Singapore Shophouses:
Conserving a Landscape Tradition

The shophouse has evolved over 100 years (1840-1940) of Singapore's history, and remains a symbol of the city's vernacular architectural tradition. Capturing the architectural traditions of both the East and West, this - once ubiquitous - building has undergone many transformations. **Victor Savage** *looks at the past and present, origins, growth, demise and conservation of the shophouse in Singapore*

Like many cities in the developing world, the urge to modernize and develop landscape traditions of the western world as symbols of development has led to the demise of the shophouse in Singapore. At one phase of Singapore's frenzied development, it would seem that its planners and government officials were seized by the demons of destruction to wipe out all historical buildings. Well, almost 70 per cent of the colonial landscape has been eradicated before sanity prevailed.

What is a shophouse?

No one knows exactly how the term 'shophouse' was first coined. This word is not found in any of the major dictionaries or encyclopaedias. Furthermore, none of the early writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used the term 'shophouse' specifically although from the descriptions given, these 'dwelling house', 'labour line', 'tenement', 'commercial house' and 'native's shop' fit basically the 'shophouse'. In fact, the earliest reference to 'shophouse' was in the *1946 Annual Report* on Singapore (*Annual Report 1946:72*).

Definitions of the shophouse are relatively recent. Based on the criteria of the general plan of the shophouse, the first Singapore Master Plan of 1955 defined the shophouse as a form of housing with a 'narrow frontage of 20 feet (6 m) or less, built in terraces without side ventilation to a depth of 60 or 70 feet (18 to 20 m)'.

More recent definitions of the shophouse highlight the many functions of the building. 'It is a common practice in small businesses to maintain the ground floor as a shop, godown, servants' quarters or office while the owner lived on the upper floor or used it as a store' (Vatsaloo, 1981:12). Kohl (1984:172) uses the term 'shophouse' to indicate the 'essentially multi-purpose functions of these buildings, combining business areas on the ground floor with residential quarters on the upper floors'.

All these definitions broadly define the shophouse to a limited extent although none of them totally embraces its numerous variations. The shophouse as a vernacular building varies from place to place in terms of its architectural design, the socio-economic functions and cultural influences. Even in a small island like Singapore, there is no homogeneity in the morphology (i.e. the physical form) of the shophouse.

To sum up the various definitions, the shophouse can be broadly defined as a vernacular building of two to five storeys high; following a basic floor plan of a narrow frontage and common party-walls; with a versatility of being able to serve many functions such as economic, residential and recreational purposes; lacking in basic amenities and modern facilities such as a flush toilet system, fire escape, well-ventilated rooms, escalators and lifts; and lastly, it possesses the capability of residential 'involution', i.e. it is able to absorb a huge number of people by the process of dividing and subdividing its living space into tiny cubicles.

Singapore shophouses that are built after the Second World War do not follow the same basic plan and building structures, and are distinctly different from those built before this period. The term 'shophouse' is also taken to include 'terrace shophouse' although this type is mainly used for residential purposes. This is because both are 'one and the same in plan, form and stylistic treatment, built in rows sharing load-bearing party-walls and with units which are connected by a continuous covered walkway (also known as five-foot way)' (Vatsaloo, 1981:4). It is difficult to generalise that all shophouses must have a commercial unit because there are some instances where in a row of shophouses, some units are used mainly for residential purposes or other functions such as associations, guilds, mahjong clubs, illegal gambling dens, brothels and so on.

The Singapore shophouse shares many basic characteristics with its counterparts in Malaysia and Phuket Island (south of Thailand). This could be due to their close geographical position as well as the fact that these countries have shared similar historical links in the colonial era. The diffusion of the shophouse to Phuket is a result of the Chinese labour that moved from Penang to Phuket. Many Chinese set up businesses revolving around Phuket's thriving tin-mining industry, hence the strong Chinese Penang connections in Phuket till today.

The Origins and Spatial Spread of the Shophouse

The English colonialists' town plan, the Raffles' Plan (to physically separate the various racial communities on the island in the early 19th Century), is clearly illustrated in the figure on the next page which was redrawn from a map by Lt. Philip Jackson in 1828 (Fig. 1). The map shows distinctly the segregation of the different races and the areas that were allocated to them.

Following this plan, the Chinese built their shophouses along the streets which were laid out by the administrators in a grid-iron pattern (Fig. 1). Between 1826 and 1827, more than

