

PHT *newsletter*

PENANG HERITAGE TRUST • PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG

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The Nara Symposium

The 4th Annual Symposium of the Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation (AWPNUC) held from 27 to 30 October 1995 in the city of Nara, Japan.

Lim Hooi Siang reports.

The Participants

THE SYMPOSIUM, ORGANIZED BY THE NARA Machizukuri Center Incorporated, was a big success. Over 200 participants attended it. They were from non-governmental organizations, government agencies, universities, and the private sector. 10 countries were represented.

The first day started with the participants taken on a guided tour of Naramachi, the old section of Nara city, to look at several shophouse restoration projects. This was followed by the opening ceremony officiated by the Mayor of Nara City at the historic Nara Hotel. The participants later also took in an excursion to Horyuji Temple, which was registered as a World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 1993, and to Imai-cho, an historic merchant town, a conservation area protected under Japanese law.

PHT members who attended the Symposium included Dr Choong Sim Poey, Loh-Lim Lin Lee, Lim Hooi Siang, Tengku Idaura Ashkandar, Alex Koenig, Victor Chin, and Penny Ramsay.

The Theme

The main theme of the symposium was "Succession and Development of Historical Streets and Living Culture of Shophouses for the Future". The Penang Heritage Trust was given the honour of delivering the keynote address. Dr Choong spoke on the future of conservation in Penang and the role of NGOs while Ms Loh-Lim gave an impressive account of the activities of the PHT.

Meetings were held concurrently to discuss: (1) Livability of Residents; (2) Workmanship; (3) Amenity, and (4) The Age of NPO, NGO and International Exchange. Tengku Idaura presented a paper on The Heritage Centre Penang in one of the sessions.

The Nara Declaration

AWPNUC held its secretariat meeting on the final day to draft the declaration of the Symposium. The Nara Declaration contained four main points: (1) The call for the conser-

vation of historic urban environments and the recognition and enhancement of their value; (2) The idea of co-existing with nature and the historic environment; (3) The call on local residents, citizens and non-profit civic organizations to play the main role in addressing the above issues; and (4) The need for cooperation among NGOs and with the government.



Talk and Slide Show and Panel Discussion

Urban Development in Japan: Learning from the Ancient City of Nara

Speakers and Panelists

Dr Choong Sim Poey

Ms Loh-Lim Lin Lee

Tengku Idaura

Alex Koenig

Saturday 20 January

8.00pm

Malaysian-German Society

Ayer Itam Road

(See Location Map)

Light refreshments will be served

Shift in Focus

The Nara Symposium was a great success in many ways. The most significant point arising from the presentations and discussions was the shift in focus of the urban conservation movement from the technical and legal aspects of preserving historic buildings and structures to a philosophical and spiritual viewpoint whereby local residents and citizens should be able to enjoy life in the historic quarters of the city. It clearly demonstrated the importance of local initiatives in urban conservation and the need for cooperation with all sectors including the government. The fact that the cities in Asia are at different levels of development was noted. Noted also was that it is only through inter-

national networking among non-governmental conservation groups that we can effectively promote and sustain efforts in preserving the historic environments of these cities.

Nara City

"Nara was the oldest capital of Japan (710-784), and was the cradle of Japanese culture, arts and crafts. Buddhism first flourished here under the strong patronage of successive Emperors. Walking through the city's quiet streets is like strolling through the pages of history. Here, you can find peace of mind and spiritual contentment." (Nara Tourism promo)

Stepping out from the Nara Kintetsu train station, and walking southwards through two blocks of shopping mall, is like having passed through a time tunnel. You are now in Naramachi, the old quarter of Nara city which developed from temple hamlets – settlements that grew near Buddhist temples. The narrow alleys are lined with timber framed *machi-ya* or townhouses on long rectangular plots with narrow frontage, not unlike the shophouse plots in the older parts of George Town. Naramachi has its unique traditional house which has a facade of timber lattice. One such example was restored by the municipal government and is now used as an art gallery.

The Naramachi district is designed as a "Townscape Formation Area" by the Nara Municipal Government who provides subsidy for conservation of buildings in the area, up to a maximum of 10 million yen. The intention is similar to the "conservation zones" of George Town, where any building work, either new construction, reconstruction, extension or repair, has to conform with the townscape standards.

Concert

The Penang Arts Council
presents

The Merry Widow **An Operetta in Three Acts** *by Franz Lehar*

18 & 19 January '96
8.00 pm, Dewan Sri Pinang

Cast: MARILYN HILL SMITH, COLIN MORRIS,
TRACY KING, ONG WEI KIAT, DAVID QUAH

Director: LEOW SIAK FAH

Conductor: MARK SHANAHAN

(For details, contact Belynda. Tel: 04-378477)

Exhibition

The Syed Alatas Mansion Revisited

18 January - 17 February
Weekdays: 9.00am - 5.00pm
Saturdays: 9.00am to 1.00pm
(Closed on Sundays)

Syed Alatas Mansion
(128 Armenian Street)

The exhibition is organized to mark the official launching of The Heritage Centre Penang on 17 January 1996 (for invited guests only).

