

Mt Pleasant project set to show the way to redevelop other sites

Lessons learnt from study will guide heritage impact assessment framework in the works

Ng Keng Gene

Why it matters

Residents of the upcoming Mount Pleasant estate may one day sip coffee on the veranda of a century-old colonial bungalow or – if needed – make a police report in a building that first hosted police functions in the late 1920s.

Following a first-of-its-kind heritage study, it was announced on Tuesday that six buildings around the Old Police Academy will be earmarked for conservation, with four within a new 33ha, 5,000-unit public housing estate.

One building – the Senior Police Officers' Mess – will continue to be used as a police clubhouse, while five will be repurposed for commercial or community uses.

The study is the first in-depth heritage study of its scale commissioned by the authorities.

Heritage groups were consulted for the project. National Development Minister Desmond Lee said lessons learnt from the study will guide future studies and – more significantly – a heritage impact assessment (HIA) framework that is in the works.

For years, non-governmental organisations here have called for the formal adoption of environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and HIAs, so that the effects of development projects on natural and built heritage can be considered upstream.

Although neither are legally mandated, full reports of EIAs for public sector projects have been published for feedback regularly, but this has not been the case for HIAs.

However, the Government has committed to developing an HIA framework, and published the Old Police Academy study report.

This is timely, as the next phase of Singapore's urban planning journey will be strategically different, said Mr Ho Weng Hin, co-founder of conservation specialist consultancy Studio Lapis. "With climate change and the popularity of green spaces, developing forested areas is less feasible, and more brown-field sites like the former Police Academy will be selected for redevelopment," he said.

This also signals that heritage-based decisions are becoming



The Old Police Academy in Mount Pleasant. Following a first-of-its-kind heritage study, it was announced that six buildings around the Old Police Academy will be earmarked for conservation, with four within a new 33ha, 5,000-unit public housing estate. ST PHOTOS: ONG WEE JIN

more mainstream and increasingly being made upstream, said Mr Ho.

Associate Professor Yeo Kang Shua of the Singapore University

of Technology and Design said HIAs allow the significance of historic sites to be studied and retained. For instance, a single barrack block may not have been significant, but it could contribute to the police academy's narrative when studied alongside other structures.

HIAs also make planning a more transparent and inclusive process, said the architectural historian. "While agencies may have internally assessed what to keep in the past, conducting HIAs means the public can see that the value of her-

itage has been presented and argued to the decision makers."

What lies ahead

The HIA framework should clearly spell out when and how studies are done. The Old Police Academy study and outcome signals progress, but its timing could have been improved.

The Land Transport Authority began work on Mount Pleasant MRT station within the former academy's compound in early 2015. By August 2018 when the her-

itage study started, the station's location had been fixed and six buildings and ancillary structures were already demolished, following an internal assessment by the URA.

If called early enough, future HIAs could guide the positioning of new infrastructure.

The URA has said a detailed, large-scale study will be conducted for the former Turf Club in Bukit Timah, which spans about 140ha and is zoned for housing.

The authorities can also look beyond individual sites, and consider mapping the entire country's natural and built heritage, said Associate Professor Johannes Widodo of the National University of Singapore's Department of Architecture. Such an approach – known internationally as the historic urban landscape – will consider multiple historical significance at several scales, from individual buildings to the neighbourhood and then the entire city-state.

Specific EIAs and HIAs can then be called for sites deemed significant and vulnerable, even if no specific redevelopment plans are in the pipeline. After all, conservation is the management of change, and future change guided by these studies will be more meaningful, said Prof Widodo.

kenggene@sph.com.sg