



Voices & Vision – Art Thought Leadership Symposium

Voices and Vision is a 2-day art thought leadership programme, on the occasion of **Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60**, that creates a space for meaningful exchange and deeper engagement with real-world issues. Join us in shaping the dialogue on our shared past, present, and future.

Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60 and Voices and Vision are presented by The Culture Story, produced by Family Office For Art.

Changing Skylines: Evolving Practices in Urban Planning and Cultural Stewardship

27 July 2025

Moderator:

- Ho Weng Hin | Founding Partner of Studio Lapis, Architectural Conservation Specialist

Speakers:

- Darren Soh | Artist, Researcher
- Prof. Ho Puay Peng | Professor and former Head of Department, Department of Architecture, College of Design and Engineering, NUS
- Karen Tan | Founder of Pocket Projects and Projector

Introduction

Moderator Ho Weng Hin opened the discussion by compressing decades of Singapore's conservation history into a brisk narrative. From the colonial-era photographs of Marjorie Doggett and Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill, to the early advice of UN planners in the 1960s, Singapore's built environment was once dismissed as slums and squatters. Yet by the 1980s, citizen groups, academics, and architects began advocating for heritage as cultural capital, publishing landmark works such as *Pastel Portraits: Pastel Portraits: Singapore's Architectural Heritage* by Gretchen Liu. By 1989, conservation had been institutionalised with whole districts of shophouses declared worth preserving.

Ho mapped key turning points since then: the demolition of the old National Library in 2004, which galvanised civil society; the debates around Bukit Brown Cemetery and Dakota Crescent, which pushed the boundaries of what counted as heritage; and the eventual conservation of modernist icons like Golden Mile Complex. Each episode revealed the tension between urban renewal, public sentiment, and state planning. Against this backdrop, the panel explored what conservation means today—not only for architecture, but also for memory, identity, and community.



Whose Heritage?

Prof. Ho reflected on returning to Singapore after decades of conservation work in Hong Kong. Initially, he admitted, he felt despair: Darren Soh's photographs of demolished buildings seemed to embody a relentless cycle of loss. Yet he also noted glimmers of hope—signs that Singapore's conservation ethos was shifting.

In earlier decades, he observed, conservation was often reduced to façadism: preserving the street-facing shell while gutting interiors to maximise profit. This reflected an urban design mindset that prioritised visual coherence over lived experience. Encouragingly, Prof. Ho now sees greater emphasis on preserving interiors, typologies, and cultural uses, particularly in districts like Kampong Glam. Still, he posed a fundamental question: "Whose heritage are we preserving? For whom, and for what purpose?" Heritage, he argued, cannot be reduced to monuments or façades.

"Whose heritage are we preserving—for whom, and for what purpose?" — Prof. Ho Puay Peng

Its purpose is to transmit meaning across generations, anchoring communities in continuity even as skylines evolve. For Prof. Ho, conservation must be both cultural and social: retaining stories, practices, and values, not just bricks and mortar.

Adaptive Reuse and Creative Survival

Entrepreneur Karen Tan offered the perspective of a cultural practitioner embedded in a heritage building. She co-founded The Projector, Singapore's only independent cinema, previously housed in the Golden Mile Tower's 1970s theatre. For her, the cinema's retro patina and lingering grime were not liabilities but assets—creating a space that contrasted with Singapore's polished urban fabric and gave audiences the experience of stepping back in time.

Yet the realities of survival are harsh. Older buildings often suffer from lease decay, which lowers rents enough to allow creative businesses or migrant communities to thrive. But declining rents also signal deferred maintenance, which accelerates dilapidation and encourages owners to sell en-bloc. For tenants like The Projector, this creates perpetual uncertainty: "You don't know if the building's going to go in six months, a year, or two years."

"You're not just conserving a building—you're writing another chapter onto what has been." — Karen Tan

Karen argued that adaptive reuse is the key to relevance. Heritage must not only be conserved but also made useful—rewoven into contemporary life through programming, design, and community activation. Without this, the opportunity cost of retaining ageing buildings in a city of soaring land values becomes too high. She called for policy interventions to support long-term leases and creative tenancies, noting that the free market alone cannot safeguard heritage.



Obituaries for Lost Buildings

Photographer Darren Soh underscored the emotional stakes of conservation with a slideshow of eighty “obituaries”—images of demolished buildings. He deliberately omitted captions and dates, forcing viewers to confront the scale of erasure. “We are losing buildings all the time,” he said, “and once they are gone, they vanish not just from the landscape but from collective memory.”

He illustrated this with the case of the old National Library on Stamford Road. For those who never experienced the building, it exists only in stories. This amnesia, he warned, erodes cultural continuity.

Soh also highlighted the unevenness of conservation. Large government buildings, such as the Singapore Conference Hall, have been saved, while privately owned modernist icons like Pearl Bank Apartments and Shenton House continue to be demolished. In a land-scarce city, the economics of redevelopment exert immense pressure. Still, he argued, Singapore cannot afford to lose what little remains: “Whatever we have left today, we should try to save, because most of it is already gone.”

