

Project a first step to revive Ubin's charm

Rebuilding of drinks stall a testbed for future kampung homes on the island

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Every weekend, 80-year-old Pulau Ubin resident Lai Huat So mounts her motorbike and takes a short ride from her home to her kampung drinks stall.

There, she sells coconut juice and cold beverages to thirsty cyclists and other day trippers.

Madam Lai is a picture of health. But that cannot be said of her 23-year-old stall in Jalan Jelutong.

The stall is slanting badly as a result of the ground sinking. Its timber columns have also been damaged by periodic flooding of the mangrove behind the stall.

As part of efforts to revitalise the site while retaining its rustic character, a group of National University of Singapore (NUS) architecture undergraduates are rebuilding Madam Lai's Ah Ma's Drink Stall.

It is believed to be the first kampung structure to be built on the island in 20 years.

The pilot project was initiated by community group Kawan Ubin, the Singapore Heritage Society and a group of volunteer life-guardians called Sea Angel. It is supported by National Parks Board and Friends of Ubin Network. Ministry of National Development has been working through the network to gather ideas on how to maintain Ubin's rustic charm.

The Ah Ma's Drink Stall project serves as a test bed for the construction and rebuilding of future kampung homes on Pulau Ubin.

According to some Ubin residents, there are more than 20 kampung structures on the island today and some are decrepit.

The professor in charge of the drinks-stall project, Dr Tan Beng Kiang from NUS' Department of Architecture, said the effort involves knowledge transfer from islanders to a new generation of students. The students will be employing kampung-style construction methods and have engaged two Ubin villagers to teach them.

These techniques include interlocking timber joints instead of using nails and screws.

One challenge of the project was getting approval to build the kampung structure. Present-day building regulations were developed for modern building methods and materials.

Dr Tan said the team's pro bono professional engineer told the authorities that the risk to lives due to fire is low. It is also a standalone structure located in a rather rural part of Ubin.

But retaining rustic charm amid stringent building regulations presents a tension.

Dr Tan said: "If we are to preserve kampung life on Ubin, there is a need to have a different set of regulations to make it easier for the villagers to build and restore the houses themselves or with the help of volunteers. They cannot afford to hire professional architects, engineers and contractors."

Madam Lai and her late husband Choo Lai Huat used to be prawn farmers. But they changed trades after the authorities took back the pond they had been renting from the state.

The couple, who had seven children, then opened the drinks stall on the island's main strip.

Mr Choo and his son-in-law built the stall from scratch in 1995, with scrap and spare wood from around Pulau Ubin.

The new structure's design will closely replicate the original look, feel and layout of Ah Ma's Drink Stall.

Madam Lai told *The Straits Times*: "I am happy that (the students) are helping me. I believe they will do a good job."

Furniture, including tables built by the late Mr Choo and the Ah Ma's Drink Stall signboard which he painted, will be refurbished and reinstated at the new stall.

Madam Lai's daughter Ivy Choo, 55, who helps out at the stall, credits the stall's name to teenage day trippers who arranged to "meet at Ah Ma's drink stall", as Madam Lai was a familiar face.

"Ah ma" is the Hokkien term for "grandmother".

On retaining the signboard, Ms Choo said: "This way, her name and legacy can live on."



Madam Lai Huat So and her daughter Ivy Choo outside Ah Ma's Drink Stall, which will be rebuilt by NUS architecture undergraduates. The stall is set to be rebuilt according to the artist's impression (top right) of the new design by NUS architecture student and project leader Ethan Chung. The picture at bottom right shows Madam Lai and her granddaughter at work as the original drinks stall was being built in 1995. PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI, ETHAN CHUNG, IVY CHOO



SCAN TO WATCH
Ah Ma's Drink
Stall to be
rebuilt.



<http://str.sg/drinkstall>