

Study Case

The Revitalisation of Singapore River

1) Project location

Singapore River (3km) in Singapore

2) Company or Institutions to be referred to:

-Companies, Companies Partners, Organizational structure, Activities carried out by the Company:

The revitalisation of Singapore River is a project conceived and spearheaded by the government of Singapore. Various government agencies were involved, for example,

Urban Redevelopment Authority – national planning and conservation authority that coordinate the overall planning, development and implementation, master planning, planning study, conservation guidelines and manuals, development guide plan, development control;

Ministry of Environment – drainage department, drainage matters, riverbed and riverwall repair, river clean-up which took 10 years;

Singapore Tourism Board – tourism promotion authority, development of tourism product and promotion

Port of Singapore Authority – port authority, controls boat and water taxi licence;

Parks and Recreation Department, Ministry of National Development – develop, plant and maintain trees and parks, landscaping along the riverbank;

Public Works Department, Ministry of National Development – road authority, plan, design and build roads, bridges and walkways along the river bank;

Land Office – state land authority, controls land lease.

In addition, stakeholders from the community were engaged in the planning process. Private businesses and developers were invited to develop the sites and implement the plan. The revitalisation effort bespeaks of public-private partnership.

3) Intervention Area :

-Area Dimension, Number of buildings or information on building heritage, Resident Population, Area's main feature (residential, retailing etc.):

The Singapore River covers a land area of 96 hectares in the heart of Singapore city. It was the site of British landing and colonisation in 1819. Until the advent of containerisation, it was the main port area of Singapore. With the development of trade, the population in the area increased. The shophouses¹ and warehouses on the river banks (Boat Quay, Clark Quay and Robertson Quay) were a source of employment leading to a large number of Chinese immigrants settling in nearby Chinatown on the south-west bank of the river (Times Books International, 1983). By the late 19th century, the Singapore River had become one of the most popular sites for Chinese street story-telling, stunts, musical and opera performances (Yung and Chan, 2003). The Chinese community with its diversity of clans and dialects built temples near the river to pray for safe passage in and out of the river. In addition to port activities, street hawkers, peddlers, backyard industries (such as boat repair, sawmill, gambier, sago and sea-weed processing plants), as well as squatter colonies mushroomed along the river banks.

¹ Introduced during the colonial period, the shophouse is a typical local built form. Found in Singapore and many other cities of Southeast Asia, the shophouse is usually made up of 2-3 storeys where the ground floor is used for business, i.e. shop, and the upper storeys for residence.

As a working port, the river was at once a domestic as well as industrial sewer reinforced by its black water and depletion of marine life (Chou, 1998).(Figure1-2)

4) Project Framing :

-Situation before the initiative began, Identified Priorities, Intervention Typologies and Methodologies (building, social and economic uses), Subjects to whom the interventions are addressed and type of facilitations for every typology, Funds to be allocated and their source (% [percentage] of public and private funds on total amount), Key dates (project duration), achieved outcomes.

With advancement in maritime transportation technology, cargo boats had by the 1970s moved to unload at the new container port (off the southwest coast away from the city centre) and stopped bringing goods to the Singapore riverside warehouses. Following relocation of docking activities, life around the abandoned warehouses and river went into rapid decline. The riverscape with its abandoned and increasingly dilapidated buildings was a visible symbol of obsolescence. Setting the tone of regeneration, the vision in the Concept Plan (1991) is to revitalize the Singapore River,

“so that, soon after the Year 2000, it will be a new ‘activity corridor’ with shops and offices and residential development running along its flanks. The scenic and recreational potential of the river will be realized. Boating facilities and a new promenade will be built by the Boat Quay area and the old buildings will be restored. New hotels and shops will add to the life brimming alongside the Singapore River. At Robertson Quay and Clarke Quay, some of the old warehouses lining the river bank will be integrated with the new developments’ “(Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1991, p27).

