

**The Influence of Survivalist Ideology
on Architectural National Identity in Singapore**

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Singapore's survivalist ideology, dominant during the nation's early independence, influenced its development of tangible architectural identity. By examining various initiatives across the changing socio-economic landscape of the country till present day, this article outlines how architecture became a tool for nation building. Primary sources including government press and speeches, legislations as well as public discourse on architecture provides the narrative to evaluate effectiveness in using architecture to foster national identity. This thesis argues that the prioritisation of pragmatism stemming from the ideology of survival has significantly impacted how Singaporeans perceive national identity and the built environment.

Keywords

National Identity, Singapore architecture, Singapore heritage, Nation building, Post-independence Singapore

Introduction

"[Singapore] is conceived as the apotheosis of the tabula rasa: the razed plane as the basis for a genuinely new beginning," Rem Koolhaas wrote, reflecting on Singapore's early years of development.¹ Within just 41 years of gaining self-governance in 1959, Singapore achieved the "first world" status.² This was only possible as Singapore was governed with the ideology of survival, characterised by Chan Heng Chee as one that was pushed by the early government for Singapore to be a cohesive unity that prioritises pragmatic solutions geopolitically and economically for the survival of the nation-state.³ In the built environment, this translated into efficient land usage for rural redevelopment and economic growth.⁴ As such, much of Singapore's built heritage and landscape have been demolished and replaced with commercial buildings or public

1. Rem Koolhaas, "Singapore Songlines," in *S, M, L XL* (New York, N.Y.: Monacelli Press, 1995), 1009–89, 10631

2. Jon S.T. Quah, "Why Singapore Works: Five Secrets of Singapore's Success," *Public Administration and Policy: An Asia-Pacific Journal* 21, no. 1 (July 2, 2018): 5–21, <https://doi.org/10.1108/pap-06-2018-002>.

3. Heng Chee Chan, *Singapore; the Politics of Survival, 1965-1967*, Internet Archive (Oxford University Press, 1971), <https://archive.org/details/singaporepolitic0000chan/page/n3/mode/1up>.

4. Ming Guang Han and Yikang Feng, "The Politics and Commodification of Heritage: A Critical Examination of State-Directed Heritage Policy and Institutions in Singapore" (n.d.)

housing.⁵ National identity as defined by Lily Kong, involves a national consciousness of “a shared image” and “a sense of belonging”.⁶ On this basis, architecture is important to national identity as it is the representation of the development of local culture.⁷ Therefore, demolition of the built environment can be seen as an erasure of cultural identity. Nonetheless, early governmental position on national identity was more focused on uniting the different ethnicity of migrants as Singaporeans through economic means rather than tangible heritage.⁸

This thesis evaluates how this pragmatic ethos, dominant during the 1960s to 80s, affected Singapore’s architectural landscape and their relation to national identity. This is explored through architectural projects that include: heritage sites marked for conservation by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) like Chinatown;⁹ modern architecture both demolished and existing, Pearl Bank Apartments by Tan Cheng Siong (completed in 1976; demolished in 2020),¹⁰ and Golden Mile Complex by DP Architects (opened in 1972; slated for conservation in 2021; refurbishment to complete in 2029);¹¹ as well as contemporary architecture like the Founders Memorial by Kengo Kuma Association and K2LD Architects (competition won in 2020; to open in 2028).¹² In addition, smaller vignetted examples are mentioned to support the argumentation of this thesis.

Even though heritage conservation was mentioned in few government policies from the 1950s to 70s,¹³ it was not until the 1980s that this topic was brought into the spotlight

5. Koolhaas, “Singapore Songlines”

6. Lily Kong, “Globalisation and Singaporean Transmigration: Re-Imagining and Negotiating National Identity,” *Political Geography* 18, no. 5 (June 1999): 563–89, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0962-6298\(99\)00002-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0962-6298(99)00002-5).

7. Hoshir Nooraddin, “Architectural Identity in an Era of Change,” *Developing Country Studies* 2, no. 10 (2012): 81–96.

8. Wen Ling Chan, “Being and Becoming: Constructing Singapore and Singaporeans,” BiblioAsia (National Library Board, Singapore, July 2011), <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-7/issue-2/jul-2011/singapore-singaporeans-constructing-becoming/>.

9. “Historic Districts,” Urban Redevelopment Authority, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Get-Involved/Conserve-Built-Heritage/Explore-Our-Built-Heritage/Conservation-Areas/Historic-Districts>.

10. Weng Hin Ho, “Pearl Bank Apartments,” Docomomo Singapore, May 12, 2021, <https://www.docomomo.sg/modernist-100/pearl-bank-apartments>.

11. Cheng Tong Yap, “Opens Today: First of the Golden Mile Projects,” *The Straits Times*, January 28, 1972, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19720128-1.2.189.2>; Keng Gene Ng, “Golden Mile Complex to Feature Architecture Centre after Upgrading Is Completed in Q3 2029,” *The Straits Times*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/golden-mile-complex-to-feature-architecture-centre-after-upgrading-is-completed-in-q3-2029>.

12. Kim-Kyna Tan, “Only the Finest,” *Today*, May 24, 2002, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/today20020524-1.2.6.6>; “Road to Founders’ Memorial,” Founders Memorial, July 19, 2024, <https://www.foundersmemorial.gov.sg/>.

13. Han and Feng, “Politics and Commodification of Heritage”, 6-7

with the Conservation Master Plan of 1989.¹⁴ This change in governmental position is attributed to the changing economic, political and social landscape in Singapore. Following a period of economic recession earlier in the decade, Singapore needed to expand and shift their economic drivers, finding the opportunity to do so through heritage tourism in the late 80s.¹⁵ Additionally, the reclaimed Marina Bay area and calming of the housing crisis alleviated limitations to development.¹⁶ Politically, the need to foster national identity through heritage became apparent following a People's Action Party (PAP) electoral loss in 1981.¹⁷ This is due to younger Singaporeans finding the need for survival less relatable as they did not experience the nation's early hardships.¹⁸ Comments by Chng Hee Kok in 1986, a former member of parliament, reflect this shift in perspective, "We lose the means of communicating with younger Singaporeans some aspects of our origins, our roots and our culture... But our priorities were different then...we have to do something about preservation now."¹⁹ Along with the economic benefits of heritage tourism, Singapore made heritage conservation and preservation part of its national agenda.

