

# See restoration in progress at 1880s heritage building

Neil Road townhouse offers chance to learn about conservation; public visits from 2023

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From early 2023, the public can observe restoration work up close in a conserved townhouse and learn about how conservators bring back the lustre of Singapore's heritage buildings.

The restoration of 141 Neil Road, an 1880s house in the Blair Plain conservation area, will also provide students and researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) with learning and research opportunities.

On Monday, the university's Department of Architecture, which comes under the NUS College of Design and Engineering, opened the Architectural Conservation Laboratory (ArClab), an educational centre that will be housed in the conserved building.

The building was donated to NUS by the Portabella family, along with a gift of \$2 million to support repair and conservation works, which will take place over five years and be completed in 2027.

A fourth-generation member of the family, Mr Ricardo Jr Portabella, said his family has been invest-

ing in properties in Singapore since 2008, and currently has 13 shophouses in their portfolio.

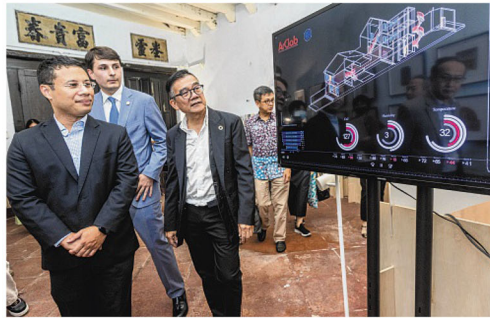
Mr Portabella, 25, said his family acquired the Neil Road townhouse in March 2020 with the intention of donating it towards research that would improve local knowledge and expertise in maintaining and conserving shophouses.

NUS said that by using the conserved townhouse as a laboratory, ArClab will contribute towards building professional capacity in the management of historical resources, and promoting historical and environmental studies.

Established in January, ArClab aims to increase local training capabilities and research in building conservation, apply technology in conservation works, and promote building retrofits that will make them carbon and energy neutral.

Speaking at the laboratory's opening on Monday, National Development Minister Desmond Lee noted that Singapore has for many years learnt from global best practices and relied on skilled foreigners for restoration expertise.

"Moving forward, we would like to push ourselves further and ele-



From left: National Development Minister Desmond Lee, Mr Ricardo Jr Portabella and Prof Ho Puay Peng, who heads the NUS Department of Architecture, at 141 Neil Road. The building was donated to NUS by the Portabella family.



NUS opened the Architectural Conservation Laboratory, an educational centre that will be housed in the building, on Monday. Conservation works at the building will take place over five years. PHOTOS: LIANHE ZAOBAO

vate the conservation landscape in Singapore," he said, adding that one way is to further develop the skill sets of local built heritage professionals.

"After all, it is the local architects, designers, engineers and members of the built environment sector who understand well Singapore's unique values and history, and – working together with our friends and counterparts from around the world – are able to translate these into our conservation efforts."

Through the restoration of 141 Neil Road, NUS will facilitate graduate and postgraduate studies of built heritage, and provide advanced courses for built heritage professionals.

Mr Lee said he hopes ArClab will also kick-start more conversations on the future of the built and cultural heritage in Singapore, and foster appreciation for the nation's built heritage among the public and potentially inspire future leaders in this area.

NUS said 141 Neil Road is among the oldest buildings in Neil Road, having been built as part of the Everton estate in the 1880s. It occupies a land area of about 296 sq m and has a gross floor area of 447 sq m over two floors and an attic.

Professor Ho Puay Peng, who heads the NUS Department of Architecture, said that besides technical conservation research, research into the house could also yield new understandings about social patterns in Singapore.

"We talk about kampung spirit, but we never talk about shophouse spirit or townhouse spirit," said Prof Ho, adding that there is scope for research on the relationships within shophouse communities, which began in the mid-1800s.

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