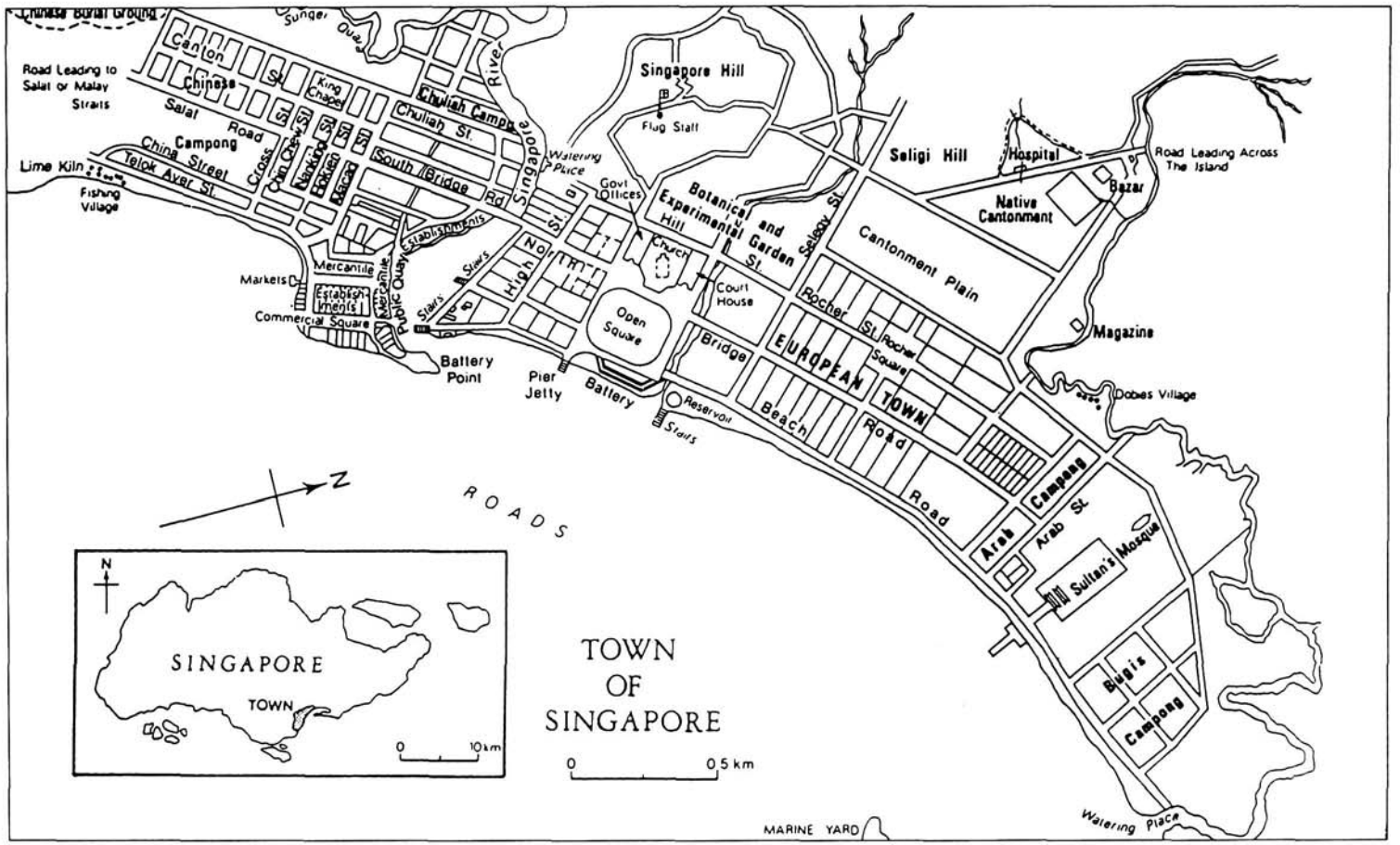


Figure 1: Jackson's plan of the town (1823) showing ethnic residential areas. (After John Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China, 1828).

200 leases were given out to the Chinese inhabitants to build on land situated, predominantly, on the south side of the Singapore River which is the Chinese sector in the Raffles' Plan (at Market Street, Philip Street, Telok Ayer Street, Church Street, China Street, Pekin Street, Kling Street, Circular Road, Amoy Street, Cross Street, South Bridge Road and High Street (Song, 1967:26)). The streets were an important feature because their 'uniformity and regularity' (Clause 15 of Raffles' letter, 4 November 1822) determined the liner shophouse development on both sides of these streets.

As the British colony expanded rapidly, so did the Chinese population. In 1824, the Chinese was estimated to be around 3,317, i.e. nearly one-third of the total population of 10,683. By 1840, this figure had grown to 17,704 which was slightly more than half the total population of 35,389 people. Most of this Chinese population lived in the shophouses which were mainly confined to the Chinese area allocated by Raffles.

Although no data could be found to substantiate the number of shophouses in the Central Area during the pre-1945 period, this concentration of shophouses can be imputed from the social survey done by Goh Keng Swee (1953/54) on urban income and housing because the shophouse conditions which existed before the war prevailed till the 1960s.

In the survey, it was found that more than one-third of the sample population (i.e. 38.9 per cent) which amounted to 7,262 persons or 2,364 households stayed in shophouses (Goh, 1956:63). Within the city centre, more than three quarters of the households surveyed were housed in shophouses (Goh, 1956:64). This concentration of shophouses in the city centre (Central Area) led Goh (1956: 81) to conclude that the shophouse was the most important type of dwelling in terms of the number of occupants in the city area.

Although urban renewal has brought about a decline of shophouses within the Central Area in the 1960s, this marked clustering in the city centre as compared to those areas further away can still be seen in the 1980 Census Report on census houses (Table 1).

The rapid population increase up to 1931 was mainly due to large scale migration from China and India. For example, there was an increase of 83 per cent in the Chinese and Indian population between 1911 and 1931 but a steady natural increase took the place of migration as the main factor of population increase after 1945 - a re-

Table 1: Number of shophouses by area, 1980
(adapted from C H Khoo, Census of Population 1980, Singapore)

AREA	NUMBER OF SHOPHOUSES
Central Area	
North of the Singapore River	
Cairnhill area	433
Kampung Glam	1,393
Jalan Besar	1,060
River Valley road	379
Rochore area	1,116
Sub-total	4,381
South of the Singapore River	
Anson area	590
Havelock Road	355
Kreta Ayer	768
Tanjong Pagar Road	724
Teluk Ayer Street	1,501
Sub-total	3,938
Total (within Central Area)	8,319
Outside Central Area	
Braddel Heights	155
Bukit Batok	157
Bukit Timah	153
Farrer Park	480
Geylang (east and west)	892
Upper Serangoon	278
Total	2,115

sult of the 'post-war baby boom' (Blythe, 1951:23).

The expanding immigrant population in the early twentieth century led to an increase in housing demand, and shophouses were built at a very rapid rate. The population demand, however, outstripped the shophouse residential supply; therefore, within the shophouse itself, living spaces were divided and subdivided into tiny cubicles which were then rented out to the new migrants. This practice of internal division continued right up to the late 1950s.