The discussions about national identity in relation to architecture in Singapore have often been linked to built heritage and conservation,²⁰ and less commonly, post-colonial contemporary architecture.²¹

14. Ministry of National Development Singapore (MND), *Groundbreaking: 60 Years of National Development in Singapore* (The Centre for Liveable Cities, 2019), <https://www.clc.gov.sg/docs/default-source/books/groundbreaking-60-years-of-national-development-in-singapore.pdf>, 61

15. Han and Feng, "Politics and Commodification of Heritage", 17

16. MND, *Groundbreaking*, 77

17. Kah Seng Loh, "Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 1–21

18. Loh, "Within the Singapore Story", 4; "PAP Will Win Back Anson, Says Lee," *The Straits Times*, November 2, 1981, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19811102-1.2.12?qt=pap,%20will,%20win,%20back,%20anson&q=Pap%20Will%20Win%20Back%20Anson>.

19. "Remembering How It Was...", *The Straits Times*, August 29, 1986, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19860829-1.2.27.9?qt=remembering>.

20. Ilene Aleshire, "6 Areas to Be Preserved," *The Straits Times*, December 27, 1986, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19861227-1.2.2>; Giok Ling Ooi, "National Identity, Public Housing and Conservation in Singapore," *Habitat International* 18, no. 2 (January 1994): 71–80, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0197-3975\(94\)90051-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0197-3975(94)90051-5); Natalie Pang, Chia Shih Paveena Seah, and Kwang Lin Wong, "Survey on the Perceptions of Singapore's Built Heritage and Landmarks," *IPS Working Papers*, vol. 36, August 2019, <https://doi.org/10.25541/BNX2-F364>; Vivienne Wee and Ai Lin Chua, "Heritage Issues in Singapore: The Perspectives of State and Society," (Heritage Making in Asia: Conservation in Action, 2017); Belinda Yuen, "Searching for Place Identity in Singapore," *Habitat International* 29, no. 2 (June 2005): 197–214, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2003.07.002>.

21. Michaela Busenkell, "Ethical Contestation in Architecture for a Creative Singapore," in *Urban Ethics: Conflicts over the Good and Proper Life in Cities* (Routledge, 2021), 196–212; Habibul Haque Khondker, "Identity by Design: Architectural Developments in Globalizing Singapore," (ARCASIA FORUM 12 International Seminar Globalization and Asian Architecture, 2003) (ARCASIA FORUM 12 International Seminar Globalization and Asian Architecture, 2003), https://www.academia.edu/34818518/IDENTITY_BY_DESIGN_ARCHITECTURAL_DEVELOPMENTS_IN_GLOBALIZING_SINGAPORE_Sub_theme_Culture_and_Identity; Francis Chia Hui Lin, "Ang Mo, Ah Beng and

Much criticism about heritage architecture conservation centres around how it is conducted. Conservation was something Singapore “could not afford” back when it was still a developing country,²² hence the emphasis was on “demolish-and-rebuild” during the 1960s to early 1980s.²³ Scholars like Han and Feng, Wee and Chua, Yeoh and Kong, and Zhao, argue: the top-down processes of conservation by the authorities causes lack of involvement and overlooks local communities;²⁴ surface level restorations that replace “‘lived culture’ with ideological expressions” as well as over-commercialisation of heritage sites mainly due to tourism, creates a sense of disconnection of locals with those areas.²⁵ Going against conservation is the rampant demolishing of built heritage despite having proven local importance, due to prioritisation of urban development plans.²⁶ This thesis concurs with the aforementioned reasons that despite governmental emphasis on cultural heritage conservation, it reads to many as an “artificial replica of the past”.²⁷

Post-colonial modern and contemporary architecture is less included in conversations about national identity, even though it is promoted in government efforts like: the “Renaissance City” from which the Esplanade theatre (2002) was proposed;²⁸ the old National Theatre (demolished in 1986) to create a commonality and “richer inter-ethnic

Rojak: Singapore’s Architectural Orientalism,” *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering* 22, no. 2 (March 4, 2023): 896–913, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13467581.2022.2064474>; Raymond Quek, “Dramatic Pre-Emption in Singapore’s National Theatre: Constructing National Identity before an Independent Nation,” *National Identities* 14, no. 3 (September 2012): 287–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2012.702740>.

22. Kevin Blackburn and Peng Hong Alvin Tan, “The Emergence of Heritage Conservation in Singapore and the Preservation of Monuments Board (1958-76),” *Southeast Asian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2015): 341–64, https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.4.2_341.

23. Brenda SA Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, “The Conservation-Redevelopment Dilemma in Singapore: The Case of the Kampong Glam Historic District,” *Cities* 13, no. 6 (December 1996): 411–22, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751\(96\)00028-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751(96)00028-5); Lily Kong and Brenda SA Yeoh, “Urban Conservation in Singapore: A Survey of State Policies and Popular Attitudes,” *Urban Studies* 31, no. 2 (March 1994): 247–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420989420080231>.

24. Han and Feng, “Politics and Commodification of Heritage”; Wee and Chua, “Heritage Issues in Singapore”; Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, “The Notion of Place in the Construction of History, Nostalgia and Heritage in Singapore,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 17, no. 1 (June 1996): 52–65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9493.1996.tb00084.x>. Yihua Zhao, “Renewing the Old, Creating the New: Examining the Strategies and Results of Urban Conservation in Singapore and Shanghai,” *Journal of City Branding and Authenticity* 1, no. 1 (July 31, 2023): 42–63, <https://doi.org/10.61511/jcbau.v1i1.2023.83>.

