

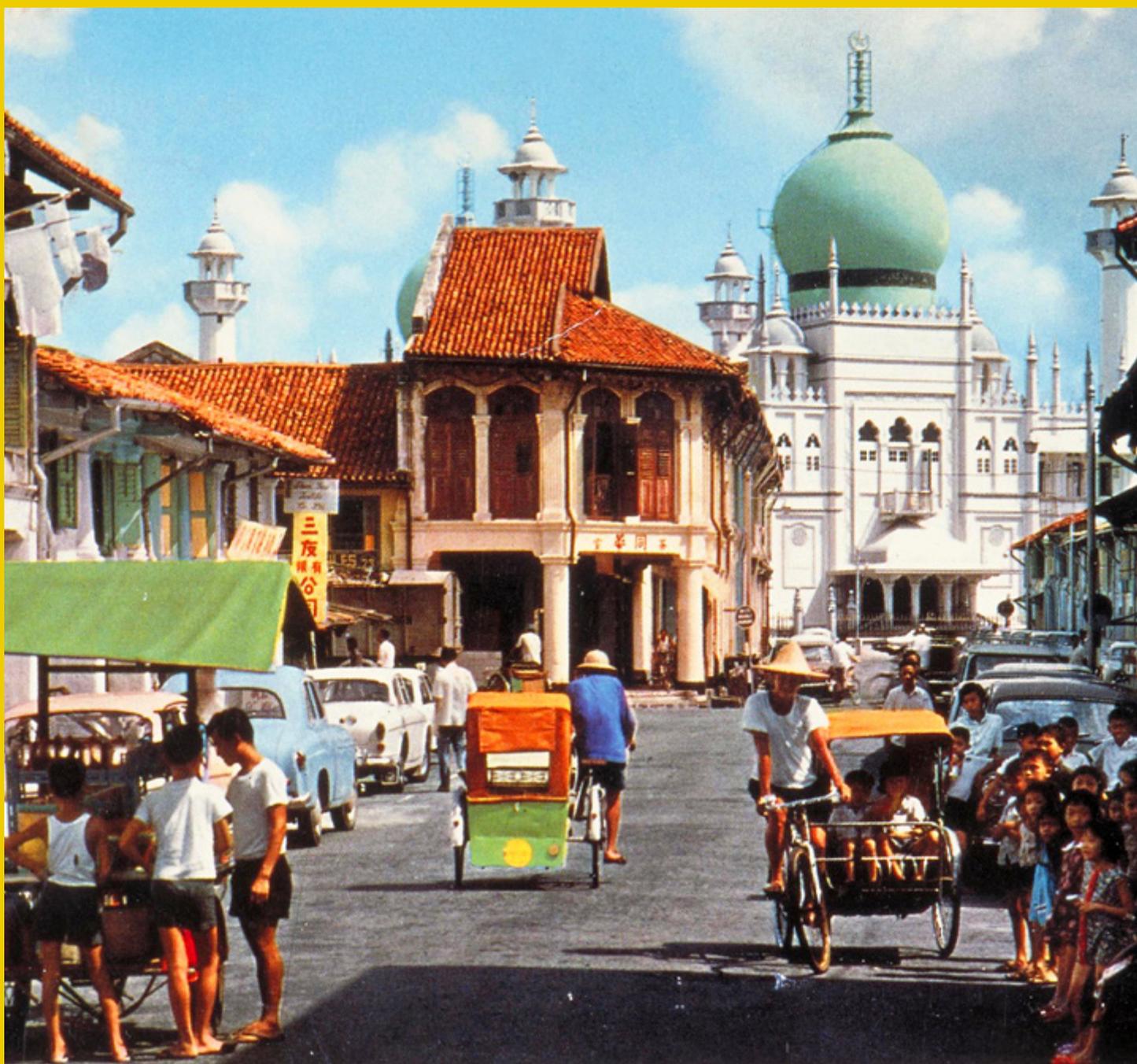
# MUSE SG



Volume 15 • Issue 02

No  
45

## Rediscovering Place Heritage



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## A note from the MUSE SG team

This issue of *MUSE SG* explores place heritage, which comprises not just the built environment, but also the stories and legacies of our communities embedded in places. We open with an opinion piece by Dr Johannes Widodo, a heritage specialist, who takes us through the evolution of place heritage discourse in Singapore, and offers a clarion call to all of us to play our part in preserving the intangible aspects of heritage.

Embedded within our everyday surroundings, but largely unnoticeable due to its nondescript appearance, is the humble benchmark—an object whose modest size belies its importance in civil engineering. In our next feature, we mine the history of benchmarks following the recent discovery of a benchmark from the 1930s within the premises of the National Museum of Singapore.

Just months before the benchmark was found at the National Museum, there was a serendipitous unearthing of two 19th-century boundary markers in Dover Forest, one of which is now on display at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. But few would know what occurs behind the scenes during the conservation process of historical artefacts—a profession largely hidden from the public eye. Our next article spotlights the conservation of the boundary markers by conservation specialist Berta Mañas Alcaide.

The issue also dives deep into three National Heritage Board initiatives that promote place heritage: the evolution of the beloved Singapore Night Festival, which has been central to placemaking efforts in the Bras Basah Bugis precinct; the Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme, which showcases the heritage of selected decade-olds businesses within historic precincts through a ‘mini-museum’ at their shopfront; and Virtual Kampong Gelam, a landmark digital twin project that fuses the physical and virtual realms anchored in the historic precinct.

Finally, for our columns, we present a curatorial piece on the Malay Heritage Centre’s *Cerita* special exhibition for National Collection Spotlight, and in Meet the Expert we hear from seasoned curator Noorashikin Zulkifli on her unconventional journey to becoming a curator and her take on the future of curatorial practice.

Filmmaker Werner Herzog said, “The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot.” Indeed, we hope this issue will inspire our readers to go out and bear witness to the here and now—not only our built heritage but also our living cultural legacies and natural environments, appreciating anew the familiar places and faces that surround us.

### PUBLISHER



National Heritage Board  
61 Stamford Road,  
#03-08, Stamford Court,  
Singapore 178892

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**  
Chang Hwee Nee

**DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE**  
Alvin Tan (Policy & Community)

### MUSE SG TEAM

**Director**  
Wai Yin Pryke (Education  
& Community Outreach)

**Lead Editor**  
Fiona Lim

**Managing Editors**  
Kelly Tan  
Tan Jeng Woon  
Grace Huang

**Contributors**  
Ariane Lo  
Berta Mañas Alcaide  
Dr Johannes Widodo  
Kezia Toh  
Rashid Md Noor  
Sharon Lim  
Syed Hafiz Nasir  
Mok Ly Yng  
Noorashikin Zulkifli  
Victoria Chua  
Zinnurain Nasir

**DESIGN & PRINT**  
MAKE

**COVER IMAGE:**  
Postcard depicting Kampong Gelam  
with Sultan Mosque in the background,  
1970s–80s. National Museum of  
Singapore Collection. 2001-04361.

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# Place Heritage

## Our Shared Responsibility

Place heritage is not just about the built environment, but it also includes the intangible aspects—communities, ways of life, the natural ecology. All of us have a role to play as we collectively take on the stewardship of place heritage.



Two elderly men playing Chinese chess in a hawker centre. Place heritage comprises not just the built environment, but also communities that have formed organically over time in a particular locale.

*Courtesy of Heng Lim/Shutterstock.com*

The city is a collective memory, a result of the contributions of all of its inhabitants accumulated over time.<sup>1</sup> Place names, tangible features such as natural elements and architecture, and intangible aspects like history, events and communities—all of these form one's *sense of place*. On another, more personal level, we as the city's inhabitants ascribe meaning to a place with our memories of it. As such, decisions to keep or change a place, or even erase it, bear significant consequences—affecting one's sense of place and attachment to the locale.

#### Place Heritage: Beyond the Tangible

Place heritage traditionally referred to buildings and sites, while heritage properties were mainly associated with monuments and buildings, without any relationship to their surrounding landscape.<sup>2</sup> Today, the meaning of place

heritage has been expanded to include the interaction between tangible and intangible aspects rooted in the cultural landscape, referring to a symbiosis of human activity and the environment.

Place heritage conservation therefore protects and upholds a set of values that the community has maintained for decades—historical, architectural, social, cultural, timelessness, economic and contextual.<sup>3</sup> Part of it is retaining the 'authenticity' of a place, which helps people understand themselves and their place in society as a whole. In the process of place conservation, people collectively figure out what identity is, what a sense of belonging means, and recognise them. The authenticity of a locale's heritage is thus one of the most crucial factors in considering how everyone, including residents and visitors, can develop a genuine appreciation and attachment to a place from the past through to the present for the benefit of future generations.

↓ Shophouses along East Coast Road. The iconic red-brick building used to house Katong Bakery and Confectionery, or 'Red House Bakery', a popular breakfast spot for residents in the area. Established in 1925, Red House Bakery closed in 2003. Today, the refurbished shophouse is home to micro red | house, a modern bakery serving up sourdough loaves.



↑ **TOP**  
Boat Quay, c. 1930. Quays are manmade platforms built alongside or into water to allow ships to dock and unload cargo.  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

**ABOVE**  
Present-day Boat Quay. Although the original functions of the harbour and its associated activities have changed, the place name that carries the memory of the past is still in use today.  
*Courtesy of author*



↑ The former Singapore Improvement Trust flats built in the 1930s for customs workers in the Chinatown area have been repurposed for commercial activities, 2004. *Courtesy of author*

### Safeguarding Singapore's Place Heritage

The priority of Singapore from its independence in 1965 to 1989 was economic development and housing. In those decades, the city-centre was radically transformed from a slum and squatter zone into a modern financial and business hub. However, understanding the importance of place heritage amid the need for development, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) launched its Conservation Plan in 1989, which focused on physical conservation and city rebranding efforts.<sup>4</sup> Conservation policies and guidelines at the time were inclined towards the conservation of the country's multi-ethnic and colonial built heritage.

Under the Conservation Plan, conservation status was granted to historic districts like Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Gelam and areas surrounding the Singapore River. Later, secondary settlements such as Joo Chiat and Geylang were also granted conservation status. While the conservation policy was geared towards

protecting built heritage to preserve a distinctly 'local' flavour that would resonate with the people, a component of it was to drive tourism numbers.

URA adopted a stylistic classification for shophouse architecture for various conservation areas such as Chinatown, Kampong Gelam and Little India.<sup>5</sup> This classification is defined according to linear periodisation, with meticulous stylistic descriptions of the architectural features: Early Shophouse Style (1840–1900), First Transitional Shophouse Style (early 1900s), Late Shophouse Style (1900–40), Second Transitional Shophouse Style (late 1930s) and Art Deco Shophouse Style (1930–60).

According to URA's conservation guidelines, the facades of shophouses are to be retained as a priority, with some flexibility in the building's interior to support adaptive reuse. Conserving the facades of old shophouses helped create a visual identity for these places, which were in turn also rebranded accordingly as 'Little India' and 'Chinatown' to impress upon tourists the identity of these historic areas.

Alongside the conservation work of URA was the former Preservation of Monuments Board, known today as the Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM), under the National Heritage Board. URA's mandate is to carry out conservation albeit allowing modifications to accommodate development, while PSM is the national preservation authority whose mandate is to identify structures and places of national significance and gazette these for preservation as national monuments. One of its functions is to ensure the full authenticity of the preserved buildings and sites.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the focus on the conservation and preservation of built heritage from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, little attention was paid to preserving existing communities, their ways of life or the sociocultural fabric. Thus, much intangible heritage was lost in those decades due to gentrification as old businesses were driven out by market forces and communities relocated due to development. But this was to change in the new millennium, when a more holistic manner of conservation became the overarching framework.

→ The Urban Redevelopment Authority's stylistic classification for shophouse architecture in the conservation area of Little India (from top):

- 1 Early Shophouse Style (60 Buffalo Street)
- 2 First Transitional Shophouse Style (39 Campbell Lane)
- 3 Late Shophouse Style (47 Desker Road)
- 4 Art Deco Shophouse Style (35 Cuff Road)



### Holistic Conservation

Changes in the political climate and public aspirations saw the government gradually shift from a top-down approach to a more participatory strategy for urban conservation in the early 2000s. This was partly to nurture Singaporeans' sense of ownership and stewardship of the city's architectural and place legacy. The public desired a more inclusive framework for conservation, where a balance could be struck between conservation and redevelopment. Government policy increasingly moved towards holistic conservation—an integrated, synergistic approach beyond physical structures to include communities and activities that contribute to a locale.

From August 2000 to May 2001, URA held public consultations in the urban planning process for the Concept Plan 2001.<sup>7</sup> Ideas and contributions from the public were gathered through public forums, exhibitions and dialogues before the Concept Plan was finalised at the end of 2001. A similar process was implemented in the following year when the Master Plan 2003 was being drafted. Specifically, the Ministry of National Development appointed three subject groups comprising professionals, representatives from interest organisations and laypeople to study proposals relating to: (1) Parks and Water-bodies Plans and Rustic Coast, (2) Urban Villages and Southern Ridges and Hillside Villages, and (3) Old World Charm. The ideas and recommendations were incorporated in the draft of the Master Plan 2003.

No longer were policymakers focused solely on built heritage; communities, trades, traditions and activities could all contribute to the 'old-world charm' of a place. Such a holistic conservation approach thus includes modern and less aesthetically significant structures. The framework is multidimensional, encompassing buildings, traffic patterns, streetscapes, open spaces, and views. Holistic conservation therefore necessitates multidisciplinary participation at both local and national levels, and it involves all conservation stakeholders—users, owners, heritage supporters and decision-makers.



→ The restored Buddhist-Taoist shrine (photographed in 2022) in Toa Payoh after the tree collapsed due to a storm in 2013. The restoration was supported by the Singapore Toa Payoh Central Merchants' Association, against the initial plan to clear the shrine by the National Parks Board.  
*Courtesy of author*

↓ A Buddhist-Taoist makeshift shrine, popularly known as Ci Ern Ge, under an old banyan tree in Toa Payoh Central, 2005. The tree and the shrine were interwoven into the new urban fabric when the town centre was built around 1966–70.  
*Courtesy of author*



↑ Visitors walking along the Rail Corridor before the removal of the rail, 2011.  
*Courtesy of author*

### Voices from the Ground: Heritage and Nature Advocacy

An impetus for the above-mentioned policy changes can be attributed to the active engagement with government bodies by heritage societies. The Singapore Heritage Society was established in 1986 as a nonprofit organisation dedicated to preserving, transmitting and promoting Singapore's history, legacy and identity.<sup>8</sup> The society advocated for the future use of the former KTMB (Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad) Rail Corridor and the Bukit Brown Cemetery, working together with the Nature Society (Singapore).