The population in the pre-1945 era was concentrated in the Central Area, and even up till 1947, it was reported that 72 per cent of the population lived in the Municipal Area of 31 square miles (80 sq km) (Goh, 1956:21). The density of population in the Chinatown area in 1953 was 1,250 persons per hectare (Mak, 1975:25) and it was estimated that in 1960, nearly one quarter of a million people were living in badly degenerated slums comprising

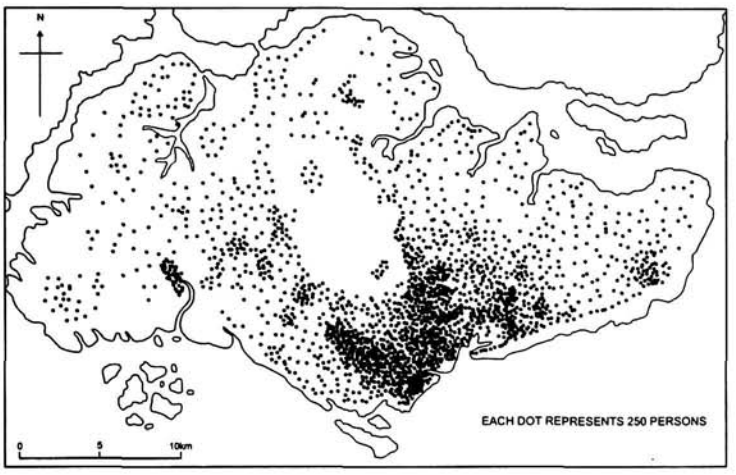


Figure 2: Distribution of Chinese Population

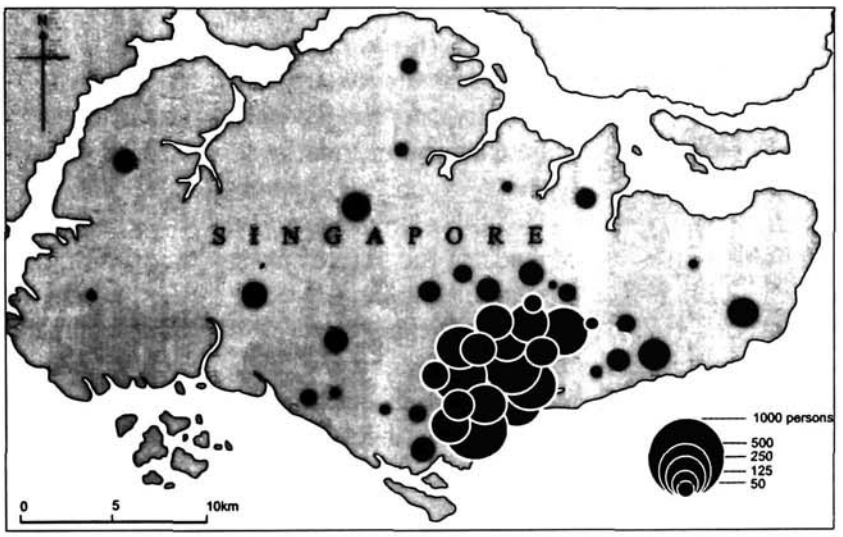


Figure 3: People Living in Shophouses

shophouses of nearly a century old (Choe, 1975:98).

Based on the distribution of Chinese population in the Central Area and the concentration of shophouses in the Central Area, it seems evident that shophouses were populated predominantly by Chinese residents (see Figs. 2 & 3).

Shophouses in Kampong Glam showing a Muslim undertaker business (1986).

By the early 1970s, the population in the shophouses had declined considerably. A study done by Yeh (1975:25) indicated that the number of households in shophouses (including the floors of shophouses) had dropped from 103,000 households in 1966 (i.e. 31 per cent of the total households in Singapore) to 79,000 (or 21 per cent) in 1970. The Chinese population which had reached the 1.5 million mark in 1970 began to move to the satellite towns of the suburbs as a result of urban renewal and government policies. Since 1966, when the urban renewal programme was started, more than 121 hectares of slum and densely squattered areas in the strategic city centre (Choe, 1975:109) had been cleared away. The governmental Housing and Development Board (HDB)'s establishment of new housing estates away from the city centre (e.g. Queenstown, Toa Payoh, Kallang, Marine Parade, etc.) was instrumental in reducing the Chinese population in the Central Area.

The Changing Morphology of the Shophouse

Other fundamental concepts of Chinese architecture inculcated in the early shophouses were in the construction of (a) courtyards; (b) exposure of the structural elements e.g. the beams supporting the ceiling; (c) the emphasis on the roof; and (d) the use of colour (Needham, 1971:65).

The internal courtyards or open air wells on a smaller scale were often incorporated in the shophouses because they provided internal light and ventilation as well as facilitate the collection of rain water which is equated with good luck (Yong, 1956:4) and some of these shophouses can be seen in Armenian Street.

Almost all of the early Chinese buildings built in the 1820s were arranged with the primary elements on the North-South axis while the secondary elements develop transversally to them, resulting, therefore, in a rectangular or square form of plan. The pillars, rafters and beams in the roofs and walls were also exposed and emphasized. These early shophouses have no facades because they were simply arranged with supporting pillars and unhidden, unadorned cross-beams (Kohl, 1984:179). This sort of construction was in accordance with the strong Chinese beliefs in geomancy.

The elevation of the early shophouses were rather low but the sloping roofs gave the building a much taller appearance (as can be seen in some of the shophouses in Kampong Glam). These pitch or sloping roofs (which were mainly built of attap due to cheap, abundant and easily available building materials) were preferred because of the frequent rains in Singapore. Gutters in the roof were created to carry the rain water quickly down the steeply sloping roofs to the eaves which project far from the walls of the buildings (Kohl, 1984:23). The early roofs, which followed the Chinese-style with round-ended gabled walls, had no ornamentation on them.

These attap roofs were greatly susceptible to fires, and they were soon replaced by tiled ones which were more fire-resistent.

