

**THE DEMOLITION OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY:
IDENTITY AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION
IN SINGAPORE (1998-2004)**

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This thesis represents my own work and I have duly acknowledged in the footnotes and bibliography the sources and information I have consulted for the purpose of this study. This thesis has not transgressed the maximum word limit of 12,000 words. The total word count for this thesis is _____ words.

Khoo Kim Lin, Clara-Ann

Abstract

On 31 March 2004, the National Library at Stamford Road opened its doors for the last time. On that day, a commemorative ceremony was held to mark the closure of the much-loved redbrick library building. This thesis will be using the National Library's demolition as a case study to illustrate the complexities surrounding heritage conservation in Singapore. Firstly, the reasons for removing the library are discussed to demonstrate the government's attitude towards heritage as well as its changing relationship to the past. In addition, the library's demolition and the debate surrounding it allows for the exploration of the public's reaction and response to the issue. In particular, different groups of people had attached different meanings to the library, resulting in a varied response to the news of its demolition. Lastly, this study concludes by examining how the old National Library and its demolition have been remembered and the meanings that have been attached to the event.

Preface

When the time came for me to think of a feasible research topic for my dissertation, I was sure that I wanted it to be related to Singapore. Then I had to decide on which aspect of Singapore I would like to research on and the word “heritage” was the first thing that came to mind. My interest in heritage management and conservation in Singapore started while I was doing research for the modules SSA 2211: The Evolution of a Global City-State and HY 2254: Popular Culture in Singapore. For the former, I wrote about the Singapore River and how it has changed and for the latter, I did a piece on one of the Living Galleries at the Singapore National Museum.

Why the old National Library then? As strange as it may sound, the image of the old redbrick library and its courtyard entered my mind at 3 one morning. To my surprise, I discovered later on that there had not been any comprehensive research written about the library in relation to heritage, memory and identity in Singapore. My interest in the library’s demolition grew as the event offered a channel into exploring other facets of Singapore’s heritage discourse. Researching on the old library building allowed me to discover many other iconic landmarks that are no longer part of our landscape today such as the Van Kleef Aquarium and the National Theatre. How the library’s demolition has been remembered and its relevance for Singapore’s heritage discourse engaged me further. On the whole, this study represents a step towards a fuller understanding of a building and an event that ought not to be forgotten as there is much to learn from the past as the future is ours to create.

Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis was the beginning of many ‘firsts’ for me. I have never spent so many months – one and a half semesters to be exact, brooding over a topic and refining a piece of written work. A year ago, I would have never imagined myself reading through stacks of books, journal articles and newspaper reports on a daily basis. Neither did I foresee myself going to sleep in the wee hours of the morning and waking up a few hours later to go for class. Nonetheless, the completion of this thesis fills me with both relief and a tinge of sadness. Relief because the mentally and physically-draining process has finally come to an end but sadness because the conclusion of this thesis also signals the closure of one chapter in my life. Throughout this whole process, I have been supported by various individuals without whom writing this thesis would have been even more painful than it already was.

Dr. Quek Ser Hwee, my thesis supervisor, has been invaluable throughout this whole period. Thank you for being so patient with my endless worrying and paranoia. Even when I was losing faith in my own capabilities, you never once stopped believing in me. There are also other teachers I would like to thank – Dr. Chua Ai Lin, thank you for your insightful ideas and for taking time off your busy schedule to let me interview you; Prof Mark Emmanuel, my heartfelt thanks for always checking on my progress and coming to my rescue whenever I was having difficulties; Mr. Loh Kah Seng, my former tutor for guiding me throughout this period and introducing me to the wonders of Oral History. Not forgetting Mr. Tim Yap Fuan of the Central Library who was ever-ready to help me hunt down any source I needed.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Edgar Liao, my former tutor who is now my friend. Over the past few years, I think we have shared approximately 500 MSN conversations, 720 SMSES, 10 hours over the phone and 30 hours meeting face-to-face. Despite having to repeat the same thing to me over and over again, Edgar rarely gets irritated and in the event that he does, it is only for a short while. Last but not least, the kind of teacher he was to me has inspired me to be the same towards my future students and I will always remember his “words of wisdom” in particular the need to think for myself and make my own decisions. For all this and more, thank you.

Thanks also to my fellow History classmates for being the most happening cohort ever and for the support and reassurances that we were all going through this together. Outside school, there are a few individuals that deserve special mention. Thank you Sugy, Isza and Gary for helping me escape from my dreadful world of deadlines and assignments. Our birthday bashes at Gallery, movie-outings and regular pig-out sessions will not be forgotten. My gratitude also goes out to my family for their support – Daddy, for supplying me with my usual late night supper; Mummy – for putting up with my endless whining, closing one eye when I cluttered the whole house with my work and proof-reading my thesis at the 11th hour and Gwyn, for your technical support and company at the dining table ☺

Last, but not least to God for making all this possible.

Abbreviations

CAP	Conservation Advisory Panel
LTA	Land Transport Authority
MND	Ministry of National Development
NL	National Library
NUS	National University of Singapore
PAP	People's Action Party
PMB	Public Monuments Board
PWD	Public Works Department
RGS	Raffles Girls' School
RI	Raffles Institution
SHS	Singapore Heritage Society
SJI	St. Joseph's Institution
SMU	Singapore Management University
URA	Urban Redevelopment Authority

Chapter 1 – Introduction

When it was made known to the public on 13 March 1999 that the National Library (hereafter, NL) was going to be demolished to make way for the Fort Canning Tunnel, there was a rare display of civic activism by a vocal minority over the building's fate. Before the advent of the Internet, the library was the only affordable and readily available source of information. Thus, the redbrick edifice had become an integral part of the lives of many Singaporeans who had grown used to the familiar façade. However, the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) felt that it “did not possess sufficient merit to be accorded the status of a gazetted national monument”.¹ As a result, the NL, after serving the public for forty-four years, marked its final day with a commemorative ceremony on 31 March 2004.

Looking at the debate that surrounded the fate of old library, one can discern two mainstream positions. The first adopted the stance that heritage conservation cannot occur indiscriminately and must be balanced with other practical needs while the second believed that landmarks such as the old library are significant parts of Singapore's material culture and should be retained. This thesis argues that the NL's demolition is not an event in isolation as the whole episode sheds light on other important issues related to heritage conservation in Singapore. First, the case of the NL exemplifies the State's pragmatic stance with regards to heritage that still prevails. Secondly, the episode reveals how heritage is a highly subjective and divisive issue, especially the questions of what constitutes heritage and whose heritage is worth preserving. Divided views were evident not only between the State and the public but were also apparent within the latter. Lastly, the NL episode demonstrates how heritage has become politicized with members of the public getting involved in discussions about heritage conservation.

¹ ST, “National Library building will not be conserved”, 27.03.99.

1.1 Methodological and Literary Review

There are a few extant studies that use the NL to illustrate the competing uses and interpretations of heritage in Singapore. Roy Jones and Brian J. Shaw mention the library to demonstrate the “complexities of heritage conservation in the face of competing interests” but it is not really an in-depth coverage as the article is a comparative study between Singapore and Jakarta.² Likewise, Joan Beaumont also brought up the NL to illustrate the “fragility of heritage claims when opposed to development priorities” but again, it is briefly covered as the crux of her study was the demolition of Changi Prison.³ Hence, in view of how existing works do not examine the full complexity and significance of the NL’s demolition in relation to heritage and nation building in Singapore, this thesis will examine the NL’s demolition as a prism that highlights certain issues of importance pertaining to the conservation-redevelopment conundrum in Singapore.

As this study is about the NL and its demolition, existing publications written about the old library were consulted. The first group consists of works by K.K. Seet, Brendan Luyt, Edward Lim and Anuar Hedwig about the origins and uses of the library while the second is made up of various books such as *Moments in Time: Memories of the National Library* and *Memories and the National Library* that contain people’s recollections of their times spent at the NL.⁴ These allowed an in-depth study on the institutional history of the library as well as how people remembered the building after its demolition.

In addition to the above literature, another aspect of my study examines the use of concepts such as the relationship between heritage, memory and identity. The inherently opposing uses

² Brian J. Shaw and Roy Jones, “Palimpsests of Progress: Erasing the Past and Rewriting the Future in Developing Societies – Case Studies of Singapore and Jakarta”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, (March 2006), p. 126.

³ Joan Beaumont, “Contested Trans-national Heritage: The Demolition of Changi Prison, Singapore”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, (July 2009), p. 307.

⁴ National Library Board, *Moments in Time: memories of the national library* (Singapore: the National Library Board, 2004); Kwok Kian-Woon, Ho Weng-Hin and Tan Kar-Lin, eds. *Memories and the National Library*, (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2004).

and meanings of heritage as a political, economic and cultural resource put forward by J.E Tunbridge and G.J Ashworth explain the lack of agreement as to what constitutes heritage in Singapore and why the government and the public differ on their ideas of heritage and its uses.⁵

Next, Dolores Hayden and John Agnew sheds light on how sites of memory, in this case the NL, are integral to a sense of identity. Hayden in *The Power of Place* argues that,

Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories and collective or social memories [and] urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories...⁶

Echoing this, Agnew argues that place is more than an independent and passive ‘object’.⁷ Instead, it is an “object of identity for a subject” because daily practices situated within a locale gives rise to a larger “structure of feeling”.⁸

Likewise, David Lowenthal sheds light on the importance of knowing one’s roots and heritage and this need to know the past was in effect one of the principle reasons underpinning the Singapore government’s National Education initiative. According to Lowenthal, “remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity [because] to know what we were confirms that we are”.⁹ Furthermore, Tunbridge and Ashworth’s idea of the inevitable dissonance in heritage was of great relevance as this thesis will deal with the contested and divisive nature of heritage, seen from the debate that surrounded the NL’s demolition. To Tunbridge and Ashworth,

Dissonance in heritage involves a discordance or lack of agreement and consistency [and] is inevitable in some form or another in a system where selection is unavoidable... all heritage

⁵ J.E Tunbridge and G.J Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: the management of the past as a resource in conflict*, (New York: J. Wiley, 1996), p. 2.

⁶ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 9.

⁷ John A. Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society*, (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 27.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a foreign Country*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 197.

is someone's heritage and therefore logically not someone else's.¹⁰

This intrinsic dissonance in heritage accounts for the divided response of the public due to how various individuals had developed different degrees of attachment to the NL. In addition, Lowenthal and Pierre Nora's ideas are useful in explaining why there has been such a fixation with memory and heritage as a study on the NL's demolition and the public dissension it triggered needs to consider how and why people relate to their past. According to Nora,

The quest for memory is the search for one's history... fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future to give the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige the potential dignity of the memorable.¹¹

In the same way, Lowenthal's notion of the "past as an attractive alternative to the present [and] an antidote to the frenzy of modern life" explains why the general public began to develop a greater interest in their past and why some Singaporeans felt very strongly about the NL's demolition.¹²

Other than referring to the above concepts and applying them to the example of the NL, this thesis also relied on other existing local works about the State's relationship to the past. Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne's coverage of the PAP's "political pragmatism based upon purposive rational policies" makes much sense in aiding us to further understand the government's initial lack of interest towards the past.¹³ Also, Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh's ideas that "the optimal use of resources in a land scarce city-state like Singapore is essential for its

¹⁰ Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, p. 20.