The Nature Society (Singapore) has a history that stretches back to 1921, and it is presently a nongovernmental organisation that promotes nature appreciation, the conservation of natural resources, and engagement in local, regional and global initiatives to preserve biodiversity.<sup>9</sup> Its advocacy work has seen success in the now-conserved Sungei Buloh Wetlands

Reserve and Chek Jawa in Pulau Ubin. In 2015, the Nature Society and the Singapore Heritage Society collaborated on *Green Rail Corridor: A Guide to the Ecology and Heritage of the Former Railway Land*—a comprehensive map of the former rail corridor that explores its diverse ecology and cultural heritage.

Heritage advocates based online, particularly on social media, have also mushroomed organically within the last decade in Singapore. Today, we have social media groups and other online communities made up of individuals with a shared interest in place heritage: Facebook groups Tiong Bahru Heritage Trails<sup>10</sup> and Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery;<sup>11</sup> blogs 'Bukit Brown: Living Museum of History and Heritage'<sup>12</sup> and 'All Things Bukit Brown: Heritage, Habitat, History';<sup>13</sup> websites *The Green Corridor*,<sup>14</sup> *Wild Singapore*<sup>15</sup> and *Singapura Stories*;<sup>16</sup> and many more.

In 2014, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

Singapore was founded as a non-governmental organisation consisting of professional heritage practitioners who have worked closely on public and private projects pertaining to Singapore's heritage sites. ICOMOS is an advisory body to UNESCO which actively contributes to the implementation of the World Heritage Convention.

A more recent addition to the ground-up heritage landscape is the nonprofit group Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of Modern Movement, or Docomomo Singapore, established in 2021.<sup>18</sup> Docomomo Singapore aims to create awareness among Singaporeans on the nation's modern built heritage. Besides research and advocacy work, it also works with partners to find creative, sustainable and inclusive ways to conserve and retrofit the modern built heritage of Singapore.

Social media's influence on the increasing interest in heritage and sense of belonging among the younger generation cannot be underestimated. It will continue to be an essential platform of engagement of and their attachment to heritage places. Needless to say, the proliferation of heritage groups online and offline has greatly increased community involvement in heritage-related issues, contributing to a stronger shared ownership of Singapore's place heritage.

### A Shared Responsibility

Although the National Heritage Board is the official custodian of Singapore's heritage, nongovernmental organisations and other community movements are crucial in the stewardship of Singapore's heritage. It is the responsibility of



It is the responsibility of everyone to preserve and celebrate the shared heritage of our diverse communities, as the integrity of the tangible and intangible heritage entrusted to us by past generations depends on us.



everyone to preserve and celebrate the shared heritage of our diverse communities, as the integrity of the tangible and intangible heritage entrusted to us by past generations depends on us.

Under our generation's stewardship, it may be destroyed, damaged, altered or abused; on the other hand, it may also be restored, repaired, maintained, conserved or preserved. Conserving our natural and cultural legacies is an act of managing changes, extending the past to the present and the future for the current and subsequent generations—and this requires the active involvement of everyone, not only the government.

The importance of the retention of identities through the preservation and conservation of natural and cultural heritage—especially place heritage—will become even more crucial as the development and redevelopment of our urban areas continually expand outwards to cater to the needs of a larger population and economic growth. But we must never forget that we need to preserve the people's memories, identities and sense of place for future generations. Heritage conservation is, after all, about the people.

← A resident of Pulau Ubin sharing stories about the community and place to a group of visitors, 2019.  
Courtesy of author

### NOTES

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- 6 In 2021, a law was enacted that facilitates the gazetting of historic sites like the Padang, which is not a building or a structure, as a national monument. Prior to that, preservation status was only granted to buildings and structures.
- 7 Presently known as the Long-term Plan, the Concept Plan is the macro-level blueprint for urban planning in Singapore that takes into account land use and infrastructure needs. The Master Plan, on the other hand, translates the long-term urban planning strategies of the Long-term Plan into more detailed plans for implementation. Reviewed every five years, the Master Plan is the statutory land use plan for the medium term over the next 10–15 years.
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## All Around Us

### The Humble Benchmark in Singapore

Benchmarks are all around us, though they are barely noticeable. Recently, one dating to the 1930s was discovered at the National Museum of Singapore building. The relic measures a mere two centimetres, but belying its size is an important function.

Mok Ly Yng, Map Research Consultant; Rashid Md Noor, Assistant Manager, Survey Services, Singapore Land Authority; Sharon Lim, Senior Manager, Heritage Research & Assessment, National Heritage Board

← A bolt-style benchmark from the 1930s. The bolt head measuring two centimetres in diameter is screwed into the middle of the square plate.

→ A benchmark from the 1930s (see image on facing page) is located at the southeastern corner (circled) of the National Museum of Singapore main building.



“The city... does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.” — Italo Calvino<sup>1</sup>

The serendipitous discovery of two 19th-century granite boundary markers in October 2021 in Dover Forest stirred public interest in land histories and survey-related matters. Carefully extracted and accessioned into the National Collection to be preserved for posterity (see page 20 on the conservation process of the boundary markers), these two blocks of granite not only reveal the extent of landownership by two prominent merchants in colonial Singapore, but also historical methods of land survey.

After the two boundary markers were found, the National Heritage Board’s (NHB) Heritage Research and Assessment Division embarked on a

collaboration with the Singapore Land Authority’s (SLA) Survey and Geomatics Division to document other historical survey markers. In March 2022, SLA’s land surveyors, also known as geomatics engineers, brought a team from NHB to a familiar place—the National Museum of Singapore—to show them a survey marker that had been recently discovered.

Led to the southeastern corner of the front of the main museum building, the NHB team, expecting to see a marker like a hefty granite boundary marker, stood perplexed as the land surveyors pointed downwards to a portion of the wall where a layer of the painted concrete had been hacked. Framed by the rest of the intact wall and pebbles on the ground was a thoroughly unremarkable, very modestly sized squarish brownish patch sitting perpendicular to the ground. The NHB staff bent down to take a closer look: a square plate reddish-brown with rust was embedded into the wall, and screwed into the centre of the plate was a round bolt measuring a mere two centimetres in diameter. *This bolt, the SLA team shared matter-of-factly, is a benchmark from the 1930s.*



↑ A benchmark in the bolt form, which is drilled into a vertical surface. The flat surface on the bolt head is where a leveller would be placed to determine the elevation of a nearby location. *Courtesy of Singapore Land Authority*

## What Is a Benchmark?

The highest point in Singapore is the summit of Bukit Timah. Arriving at the summit of the hill, one is greeted with a boulder bearing an inscription that states a height of 163.63 metres—but what exactly does this mean and how was this measurement derived?

There are several ways to measure land elevation. The most accurate method is levelling whereby the elevation, or height, of a terrain is determined or verified in relation to a datum, which is usually the mean sea level.<sup>2</sup> The elevation value that is obtained through this method would then be recorded in a survey marker—a benchmark.

Benchmarks come in a variety of designs and forms according to the period during which they were installed, but all of them perform the same function: each one serves as a stable reference point for determining the elevation of a nearby location. The earliest benchmarks were simply chiselled into vertical surfaces using the symbol of a broad arrow below a horizontal line. The middle of the horizontal line represents the height at that spot with reference to a particular datum. An angle-iron could be placed in the depression of the horizontal line to form a level surface—known as a ‘bench’—on which a levelling staff could be positioned accurately.



The benchmark at the National Museum takes the form of a single, round bolt, without any inscription, screwed into a square plate. Both the benchmark and the plate are probably made of cast-iron. The relic was discovered through SLA's archival records of historical elevation values that were at times accompanied by location sketches.

With a known elevation value, this benchmark can still be used to determine the elevation of a nearby terrain. To do this, a land surveyor would place a levelling staff at the top of the bolt and thus determine the elevation value of another location using the museum's benchmark as a point of reference.

One of the oldest existing benchmarks, likely etched in 1882, is found at the northern abutment of Cavenagh Bridge, which was built in 1869. Incidentally, this bridge is the oldest one across the Singapore River and was gazetted as a national monument in 2019. Despite its age, the Cavenagh Bridge benchmark is still in use today.

Benchmarks are also shown on some maps, depicted using the arrow symbol or labelled ‘B.M.’, as well as in various British Admiralty charts of Singapore. The Cavenagh Bridge benchmark, for instance, is seen in an 1881<sup>3</sup> map and an 1893 map of Singapore.

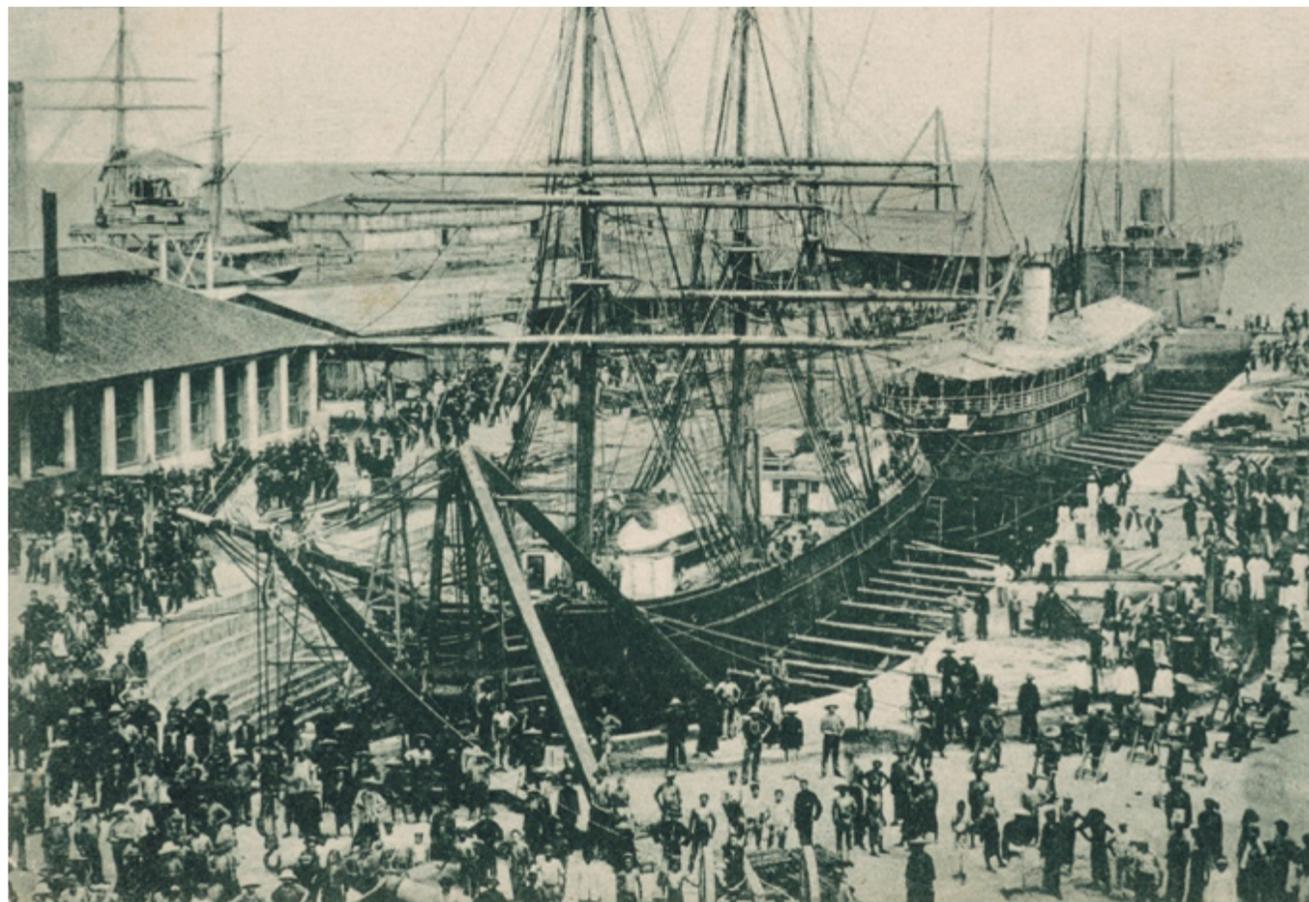
↑ A levelling staff (centre) is placed on top of the benchmark, and the total elevation value is taken (right). To find out the elevation, or height, of another location (left), the elevation value of the benchmark is used as a point of reference.

← An angle-iron dating to 1914. A levelling staff would be placed at the ‘bench’ as indicated by the blue line.  
Courtesy of Science Museum Group



↑ The oldest existing benchmark, dating to around 1882, at the northern abutment of Cavenagh Bridge. The benchmark (inset) is depicted by the traditional chiselled broad arrow with a horizontal line above. The middle of the horizontal line represents the height at that spot with reference to a particular datum.

← The benchmark at Cavenagh Bridge is shown in an 1893 map (top) and a 1925 British Admiralty chart (bottom). Both are labelled ‘B.M.’, with the map also employing the broad arrow symbol of the benchmark.  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



### History of Benchmarks and the Levelling System in Singapore

Singapore inherited the system of levelling and benchmark design from the British, who conducted their first precise levelling in the UK between 1840–60 in England and Wales using the mean sea level as the datum. Specifically, the mean sea level was obtained via tidal observations carried out at the Victoria Dock in Liverpool in 1844. The term ‘benchmark’ thus began to be used in the context of levelling.

In Singapore, the former Survey Department adopted the same survey technique, with the earliest tidal observations for land surveying purposes conducted by the then Public Works Department in 1882–83. This set of readings was taken at the Singapore River near the northern abutment of Cavenagh Bridge where the aforementioned benchmark is located.