25. Imran Bin Tajudeen, “State Constructs of Ethnicity in the Reinvention of Malay-Indonesian Heritage in Singapore,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 18, no. 2 (2007): 7–27, https://www.academia.edu/300373/Imran_bin_Tajudeen_2007_State_Constructs_of_Ethnicity_in_the_Reinvention_of_Malay_Indonesian_Heritage_in_Singapore_Traditional_Dwellings_and_Settlements_Review_18_no_2_Spring_7_27; Yeoh and Huang, “The Conservation-Redevelopment Dilemma in Singapore”; Yuen, “Searching for Place Identity”.

26. Pang et al., “Perceptions of Singapore’s Built Heritage”; Sumiko Tan, “Not Just a Cry for Conservation,” *The Straits Times*, May 7, 1991, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19910507-1.2.77.4>.

27. Yuen, “Searching for Place Identity”, 208

28. Busenkell, “Ethical Contestation in Architecture”

understanding”;²⁹ the Founder’s Memorial (slated to open in 2029), intended to be a landmark for Singaporeans’ key national, community and personal moments.³⁰ Other projects like Pearl Bank Apartments and Golden Mile Complex, though economically driven, also contributed to shaping national identity through their distinct designs and reflection of the developing local culture.³¹ Some older examples mentioned have been demolished as part of redevelopment plans,³² and the discourse surrounding others was the lack of local context in architecture that was designed to be global.³³

Within local literature, there are minimal journals drawing relations to contemporary architecture like Lin’s *Ang Mo, Ah Beng and Rojak*. Lin maintains that “contemporary Singaporean architecture reflects not only formalistic features of global trends but also regional as well as geostrategic cultural politics” and exemplifies it through Jewel Changi Airport.³⁴ Yet heritage architecture remains the dominant narrative, as evidenced through the article “Preserving a Unique National Identity” displaying heritage architecture as Singapore’s cultural identity on state-managed platform, SG101.³⁵ This thesis therefore aims to expand the discussion of Singaporean architecture beyond heritage conservation and national identity through the lens of survivalist ideology, examining its imprint on public perceptions and government decision-making over time.

The argument is presented in four sections, tracing how the shifts in governmental perspective on national identity influenced the development of architecture. First section looks at how the government prioritised economic development heavily over heritage considerations. Second section then argues how architectural national identity emerged unintentionally from economic development. Third section assesses the success of heritage conservation as a means of fostering national identity. Fourth section presents the local’s perspective on contemporary architecture in Singapore regarding national identity. Finally, it concludes by arguing that although the survivalist ideology is not as dominant, it continues to shape how Singaporeans relate to their built environment.

29. Quek, “Singapore’s National Theatre”

30. “Singapore Launches International Architectural Design Competition for Founders’ Memorial,” Founders’ Memorial, January 10, 2019, <https://www.foundersmemorial.gov.sg/milestones/launches-international-architectural-competition-for-fm>.

31. Zihao Wong, “The Nation’s ‘Other’ Housing Project: Pearlbank, Pandan Valley, and Singapore’s Private High-Rise Housing Landscape,” *The Architecture of Housing after the Neoliberal Turn* 13, no. 24 (July 3, 2019): 73–90, <https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.13.1.2136>; MND, *Groundbreaking*, 38-39

32. Lin, “Ang Mo, Ah Beng and Rojak”; Wong, “The Nation’s ‘Other’ Housing Project”

33. Busenkell, “Ethical Contestation in Architecture”; Lily Kong, “Cultural Icons and Urban Development in Asia: Economic Imperative, National Identity, and Global City Status,” *Political Geography* 26, no. 4 (May 2007): 383–404, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.11.007>.

34. Lin, “Ang Mo, Ah Beng and Rojak”, 912

35. “Preserving a Unique National Identity,” SG101, accessed February 2025, <https://www.sg101.gov.sg/infrastructure/urban-planning/unique/>.

Urban Development Prioritisation

Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 came just 23 months after the initial union, and 6 years after gaining self-governance from the British.³⁶ By then, the housing crisis had eased, but the country was anticipating an imminent withdrawal of the British military—a major economic source. Faced with a growing population and need for economic growth, the government had to prioritise urban development.³⁷ To keep public projects financially viable, land had to be acquired at low costs. Prior to the enactment of the Land Acquisition Act of 1966, the government could acquire private land but had to pay compensation based on inflated prices from their own redevelopment efforts.³⁸ This counterintuitive act made upscaling urban redevelopment unsustainable financially.³⁹ Thus, when the Land Acquisition Act came into effect in 1967, landowners were only compensated on the value of land pre-development as stated in Section 34, enabling large-scale urbanisation.⁴⁰ However, this also granted the government authority to demolish built heritage that was perceived as economically non-beneficial.

One such example was the original Raffles Institution on Bras Basah Road. (Figure 1) It was designated for demolition to enable economic developments in the Central Area. Chee Teck Chiang, then acting Head for Urban Renewal Department (URD), described the institution as “centrally located” on “very valuable land” but “under-used and not compatible with its surrounding neighbours”, hence “redevelopment is inevitable”.⁴¹ This announcement prompted several letters to local newspapers urging authorities to consider conserving the building. Such voices included Milton Tan, then President of the Old Rafflesian Association Singapore, pleading to URD that the building should be preserved “as a matter of national pride” as it is the “first monument of education in

36. Felix Abisheganaden, “Singapore Is Out,” *The Straits Times*, August 10, 1965, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19650810.2.3>; “The Cabinet to Be Sworn in Today,” *The Straits Times*, June 5, 1959, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19590605-1.2.132>.

37. MND, *Groundbreaking*, 38 & 48; Singapore Infopedia, “Land Acquisition Act 1966,” National Library Board, April 8, 2014, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cms_uuid=153040f3-9475-444a-ba5c-be2a56658c34; “Pull-out in middle 1970’s,” *The Straits Times*, July 19, 1967, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19670719-1.2.2>; “All out by 1971,” *The Straits Times*, January 17, 1968, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19680117-1.2.3>.

38. “Govt Move to Curb Land Profit in ‘Boom’ Areas,” *The Straits Times*, October 27, 1966, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19661027-1.2.15>.