¹¹ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire", *Representations*, no. 26, (Spring, 1989), p. 13.

¹² Lowenthal, *The Past is a foreign Country*, p. 50.

¹³ Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People's Action Party*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 52.

survival” is useful in understanding why, from the point of view of the State, the former NL had to give way to the more pragmatic use of land.¹⁴ With regards to the importance of heritage and history for national building in Singapore, Lily Kong, Brenda Yeoh and Wang Gung-Wu sheds light on how a sense of history is instrumental in instilling a sense of national identity, which accounts for the reversal of earlier government policies with regards to the uses of history.¹⁵

To access the public and individual voices, sources like newspaper articles, speeches and online forum postings were utilized. Informal discussions over the social networking site, Facebook, were also conducted with various ex-students from schools formerly situated around Stamford Road such as St. Joseph Institution (SJI), Anglo-Chinese Primary School and Raffles Institution (RI) to gain a deeper insight into their social recollections of the library and how they felt about its demolition. Similar exchanges were carried out with twenty friends and schoolmates between the ages 20 and 25 to see if any useful comparisons could be made. Lastly, oral interviews were conducted with various individuals who were connected to the old NL in one way or another like architects Tay Kheng Soon, William S.W Lim and Dr. K.K Seet to elicit their thoughts on the NL’s demolition.

1.2 Limitations

Due to time constraints, not everyone who was involved in the debate surrounding the library’s fate could be interviewed. Additionally, the total number of respondents does not fully reflect the sentiments of the whole public. However, this thesis is not an exhaustive study of the old NL’s institutional history or a documentation of people’s memories of the library. Instead, it

¹⁴ Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: a Developmental City State*, (England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1997), p. 191.

¹⁵ Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, eds. *Portraits of Place: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995); Lily Kong, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: constructions of a “nation”*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Wang Gung-Wu, ed., *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005);

examines the subjective and divisible nature of heritage, which the different voices and reactions of the public exemplify.

1.3 Thesis structure

With this in mind, Chapter 2 will outline the reasons for the library's demolition from the standpoint of the government and its agencies which in turn reveals the State's relationship to the past and its attitude towards heritage. After which, Chapter 3 will examine the arguments put forward by those who felt the NL should be preserved as well as the interstices and silences within the public as not everyone was equally affected by the library's removal. Also, why was it that not everyone who disagreed with the government's decision to tear down the library made their voices heard? Chapter 4 will seek to answer this question by addressing the issue of public involvement in relation to heritage conservation in Singapore. Lastly, this thesis will conclude by discussing what the old NL's demolition had become a symbol and metaphor for in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2 – “National Library to go”

By outlining the perspectives of those that were in favour of the NL’s demolition, this chapter will demonstrate how the pragmatic approach adopted by the State towards heritage is incompatible with its nation building objectives. First and foremost, library development in Singapore was very much a part and parcel of the State’s investment in education, constituting a “key pillar in the overall infrastructure” in expanding Singapore’s learning capacity.¹⁶ Yet, libraries are not only repositories of knowledge and information as they also function as a “nuclei of culture and heritage”, providing the social setting that allows for both learning and interaction between people.¹⁷ With this in mind, the old library at Stamford Road had already been a subject of public consultation as early as 1988 during the formulating phase of the Civic District Master Plan. In an open dialogue chaired by then National Development Minister S. Dhanabalan in 1988, Mr. Abdul Husein, Vice-Dean of Architecture at the National University of Singapore (NUS) suggested that Singapore rethink the very concept of the district and not pull down the NL because of its sentimental value.¹⁸ A year earlier, a panel of foreign experts who took part in a government-commissioned feasibility study also felt that “the library constituted an important element in Singapore’s architectural development and should not be removed”.¹⁹

Nonetheless, after three years of reformulating the Civic District Master Plan, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), made public its decision to construct a one-way Fort Canning Tunnel during an exhibition of the plan in 1992. (See figures 1 and 2 below).

¹⁶ Library 2000 Review Committee, *Library 2000: investing in a learning nation*, (Singapore: SNP Publishers, 1994), p. 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ ST, “Professionals share views on Heart of Singapore”, 29.05.88.

¹⁹ Kwok, Ho and Tan, *Memories*, p. 77.

Figure 1: Map showing the old NL

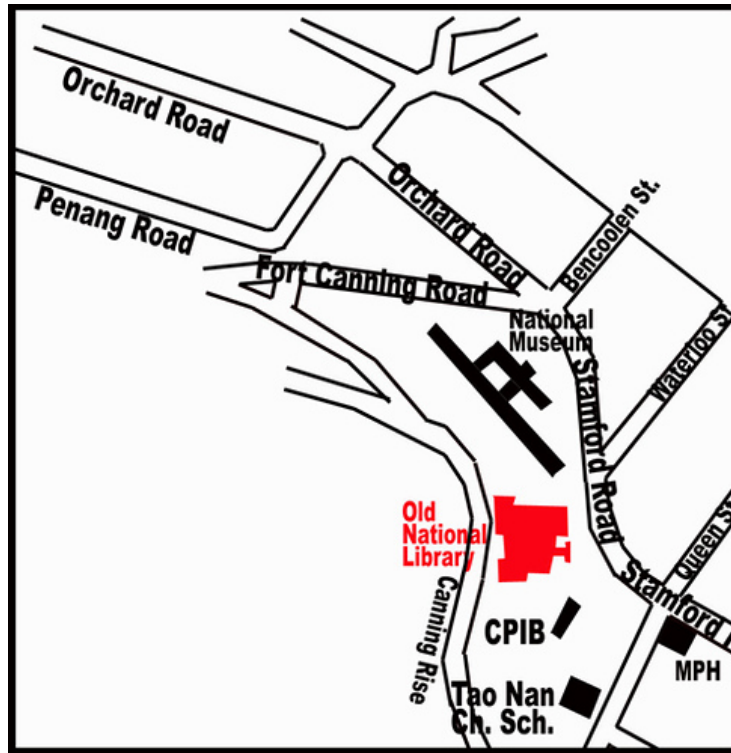
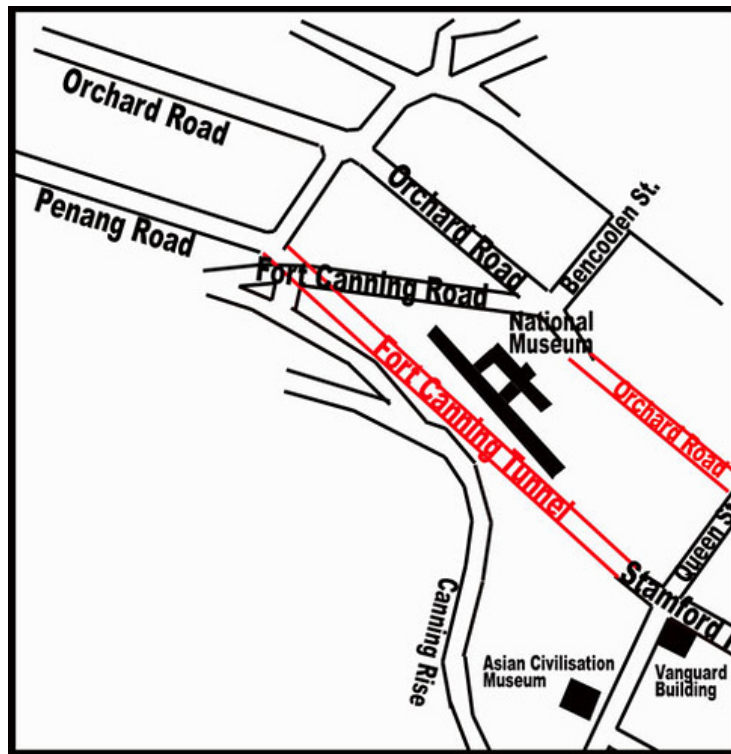


Figure 2: Map with the Fort Canning Tunnel



Both pictures taken from: <http://timesofmylife.wordpress.com/2007/09/13/that-red-brick-library-part-2/>

As seen in the two pictures, the tunnel would enter the hill where the NL was situated and emerge at Penang Road, diverting traffic away from the museum precinct. However, the exhibition did not mention specifically what would happen to the library. It was only on 8 December 1998 that a letter to the Forum Page of *The Straits Times*, written by Kelvin Wang, a Singaporean residing in England, called the public's attention to the possibility that the library will be demolished.²⁰

I suspect that the current library building will be demolished to make way for the new university's campus... the modest brick and concrete library may not be architecturally outstanding but its historic and cultural importance are great... Bras Basah has lost too many unique buildings already and we should not lose the NL...²¹

The letter was responding to a newspaper report which stated that the Singapore Management University (SMU) will be building its new city campus in the Bras Basah area, occupying six parcels of land, which included the library's site.²² SMU, in a reply to Kelvin Wang's letter assured the public that they will have a part to play in deciding the eventual fate of the NL as it had not decided what to do with the building.²³ According to SMU chairman, Mr. Ho Kwon Ping,

The process of public consultation and involvement is as important as the final design... building a new university is not just about bricks and mortar but about constructing a new community of stakeholders... we are therefore planning a series of measures to solicit public opinion.²⁴

However, on 13 March 1999, at a public symposium organized by SMU, Mr. Ho announced that the library will be torn down to make way for the Fort Canning tunnel. Consequently,

²⁰ ST, "Let's not lose National Library too", 08.12.98.

²¹ Ibid.

²² ST, "New Campus at Bras Basah", 06.12.98.

²³ ST, "Public will have a say in building's fate", 09.12.98.

²⁴ Ibid.

many who had developed a deep attachment for the building wrote numerous letters to both the English and Chinese press in an attempt to save the NL. Member of the public, Edwin Wong wrote in to the Forum Page of *The Straits Times* questioning whether another landmark had to be demolished considering how “Capitol Theatre, the Van Kleeef Aquarium and the National Theatre [were all] chosen for sacrifice at the altar of progress.”²⁵

It is with great sadness that I learnt that another Singapore icon will soon be no more. It seems that one by one, the landmarks that anchor my sense of the past and national identity are being torn down.²⁶

In view of the unexpected public response, SMU decided to organize a technical workshop in January 2000 to obtain feedback from the architectural community on three alternative proposals by SMU’s master planners.²⁷ While the NL was one of the many buildings in Singapore which people had fond memories of, the PMB believed that in land scarce Singapore, it was not practical to retain and permanently preserve all such buildings as national monuments.²⁸ From this, it is clear that the government and various institutions such as the URA adopted a very pragmatic and utilitarian view towards heritage and conservation. However, managing Singapore’s heritage in such a functionalist manner seems contradictory to the government’s constant reminders that Singaporeans need to have a greater sense of awareness of their history.

2.1 The Government’s changing relationship with the past

Questions of heritage and identity were not considered a top priority after Singapore gained independence in 1965. The survivalist mood of the 1960s and 70s meant that both the construction of a national history and heritage issues occupied a low priority amidst other more

²⁵ ST, “Do we have to see yet another landmark gone?”, 16.03.99.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ ST, “Public consulted on Library, Chinatown”, ST 25.2.00.

