

(From left) Ms Jiang Xue, Ms Denise Ho and Mr Ahmad Osman, then students at NUS' Department of Architecture, during field work at House 22E on Pulau Ubin. They are part of a team of architecture graduates, led by Assistant Professor Imran Tajudeen, who are piecing together ideas on how best to restore these structures. PHOTO: IMRAN TAJUDEEN



Five kampung homes in Ubin to be restored

Authorities engaging community on design and scope of works

Melody Zaccheus
Heritage and Community Correspondent

Pulau Ubin is home to 75 kampung houses and structures but only one building on the island is conserved – a colonial 1930s Tudor-style house on its eastern tip.

Now, effort is being ramped up to look into the restoration of Pulau Ubin's forgotten and neglected traditional kampung houses.

The National Parks Board (NParks) told *The Straits Times* on Friday that five vacant kampung houses have been identified for restoration and the authorities are "engaging the community on the design and scope of the restoration works".

They are Chinese kampung houses 63C and 425B, and Malay houses 6J, 22E and 846P. These houses are scattered across the island and will be restored for community use. The community can propose how these sites will be used.

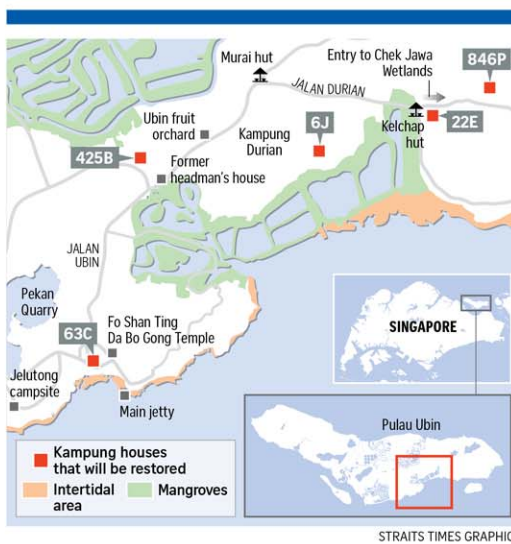
House 22E is one of four raised-floor or *panggung* Malay kampung houses being studied by a team from the National University of Singapore's Department of Architecture.

Since last November, the team has been documenting the traditional construction methods and characteristics of the occupied kampung houses of 456, 488A and 760D located within Ubin's Kampung Sungei Durian; as well as the vacant House 22E – the last structure in Kampung Surau.

Led by Assistant Professor Imran Tajudeen, the architecture graduates are in the midst of piecing together a proposal with recommendations on how best to restore these structures. They said it is the first time that Pulau Ubin's Malay kampung houses are being studied and documented.

They will submit a paper on their findings to the Ministry of National Development and NParks later this year.

Dr Adrian Loo, NParks' group director of conservation, said the project, which was initiated by NUS' Department of Architecture, "will provide a baseline reference for future restoration works" of



First built in the 1930s, House 63C near the island's jetty, was the home of Mr Tan Bak Tee and his family for 50 years. It is among the houses that will be restored. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

the kampung houses.

NParks previously identified House 63C for restoration in an announcement last July on a multi-year kampung house restoration effort. First built in the 1930s, House 63C near the island's jetty, was the home of Mr Tan Bak Tee and his family for 50 years.

The NUS team's project, which started out as work for an architecture module, focused on the structure and construction of the houses, and the materials and extent of restoration required. The team also mapped out the interior layouts of each of the four houses.

Dr Imran believes this work is urgent. He said the community, cultural and built heritage of the island has been neglected for decades since plans for Ubin have generally focused on the island operating as a recreational park and nature site.

Team member Lee Kah Hui, 22, a research assistant under Dr Imran, highlighted the urgent need to act to keep Singapore's last offshore kampung alive.

She noted that 83-year-old Mr Ahmad Kassim of House 488A is one of the last remaining Malay Ubin residents who remembers how to construct traditional vernacular kampung houses and is an expert on wood types and the island's trees.

She said: "Since no one is practising this form of building, knowledge is fading."

The team also recommends restoring all the island's homes "as soon as possible" since many of them are suffering from issues such as termite infestations.

Former resident Rukaiyah Kasah, 77, a retired clerical officer, who now lives on mainland Singapore, used to spend her weekends at Kampung Surau's House 22E with her family. She estimates it would cost about \$50,000 to restore the structure.

A chunk of the money would be used to source and purchase appropriate wood such as teak planks known as *papan jati* to replace the structure's damaged floor boards, as well as on hiring transport to ferry supplies to the island.

Kampung Surau residents were evicted in the 1990s, because of plans to redevelop the site into a resort although this did not materialise, noted the team.

Madam Rukaiyah hopes to spend her weekends there once again: "It is my wish for the house to be restored. It is irreplaceable."

