THE CHANGING ROLE OF LOCAL ACTIVISM IN SINGAPORE CONSERVATION

XIN MIAO YONG
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

INTRODUCTION

Singapore’s transformation over the past half a century has been nothing short of stunning. The low-rise built environment of the British colonial period has largely been removed to make way for dense, high-rise urban developments. As rapid urbanization takes place, the concern about physical and cultural conservation becomes extremely urgent. As with other burgeoning Asian cities, old historic fabrics are being demolished in favor of new infrastructures supporting urban life. To date, there have been several instances of places and buildings of shared memory (and hence of publicly perceived importance) being removed despite public outcry—simply because of their lack of “architectural merit”. This paper examines the way in which the public and government have been interacting in the decision-making process in Singapore, in particular its gradual transformation over the past decade.

One factor in this progressive change is the advent of new social media, in addition to blogs and websites, which allowed citizens to raise their concerns to a large audience without restriction from the government. This caused the public voice to become louder and more difficult to put aside. Two case studies will be used to outline this transformation over the past decade as well as the development of local activism in attempting to save Singapore's national heritage—the old National Library (demolished in 2004) and Bukit Brown Cemetery (soon to be partially exhumed).

Conservation in Singapore

The government tightly regulates conservation in Singapore. Whether a building or place is conserved depends on several factors determined by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA, under the Ministry of National Development), the government arm that oversees and regulates urban planning in the country. To make this decision, a conservation study is carried out. This involves evaluating a building’s architectural merit and rarity, historical significance, contribution to the environment, identity and economic impact. In addition, views from relevant property owners are sought. Since 2002, the process has also included consultation with the Conservation Advisory Panel, an independent group of people from diverse backgrounds (including the building industry, arts and heritage, government, education and journalism), as the URA began to consider post-World War II buildings for conservation. However, this paper will venture to show that economic factors weigh the most heavily in the discussion of conservation in Singapore.

Local Activism in Singapore

Local politics is an important consideration when discussing social media and local activism. With a dominant party that consistently wins about two-thirds of the national vote, Singapore has had several
decades of political stability. The trade-off is the creation of a “nanny-state”\(^3\), one that doggedly pursues and regulates aspects of social and private life as well as the physical environment, in order to ensure the success of a small country without natural resources. This is not only reflected in the state of conservation of old buildings and places in the country, but also in the way the media and activism are restricted.

Local newspapers are known for having connections to the government – a “free and independent press” does not exist\(^4\). In recent years, the introduction of new social media such as Facebook and Twitter has allowed individuals to broadcast their opinions across multiple platforms, bypassing the traditional media outlets. More recently in 2013, the government reacted to this new development by enacting a new rule that would require websites with 50,000 local readers and carrying local news at least once a week to acquire a license and post a performance bond of 50,000 Singapore Dollars (40,000 USD). In addition, any content in breach of the Media Development Authority (MDA) must be removed within twenty-four hours once given notice to do so.\(^5\)

Activism in Singapore is similarly deterred by the state. The violent racial riots of the 1960s resulted in a slew of laws aimed to obliterate social unrest, including the Public Entertainment and Meetings Act as well as the Public Order Act. For example, groups of five or more are considered illegal under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act (MOA). Groups participating in cause-related activities would require a permit regardless of the number of persons involved or the format of the activity.\(^6\)

Because of such tight government regulation, local activism will naturally tend to be milder than other efforts internationally. Before the advent of new social media, responses to top-down action were usually given either to the Members of Parliament representing certain constituencies or interests, or in letters to local publications.

THE CONTEST FOR THE OLD NATIONAL LIBRARY

![Figure 1. Entrance of the Old National Library](image)
It is apt to discuss the demolition of the old National Library, since it occurred in 2004, just prior to the proliferation of new social media in Singapore. The library was held dear and mattered to Singaporeans in several ways. First, it was built in 1960, and was the first public library in the country. Second, several services offered there were unique to that branch. For instance, it was the only branch that had an extensive microfilm newspaper archive, which was very useful for historians and students wishing to locate old news spreads. Third, the library was conveniently located downtown, a short walk from civic monuments such as the Supreme Court or City Hall and easily accessible via public transportation. Many also had fond memories of first dates there, due to its proximity to Fort Canning Park. It is then unsurprising that many citizens expressed their unhappiness and waxed nostalgic upon the announcement of the library’s impending demolition.

The idea to demolish the old National Library was first discussed in 1988, while URA was formulating the Civic District Master Plan. In 1999, the Singapore Management University (SMU) proposed to build their first campus in the Bras Basah area (where the library was located), which revived debate about the library’s demolition. URA had several reasons for the demolition of the library, which were in large part very practically motivated. First, the demolition of the library building would allow Stamford Road to be realigned, so a tunnel running through the old library site could be built to ease nearby traffic congestion (see Fig. 2a and 2b). Second, a good-sized land parcel could be set aside for one of the six city campuses of the new SMU. Third, a better-equipped and technologically up-to-date library building was planned at Victoria Street to replace the old library, which would be five times larger than the size of the old building. Fourth, demolition would allow for the revitalization of the Civic and Cultural District (CCD) by injecting a new student population into the area, giving the district’s museums and art groups a much-desired boost in patronage.
Local Defense of the old National Library

The public response to the announcement of the demolition was fast and furious, but largely scattered. While the general sentiment was to save the old National Library building, there was neither organized consensus nor groups to help coordinate the whole response.