²⁸ ST, “Library building will not be conserved”.

pressing demands. The main problems at that time included an ever-growing population and a growing labour force that resulted in rising unemployment in Singapore. Faced with such circumstances, the PAP had no other option but to adopt tough policies for the country's survival and Singaporeans were compelled to "examine the present, think of the future and forget the past".²⁹ This period also coincided with a series of wholesale landscape changes guided by a series of Master Plans. High-rise housing estates and new towns with efficient transportation infrastructure replaced the traditional *kampongs*. In the city centre, urban renewal and redevelopment resulted in the construction of numerous international hotels, offices and shopping complexes. Thus, in a relatively short period of time, Singapore had been transformed into a modern city-state and an international business hub.³⁰

However, by the late 1980s, the State had begun to realize that Singapore had become a city bristling with efficiency and productivity but without a soul. Singapore's rapid development had systematically resulted in the removal and destruction of "existing city fabrics [that have acted as] containers of history and societal-bound values and cultures".³¹ The speech, "Civil Society – Between the Family and the State" by George Yeo, then Acting Minister for Information and the Arts and Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, was a public acknowledgement by the State that its earlier pursuit of economic growth was detrimental to a sense of belonging and national cohesion. In a world where multiple loyalties to more than one community was to be expected, Yeo believed that,

The problem is how to make Singapore more than just a nice hotel to stay in [and] how to make it a home worth living and caring for? It is therefore not enough just to improve the standard of living or the quality of life... what we must have is a soul... without it, Singapore is only a hotel.³²

²⁹ Albert Lau, "The National Past and the Writing of the History of Singapore" in *Imagining Singapore*, Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir and Tong Chee Kiong, eds. (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992), p. 37.

³⁰ Jones and Shaw, "Palimpsests of Progress", p. 124.

³¹ William S.W Lim, *Alternative (post) modernity: an Asian perspective* (Singapore: Select Pub, 2003), p. 12.

³² Speech by George Yeo at the National University of Singapore on June 20, 1991.

While Yeo was talking about the importance of civic life which “creates public affections and the soul in our society”, his speech was nonetheless an indication of the State’s recognition that Singapore was at risk of becoming more a hotel than a home.³³ Prior to this, Singapore officials had already started to warn against “the indecent haste to obliterate [Singapore’s] historical heritage”.³⁴ In 1983, S. Jayakumar, then Minister for Law and Minister for Home Affairs, mentioned in a speech that the rapid pace of Singapore’s development had transformed its physical landscape beyond recognition and “future generations will not know how Singapore was like before”.³⁵

Likewise, in 1989, Dr. Hong Hai, a Member of Parliament said,

In its haste to reach the ranks of developed nations, Singapore had sometimes cast aside buildings, places, fragile traditions and old practices that collectively formed a people’s root and heritage.³⁶

Lee Hsien Loong, then Minister of Trade and Industry and Second Minister for Defense in 1989 also believed that “the long-term survival of a country, especially a small one, depends in large measure on a strong sense of identity”.³⁷ Therefore, in contrast with the government’s previous policy, History now became part of a larger nation building process, to foster a “national consciousness, identity, patriotism and citizenship”.³⁸

The State’s drive to reclaim Singapore’s heritage is most evident in the conservation efforts of the URA that consists of the “preservation, enhancement or restoration of the character or appearance of the area or the trades, crafts, customs and other traditional activities carried on in

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Albert Lau, “Nation-Building and the Singapore Story: Some Issues in the Study of Contemporary Singapore History,” in Wang Gung-Wu, ed. *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), p. 226.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Shirlena Huang, Peggy Teo and Heng Hock Mui, “Conserving the Civic and Cultural District: State Policies and Public Opinion” in Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, eds. *Portraits of Place: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995), p. 25.

³⁷ Albert Lau, “Nation-Building”, p. 227.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 222.

the area”.³⁹ According to the Committee on Heritage Report, ‘heritage’ consists of “artefacts, traditions and records which are handed down or extracted from the past [that] serve as tangible symbols of the history of our people”.⁴⁰ Initially, the early concern was with preserving individual landmarks and national monuments. Buildings and landmarks are selected based on their “architectural and historical significance, rarity in terms of building type and role in enhancing their locale”.⁴¹ Later on in the 1970s, priority was given to religious buildings and places of worship. Gradually, the URA’s conservation efforts expanded to include whole historic districts and ethnic areas such as Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam and the Singapore River by the 1990s. These buildings and sites were chosen because they were emblematic of the “government’s support for freedom of worship, multiculturalism and religious harmony”.⁴² As such, it can be seen that the State’s drive to reclaim Singapore’s heritage is motivated less by intangibles such as the need to preserve memories and more by how selected parts of the past could be utilized to serve various political, economic and social objectives of the State.

However, it is contradictory when those building which have been gazetted attract “little public attention while redevelopment continued to wreck destruction on the historic form and fabric of the city”.⁴³ Moreover, while Singapore officials spoke of the need to build up the “heartware” of Singaporeans in an age of rapid modernization, the State’s track record on heritage conservation has largely ignored the emotional aspect of heritage.⁴⁴ More importantly, the case of the NL also goes to show how various segments of the public has its own views on heritage that may differ from the one adopted by the government and its agencies.

³⁹ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore*, p. 265.

⁴⁰ Committee on Heritage, *The Committee on Heritage Report*, (Singapore: Committee on Heritage), p. 30.

⁴¹ ST, “Historic buildings no bar to progress”, 13.12.06.

⁴² Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore*, p. 265.

⁴³ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore*, p. 261.

⁴⁴ ST, “Sense of ‘we’ growing here”, 28.11.99.

2.2 The Government's Perspective

For the State, the library's demolition did not necessarily have to connote something negative. The removal of the NL at Stamford Road will facilitate the library's relocation to a bigger and better site at Victoria Street as the old NL had been described as "very cramped and congested... with grossly inadequate facilities."⁴⁵ The Civic District Master Plan will also result in "a bigger civic district, a new park opposite the Istana, a larger museum precinct and the refinement of pedestrian networks".⁴⁶ Furthermore, there was billions of dollars worth of government-backed private capital investment in the new SMU campus, other commercial buildings and an underground road network at stake.⁴⁷ Even former SJI student and then Minister for National Development, Mah Bow Tan, who had spent many hours in the library did not think that demolishing the NL had to be frowned upon. Instead, he believed that redeveloping the Bras Basah area will recapture the spirit and "bring back what was there in the past".⁴⁸

Subsequently, a few suggestions were made with regards to how the old NL building could be utilized since it made no sense to have two libraries within the same vicinity of each other. SMU chairman, Mr. Ho proposed moving parts of the old NL, such as the balustrade to the new campus courtyard as a way of preserving a part of the old NL while Associate Professor, Chua Beng Huat of the Sociology Department in NUS suggested "preserving the place and adapting it to serve the new university".⁴⁹ The PMB also came up with several recommendations that included "retaining some parts of the building in the new SMU campus or the new NL in Victoria Street", recording people's memories, organizing exhibitions and

⁴⁵ ST, "Plan to build new National Library", 23.03.89.

⁴⁶ ST, "A Piece of Peace in the City", 21.02.92.

⁴⁷ Brian J. Shaw and Roy Jones, *Contested Urban Heritage, Voices from the Periphery*, (England: Ashgate publishing Ltd, 1997), p. 128.

⁴⁸ ST, "Redevelopment to preserve spirit of past", 07.03.00.

⁴⁹ ST, "Have a buss till midnight", 11.03.99.

creating a virtual tour of the old NL online.⁵⁰

While the ideas offered by Ho and the PMB was an attempt to preserve the memories of the NL, both failed to grasp Graham's argument in his book, *A Geography of Heritage* that "authenticity is unattainable in any instance of restoration".⁵¹ For librarian Wong Heng,

(The balustrade) had its own unique atmosphere and ambience that would be hard to recreate... so even if the exact stones and cement are saved, to be duplicated, it may not be the same.⁵²

Likewise, retired businessman, Lee Kip Lee was quoted saying that "heritage is a matter of memory... we want to see the building [so] if you tear it down and put up a plaque, of what significance is that?"⁵³ Therefore, as the act of preservation refers to "the maintenance of an object, building or landscape [as] defined by its historic context", the various proposals put forward did not seem to be preserving the NL or its memories.⁵⁴

On a broader level, the government's treatment of heritage is erroneous if they think that transplanting the library or retaining some of its components is enough to perpetuate the same memories. At this juncture, the recent example of Hong Kong's Wing Lee Street - the shooting location for the film: *Echoes of The Rainbow* is worth mentioning. Until the film, there had been hardly any protest when plans were made to demolish all but three tenement buildings in 1998. However, the voice to preserve more of Wing Lee Street grew louder after the film won the Crystal Bear at the 60th Berlin International Film Festival in 2010.⁵⁵ People went to the

⁵⁰ ST, "Library building will not be conserved".

⁵¹ Brian Graham, G.J. Ashworth and J.E. Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage: power, culture and economy*, (NY: Bookpoint, 2000), p. 16.

⁵² ST, "Library building will not be conserved".

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Today, "It's All About Soul", 26.03.10.

streets tying yellow ribbons and protesting plans to tear down the buildings and a fortnight later, the government announced that it would be preserving the entire street.⁵⁶

Ironically, many people who championed for conservation in Hong Kong referred to Singapore as a model. To them, areas like Chinatown, Boat Quay and Clarke Quay come across as marvelous examples of heritage conservation.⁵⁷ However, the adaptive reuse and careful restoration of old buildings is not enough as it only “maintains the body but not the soul”.⁵⁸ In the same way, the suggestions offered by the authorities in a bid to preserve the memories of the NL “came as little comfort to those who wanted the building to be conserved” because it was the sense of place and the community that they want to preserve, not just parts of physical structure.⁵⁹ With this in mind, Chapter 3 will proceed to examine the public’s response to the NL’s demolition.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ ST, “Library building will not be conserved”.

Chapter 3 - “Heed the people’s call”

The ‘protestors’ consisted of at least three different groups of people i.e. those who had a sentimental attachment to the NL, others like architects Tay Kheng Soon and William S.W. Lim who saw the library as a metaphor for people’s social memories and those who felt that the NL’s demolition linked to larger issues of civic participation and heritage conservation in Singapore. On the other hand, there were people who remained unaffected by the episode and did not care much about the library’s fate. Thus, the two mainstream positions that argued ‘for’ and ‘against’ the demolition of the library was by no means wholly representative of how the general public felt. As such, the first section of this chapter will outline the arguments put forwards by those who wanted to preserve the NL before examining the gaps and silences within the public’s response that can be attributed the contested and subjective nature of heritage.

