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thesundaytimes June 2, 2013

Keeping a city's memories alive

A sense of ownership of urban landscape contributes to continuity and history



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Its geometric, Art Deco-inspired tiles, wave-like grilles and murals full of frolicking mermaids and sea creatures are now discoloured and caked with dirt and rust.

But there is new hope that Singapore's second-oldest public swimming pool, closed since 2001, may rise from its watery grave instead of being levelled over and turned into a sports facility.

Today's report on a new grassroots effort to save the former Yan Kit swimming complex, spearheaded by Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Indraneel Rajah, is revealing. The survey she commissioned among residents, which has shown that many want the 61-year-old pool and community landmark reopened, reflects a possibility that the Singapore Sports Council may backpedal on its alternative plans for the site.

The growing global wisdom that a city's liveability is enhanced when residents are involved in urban planning decisions is starting to influence planners here. Another report last week showed the Housing Board and National University of Singapore polling 2,400 residents across Singapore on how communal facilities such as playgrounds and rooftop gardens affect neighbourliness. The study is expected to find its way into future public housing designs.

More pertinently, with regard to the fate of old spaces and buildings in a land-scarce and generally un-sentimental city, one holds out the hope of greater public consultation with affected stakeholders, instead of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and other government agencies' decisions being the be-all and end-all.

It is still too early to tell if such consultation will increasingly become part and parcel of the redevelopment of heritage sites, but Bukit Brown flagged the need for it. Located smack in an area zoned for long-term residential use, the wildlife-abundant cemetery where some local pioneers and their families are buried was the subject of heated debate two years ago when the Land Transport Authority and URA decided to build a road cutting through it. After much lobbying by heritage and nature groups, it was decided to save some fauna and graves by turning a part of the road into a bridge.

For better or for worse, Singapore the city has been planned to within an inch of its life. The renowned Dutch architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas even called it, back in 1995, a tabula rasa, or blank

slate, where the old had been razed to make way for the new and history had become a victim of market forces.

Have times changed? Clearly a shift in tone in terms of the willingness to listen has taken place between Bukit Brown and the last great conservation-related debate – over the former National Library at Stamford Road in the late 1990s. A public outcry and alternative proposal by Singapore architect Tay Kheng Soon failed to save the quaint red-brick building from being demolished, and the hulking Fort Canning Tunnel now stands in its place.

The fact is that an active citizenry needs to feel a sense of ownership of the urban landscape. One could even argue that consultation on urban planning matters is one of the many tests of the People's Action Party Government's recent pledge to be dominant "without wanting to completely dominate", as Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam put it to The Straits Times in April.

In general, big-name foreign architects invited here to consult on projects tend to sing praises of Singapore's liveability and environmental sustainability, but one recent guest made some incisive comments that deserve notice.

He is none other than Chinese architect Wang Shu, who received architecture's foremost award, the Pritzker Prize, last year. Amid the frenzied urbanisation of his native China – where gaudy copies of Western-style skyscrapers and shopping malls are a dime a dozen – Mr Wang is seen as something of a maverick for his sensitive structures incorporating traditional Chinese architectural elements like courtyards and canals.



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His buildings may be apartment blocks, museums or university campuses – like the stunning Xiangshan campus of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, the roofs of which are covered with over two million tiles salvaged from demolished traditional houses – but they are at once rustic and contemporary, dignified and yet indelibly striking.

Mr Wang sits on the advisory panel for the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, part of the Singapore University of Technology and Design. In town last month, he was interviewed by Chinese-language daily Lianhe Zaobao and noted that a typical discussion in Singapore often proceeds on the assumption that with the Government in charge, "what remains to be sorted out are the technical issues".

The problem, he said, is that architecture is part of culture, and "that is certainly not something a government can create. The socie-

ty's spontaneous efforts are especially important".

He identified two areas that could be addressed to make the city more vibrant, particularly as other developing countries like China look to Singapore as a model of urban development. One, he said, "the Government should know when to take a step back in its management role and give space to the people", so they can feel invested in the urban landscape.

Two, he highlighted the fact that a city is made up of memories. Whether this sense of the past comes from colonial or local architecture, he said, is immaterial. "It is easy to destroy traditional objects and buildings, but if you want them to emerge again, sorry, it's something that will not happen in a hundred years. To recreate culture from scratch is extremely difficult."

Some of those who would like Yan Kit pool to reopen are families in the neighbourhood whose young children can swim there. Yet

others grew up with fond memories of splashing about in a pool that, in its heyday, was so crowded it was only standing room for swimmers young and old.

For me, never the sporty sort, its equivalent is probably the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall. Growing up, I performed in many a school play and choral recital in these stately yet intimate colonial-era venues, and later watched numerous productions there as an arts journalist and audience member.

The theatre and concert hall are currently undergoing renovations, but I take comfort in the fact that as gazetted national monuments, their architecture, spirit and position in the surrounding Empress Place area will stay much as it did 100 years ago.

Now, if only more neighbourhoods in Singapore could have the same sense of continuity and history.

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