↑ In 1937, the former Survey Department adopted a datum for benchmarks based on tidal readings taken at Victoria Dock (pictured here in the 1890s) in Tanjong Pagar. The dock was demolished in 1982.  
Courtesy of Children's Museum Singapore

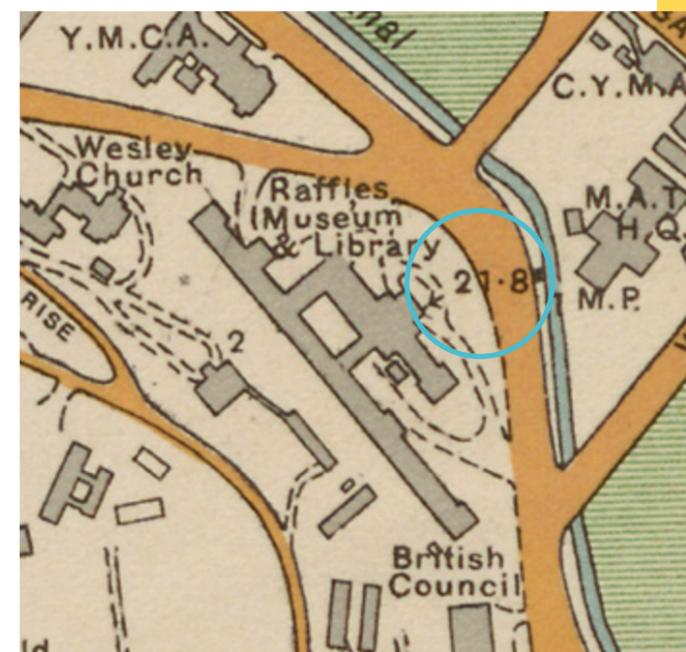
The Survey Department was at the time just a stone's throw away, housed in the municipal building known later as Empress Place Building and now home to the Asian Civilisations Museum.

In 1937, however, the Survey Department adopted a datum based on tidal readings taken at Victoria Dock, which was located at what is known today as Keppel Harbour in Tanjong Pagar. Originally known as the Survey Department Datum, it was renamed as the Singapore Height Datum in 2015—the official standard that is presently used by SLA.

To avoid confusion stemming from benchmarks based on different datums, which would result in inaccurate measurements, in 1958 the chief surveyor of Singapore established a precise levelling network covering the whole of Singapore based on the Survey Department Datum. This network comprised 68 ‘precise level benchmarks’

placed in the form of a closed loop around the main island. Subsequently, five more island-wide levelling exercises were conducted to densify and upgrade this infrastructure in 1977, 1983, 1987, 1994 and 2009. These benchmarks were all based on the Survey Department Datum.

Presently, there are approximately 450 precise level benchmarks maintained by SLA. They are installed along major roads across Singapore, each spaced about one kilometre apart. These modern benchmarks are simply a bolt set in concrete or stone, not unlike the benchmark at the National Museum dating to the 1930s, albeit with more identification information surrounding the modest bolt.



↑ A modern precise level benchmark located at Tuas South Drive, 2019. The benchmark comprises a bolt set in concrete, with a plate detailing its unique identification number.

Courtesy of Singapore Land Authority

← Historical benchmarks at the Raffles Library and Museum as shown in 1893 (top) and 1954 maps (bottom). The building today houses the National Museum of Singapore. Both maps use the broad arrow symbol to represent the benchmark, while the 1893 map is also labelled ‘B.M.’.

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (top) and Singapore Land Authority (bottom)

## Historical Relics

In spite of Singapore's profound transformation since independence, a handful of benchmarks from the previous generations has survived. With the demolition of the former tide gauge at Victoria Dock in Tanjong Pagar in 1982, these historical benchmarks provide important links between historical datums used for precise levelling in Singapore over the last 140 years.

The benchmark at Cavenagh Bridge represents a datum from late-19th-century Straits Settlements. Significantly, it was used to mark the chart datum of the British Admiralty when they were conducting hydrographical surveys in

Singapore waters. Hence, this benchmark points to a record of Singapore's historical sea level from around 1882.

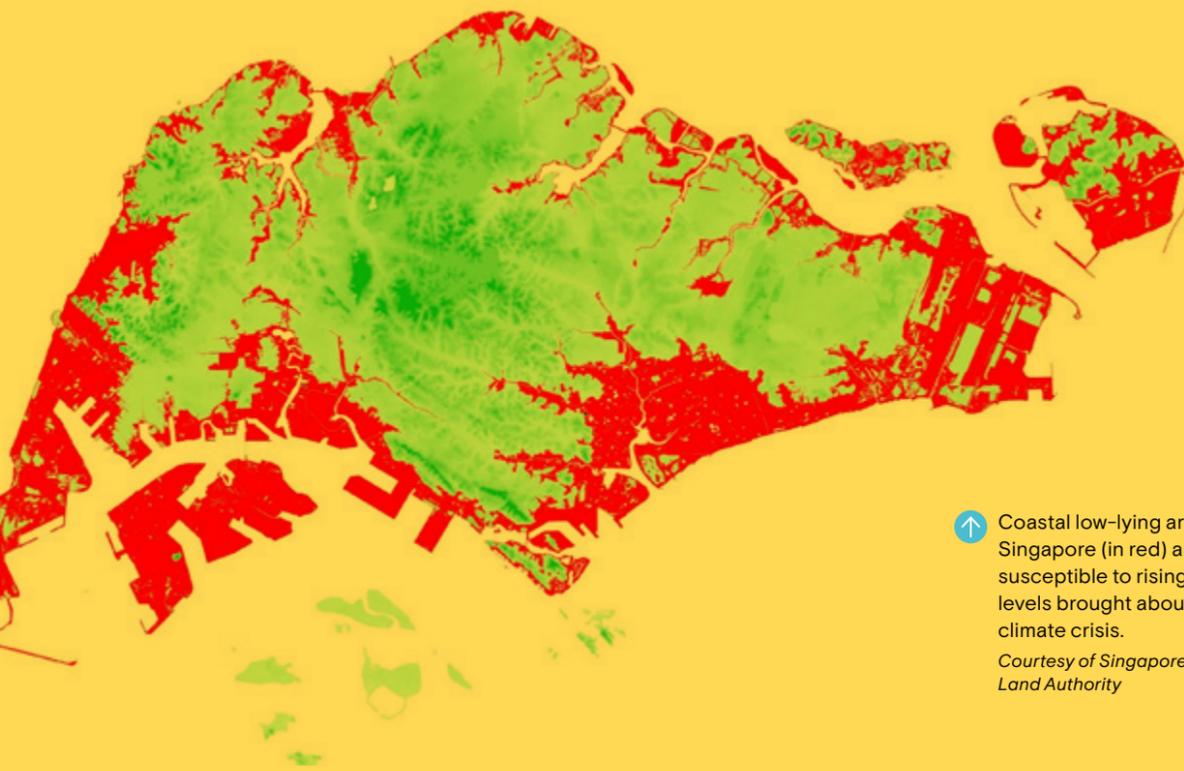
On the other hand, the recently discovered National Museum benchmark from the early 1930s is a relic of the pan-Malayan land surveying system during the interwar years. Interestingly, there are two other benchmarks recorded to be at the National Museum building.<sup>4</sup> The earliest is located near the entrance stairways to the building, as depicted in an 1893 map featuring the Raffles Library and Museum which occupied the building at the time. The second is on one of the pillars outside the building, recorded in a 1954 map. With the latest discovery of the benchmark

from circa 1930s, the National Museum building is the 'most benchmarked' structure known in Singapore to date.

At the pump house of MacRitchie Reservoir lies another benchmark dating to 1960. This benchmark, based on the former Survey Department Datum, is still in use today for precise levelling. The top of the bolt is inscribed with its elevation value, which may also be purchased online via the SLA portal. Civil contractors use this data to determine the surface elevation of the area.



← A benchmark at the pump house of MacRitchie Reservoir, installed in 1960. This benchmark is still in use today for precise levelling. The top of the bolt has a height elevation value. This information, which may also be purchased online via the Singapore Land Authority portal, is used by civil contractors to determine the surface elevation of the area. *Courtesy of Singapore Land Authority*



↑ Coastal low-lying areas in Singapore (in red) are highly susceptible to rising sea levels brought about by the climate crisis. *Courtesy of Singapore Land Authority*

## Modern-day Relevance of Benchmarks

As Singapore and the world confront the climate crisis, rising sea levels due to global warming pose a major threat to Singapore's survival, being a low-lying island-state. Thirty percent of Singapore is less than five metres above the Singapore Height Datum, which means that any increase in sea level could spell disaster—coastal land may very well be swallowed by the sea.

The precise level benchmarks spread across the island today allow authorities to form a detailed terrain map used to assess the impact of rising sea levels on critical infrastructure. Low-lying areas that are more vulnerable to a rise in sea level may be raised, while other potentially risky areas may require mitigation strategies for localised flash floods.

Benchmarks also serve another significant function: a well-distributed and accurately surveyed precise levelling network ensures the safety of a wide range

of engineering projects, both above- and underground. These include the construction of expressways, train tunnels and airport terminals, among others.

Often unnoticed, unseen, benchmarks are visually unspectacular objects that are embedded in our everyday vernacular environment.<sup>5</sup> But belying their nondescript appearance and modest size, they, too, have a story to tell and serve a very important function as Singapore continues to transform and adapt its land use according to market conditions, government policies and the climate crisis. We simply need to pay attention to our surroundings as the city reveals its layers to us with all its marks and traces.

## NOTES

- 1 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich, 1978), 11.
- 2 The mean sea level is derived from the sea level between high tides and low tides.
- 3 It is speculated that the Cavenagh Bridge benchmark as shown in the 1881 map was selected to be the reference datum in 1882 when the mean sea level was determined. It is a common practice among land surveyors to select a single pre-established benchmark for use as a reference (datum) for future surveys out of convenience and cost considerations. It is expensive to start every levelling survey from the tide gauge onwards.
- 4 The existence of these two benchmarks has not yet been verified by SLA.
- 5 Benchmarks are typically located in unobtrusive spots and hidden from the public eye to ensure their permanence and stability.

# Set in Stone

## Conserving Our Boundary Markers

The laborious work of conservation is often invisible to museum visitors, despite it being so central to the preservation of our national heritage. *MUSE SG* delves into the conservation process behind two 19th-century boundary markers.



A key part of the museum experience is encountering stories told through historical objects. We stand before an artefact, admiring its form and the layers of meaning it holds. We imagine it existing during the time of its creation—which could be as far back as a millennium ago. After all this time past, perhaps buried beneath the earth or underwater, perhaps in a collector's home, it finally finds a permanent abode in the museum, where it is given a new lease of life.

But usually invisible to the visitor's gaze is the laborious conservation work carried out before the object makes its way to being encased in the vitrine. How did an artefact look when it was first discovered and what was the conservation process like before it was housed in the museum, where we now view it in its preserved form?

We trace the conservation journey of two 19th-century artefacts—merchants Sim Liang Whang's Teck Kee and Tan Kim Seng's Hong Hin boundary markers—and examine the complexity of the behind-the-scenes work. Discovered in 2021, the condition in which the markers were found is vastly different from what they are today, thanks to the work of Berta Mañas Alcaide, Senior Conservator (Objects), Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC), who specialises in stone conservation.



#### FAR LEFT

The Teck Kee boundary marker, after conservation treatment, with the Chinese characters '德記界' (Teck Kee's Boundary) at the top. Chop Teck Kee was a business run by merchant Sim Liang Whang. The granite marker measures 82 x 17 x 14 cm and weighs 26 kg.

#### LEFT

The Hong Hin marker is still undergoing conservation treatment. The Chinese characters '豐興山' (Hong Hin's Estate) are engraved at the top. Hong Hin was a business owned by eminent merchant Tan Kim Seng. Below the Chinese characters are Tan's initials 'T.K.S.'. The granite marker measures 88.5 x 25 x 12 cm and weighs 62 kg.



The two boundary markers newly excavated from Dover Forest before being sent to the Heritage Conservation Centre.



#### The Markers' Original State

Boundary markers were installed in Singapore from 1881 onwards to delineate the boundaries of privately owned land. Both the Teck Kee and Hong Hin boundary markers, made of granite from a local quarry, were discovered near each other in the Ulu Pandan area of Dover Forest. Two-thirds of the Hong Hin marker had been buried vertically with the remaining portion exposed, while the Teck Kee marker was completely underground. After a careful excavation, they were sent to HCC for assessment, analysis and treatment.

The first thing that a conservator does upon receiving a new artefact is to assess its condition. Mañas notes:

*The boundary markers arrived at HCC covered with mud and in a very wet condition. The exposed part of the [Hong Hin] marker had biological matter; these may include plant, algae, moss and lichen. Anything that enters HCC with biological growth or pests would have to be treated first to prevent contamination.*

Mañas applied ethanol to eliminate all biological matter on the markers, and mud was removed with deionised water and soft brushes. This process of cleaning



had to be done meticulously as there were areas of engravings on the stone with paint remains; it was imperative that the paint would not be accidentally removed during the cleaning procedure. Hence, for the carvings, she cleared the mud slowly and carefully using cotton swabs.

After cleaning the outermost layer of the markers, granite particles were observed to be missing on the surface as a result of erosion due to environmental conditions. At the same time, carvings on the stones became more apparent. The Hong Hin



Conservator Berta Mañas Alcaide (left) and Sharon Lim, a colleague from the Heritage Research and Assessment department, conducting an initial visual assessment of the boundary markers upon their arrival at the Heritage Conservation Centre.

marker is one of the few known boundary markers carved with both Chinese and English characters: ‘豐興山’ (Hong Hin’s Estate; ‘Hong Hin’ was the name of the business owned by eminent merchant Tan Kim Seng); and ‘T.K.S.’, Tan’s initials, below the Chinese characters. The Teck Kee marker, on the other hand, had only ‘德記界’ (Teck Kee’s Boundary) engraved on it. Chop Teck Kee was a business owned by Sim Liang Whang. The two boundary markers are the only ones associated with the two pioneer businessmen that have been found.

Some black paint was also observed on the exposed section of the Hong Hin marker over the Chinese characters, as well as on the Teck Kee marker. On closer inspection, Mañas discovered red paint fragments—which proved to be the original colour of the carvings—some of which were beneath the black paint. Red paint was only found on the Chinese characters for both markers, not the English initials for the Hong Hin marker. As a result of natural degradation, remains of the original red paint were minimal, in poor condition and fragile.



↑ Mud on the granite surface being removed with deionised water and soft brushes.

→ The conservator carefully cleaning mud from engraved portions of the boundary marker with deionised water using cotton swabs. This had to be carried out slowly so that paint pigments on the engraved areas would not be accidentally removed.



