

The 1970s under siege in Singapore

Preservationists and architects struggle to save iconic residential buildings

By Jennifer Chen

SINGAPORE

Ed Poole, an American architect living in Singapore, has some of the city's most enviable views. On a clear day, he can stand on the terrace of his 37th-floor penthouse and gaze across the tiny, tropical city-state to neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia.

Inside, the Chicago native also has envy-inducing floor space: nearly 372 square meters, or more than 4,000 square feet, spread over three levels.

For Poole, 47, the value of his penthouse does not lie just in its views, floor space, five-meter-high ceilings or prime location, but also in the building itself: Pearl Bank Apartments.

Constructed in the late 1970s, Pearl Bank was Singapore's tallest residential building in its day and was hailed as a pioneer in high-rise living, with interlocking, split-level units and a distinctive, circular shape. Today, although air-conditioners and mismatched windows mar its once-gleaming, smooth facade, it continues to

And Pearl Bank Apartments is not the only modern icon that is under serious threat in Singapore, which actually has one of Asia's best track records for preservation.

Since 1999, a sale can go through if it is approved by 90 percent of the owners in a building less than 10 years old and by 80 percent in a building that is older. The market for these sales — known as collective or en bloc sales — has been exploding since 2005 thanks to the robust economy. According to the Jones Lang LaSalle real estate agency, the total value of the collective sales in Singapore last year skyrocketed to 7.75 billion dollars, compared with 161 million in 2002. As of early May, the total value for 2007 already was nearly 6.4 billion dollars.

At first, nobody seemed to object to what developers and real estate agents say solves the problem of urban decay and pressure for space in Singapore, which totals only 693 square kilometers, or 268 square miles. Speculators and residents have enjoyed enormous windfalls, sometimes making returns of more than 80 percent, according to real estate agents.

In recent months, though, concerns have emerged. People have reportedly lost their homes in sales that they did not know about or have been inadequately compensated because the cost of renovations and mortgage interest were not factored into the sale price. Maintenance and renovations have slipped in some buildings because owners are reluctant to invest in something that might be demolished. Neighbor has turned against neighbor because of differences over sales.

Meanwhile, with years to go before some new residential complexes are finished, real estate values in central Singapore have soared by as much as 100 percent, surprising some owners who, once they sell, find they cannot afford to buy again in the same neighborhood.

There is the question of whether some buildings — admired or not — should be preserved.

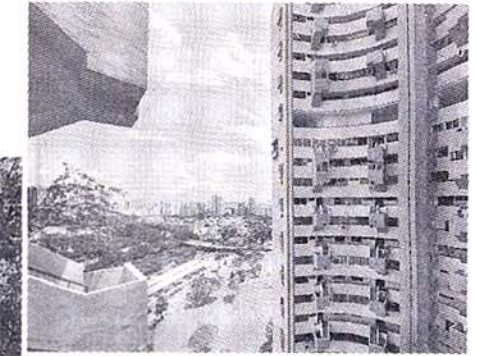
"It doesn't apply to every building because there were a lot of not-very-nice buildings that were built in the 1970s," said Dinesh Naidu, 32, a local architect and writer who is working on a book about modern architecture in Singapore. "Solving the rights of the minority who don't want to sell is one issue. But over and above that, we should have a sense of buildings that need to be protected."

Cities in Europe and the United States have been grappling with similar questions since the 1980s. Buildings constructed during the mid- to late-20th century are often called eyesores, structures that never should have been built. But enthusiasts of the style argue that noteworthy examples need to be saved not only for their aesthetic and architectural merit, but also for their historical and political significance.

In recent years, they have been gaining



Photographs by Jonathan Drake for the International Herald Tribune



A residents' vote is looming on the sale of Pearl Bank Apartments, left. If it is approved, the late-'70s building, a pioneer in high-rise living, almost certainly will be razed. Above, a view from a balcony of Pearl Gate, which is in a prime location.