Mohd Azman, Raymond Kwok, and David Yeo, PHT Antique-collectors Club members, will recreate the living room and bedroom of Syed Mohamed Alatas – with examples of furniture and artifacts such as might have been used by a prominent Malay leader of the Penang community in the later half of the 19th century.

Admission Free!

Interspersed within the checkbox street pattern are shrines, temples, shophouses and several traditional houses which have been recycled for other commercial and civic uses. For the pachinko die-hards and others predisposed to taking chances, there are two shrines dedicated to the god of gamblers, one who lost and the other who won. You pray for good luck to one of them – guess which one?

"House of the Tale of Nara"

The Nara Monogatari-Kan or "House of the Tale of Nara" is located in Naramachi, about ten minutes walk from the railway station. It is a restored traditional shophouse, a project undertaken by the Naramachizukuri Center at a cost of 25.66 million yen (approx. RM700,000). The Ministry of Construction and Nara City Office subsidized 14 million yen and the rest came from fund-raising (roof tile fund) and assistance from private sector.

The Nara Monogatari-Kan project, completed in March '95, is in many ways similar to that of Penang's Syed Alatas Mansion in Armenian Street. The funding in both cases came from the central and local governments. The Naramachizukuri Center Inc., housed in the Nara Monogatari-Kan, and The Penang Heritage Centre, in the Syed Alatas mansion, both aim to provide information, advice and training in building restoration and townscape conservation. However there is one major difference: while the The Penang Heritage Centre is government sponsored, the Naramachizukuri Center Inc. is a non-governmental organization.

New Members

We welcome the following as members of the PHT. They can nominate, vote, stand for elections, and take part in any of its activities.

Life members: Dr Ong Too

Ordinary members: Goh Kok Soon
Stephanie Lee

A New Lease of Life

The best is yet to come...so believe those with the determination, and the money, to purchase a property that requires restoration and renovation. The obstacles to fulfilling their dream are many, and yet more and more successful Singaporeans are looking to renew heritage districts with their own well-earned dollars. Four of them tell Low Yit Leng why the results are worth it

IN 1989, CHEW Kheng Chuan, managing director of Wordmaker Design Services Pte Ltd, faced a dilemma. His landlord had given him notice to vacate his office space on expiry of his lease, with barely three months to look for new premises. It was to be the third move in four years for his company, which provides corporate design and editorial services.

"Owning a conservation shophouse office was something that never entered my mind before," recalls Chew. "It was a fortunate turn of events that led to this purchase. URA-restored office space in Tanjong Pagar Conservation Area was then having a 'promotion' — they were asking for \$1 dollar per square foot. That caught my attention, and was how the idea first came to me of renting, and then of even buying such a property."

Today Chew is the proud owner of 9 Ann Siang Road, a three-level property which he bought jointly with two friends, architects Eugel Yeo and Chik Chooi Fah, as minority share owners. At less than \$400,000, the price was considered a steal: within a few months of their purchase, prices for such units skyrocketed. Recently, a neighbouring unit was on the market for \$1.5 million.

Ann Siang Road is an historically well-known residential area in Chinatown, where several early pioneers made their homes. Today, a number of Chinese clan associations are still housed there, while newcomers include several design houses, law firms, architects and an advertising agency, Batey Ads, which occupies the prominent corner at Number 28.

Chew and partners, after spending more than \$200,000 to restore the "run-down place", were among the first new owners to move into the street. Pleased with his new office, he tells us: "This place has got a character and ambience unmatched in Chinatown, or elsewhere. And I was lucky to have Eugel as a partner in this development. Having worked on several restored projects, he is well versed with all the URA regulations and thus we had less difficulty in getting our design plans for restoration approved."

The authorities have imposed strict guidelines for areas designated for conservation. Others have not been as lucky as Chew and his partners: stories are exchanged among restorers of new property who, after spending as much as half a million dollars just for the restoration work, found their designs rejected. Modifications of their designs were required, which adds more figures to their bill.