→ Both black (see arrows) and red paint (circled) were found at the engraved portions of both boundary markers. But the red pigments were minimal, in poor condition and fragile due to natural degradation.



### The Question of ‘Originality’

Following the discovery of the red paint, conservators discussed with museum curators whether to retain the black paint, or to remove it and thus reinstate it to its ‘original’ state. The removal process would be irreversible.

Although parts of the red paint had been painted over with black, the state in which the stones were discovered also constitutes a part of their history. Is there ever an ‘original’ state for a historical artefact that has undergone manmade and natural changes over a long period of time? This is a perennial issue faced by conservators: which ‘version’ of the object to treat for preservation.

The conservators and curators jointly assessed the Teck Kee marker and its contextual history, as well as the different possibilities of conservation treatment. Weighing the erasure of a part of the object’s history against the importance of that particular feature to the artefact’s biographical history, the team’s eventual recommendation was to remove the black paint as it was

not considered original. Furthermore, it would be ‘visually disturbing’, as retaining the black paint would affect the legibility of the Chinese characters.

Mañas proceeded to remove the black paint for the Teck Kee marker, though this proved to be less than a straightforward task as some of the red paint sat underneath the black paint. To effectively remove only the black pigments while retaining the red ones required many mechanical and chemical trials. After testing different types of solvents, the black pigments were removed successfully, and photographic evidence of the stone with the black paint was archived for future reference.

Mañas’s next step was to consolidate the fragile red pigments. She applied a consolidant to ‘glue’ the remains of the red paint to the stone so that they would not chip off. Similarly, this process is irreversible—once applied, the consolidant cannot be removed without compromising the red paint.

Another consideration during conservation is whether to restore certain

original features if some of them are lost due to degradation. Mañas explains the principle of restoration in conservation:

*Generally, conservation does not involve repainting what is missing. However, if, say, 95 percent of the paint is still intact, conservators may carry out colour retouching—that is, to apply colour at the missing areas—albeit using a material that is different from the original. But during this process of colour retouching, it is crucial to never alter the original paint, and this is a principle that is common across the restoration of paintings and objects.*

In the case of the Teck Kee marker where more than 95 percent of the original red paint was lost, Mañas did not perform colour retouching, thus leaving only fragments of the original red paint. Still visible to the naked eye, however, these fragments allow viewers to imagine what the boundary marker might have looked like back in the day with its bright-red engraved characters.

### Permanent Home in the Museum

After conservation, the artefact is ready for its debut to the public with its refreshed look—now safely nestled in its permanent home, the museum, as part of the National Collection. An object of cultural importance, it will be preserved for time immemorial for future generations. Due to the material vulnerability of these historical objects, however, there are several considerations as to how they ought to be displayed in the museum for optimal preservation. These include environmental factors such as the humidity level and lighting, as well as the method of mounting and whether or not to encase the artefact.

For the Teck Kee marker, which is currently on display at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall,<sup>1</sup> Mañas and the curators decided it was best to display it vertically and to have lighting angled from the side for better legibility of the engraved characters. Additionally, considering the fragility of the paint remains and to prevent further deterioration, the lighting level had to be dim, the humidity level set within the range of 55–65 percent, and the stone displayed within a showcase to prevent physical contact.

The intricate work on the markers has shown that, though largely invisible to the public eye, the work of conservators is a highly demanding one. It requires a “keen understanding of material culture, and sensitive negotiation of the interconnection between an artefact[’s]... materiality and social relationship throughout its history, in order to enable both it and its significance to persist”.<sup>2</sup> If not for conservators, our cultural artefacts will be lost to time and irreparable damage—and what are we, as a society, without our heritage?



↑ The Teck Kee boundary marker on display at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.

**Scan the QR code to find out more about the boundary markers and how they were discovered!**



## SINGAPORE'S ONLY STONE CONSERVATOR

### Berta Mañas Alcaide

Originally from Madrid, Spain, Berta Mañas Alcaide is the only conservator in Singapore specialising in stone and has been working at HCC for the past five years. The idea of conservation had always been on her mind, even before high school.<sup>3</sup> Mañas shares what sparked her interest in conservation as a child:

*Once, I visited the Museo Nacional del Prado [Prado Museum] in Madrid with my family and wondered if it was possible to remove the black layer on some of the paintings that made it difficult to see the true colours underneath. Years later I learned that the conservator profession existed, whose role was to care, treat and conserve artefacts for posterity.*

Pursuing her interest, Mañas studied fine arts at the Complutense University of Madrid, specialising in conservation in the last two years of her undergraduate studies. She was trained in sculptural conservation—specifically, gilded and polychrome wood, stone and metal. Mañas explains why she was particularly drawn to stone as a material:

*I have always perceived stone as one of the strongest materials. It can last for centuries and millennia, providing information on artistic styles, ways of living and the available technology of the time to future generations. Through conservation, conservators aim to extend the lifespan of artefacts*

*by stopping and preventing degradation. Many of the great monumental sites and artefacts around the world are made from stone, and they still exist today. Other materials do not withstand the passage of time as well as stone.*

After graduating, Mañas spent over two decades in different parts of Spain working with both public institutions and private companies on on-site projects, such as the restoration of churches as well as laboratory-based work. She then moved to England to work for two years; there, Mañas learned of a job opportunity at HCC, and she took it up.

Comparing her work experiences in Europe and Singapore, Mañas notes that the different climate and environmental conditions affect the type of treatment for stone conservation. Additionally, at HCC she works on smaller artefacts instead of large monuments back in Europe.

Mañas appreciated that the work at HCC was mainly off-site as artefacts mostly arrived at the centre to be treated, which meant that she could spend more time with her family without having to be away for extended periods at different locations. On a more light-hearted note, she expressed a personal preference for the tropical weather, compared to the harsh winter climate in England.

Today a Senior Conservator at HCC, part of Mañas’s work involves research. Her current research focuses on salt efflorescences—one of the foremost causes of damage for porous materials. She is looking into ways to prevent this damage from occurring to the ceramic and stone artefacts in the Tang Shipwreck Collection<sup>4</sup> of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

In addition to conservation and research, Mañas trains young conservators in Singapore in stone conservation, a role she relishes:

*It gives me great satisfaction as I enjoy teaching and sharing knowledge while learning from others.*

Mañas is currently working on the Gemmill Fountain, once a public drinking fountain, built in 1864 and presently located within the grounds of the National Museum of Singapore.

#### NOTES

- 1 The Hong Hin boundary marker is still undergoing treatment for conservation, which is expected to be completed in a few months.
- 2 Alison Bracker and Alison Richmond, *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths* (Butterworth-Heinemann; V&A Museum, 2009), xiv.
- 3 The equivalent of secondary school in Singapore.
- 4 The Tang Shipwreck Collection comprises Tang dynasty (618–907) artefacts found in a ninth-century shipwreck of an Arab merchant vessel, discovered in 1998 off Belitung Island, Indonesia.



## The Twin Effect

### Bridging the Physical and Virtual Realms

In recent years, the intersection of arts, culture and technology has seen the rise of virtualisation, gamification and digital twins. Virtual Kampong Gelam is a landmark digital twin initiative by the National Heritage Board—where tech and heritage, reality and the virtual worlds collide in a historic precinct.

**Kezia Toh**, Senior Manager, Organisational Design and Innovation, National Heritage Board; **Ariane Lo**, Assistant Manager, Organisational Design and Innovation, National Heritage Board

For the third time in a week, customers at the Bhai Sarbat tea stall in Kampong Gelam watched on as five sweaty strangers pointed their phones at a nearby display case. Under the glass lies an old sock accompanied by a short caption (see page 34 for more on the Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme). The sock was once a filter for coffee grounds or tea when preparing beverages like *teh tarik* and *teh sarabat*.

However, the filter sock also served as an augmented reality marker for image recognition in Heritage Hunter Volume 2—a treasure hunt in the form of a bingo<sup>1</sup> that straddled the virtual and physical worlds. Accessible on smartphones and tablets, the game took place on the Virtual Kampong Gelam platform, where 3D-model versions of

the mosque's golden dome and other iconic sites in Kampong Gelam formed a 'digital twin' of the precinct.

From 12 March to 2 April 2022, heritage and culture enthusiasts walked around the historic precinct of Kampong Gelam in search of clues, such as the filter sock, to complete the online bingo sheet. On the Virtual Kampong Gelam platform, over a thousand users explored the digital twin of the precinct, discovered the Malay Heritage Centre's (MHC) *Cerita* exhibition (see page 54 for more on *Cerita*) in a 360-degree tour, learned historical tidbits, answered quizzes and collected rewards along the way. This was, in other words, a *phygital* experience: a combination of physical and virtual or digital elements.

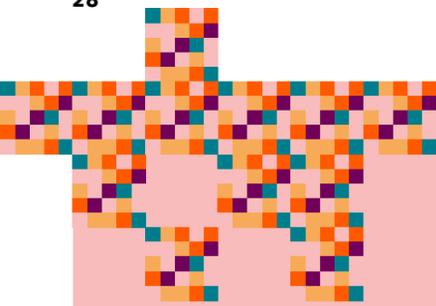


Virtual Kampong Gelam provides users with an augmented exploration of the historic Kampong Gelam precinct.



**TOP**  
The iconic golden dome of the Sultan Mosque in Kampong Gelam.

**ABOVE**  
Perspective view of Kandahar Street in Virtual Kampong Gelam.

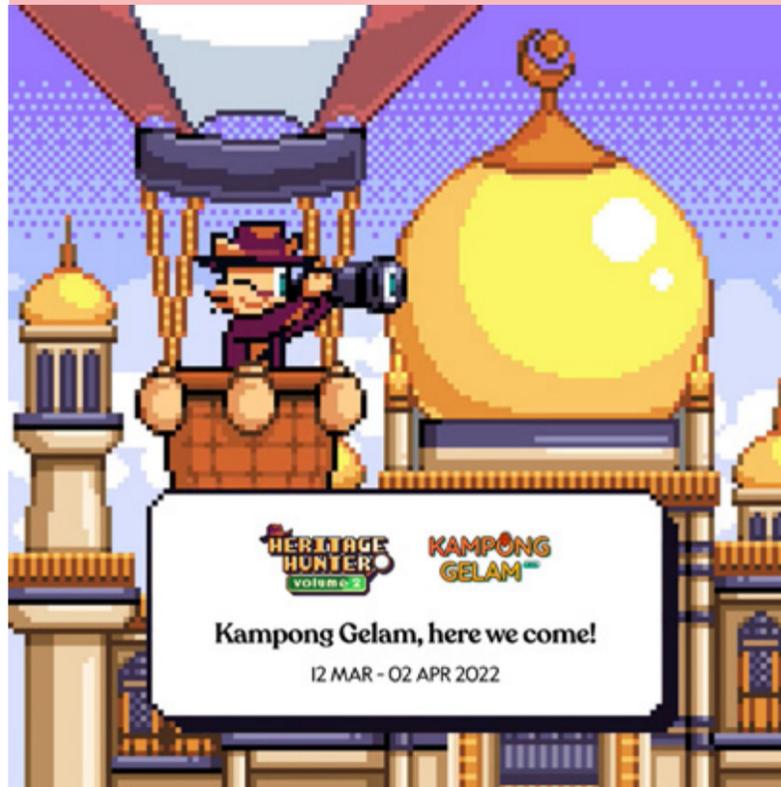


As Singapore moved through various circuit breaker phases to contain the pandemic in 2020, the National Heritage Board (NHB) noticed behavioral changes among the public and a growing desire to resume cultural explorations. Time spent in the presence of artefacts, or the gentle hum of galleries had been a moment of solace and liminal travel for many who were now stuck at home.

Considering the situation, NHB saw potential in leveraging virtual technologies to reconnect with audiences and reach out to new demographics. In March 2021, NHB took a small, albeit significant, step towards digital engagement amidst the pandemic with the inaugural edition of Heritage Hunter, an online treasure hunt. Players solved riddles that led to little golden coins hidden in NHB's Roots.gov.sg heritage resource portal.

There was no new technology involved, only a simple website that anyone could access. Nonetheless, Heritage Hunter effectively exploited the NHB resource portal by relying on game mechanics and user interface, with more than 3,700 players participating in the search for six clues in three weeks.

## THE FIRST EDITION OF HERITAGE HUNTER



↑ Heritage Hunter Volume 2, the bingo component of Virtual Kampong Gelam where players visited locations at the precinct to solve puzzles.

### Entering the Digital Realm: Virtual Kampong Gelam

In November 2020, the National Heritage Board (NHB) embarked on the creation of a virtual twin for MHC and Kampong Gelam. For over a year, NHB worked with a tech company to conceptualise an interactive digital twin where users and their avatars could play games while discovering the historic precinct. Virtual Kampong Gelam was thus conceived. The underlying objective was to convert online engagement into footfall in the precinct and MHC, especially as the pandemic situation in Singapore had improved and physical visits seemed feasible by the launch date of March 2022.

The idea of hosting a new edition of Heritage Hunter on the platform after the successful first iteration (see text box above) grew organically as it would offer multiple ways to explore the precinct's rich heritage. Nicholas Chen, Senior Manager (Digital), Strategic Communications and Digital, NHB, adds:

*We were ready to try something new for Heritage Hunter Volume 2. Virtual Kampong Gelam aligned nicely with our efforts in using the digital to spark interest in heritage places and practices, both digitally and physically. Virtual Kampong Gelam first piques players' interest in the precinct by inviting them to visit selected locations virtually, after which they follow up with in-person visits to complete the bingo component. Of course, small rewards along the way help create a rewarding experience.*

The digital twin presented an opportunity to test a newer and more virtually anchored format of engagement. While counterintuitive at first, the innovative nature of digital twins reinforced NHB's choice of Kampong Gelam as the first locale to be transposed into the virtual realm.

