

Heritage conservation, the commercial imperative, and Singapore's placemaking – The case of Kampong Gelam

DATE AND TIME

30 Sep 2026,
11am - 12.30pm

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VENUE

Cohort Classroom 12
Building 2, Level 4 (2.406)

SYNOPSIS - This talk examines Kampong Gelam's transformation from historic neighbourhood to managed heritage-tourism district, tracing three key phases. The 1970s-80s witnessed demolition and rebranding: Singapore's historic quarters were designated as historic districts in the 1970s in internal planning documents, a period that paradoxically also saw selective demolition. In Kampong Gelam, this destroyed the entire Kampong Rochor shophouse/compound house district and swaths of buildings between Ophir Road and Jeddah/Weld Street—cutting the area to less than half its original size and destroying 3 historic mosques and 3 old schools. In 1984, Singapore publicly announced plans to rebrand what remained of these old quarters as ethnic cultural heritage districts.

Secondly, starting in 1995, residents were removed from Kampong Gelam, followed by physical conservation of the buildings themselves. Notably, this displacement occurred even though the official justification for conservation was preserving cultural heritage—raising an inherent contradiction between removing a community and claiming to represent it.

Thirdly, after 2011 the district enters the era of "placemaking" and its challenges. An earlier hands-off approach to leases and rents created problems that are only now being acknowledged. Since 2011, Singapore has shifted to a "placemaking" framework meant to involve "stakeholders"—though in practice this has centred mainly on business owners rather than the displaced community. This has institutionalised management around business success and cultural programming, exposing an ongoing tension: how to reconcile free-market non-regulation of rents/leases with the stated goal of cultural-historical representation, and how to question who actually counts as a "stakeholder" and why.



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IMRAN BIN TAJUDEEN is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Malay Studies and the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, where he teaches topics on identity and representation through built heritage and urban history in Singapore and maritime Southeast Asia. He researches the material and discursive outcomes of the colonial encounter on the heritage construction of vernacular architecture and indigenous urbanism, traditional settlements, and their associated tropes. He also examines Southeast Asia's historical mosque forms and ornaments in the context of transregional interactions and translations across the region's vernacular and Indic architectural legacies and under colonial rule. His doctoral dissertation on these topics (NUS, 2009) won the ICAS Book Prize in 2011. He is co-editor of Southeast Asia's Modern Architecture (2018). He was postdoctoral fellow at MIT's Aga Khan Program (2009–10) and the IIAS in Leiden (2010–11), and Mutawa Visiting Fellow at OXCIS (Oxford, 2019–2020; 2022).

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