Two problems, however, surfaced with this change of building materials. Firstly, there was the problem of ventilation because this type of tiled roof did not have the same 'cooling effect' found in the attap roofs. To relieve the heat in the house, the Chinese came up with a new innovation in the form of their jack-roof. This term refers to an elevated gabled or pyramidal roof segment sheltering a clerestory opening which separates it from the main roof. The diagram here shows the side elevation of the jack-roof in the local shophouses (Fig. 4).

The second problem was due to the increased in weight of the tiled roofs. Previously, timber pillars were strong enough to support the attap roofs but with the tiled roofs, stronger pillars were needed and the answer came in the form of brick pillars.

The early Chinese shophouse was also influenced by the local Malay architectural tradition, and this can be seen in the presence of the verandah on the local shophouses. The verandah became a requirement later, after the island's British administrators imposed an obligation on all future shophouses to contain one. Verandahs were tropical innovations, and were built in Malay homes on three sides of the house to provide additional cooling services (Parkinson, 1955:40). They

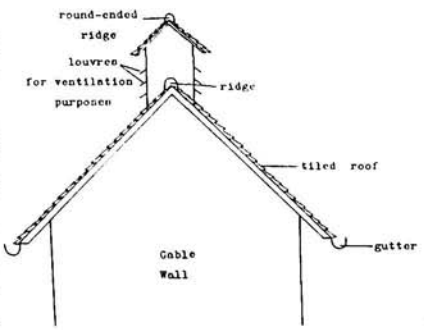


Figure 4: Diagram Showing the Side Elevation of a Jack-roof

were later incorporated at the front of the shophouse to provide shelter from the frequent and sudden rainstorms as well as from the hot sunlight. These adaptations were later known as five-foot ways, and their prevalence in all the shophouses in Singapore can be traced back to the letter written by Raffles to the Town Committee on 4 November 1822 in which he stipulated that each (shop) house must have an open verandah 'to be open at all times as a continued and covered passage on each side of the street' (Buckley, 1984:84).

While shophouses probably existed during the wood and attap phase of Singapore's history, the current brick and mortar shophouses had its first prototype when John Turnbull Thomson built the Ellenborough buildings for the Chinese towkay (tycoon) Tan Tock Seng (1778-1850) in 1840 (Teo & Savage, 1991:322). The Ellenborough shophouses had all the fundamental aspects of shophouses built over the next century. They were 2-storey buildings with a covered passageway. The buildings had

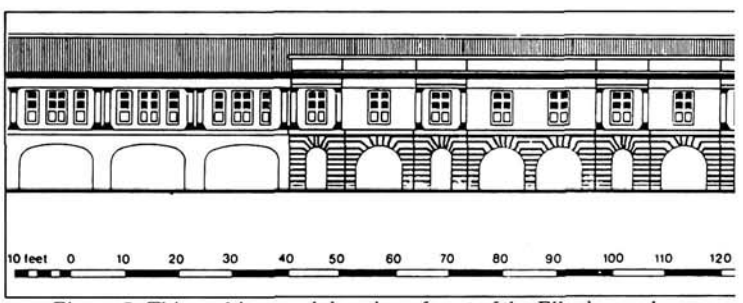


Figure 5: This architectural drawing of part of the Ellenborough Buildings reflects the prototype of the architectural style of Chinese shophouses in Singapore.

Figure 6: Early Shophouse Style

little embellishments adorning the front. Essentially, the Ellenborough shophouses were simple and very functional buildings (see Figs 5 & 6). It seems a shame

that these shophouses stood the test of time until very recently when they were demolished in the 1990s to make way for the subway (MRT) station. One wonders why the authorities did not save these historic buildings, and integrate them as part of the facade of the subway station. Ironically, after tearing them down, new facades or paintings of these historic prototype buildings were built to evoke their memory.

Western influence played an important part in the later architectural development of the Chinese shophouses (i.e. from 1845 to the 1920s). Two European architects, G D Coleman (1826-1841) and J T Thomson (1841-1853) were instrumental in introducing many of the European architectural styles to the Singaporean shophouses which were later copied by subsequent architects.

The first trained architect in Singapore was George Drumgoole Coleman who came to the settlement in 1826 and was appointed Superintendent of Public Works, Overseer of Convict Labour and Land Surveyor in 1832 (Buckley, 1984:227). Coleman introduced the Palladian-style of architecture to the Singaporean landscape (Figs. 7 & 8). This High Renaissance style of architecture derived its name from Andre Palladio (1518-1580), a Venetian architect who revived and reinterpreted the use of the Greek and Roman Classical Orders after an abeyance of a thousand years. These Classical Orders were later adapted and used in the designs of the shophouses in Singapore. Many important buildings (e.g. the Armenian Church) were designed by Coleman, and he did much to improve the town's infrastructure. In short, he had a crucial part in shaping the city's early skyline (Gretchen, 1984:18).

By the late nineteenth century, western influence was strongest in the facades of the upper floors. The westerners introduced pomp and grandeur into these facades with their Greek and Roman motifs, Venetian arches, rustication, festoons, baroque foliage, consoles and elaborate false fronts featur-

Figure 7: First Transitional Shophouse Style

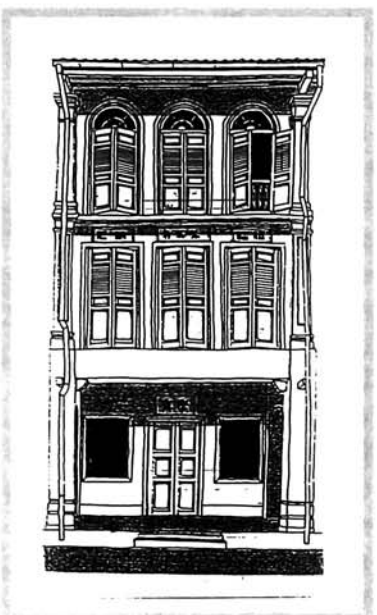


Figure 8: Second Transitional Shophouse Style

Figure 9: Late Shophouse Style: Chinese Baroque

ing parapets, open balustrades and flamboyant facade gables (Kohl, 1984:184).