The most public figure that stood up in the defense of the old National Library was local architect Tay Kheng Soon. He was initially supportive of the demolition of the library, calling it a “bad building”. He later made an about-turn when he realized that “sentiments” and “fond memories” of people were attached to the place, and went to the extent of developing and submitting an alternative plan that would retain the building, by diverting the tunnel the government planned to create (see Fig. 3). Despite holding a press conference to publicize his design, URA did not attend it. The latter claimed not to have been invited, and that Tay had only mentioned it to a senior URA staff in passing. While the proposal was thereafter submitted to the Prime Minister and then to the URA to study, it did not manage to change any of the URA’s plans.

Another method was to write letters to the editor of the most widely-read national newspaper, the Straits Times (ST). Many citizens wrote letters in to defend the old National Library. In 2000, Ho Weng Hin and Tan Kar Lin wrote a long letter to the ST to present a case opposing the demolition. There were six main points to their argument. First, foreign experts invited to participate in a 1987 government commissioned feasibility study of the development of the Civic District had advised that the old National Library Building should be retained “simply as an element in architectural development in Singapore,” and should not be “casually removed.” Second, contrary to news reports that there was support for the library’s removal, a 1988 URA public dialogue revealed the consensus that overall sentiment was for the preservation of the building. Public dissent eleven years later also appeared in both English and Chinese language media. Tay Kheng Soon’s alternative master plan for the area that retained the library also gave rise to public calls for the URA to reconsider their plans. Third, there had rarely been a building so treasured and defended in the country. The library had garnered support from people of all races, religions, languages, and walks of life, rendering the
building a part of Singapore’s heritage. Fourth, the redevelopment plans for the Bras Basah area had been revised for over fourteen years, providing ample time for the government to realize the importance of the old National Library to the people. Fifth, the possible alternatives where the traffic tunnel and old National Library building could co-exist had not been exhausted, and should be further examined. However, in the process of editing the letter for brevity to be published, many of the pertinent points were either watered down or simply excluded. Similarly to the Tay Kheng Soon case, this method of protest did not manage to make URA reconsider nor alter their original plans.

In the end, the multiple pleas for the old National Library from citizens, heritage groups and architects to be retained were rejected, and the wrecking ball arrived on March 13, 2004. All that is left of the library today are its two brick entrance pillars (in their original location) as well as 5,000 bricks salvaged and used to create a commemorative wall in the new National Library.

SAVING BUKIT BROWN CEMETERY

The debate surrounding the demolition of Bukit Brown Cemetery started around 2011, when many Singaporeans, especially the younger generation, had been exposed to and became familiar with new social media and its effectiveness in publicizing messages and opinions. As this incident occurred about ten years after the old National Library saga, the experience of past encounters with the government as well as the knowledge of new mediums allowed for a much more comprehensive and improved approach towards the defense of another part of Singapore’s heritage.

Bukit Brown Cemetery is located in the central part of Singapore, away from the Central Business District on the south. In 1872, the land was bought and used as a burial and farming ground for a group of Hokkien businessmen in the Ong clan. However, the oldest grave in the cemetery belonged to a person who passed away in 1833. The cemetery had many previous names – Tai Tuan Shan, Xing Wang Shan, and Kopi Sua (Coffee Hill, due to the nearby coffee plantations on Mount Pleasant). It was eventually named Bukit Brown after the British trader George Henry Brown, who built his business in Singapore in the 1840s and lived close by on Mount Pleasant. The commissioner of the then-Municipal Council (which oversaw water, gas, electricity supplies for the city), Tan Kheam
Hock, pushed for the site to become a public burial ground for the early Chinese community. The Municipal Council subsequently officially opened the cemetery in 1922.

The cemetery is dissimilar to the old National Library in many ways. Unlike the library’s downtown location, the cemetery is located in a forested area, away from the bustle of urban life. Despite its proximity to a main road (Lornie Road) and expressway (Pan Island Expressway), it has a low visibility. While the old National Library had been well used and visited in the immediate years prior to its demolition, Bukit Brown Cemetery had been abandoned since its closure in 1973. However, the graves of many famous Chinese pioneers were sited there, including Tan Lark Sye, Chew Joo Chiat, Gan Eng Seng, and Chew Boon Lay. The cemetery is estimated to house 100,000 tombs within 0.86 square kilometers.\(^{12}\)

In September 2011, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) announced their plan to construct a new road, parallel to Lornie Road, which would cut through Bukit Brown Cemetery (see Fig. 5). This was expected to affect about 5000 tombs.