39. MND, *Groundbreaking*, 48; “Govt Move to Curb Land”

40. “Land Acquisition Act 1966,” 34 § (2020), <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/LAA1966>; Tong Dow Ngiam, “Taking over Private Turf for Public’s Good,” *Today*, February 2, 2007, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/today20070202-2.2.9.9>.

41. Teck Chiang Chee, “Raffles: Redevelopment That Is Inevitable,” *The Straits Times*, July 3, 1968, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19680703-1.2.70?qt=raffles,%20institution&q=raffles%20institution>.

Singapore”.⁴² Despite appeals, demolition works went through in 1972.⁴³ Today, the site is occupied by Raffles City Singapore, a commercial complex designed by architect I.M. Pei and opened in 1986.⁴⁴ (Figure 2)

Chee’s remark in 1968 about the redevelopment of Raffles Institution, “Let us not be over-sentimental over the disappearance of some historical buildings...many will have to go to make way for the right kind of developments...”, exemplifies the national sentiment in regards to tangible national identity up to the early 1980s, as exacerbated by the pragmatic ethos, leaving little room for Singapore to consider heritage preservation in its early days of independence.⁴⁵

“Coincidental” National Identity

On the other hand, introduction of certain economic initiatives inadvertently created iconic architecture that shaped Singapore’s modern skyline.⁴⁶ In the same year the Land Acquisition Act was enforced, the first Sale of Sites programme was launched.⁴⁷ URD saw an opportunity to create economic growth and redevelop the Central Area through selling of state owned land for residential, commercial, recreational and office development.⁴⁸ Some landmarks conceived from this urban renewal scheme are the Golden Mile Complex, a 16-storey mixed-use building opened in 1972,⁴⁹ and Pearl Bank Apartments, a 38-storey private residential building opened in 1976.⁵⁰

Golden Mile Complex (GMC), part of 14 urban redevelopment projects to give Singapore a “new look” and image as a “global city”, was designed by Design Partnership (now DP Architects) under William S.W. Lim, Tay Kheng Soon and Koh Seow Chuan, influenced

42. Milton Tan, “Raffles, Past, Present and Future,” *The Straits Times*, July 13, 1968, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19680713-1.2.50.1?qt=raffles>.

43. William Campbell, “Preserving Bits of the Old RI at Its New Site,” *The Straits Times*, November 10, 1972, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19721110-1.2.78>.

44. “Visit Us | CapitalLand Malls,” CapitalLand, 2024, <https://www.capitaland.com/sg/malls/rafflescity/en/concierge.html>.

45. Chee, “Raffles: Redevelopment That Is Inevitable”; MND, *Groundbreaking*, 61; Han and Feng, “The Politics and Commodification of Heritage”, 12

46. MND, *Groundbreaking*, 38-39

47. Alison Lee, *The Government Land Sales Programme: Turning Plans into Reality* (Singapore: Centre For Liveable Cities, 2021), <https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/50/30ad46db-7e79-496b-8f9d-fe6fb7941424/uss-government-land-sales.pdf>, 16

48. Lee, *Government Land Sales Programme*, 16; MND, *Groundbreaking*, 37-38

49. “Golden Mile Complex,” DP Architects, December 2022, <https://www.dpa.com.sg/projects/golden-mile-complex/>; Yap, “Opens Today”

50. Justin Zhuang, “Saving Pearl Bank Apartments,” *BiblioAsia* 12, no. 3 (2016): 12–16, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/files/pdf/vol-12/v12-issue3_PearlBank.pdf; John Rizor, “AD Classics: Pearl Bank Apartments / Tan Cheng Siong, Archurban,” *ArchDaily*, September 18, 2011, <https://www.archdaily.com/157679/ad-classics-pearl-bank-apartments-tan-cheng-siong>.

by the Metabolist and ‘linear city’ movements.⁵¹ (Figure 3-4) As one of Singapore’s first large scale mixed-use typology introduced through the scheme, its architecturally different formation made it a “prestige landmark” from its opening.⁵² It was also praised as a “masterpiece” of experimental urbanism by Rem Koolhaas.⁵³ Additionally, GMC’s typology as a public space also contributed to shaping national identity. In Sharon Zukin’s *The Cultures of Cities*, she states that the characteristics of urban public space, “proximity, diversity, and accessibility” fosters “a national identity that will be more multicultural, and more socially diverse...”⁵⁴ Echoing this, GMC became a hub for Singapore’s Thai community in the 80s, dubbed “Little Thailand”, allowing the migrant workers to feel a sense of belonging on foreign land as well as reinforcing Singapore’s identity as a multi-cultural society.⁵⁵

Despite the architectural acclaim and cultural importance of the building, not everyone is convinced about its national identity. Former nominated Member of Parliament, Ivan Png, called GMC a “vertical slum” and “national disgrace” as it did not resemble Singapore with its disorderly appearances of corrugated metal sheets on its facade.⁵⁶ (Figure 5) It can be argued that his criticism as a government official is reminiscent of the survivalist ideology of the nation. The housing crisis under the British colonial government created messy and overcrowded urban slums built with scrap metal and attap leaves. (Figure 6) Regarded as a “disgrace to a civilised community”, they were replaced with neat public estates as Singapore gained self-governance.⁵⁷ Thus, while GMC’s architectural merit is recognised, the mixed responses highlight the complexities of fostering a national identity through architecture, where the unintentional creation of symbolic forms may clash with ingrained ideals of order as part of Singapore’s survivalist ideology.

51. Poteik Chia, “\$90 M Plan for a new look Singapore,” *The Straits Times*, June 16, 1967, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19670616-1.2.30>; H. Koon Wee, “An Incomplete Megastructure: The Golden Mile Complex, Global Planning Education, and the Pedestrianised City,” *The Journal of Architecture* 25, no. 4 (May 18, 2020): 472–506, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2020.1767174>; Justin Zhuang, “Golden Mile Complex: Five Decades of an Architectural Icon,” *BiblioAsia* 19, no. 2 (2023): 12–19, <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-19/issue-2/jul-sep-2023/golden-mile-complex/>; “Golden Mile Complex,” DP Architects

52. Chia, “\$90 M Plan for a new look Singapore,”; Yap, “Opens Today”; Cheng Tong Yap, “Shopping Centre Is More than Just a Prestige Landmark,” *The Straits Times*, January 28, 1972, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19720128-1.2.189.3>.