This blending of the different influences from the various cultures merged together to form a unique architectural style known as the 'Singapore Eclectic' (Seow, 1967) or 'Chinese Baroque' (Parkinson, 1955) and as a result, the shophouses in Singapore (and Malaysia and South Thailand) are quite distinct from those shophouses found in other parts of Southeast Asia (Fig. 9).

The Utility of Shophouses

Generally, the shophouse has two basic functions - it serves economical as well as residential purposes. The word 'shophouse' itself demonstrates explicitly this dual function: 'shop' (the economic dimension) and a 'house' (the residential function). Over the years, this dichotomy has not been strictly observed and many variants are discernible. The shophouse can be used solely for residential purposes or solely for economic functions such as retailing, warehousing, storage and offices. In the past as in the present, the shophouse has been used as brothels and dens for prostitution. Some shophouses are also used for associations or guilds.

The shophouse businesses

Shophouses played a versatile role in the early economic development of Singapore. As trade and commerce flourished from the 1820s onwards, the economic activities of the shophouses expanded to include functions such as cottage industries which were mainly labour-intensive (e.g. manufacturing of gunny sacks, religious products, biscuits, shoes, clothes, etc.), retailing, wholesaling, offices, storage and services such as teahouses, coffee shops, restaurants, lodging houses, stevedoring and so on. Some of these early shops were owned by rich Chinese merchants such as Tan Che Sang, Choa Chong Long, Yeo Kim Swi, Tan Tock Seng and Teo Lee in the Chinatown area (Song, 1967:25).

The various shophouse businesses that are still found in most of the shophouses nowadays include:

(a) retailing - those selling goods in small quantities directly to customers, e.g. photo studios and goldsmiths
(b) wholesaling - those dealing with goods in large quantities, e.g. scarp metal and import/export firms
(c) offices
(d) storage
(e) cottage industry - these include light industries such as manufacturing of gunny sacks, religious products, furniture making and others

Shophouse turned into slum-additional rooms/space added to the shophouse (1980s).

(f) services - those dealing with food, e.g. restaurants and coffee shops and other services such as tailoring, barber shops and beauty salons.

Table 2 gives a breakdown of the broad types of functions of the shophouses that were surveyed in 1985 by Kew (1985/86).

Table 2: Types of functions of the shophouses

FUNCTIONS	NUMBER OF SHOPHOUSES	PERCENTAGE
Retailing	48	37.8
Wholesaling	7	5.5
Office	13	10.2
Storage	1	0.8
Cottage industry	7	5.5
Services	46	36.2
Others*	5	4.0
Total	127	100.0

*others include shophouses which are used solely for residential purposes or for associations, gambling dens and so on.
Source: Kew (1985-86)

Segregation of the different ethnic groups into different areas (e.g. the Chinese in Chinatown, and the Indians in Little India) also brought about various specialization of economic activities in the shophouses. These occupational specialization were not only racially determined but extended to the dialect groups within each race as well.

For instance, among the Chinese, the Hokkiens living in the shophouses around Amoy Street, China Street, Telok Ayer Street and Hokkien Street were mainly carpenters, odd-job labourers, proprietors of retail shops, wholesalers and merchants; the Teochews who were vegetable wholesalers and hawkers concentrated their businesses in North and South Canal roads, Merchant Road, River Valley Road and Carpenter Street; the Cantonese had their goldsmith shops, tailor shops, restaurants and tea-houses in Temple, Pagoda and Mosque streets; the Hainanese had their retail shops, coffee shops and restaurants in Middle Road, Purvis Street and Seah Street; and finally the blacksmiths' shops, shoe shops and medicinal shops of the Hakkas were located mainly in Upper Chin Chew, Upper Hokkien and Upper Cross streets (Lloyd, 1984:8).

Clark Quay shophouses showing clothes drying in the sun (1984).

Shophouse in Chinatown with Chinese good-luck calligraphy writer (1980s).

The early Indians also concentrated their activities such as moneylending in Market or Chulia Street, and later expanded their businesses to the Serangoon Road area. High Street was the area where the Sindhis, Gujeratis and Sikhs had their cloth and electronic shops; and the Indian Muslim traders were concentrated in Beach Road and Jalan Besar area (Siddique & Shotam, 1982:13).

The residents and their occupations

The early residents of the shophouses were mainly the young, poor male immigrants from China (and India). The vast majority of them were single and unmarried because there were very few females in the settlement in those days. These residents include shophouse proprietors and their workers; labourers working in the docks or construction sites; hawkers; rickshaw pullers; and other odd-job workers.

Early Chinese proprietors or shopkeepers in Singapore were from Malacca (e.g. Tan Che Sang, Si Hoo Keh and Choa Chong Long); they had already established themselves before coming over to Singapore, and many of them, in fact, owned the shophouse in which they were staying. These shopkeepers were very industrious, frugal and hard-working. They demanded a lot from their employees who also stayed with them. As the settlement became progressively developed, many of richer and more established merchants built terrace shophouses for themselves in the suburbs, and rented out their shophouse premises to chief tenants who stayed and worked there. Dr John Bertram van Cuylenburg (1982:48) observed that in the 1920s, 'the Chinese bigwigs used to live about their premises in those days, unlike their modern counterparts who live, as the Euro-

peans do, on the outskirts of the city'.

This pattern has persisted right up to the present day in which the majority of the shophouses within the Central Area are owned by absentee landlords. Whereas those proprietors (who rented the shophouses), who once worked and lived in the same shophouse, were quite common during the pre-war years, the situation has changed drastically during the past two decades.