Economics, Policy, and the Paradox of Decline

A central theme of the discussion was the paradox of lease decay. As 99-year leases age, buildings lose market value, lowering rents enough for marginal communities—migrant workers, small traders, creative businesses—to occupy them. Yet this very decline accelerates calls for redevelopment. The panelists debated whether government intervention is needed to break this cycle, through incentives, long-term leases, or conservation-linked planning rules.

Examples were raised of recent URA policies requiring developers to integrate conserved structures into new projects, such as Avenue South Residence’s integration of kampong-style housing blocks. While such policies show promise, the panelists questioned whether they have sufficiently addressed programming needs and affordability for communities.

Third Space and Heritage Architecture

Audience questions deepened the debate. One raised the controversy over relocating libraries into malls, citing Geylang East Public Library. Panelists noted official reasons—declining use, high costs—echo redevelopment trends, but urged community action, stressing the library’s charm and role as a “breathing space.” Karen Tan suggested hybrid programming or shared uses to sustain such sites. Another question highlighted Malay vernacular houses, now nearly extinct on the mainland. Prof. Ho stressed their rarity and identity value, though timber’s fragility and cost deter agencies. These hybridised forms, he argued, merit preservation. The challenge lies in overcoming technical and financial concerns through advocacy and cross-agency dialogue.



For Whom Do We Conserve?

Throughout the discussion, the question “for whom” resurfaced. Is heritage preserved for tourists, as in the case of Chinatown under the Singapore Tourism Board? For future generations, as educational touchstones? Or for present communities who inhabit and animate these spaces?

“Once a building is lost, a whole generation grows up with no memory of it—and therefore no sense of loss.” — Darren Soh

Karen Tan emphasised that adaptive reuse must serve living communities, not just nostalgia. Darren Soh argued that conservation safeguards structures so that future generations have something tangible to inherit. Prof. Ho reminded the audience that heritage is ultimately about transmission—ensuring that what is meaningful in one generation is passed to the next.

Conclusion: Managing Change, Sustaining Memory

In closing, Ho Weng Hin reflected on conservation’s place in Singapore’s planning ethos. In the URA Master Plan, heritage is just one circle among housing, infrastructure, and green spaces. Yet, he argued, it should be seen not as an obstacle but as a pillar of sustainable urbanism. The panelists agreed: conservation is not about resisting change but managing it sensitively. Buildings can be adapted and reprogrammed so long as they remain anchors of memory and identity. Darren Soh noted that without structures, memory lacks roots; Karen Tan stressed creative reuse; Prof. Ho added that heritage is about transmitting meaning across generations. In a city of flux, they concluded, conservation is essential to keep stories alive.

Alternative Recap

This panel traced the evolution of Singapore’s conservation movement and examined the tensions between urban renewal, heritage preservation, and community life. Moderator Ho Weng Hin set the stage with a historical overview: from early colonial documentarians and tentative UN planning studies in the 1960s, to grassroots efforts in the 1980s that reframed shophouses as cultural assets rather than slums. Landmark debates such as the loss of the old National Library and Bukit Brown Cemetery marked turning points, galvanising civil society and gradually expanding the state’s conservation agenda to include post-war and modernist buildings.



Prof. Ho Puay Peng reflected on his return from Hong Kong after decades in conservation practice. He observed shifting priorities—Singapore once prioritised façades, treating conservation as urban design; now, interiors and cultural integrity are valued. He posed the fundamental question: “Whose heritage are we preserving, for whom, and for what purpose?” Heritage, he argued, must transmit meaning, not merely retain structures.

Karen Tan spoke from her experience establishing The Projector cinema in the Golden Mile Tower. For her, adaptive reuse is key: heritage buildings must remain useful and relevant to survive in Singapore’s high-rent environment. Short leases and en-bloc threats pose challenges, yet she argued that the “grime and patina” of such buildings create the very conditions to nurture creative communities and offer contrast to sterile environments.

Photographer Darren Soh presented a slideshow of eighty “obituaries”—images of demolished buildings—underscoring a sense of national amnesia around lost structures. Once gone, he warned, buildings vanish from both landscape and memory. His documentation makes visible what has been erased: from the National Library on Stamford Road to modernist towers along Shenton Way. For Soh, safeguarding remaining structures is critical; without them, future generations inherit nothing.

Discussion turned to lease decay: lower rents attract migrants and creatives but deter upkeep. Audience members raised concerns about libraries moved into malls and the neglect of Malay vernacular houses, calling for broader definitions of heritage that include social value and intangible memory.

The panelists agreed that stewardship goes beyond architecture. It requires adaptive reuse, community mobilisation, and inter-agency cooperation. Process matters as much as outcome: advocacy, engagement, and dialogue shape decisions and identity. As Ho concluded, conservation is less about resisting change than managing it sensitively—ensuring that while skylines evolve, memories endure.

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