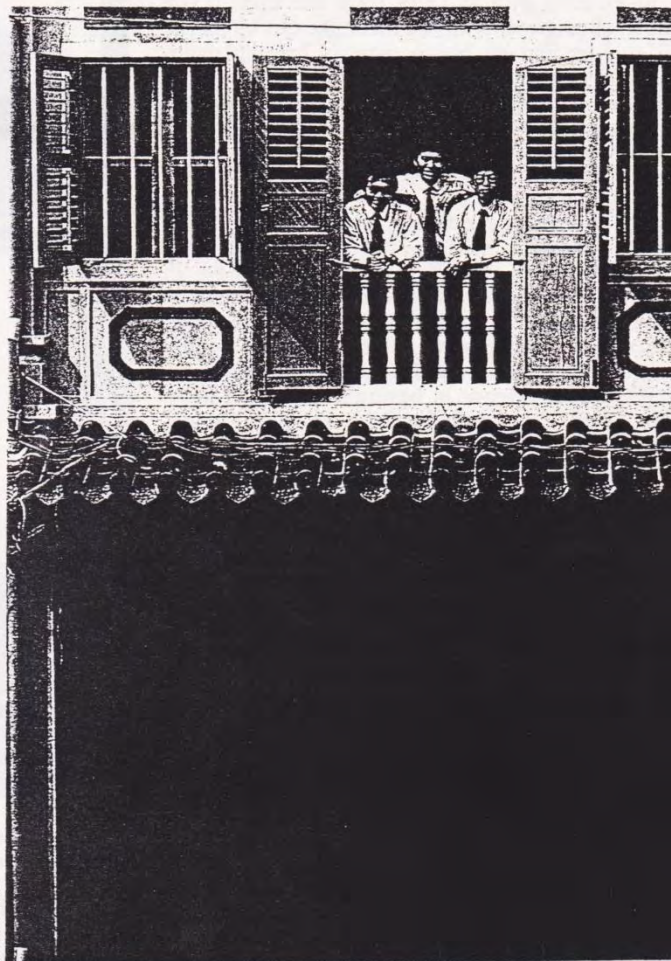
"Often there are different guidelines for different areas. Even within the same project, new regulations are sometimes added, such that even people who have worked on such projects before will find it quite a task to restore," explains Chew's partner Yeo, who has been restoring several houses in Little India, Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Emerald Hill. "The wonderful part of this location, for an architect like myself, is that the Urban Redevelopment Authority, the governing body for such projects, is just a stone's throw from here. Our work takes us there several times a day," he smiles.

While Ann Siang Road is slowly transformed into another row of buildings housing designers, architects and lawyers, plans to turn nearby houses in Club Street into hotels and inns, with the addition of retail shophouses, promise to add more vibrancy to the neighbourhood.

For Chew, Yeo and Chik, owning one prewar property has spurred them to acquire more — they are now also the owners of 807 and 809 North Bridge Road in Kampong Glam.

CHEW KHENG CHUAN

9 Ann Siang Road



Chew Kheng Chuan, with partners Eugel Yeo and Chik Chooi Fah, restored this property in Chinatown to use as office space

ONE WOULD HAVE thought that a yuppie couple like Chan Soo Khian and Loretta Reilly-Chan would have settled for a condominium. Instead, their love for old things drove them to explore Singapore from north to south, east to west, looking only at prewar houses, upon their move from New York. Only three months later, the couple bought a two-level plus attic terraced house at 7 Koon Seng Road as their residence.

"We both have a passion for old things," explains Mrs Chan. "In fact, we spent a lot of time going around the antique shops when we first arrived. It is the ultimate to get a prewar house because of its historical and cultural heritage."

An architect for five years, Mr Chan, who graduated with a masters degree from Yale University, adds: "For me, the main draw is that we can renovate it and customise it to our needs. When we first started looking, we found several nice houses, but they were either sandwiched between ones that had lost their character or were in the process of being torn down." It is the unique ambience in Koon Seng Road, brought about by the architecture of the houses, which charmed the couple.

Mrs Chan, who is an art director in a design house, admits that she is attracted to the unique features of the house. "When I first saw this stretch of road when we were exploring, I said, 'This is where I'd like to live.' I couldn't believe our luck when we saw an advertisement in the papers with this property in Koon Seng Road for sale." The Chans were among the first to arrive and bought it there and then.

Koon Seng Road is indeed unique. Earmarked for conservation only recently, two rows of prewar houses, each with 15 units, flank the road. It is a much-photographed street, made famous by its riot of colours and by house façades bearing multicultural influences — their classical features and decorative motifs stand out prominently. Adding to the charm of the houses is the plethora of colourful Peranakan tiles, unique in the former Straits Settlement, and plaster reliefs, which in some areas look like icing on a cake.

It is not only the façades that are unique. The house that the Chans bought, for example, with its built-up area of 3,000 square feet, will have an interior atrium. "We felt it was important for us to have the space we wanted — with a courtyard and a garden," explains Mr Chan, ruling a condominium apartment as a distant second choice despite its convenience in having recreational facilities. "Well, if we needed to play tennis or swim in the pool, we would go to a club," he laughs.