53. Koolhaas, “Singapore Songlines”, 1061

54. Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 262

55. Lito Gutierrez, “Little Bangkok at the Golden Mile,” *The Straits Times*, January 6, 1985, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19850106-1.2.9.8>; Seng Jin Lim, “My Little Home Town,” *The Straits Times*, October 13, 1995, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19951013-1.2.74.5.1>.

56. Zhuang, “Golden Mile Complex”, 17

57. Centre for Liveable Cities, *Built by Singapore: From Slums to a Sustainable Built Environment*, 1st ed. (Singapore: Centre for Liveable Cities, 2015), <https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/50/978dbceb-a5af-4164-b5b5-8d0692f1b02f/uss-built-by-singapore.pdf>, 2

Heritage vs Development

As outlined earlier, conservation became part of Singapore's national agenda in the late 1980s due to economic and socio-political changes. The Tourism Product Development Plan of 1986 linked declining tourism in Singapore to the loss of heritage from modernisation.⁵⁸ In response, a US\$233 million-dollar budget was allocated to redevelop and conserve historical districts marked in the Conservation Master Plan of 1986 by the URA. These districts include Chinatown and Little India, designated by Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, to the different ethnic groups in 1822.⁵⁹ Conservation for these heritage sites were also seen as a reflection of Singapore's 'Asian identity'.⁶⁰

Chinatown, home to Chinese immigrants and smaller Indian and Muslim populations since the 1800s, had its way of life deemed unfit for preservation by the Cabinet due to the urban slums. Therefore, conservation was focused on its physical infrastructure.⁶¹ To start the conservation process, the Singapore Tourism Board proposed a homogenous gentrified Chinese theme, while the Singapore Heritage Society advocated for multi-cultural practices of the community to take priority over tourism. After discussions with local stakeholders, a compromise was reached to revitalise the district to boost businesses while balancing heritage and tourism.⁶² (Figure 7) Despite this, the artificial nature of the heritage site was felt by some tourists when surveyed, not only amongst locals. They viewed that the over-commercialisation made Chinatown lose its original character, where it became about tourism and architectural aesthetics rather than cultural heritage.⁶³ Therefore, the unbalanced revitalisation of Chinatown can be interpreted as falling short in effectively fostering a distinct Singaporean identity,

58. Han and Feng, "The Politics and Commodification of Heritage", 19

59. "Now a New Ruling on Land Build-Up," *The Straits Times*, December 3, 1973, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19731203-1.2.45>; Han and Feng, "The Politics and Commodification of Heritage", 19; Carol Lim, "Singapore's Conservation Programme Bags Prestigious Award," *Skyline*, 2006; Bonny Tan, "Raffles Town Plan (Jackson Plan)," National Library Board, 2016, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=ed0c1981-882f-42c2-9acf-e5dae577a3ba>.

60. Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), *Annual Report 1988/1989* (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1989), https://eservice.nlb.gov.sg/flipviewer/data/booksg_publish/7/7e8f7ff4-4d02-48b3-a48f-fa766c086e3d/web/html5/index.html?opf=tablet/BOOKSG.xml&launchlogo=tablet/BOOKSG_BrandingL_ogo_.png&pn=23, 21

61. Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC), *Past, Present and Future: Conserving the Nation's Built Heritage*, 1st ed. (Singapore: Centre For Liveable Cities, 2019), <https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/50/a582ed17-968b-413c-ad26-2637ae3d14c8/uss-conserving-the-nations-built-heritage.pdf>, 33

62. CLC, *Past, Present and Future*, 46

63. Yuen and Ng, "Urban Conservation in Singapore", 45-46; Yuen, "Searching for Place Identity in Singapore", 209; CLC, *Past, Present and Future*, 46

where the bias toward development highlights the persistent influence of Singapore's survivalist ethos.

Extending the case to the current decade, the dilemma between conservation and development continues. Dr Chang Jiat Hwee, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Architecture, asserts that "Singapore today is thoroughly modern...So if we want to tell the Singapore story, how can we not focus [conservation] on Singapore's modern architecture?" He further notes that the omnipresence of modernist buildings often leads to their neglect in discussions about conservation.⁶⁴

The demolition of Pearl Bank Apartments exemplifies this overlook. Designed in a horse-shoe shape with split level units, it was a reaction to the standard public housing slabs to provide a new way of living for the modern community.⁶⁵ (Figure 8 & 9) In the building's fourth decade, a fourth attempt at an en-bloc sale was threatening the existence of the brutalist tower, amongst various maintenance issues and land demands.⁶⁶ Tan Cheng Siong, the architect behind the apartments, together with a group of residents, proposed a partial conservation by erecting a 150-unit block to fund the preservation of the existing tower through its sales.⁶⁷ However, it failed to get unanimous approval, leading to its sale in 2017 and demolition in 2018 for development of a new condominium, One Pearl Bank.⁶⁸ Ultimately, developmental interests outweighed cultural preservation.

Yet in the same year Pearl Bank Apartments was demolished, a turning point came in the case of the conservation of GMC. URA initiated a conservation study, which will prevent its demolition even with a successful collective sale.⁶⁹ Then in 2021, the complex was gazetted for conservation due to its "exceptional standing as a rare and iconic landmark from Singapore's initial years of post-war nation building".⁷⁰ It was

64. Keng Gene Ng, "New Heritage Group on Mission to Save Modern Buildings Here," *The Straits Times*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-heritage-group-on-mission-to-save-modern-buildings-here>.

65. Hannah Lee, "Interview with Tan Cheng Siong," YouTube, December 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJlaRtR0Hu8>; Weng Hin Ho, "Pearl Bank Apartments," Docomomo Singapore, May 12, 2021, <https://www.docomomo.sg/modernist-100/pearl-bank-apartments>.