On the whole, the argument for preserving the library building was one that stressed its historical, cultural and social significance. According to the Committee on Heritage Report, the five distinct areas of Singapore’s shared experience can be classified under nation building heritage, heritage of our economic success, multi-cultural heritage, heritage of our man-made environment and heritage of the natural environment.⁶⁰ Therefore, it is peculiar that the NL was declared to be unworthy of preservation despite fitting into four of the above mentioned categories. Having been built in 1960, the library had become “a symbol for national identification and solidarity” due to the fact that 1959 also saw the ushering in of a fully responsible parliamentary government based on a mass electorate.⁶¹ Many also regarded the library as a “symbol of their hopes and aspirations to be achieved through mass literacy and education” in the immediate post-Colonial years.⁶² According to K.K Seet, the library’s

⁶⁰ Committee on Heritage, *Heritage Report*, p. 29.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶² Shaw and Jones, *Contested Urban Heritage*, p. 127.

evolution of identity was a “microcosmic reflection of Singapore’s acceleration towards self-government”.⁶³

The NL also fits into the heritage of Singapore’s economic success as it exemplified “the pioneering efforts of our forefathers and their spirit of initiative and self-help”.⁶⁴ The NL was Singapore’s first free public library, born out of the active citizenship and public spiritedness of Mr. Lee Kong Chian who contributed \$375,000 towards the building of a new public library” in 1953.⁶⁵ The library building also constitutes a part of Singapore’s built heritage and material culture. Designed by Lionel Bintley, a British architect from the Public Works Department (PWD) in consultation with L.M Harrod, the National Library Director, the old NL building had received a fair share of criticism and mixed reviews from various architects and architectural students after its completion in 1960.⁶⁶ It was described as “forbidding, intimidating and out of character” with the dignified and aesthetically pleasing National Museum just adjacent to it.⁶⁷ However, the architectural merit of the NL is a subjective one since architect Tan Shee Tiong felt the building was significant because it represented a distinct period in Singapore’s architectural history.⁶⁸ Built in the style of American master architect Frank Lyoyd Wright, the NL closely resembled Wright’s Robie House – a famous landmark in Chicago.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the NL was one of the only two colonial buildings in Singapore where one can find such an exquisite matrix of red brickwork. The other building with a similar redbrick facade is St. George’s Church (see figure 3 below).⁷⁰

⁶³ K.K Seet, *A Place for the People*, (Singapore: Times Books International, 1983), p. 102.

⁶⁴ Committee on Heritage, *Heritage Report*, p. 38.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Seet, *A Place for the People*, p. 114.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 117.

⁶⁸ ST, “Design contest may throw up new ideas”, 8.02.00

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ ST, “National Library, our heritage and a treasure”, 19.02.00.

Figure 3: St. George's Church at Minden Road, Singapore



Taken from: <http://mattw.de/bangkok02/>

More importantly, every change in name and location of the library is symbolic as it traces how the concept and purpose of the library underwent various redefinitions over time. The library had been called the ‘Singapore Library’, the ‘Singapore Public Library’ and the ‘Raffles Library and Museum’ before becoming the ‘National Library’ in 1960 after its relocation to Stamford Road. What started out an exclusive institution, reserved for and mainly used by the British gradually became a repository of books to serve the reading needs of the local community. Therefore, the NL was a place that many Singaporeans could share in common as its space and uses “transcended religious, ethnic and cultural differences, it belonged to all Singaporeans”.⁷¹

In addition to its historical significance, the NL as a place also holds much meaning to those who frequently visited it. Former SJI student from the Class of 1986, Andrew Pang, recalls how the library was a popular place for “exam-cramming”, not to mention the “lovely girls

⁷¹ ST, “Let's not lose National Library”.

[one could] look at during breaks”.⁷² According to Parliamentary Secretary Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim, the library was “a place for students to meet and mix with members of the opposite sex”.⁷³ For others like Chew Chia Hock and Victor Chua, both ex-students of SJI also from the Class of 1986, the NL was the place where they first nurtured their love for reading.

I visited the library every day after school ... [It was] a place where I could seek solace from the books and escape from the harshness of the world... Somehow, I loved the library and I believed it was then that I dreamt to become a librarian when I grow up (of course that did not really come true), says Chia.⁷⁴

Therefore, as places such as the old NL are “repositories of personalized memories”, it did not come as a surprise that those who grew up going to the library were saddened and shocked upon hearing the news that it would be torn down.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, although the decision to demolish the NL had been announced, the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) went ahead with its plan to organize a forum-cum-exhibition on 17 March 2000 for those deeply concerned about the NL issue. Participants ranged from concerned members of the public, including students to professional architects like William Lim and Tan Shee Tiong. The exhibition was particularly meaningful because it seemed that more people, especially the younger Singaporeans were becoming increasingly concerned about the constant erasure of the past and the ramifications this could have on one’s sense of identity and belonging to Singapore. In fact, the library was not the first of its kind to be demolished.

⁷² Email correspondence with Andrew Pang on 25.01.10.

⁷³ ST, “Here we watched the girls go by”, 14.03.99.

⁷⁴ Email correspondence with Chew Chia Hock on 03.02.10.

⁷⁵ Lily Kong and Brenda S.A Yeoh, “The Meaning and Making of Place: Exploring History, Community and Identity” in *Portraits of Place: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, eds. Lily Kong and Brenda S.A Yeoh, (Singapore: Times Edition, 1995), p. 14.

3.1 Disappearing Icons of Singapore

3.1.1 The National Theatre

The National Theatre was officially opened on 8 Aug 1963 and subsequently torn down in 1986. In its heyday, it was the biggest performance venue in Singapore and was known as the ‘people’s theatre’ because Singaporeans from all walks of life had contributed to its construction.⁷⁶ The reasons cited for its removal was the impractical open-air roof and its substandard and unstable structure while plans to construct an elevated eight-lane expressway in front of the theatre provided another compelling reason to remove it.⁷⁷ Moreover, renovating the theatre will cost at least twelve million dollars – a cost that was deemed too steep. While there were pleas for its retention from some sentimental Singaporeans, it did not match up to the magnitude of public protest sparked off by the NL’s pending demolition. Unlike the NL where one could spend quite a significant amount of time there studying or leisurely browsing books, going to the theatre was different in the sense that one went there only when there were performances to attend and in those days, not everyone could afford to.

3.1.2 Eu Court

Another building worth mentioning is that of Eu Court - residential units built by Eu Tong Sen in the late 1920s that was redeveloped into shop houses by the URA in 1990. It was demolished in 1992 so that a four-lane dual carriageway could be constructed to meet the anticipated growth in traffic.⁷⁸ Demolishing Eu Court meant that other “architecturally richer and more commercially viable buildings” such as Stamford House could be left intact.⁷⁹ Moreover, Stamford House had better prospects of becoming “an active and successful commercial centre”.⁸⁰ The other option, which consisted of diverting traffic through Armenian and Queen Street, would require the demolition of both Tao Nan School and The Substation –

⁷⁶ ST, “Theatre for the people, by the people”, 30.04.05.

⁷⁷ ST, “National Theatre to be demolished”, 21.01.84.

⁷⁸ ST, “Going, going ... almost gone”, 18.06.92.

⁷⁹ ST, “Decision made after all options were considered”, 08.05.91.

⁸⁰ ST, “Decision to demolish Eu Court final”, 08.05.91.

a centre designated for cultural use.⁸¹

Interestingly, while Eu Court and the old NL were demolished more than a decade apart, both of them had to give way to the anticipated growth in traffic volume. Pleas for the preservation of Eu Court included posters declaring ‘I Love Eu’ that was displayed on the windows of Eu Court, a drive to start a petition for 10,000 signatures and letters that was sent to the press.⁸² Nevertheless, the scale and nature of the public’s protest was a limited one compared to the NL. For instance, “five out of the nine letters received by *The Straits Times*” were written by the SHS, two tenants of Eu Court, an environmentalist and a conservationist.⁸³ Thus, those who bemoaned the loss of Eu Court were individuals like Geoffrey Eu, grandson of Eu Tong Sen and other tenants who had unique sensitivities attached to the building.⁸⁴

It is also ironic that the government had assured the public after demolishing Eu Court that “there will be no more major road-widening within the city”.⁸⁵ Instead, more tunnel roads will be built in the city, which turned out to be the reason why the old NL had to be torn down. The above mentioned case studies are only a few examples of landmarks and buildings that had to be demolished to fulfil various developmental needs. In each of these cases, it is clear that while heritage conservation had already become a central part of Singapore’s city planning by the 1990s, other factors like commercial development and traffic considerations proved to be perhaps more important. Nonetheless, there were also notable differences in the intensity and scale of the public’s response when all three landmarks were cited for removal. Hence, the next section will seek to answer a few questions such as why was the public more articulate when it came to Eu Court and even more so the NL as opposed to the relative lack of opposition when the National Theatre was demolished? Also, why was there a sudden concern for the NL by

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² ST, “Tenants show their love for Eu”, 07.05.91.

⁸³ ST, “Not just a cry for conservation”, ST 07.05.91.

⁸⁴ ST, “Tenants show their love”.

⁸⁵ ST, “Decision to demolish Eu”.

some segments of the public only eleven years after the Civic District Master Plan was unveiled?

3.2 The public reacts?

In 1989, the MND had only revealed its plans to build a new NL and four branches in Yishun, Tampines, Hougang and Woodlands and nothing was said about what would happen to the library at Stamford Road.⁸⁶ Then on 17 March 1990, it was made official in Parliament that a new NL will be sited at the former Raffles Girls' School (RGS) site in Queen Street.⁸⁷ As it has been mentioned earlier, neither the demolition of the old library building nor reasons for changing the library's site were mentioned during the 1992 Civic District Master Plan exhibition,⁸⁸ In fact, the decision to build the one-way tunnel was a revision of the original plan that demarcated the stretch from City Hall to the Istana as 'The Ceremonial Route'.⁸⁹ This route covered Orchard Road, Bras Basah Road, Connaught Drive, St. Andrew's Road, Stamford Road, Penang Road and Clemenceau Avenue. Enhanced by "architecturally significant buildings [and] linking the important civic, cultural and institutional buildings", the Ceremonial Route was a key element in the city's layout.⁹⁰ Moreover, the library had also underwent a S\$ 2.6 million upgrading programme in 1997 so that it was better equipped to meet the changing societal needs and expectations.⁹¹ That same year, the Museums Development Guide Plan stated that the "NL building and the carparks behind it had been zoned as a reserve site for future institutional uses".⁹² Even as late as August 1998, the Straits Times reported that it was "not known what has been planned for the Stamford Road site".⁹³

⁸⁶ ST, "Plan to build new National Library".

⁸⁷ ST, "New National Library at ex-RGS site", 17.03.90.

⁸⁸ ST, "A Piece of Peace".

⁸⁹ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *Master Plan for the civic and cultural district (draft) Singapore*, (Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1988), p. 16.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ ST, "National Library's 2.6m facelift", 12.03.97.

⁹² ST, "Consider a change of plans before it is too late", 20.03.99.

⁹³ ST, "Nat Library to get new home in Victoria St", 11.09.98.

Therefore, it is not surprising that no one could foresee or anticipate the library's demolition, especially after its facelift and massive upgrading programme.

In view of the above, it seemed that the greater part of the decision-making process prior to the announcement in March 1999 hardly involved the general public. Moreover, a distinction has to be made between experts and the general public because private consultations or the consultation of certain individuals such as architects and other professionals is “not a substitute for greater public consultation”.⁹⁴ According to Ho Weng Hin and Tan Kar Lin, members of the SHS committee, the plan for the Bras Basah area had undergone certain revisions over time and thus, “there was enough time to reassess the plans and engage more deeply with the public to arrive at a satisfactory consensus” with regards to the old library building.⁹⁵ Hence, the apparent lack of transparency, information sharing and active consultation with the wider public during the formative years of the planning process could have accounted for the delayed reaction of the public to the plan to demolish the library.