Over the course of its history, Kampong Gelam had been a settlement for Bugis, Arab, Javanese, Baweanese, Chinese,

Orang Laut (people of the sea) and many other communities. It was a hub that attracted artisans and merchants from surrounding regions; a stop for pilgrims on their way to Mecca; and home to Sultan Mosque and Istana Kampong Gelam. There also used to be a vibrant publishing industry centred in Kampong Gelam, though this disappeared over time as the area underwent periods of rapid development and change.<sup>2</sup>

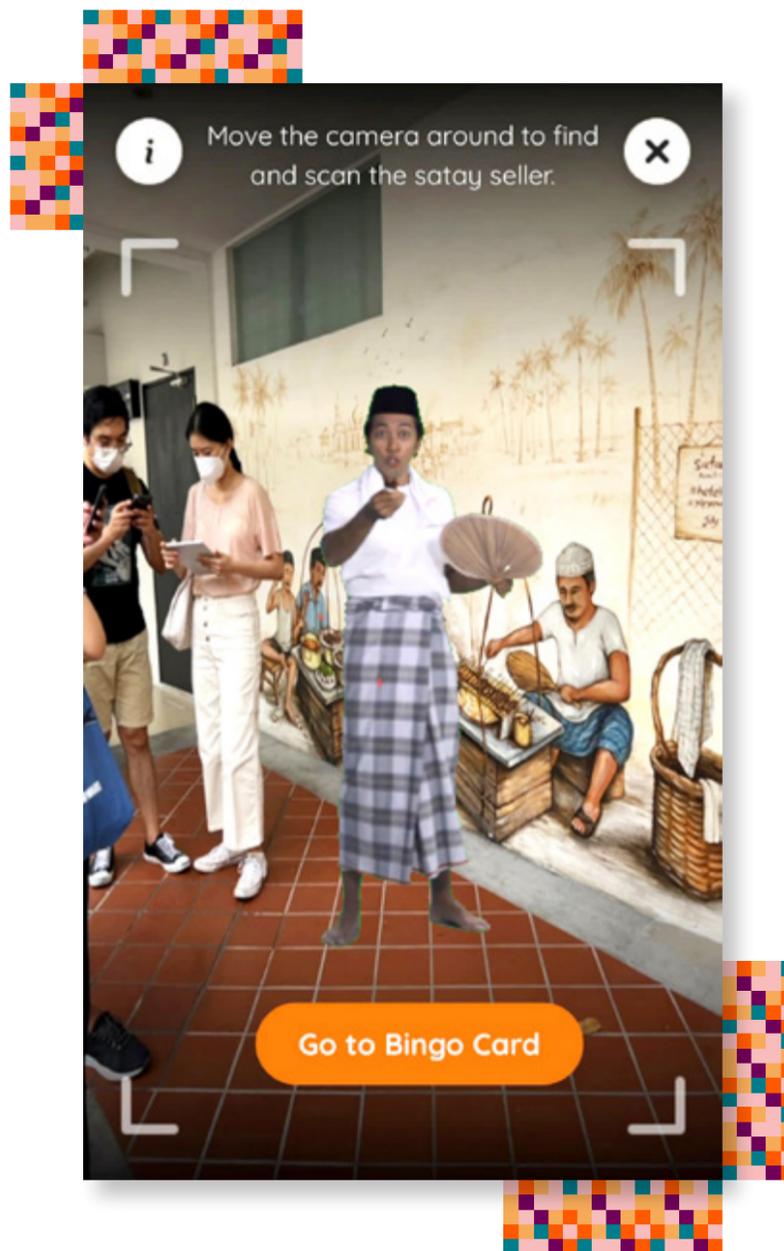
The desire to preserve and document the ever-changing incarnations of the precinct was the impetus to digitalise its buildings and monuments: documentation is a common motivation for the creation of digital twins. But one could also view Virtual Kampong Gelam as a ghostly layer itself, floating above the shops, homes, streets and people that once came and went.



[One] could also view Virtual Kampong Gelam as a ghostly layer itself, floating above the shops, homes, streets and people that once came and went.



↑ North Bridge Road in the Kampong Gelam district. It was historically a thriving hub for Muslim pilgrims, publishing houses and merchants from around the region.



Smartphone view of an augmented-reality storytelling component in Virtual Kampong Gelam. The satay seller depicted in the wall mural 'comes to life' with a tale to share.

### Gamification and Digital Twins: A Delicate Balance

While the platform's 3D model was heavily stylised, the long-term value of digital twin technology in documenting a building and its heritage was apparent. A more difficult but salient question to confront was the value of gamification and digital twin technology for the public to discover heritage in a meaningful way. Jervais Choo, Deputy Director, Organisational Design and Innovation, NHB, shares the conceptualisation process:

*We think about the takeaways for the visitor—what do they gain through the experience? The value of a digital experience is that visitors can personalise and make choices, so we think of how to trigger a physical touchpoint, for instance, with incentives and games. Hence, we first decide what we want to achieve, then we follow up with the technical solution.*

The team adopted some guiding principles to ensure that the phygital experience would encourage users to engage meaningfully with heritage. First, all technological features were incorporated with the condition that they would *augment*—and not replace—the physical, multisensorial experience of heritage. For instance, the activities in Virtual Kampong Gelam, such as viewing 3D scans of artefacts and learning historical tidbits about the precinct with a bird's-eye view, were designed to offer users an experience that would not be achieved with a physical visit.

Likewise, the bingo component required on-site participation and was kept simple to complement a player's visit. It was designed such that the game would not distract players from the physical environment but provide them with just the right dose of information to enrich their visit.

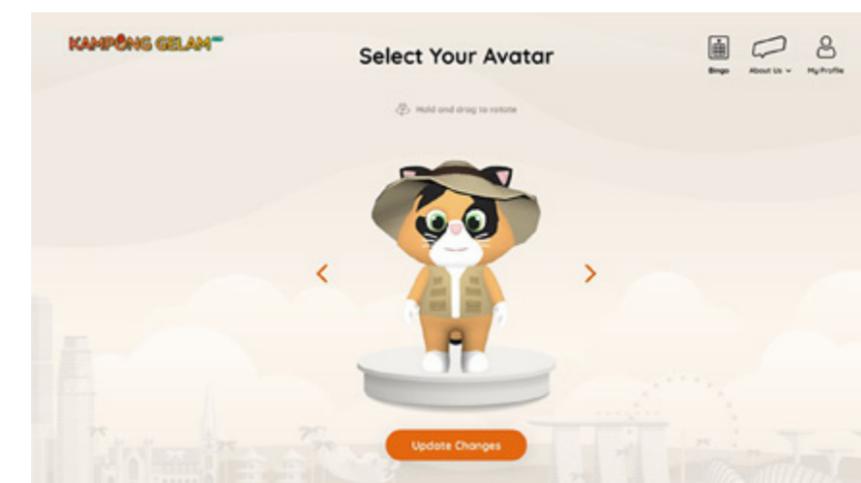
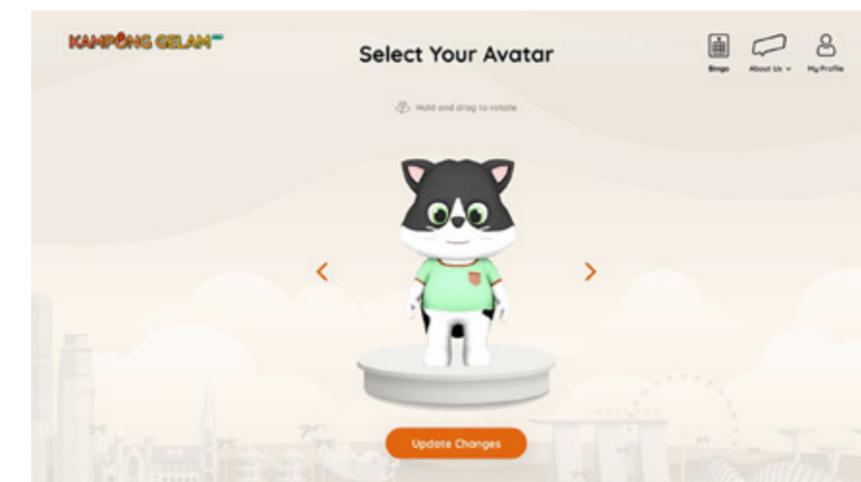
As a nod to the physical MHC, the virtual avatars were created based on the cats that reside at the centre, even replicating their characteristic calico, tortoiseshell



Aerial view of Virtual Kampong Gelam, with markers showing bingo activities and other online games.



Avatars for Virtual Kampong Gelam were based on actual resident cats of the Malay Heritage Centre, Oreo (top) and Sneaky (bottom).





National Heritage Board staff Eugene Ng testing Virtual Kampong Gelam's image recognition capacity in front of Gedung Kuning (Yellow House).

## DIGITAL TWINS AROUND THE WORLD

Use cases of digital twins from cultural institutions all around the world informed the National Heritage Board's (NHB) conception of Virtual Kampong Gelam in terms of feasibility, user experience and content choices.

For instance, the Natural History Museum in London drew on digital twin technology to visualise its infrastructure, programmes and investments. It is also planning to assimilate several standalone systems into a single dashboard to manage anything from pest control to humidity readings.

In Seoul, the National Museum of Korea partnered with web portal Naver's artificial intelligence, robot and autonomous technology wing on a digital twin project to enable visitors to use smartphones and

or black-and-white pelts. "Gamification elements such as avatars based on the MHC's resident cats and dynamic user interface worked well with the youth segment," explains Chen, "and in this sense, we have used technology to spark a new audience's interest in heritage."

In order to maintain players' interest in the games and trails, the team calibrated the difficulty level of the games and quizzes to be challenging yet fun. It was a fine line to tread: players needed to *enjoy* the process of searching for answers but the game could not be too difficult, lest it lead to frustration or a complete abandonment of the task. The game experience was continually refined as the team tweaked the avatar design, placement of buttons, instructions and game mechanics.

When Virtual Kampong Gelam was launched in March 2022, users gave feedback on disruptions due to system downtime, recommended forgoing the two-factor authentication, among others.

augmented-reality glasses to tour the museum and its multiple properties.

It grew increasingly clear that to contribute to a global conversation, NHB's digital twin would have to tread a road less explored. The example in London illustrated the potential for accurate and sustainable documentation of a museum building; the one in Seoul involved artificial intelligence to enhance visitors' experiences.

Many visitors are first exposed to this technology when they enter a museum or gallery, but what if digital twins could draw a virtual audience to your museum? Virtual Kampong Gelam tested the potential of digital twins as a phygital bridge, a tool to convert online habits adopted during the pandemic into new modes of physically connecting with heritage.



Al-Ahmadiyah Press, 1950s. The building in which it was housed is the present-day Sultan Hotel. Courtesy of Qalam Press

All this forged a greater understanding of what players wanted and what the game lacked, which serves as an impetus for improvement in subsequent cycles.

### Kampong Gelam: A Muse for Digital Initiatives

Following the conclusion of Heritage Hunter Volume 2 in April 2022, Virtual Kampong Gelam and its little cat avatars retired for a few months. NHB's flagship innovation programme DigiMuse subsequently put out an open call for creatives and technologists to create phygital projects that would draw intelligently on specific facets of the precinct's artistic and historical identity. The six projects selected are currently in development. Virtual Kampong Gelam was thus a first step towards digitalising the precinct on a larger scale.

Creative agency InTheWild imagines a single printer mysteriously connected to the 20th-century Al-Ahmadiyah Press office: users can roam around a 3D web-based model of the old printing house and

customise a print that will be produced by a thermal printer in the present-day Sultan Hotel, where the press was housed. As more people print patterns using the virtual printing house, the actual scroll in the hotel's lobby will become an ever-evolving art installation. The project by art collective GOFY will feature a retro-futuristic-themed vinyl mural art trail around Kampong Gelam and discreet QR codes directing people to a microsite with a virtual gallery. Other projects include a culinary-themed microsite with gamification features and a chatbot to deconstruct the ingredients of traditional dishes, and a web-hosted 3D virtual escape room game set in the precinct.

With these upcoming projects and Virtual Kampong Gelam, the precinct's rich history has proven to be a fertile ground for experimentation in the arts, culture and technology. New digital initiatives will find in Virtual Kampong Gelam a solid foundation, a base layer upon which to share their vision of a phygital future where technology can be harnessed to foster meaningful connections between heritage and people.

#### NOTES

- 1 Players visited Kampong Gelam to complete nine activities for the bingo tiles. The activities included learning historical facts and finding image markers peppered around the precinct. Once the markers were found, players used their smartphone camera to activate the platform's augmented reality recognition, which could trigger storytelling videos featuring, for example, a virtual satay (skewered meat) seller or a *pondok* (lodging house) chief.
- 2 Nasri Shah, 'Dichetak Oleh: A Walk Through Kampong Gelam', *MuseSG* (June 2017, vol. 10, iss. 1). Retrieved from <https://www.roots.gov.sg/stories-landing/stories/dichetak-oleh-a-walk-through-kampong-gelam/story>.

# Faces and Places

## Street Corner Heritage Galleries

Long-time businesses make up the unique features of a locale. Understanding the precarity of these old businesses, the National Heritage Board launched the Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme to promote the heritage of selected businesses through mini-museums sited at their shopfronts.

“[P]lace identity is dynamic, particularly in cities built upon innovation and dependent upon change for survival.”<sup>1</sup>

In a highly urbanised, densely concentrated city-state like Singapore where change really does appear to be the only constant, shops and trades that have existed for decades in the same locale are a rarity. Driven out by market forces or quietly disappearing without a successor to inherit the business, familiar shopfronts and old trades are commonly replaced by run-of-the-mill cafes, boutiques or restaurants serving up the latest gastronomical trends.

To prevent the complete erosion of the unique features of a place and to preserve the sense of place for communities, it is imperative to take concerted measures to protect trades and businesses that give an area its distinct flavour. Understanding the precarity of age-old businesses and trades in historic precincts such as Kampong Gelam and Balestier, where the ‘authentic’ flavour of these places risks being rapidly diluted due to gentrification, the National Heritage Board (NHB) launched Street



Xavier Lee (seventh from left), the current owner of Loong Fatt Tau Sar Piah, with his family and staff. The display case showing the business's heritage is part of the National Heritage Board's Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme.



↑ Mohamed Jamal Kazura (left) and his son Mohamed Samir Kazura, who has taken over the reins of Jamal Kazura Aromatics, founded in 1933.

Corner Heritage Galleries in 2020 to support traditional businesses that give an area its distinct characteristics.

The pilot programme aims to promote stronger participation in and ownership of heritage by decades-old local businesses and trades located in historic precincts. Taking the form of a showcase that features a bitesize history of the business, including the use of tools of the trade and historical artefacts, the 'mini-museum' sited at the shopfront invites passers-by, tourists and locals to peek into the business's rich heritage.