Golden Mile, designed by one of Singapore's most noted architects, William Lim, has been hailed as a landmark. So far it has been spared.

be an iconic residential building, according to local architects and preservationists.

"When you look back at the 1970s, this was a very daring architectural solution," said Poole, who bought his apartment in 2000 for slightly less than a million Singapore dollars, or \$656,000, and has spent nearly 400,000 dollars on renovations.

But come July 1, Poole may be in danger of losing his home. That is the deadline for fellow residents who are trying to put the 272-unit building up for sale to acquire the needed votes.

Although he could make a capital gain of more than a million Singapore dollars by agreeing to the sale, Poole is adamantly against it because the building would almost certainly be razed and Singapore would lose a piece of its heritage.

Pearl Bank "represents the transition from a colonial past to a modern future," he said.

ground, said Dennis Sharp, a London-based architect who heads the British branch of Docomomo, a worldwide movement to save modern buildings.

In East Asia, the embrace of the new usually drowns out laments for the past. But Singapore may be an exception. A prosperous, multicultural island of four million people, Singapore has some of the most progressive policies on historic preservation in Asia.

After destroying swaths of British colonial buildings and 19th-century Chinese merchants' shophouses to make room for development, the government realized in the 1980s that the city was losing its character. In response, it began a conservation program under its powerful urban planning agency that saved historic neighborhoods like Chinatown, Little India and the Malay enclave of Kampong Glam.

So far, more than 6,500 buildings have been protected. Most of those buildings were constructed before World War II, but state urban planners say the list does include some modern buildings and that others are being considered for addition. Architects and preservationists, however, say most of those buildings are state-owned, and they urge quick action because of the relentless pace of collective sales.

Demolishing Pearl Bank and its like would destroy traces of Singapore's history, said William

Lim, one of the country's most famous architects. Lim, 74, designed two buildings that have been hailed as landmarks but could go on the block in the future: Golden Mile and People Park's Complex, both mixed-use buildings.

"If you don't have this record, it means you have a totally clean slate," he said. "All that would be left will be the colonial period, the vernacular houses built before the war, and what is always new and what can always be destroyed."

Architects and preservationists acknowledge that they face an uphill battle ahead, and the biggest challenge is changing attitudes. "Modern architecture is everywhere. It doesn't feel rare or exotic, so no one winces when something is demolished," said Naidu, who lives in an 80-square-meter renovated unit in Golden Mile that he purchased for 300,000 dollars in late 2005.

Tai Lee Siang, 42, president of the Singapore Institute of Architects, goes a step further. Too few people in Singapore appreciate any kind of architecture, he said. Instead, they regard houses and other buildings as commodities or consumer goods that need to be exchanged every few years, like cars.



The People's Park Complex towering over a street in Chinatown. The neighborhood has been preserved.

"The larger issue is not keeping or losing certain landmarks," he said. "The bigger issue is the question: Why are people not endearing themselves to their environment?"

Tai, who recently advocated a reconsideration of preservation policies to protect buildings like Golden Mile, also argued that changing people's attitudes about certain buildings would increase their value. For example, after the government moved to preserve shophouses in the city's Chinatown area and encouraged architects and developers to renovate them, prices soared.

But in the case of Pearl Bank, the lure of immediate profits may prove too strong. Already, about 72 percent of the people who own units in the building have agreed to sell, said Patrick Tan, 49, who is chairman of the residents' committee organizing the sale. The building has a minimum price of 400 million dollars, so owners would make an average 90 percent return, he said.

Asked whether the building's value would rise if it were declared a landmark, Tan replied: "We don't need this kind of building. And we can't keep coming back to antiques — that's not progress."

Poole, however, is not giving up. If the vote goes in the sellers' favor July 1, he and others intend to take their case to the government, which can overturn a sale under certain conditions. And since late last year, he has talked with hundreds of people — architects, design aficionados and others — to draw attention to the building's plight.

"I have met so many people who say, 'Oh, I wish there were apartments I could get in Pearl Bank; the spaces are fantastic,'" Poole said. "So many people."