The vocal public reaction to the library's demolition could also be a result of the government's nation building initiatives itself. As mentioned in the previous chapter, national fostering of memories and efforts to recall Singapore's past was part of an attempt to cultivate a national consciousness and identity. More importantly, the repeated emphasis on heritage conservation had ironically made more Singaporeans aware that there were very few traces of the past left after decades of modernization and urban renewal. According to Pierre Nora:

We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left... as traditional memory disappears, we feel obliged to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches and any visible signs of what has been.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ ST, “Open debate and open minds needed”, 29.2.00.

⁹⁵ Newsintercom, “It is not too late to preserve options”, 13.12.00.

⁹⁶ Nora, “Between Memory and History”, p. 7.

Therefore, it seemed that as more landmarks and buildings were being destroyed, the more people desired and looked for a firm anchorage in a familiar time and place. Singaporean Edwin Siew, who wrote in to *The Straits Times* about the NL had this to say:

I beg those in charge to have mercy on us common people... when I am old and dull, let me have something to look at to *tell me that I once belonged here*.⁹⁷

According to Kwok Kian-Woon, Associate Professor and Head of Sociology at the Nanyang Technological University, this represented the “cultural predication” that Singaporeans find themselves in for as modern and advanced as our society is, people may not feel “quite at home in the modern world”.⁹⁸ As old buildings and structures play an important part in stimulating visual memory, losing such markers may end up causing Singaporeans to feel like strangers in their own city. For instance, an individual known only by his online nickname, ‘Stingerquek’ had commented in an discussion forum on 28 July 2009 that he found it difficult to feel affiliated to the country when all the landmarks he used to frequent as a child no longer existed.⁹⁹ In view of the above, it is not surprising why there was such a huge public reaction to the NL’s pending demolition. Nevertheless, it is unwise to presume that people who opposed the government’s decision and protested to save the NL building were a monolithic group with similar motivations. Thus, the next section will examine the profile of these people and the reasons they protested.

3.3 Advocacy, interstices and silences

By analyzing the various letters and commentaries in the press, it is clear that some were genuinely concerned because the Stamford Road library had been a significant part of their

⁹⁷ ST, “Tunnelling through our memories”, ST 16.03.99.

⁹⁸ Kwok Kian-Woon, “The Problem of ‘Tradition’ in Contemporary Singapore”, *Heritage and Contemporary Values*, (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2004), p. 1.

⁹⁹ “Uniquely Singapore”, 28.07.09. < <http://www.mycarforum.com/lofi/version/index.php/t2640842.html> >. Last accessed 25.02.10.

lives. Helen Chia, a journalist, had this to say:

The other night, I dreamt that I went to the NL again [and] I started to think about the places which I grew up with and it struck me that few of these buildings are still standing... If after all is said and done [and] the NL still has to be torn down, give me two red bricks as keepsakes so that I will have more than a dream to cling on to.¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, professional architects Tay Kheng Soon and William Lim spoke up about the issue because the NL building was a metaphor for people's social memories and experiences that they felt should be preserved. Tay, who initially held the view that the NL building was "unworthy architecturally" and should not be preserved, changed his mind and subsequently opposed its demolition.¹⁰¹ During a series of meetings and discussions between SMU chairman, Ho Kwon Ping and various stakeholders in early 1999, Tay's position was that SMU "should not be built on Bras Basah Park nor should the alignment of Stamford Road be changed".¹⁰² Instead, he was of the opinion that the NL should be preserved and incorporated into SMU's new campus. According to Tay, SMU proceeded with the URA's plan for the Bras Basah area because Ho felt it was not in his mandate to take on the URA who had given Bras Basah Park to SMU as a building site.¹⁰³ Upon hearing this, Tay Kheng Soon withdrew from any further discussions with SMU and decided to come up with his own design that would allow Bras Basah Park to remain an open space and save the NL.¹⁰⁴ Tay then called a press conference on 24 January 2000 at the 'Substation' to present his own unofficial master plan for SMU's new city campus.¹⁰⁵ A week later, he sent his plan to the Prime Minister's Office, who then referred it to the Ministry of National Development (MND) for evaluation.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ ST, "Put heart before head and save the library", 20.02.00.

¹⁰¹ ST, "Redevelopment".

¹⁰² Interview with Tay Kheng Soon on 02.02.10.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ ST, "New plan for Bras Basah Park offered", 25.01.00.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ ST, "Redevelopment".

Tay Kheng Soon's alternative proposal involved re-routing the Fort Canning tunnel to go under Stamford Road and not under the library.¹⁰⁷ Although it would be more costly, he also suggested the URA built SMU around Bras Basah Park and under the NL. If Tay's plan were adopted, Stamford Road had to be realigned and Stamford Canal, which runs under it, rebuilt.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the MND, after meeting privately with Tay and reassessing his plans still found the URA's plans to be better as it was "more people-friendly, eased pedestrian flow and preserved the Civic District's ambience".¹⁰⁹ Tay Kheng Soon's plan to reroute the tunnel was in fact based on the design standards of the American Traffic Engineering Handbook, which specified that for urban roads, the designated speed should not be more than 60km/h.¹¹⁰ However, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) responded to Tay's proposal saying that building roads to suit such speeds were not within Singapore's standard practice since most roads in Singapore are built with a designated speed of 80km/h.¹¹¹ Also, according to the State, Tay's alternative plan was unsuitable because it would result in a "poorer road network, a tunnel that would cut the area into two and 15-storey buildings near Fort Canning in an area designated for low-rise buildings".¹¹²

When asked how he felt about the outcome, Tay had this to say:

The whole episode smacks of bureaucratic inertia... it was a case of defending the status quo... after having committed to the decision to demolish the NL, there was face to be saved and therefore, no other possibilities could be entertained.¹¹³

From the nine month gap between the official announcement made by SMU that the NL would be demolished in March 1999 and January 2000, the time Tay Kheng Soon released his

¹⁰⁷ ST, "New plan for Bras Basah".

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ ST, "National Library to go", 07.03.00.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Tay.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² ST, "National Library to go".

¹¹³ Interview with Tay.

alternative proposal, it is clear that he did not immediately spearhead the opposition against demolishing the NL. Yet, this interval was significant as it had allowed Tay to observe how much the library meant to some segments of the public. According to Tay, it was the sudden surge in public sentiments between the years 1998 to 1999 that made him change his earlier position.¹¹⁴ In view of the NL's historical and social significance, Tay Kheng Soon requested the authorities to reconsider their stand on the NL building. The library was more than just a building, it was an icon and a symbol and by knocking it down, it was as good as knocking away the past.¹¹⁵

Tay Kheng Soon was not alone in his bid to save the library as fellow architect William Lim, who used to visit the library when he was a student and had spent a considerable amount of time there when he was not working, also entered SMU's design competition in an attempt to save the NL. Upon receiving the proposed tunnel's dimensions and its relationship to the library, Lim discovered that it was possible to construct the tunnel in a way that would not affect the library.¹¹⁶ The site that the library stood on could also be turned into an adjunct library to SMU's main library. However, Lim claims that his alternative proposal was never exhibited and no reasons were provided as to why his proposal was turned down.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, despite having comprehensive alternative plans drawn up by both architects, then Minister for National Development Mah Bow Tan announced in Parliament on 7 March 2000 that the NL building had to go.¹¹⁸ More importantly, these two examples of Tay Kheng Soon and William Lim are significant as they demonstrate how even the architects, who are responsible for Singapore's modernization and rapid development had realized that change was happening at too fast a pace.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ ST, "Redevelopment".

¹¹⁶ Interview with William S.W Lim on 03.02.10.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Kwok, Ho and Tan, *Memories*, p. 76.

In addition to the above two groups of people, the rest who voiced their concerns about the issue did so because the library's demolition alluded to the larger issue of civic participation or the absence of it when deciding whose heritage should be preserved. While retired newspaper editor, David Kraal had no personal attachment to the library, he still believed that "milestone mainstays of one's existence should be there to see, to touch and to point out to one's children and grandchildren".¹¹⁹ He also applauded how the talk of the library's demolition has sparked many "new voices for conservation".¹²⁰ Conversely, member of the public, Cheng Kum Hon wrote in to *The Straits Times* because he felt that the "S21 vision on active citizenship" was at stake in the library issue (see Chapter 4).¹²¹

On the other hand, some were vocal about the NL issue because they saw the removal of another national landmark tied to the bigger matter of heritage conservation and urban redevelopment in Singapore. SHS committee members, Ho Weng Hin and Tan Kar Lin, in referring to the NL's pending demolition believed that,

Conservation can no longer be defined narrowly as the preservation of old buildings of architectural merit. [Moreover], in an Information Age where changes prevail, we need physical markers to be anchored to our history, *to remember who we are*.¹²²

Similarly, while ex-journalist Tan Sai Siong had "no strong attachment to the NL building", he still wrote an article about the NL, requesting the authorities to consider a change of plans.¹²³

Referring to the NL's pending demolition, Tan had this to say,

It is reassuring in Singapore – where new roads and buildings spring up almost overnight and old ones disappear as fast – to have something which exudes an air of permanence and unchangeability... so in the words of Oliver Cromwell, let me say

¹¹⁹ ST, "Hurrah for the new voices", 31.03.99.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ ST, "S21 vision at stake in library issue", 12.02.00.

¹²² ST, "Heed the people's call, conserve built heritage", 16.03.99.

¹²³ ST, "Consider a change of plans".

to those who have decided on the NL's fate: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken" and consider a change of plans before it is too late.¹²⁴

Therefore, it can be seen that a fraction of the public who did not have any sentimental feelings for the NL still voiced out their concerns over its demolition because the NL had now become part of the larger conservation-redevelopment conundrum and heritage discourse in Singapore.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the above mentioned groups who disagreed with the government's decision to remove the NL, there were some individuals who found themselves completely unaffected by the library's demolition. This indifference and lack of concern can be attributed to the various developments taking place at that time. By the 1980s, most of the schools previously around the Stamford Road area had relocated elsewhere. For example, RI moved to Grange Road in 1972 and RGS also relocated from Queen Street to Holland Grove in 1979.¹²⁵ Likewise, SJI left its Bras Basah site and relocated to Malcolm Road in 1987 while the original building was subsequently opened in 1996 as The Singapore Art Museum.¹²⁶ This period also coincided with the opening of various full-time branch libraries.

By 1983, there were four full-time branches in operation: Queenstown (1970), Toa Payoh (1974), Marine Parade (1978) and Bukit Merah Town Centre (1982). Areas beyond the vicinity of these areas were served either by part-time branches or mobile library points.¹²⁷ Subsequently, four more full-time branches were opened in Ang Mo Kio (1985), Bedok (1985), Geylang East (1988) and Jurong East (1988).¹²⁸ By 1990, in addition to the Central Library at Stamford Road, there were eight full-time branch libraries around the island. In fact, this expansion of library services paralleled Singapore's increasing literacy rates. Between the

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ "History of Raffles Girls Primary School"

<<http://www.rgps.moe.edu.sg/cos/o.x?c=/wbn/pagetree&func=view&rid=49392>>, last accessed 19.02.2010.

¹²⁶ Bonny Tan, "The Singapore Art Museum Building", 31.12.09.

<http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_1625_2009-12-31.html>, last accessed 19.02.2010.

¹²⁷ Seet, *A Place for the People*, p. 139.