66. Rachel Phua, "Pearl Bank Apartments Makes 4th Attempt at En-Bloc Sale," *CNA*, July 8, 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/pearl-bank-apartments-makes-4th-attempt-en-bloc-sale-1006721>.

67. Justin Zhuang, "Saving Pearl Bank Apartments," *BiblioAsia* 12, no. 3 (2016): 12–16, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/files/pdf/vol-12/v12-issue3_PearlBank.pdf.

68. Phua, "Pearl Bank Apartments"; Melody Zaccheus, "Condo Design for Pearl Bank Site Unveiled," *The Straits Times*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-condo-will-be-beacon-on-pearls-hill>

69. Yunita Ong, "Golden Mile Complex May Stay - Even with En Bloc," *The Business Times*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/golden-mile-complex-may-stay-even-en-bloc>.

70. Michelle Ng, "Golden Mile Complex to Be Conserved, with Incentives to Attract Developers in Future En Bloc Sale: URA," *The Straits Times*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/golden-mile-complex-to-be-conserved-with-incentives-to->

eventually sold in 2022 and slated to complete redevelopment in 2029 with “familiar ‘character defining [architectural] elements’”.⁷¹ Referencing the render, (Figure 10) now renamed The Golden Mile, the additions atop of the original building and the new 45-storey tower to its right extends the horizontality of the architectural elements. The extended vertical cores at the sides and 4-storey slab mirrors the original termination of the building. The strip of glass panes and vertical columns between the old and new continue the original elemental accents. Although the building paint is grayscale, the idea of emphasis with varied shades remains.

Desmond Lee, the current Minister for National Development, mentions the conservation of GMC as an example of “celebrating [Singapore’s] built heritage” and will consider “historical and architectural significance” with stakeholders in conservation and adaptation of other key modernist buildings in Singapore.⁷² This contrasts the aforementioned quotes by government officials regarding scarification of built heritage for development. The struggle to balance between conservation and development reflects the tensions rooted from Singapore’s pragmatic survivalist ideology. Nonetheless, the growing acceptance of exploring new interventions prove that there is a shift in governmental approach. That said, the success of fostering national identity through preservation is still contested as conservation of the physical infrastructure came at the expense of displacing existing culture and community.⁷³

Survivalist Ideology in the Contemporary Singapore

Though it has been 60 years since Singapore’s independence, influences of the survivalist ideology still prevail in present day through public perception. The Founders’ Memorial, currently under construction, is approached with the purpose “to be a landmark that resonates with Singaporeans in the commemoration of national, community and personal milestones”.⁷⁴ Among the 193 international submissions from the competition, Kengo Kuma & Associates with K2LD Architects’ design was unanimously chosen as the winner. Architect Kengo Kuma describes the design intent as “the idea of a path – a journey tracing the legacy of Singapore’s founding leaders...The

[attract-developers-in-future-en](#); Keng Gene Ng, “Golden Mile Complex Gazetted as Conserved Building; Future Developers to Get Building Incentives,” *The Straits Times*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/golden-mile-complex-gazetted-as-conserved-building-future-developers-to-get-building>.

71. Ng, “Golden Mile Complex to Feature Architecture Centre”

72. Desmond Lee, “Conservation of Golden Mile Complex,” Video, *Facebook*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/desmondslee/videos/261271696010858/>.

73. Zhuang, “Golden Mile Complex”, 19

74. “Design Competition for Founders’ Memorial,” Founders’ Memorial

design aims to be a ‘living memorial’, to be owned by each new generation of Singaporeans.”⁷⁵

However, not all concur with such sentiments, especially on social media. Under a Reddit post titled “Founders’ Memorial to cost \$235 million”, a comment read,

“Doesn’t anyone find it IRONIC that the design is by a Japanese architect. Yes, Kengo Kuma is a starchitect, but the very fact that this is Our Founders Memorial, and owing to the sensitivity of the Japanese Occupation which spurred the urgency for independence, and therefore a nation of our own, I find it kinda insulting.”

The user also expresses concern over disappointment among local firms that a foreign architect is leading a nation-defining project. Other comments and on various platforms also criticise the allocated budget, preferring the funds to be channelled towards practical nation-wide needs.⁷⁶ Despite conducting discussions and workshops with Singaporeans about the memorial from 2015 to 2021, there remains a hostile attitude among the public.⁷⁷ This negativity also reflects the broader economic and socio-political anxieties, with rising cost of living and job insecurity dominating public concerns.⁷⁸ Moreover, some view the memorial as contradicting founding leader Lee Kuan Yew’s opposition to self-glorification through monuments.⁷⁹ Echoing this, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, a former member of Parliament argues in a Facebook post that the budget should be redirected into other urgent needs like healthcare which “is the kind of

75. “Winner of the Founders’ Memorial International Architectural Design Competition Unveiled,” Founders’ Memorial, 2020, <https://www.foundersmemorial.gov.sg/milestones/winner-of-the-founders-memorial-design-competition>.

76. (@shimminywiniminy), “Founders’ Memorial to cost \$235 Million,” Reddit, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/singapore/comments/1d8n3jg/founders_memorial_to_cost_235_million/; (@dogeydogezzz), “Doesn’t anyone find it IRONIC that the design is by a Japanese architect. Yes, Kengo Kuma is a starchitect, but the very fact that this is Our Founders Memorial,” Reddit, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/singapore/comments/1d8n3jg/comment/l7br391/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button; The Must Share News Team, “S\$335M Founders’ Memorial Sparks Debate, Only 22% of Poll Respondents Feel Positive about It,” Must Share News, November 1, 2024, <https://mustsharenews.com/founders-memorial-poll/>; The Online Citizen, “Dr Tan Cheng Bock Questions S\$335 Million Founders’ Memorial Cost, Citing Lee Kuan Yew’s Stance,” YouTube, September 15, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqFmv_Q_soA.

