SPEECH BY BG (RES) GEORGE YEO,
MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS AND
SECOND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
AT THE OPENING OF ONE-TWO-SIX CAIRNHILL ARTS CENTRE
AT 126, CAIRNHILL ROAD ON SATURDAY, 24 APRIL 1993 AT 11.00 AM

The re-opening of 126 Cairnhill as a residence for the arts adds another gem to our cultural crown. For old students of Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) who studied here, the restoration of the Grand Old Lady must mean a lot. I am told that a number of old boys are present today including one who graduated from here in 1939. Conservation is important to the life of a city because we need physical landmarks to find our links to the past. One can be away from Singapore for 20 years, come back to a city almost completely rebuilt and yet be comforted that the old Padang, the old War Memorial, the old Raffles Hotel, the old cathedrals, the old MPH and the old Cathay building are all still there.

Conserving old structures is only half the problem. The other half is bringing them back to life again. It is rarely possible to resurrect the old life in these buildings. Take old school buildings like St Joseph Institution (SJI), Tao Nan, the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) chapel and 126 Cairnhill. It is not possible to bring students back because the population has been largely decanted out to the suburbs. Or the example of the Raffles Hotel: the criticism that after restoration, it has lost its old run-down charm. It is often not possible to keep old buildings in good repair without a new use or a new economic basis.

One new use which the Ministry of Information and The Arts (MITA) supports is arts housing. It is a good way of breathing new life into old structures. The aesthetics and the activities then enhance each other in a mutually reinforcing way.

We need a close partnership of the arts community, the public and the Government. The Government can provide a helping hand, like the way the National Arts Council (NAC) has provided funding for the restoration of 126 Cairnhill, but the Government alone cannot make the project a success. We also need an arts community that is driven to create and excel, and a public that applauds the performance and helps pay for it.

Funding is a problem. Funding has always been a problem. That is the history of the arts. For an individual or a group to succeed, we need talent, we need guts and we need breaks. Patrons are critical because ticket sales for high quality performances are never enough. Throughout history, the arts needed the patronage of kings and princes, of popes and cardinals, and of bankers and merchants. The modern equivalents are corporations, foundations and high
net-worth individuals. Artists need patrons to give them the breaks. That is a reality we have to work with.

Without Dr Goh Keng Swee, there will be no Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) today. Without SIA, LaSalle will be in financial difficulty. Corporate support is often crucial. It made a difference to the Substation that Guinness stepped in with a million dollars. It will make a great difference to Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) if it becomes associated with National Technological University (NTU).

I would therefore encourage corporations, foundations and high net-worth individuals in Singapore to give special patronage to those artists who show particular promise. It may be easier to do this together with MITA and the NAC. For example, MITA is working with Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) on new arts residences at Robertson Quay, Waterloo Street and Prinsep Street. Interested corporations, foundations and high net-worth individuals can help the NAC give deserving arts groups a leg up at these new premises. It will be better still if the support is publicly acknowledged like the way LaSalle has been renamed the LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts. Over the next few months the NAC will release details of these new premises and invite arts groups and potential sponsors to propose ideas.

We have made good progress in the arts over the last ten years. We should keep up the momentum. As you know, we are working full-steam on the Singapore Arts Centre at Marina Bay. We intend to complete the Centre in time to usher in the new millennium. Getting the physical facilities ready will not be as difficult as filling the halls with performances and audiences. But we will get there if we work at it. Then on the evening of 31 December 1999 when the lights are turned on, the Centre will be filled with life and music.

The opening of 126 Cairnhill today should be one of many rehearsals for that coming historic event.
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