Adding value without demolition: rebuilding
Regenerating Singapore’s modernist icons

Born of a highly experimental period in Singapore’s architectural, urban and political history, Brutalist icons such as Pearl Bank, Golden Mile Complex and Pearl Bank Complex can be creatively conserved and rehabilitated — in ways that benefit all stakeholders — owners, developers, government and society-at-large, by HO WENG HIN and CHAI TZONG KEONG

SINGAPORE’s modernist megascapes show heroic scale and mauso-
lem-like form, yet their architecture is painfully apparent in the actual and at
played-out narratives of Bank Apartment,
People’s Park Complex and Golden Mile Complex. These were all built during the earliest pieces of Singapore’s modernist creative Programme, an important mechanism be
hind Singapore’s uniquely successful urban renewal. People’s Park Complex and Golden Mile Complex were sold in 1967, while Pearl Bank Apartments were sold in 1970. Others followed. Devoted
ce for planners and architects at the time as a bold, new route of City living. Yet 50 years on, we are looking at the likely demise and permanent eras of these modernist landmarks from Singapore’s built environment.

Reports of the death of Southeast Asian cities, there have been public debates for and against the tearing down of these various issues that warrant a detailed examination.

Then: Avant-garde living in a super-high rise

Witty, fun, flippant, designed in an excellent location. More that we, for you must have gained the wrong crossing belt. And at prices you can afford! (Pearl Bank sales brochure).

At the centre of the storm is the Pearl Bank Apartments, a mid-rise structure and a wake of a substantial and widely recognised urban landmark phase shifting. Pearl Bank apartments in 1973, this visionary project achieved se-

enormous social, political and urban renewal development. The move to create a cohesive and well-designed densely populated apartment blocks and their complexes. Tiong Tong Sing, the firm ArchYu-

forms were against the norm that meant a series of short tower blocks eschew-

iconic design. "Bruton block" form visually djolates the block’s mass, cap-
ture the light and sun’s influence on its most spectacular surfaces. Structurally, malevolent, well-crafted frames drape

while the brutalist wall for the fenestration, the minimal articulations of the maximums and is 

likely to be best suited to the entrance of a massive mass building. In 1968, the Pearl Bank Apartments were officially

and Brutalist modern adults. These icons are emblemified by People’s Park Complex (left) and Golden Mile Complex. Deterioration and Legal actions can turn these issues into a social and political problem that cannot be

Before Pearl Bank, a condition survey, architecture audit, and refurbishment could still be carried out to recover the structure’s original functionality.

It is not only the Pearl Bank Apartments, but a series of similar structures that need to be re-thought of and re-imagined. Many of the old buildings were built in the 1960s, and have

are now facing new challenges and needs. The Ministry of Law noted that residential uses, the govern-

establishing a series of smaller and smaller transactions.

For example, the lower floors of Pearl Bank Complex could be adapted for commercial, retail or even hospitality uses, while the upper floors may be used for office or residential uses.

Significantly, the strategies are accepted as fulfilling the lease-top-up criteria, they would unlock the potential of existing buildings with histor-

The city’s modernist buildings must be preserved and adapted to suit the needs of the community, and not the other way around. The move to demolish and rebuild these buildings is a lose-lose situation for the city’s residents and the economy.

"Bruton block" form visually djolates the block’s mass, capturing the light and sun’s influence on its most spectacular surfaces. Structurally, malevolent, well-crafted frames drape space's monumental curves. Frameless curtain-walls and glass walls create a sense of continuity between the inside and outside. This is achieved by the use of large fenestrations and minimalistic articulations of the maximums and is not only due to the Pearl Bank Apartments, but a series of similar structures that need to be re-thought of and re-imagined. Many of the old buildings were built in the 1960s, and have never been well maintained and are now facing new challenges and needs. The Ministry of Law noted that residential uses, the government may allow lease extensions if it results in local land use intensification, mitigation of property decay and preservation of community.

However, successful cases of lease-top-up appear to be more prevalent on a small scale, which is likely to be even more so for the lease of public housing. These changes are seen in the introduction of high density residential sites. Such legal policy changes, especially on how activities and urban renewal with the existing building cycles. This also discourages communities from taking on good care of their buildings, allowing these to deteriorate to a point where demolition becomes seem-

In this kind of studio apartment, the landlord is not only the owner of the property but also the manager of the building.

Singapore has a long history of urban redevelopment, from the adaptive reuse of entire shophouses like the Far East Square in the late 1990s, to the recent revival of residential use project at Cape Town Theatre and the adaptation of the Pearl Bank and Golden Mile Complexes, which are now being developed in partnerships with urban designers and architects.

In Singapore, the model for regeneration can be quite different from the Western approach. For example, the adaptive reuse of the Four Pillars building in the 1970s and the adaptive reuse of the Waves building in the early 1990s. In both cases, the buildings were adapted for new uses, preserving their architectural and historical significance.

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Singapore’s identity and its citizens’ identity as Singaporeans are inseparable from the fact that Singapore is a young and diverse community. Unlike modernist cities in Europe and North America, Singapore has never suffered an urban crisis, and Singapore did not find modern architecture alienating. Instead, the modernist city in Singapore is celebrated as a model of high density development and architecture.

This is due to the rejection of the immediate past while looking nostalgically on a slightly newer version of it, a judgment that is cyclical and also relative.

The shortening building cycle to the root of the problems lies the mount-
ing pressure of an ever-diminishing land-

buildings with historical, architectural and social significance. They could also be converted as office spaces or residential units, apart from the use of office space for other functions.

In Singapore, the existing building cycles are shorter and more frequent than in many other countries, which means that buildings are torn down and rebuilt more frequently. This can create a loss of architectural and historical value.

In Singapore, there is a surge of interest in Brutalist architecture, and the conservation of these structures in the UK’s efforts to save what may happen. Both massive, sprawling council housing estates that are said to be more sustainable and gaudy, the Barbican Estate in London is an example of such developments, with its green spaces and modernist structures.

In Singapore, the modernist buildings are being adapted for new uses, preserving their architectural and historical significance.