

HeritageGem

If buildings could talk – think what anecdotes!

From places of worship and educational institutions to the former residences of prominent figures, 72 buildings have been gazetted as national monuments. This is the latest in a weekly series revisiting these heritage gems. Each is a yarn woven into the rich tapestry of Singapore's history.

Ng Wei Kai

She was 19 and vying for a place in law school at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Ms Janice Teo, now 21, remembers waiting in the Eu Tong Sen Building on Bukit Timah campus and being overwhelmed by the history of the area. "I remember sitting in the waiting area of the interview and wondering to myself 'who else has been here before and what was this building used for in the past?'"

Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee studied there when it was called Raffles College.

Bukit Timah campus is deeply ingrained in Singapore's socio-political history, having housed many national institutes of higher learning over its 88-year history.

Over the years, the campus has seen thousands of students scampers to hand in assignments, many of whom went on to serve Singapore in different capacities.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani, a former diplomat and once Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations, read philosophy there from 1967 to 1971 on a President's Scholarship.

In 2004, he returned to the campus where he was a young undergraduate 50 years before as dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The campus also houses the NUS Faculty of Law and several research institutes (see sidebar for its changing names and institutions). His current office sits metres away from the library where he studied as a philosophy student. "Coming from a one-room flat, stepping into Bukit Timah Campus was like ascending to heaven," he said.

The halls are long, with tall doors leading to different offices, and flanked by stark white walls and imposing high arches.

Established in 1929, the campus began as Raffles College, formed as

the first tertiary institute in Singapore. The college was built by the colonial government, with help from local philanthropists, and offered three-year diplomas in the arts and sciences. Businessmen Oei Tiong Ham and Eu Tong Sen made significant contributions. Several blocks such as the Oei Tiong Ham Building bear the names of the local philanthropists.

Madam Chan Sok Hoon was a student there between 1973 and 1976, reading mathematics.

The 63-year-old teacher said: "We used to have tutorials in Nissen huts (a prefabricated steel structure made from a half-cylindrical skin of corrugated steel), which were located where the sports grounds now are."

The corrugated steel huts were named after their inventor, Major Peter Norman Nissen of the British army, and were used widely during World War I.

Much has changed over the years, but Madam Chan still finds reminders of the familiar on the current campus grounds.

"The route that we used to walk to take the bus home is now part of Botanic Gardens, but thankfully some of the old buildings like the tower block are still there."

The cluster of buildings that made up Bukit Timah campus was used as the headquarters for the Medical Auxiliary Service during World War II. All academic activities were suspended during the war. Students were mobilised on a full-time basis, providing first aid and ambulance services to those hurt during air raids.

After the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, the college grounds changed hands once more, becoming the headquarters of the occupying Japanese army.

The Japanese put up a large two-storey building on the grounds and extended the northern end of Eu Tong Sen Hostel, all the while adopting the same architectural style as the original buildings.

Although many buildings were added over the course of the campus' history, the grounds have gradually shrunk over the years.

"When the college was returned to NUS, only 30 to 40 per cent of it was left," said Prof Mahbubani.

"In Singapore, we have a tendency to tear things down, to forget the historical significance of things. We should preserve these buildings, because no other part of Singapore has contributed as much to the growth of the nation and we should remember that," he added.

Although the role and preservation of the larger campus in the long term remains uncertain, the gazetting of several of its buildings (see other story) in 2009 will help to protect the buildings and their place in the national consciousness.

Come what may, the campus today continues to inspire young minds, such as that of the now third-year law student Ms Teo.

"It reminds me that I stand on the shoulders of forefathers who had great determination and foresight, and definitely puts the little bumps and challenges along the way in perspective," she said.

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Bukit Timah Campus is deeply ingrained in Singapore's socio-political history, having housed many national institutes of higher learning over its 88-year history. The campus went from being Raffles College in 1929, to University of Malaya in 1962 – and more changes – till its present status. ST PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI



Besides the Li Ka Shing Building, the CJ Koh Law Library, the Federal Building and the Upper and Lower Quadrangle, the other buildings that were collectively gazetted as a national monument on Nov 11, 2009 were named after (from top) Eu Tong Sen, Oei Tiong Ham and Manasseh Meyer.

Timeline

JULY 22, 1929:
FORMAL OPENING

Raffles College, named after Sir Stamford Raffles, offers three-year diplomas in the arts and sciences.

1941

Outbreak of World War II. It is used as the headquarters of the Medical Auxiliary Service, which is responsible for providing medical assistance after air raids.

1942 - 1945:

JAPANESE OCCUPATION

College grounds are employed as the headquarters of the Japanese military.

The Japanese add a large two-storey building on the college grounds, and extend the northern end of the Eu Tong Sen Hostel, adopting the architectural style of the original buildings.

OCT 10, 1946

Raffles College reopens after the war.

OCT 8, 1949

Raffles College and King Edward VII College of Medicine merge to form the University of Malaya.

JAN 1, 1962

University of Singapore is born after University of Malaya in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur split to form two separate institutions.

1986

After National University of Singapore (NUS) relocates to its current campus in Kent Ridge, the National Institute of Education, part of Nanyang Technological University (NTU), occupies the Bukit Timah site.

2000

Site is occupied by Singapore Management University until it moves to its own campus in 2005

2005

The site is returned to NUS and renamed NUS Bukit Timah Campus, housing the Faculty of Law and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, among other research institutes.

NOV 11, 2009

Oei Tiong Ham Building, CJ Koh Law Library, Manasseh Meyer Building, Federal Building, Eu Tong Sen Building and Li Ka Shing Building, together with the Upper and Lower Quadrangle are collectively gazetted as a national monument.

Ng Wei Kai