#### Kith and Kin

An individual's 'sense of place' is inextricably tied to one's memories of a locale, the comforting familiarity of surroundings, with recognisable faces

and places. Over the years, we become friendly with our favourite *nasi padang* stall owner or the elderly couple running the rattan furniture shop that we pass by every other day; we form ties with one another, exchange greetings, or even watch their grandchildren grow up.

Mohamed Samir Kazura, the third-generation owner of Jamal Kazura Aromatics, articulates the sense of community among other long-time businessowners in Kampong Gelam:

*[Jamal Kazura Aromatics] has been in the location [Kampong Gelam] for 90 years. As much as the location is getting gentrified, there are old businesses that are still around. There is identity. People know one another, and there is some sort of camaraderie.*

Jamal Kazura Aromatics, a local perfumier founded in 1933, is one of the businesses participating in the Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme. With three shops in the vicinity of Kampong Gelam, Jamal Kazura Aromatics is among the oldest trades still operating in the area, which has seen a dramatic makeover within the decade. The perfumier is known for its signature *attar*—traditional alcohol-free perfumes made of essential oils which have been used by Islamic communities all over the world for centuries.



↗ Mohamed Samir Kazura of Jamal Kazura Aromatics mixing essential blends to create *attar*—traditional alcohol-free perfumes made of essential oils.

→ Serene Ng (left) and Molly Chia of Sin Hin Chuan Kee, a family-run haberdashery shop that has in operations on North Bridge Road in the Kampong Gelam vicinity for over half a century. The business is a participant in the Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme.



### Sharing in Memories and Heritage

Walking along the five-footway of shophouses on Bussorah Street to escape the punishing midday sun is a multisensorial experience. Blending in with the gentle whiffs of aromas wafting from Jamal Kazura Aromatics is the smell of ginger and brewed tea from the adjacent unit, along with familiar sounds of a drinks stall at a coffeeshop—glasses clinking against a steel worktop. But this is not like the coffeeshops we are used to seeing in our neighbourhoods; it is a standalone drinks stall called Bhai Sarbat, famous for its *teh sarabat*—sweet tea spiced with ginger.

Outside the modest tea stall is a display case containing artefacts indispensable to the trade: a tea sock for straining ground tea leaves; a plate of ginger extract used in the preparation of *teh sarabat*; metal jugs to *tarik*<sup>2</sup> (Malay for 'pull') the tea; and the classic coffeeshop-style glass cup in which tea would be served. The display case is

accompanied by captions explaining the function of each object, as well as a brief description of the heritage of the business.

Participants in the Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme mention that passers-by have been drawn to the mini-showcase, some even becoming customers. At the same time, gaining an insight into the circumstances surrounding the usually humble beginnings of the businesses and how they have persisted for multiple generations, allows patrons to better appreciate their present, continued existence.

Angeline Loy, third-generation co-owner of the famed Loy Kee Chicken Rice, shares how the display case outside the restaurant also helped build rapport with customers:

*The display case is a great conversation starter between us owners and our customers. Through the knowledge of our*

↓ Display case outside Bhai Sarbat drinks stall showing indispensable tools of the trade.



← Mohammad Asgar, owner of Bhai Sarbat, 'pulling' (*tarik* in Malay) tea. This process of pouring tea quickly and in succession from one vessel to another cools the drink and creates a foamy top.

↙ Angeline Loy (left) with her parents, James Loy and Jane Tan, in front of the Loy Kee Chicken Rice main restaurant along Balestier Road.





*brand's history, our customers are able to build a connection with us and further appreciate the food served to their tables.*

Loy Kee Chicken Rice, now a landmark in Balestier, has been serving up traditional Hainanese chicken rice since 1953. If not for the writeup on the display case, few would know that the founder Loy Nie In had started from a small stall selling the iconic dish at the former Rayman Market, which occupied the site of today's Whampoa Makan Place. This original Loy Kee Chicken Rice stall is still operating today in the food centre at Whampoa Makan Place, while the main restaurant is located two streets away along Balestier Road.

Rayman Market was part of Rayman Estate built in 1948 by the Singapore Improvement Trust, and the estate no longer exists today as the area was redeveloped to accommodate new public housing flats by the Housing

↑ Loy Kee Chicken Rice stall at the former Whampoa Market, 1984. Qua Tee, co-founder and wife of Loy Nie In, is seen here helping the stall.

*Courtesy of Loy Kee Chicken Rice*

and Development Board in the 1960s. Although there are few, if any, vestiges of Rayman Estate left—as roads were expunged and amenities carrying the name were demolished—knowing that the Loy Kee Chicken Rice stall remains at the same location of the now-demolished Rayman Market offers a precious thread that links us back to a place that might otherwise be completely forgotten.

#### A Meaningful Search

The display cases were co-created by NHB and the respective business owners. During the process of artefact selection, business owners delved deep into their family history and scoured storage boxes for historical items relating to the business. Along the way, much more beyond artefacts was uncovered: they discovered stories they had never known about their forebears, and as other family members were roped in for the search, the collective journey

of discovering one's roots proved to be so much more meaningful.

Xavier Lee, the current owner of Loong Fatt Tau Sar Piah, who inherited the business from his grandfather, speaks of the excitement during the search process, albeit with some ruefulness as few historical artefacts survived:

*The entire family was activated for the search, everyone helped out, so it was a very fun and meaningful experience! But at the time when we were asked to locate old items, coincidentally a lot of old things had just been thrown out. We didn't think to keep them then, and it was too late... But we did manage to find some historical items and these are now on display. Personally, I never liked taking photographs, but now I understand their importance as they represent a part of history.*

Meanwhile, for Loy, the curation of the display case was deeply enriching as she came to know of many stories about her grandparents for the first time:

*All items displayed in the case were new to me and the stories behind them were also first heard when we were discussing which items to include in the display case. It was definitely an eye-opener and a humbling experience for me to learn about my grandparents' time in this business. The story behind the egg basket really struck a chord with me because I was told that my grandfather would add a free egg to every customer's bowl of porridge as a way of taking care of them and thanking them for their support. His kindness has inspired me to do the same for my customers today.*

↓ A long-time staff of Loong Fatt Tau Sar Piah packing the traditional pastry into a box for takeaway.





↑ An egg basket on display outside Loy Kee Chicken Rice.

No object exists in a vacuum; each one has a story to them. Although at times we make a serendipitous discovery, most of these stories have to be actively unearthed from another person who has memories associated with these everyday objects, or who has inherited the stories from others who have since passed on.

In this way, objects such as those curated for the display case serve as a conduit for the transmission of memories. And when these objects are displayed for public viewing, like in the Street Corner Heritage Galleries project, we all have the privilege of sharing in these precious memories as well.

### Bearing Witness to the Present

NHB's Street Corner Heritage Galleries project has not only provided an impetus for the owners of these heritage businesses to rediscover their personal, family and business histories, but it is also a means for the public to appreciate these stalwarts of their respective locales.

Fauziah Rani of VSS Varusai Mohamed & Sons reflects on the project and her 87-year-old business in Kampong Gelam selling accessories for the *haj* pilgrimage:

*There has always been that underlying grit to continue the business under any circumstances. [The Street Corner Heritage Galleries] project has just made the will to carry on the business even stronger and pass it down to the fourth generation. It also made me realise our business is more than dollars and cents; it's a heritage and we have a responsibility to carry it forward.*

Besides Balestier, Kampong Gelam and Little India, the Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme will also be rolled out in Chinatown, Geylang Serai and eventually the heartlands. Even as we understand that identities, including those of places, are always dynamic and in flux, there are measures that can be put in place to mitigate the erasure of unique features of a place and protect the precarity of old businesses and trades that contribute greatly to the identity of a locale.

In addition to the Street Corner Heritage Galleries programme, NHB offers the Organisational Transformation Grant to selected businesses to enhance their business operations with the aim of providing longer-term sustainability. Jamal Kazura Aromatics is one of the businesses that has received this grant, which will support its efforts to build a digital presence.

Perhaps the public can also play a part in *carrying it forward*, as Fauziah puts it, by not taking the existence of these



age-old businesses for granted. Just by taking a walk in precincts like Little India, Kampong Gelam and Balestier, we can now learn more about these trades and businesses that have survived the test of time, through the heritage showcases. Beyond that, taking in the sensuous experience that accompanies a walk—the smells, the sounds, the tactility of objects, the taste of a dish as we make a pitstop for sustenance, the street scenes—is a means of being present and bearing witness to what we have now and ought to cherish.

↑ Fauziah Binte Syed Mohamed (middle) with her sister, Sharifah, and brother, Syed Abdul Aziz. They are the third-generation owners of VSS Varusai Mohamed & Sons, one of the oldest businesses in Kampong Gelam selling accessories for the *haj* pilgrimage. The siblings are holding their signature product, the *tali pinggang haji*, a belt used by pilgrims.

### NOTES

- 1 Niamh M. Moore and Yvonne Whelan, eds., *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity: New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape* (Aldershot; Burlington, 2008), 97.
- 2 To *tarik* tea is to pour the hot tea from one vessel into another several times and in quick succession—a process that cools the drink and creates a froth, while thoroughly mixing the ingredients which enhances its flavour.



## **LIGHTS ON!** Singapore Night Festival— Then and Now

Since its inception in 2008, the annual Singapore Night Festival has been attracting large local and international crowds with its eye-catching programmes spanning the historic Bras Basah, Bugis precinct. We take a look at the evolution of the much-beloved festival over the years and peek into its future.

**Victoria Chua**  
Assistant Manager, Festivals and Precinct  
Development, National Heritage Board

↑ Installation *Glow Away* with the letters made of slime—a collaboration by local groups HeritageCares and Sansys Collective—at SMU Campus Green, backgrounded by the facade projection mapping *Keep Dreaming* by French group Spectaculaires at the National Museum, Singapore Night Festival 2019.

The much-anticipated annual Singapore Night Festival (SNF) returns this year with a spectacular line-up of programmes after a two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since its inception in 2008, SNF has become known for its eye-catching light shows, mesmerising facade projections on heritage buildings as well as innovative cultural performances and programmes.

SNF typically takes place over the last two weekends of August each year at the heart of Singapore's arts and heritage precinct known as Bras Basah, Bugis. Held after dark and free to the public, SNF aims to increase awareness of arts

and cultural institutions located in the precinct and of its place heritage.

Each edition of the festival involves the participation of many stakeholders in the precinct such as the National Museum of Singapore, CHIJMES and the Singapore Management University. With nearly every corner of the precinct injected with life during the festival, SNF attracts a wide range of audiences from all walks of life. Before the pandemic, the annual visitorship to SNF achieved a steady state of about 600,000, while the 2017 edition of SNF drew a record-breaking 745,000 visitors.



↑ *Invasion* by Dutch theatre company Close-Act outside the National Museum, featuring mythical creatures, Singapore Night Festival 2016.

### Beginnings: Nightfest

First known as the Night Festival, commonly referred to as Nightfest, the event was conceived as a part of a larger placemaking<sup>1</sup> initiative to enliven the Bras Basah, Bugis precinct. The history of the area dates back to the 19th century when it was home to various ethnic groups, schools, places of worship, traders, entertainment joints and small businesses. Today, Bras Basah, Bugis continues to be a hub for many tertiary students, office workers, residents, art institutions, monuments and arts housing tenants, all of whom contribute to the locale's diverse, eclectic and vibrant character.

Though much of the precinct has transformed over the decades, it has retained some of its traditional architecture such as the iconic 19th-century neo-Palladian-style National Museum of Singapore building. A contemporary

landmark is the School of the Arts, completed in 2009, whose design has garnered multiple architectural awards. However, while many worked, studied and hung out in the area during the day, the precinct was largely quiet and devoid of human traffic and activity after sunset. Nightfest was thus launched as part of a larger plan to revitalise the city-centre and to cultivate a deeper interest among the public in local arts and cultural institutions.<sup>2</sup>

The inaugural edition of Night Festival in 2008 aimed to showcase Singapore's heritage in a new light. With its programmes located mostly around the premises of the National Museum, the festival was presented at a turning point of museum awareness in Singapore—audiences had begun to view museums as a recreational and entertainment option, departing from the traditional perception of museums as staid institutions that dispensed history lessons.



↑ Italian performance group Studio Festi dancing in mid-air in front of the National Museum, Night Festival 2008.

Besides the boosted branding of Nightfest and public interest generated, the festival also arrived at a time when major arts events were still fairly limited in Singapore, which enhanced the uniqueness of the festival.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, holding Nightfest at the end of August meant that it would follow closely on the heels of Singapore's National Day celebrations that culminate on 9 August each year, sustaining the jubilant community spirit.

In the early years of Nightfest, the festival was criticised for featuring only international artists, which prompted the programming team to include more local artists in the line-up. Established Singaporean dance choreographer Aaron Khek was engaged in 2009 as artistic director to showcase local performers at the festival. Khek presented Nightfest 2009's opening show *Bersama Hijau* (Together in the Green), which saw 80 local performers combine dance, percussion and vocals in a highlight show

## THE HISTORIC BRAS BASAH, BUGIS PRECINCT

The Bras Basah, Bugis precinct was among the first areas in Singapore to be developed. Constructed with convict labour, Bras Basah Road appears on an 1836 map of Singapore as 'Beras Basah', which is Malay for 'wet rice'. The road name was derived from the wet rice that used to be laid to dry on the banks of the 'freshwater stream', today's Stamford Canal.

In Stamford Raffles's earliest town plan, Bras Basah was allocated as part of the European quarters that housed the colony's main civic life. It also served as the suburb to the busy financial district of Commercial Square (later renamed Raffles Place). As a result of its central location, Bras Basah was considered an ideal location for

the establishment of schools and places of worship for the ever-growing multicultural communities of Singapore. A detailed map of the town published in 1846 shows that the area was already relatively built up by then, with churches, synagogues, schools, businesses and private residences existing side by side.

Today, major institutions located within Bras Basah, Bugis include the National Museum of Singapore, Peranakan Museum, School of the Arts, National Library, Singapore Art Museum,<sup>3</sup> Armenian Church, Singapore Management University and many others. Most, if not all, of these entities consistently participate in the Singapore Night Festival.

held at the open green space outside the Singapore Management University, known as SMU Green. This turn towards homegrown artists was met with great interest and support from the public.