77. “Road to Founders’ Memorial,” Founders Memorial

78. Yuen-C Tham, “8 Things to Look out for in 2025,” *The Straits Times*, December 30, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/8-things-to-look-out-for-in-2025>; Yan Han Goh, “Cost of Living and Job Security among S’poreans’ Top Concerns to Be Covered in Budget 2025: PM Wong,” *The Straits Times*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/cost-of-living-and-job-security-among-singaporeans-top-concerns-that-will-be-covered-in-budget-2025>

79. Hsien Loong Lee, “Parliamentary Statement on Calls to Honour Mr Lee Kuan Yew,” Speech, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/parliamentary-statement-calls-honour-mr-lee-kuan-yew-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-13>.

forward-thinking, practical solution that our founding fathers would have championed.”⁸⁰

Conclusion

Singapore’s development has been shaped by an ideology that was rooted in the need to survive as a small nation with no natural resources, emphasising on the economic growth and pragmatic issues of the nation which often comes at the expense of the local culture and built heritage. The demolition of landmarks like the Raffles Institution and Pearl Bank Apartments exemplifies the enduring tendency to favour development over modern heritage. By contrast, the recent cultural recognition and conservation of Golden Mile Complex marks a governmental shift in methods to approach modern building conservation. However, in contemporary Singapore, the influence of the survivalist ideology still lingers as evidenced from the sceptical public attitude towards the Founders’ Memorial, particularly about its budget. Regardless of the government’s intent to foster national cohesiveness and identity through architecture, the public is more concerned with resource utilisation, highlighting the deep-rooted issues of pragmatism which is reminiscent of the survivalist mindset. Hence, while national identity is increasingly woven into the built fabric of Singapore, pragmatic concerns still dominate the collective consciousness of Singaporeans. Moving forward, cultivating the Singapore identity through architecture may require a more grounded approach and execution that resonates relevance with the community.

80. Cheng Bock Tan, “Rethinking the \$335 Million Cost of Our Founders’ Memorial,” Facebook, September 14, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/TanChengBock/posts/pfbid02fLiz2KL6yeDJ8rZ1sSDL4bNZK7gAd6Gc4Ld6c8KcowiCPvzjvg1rVS5R7vcHNaAgl>.

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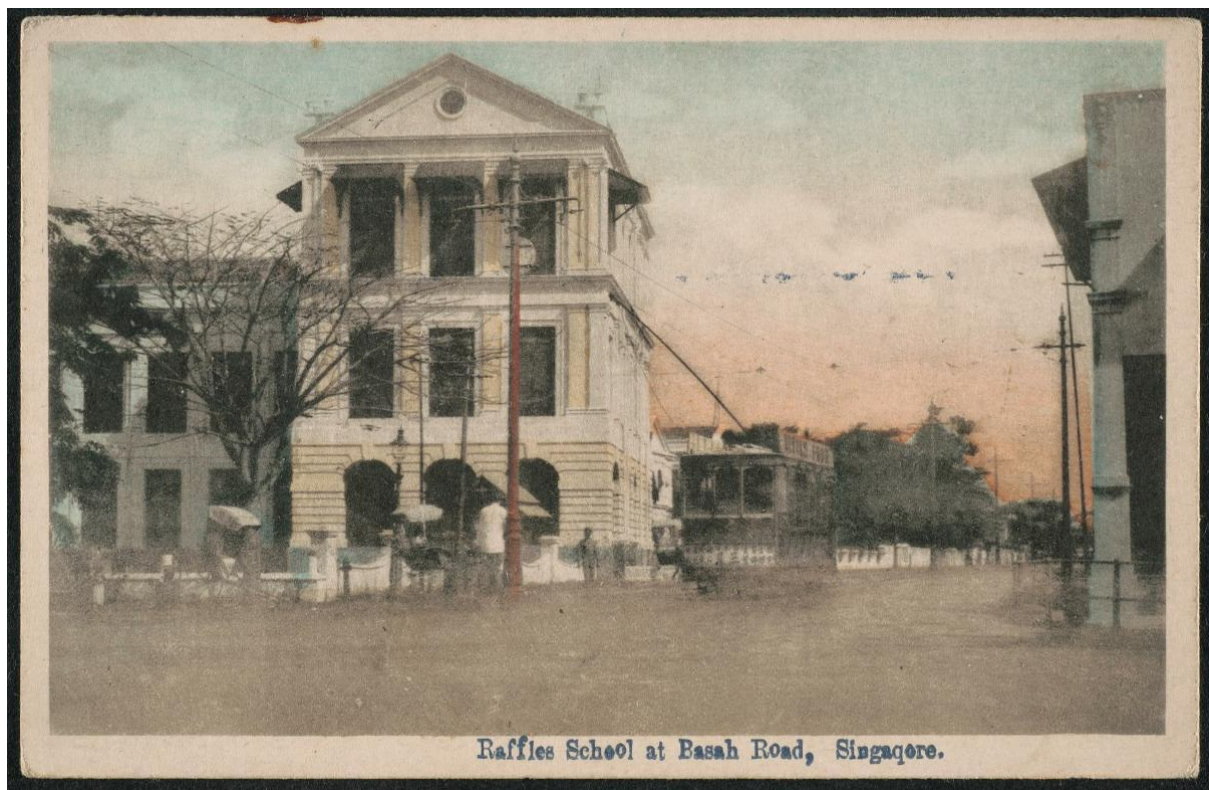


Figure 1. The original Raffles Institution at Bras Basah Road in the late 19th to early 20th century.

(National Museum of Singapore, *Raffles Institution, Bras Basah Road*, n.d., Postcard, National Heritage Board, n.d., <https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1046090?taigerlist=collections>)



Figure 2. Raffles City Singapore sitting on the site of the original Raffles Institution.

(CapitaLand, *Raffles City Singapore*, 2024, Photograph, *CapitaLand*, 2024, <https://www.cict.com.sg/integrated-development/raffles-city-sg.html>)



Figure 3. Golden Mile Complex as seen from the public housing buildings opposite, along Beach Road.

(Sengkang, *Golden Mile Complex*, August 7, 2007, Photograph, *Wikimedia Commons*, August 7, 2007,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Golden_Mile_Complex_4,_Aug_07.jpg#/media/File:Golden_Mile_Complex_4,_Aug_07.jpg.)