The living conditions

The shophouses in Chinatown and its surrounding areas have frequently been depicted as slums with tales of squalor, extreme congestion and inhumane living conditions. These conditions which were in existence since the late nineteenth century grew progressively worse after the war because the population kept increasing rapidly without an accompanying increase in housing.

A third of the cubicles surveyed by Kaye (1960:56) in Singapore had neither windows nor other external openings, and 87 per cent of the cubicles with windows merely had unglazed openings with wooden shutters. Many households therefore lived in cramped, poorly ventilated conditions of almost permanent semi-darkness. In Upper Nankin Street, each floor of the shophouses there generally had only one kitchen, one bathing place, and one toilet, irrespective of the number of households occupying that floor, and Kaye (1960:70) found that the toilet was often a tiny cubicle built into the same verandah which served as a kitchen. Frequently, the 'kitchen' space was devoid of a sink, and operations such as washing clothes or pots, and the cleaning of vegetables were performed in bowls set beneath taps fixed to the wall and commonly located in the airwell or back yard. The 'bathroom' was just an enclosed space with either a wall tap and tin bath or, often, only a tap (Kaye, 1960:84).

Buchanan (1972:192) too, shows the physical living conditions of the shophouse accommodation in 1966 as is depicted in the following table. Kew's (1985/86) study of shophouses

Table 3: The physical conditions of the shophouse, 1966

	PERCENTAGE OF SHOPHOUSES
Building deteriorated or dilapidated	27
No piped water	3
No electricity	2
No bathing facilities	3
No toilet facilities	4
No kitchen	41
No radio, TV or refrigerator	50
1 or less rooms per household	63

Table 4 gives an indication of the number of inhabitants in the shophouses surveyed in mid-June 1985 (Kew, 1985/86).

Table 4: Number of inhabitants in the shophouses, 1985

NUMBER OF INHABITANTS	NUMBER OF SHOPHOUSES	PERCENTAGE
None	33	26
Less than 5	24	19
6 to 10	18	14
11 to 15	14	11
More than 15	9	7
Others*	29	23
Total	127	100

*Others include non-responses, those respondents who were not too sure of the numbers and those whose numbers of inhabitants vary frequently

The covered five-foot way in the Ellenborough shophouses - with labourers resting between jobs in the Singapore river boats.

Chinese temple in the Clark Quay shophouses in the 1980s.

Shophouse in Boat Quay - traditional 7-Eleven store (1985).

Shophouse in Club Street area with cottage industry - the making of spring roll 'skin' (wrappings) (1980s).

Renovated shophouses on Sago Street (1998).

in 1985 showed that there were still many basic amenities which were lacking in shophouses, and that many households (63 out of the 100 households surveyed) occupied one room or less (see Table 3 on page 15).

Urban Renewal: The Shophouse in Danger

As a result of rapid urban renewal over 25 years (1960-1985), the urban landscape of Singapore has been drastically altered. This urban change is especially evident in the new towering skyline of the city at Raffles Place, Shenton Way, the Golden Mile, North Bridge Road and People's Park. Needless to say, such urban development was done at the expense of shophouses, and what is now left are isolated pockets of shophouses in the Central Area.

Town planners, architects, government officials and bureaucrats have often been divided over the issue of redevelopment of the remaining shophouses, especially in the Central Area. The government is faced with the unenviable task of having to decide between the two conflicting policies of conservation (preserving the shophouses) and development (eradicating the shophouses for high-rise office buildings and flats).

According to Mr Fan Kai Chang, the then Deputy General Manager of URA, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (1983), 'redevelopment' can be defined in two different senses: 'one is to pull down old buildings and build new ones and the other is to renovate and rehabilitate the existing building and then put it into compatible use'. However, renovation of shophouses is no easy task. Sometimes it involves complying with new building codes that would bring the costs of renovation of such dilapidated buildings to as high as three times the cost of demolishing and rebuilding a whole new structure of the same design. Furthermore, who is going to pay for all these renovations? Property owners or tax payers?

Not all shophouses in Singapore are so fortunate as to be spared from demolition. Ninety shophouses in the area bordered by Serangoon Road, Kerbau Road, Buffalo Road and Belilios Lane have been affected by the HDB clearance of land to be completed by the third or final quarter of 1986 (The *Sunday Times*, 26 May 1985). There were some unfavourable views from the businessmen of this 'Little India' area which is a thriving area of shopping for Indian tourists and local Indians. One complained that 'Little India' will become 'Minute India' if the shophouses are cleared. But on the other hand, the views from the residents were quite favourable as most of them were quite glad at being resettled in HDB flats because of better living conditions (*The Straits Times*, 11 June 1985).

Conserving the Shophouse

The shophouse has been preserved in its original state at times modestly and at other times with outlandish colourings, but it has become alive in the landscape due to a combination of many factors:

(a) The tourist impetus : landscape attractions.
(b) The government desire for conserving some of them.
(c) The 'yuppie' interest in them for work sites or as home.
(d) As investments. Given their central location, freehold, 2-storey shophouses can fetch up to S$3 million (Tan, June 2000).
(e) Good central locations. Most of the shophouses are located in the Central Area of Singapore, and if they are conserved they make for very important key locations for business and entertainment activities. In Teo's (1997-98) study of Little India, favourable customer access and good location were the two main reasons for businesses operating in the conservation of shophouses (see Table 5).
(f) Suitable establishments for restaurants, advertising agencies, antique or curio shops and boutique hotels. About 5 per cent of total hotels comprise boutique hotels which are mainly run from restored shophouses. Three boutique hotels (The

Royal Peacock, The Inn of the Sixth Happiness; Regal Inn) are, for example, found in the red light area of Keong Siak Street in Chinatown. Given the large spaces within shophouses, these premises have been readily transformed into boutique hotels by carving up space into rooms (e.g. Duxton Hotel) (see Fig. 10). The study by Chan Yin Meng (1996/97) of the Duxton and Royal Peacock boutique hotels show how each developer successfully converted old shophouses into the current boutique hotels (see Table 6).