Nightfest then appointed local theatre veteran Ong Keng Sen as artistic director in 2010. A Cultural Medallion winner and artistic director of TheatreWorks, Ong helmed that year's festival, themed 'New World', inspired by Singapore's entertainment scene and amusement parks in the 1960s. The line-up included street performances, theatre and circus acts, art installations, video screenings and a fashion parade for visitors to experience both the past and the future in immersive ways. Visitors were exposed to works by artists such as local collectives

↓ *Les Hommes Debout* (The Standing Man) by AADN from France, featuring 16 glowing human-size figurines at the entrance of the Singapore Art Museum, Singapore Night Festival 2017.



Vertical Submarine and FARM, alongside regional artists Wit Pimkanchanapong (Thailand), Forum Lenteng (Indonesia) and The Propeller Group (Vietnam).

Over the years, the festival began to mature and found its footing as a key arts event in the public consciousness. Night Festival was rebranded as Singapore Night Festival from the 2013 edition—signalling the festival as a significant event on the national arts calendar. Through the following iterations, SNF further cemented its position as a leading festival marked by its international appeal, without compromising on its local flavour.<sup>5</sup>



〰〰  
[The Singapore Night Festival has] redefined its raison d'être: to celebrate the rich history, diverse communities, and colourful place identity of Bras Basah. Bugis by unearthing stories of everyday spaces in the locale.



↑ *World of Wearable Art*, in which technology meets fashion, by Galina Mihaleva, an assistant professor at the Nanyang Technological University's School of Art, Design and Media, Singapore Night Festival 2018.

### A New Approach

The pandemic led to the cancellation of the 2020 and 2021 editions of SNF; however, NHB took the opportunity to conduct a review of the festival. A series of in-depth interviews with precinct stakeholders, artists and cultural partners, as well as public surveys, were conducted to gather their perspectives on the festival.

The results of the study revealed a keen interest in the festival's exploration of untapped spaces in Bras Basah. Bugis to uncover the precinct's history and to offer a refreshing approach to experiencing the locale at night-time. Through showcasing the nooks and crannies of everyday spaces where people live, work, study and play in Bras Basah. Bugis, festival-goers would be better acquainted with the unique identity of the precinct—an objective that is not only central to SNF, but also sets it apart from other festivals.

Following the review, SNF redefined its raison d'être: to celebrate the rich history, diverse communities, and colourful place identity of Bras Basah. Bugis by unearthing stories of everyday spaces in the locale. To achieve this, the festival employs three key strategies to strengthen the relationship between SNF and the Bras Basah. Bugis identity, prioritising

the deepening of SNF's engagement with the precinct's stakeholders in the overarching aim of placemaking.

First, SNF will dive deep into the identity of Bras Basah. Bugis by showcasing stories embedded within the precinct through tours, for example, and thus creating shared experiences. It will also seek to nurture a sense of place via artworks that respond to and reference site-specific histories so that the public can connect meaningfully with the area.

Second, by enhancing access and participation in the arts and heritage through, for instance, art installations and workshops, the festival will engage a broad spectrum of audiences with the aim of uncovering, reimagining and activating the many untapped everyday spaces and experiences in the precinct.

The third strategy centres on building communities in Bras Basah. Bugis by engaging the precinct's stakeholders to co-create SNF programmes, which will also lead to richer, more site-specific content. These strategies will inform the narratives and curation of commissioned artworks and performances for future editions of SNF.



### Future of the Festival: SNF 2022

In a fast-moving world inevitably shaped by technological and digital innovations, the SNF team is also challenged to rethink the ways in which technological developments and sociopolitical and economic climates are transforming festivals of the future. David Chew, Director, Festivals and Precinct Development, NHB, expresses the importance of considering the ever-changing consumption patterns of festival-goers and keeping pace with technological innovations:

*Our audiences are constantly evolving alongside technological and digital innovations and trends [which impact] the way they consume and experience everything in the world today online and offline... The lines between the real world and digital world are becoming increasingly blur[red], and it is definitely something to keep in mind when planning the festival experience of today.*

*The other impact of the pandemic on festivals today[, the need] for more safe distancing and smaller group sizes*

↩ **Project: Dome – SOLIS** by Mischief Makers X MeshMinds recreates the energy present within the sun and encapsulates this projection within a dome on SMU Campus Green, Singapore Night Festival 2019.

↩ **Interactive outdoor pods** as part of *Tessellations of Time: Pods of Light* by LiteWerkz, comprising students from the Singapore University of Technology and Design in collaboration with science company 3M, at the lawn of the National Museum, Singapore Night Festival 2017.



*[which] translates to more intimate experiences[,] is probably more welcomed than not. If anything, this decentralisation of the mega, mass nature of festivals creates an opportunity for more in-depth, meaningful experiences in smaller, more intimate settings.<sup>6</sup>*

Although safe management measures have eased significantly in the recent months with the improvement of the COVID-19 situation, the upcoming and future editions of SNF will feature a more decentralised spatial format, instead of being centred around the main festival village like in previous years. With support from the precinct's stakeholders, the festival's programme offerings will similarly be spread out across the precinct.

For SNF 2022, audiences can still expect to be wowed by SNF's signature array of interactive light installations, facade projection mappings and multisensorial performances. The multidisciplinary works draw inspiration from and relate closely to the site-specific histories,

communities and spaces of the precinct. SNF 2022 will also feature its first-ever immersive theatre experience as the highlight act, along with a slew of more intimate experiential programmes created by the precinct's stakeholders.

Facade projection mapping shows—a perennial favourite of visitors—will also return, with the National Museum hosting the festival's largest, created by Maxinosity, a 3D visual art collective from Hungary. The work will explore Singapore's mythical origins and history dating back to the 14th century. This is particularly relevant given the museum's proximity to Fort Canning Park, a key archaeological site in the discovery of artefacts from the 14th century and before. Weaving together the unique architecture of the National Museum with the precinct's history, this head-turning projection mapping will take festival-goers on a journey to discover the Singapore Stone, the history of Fort Canning Park and the legend of Badang.

↑ Entrance to the Festival Village on Armenian Street, Singapore Night Festival 2019.



Besides Maximosity's work, there will be four other facade projection mappings transforming monuments and buildings in Bras Basah. Bugis into site-specific canvases, telling stories of the precinct's history and its communities. Festival-goers can also look forward to specially curated food menus at various participating food and beverage outlets, programmes by arts groups housed in spaces under the National Arts Council's Arts Housing Scheme along Waterloo Street, among others.

Significantly, the upcoming SNF will provide a taste of what is to come for large-scale outdoor festivals as we learn to live with the ongoing pandemic. By continually adapting and evolving its programming over the years, SNF has become a stalwart of major public arts events in Singapore—a much-loved festival with something for everyone.



#### NOTES

- 1 Placemaking refers to the process of proactively managing a place to make it better for the public and the communities embedded within it. See Urban Redevelopment Authority, 'Making Lovable Places', last updated 6 May 2022, [www.ur.gov.sg/Corporate/Planning/Master-Plan/Themes/Liveable-and-Inclusive-Communities/Making-Loveable-Places](http://www.ur.gov.sg/Corporate/Planning/Master-Plan/Themes/Liveable-and-Inclusive-Communities/Making-Loveable-Places).
- 2 Government of Singapore, 'Welcome to Bras Basah. Bugis', Bras Basah. Bugis Arts and Heritage District (website), last updated 10 March 2022, <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/brasbasahbugis/who-we-are/welcome-to-bras-basah-bugis>.
- 3 The Singapore Art Museum building is presently undergoing renovation and the museum is temporarily housed at the Tanjong Pagar Distripark.
- 4 In 2008, major arts festivals besides the Night Festival were the Singapore International Festival of Arts and Chingay.
- 5 Kezia Toh, 'Fireworks in the City: Singapore Night Festival', Culture Academy, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, May 2021.
- 6 'An Interview with Mr David Chew', *Culture Bytes* (website), Culture Academy, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, April 2022, <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/-/media/Mccy-Ca/Feature/Resources/Newsletters/Culture-Bytes-April-2022/Mr-David-Chew-Interview.pdf>.

Scan the QR code  
to find out more  
about the upcoming  
Singapore Night  
Festival!



# Stories as Ways of Seeing

## *Cerita* at the Malay Heritage Centre

Before closing for renovation at the end of the year, the Malay Heritage Centre put up its final exhibition titled *Cerita* (Stories)—a retrospective survey of the centre's decade-long invaluable work of spotlighting the diverse peoples and cultures of the Malay World.

Zinnurain Nasir, Assistant Curator, Malay Heritage Centre;  
Syed Hafiz Nasir, Curatorial Fellow, Heritage Institutions



View of the Me-Reka gallery in the *Cerita* special exhibition at the Malay Heritage Centre.

Heritage scholar Laurajane Smith notes that heritage can either promote a “consensus of a version of history” by social elites or be used by under-represented groups to challenge such elite narratives.<sup>1</sup> With the latter in mind, the acknowledgement of experiences of marginal communities by giving them a voice, and thus increasing the visibility of forgotten identities in contemporary times, has been the driving force behind the work of the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) for the past decade.

Since its reopening in 2012, MHC’s exhibitions, festivals and programmes have been anchored in and driven by a strong belief in the importance of sharing stories, be they personal anecdotes, community adages, institutional accounts or national records. Explored loosely through the themes of *bangsa* (nation), *bahasa* (language), *budaya* (culture) and *adat* (custom), MHC has worked with various Malay ethnic

communities—such as the Baweanese, Minangkabau Javanese, Bugis and Banjarese—on exhibitions exploring their identities, material cultures as well as tangible and intangible heritage.

The primary means of collaboration with the communities were co-creation and co-curation, so that they could present their heritage and living cultures in ways that were meaningful to them. The use of stories to engage audiences was a consistent theme throughout the decade of exhibitions and programmes at MHC, which offered new perspectives and connected us across communities. As such, the final exhibition at MHC before it closes for renovation at the end of the year is aptly named *Cerita* (Stories)—premised on stories that have been passed down through generations within various Malay communities across the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago).

↓ View of the Kita gallery in the *Cerita* special exhibition at the Malay Heritage Centre.



### ***Cerita*: Exhibition-making and New Conversations**

Spanning written and oral histories, objects, beliefs, customs and practices of the Malay World, *Cerita* brings together all the stories that MHC has told thus far. As the special exhibition surveys the decade-long work of MHC and imagines the future together with its audiences and stakeholders, MHC hopes to continue to encourage discussions on perennial questions: Who are the Malays in Singapore? What are their contributions to the global cultural landscape?

To summarise a decade’s worth of exhibitions was a mammoth task. As each exhibition was a milestone itself, it was challenging to re-present the respective community’s stories together in a single exhibition. Thus, curators for *Cerita* decided to return to what they perceived as the foundational purpose of a public museum—a repository of knowledge and stories.

*Cerita* comprises two galleries—Kita (Us) and Me-reka (Them)—each offering a different lens through which to view the exhibition. The Kita gallery tells stories of the local Malay community, Malays of the wider Nusantara and MHC’s institutional history. The Me-reka gallery, on the other hand, supplements that dimension by showing how the Malay World has been understood and conceptualised through the perspectives of others. The term *reka* within *mereka* means ‘to create, craft or produce’—another thematic layer of the exhibition that is essentially a survey of the material and visual cultures of the Nusantara.



### **Stories of the Malay World Ideas and Visual Culture**

*Cerita* features many artefacts from the National Collection, such as publications by Qalam Press. Qalam Press was a Jawi publishing house formally established in 1951 in Singapore by the writer Syed Abdullah Hamid Al-Edrus, who also went by the pen name of Ahmad Lutfi. Jawi is an Arabic script that was widely used for written Malay in Singapore until the 1960s when the government and other Malay-language activists pushed for the romanisation of the script, as the Latin alphabet was viewed to be

↑ Cover of a 1951 issue of *Qalam* magazine showing former leaders of independent Indonesia.

Creator: Syed Abdullah Hamid Al-Edrus  
Date: 1951  
Region: Singapore/  
Malay Peninsula  
Material: paper  
Dimensions: 26.2 x 19.2 x 0.5 cm  
Accession no.: 2001-04939  
Collection of: National Museum of Singapore

more practical in terms of transmitting knowledge from the Western world. Qalam Press's Jawi publications are therefore a window into the politics of modern Jawi writing and publishing in the postwar Malay milieu. In addition, they allow us to study the ways through which communities in the past sought knowledge and discussed issues of the day.

Syed Abdullah launched *Qalam* magazine in July 1950, which became one of the longest-running Jawi magazines before its demise in 1969 due to dwindling sales across the Malay Peninsula and amid strong calls to romanise Jawi. During its nearly two-decade run, *Qalam* contributed significantly to public discourse on Malay-Muslim and broader issues in Singapore and Malaya through its editorials and columns featuring topics that kept pace with the times. These included discussions on the 'ideal' Malay-Muslim identity and the independence of Malaya—subjects that resonated with the Malay masses. The magazine attracted a broad swathe of readers; at its peak in the late 1950s, *Qalam* reportedly had a distribution of 30,000 across Singapore and Malaya.

Among the highlights of *Qalam* were its columns that broached a wide variety of topics. Some of the columns were a platform for readers to correspond with

columnists. A mainstay column was the popular '1001 Masalah' (1001 Problems) where readers mailed questions to the magazine, which columnist Abu al-Mokhtar would answer. Many of these questions concerned issues relating to the Malay-Muslim community, such as religious practices, marriage traditions, and history. In this way, *Qalam* helped create an ecology of information and knowledge circulation among the Malay-Muslim populace.



→ Cover of the novel *Chukriya*, written by Ahmad Lutfi and published by Qalam Press. Ahmad Lutfi is the pen name of Syed Abdullah Hamid Al-Edrus, who founded Qalam Press.

Creator: Syed Abdullah Hamid Al-Edrus  
Date: 1949  
Region: Singapore/  
Malay Peninsula  
Material: paper  
Dimensions: 18.9 x 14 x 0.7 cm  
Accession no.: 2001-04775  
Collection of: National Museum of Singapore

### From Transactions to Representations

A section in the Kita gallery showcases historical ingots used by Malay communities of the Nusantara from the 15th to 19th centuries. The ingots reveal ways through which peoples interacted and portrayed themselves to the world. These differently shaped ingots were used for transactions up until the 19th century when they were replaced with *pitis*—round tin coins with a hole in the centre—such as those issued by Kelantan sultanate.