**Local Defense of Bukit Brown**
The main difference between the public response to defend Bukit Brown Cemetery and the defense for the old National Library is that the former was more organized. Conservation groups such as SOS Bukit Brown and All Things Bukit Brown (AtBB) were set up. The Nature Society of Singapore (NSS), Singapore Heritage Society and Asian Paranormal Investigators (API) also got involved. AtBB may be the most prolific and active of all the groups. The founders met through the Facebook page “Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery” and set up a website in 2011, hoping to educate the public about the historical and ecological value of Bukit Brown Cemetery. On the website, they collected all related news articles and commentaries, research done on the cultural histories and architectural qualities of the tombs, information about existing flora and fauna, and also advertised its free guided walking tours of the cemetery (see Fig. 6).

The walking tours were led not only by members of AtBB, but also volunteers from architectural history academia, historians, and descendants of people buried in Bukit Brown. Since the cemetery was not as well known as the old National Library, citizens whose curiosity was piqued after the intense debate in the local papers could join and acquaint themselves with the qualities and historical value of the cemetery. In addition to the website, a new Facebook page “All Things Bukit Brown” was set up to promote their events and activities. Other groups such as the NSS made its views heard publicly mainly through the local news media. The NSS suggested alternatives such as introducing a toll gantry or widening Lornie Road to reduce or ease traffic, saying that the proposed road, even when elevated on a bridge, would cast a shadow under it and cause the plants growing below to wither. In addition, over ninety species of birds live in the forest surrounding the cemetery, and would likely be negatively impacted by the construction of the new road.

Engagement with the Authorities

On March 19, 2012, the Minister of State for National Development and Manpower Tan Chuan-Jin held a closed-door meeting with interest groups and government agencies to share background information and considerations behind the fate of Bukit Brown Cemetery. That same evening, the interest groups released a press statement calling for a moratorium on all plans for the cemetery, stating that there had been insufficient time for a public conversation over LTA and URA’s plans, and calling for fuller engagement over the future of the cemetery and the consideration of other options. They also criticized the way the meeting was handled, alleging that it had been postponed from an originally requested meeting, and that only a few of the original thirty-one representatives had been invited for the dialogue.
Tan rebutted by saying that, while the government could not fully accommodate all wishes, they had taken some into consideration. He cited the documentation of affected graves, following advice from the Singapore Heritage Society. The design of the new road had also been altered (see Fig. 7) after incorporating feedback to minimize impact to biodiversity, hydrology, and the cemetery. Lee Bee Wah, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for National Development and the Environment, said “Singapore is so small and needs land for redevelopment. We need to strike a balance,” reiterating the government’s constant refrain.

Despite all this, there came a silver lining. In October 2013, AtBB received a call from the National Heritage Board. The latter offered to support the former’s programs, agreeing about the importance of Bukit Brown Cemetery as a heritage site. A few days prior to that announcement, the cemetery had been included in the 2014 World Monuments Watch list of at-risk sites. At that point, AtBB’s co-founder Catherine Lim said they had “gone past the stage of trying to engage the Ministry of National Development,” and were grateful to receive support from the NHB. Nonetheless, she made another pitch for the cemetery by suggesting that Singapore’s proposal to nominate the Singapore Botanic Gardens to the United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO) could be made stronger by pairing it with Bukit Brown cemetery, as they were in close proximity.

A Partial Win
Despite the improved methods of response by public initiatives, the government went ahead to award a tender for the construction of a new dual four-lane road cutting through the cemetery in August 2013. The contract was valued at 134.7 million Singapore Dollars. However, a documentation team would be present to record the entire exhumation process, and family members could keep burial items or have the National Heritage Board “assess and handle” them. After the road is constructed, there would still be some 90,000 tombs remaining, which activists say they want to work on preserving. To date, AtBB’s tours of the cemetery are still ongoing.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

The trend seems to be unmistakable – once the Singapore government makes a decision to change the physical landscape of the country, dissent is allowed but the plan ploughs ahead regardless. However, from the two studies above, it can be seen that the tide is turning, albeit slowly. The government seems to be listening more to voices on the ground. Members of the public are also learning how to become organized in a way that would be more effective not only to disseminate their message but also to engage with the authorities in dialogue.

One thing that seems not yet to have occurred is a mutual awareness and understanding of the positions of both sides. The dialogues thus far have resulted in a stalemate and a continuation of the government’s originally announced plans almost intact. However, a balance could be sought and achieved if only the parties involved can consider the value of the opposing arguments. The old National Library had served as a potential site for the implementation of a balance between preservation and economic practicality, but due to various factors could not be saved. It is hoped that, with a greater familiarity with ways of engagement with the authorities, Singapore would be able to have more instances of compromise between heritage and the economy, in order to retain familiar landmarks and shared memories.
THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE
Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University
London: 01—03 April, 2014

ENDNOTES


--

BIBLIOGRAPHY


**IMAGE REFERENCES**