¹²⁸ National Library Board, *Annual Report 1990*, (Singapore: National Library Board 1988).

years 1960 to 1975, total enrolment in Secondary School and Junior Colleges rose from 59,244 to 176,224.¹²⁹ Literacy also improved in tandem with the “upgrading of the educational level of Singapore residents”, rising from 84% in 1980 to 90% by 1990.¹³⁰ By the year 2000, a three-tier public library system was implemented that consisted of “Regional, Community and Neighbourhood Libraries in descending order of size, range of collections and services”.¹³¹ More importantly, the gradual opening of full-time branch libraries meant that people had greater access to libraries nearer their area of residence did not have to visit the NL at Stamford Road.

This was in direct contrast to the situation that existed in the pre-high tech eras of the 1960s and 1970s where the NL at Stamford Road was regarded as the most convenient and central location for Singaporeans who needed library services. The old library was the preferred choice due to its central location as opposed to the Queenstown and Toa Payoh branches. At that time, school libraries were not as well-equipped and even those who visited the Queenstown and Toa Payoh branch libraries found themselves going to the Stamford Road library when certain materials and references were only available there.¹³² However, by the 1980s and 1990s, people began to patronize the various branch libraries and this essentially diffused the membership patterns that once concentrated at the NL.

In 1978, eight years after the Queenstown and Toa Payoh branches opened, a re-registration of readers had demonstrated a drop in Central Library membership from 196,626 in 1971 to 161,482 by 1978.¹³³ The cancellation of membership also coincided with the opening of the new Marine Parade branch. Subsequently, in 1985, Central Library membership had increased by only 6.5% compared to the 7.5% and 8.3% increase in library membership for Queenstown

¹²⁹ Department of Statistics, *Economic and Social Statistics Singapore 1960-1982*, (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 1983), p. 236.

¹³⁰ Department of Statistics, *Census of Population 1990 Advance Data Release*, (Singapore: SNP Publishers), 16.

¹³¹ Library 2000 Review Committee, *Library 2000*, p. 6.

¹³² Kwok, Ho and Tan, *Memories and the National Library*, p. 66.

¹³³ National Library Board, *Annual Report 1978*.

and Toa Payoh.¹³⁴ Once again, this took place alongside the opening of two more full-time branches in Ang Mo Kio and Bedok. Likewise, in 1988 during another re-registration exercise, the number of Central Library members had sharply decreased to 35,968 from 299,942 in 1987.¹³⁵ While other branch libraries also experienced a fall in membership numbers, the Central Library's 88% membership drop was the highest among the other branches. As mentioned earlier, the year 1988 also saw the opening of the Geylang and Jurong East branch libraries which could also be responsible for the redistribution of library membership.

Therefore, putting aside the age factor, for those who did not frequent the old NL either because they preferred going to the neighbourhood branch libraries or because they were hardly library-goers in the first place, it is understandable why there was no reaction from them. Likewise, it seemed that while some went to the Stamford Road library with their parents in their childhood years, they did not possess very much recollection of those visits.

Quoting Wu Guan Zhen, a 23 year old student,

The last time I went to the Old National Library was more than 10 yrs ago with my mother. A typical visit would probably be me running around grabbing any book that was colourful enough and reading them at the small tables for children ... I guess I was too young to remember anything else.¹³⁶

Also, the indifference of some to the NL's demolition can be attributed to the nature of the library as an institution. According to K.K Seet,

[The NL] is the Headquarters of Singapore's island wide network of libraries. It is where the most rare books and important documents are kept. Hence, as a NL, *it is more conceptual* rather than a tangible concrete notion.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ National Library Board, *Annual Report 1985*.

¹³⁵ National Library Board, *Annual Report 1988*.

¹³⁶ Email correspondence with Wu Guan Zhen on 27.01.10.

¹³⁷ Interview with K.K Seet on 02.03.10.

Furthermore, as school libraries, especially that of the universities began improving their catalogues and services, it became less necessary to visit the NL. Moreover, it should not be assumed that all those who visited the NL in their youth continued to frequent the library once they left school and entered the workforce. With the advent of the Internet, information had also become readily accessible and convenient via online libraries or databases. Thus, the presence of alternatives like the Internet and school libraries could have reduced the need to visit the NL at Stamford Road for research purposes.

In fact, growing up visiting the library did not automatically mean that one opposed its removal. Former St. Anthony's Convent student, Ethel Chong, who started going to the NL since she was in primary school, "was all for change and felt ok about the demolition" as the new NL offered a bigger space and more resources.¹³⁸ Even ex-SJI student, Andrew Pang, mentioned earlier in this chapter, was "not affected by the demolition [as he has] no sentimental attachment to the NL".¹³⁹ Likewise, K.K Seet, an academic, writer and theatre director who spent numerous hours, even weekends researching and writing in the Southeast Asian room of the NL had this to say,

On one hand, I'm sad having known it intimately but since it's architecturally not worth preserving... If the old library was of architectural importance then perhaps we could re-use it as in the case of Bugis Junction where we hollowed out the insides of those old terraces but preserved the facades... but since the library was architecturally uninteresting plus its site was not particularly significant, I have no qualms about losing it.¹⁴⁰

This reveals how there certain segments of the public that shared the same pragmatic mindset as the Singapore government when it came to the question of heritage conservation. More importantly, the interstices and silences within the public reveal the subjective and divisive

¹³⁸ Email correspondence with Ethel Chong on 31.01.10.

¹³⁹ Email correspondence with Pang.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Seet.

nature of heritage. At the end of the day, it is the individual who ultimately selects, interprets and discards from past images and memories.¹⁴¹ However, for those who regarded the NL as part of their heritage and wanted it to be preserved, it is worth mentioning that not all made their views heard. On a broader level, this reluctance to get involved with the debate links to broader issues of politics and civil society in Singapore that Chapter 4 will examine next.

¹⁴¹ Kwok Kian-Woon, Lily Kong, Kuo Pao Kun, Kwa Chong Guan, William Lim, Tan Beng Luan and Brenda Yeoh. "Introduction: Our Place in Time – A Preliminary Reflection" in *Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*, Kwok-Kian-Woon et al. eds. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1999), p. 8.

Chapter 4: Public Involvement in NL issue

While pleas to preserve the NL revolved around issues of social memory and public sentiments, not everyone who opposed the government's decision made their voices heard. From the various interview responses, one can sense a very pessimistic and defeatist attitude when it came to the matter of public consultation and whether the library could be saved. More importantly, any unwillingness by government agencies to engage the larger public may cause some to question if the government means what it says. In this case, the perceived absence of genuine consultation could have made Singaporeans less inclined to question or challenge the existing status quo. This reluctance to dispute the government's decision stands in remarkable contrast to the situation elsewhere where people are more vehement in their opposition to certain government decisions that they do not agree with. The case of Queen's Pier in Hong Kong is one such example.

4.1 The case of Queen's Pier

The pier, with a modern utilitarian architectural style was opened in 1954 and had been named after Queen Victoria. It functioned mainly as the place of arrival and departure for the British royal family and Hong Kong Governors and gradually became a venue for other ceremonial events, civic gatherings and public recreation.¹⁴² In 2007, it was announced that the pier would be demolished so that the "reclaimed land would be used for [the construction of] a four-lane highway and commercial property development".¹⁴³ As in the case of Singapore's NL, there was also the disagreement about its historic and architectural merits. While the Antiques Advisory board rated the pier the "highest grade for historic buildings", the Home Affairs

¹⁴² Joan C. Henderson, "Conserving Hong Kong's Heritage: The Case of Queen's Pier" in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol.14, no.6, (Nov 2008), p. 542.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Secretary felt that it had no significant “historical, archaeological or palaeontological significance to qualify it as a protected monument”.¹⁴⁴

The final decision to pull down the pier was greeted with angry protests, all-night vigils and even hunger strikes.¹⁴⁵ Nearing the pier’s closure date, many protesters gathered at the pier with a small group going on a hunger strike while others camped around the pier for more than ten days until the police were called in to take them away.¹⁴⁶ Subsequently, the protestors applied for a judicial review but the judge still gave the go-ahead for the demolition, dismissing attempts to challenge the legality of the government’s decision.¹⁴⁷ In fact, members of the general public were not the only ones opposing the pier’s demolition as other organizations such as the Hong Kong Institute of Architects; the Conservancy Association; the Civil Exchange think tank; the Hong Kong Federation of Students and the Friends of the Harbour and Society for the Protection of the Harbour were among the seventeen “concern-groups” who advocated the preservation of Queen’s Pier.¹⁴⁸

Ronald Lu, President of the Hong Kong Institute of Architects, had this to share about the pier,

"Architecturally, it is not a significant masterpiece by any stretch of the imagination ... but it has a legacy. If we forget about Queen's Pier then there is no relationship between Hong Kong and its history."¹⁴⁹

Similar to the NL’s example, the case of Queen’s Pier illustrates the differences between the government’s point of view and popular feelings about heritage. For the government and

¹⁴⁴ Henderson, “Conserving”, pp. 542-543.

¹⁴⁵ Stephanie Holmes, “Pier pressure builds in Hong Kong”, 10.08.07. < <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6933255.stm> >, last accessed 06.03.10.

¹⁴⁶ NowPublic, “Hong Kong Heritage site "Queen's Pier" about to be demolish by HK government”, 31.07.07.

<http://www.nowpublic.com/hong_kong_heritage_site_queens_pier_about_be_demolish_hk_government>, last accessed 06.03.10.

¹⁴⁷ Holmes, “Pier pressure”.

¹⁴⁸ Henderson, “Conserving”, pp. 544-545.

¹⁴⁹ Holmes, “Pier pressure”.

various politicians, while heritage assumed a higher priority in 2006 when the Star Ferry Pier was demolished, citizens were reminded that “conservation could not come before growth”, which necessitated expenditure on infrastructure and replacing old buildings with new ones.¹⁵⁰ Pulling down the pier was part of Hong Kong’s larger redevelopment project to improve its city’s infrastructure and delaying the demolition will “hold up reclamation and infrastructure work, leading to very expensive compensation payments”.¹⁵¹ In response, residents of Hong Kong had a spectrum of views as to why they wanted the pier to be preserved. These ranged from the continued destruction of Hong Kong’s heritage to how the pier had been a significant part of their lives. Like the case of the NL, the Hong Kong public was divided on whether the pier was worth preserving. To some, felt the pier was an “ugly and unwanted relic” that should give way to development.¹⁵² Even the ‘protestors’ were not a monolithic group that endorsed the conservation cause. Quoting an unemployed youth:

I am not a conservationist... I joined the campaign because I get along well with the other people there... The education system in Hong Kong is a waste of my time”.¹⁵³

Both the cases of Queen’s Pier and the NL demonstrate how issues pertaining to heritage that resonates more with the public tend to be those that are interwoven in their personal life stories. Nevertheless, despite how the demise of Queen’s Pier and the NL all witnessed a wave of public dissent, there were notable differences in how the protestors reacted. In Singapore’s case, with the exception of a few vocal and disgruntled individuals, the rest of the public who complained and lamented about the library’s pending demolition did not participate in the debate nor openly petitioned for it to be saved. This could be due to the fact that Singaporeans are by and large “a pragmatic lot and have grown used to the constant rebuilding of the

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Henderson, “Conserving”, pp. 544.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 546.

landscape”.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, it is equally plausible that the reluctance of some to participate in the debate could also be because they did not think that the State would retract its decision.