Their advice to those contemplating buying such properties? "Be prepared for some irritation, like having to submit your design plans to several departments of the government for any change or addition," claims Mr Chan, who has not yet received his bill for the restoration works as they are still in their final stages. But he expects the sum to come to about one-third of the home purchase price and warns: "Financially, it can be a strain. For example, when we removed the false ceiling, we found that the beams are of different sizes, as they have been changed many times because of termites. To expose the wooden ceiling, the beams may need to be changed."

Restoring the house, which was built in the 1920s, into their dream home has been a road of discovery for the Chans. "We had to research the details to restore the lower portion of the façade to its original design," says Mrs Chan.

The house was formerly occupied by three families, all related. There were several rooms, but the new owners are converting them into three large rooms. "Tearing down the walls, we found they had been coated with many different layers of finishing including wall-paper and wood panelling. When we got through the two layers of ceiling, we found the intricate designs of the cornices still intact," relates Mr Chan, who intends to add a pool and a garden on the ground floor, "to enjoy nature in an urban setting". Of course, the best part is that the couple get their own private studio and darkroom which will allow them to fully indulge in their hobby: photography. They live on the right street for it!

SOO KHIAN AND LORETTA CHAN 7 Koon Seng Road



Soo Khian and Loretta Chan researched the details to restore the lower part of their home to its original design — work that is still in progress

"MAYBE BECAUSE I was born and grew up in a prewar house, I've always wanted to buy one," says Christopher Ang, who has been living in his restored property at 19 Martaban Road for more than a year now. When the 35-year-old vice-president of advertising agency D'Arcey Masius Benton & Bowles Pte Ltd (DMB&B) and his copywriter girlfriend, Julie Durkin, first decided to buy a residential property, they sought the assistance of real estate agents. "We had told them that we wanted a house with some character. And what did we get to see? Old condominium apartments!" he laughs.

"Four months later, Julie saw the ad for this place — and when she told me it was a prewar house on Martaban Road, I had thought it must be somewhere near Ulu Sembawang. To our surprise, it is just at Balestier Road, about 10 minutes from the city," recalls Ang. It was the fifteenth house the couple surveyed. "When we first saw the house, without consulting each other, we just felt that we had to get it," he continues.

Martaban Road is indeed full of character. It is a fairly quiet residential area with an interesting row of terraced houses built about 60 years ago. An old coffee house selling local delicacies introduces the stretch of homes which have been painted and restored according to the fancy of the individual owners. One unit at a corner has been turned into a Chinese temple. Another stands out for its heavy use of Thai architectural design on its façade. A few doors away from Ang's house is another unit still in the process of being restored — its owner has ordered some Indonesian-made fixtures for parts of the house. Another incorporated the look of a garden in front, complete with rocks and flowing stream in its landscape. Close by stands an old building housing the Salvation Army (Balestier Corps).

Number 19, according to the owner, is restored close to its original look. The three-level unit has a built-up area of 2,900 square feet. Next to the kitchen is a cosy patio greatly enhanced by the presence of a landscaped garden — the favourite place for the couple to take their meals. The walls are decorated with prints of cats and watercolour sketches of old shophouses. "Most of what you see — the garden and choice of colours, was conceptualised by Julie. We are lucky that most of the stained glass was originally from the house and only a few pieces were replaced," says Ang.

Compared to other owners, Ang feels that the problems he encountered during the restoration were minor — painting on the walls was not even, wiring and power sockets were not concealed (because the contractor said that was how it was in the old days!) and a minor leak seeped from the roof. "Most owners will tell you that contractors never deliver on time. Believe them!" he states, continuing: "I had to extend my lease for my service apartment two months because of the delay."

One practical act for potential restored-property owners, Ang advises, is taking time to look at the different designs and models of prewar houses. He explains: "Then you can decide whether you prefer an air well, a patio or a courtyard and you have some parameters for comparison when it comes to the price." In addition, he says, it is usually the cost of renovation which creates a strain financially: "You must be ready to deal out cash of nearly \$200,000!" After spending half a million dollars, including renovation costs, Ang feels he is lucky to have bought the house at the right time, "just before the authority (URA) offered some houses nearby for tender, which caused prices of the houses to increase considerably."

To him, the charm of his residence is its simplicity and thoughtful architecture. "It is not only the large space in terms of area that one appreciates, but the total volume in these properties because of the high ceiling." Like many owners, part of the excitement for Ang and Durkin is the opportunity to redefine the uses of the space, and design an appealing interior shell. Says Ang: "My only regret is that I travel so much, I hardly have enough time to enjoy the space at home and play with my cats."

CHRISTOPHER ANG 19 Martaban Road



Christopher Ang advises that buyers of conservation properties must be ready to pay \$200,000 for restoration work alone



Location Map
Suffolk House
and
Malaysian-German Society

PROPOSED SUFFOLK
HOUSE-AIR ITAM RIVER
HISTORICAL PRECINCT

