideline that will put a cap on the number of homes that can be built in each non-landed private residential development outside the Central Area.

This will discourage new developments from providing mainly “shoebox” units but yet give developers the flexibility to offer a range of homes of different sizes to meet the needs of various demographics and lifestyles. “Shoebox” apartments are typically 50 sq m or less.

Under the new guideline, which will take effect from 4 November 2012, the maximum number of homes in non-landed private housing projects outside the Central Area will be capped based on an average area of 70 sq m. This is comparable to the average size of a three-room HDB flat.

Number of “shoebox” homes to increase

There are about 2,400 completed “shoebox” units as at end of 2011. This figure will grow more than four-fold to about 11,000 units by the end of 2015. Furthermore, developers are proposing more and more new housing developments comprising a disproportionately large number of “shoebox” units.

“Shoebox” units tend to appeal to singles, retirees and couples without children. However, they do not cater...
Last November, URA introduced a limit on the number of housing units that can be built on private non-landed residential developments within gross plot ratio of 1.4 and other low-density residential estates due to infrastructure concerns within these estates. A more stringent guide was imposed for the Telok Kurau estate, based on an average area of 100 sq m. This was due to the more severe ground conditions in the estate, arising from the rapid injection of a large number of units through redevelopment of existing landed houses. This resulted in significantly higher traffic volumes and congestion along the existing narrow local access roads. The more stringent formula would ensure that redevelopment in the estate will be at a pace and density that the local road infrastructure can accommodate. Homeowners had welcomed the move to improve their living environment.

From 4 November 2012, the same stringent guideline applied to Telok Kurau will be extended to all flat and condominium developments in Kovan and Joo Chiat / Jalan Eunos estates. These two clusters have similarly seen more housing developments with large numbers of units proposed in recent years. If left unchecked, these areas could potentially end up facing more severe infrastructure conditions in the future. The new guideline will ensure that the extent of redevelopment will be in tandem with the provision of local infrastructure within these estates.

More stringent rules for congested estates

It is with these considerations in mind that URA decided to introduce the new guideline. It only applies to non-landed private housing projects outside the Central Area, where larger households and families typically live. URA’s guidelines are monitored and reviewed regularly to take into consideration socio-demographic and lifestyle changes.
Connecting the city underground

By Valerie Yeo
URA has grown its plans for the Underground Pedestrian Network within the city centre. To help realise the Central Area Underground Master Plan, URA has also doubled an existing Cash Grant Incentive that reimburses building owners for the cost of constructing underground pedestrian links. More planned underground links are also now eligible under this scheme. Within the city centre where MRT stations are located underground, the underground links provide all-weather, seamless and direct accessibility for rail commuters, shoppers and tourists to the surrounding developments.

In recent years, the Underground Pedestrian Network at Orchard Road and within the Central Business District (CBD) and Marina Bay have grown significantly. This is due to the redevelopment of some of the adjacent sites as well as the sale of sites under the Government Land Sales Programme where the construction of underground links have been specifically included as planning conditions to the redevelopment plans or as conditions of tender to the sale of the sites. These include the underground links between ION Orchard and Wheelock Place and from Orchard Central to Centrepoint. At Raffles Place, one can now walk in comfort all the way from the MRT Station to the Marina Bay Financial Centre, through One Raffles Quay and The Sail@Marina Bay.

However, in existing areas like Orchard Road and the CBD, such underground pedestrian links can only be realised when the existing developments undergo redevelopment or major works. As part of the planning approval process, URA will guide the developer to include the construction of the underground links as part of the new development.

Under the Cash Grant Incentive Scheme, URA reimburses the developers for the cost of constructing links. In response to stakeholder feedback, URA has increased the Cash Grant rate to take into account current construction costs. In addition, the pedestrian walkway component and the vertical circulation (e.g. escalators, lifts and staircases) of the underground links can now also be exempted from being computed as part of the Gross Floor Area (GFA) exemption.

The construction of the underground links by developers or building owners, allows for the underground links to be fully integrated with the adjoining developments, leaving the streets and pedestrian malls free of standalone entrance or exit structures, ventilation shafts and electrical substations, and thus providing more space for pedestrians and streetside greenery. Developers are also given the opportunity to consider including retail or food and beverage outlets along the underground links that can form an extension of their developments and help to enhance the pedestrian experience along the underground links.

As part of the revised Cash Grant Incentive Scheme, URA has also increased the number of eligible underground links from the initial 11 links to 20 links. These now include 12 links in Orchard Road, two in the Central Business District and four in Downtown (North). Two existing links in Orchard Road have also been identified as eligible under the Cash Grant Incentive if building owners carry out works to upgrade these links: between Lucky Plaza and Ngee Ann City, and between Tangs Plaza and Shaw House.●
To make Singapore a great city to live, work and play in.

URA was conferred the 2012 Downtown Pinnacle Award by the International Downtown Association (IDA) — an international association that champions vital and liveable urban centres — for presenting i Light Marina Bay 2012, Asia’s first sustainable light art festival.

The festival snagged one of two Pinnacle Awards presented in the category of Events and Programming. “URA’s project received this prestigious award for demonstrating excellence in downtown management”, said David Downey, IDA’s President and CEO. “Each year the IDA Awards Jury honours the very best programmes and projects in each category to recognise great work and most importantly to set the standard for best practice in our industry. i Light Marina Bay is a wonderful example for all downtowns to emulate.”