4.2 “S21 vision at stake...”

According to Chua Beng Huat, “it is understandable that Singaporeans [harbour] doubts as to whether public opinion can change things because it had not in the past”.¹⁵⁵ For instance, a few young architects who agreed with Mr. Tay Kheng Soon’s alternative proposal did not make their views known because they felt it was a “waste of time” and were convinced that the prevailing views of the URA would be carried out in the end.¹⁵⁶ Likewise, member of the public, Allen Toh realized that the numerous protests and pleas on behalf of the general public were futile after joining a lobby group to save the NL. Toh recalls,

I went online to petition... I can’t recall the group but it was part of the National Library Board! They organized group and one-to-one sessions explaining why the library had to go... which made me question how far it really lobbied to keep the library.... I think many disgruntled people left those sessions... even recalling this makes me feel sad.¹⁵⁷

It should also be noted that even the leading figures who led the movement to save the library shared the same sentiments as Toh. Tay Kheng Soon felt that the various dialogues and meetings held between himself and the relevant authorities such as the LTA, URA and SMU were mere formalities and that the other parties involved had no intention to change their plans.¹⁵⁸ In the same way, William S.W. Lim held the view that the NL was torn down because the government did not want to save it, since both Tay and himself had demonstrated that it

¹⁵⁴ ST, “Put Heart before head”.

¹⁵⁵ ST, “Design contest”.

¹⁵⁶ ST, “S’pore? It’s a piece of kitsch”, 18.02.00.

¹⁵⁷ Email correspondence with Allen Toh on 30.01.10.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Tay.

was technically possible and feasible to retain the building.¹⁵⁹ Likewise, Dr. Chua Ai Lin, a History professor in NUS who took part in the forum-cum-exhibition organized by the SHS felt saving the NL was a question of political will.¹⁶⁰ Quoting Dr. Chua,

Someone at the top with a lot more political influence was needed in order for the library to be saved since it appeared that there was nothing more the public could have done.¹⁶¹

From the above, it is clear that many people, including some of the protestors felt that the voice of the public failed to make any difference once the relevant authorities have made up their mind.

On a larger context, the NL's demolition and the unsuccessful attempts on behalf of the public to preserve the building is a reflection of Singapore's larger political culture where consensus is imposed rather than achieved through genuine dialogue and debate. This in effect contradicts the government's attempts to get Singaporeans to take ownership and be more interested in their past. As such, the NL debate was not just about preserving a building or the social memories of Singaporeans. It was also about the government's S21 vision, which expressed a desire to foster an active citizenry via more civic participation and putting it into action. In 1997, the Singapore S21 Committee recommended that the various government ministries, departments and the Feedback Unit be more receptive and open to citizens' ideas and views.¹⁶² The State had also realized that it was no longer feasible to try and manage all facets of Singapore's society against the backdrop of an increasingly fast-moving and global setting.¹⁶³

At first glance, it seemed that the government had become more willing to consult the public when it came to its decision-making process. With regards to the NL issue, SMU organized an

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Lim.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Chua Ai Lin on 11.02.10.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People's Action Party*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 165.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

open design competition in collaboration with the Singapore Institute of Architects and held workshops with various stakeholders and professionals to elicit their opinions on the new campus. However, at the end of the day, what is identified as heritage and why some are privileged over others is linked to how power is negotiated between the different groups in society. In the case of the NL, the decision-making process and the final outcome is ultimately reflective of the larger power relations in Singapore society where the State usually has the final say.

According to John Clammer, consensus can only exist when “there is a real possibility of disagreement and argument that [forces] both sides to change their position to agree on a decision”.¹⁶⁴ The examples of Eu Court and the NL, among many others reveal that little or not enough is being done in consulting the public, especially those directly affected by conservation or the absence of it. It was only after the NL episode that witnessed certain changes with regards to heritage conservation and the public’s input in the decision making process. Previously, it was mainly government agencies like the URA and the PMB along with some passionate individuals that rallied for the conservation of Singapore’s built heritage. The same agencies were also in charge of identifying and deciding which buildings to conserve. However, the controversy that surrounded the old NL’s demise had the effect of sparking greater awareness among Singaporeans of the need to protect their heritage and preserve important aspects of their past. Moreover, it was only fitting that the general public be involved since conserving built heritage is about preserving symbols of peoples’ shared memories.

As such, a Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP) was formed in 2002 whose main role was to “provide a multi-disciplinary perspective on URA’s conservation proposals” so as to gather a

¹⁶⁴ John Clammer, “Deconstructing Values: The Establishment of a National Ideology and its Implications for Singapore’s Political Future” in Garry Rodan, ed. *Singapore Changes Guard: Social, Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), p. 40.

wider spectrum of views.¹⁶⁵ Another example of the shift from looking merely at a building's architectural merit to that of "identity" is embodied in the Identity Plan, drawn up as part of the Master Plan 2003.¹⁶⁶ Under this plan, various areas and individual buildings that contribute to the identity of a place are selected for conservation.¹⁶⁷ During the 2004 URA Architectural Heritage Awards, Mr. Mah Bow Tan, then Minister for National Development, spoke of the need to conserve architectural works of the post-war era. Besides being part of the memories of the post-war generation, landmarks and buildings built in the "last 40 years or so best capture the mood and aspirations of the time".¹⁶⁸ On this note, it is ironic that the old NL building was demolished when it fits the above mentioned criteria. It is even more puzzling when we consider how all the public buildings that were constructed in Singapore's immediate post-colonial period such as the National Theatre, the National Stadium and the NL have either been demolished or is earmarked for removal.

Nevertheless, despite this display of willingness of the URA to consult the wider public with regards to the issue of heritage preservation, it is not without certain shortcomings. First, it is not clear whom the URA was referring to when it spoke of a more participatory process. Suppose input is gathered from the CAP, comprising of various professionals from the building, education and journalism industries, the building owners, other direct stakeholders followed by the general public, there remains the question of whose opinion carries a larger weight. Secondly, within the public itself, not all Singaporeans have a high regard for the past and will enthusiastically participate as many tend to focus on today and tomorrow, not yesterday. For example, almost every respondent belonging to the age groups 20-25 when

¹⁶⁵ Speech by Minister of State for National Development, Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan at the URA Architectural Heritage Awards on July 10, 2002.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Speech by Minister for National Development, Mr. Mah Bow Tan at the URA Architectural Heritage Awards on October 12, 2004.

asked how they felt about the NL's demolition were of the opinion that the old should give way to the new.

Also, since the demolition of the NL, the absence of a similar case study means that there is no way of asserting whether the government has since modified its treatment of heritage. The closest example that had the potential to be a 'test case' was that of the National Stadium. Like the case of the NL, the stadium was an example of modern architecture that projected an image of restraint and rigour as seen in its "soaring concrete structural frame, its vast, sweeping curves and the gravity-defying 20m cantilevered grandstand roof".¹⁶⁹ Planned by the Housing Development Board Urban Renewal Department and designed by the now-defunct PWD in the 1970s, it was "the country's first attempt at such an ambitious building project, overcoming unknown odds with limited means".¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, having hosted over three decades worth of sporting events and National Day Parades, it is undeniably a venue for the "unreserved expression of patriotism for generations of Singaporeans".¹⁷¹

However, the stadium is scheduled to be torn down and replaced by a multi-purpose sports complex, in an ambitious bid to turn Singapore into a vibrant sports city.¹⁷² On 15 February 2003, then Sports Minister Yaacob Ibrahim made a "surprise announcement to about 200 sports officials" when he launched a code of conduct aimed at ensuring that national sports associations are run professionally.¹⁷³ The new sports hub will comprise a "new 55,000-seater national stadium, a 6,000-seat indoor aquatic centre and a 3,000-seat multi-purpose arena".¹⁷⁴

Upon hearing this news, there were a variety of responses from the public. On one hand, some were saddened and reluctant to see the stadium go. For Singapore Armed Forces officer

¹⁶⁹ ST, "Losing a slice of history...", 13.07.07.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² ST, "National Stadium to make way for Sports Center...", 16.02.03.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ ST, "Not yet game over...", 08.04.07.

Christopher Wong, 43, the stadium had been very much a part of him, recalling the times he ran for his school's athletic meets in the late 1970s and even his wedding photos were taken there in 1999.¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, while national soccer player, Aleksandar Duric was "sad to see the stadium go, [he was] also very excited about the new Sports Hub".¹⁷⁶ Likewise, Mahmood Gaznavi, Deputy President of the Singapore Cricket Association had this to say,

[While] the National Stadium is a very significant part of our sporting history... we have to face reality and get a new sporting facility that is more in sync with our current generation.¹⁷⁷

Therefore, most of whom that were affected by the stadium's pending demolition were those who were directly linked to the stadium such as athletes, people who worked in the stadium and regular members of the public who frequently visited the stadium either for sport or as spectators. As such, while the above example of the National Stadium had certain similarities with the case of the NL, it could not be an adequate 'test case' considering how the public response was not very strong compared to the wave of public dissent sparked off by the NL issue.

Thus, it remains to be seen how civil society will be engaged in the 21st century and how far the government is prepared to listen and debate when it comes to the question of whose heritage is worth preserving. On another level, the demolition of the NL had essentially become a metaphor for the government's unwillingness to listen to public opinion. One possible solution to this conundrum is to have "an independent and proactive conservation body", that holds the same level of negotiation power with other government agencies such as the URA and the LTA.¹⁷⁸ Having said this, Chapter 5 will conclude this thesis by looking into the significance and meanings that has been attached to the NL's demolition.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ ST, "Singapore sports fraternity reacts", ST 20.01.08.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Newsintercom, "It is not too late".

Chapter 5 – Conclusion: “Tunnel Vision”

Today, when people see the tunnel in place of what many felt was a national icon – two words come to their mind; “tunnel vision”, used to describe the government’s state of mind when it had allowed the old library to be demolished.¹⁷⁹ In April 2000, plans for the NL site involved building “classrooms, an indoor sports centre and a grand staircase up to Fort Canning Hill”.¹⁸⁰ However, none of that has materialized to date as there is nothing that currently stands on the land surrounding and above the tunnel. This has caused many Singaporeans to question whether knocking down the NL to build the tunnel was really worth it? After all, how important is saving five minutes for Singaporean motorists when there are many who are willing to spend more than five minutes taking a detour to avoid paying the Electronic Road Payment?¹⁸¹ These sentiments are aptly portrayed in Mr. Brown’s podcast.

Owner of the blog *Browntown* and well known for his satirical humour, Mr. Brown recorded a podcast titled “tunnel vision” to poke fun at the 34 million dollar ‘hole’, measuring only 35 000 centimetres in length and taking only 18 seconds to drive through.¹⁸² For others, the case of the old library has been likened to that of a “national tragedy” and a “costly mistake in terms of nation building”.¹⁸³ The incident has thus been remembered and framed by some as a lesson so that policy makers in the future would not repeat such a move. Furthermore, even though the old library building had ceased to exist by 2005, people still referred to the library when discussing about larger issues in Singapore’s heritage discourse. In response to the news that the 7th Storey Hotel will have to make way for the Downtown Line MRT Station, a blogger lamented that, “If the [government] would not spare the old National Library in spite of much

¹⁷⁹ Today Online, “Tunnel Vision is no excuse”, 13.03.07.