If not for the tourist dollar, Singapore's shophouse conservation might not have met with the success it has to date. One of the first areas of shophouse conservation (August 1981) is the Emerald Hill Area in the tourist belt of Orchard Road, covering an area of 9.58 hectares with 150 units of vernacular shophouses. The whole area was zoned for residential purposes and the streetscape was enhanced by the planting of trees and decorative road surfaces. On 1 June 1985, the Peranakan Place at the corner of Emerald Hill Road and Orchard Road was officially opened. This 'museum-cum-handicraft centre' is geared towards reviving Peranakan culture in the ornate Straits-born Chinese shophouses (Peranakan culture is a mixture of Chinese and Malay traditions; Peranakans are the descendants of early Chinese settlers and native Malays in the Straits Settlements which included Malaysia and Singapore; in the Malay language, the word Peranakan means half-caste).

Table 5: Ranking of the importance of the reasons cited

REASONS	RANKING
Favourable customer access	1
Proximity to linked business	2
Good location	2
Architectural design/heritage appeal	3
Low cost of doing business	3

Source: Teo, 1997/98:36

Some areas of Chinatown have also been included in the conservation scheme of the URA, as recommended by the Tourism Task Force that had just completed a study of the area. Many of the pre-war shophouses in areas such as South Bridge Road, Sago Lane, Trengganu Street and Smith Street were given a facelift in May 1985 as part of the 'interim facelift operation' (*The Straits Times*, 10 May 1985). Most of these areas have already been acquired by the URA which found quite a number of shophouses still in fair structural con-

Table 6: Comparison between the Duxton and Royal Peacock

ASPECT	THE DUXTON	THE ROYAL PEACOCK
concept/ distinctive feature	Exclusive boutique hotel with traditional European approach due to colonial history of Singapore; only Southeast Asian hotel to be a member of *Relais & Chateaux Association* in France	Boutique hotel that managed to capture historic identity of the area. Located right in the heart of Chinatown, it offers its guests the experience of living in a traditionally Chinese area
location	Tanjong Pagar Conservation Area in Chinatown Historic District	Bukit Pasoh Conservation Area in Chinatown Historic District
architectural features		
- pilasters	Corinthian ornamentation	Corinthian ornamentation
- fanlights	semi-circular + segmental arch	Rectangular
- windows	3 French windows	2 casement + 1 French window
- pintu pagars	changed to timber framed glass panel	retained except for main entrance
- other features	airwells and canopy	jackroofs
clientele	non-Singaporean, independent exclusive, business travellers of the senior management level	non-Singaporean business traveller, tour groups from agency and shipping companies
average room rate	$280 - $450 per night	$125 - $200 per night
number of rooms	49 rooms in 8 shophouses	79 rooms in 10 shophouses
conversion process	Length of process: 36 months Main problem faced: - original intention was to have offices and food court. Owner decided to change it to hotel use when construction was almost completed and therefore resulting in a lot of complicated alterations to structure	Length of process: 14 months Main problem faced: - no proper planning carried out as to how the building is to be used. Hotel consultant came in only at the end of the construction and discovered that a lot of considerations for hotel design were not accounted for

dition that needed only basic repairs to prevent them from deteriorating further (Fig. 11). However, the plans for restoring the more dilapidated shophouses were still inconclusive although the Government has announced its decision to preserve Chinatown since November 1984. The fire in Temple Street on 4 November 1985 in which nine people were killed, has incited the Government to speed up their long term plans (*The Straits Times*, 5 November 1985).

Another recent Government commitment (after three years of deliberation) for the preservation and redevelopment of shophouses are those along the Singapore River (*The Straits Times*, 7 September 1999). Stripped of its picturesque Chinese boats, this project came in the wake of a fear that the character and flavour of the area (bounded by River Valley Road, Hill Street, Collyer Quay, Cecil Street, Church Street, Upper Pickering Road, Havelock Road and Kim Seng Road) was in the danger of being lost forever if nothing is done about it. Ideas and recommendations from the public reflect a desire to see this old centre of trade and enterprise turned into a place of entertainment, shopping and watersport attraction without losing its charm and character. Central to the maintenance of the character of the river landscape is the preservation of the old three and four-storey shophouses along the river front (*The Straits Times*, 7 September 1999).

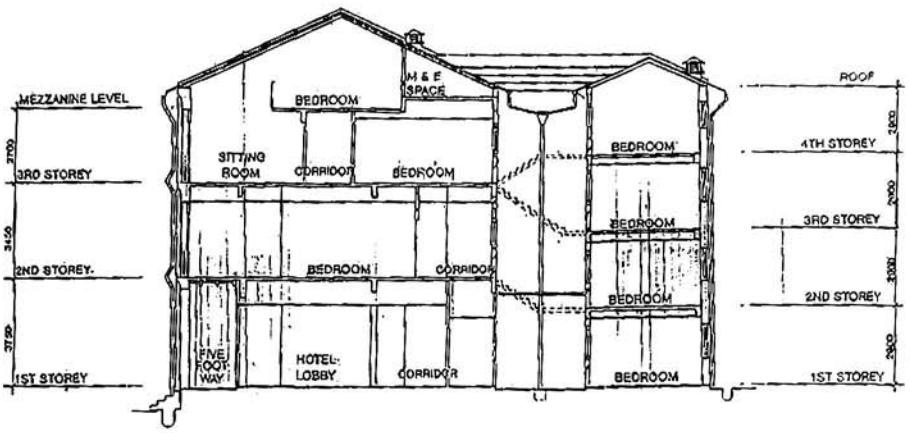
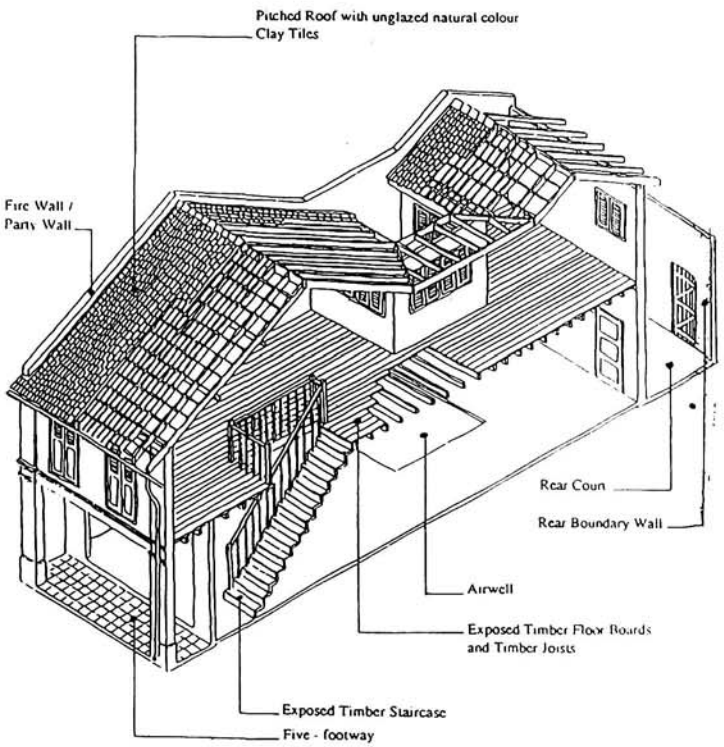


