

**EMBARGOED TILL 6 PM, 3 OCTOBER 2013**

**SPEECH BY MR TAN CHUAN-JIN, ACTING MINISTER FOR MANPOWER,  
AT THE URA ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AWARDS 2013  
PRESENTATION CEREMONY AT HONG SAN SEE TEMPLE,  
THURSDAY, 3 OCTOBER 2013, 4.35PM**

Dr Chia Shi-Lu, Member of Parliament for Tanjong Pagar GRC

Er Dr Lee Bee Wah, Member of Parliament for Nee Soon GRC

Mr Ng Lang, CEO of URA

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Good afternoon. It is good to be back at the Architectural Heritage Awards 2013 presentation ceremony. Standing in the Singapore Lam Ann Association Hall, next to the historic Hong San See Temple where Hokkiens from Southern Fujian have met and worshipped since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is reason to give me pause. As then-Deputy Prime Minister S. Rajaratnam once said: "A nation must have a memory to give it a sense of cohesion, continuity and identity. The longer the past, the greater the awareness of a nation's

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2. Indeed, places like these help to mould Singapore's identity as a nation. It is my honour to join you this afternoon to celebrate these latest reflections of our shared history, and the people behind them.

**Conservation for all, by all**

3. I am told that this year's submissions for the Awards were of a particularly high standard. It is evident that the property owners, architects and contractors take pride in their properties and work. They know they are preserving buildings not just for themselves, but also for future generations.

4. Likewise, communities can be champions in conservation efforts too. An example is our host this year. Hong San See Temple was the first building in Singapore to win the Award of Excellence in the annual UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation. What you see today is a result of the temple trustees' drive to painstakingly restore the temple. At the time, I was interested to read in the newspapers of how a dispute over the original colour of the roof tiles was settled when the trustees consulted century-old record books which contained detailed building records. This then encouraged other Chinese organisations to locate more surviving historical documents. The community was also actively involved in selling old bricks to raise funds.

National Archives of Singapore

5. The result is a spectacular example of Singapore-style Minnan architecture, preserved and opened for public enjoyment and education. In all, I think we can say that the restoration of the temple shows how communities can be crucial drivers of conservation.

6. It is not just communities that play a part. Homeowners and residents also act as custodians of the conserved properties entrusted to their care. They are the visionaries who ensure the buildings' characters are upheld,

even as they are adapted to meet modern needs. I was told that more young people are choosing to set up businesses in shophouses. I was pleasantly surprised and asked if they found the space too small or constrained. Apparently not – they find it suits their 24-hour lifestyle, where they can live, work and play in the same space. We can see that more and more individuals are recognising and cherishing the unique characteristics of older buildings, seeing in them possibilities rather than restrictions.

7. Seeing possibilities was exactly the challenge posed to architects of one of today's winners – the Lorong 24A Shophouse Series. Eight identical shophouses were given to eight local architects for them to re-imagine as they saw fit. The interpretations are remarkably respectful yet ingenious. The row of shophouses has also brought a new buzz to the *lorong* as they are open for tours between tenancies. Having new families living in an old street has also helped to boost the sense of a live-in community. Conservation is never just for one person's advantage – when done well, its benefits ripple to the surrounding community and beyond.

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### **Working with what we have**

8. In a rapidly-developing Singapore, conservation stands out as it is not about building more, but learning to appreciate what we already have. Over 7,000 buildings have been conserved since 1989, but not many of us are aware of the significance of buildings we walk or drive past every day.

9. I am heartened to hear of two new initiatives that the URA is rolling out. The first initiative is the installation of mini-storyboards next to the familiar AHA plaque that winners display on their properties. Visitors and passers-by will not only see that the properties are award-winners, but also be able to read about the buildings' stories. In this way, conservation can be more than a label, with buildings becoming part of our living history and present understanding.

10. The second initiative is a new online portal, "My Conservation Portal", that will provide a one-stop destination for professionals and members of the public on conservation matters and properties. The portal allows the user to type in the address of a conserved building he is interested in, and instantly find out more about its history, background and the restoration guidelines. It is also a platform for users to contribute their stories about the buildings. With the public's collaboration, the portal can become a rich resource on Singapore's built heritage for everyone to tap on.

Nat 11. I am also encouraged to hear that young people are coming onboard to document our built heritage. For the first time, students from the School of The Arts and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts have made short films on last year's AHA winners. Students from NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information will be doing the same for this year's winners. These short film projects will bring fresh perspectives on these heritage gems, and reveal their meaning and value to a wider community. ore

### **Identifying our heritage touchstones**

12. Because conservation helps shape our collective identity, it is ideal for the government's efforts to be complemented with constructive suggestions and contributions from the community.

13. Today, I am glad to announce that three buildings in Queenstown will be conserved as part of the upcoming Master Plan, namely the Queenstown Public Library, former Commonwealth Avenue Wet Market and Alexandra Hospital. They are also three of the various buildings in Queenstown that a community group – My Community – recently proposed to the URA for conservation. These three buildings add on to the other three buildings – Princess House, the Church of the Blessed Sacrament and Anchor Brewery – that we have already conserved in Queenstown.

14. The Queenstown Library is Singapore's first branch library and is well-used by many of the area's residents. Its conservation will ensure its longevity as a beloved community touchstone and gathering place. It is an example of

Nat how we have consciously sought to develop a sense of community through building community institutions whenever we build new towns. ore

15. Similarly, the former Commonwealth Avenue Wet Market is well-known to residents and visitors to Queenstown. It is also the only remaining market built by the Singapore Improvement Trust. The market remains a marker of important changes – a reminder of when itinerant hawkers were first housed

in food centres serving the suburban public housing estates. This drastically improved sanitary conditions and met the needs of the growing population.

16. Lastly, Alexandra Hospital has been a stage to significant scenes from Singapore's history. At various times, it served the medical needs of the British Armed Forces, was overrun by Japanese troops, and witnessed the first successful limb re-attachment in Southeast Asia. To this day, it remains a landmark at the junction of Ayer Rajah Expressway and Alexandra Road.

17. All three buildings are important representations of what conservation can do to reinforce a community's identity and preserve its "flavour" for past, present and future residents. We look forward to community groups, such as 'My Community', carrying out programmes to help residents and visitors enjoy, use, understand and cherish the conserved heritage buildings in Queenstown and other parts of Singapore.

18. This afternoon, we are here to pay tribute to five remarkable examples of quality restoration, and the passionate communities and individuals who made them happen. The winning projects are: (i) a meticulously restored century-old temple – the Hong San See Temple; (ii) two boldly re-claimed shophouses that effectively preserve the heritage streetscape along North Canal Road; (iii) a stately colonial bungalow re-imagined as a multi-generational family home along Chatsworth Park; (iv) a Joo Chiat neighbourhood bookstore converted into an unconventional residence; and (v) a series of Geylang shophouses unique in their interpretations of heritage

spaces. This brings the total number of projects that have been given the Architectural Heritage Awards since 1995 to 117.

19. Please join me in congratulating this year's award winners. On behalf of the URA, I would like to thank the owners, developers, professionals and contractors of these outstanding projects. Your passion and dedication have produced long-lasting results that are of the highest standards and relevancy to the conservation movement and to the community.

### **Conclusion**

20. Conservation is important in reflecting our growth, social history and memories as a nation. As such, it is rarely a cut-and-dried process. We require your continued support, as we work together to build a consensus on the legacy we want to create through the conservation of our built heritage. Great strides have been made in this area over the years. May we press on to seek creative solutions and common understanding to effectively bring our past into the present.

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21. Thank you.