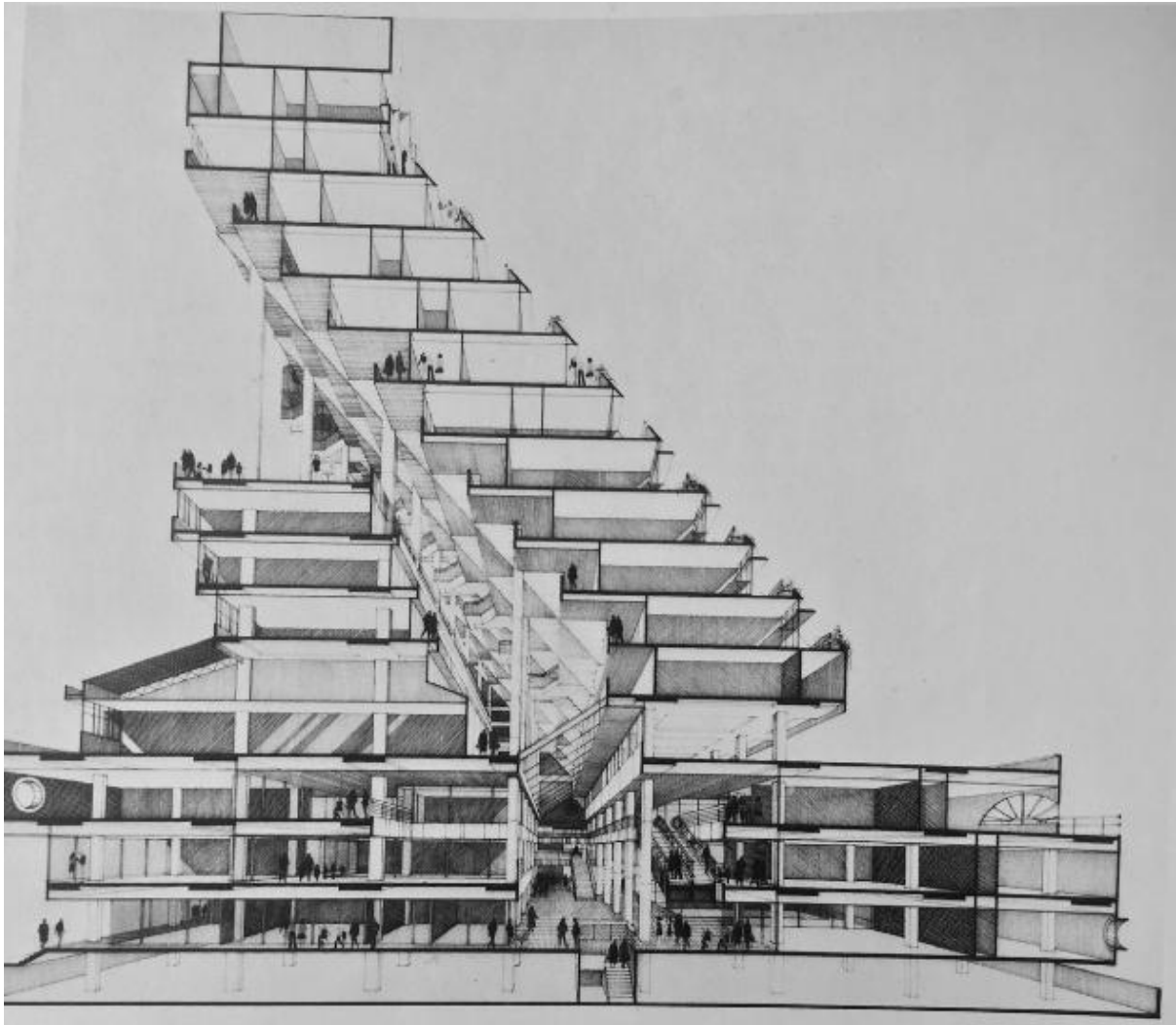


Figure 4. Sectional Perspective of Golden Mile Complex

(William S.W. Lim, *Design Partnership, Golden Mile Complex (GMC), as-built sectional perspective, 1973, An Incomplete Megastructure: The Golden Mile Complex, Global Planning Education, and the Pedestrianised City, 482, 2020*)



Figure 5. View of Golden Mile Complex from Nicoll Highway

(Andrew Nelson, *Golden Mile Complex*, October 16, 2019, Image, *Site Visits*, October 16, 2019, <https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/58ac54992e69cfa96ffb2fee/1571226951881-OIPNGVZHLUZ9E835NH9Z/Golden+Mile+Complex+01%2C+image+by+Andrew+Campbell+Nelson.jpg?format=1500w>)



Figure 6. View of urban slums with public houses in the background.

(Singapore Press Holdings, *SLUM AREAS in SINGAPORE*, December 23, 1976, Image, *National Archives of Singapore*, December 23, 1976, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/photographs/record-details/992c50b7-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>)



Figure 7. View of Chinatown at night.

(spintheday, *Night at Chinatown (Singapore)*, October 12, 2012, Photograph, *Flickr*, October 12, 2012, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/spintheday/8079668861>)



Figure 8. Pearl Bank Apartments with its parking structure, focusing on the inner courtyard facade.

(Jon Chiang, *Head-on Shot of Pearl Bank Apartments*, February 25, 2018, Photograph, *Flickr*, February 25, 2018, <https://flic.kr/p/GwnWvj>.)



Figure 9. Public housing slabs common around the new estates built by the HDB in the 1960s

(Singapore Press Holdings, *HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT BOARD (HDB) FLATS AT TOA PAYOH NEW TOWN*, March 26, 1968, Photograph, *National Archives of Singapore*, March 26, 1968, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/photographs/record-details/9ec70b5f-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>)



Figure 10. Render of the Golden Mile and Aurea from Nicoll Highway

(Perennial Holdings and Far East Organization, *An Artist's Impression of the Golden Mile (Left), with 22 Storeys, and the 45-Storey Aurea, Facing Nicoll Highway, 2024, Render, Perennial Holdings, 2024, <https://www.perennialholdings.com/properties/singapore/sg-golden-mile-complex.html>.*)