A primary goal is to turn the abandoned derelict quays into popular ‘people places’, lively places to live, work and play. All 117 shophouses in Boat Quay and the remaining godowns in Clarke Quay and Robertson Quay are earmarked for conservation. The national planning and conservation authority, Urban Redevelopment Authority, is appointed the implementation agency. Conservation manual and guidelines lead the way in ensuring that the restoration works do not ‘compromise...the authenticity of the historic districts’ (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1988, p86). Accordingly, conservation building owners are required to retain the original external building profile and height, restore all the original exterior and facade elements, retain existing size and location of air well and maintain the party wall between buildings. A government budget of S\$43 million is allocated for environmental improvements in the Singapore River conservation area. A further sum of S\$200 million is spent on cleaning the polluted river.

As outlined in the 1992 Singapore River draft Development Guide Plan, major improvements to the Singapore River public realm include the introduction of:

- promenade (6000 m) along both banks of the river to encourage pedestrian movement and access to the river;(Figure 3- 4)
- open spaces along the river to create focal points;
- improved transport links including pedestrian bridges and boat landing points within the river area and to adjacent neighbourhoods such as Orchard Road, Chinatown and the central business district.

In addition, emphasis is on mixed-use development to create diversity and bring more people back to live by the river. The anticipated provision is about 20% residential development: 2600 units for a population of 7,800 which is about double the 1990 population census figure of

3,388, and 80% commercial development: 950,000sq m. To facilitate phased redevelopment, the Singapore River is divided into three sub-zones (Table 1), each envisaged with a different thematic development.

Table 1: Singapore River Planning Areas

Sub-zone	Land area	
	ha	%
Boat Quay	15	16
Clarke Quay	30	31
Robertson Quay	51	53
Total	96	100

Source: Urban Redevelopment Authority (1994) Singapore River Planning Area Planning Report, p.5

- Boat Quay: as a riverside dining and entertainment area of ‘shophouses, outdoor cafes, historic views, tree-lined promenades’ (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1992, p25);
- Clarke Quay: as a riverside ‘festival village’ of conserved godowns and new developments with pushcarts offering traditional food and crafts, river ride, ‘fringe theatre, eating houses’ (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1992, p28);
- Robertson Quay: as a hotel and residential area with condominiums and hotels located amidst historic warehouses with sympathetic new uses (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1992, p29).

The regenerated Singapore riverfront is to provide public spaces, access to the river and recreational amenities. To quote the Singapore River Planning Area Planning Report, 1994, the riverfront will provide ‘waterfront housing, enjoyment and fun to present and future generations of Singaporeans.’ (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1994, p7) The regeneration of urban waterfront is a process that takes years. The emerging image is that of a (re)vitalised river offering hope for celebrating the public realm and access to the water edge. To quote the South China Morning Post (15 Jan 2003), (Figure 5)

“The so-called Singapore River was in its natural state a sluggish backwater of brackish water surrounded by murky swamp. Until a dozen years ago, it was lined by rotting slums...Today, there are imaginative statues and shade trees, kiosks and cafes, wine bars and outdoor seating. It is alive, it works and it is a joy for both visitors and local residents.”

For more information on the Singapore River area and regeneration, see

- Chou, L. M. (1998) The cleaning of Singapore River and the Kallang Basin: Approaches, methods, investments and benefits, *Ocean and Coastal Management* 38:133-145.
- Times Books International (1983) Chinatown: An Album of a Singapore Community, Singapore: Times Books International.
- Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) (1988) A Manual for Chinatown Conservation Area, Singapore.
- Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) (1991) Living the Next Lap, Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority.
- Urban Redevelopment Authority (1992) Singapore River Development Guide Plan, Draft, Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority.
- Urban Redevelopment Authority (1994) Singapore River Planning Area, Planning Report, Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Yung, S. S. and K. B. Chan (2003) Leisure, pleasure and consumption: Ways of entertaining oneself in K. B. Chan and C. K. Tong (ed) Past Times: A Social History of Singapore, Singapore: Times Editions.

Edited by:

Dr Belinda Yuen, Associate Professor "National University of Singapore", School of Design Environment.

Figure 1: Conservation shophouses along the banks of Singapore River provide contrast to the modern townscape of high-rise buildings



Figure 2: Pedestrianised streets to bring people into the public realm





Figure 3: Public arts and sculpture add interest to the pedestrian environment



Figure 4: River taxis provide alternative travel by water



Figure 5: Outdoor recreation areas are encouraged to bring more vibrancy to the Singapore River