The team added that it believes Pulau Ubin, which is designated as a reserve site on the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Masterplan, should eventually have specific settlement areas set aside as conservation zones – much like the more than 20 other places the URA has gazetted so far. These include historic districts such as Little India, the secondary settlement of Geylang, and Sentosa.

Project member Ahmad Osman, 25, now an architectural conservation consultant, said it is crucial that Singapore's last offshore kampung is provided with the right conditions to flourish.

Mr Ahmad said: "Ubin is home to authentic kampung structures. As a modern country, we have forgotten about our kampung past and younger Singaporeans know very little about how they were built and what the lifestyle was like. We cannot let kampung life on Pulau Ubin just fade away."

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Pulau Seking's last islanders were relocated in 1994 to make way for a landfill operation. ST PHOTO: FRANCIS ONG

Pulau Seking: Once a kampung island

Like a scene from a promotional video for an idyllic tropical paradise, men are strumming their guitars on blue wooden benches as palm trees tower over the merry-makers in the background.

Children bob in the water, swimming languidly in between kampung houses perched on sea-drenched stilts and their attached wooden boats.

The shots were actually taken on Pulau Seking, an island off Singapore's south coast, captured in an

old video called *The Last Island* Kampung: Pulau Seking on YouTube. Its last islanders were relocated in 1994 to make way for a landfill operation.

Some have bemoaned the loss of Pulau Seking's village life. The island is believed to have roots dating back beyond 1819 with cultural anthropologists saying its villagers were the descendants of the original Orang Selat who would have known Sir Stamford Raffles.

The size of about 10 football

fields, it was Singapore's second last offshore village with 44 kampung houses and no roads and cars.

The only offshore village today can be found on Pulau Ubin.

Although few traces of it are left today, island life formed a key part of the Singaporean identity, noted heritage blogger Jerome Lim, a naval architect, who shared his research with *The Straits Times*.

For instance, a census in 1980 indicated that nine islands were inhabited with a total population of

4,781 people – with the largest populations in Pulau Ubin and Pulau Tekong Besar.

Based on historical maps dating back to 1846, researchers from the National University of Singapore's Departments of Chinese Studies and Geography counted at least 220 kampungs across mainland Singapore and its isles.

Other interesting stories about island life abound, said Mr Lim.

For instance, although Singapore's three north-west islands were primarily uninhabited, one of them, Pulau Sarimbun, was once home to a lone bungalow. It was the retirement home of a Boer War veteran turned planter, tin miner and waterworks engineer – Mr W. A. Bates Goodall – from 1932 to 1941, said Mr Lim.

Over time, people living on Singapore's islands were evicted as the country's building drive kicked into full gear.

For example, Singapore's South-west islands, now the site of petrochemical industries, were home to kampungs such as Ayer Chawan and Ayer Merbau, which once had their own cemeteries. Mr Lim noted that they were redeveloped without doing any archaeological studies.

Meanwhile, islands such as Tekong, as well as Pulau Sudong, Pawai and Senang, are used by the military for training exercises and for live firing.

Melody Zaccheus

Islands and their royal connection

The fourth son of the 19th century ruler, Sultan Hussein Shah of the royal family of Kampong Glam, once held jurisdiction over Singapore's eight north-eastern islands.

One of them was Pulau Ubin. From the 1840s, the Sultan's son, Tengku Abdul Jalil, was the royal headman who administered the islands from Pulau Tekong Besar, according to research dug up by Dr Imran Tajudeen, an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore's Department of Architecture.

The other islands he was in charge of were Tekong Kechil, Ketam, Seranggong, Sajahat, Unum and Sanyongkong. Dr Imran learnt that Tengku Abdul Jalil's 11 children were born on Pulau Tekong Besar at Kampung Selabin starting from 1844. His descendants continued running these islands until Singapore's independence in 1965.

Dr Imran decided to dig up more about the islands' history after interviewing the family of Pulau Ubin's House 22E – the last home standing in Kampung Surau.

His work also sheds new light on Kampung Surau's origins, which are often misstated in books, blogs

and other websites. Previously thought to have been founded by Ubin pioneer Endut Senin – who has a road named after him on the island – Dr Imran said an oral history archive interview says otherwise.

The kampung was most likely founded by Mr Endut's son – Mr Sulong Endut. Dr Imran said: "The oral history interview was conducted in 1988 with a former headman of the kampung and a descendant of the father-and-son pair. It clarifies the kampung's origins."

Dr Imran estimates that Mr Endut would have arrived on Pulau Ubin in the 1850s or 1860s while his son would have established Kampung Surau around the 1880s. He said: "This means Kampung Surau is a second-generation settlement."

Dr Imran said it is likely that Mr Endut started another settlement, farm or plantation near Pulau Ubin's Sungei Jelutong where the road Jalan Endut Senin lies today.

He noted that both father and son would have had to seek the permission of the royals to found their settlements.

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