Figure 10: Cross sectional view of the hotel



Source: Historic Districts: Conservation Guidelines for Chinatown Conservation Area

Figure 11: Key Elements of the Shophouse

The Three 'R's

Given the frail conditions of the shophouses in Singapore, the authorities have been prac-

tising and giving out advice to land developers in shophouse conservation based on the '3 R's principle:

(a) Maximum Retention.
(b) Sensitive Restoration.
(c) Careful Repair.

Given that shophouses have become endangered building species in Singapore, the URA is making an all-out attempt to conserve shophouses that are scattered in various areas of Singapore. This Authority has laid down specific restoration guidelines for shophouse preservation (see Table 7). Part of this conservation effort has been carried out through the URA's major urban planning exercise as implemented under the Development Guide Plans (DGPs) for the new Master Plan.

Modern Chinatown, with skyscrapper in the background.

Table 7: Main Restoration Guidelines considered in Conversion Process

KEY ELEMENTS	RESTORATION GUIDELINES
ROOFS	The original profiles, pitch, height party wall and eaves projection shall be retained and restored.
FRONT FAÇADE	
- residential front	The original residential front shall be retained for street blocks. For buildings where non-residential use is allowed, the original timber panel for the 1st storey casement windows and doors can be replaced with glass.
- fanlights, windows, doors and vents	The original fanlights, windows, doors and vents shall be retained and restored.
- balustrades for French window	The original balustrades for French windows shall be retained and restored.
- five-footway	The level of the five-footway shall match with the adjacent units and open walkway where possible.
- decorative features	The original decorative features, if any, shall be retained and restored.
- canopy	Existing canopy shall be retained and restored. Traditional roofing material of small size, V-profile, unglazed natural colour clay tiles identical to those of the main roof is to be used.
- *pintu pagar*	Existing *pintu-pagar* can be retained or removed.
REAR FAÇADE	
- window facing rear court	The original windows facing the rear can be retained and restored, or changed to a French window subject to the design matching those of the front façade. New windows shall be material similar to those of the front façade.
INTERNAL - party wall	The first 3-metre length of the party wall perpendicular to the 1st storey shop front must be retained. Openings in the party wall are allowed subject to the total width of the openings being not more than 50 per cent of the total length of the party wall within the building envelope.
- roof mezzanine	New roof mezzanine within building envelope is allowed subject to the new floor level being not lower than the top of the fanlight-window at the front façade of the upper most storey.
- staircase	Existing staircase position can be retained or changed. New staircase can be added. Variation in staircase layout and railing design are allowed.
AIR-CONDENSING UNITS	Air-condensing units shall be located such that they are least visible from the exterior.

Source: *Historic Districts-Conservation Guidelines for Chinatown Conservation Area.*

The nature of the DGPs planning specification for each of the 55 planning zones has helped tremendously to preserve old shophouses in the major zones. The zones covering Joo Chiat, Little India, Chinatown and Jalan Besar area certainly helped to ensure that the remaining shophouses in these areas were conserved. Indeed, the presence of old shophouses in these traditional ethnic-based zones evoke very much the character and identity of these places. Such communities, living in these shophouses, and the roads and spaces of the 'shops' have come alive with children playing, women chatting and families engaged in evening 'outings'.

Yet, the question that plagues communities and heritage lovers is whether this grand exercise in shophouse conservation is a misplaced

effort. What the URA conservation's goals are all about is merely retaining and preserving shophouse buildings. That is fine, but it does not do justice to the holistic context of shophouse conservation.

Shophouses were the heart and soul of Singapore's residential population for a century as well as the economic arena in which businesses unfolded. Unfortunately, while shophouses have been preserved in Chinatown, critics have been appalled that the Chinese community there has been eroded and evicted. What we now see in Chinatown is an empty shell of well-renovated shophouses but without the traditional Chinese community that gave life and spirit to it. Insult is added to injury in the recent attempts by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to turn Chinatown into a tourism theme area. The Singaporean Chinese community sounded a deafening disapproval of the STB proposal. Private architects had proposed creating a 'Chinese atmosphere' but with architectural inputs from China. The issue was simple: Singapore's Chinatown was defined by a vernacular architecture of shophouses, and it seemed sacrilegious for the STB to turn Singapore's historical Chinese centre into some *disneylike* place *a la Chinese.*

Photographs supplied by Victor Savage

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