Beyond their transactional usage in the past, the ingots today also tell us how cultures were represented. Animal ingots, for example, reveal the communities' relationships with nature and communal heritage. Historical accounts indicate that this 'animal money' had been in use from as early as the 15th century.<sup>2</sup> Many of the ingots that have survived take the form of various animals, especially crocodiles, elephants, tortoises, grasshoppers and cockerels.

Animal ingots provide a glimpse into cultural practices of the day. For example, the cockerel-shaped ingot that was prevalent in states such as Kedah and Perlis alludes to the cock-fighting circuits popular within kampong communities there. On the other hand, they are also testament to global influences in the Malay World: tortoise-shaped ingots, inspired by the design of Chinese ingots, and the more familiar-looking *pitis* indicate the presence of Chinese influence in local markets. The form of the *pitis* was

→ An ingot in the form of a tortoise.

Creator: unknown  
Date: 15th–18th century  
Region: Malay Peninsula  
Material: tin  
Dimensions: 13 x 11 x 4.5 cm  
Accession no.: N-3623  
Collection of: National Museum of Singapore

derived from coins used in China from as early as the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE). The diversity of these numismatic objects reveals the bustling economy in the Nusantara from the 15th century.

With their historical value, myriad forms and rarity, the ingots became prized collectibles during the British colonial administration as part of the material culture of the colonies.<sup>3</sup> In particular, coins shaped as the muntjac (barking deer), or *kijang*, were also collected as amulets for rituals and goodwill among subsequent generations of Malay communities.<sup>4</sup>

↓ An ingot in the form of a grasshopper.

Creator: unknown  
Date: 15th–18th century  
Region: Malay Peninsula  
Material: tin  
Dimensions: 17 x 6 x 6 cm  
Accession no.: N-3630  
Collection of: National Museum of Singapore





### Seeing Beyond Objects

An overt strategy employed in *Cerita* is the inclusion of artworks within the predominantly object-centric world of heritage museums. While this is not the first time that MHC has included artworks, *Cerita* explores visual culture in the Malay World via themes such as art and craft and the publishing world. Visitors will encounter a painting by 19th-century Javanese painter Raden Saleh, displayed alongside an exquisite *songket*<sup>5</sup> fabric and Bugis jewellery. Grouped together, the painting and artefacts create a visually striking display that attests to the rich visual and material cultures of the Nusantara.<sup>6</sup>

Islamic art discourse tends to be dominated by objects and artefacts that are utilitarian in nature—manuscripts and amulets, for example. This is

especially apparent if one were to visit international museums like the Louvre in Paris or the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. However, the batik paintings of Sarkasi Said and Jaafar Latiff challenge preconceived notions of Islamic art, such as its strong association with Islamic calligraphy.

Better known for his floral and abstract batik paintings, Sarkasi expressed that whether a work was considered ‘Islamic art’ ultimately depended on the artist’s intentions: “If we begin by respecting God’s creations, then we are heading there, closer to God, and that feeling can be transmitted to our works.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Jaafar’s works are not overtly Islamic. His series of paintings titled ‘Unspoken Dialogue’ harmoniously combines various elements like colours, brushstrokes and Jawi letters, which can be interpreted as a spiritual exercise—a

↑ A display cluster of paintings and other artefacts including a *songket* textile and Bugis jewellery in the Me-reka gallery showcasing the visual and material cultures of the Malay World.

rumination on his Malay-Muslim identity and the tradition of batik-making.<sup>8</sup>

Many writings about Jaafar and Sarkasi focus on their styles and techniques. When displayed together with artefacts such as the illustrative *Qalam* magazines, however, their artworks reveal another pathway to understanding the sociocultural complexities of Malay heritage, including the historical predominance of Jawi.



*Cerita* charts the journey of [the Malay Heritage Centre’s] unwavering commitment to spotlighting the diverse peoples, stories and cultures that make up... the ‘local Malay community’, situating them within the wider Nusantara.



→ An exquisite gold and silk *songket*—a traditional handwoven textile of Southeast Asia.

Creator: unknown  
Date: 19th century  
Region: Malay Peninsula  
Material: red silk with gold thread  
Dimensions: 207.4 x 79.3 cm  
Accession no.: 2017-00614  
Collection of: Malay Heritage Centre





### The Work Continues

From the beginning, MHC's curatorial strategies have always aimed to spark conversations on topics typically deemed marginal, particularly relating to Malay micro-ethnic communities, and on the overlooked aspects of Malay-Muslim heritage in Singapore. As a retrospective survey of MHC's work in the past decade, *Cerita* charts the journey of MHC's unwavering commitment to spotlighting the diverse peoples, stories and cultures that make up what is termed broadly as the 'local Malay community', situating them within the wider Nusantara through the exhibited artefacts.

While the display of objects and artworks have been carefully curated to 'speak' to each other and open up new pathways of interpretation of Malay heritage and identity, conversations among visitors inspired by these artefacts will live beyond the exhibition. Through this, we hope to preserve the memories and heritage of the communities that MHC has collaborated closely with. Even as MHC closes for a revamp, this work—making visible the invisible and centring those on the margins—will continue. For now, we leave it to the public to cherish the invaluable stories that have been generously shared with us by the communities as we look forward to a continued collective exploration of our Malay roots in the future.

#### ← Untitled (Shahadah)

Creator: Sarkasi Said  
Date: c. 1980s  
Region: Singapore  
Material: batik  
Dimensions: 82 x 140 cm  
Collection of T:zi

#### ← A painting in Jaafar Latiff's 'Unspoken Dialogue' series

Creator: Jaafar Latiff  
Date: 1998  
Region: Singapore  
Material: mixed media  
ink on canvas  
Dimensions: 70 x 85 cm  
Collection of the artist's family<sup>9</sup>

### NOTES

- 1 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 2 W. Shaw and Kassim Haji Ali, *Tin Hat and Animal Money* (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Negara, 1997).
- 3 Tim Barringer, *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 4 Anker Rentse, 'Gold Coins of the North-Eastern Malay States', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1939: 88–97.
- 5 *Songket* is a traditional handwoven textile of Southeast Asia.
- 6 Russell Storer, Clarissa Chikiamco and Syed Muhammad Hafiz (eds), *Between Worlds: Raden Saleh and Juan Luna* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017).
- 7 Mohamed Noh Daipi and Rahmat Subadah, *Bicara Budiman: Sarkasi Said* (Singapore: Malay Language Centre, Ministry of Education, 2020).
- 8 Syed Muhammad Hafiz, *Jaafar Latiff: Beyond the Familiar* (Singapore: RHT Rajan Menon Foundation, 2020).
- 9 This work is in the process of being accessioned into the National Collection.



Scan the QR code to explore *Cerita* virtually!



Noorashikin Zulkifli with the Asian Civilisations Museum's pop-up exhibition *Apa Khabair?—Peranakan Museum in the Making* in the background.

## Meet the Expert

### Noorashikin Zulkifli

Senior Curator (Islamic Art), Asian Civilisations Museum and Peranakan Museum, National Heritage Board

Noorashikin Zulkifli, a veteran curator with the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) specialising in Islamic art, has been with the National Heritage Board (NHB) for more than a decade. Involved in numerous exhibitions and programmes throughout her career with various cultural institutions, Noora most recently worked on the pop-up exhibition *Apa Khabair?—Peranakan Museum in the Making* held at ACM.

*MUSE SG* speaks to Noora about her unconventional journey to becoming a curator, as well as her thoughts on the evolving role of museums and public perceptions on heritage.

#### 01.

NOORA, PLEASE TELL US ABOUT YOUR PATH TOWARDS BECOMING A CURATOR AT A NATIONAL HERITAGE INSTITUTION!

I'd never imagined where I would be now in terms of my career—looking back, it was a meandering journey with different stops along the way. I have always been interested in the arts, even back in school. My first interest was theatre. After junior college, I did not attend university right away but got involved in local theatre groups such as The Necessary Stage and Teater Ekamatra in both onstage and offstage capacities. As an 18-year-old then, these experiences were very exciting.

That sparked my interest in arts management, which I took up in university, and it was then I discovered my next love: modern contemporary art. Thus, I pursued a master's degree

in interactive media and critical theory at Goldsmiths, University of London. After I returned to Singapore, I wondered if I wanted to practise as an artist; yet I was also interested in putting together a production.

I had the opportunity to join the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) as a programmer after my studies and that gave me the opportunity to put on spectacular live events, as well as understand how curating and programming complement each other. SAM was also where I tried my hand in curating for the first time. It was an eye-opening experience working with such a huge gallery, dealing with artists, and building an art exhibition. After SAM, I taught media theory at LASALLE College of the Arts for three years.

A turning point arrived when I was engaged as a researcher to work on the revamp of MHC in 2009. The work

made me reflect on various historical subjects, as the questions and issues that were being addressed for the project necessitated greater examination and a deeper look into the past. I joined MHC officially the following year as a curator and worked there until 2015.

One of the things I experimented with at MHC was community co-creation—setting up ‘clinics’ with community groups to discuss exhibition-making. I adopted this co-creation model for the *Se-Nusantara* series at MHC that highlighted different ethnic groups. It aimed to provide communities with the space to have their own voice. It was a truly enjoyable process; it challenged what I thought I or they knew, but I realised in the end that it’s really all about *listening*.

After these ‘detours’, I joined ACM as a curator in 2015 while it was undergoing a revamp and worked on the Islamic art gallery.

## 02.

### WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM WORKING ON ARTEFACTS AT ACM?

I came to appreciate how details of an object can be used to draw out rich stories, and I also became more acquainted with a variety of media and materials. Having the privilege of touching objects that have lasted, say, 500 years, made by people during that time—that never ceases to amaze me. That someone living in an environment with far less technology than we have today, was able to rely on their own skills without computer-aided design, and yet could execute intricate details so masterfully—it blows my mind!

I was also exposed to other aspects of curation that were less ‘public-facing’—collection acquisition and development, which I found to be very meaningful.

Humans forget and our memory is fallible. Having the National Collection as a repository of works preserved from centuries ago is an incredible resource to rediscover techniques or knowhow, as well as to rediscover peoples and their stories.

## 03.

### CAN YOU SHARE WITH US AN ARTEFACT THAT HAS LEFT A LASTING IMPRESSION ON YOU?

A calligraphic tile from the 13th century. The brilliant metallic hues that can be achieved are amazing to behold, especially in terms of how a variety of shades can be seen depending on how light hits the surface. Considering the difference in scientific knowledge and methods between now and then, I’m amazed at how the artist(s) figured out what compounds or elements to use and the innovation it took to create such a beautiful effect.

Given how long it takes to throw, mould, decorate and fire a piece of ceramic, it must have been quite a long road in terms of experimentation—imagine the amount of patience, focus and dedication required!



### ↓ **Calligraphic tile** Iran, Kashan, 13th century Glazed fritware 1996-00190

One of the major innovations of Islamic art is the advancement of lustre painting. The technique involves the application of metallic glazes on fired surfaces. The objects are then fired a second time to produce a shiny metallic veneer over the existing glaze. It appeared on glassware in Syria and Egypt from the seventh to the ninth centuries before being applied to ceramics, initially by Egyptian potters. It reached new heights in Syria and Iran, particularly in Kashan.



Noorashikin Zulkifli viewing a display case at the Islamic Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

## 04.

### IN YOUR RELATIVELY LONG CAREER SPANNING MANY DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS, WHAT CHANGES HAVE YOU PERCEIVED IN TERMS OF PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS RELATING TO HERITAGE AND HISTORY?

Since my time at MHC, there is now a much greater public appreciation for heritage. At MHC, we relied a lot on the community coming forward with their stories, but sometimes they didn't, not because they didn't want to, but because they didn't know what they had.

However, that is changing. People now have a better understanding that these stories are valuable and meaningful not only to themselves but also to other people, and that sharing them publicly can be a good thing. People are more invested in their identities and cultural heritage. They realise they can take ownership of their past, and this development has been very heartening and encouraging. Hopefully the interest continues to grow.

Although NHB is the official custodian of our heritage, it shouldn't be just us; everyone needs to play a part in it. We can't cover every story. The only story you can take control of is your own.

## 05.

### EXPANDING ON WHAT YOU SAID ABOUT PEOPLE TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THEIR OWN STORIES, HOW DO YOU VIEW THE ROLE OF EXHIBITIONS TODAY IN TERMS OF THE PLURALITY OF VOICES?

In the first place, an exhibition should never be an end point—but the start of a journey. Ideally, people should go to exhibitions and be inspired to embark on their own journeys

of exploration. This process of discovery doesn't end in the gallery.

For me, museums are incubators, forums and facilitators. We focus on the larger sweeps of art history. These are frameworks for people to situate, make sense of, or place their own personal histories. From time to time, we have the opportunity to highlight these histories. Museums ought to be a resource in that way, but not an encyclopaedia.

A shift that is occurring in the cultural sector not just locally, but globally, is that it is all about relationships and engagement. I am not wedded to the idea of the museum or any institution being the 'supreme' authority. I believe in plurality—and that is my ideal vision of the world. Museums are just one estate. There are things that museums do well, such as having the resources to conserve materials. But ultimately, we need to recognise that museums are only one of the players among many others.

## 06.

### WHAT IS THE GREATEST LESSON FOR YOU IN TERMS OF YOUR CAREER PATH?

Right now, the perception of a curator is still very rooted in being an academic. But I would like to make the point that there isn't just a single path. I have learnt so many skills through the roles I've played in various points of my life and in different settings.

In theatre, for example, one is trained in storytelling and scene-setting, and these are skills that are transferable to other kinds of work, such as exhibition-making. Also, I marry my contemporary art sensibilities with traditional art and historical objects, turning up new ways of seeing and contextualising. There are so many different pathways!



Although [the National Heritage Board] is the official custodian of our heritage, it shouldn't be just us; everyone needs to play a part in it. We can't cover every story. The only story you can take control of is your own.



Don't just limit yourself to one thing. Instead, seek to adopt a multidisciplinary thinking. When I was in theatre, improvisational games were often part of practice and rehearsals —being exposed to these experiences helped me become more agile in my perspective. I am not so upset if things do not go according to plan. We need to think laterally and have multiple solutions.

From being involved in small, independent collectives and projects in my younger years to a national institution now, there is still some of the DIY (do-it-yourself) spirit in me. For example, I don't get too fussed about who needs to be doing what, in terms of the hierarchy of roles. We just do what needs to be done to make something happen—including an exhibition. That, for me, is what I value. Like, I would not be averse to sweeping the floor! [laughs]