¹⁸⁰ ST, “Picture-perfect setting for Bras Basah Campus”, 01.04.00.

¹⁸¹ Today Online, “Tunnel Vision”.

¹⁸² Mr. Brown, “Tunnel Vision”, 24.11.06. < <http://www.mrbrowshow.com/?p=494>>, last accessed 24.02.2010.

¹⁸³ Today Online, “Relook Criteria for conservation and it’s a costly nation-building error”, 15.03.07.

public objections, why should they spare this one?”¹⁸⁴ This essentially echoes what a disgruntled forum member mentioned earlier that, “If the red brick library can be demolished to build a tunnel, then every building can be demolished.”¹⁸⁵

Nonetheless, while the demolition of the old National Library represented the closure of one chapter in the history of Singapore libraries, a new chapter was opened by the creation of the current National Library in Victoria Street (see figure 4 below).

Figure 4: The New National Library



Taken from: <http://www.ndl.go.jp/en/cdnlao/newsletter/055/554.html>

The purpose of a library had also changed from what used to be a mere repository of books to an institution that served the diverse needs of the community. The NL today aspires to be a resource-rich, service-oriented, people-friendly, space-beautiful and future-proof library.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Victor Koo, “Behind Capitol Building – through the years”, 27.07.08, <http://victorkoo.blogspot.com/2008_07_01_archive.html>, last accessed 26.02.2010.

¹⁸⁵ “Demolishing that 7th storey hotel”, 27.06.07. <<http://www.spug.sg/forums/showthread.php?p=1265094>>, last accessed 26.02.2010.

¹⁸⁶ K.K Seet, *Knowledge, Imagination, Possibility: Singapore’s Transformative Library*. (Singapore: SNP Editions, 2005).

The new building “not only replicates and fulfils all the functions of the National Library at Stamford Road but also exceeds it” in being “adaptable and bio-climatically attuned to the tropical landscape”.¹⁸⁷ Designed by Malaysian architect Ken Yeang, the new ten-storey building has six floors of book-lined rooms; a sky garden with benches; an observation pod on the rooftop; a café; a library shop and an auditorium for concerts with a seating capacity of 400.¹⁸⁸ When asked how he felt about the new NL, Dr. K.K Seet had this to say,

I’m very pleased that we’ve come up with a new one that’s both aesthetically more pleasing and also ecologically friendly. In fact, the current one is so much more of a landmark than the old one. It’s got green lungs, it is energy efficient and at night, it shines like a beacon. Integrating the drama centre there is also a good idea as it provides another form of cultural diversion.¹⁸⁹

However, the public once again stands divided in its views regarding the new library with some preferring the feel of the old library while others remain unaffected since they hardly go to libraries. When asked how they found the new library at Victoria Street, a significant number of respondents felt that it was certainly modern and swanky but was too cold, pristine, sanitized and uninviting for their liking. Former SJI students, Mac Chew and Victor Chua, who fondly missed the old NL, felt that the new one was a “difficult to access as a place” with multiple barriers and “hidden areas that the public rarely sees”.¹⁹⁰ The presence of security guards at some levels had the effect of adding “to the distance between the library and the public”.¹⁹¹ For others, it seemed that the new library did not possess the charms of the old one at Stamford and Allen Toh, a member of the public who opposed the NL’s demolition, goes as

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁸⁸ ST, “Coming up – 10-storey library at Victoria St.”, 31.10.01.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Seet.

¹⁹⁰ Email correspondence with Mac Chew and Victor Chua on 26.01.10.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Chua.

far as to call it an “eyesore next to Bras Basah Complex [that sticks out like an] odd metallic structure in the middle of nowhere”.¹⁹²

As the National Library finds itself a new home, its absence at Stamford Road has undeniably impacted the landscape. Yeo Hock Yeu, who wrote an entry for the book *Moments in Time*, felt that Fort Canning seemed incomplete without the library – the familiar red brick building that was a storehouse of knowledge and information.¹⁹³ By looking at both pictures below, one can see how much Stamford Road has changed after the library’s demolition.

Figure 4: All that remains of the old NL



Taken from: <http://timesofmylife.wordpress.com/2007/09/11/that-red-brick-library-part-1/>

¹⁹² Email correspondence with Toh.

¹⁹³ National Library Board, *Moments in Time*, p. 14.

Figure 5: The NL in the 1960s and 70s



Taken from: <http://victorkoo.blogspot.com/2010/01/old-national-library-revisited.html>

What these photographs illustrate is that the transformation of Singapore into a modern city-state since the 1960s has involved the constant remaking of the landscape, often at the expense of people's sense of identity and belonging. The loss of the library building together with other significant landmarks such as the National Theatre and the National Stadium could very well mean that future generations would be left with little more than photographs and memories to understand what Singapore was like before.

Moreover, once a building like the NL is gone, it is not just bricks and mortar that is lost. Tunnels can always be built somewhere else but the removal of old buildings such as the NL may cause Singaporeans, especially those who grew up with those landmarks, to lose a sense of familiarity that anchors them emotionally to a place. According to Yeoh and Huang, the conservation-redevelopment dilemma is "no longer a straightforward tension whether urban

renewal should entail redevelopment or conservation.”¹⁹⁴ Instead, it has become a matter of “which building deserves to be conserved... who makes the decision and on what basis”.¹⁹⁵

As such, the case of the NL has demonstrated that while the conservation of various landmarks and historical areas has gained significant ascendancy, those sites that are preserved tend to be the ones that are economically more viable while the rest face the risk of being erased from the landscape. Also, it seemed that the State had gone through the motions of consultation only after it had largely made up its mind. Even after requesting the opinion of foreign experts back in 1987, the government still went ahead with the decision to tear down the NL building. Hence, if the government could ignore the advice of the foreign experts, the odds of them listening to the general public and reversing its decision are extremely low. In view of this, it appears that the various public dialogues and private meetings were merely pro forma and did not seriously consider alternative proposals that could save the NL building.

All in all, perhaps the most enduring message that one can take away from the case of the old NL is that a building or landmark need not be considered good architecturally for it to be remembered or become an icon. On the other hand, the constant erasure of the past in the form of Singapore’s built heritage reveals the inconsistency between government efforts to promote a sense of historical awareness and its disregard for certain sites of memory such as the old NL. Moreover, as heritage plays a crucial role in the creation and nurturing of one’s sense of belonging and national identity, this incongruity between the State’s rhetoric and actions in reality makes nation building “an exercise in futility”.¹⁹⁶ Perhaps this realization will make the government rethink its approach towards heritage and to think twice and consult the wider public before knocking down another landmark or building.

¹⁹⁴ Brenda S.A Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, “The conservation-redevelopment dilemma in Singapore: The case of the Kampong Glam historic district”, *Cities*, Vol. 13, No. 6, p. 421.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ ST, “Do we have to see yet another landmark gone”.

APPENDIX

Interview transcripts

- **Excerpts from interview with Dr. Chua Ai Lin**

Why do you think the library was demolished when there were many who felt it was worthy of preservation?

I guess it's about who's making the decisions. At the end of the day, it is about political will. Somebody has to make the decision that the heritage element is more important than economics. To conserve an old building vs. costing the same amount of money to build a new one. It is better to build a new one or conserve the old building. In this case it was about traffic flow and on hindsight, does the tunnel make a difference?

- **Excerpts from interview with Dr. K.K Seet**

Having written a number of books on the National Library, how did you feel or react when you heard about the plans to demolish it?

When I started on the second book, the library had already been demolished. I was quite sad because I remember what it was like on a silent Sunday afternoon having the entire library to myself. At the rear of the SEA room was a Conference room and that was also where I did a lot of writing and research. Also, behind the counter in the reference section, there was a door that led to an attic and I even spent time in the attic reading microfilm as the microfilm readers were located there. So for me, it was getting to know the nooks and corners of the NL that was especially exciting.

How did you feel about the eventual outcome - that despite attempts to save the library, it was still demolished?

On one hand, I'm sad having known it intimately but since it's architecturally not worth preserving; I'm also very pleased that we've come up with a new one that's both aesthetically more pleasing and also ecologically friendly. In fact, the current one is so much more of a landmark than the old one. It's got green lungs, it is energy efficient and at night, it shines like a beacon. Integrating the drama centre there is also a good idea as it provides another form of cultural diversion.

- **Excerpts from interview with Mr. Tay Kheng Soon**

What motivated you to come up with an alternative proposal later on that would save the library building and how was your proposal different from the one proposed by the URA?

The issue of preservation of the library was related to the issue of the siting and design of SMU. I had totally disagreed with the URA plan and the subsequent design discussions conducted by Ho Kwok Ping – who was Chairman of the SMU Committee at that time. He invited opinions from stakeholders and there were a series of meetings on it. My position was that it should not be built on SJ field nor should the alignment of Stamford Road be changed. Instead, it should be preserved and become part of SMU. This view ran counter to SMU's management who, given the green light by URA just proceeded with URA's plan.

In fact, Ho Kwok Ping said it wasn't in his mandate to consider other issues nor take on the URA's decision on building on the field ... he just wanted to get on with the job. I told him during the public meeting that it was unacceptable. Then I withdrew from any further discussion with SMU and decided to do a re-design of the complex around the greenery area and also to preserve the National Library. This I did with the participation of the Master of Urban Students @ NUS.

- **Excerpts from interview with Mr. William Lim**

Did you say or do anything to try and save the old library building? Why or why not?

SMU organized a design competition which we entered. We got the data of the tunnel and its relationship with the library and we sorted out that the library does not need to be pulled down. The tunnel just needs to be dug in a particular way. What is more interesting is that the site that the library stood can be a secondary library to the main library in SMU. So what we needed to do was re-fit that place and turn it into SMU's secondary library. We wrote to the minister and submitted the proposal to SMU to save the library and not pull it down. Our project was never exhibited so we assumed we were disqualified.

Firstly, it's not an architectural question but they missed out the whole issue of the user and community's interest in preserving the building. They have not recognized it as part of an important visual memory of cities for future generations to remember. Once the government has made a decision of building the tunnel – they were already committed to demolish the library, to have a new library. No amount of technical or further information can get the minister to re-look at the situation. The decision is made, conclusive and the file is closed. This type of decision making is still going on in Singapore. I'm not saying its right or wrong, just saying this is the way it is.

- Mr. Tay Kheng Soon A practicing architect and adjunct professor at the NUS School of Architecture. Former President of the Singapore Institute of Architects who came up with an alternative plan for SMU's campus that would save the old NL.
- Mr. William Lim Architect who also writes and lectures on subjects ranging from architecture to post-modernity. Founding President of the Singapore Heritage Society who chaired the forum-cum-exhibition of the NL in 2000 and also came up with an alternative plan for SMU's campus.

Email Correspondence

- Mr. Andrew Pang Former SJI student from the batch of 1986.
- Mr. Allen Toh Former SJI student from the batch of 1987.
- Mr. Chew Chia Hock Former SJI student from batch of 1983.
- Ms. Ethel Chong Former student of St. Anthony's Convent.
- Mr. Mac Chew Former SJI student from the batch of 1986.
- Mr. Victor Chua Former SJI student from the batch of 1986.
- Mr. Wu Guan Zhen Student who frequented the NL when he was young.

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