

# State Constructs of Ethnicity in the Reinvention of Malay-Indonesian Heritage in Singapore

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Over the last several decades the Singapore government has attempted to create hyper-traditional environments in two historic, but largely expunged, Malay-Indonesian *kampung* districts.

Tourist-oriented projects in these areas have resorted to generic Malay and Arabian-Islamic imagery and selective concealment and framing of historic settings to portray Malay-Indonesian culture as alternately “rural” and “regal.” This article explores the political-economic basis for these stereotypical re-creations, which have obscured real historic conditions of heterogeneity and severed old interethnic links. It also shows how the rejection, negotiation or appropriation of such spatial-physical impositions reveals the potential of everyday culture to disrupt such essentialist ethnic portrayals.

In Singapore, Kampung Gelam and Geylang Serai are the sites of long-standing government attempts to re-create traditional Malay-Indonesian districts known as *kampung*. In the old port towns of the Malay-Indonesian region, a *kampung* denoted a ward or district.<sup>1</sup> However, present use of the term obscures actual historical conditions and the fact that *kampungs* often had fundamentally different characteristics. Thus, Kampung Gelam was an urban district connected to Singapore’s earliest port and harbor, while Geylang Serai was a younger suburban settlement which grew around a former transport terminus and trade-fair site (FIG. 1). Nevertheless, from the 1960s to 1980s, both sites underwent extensive programs of demolition for urban renewal. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, portions of them were transformed as packaged, stereotypical “ethnic districts” for cultural tourism.

The present “Malay-Indonesian” label for these reinvented historic districts is also misleading. Although people of such descent did once represent a majority of the population in both areas, in no way were these ever exclusive ethnic enclaves. Today, however, what *kampung* denotes, and what it has come to connote, have diverged considerably. A nostalgic-generic

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**FIGURE 1.** *Kampung Gelam and Geylang Serai in Singapore today. In Kampung Gelam: (1) Kampung Gelam Conservation District, 1989; (2) Bugis Town prior to 1822 relocation (Bugis Junction mall today); (3) Kampung Masjid Bahru, expunged 1980s; (4) Kampung Rochor, expunged 1960s (public housing and retail blocks today); (5) Kampung Bugis, expunged (empty state land today); (6) Kampung Kallang, expunged 1930s (recreation and state institutions today). In Geylang Serai: (7) Malay Village, begun 1984; (8) Geylang Serai Market; (9) former extent of settlement (lowrise industrial estate today). Graphic by author.*



social memory of the *kampung* as an idyllic “village” has effectively obscured more precise familiarity or recollection of actual, particular *kampungs* in Singapore and their architecture, morphology, and socio-cultural composition. A similar homogenizing trend has taken place in other aspects of life among Singaporeans of diverse Malay-Indonesian descent.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, as Yeoh and Lau have argued, the modern affliction known as “cultural amnesia,” wherein “people are no longer personally or intimately acquainted with their own cultural roots,” has made it easier for the state to “impose a particular version of the cultural past” in its conservation programs.<sup>3</sup> Generic remembrances have displaced particular histories, facilitating an oblique sense of forgetting. Ironically, this is so because, as Chua has argued, popular social memory of the *kampung* is infected by nostalgia.<sup>4</sup>

Building on this general social affliction, the government, mainly through its tourism and redevelopment agencies, has invented markers that accentuate artificially themed

enclaves according to state-defined categories of ethnicity. These are designed both to titillate tourists and play a didactic role among the local population. These physical reinscriptions on expunged environments, in the guise of projects to restore or beautify remnants of physical heritage for cultural tourism, have thus produced ethnic districts that are hyper-traditional.

#### HYPER-TABULA RASA: REINVENTING ETHNIC DISTRICTS IN SINGAPORE

State initiatives to reinvent Singapore’s heritage along ethnic lines officially began in 1984 with the creation of a Tourism Task Force. This was the second year of declining tourist arrivals (following the so-called “tourism crisis” of 1983). To counter this trend, the task force recommended that the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) be given license to serve

as overall coordinator for the redesign of heritage districts in collaboration with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA).

The events organized by the tourism authority in Geylang Serai that year were revealing of future directions: they included the street light-up for Ramadan and Hari Raya Puasa (Eid-ul-Fitr) (which subsequently became an annual affair), the erection of arches over two roads at the famed Geylang Serai Market, and an invitation to popular Malay artists to perform on a temporary stage built behind the market. A “Malay Village” proposal for the area was also officially announced that year, which included major changes by the Ministry of National Development (MND) to earlier proposals by the Malay Affairs Bureau (MAB).

These developments in Geylang Serai signaled what would soon become a comprehensive new government policy to use essentialist notions of ethnicity to translate heritage areas into commodities for cultural tourism. Two years later this policy would be embodied in the 1986 URA Conservation Masterplan for ethnic districts, and in the Tourism Product Development Plan (TPDP). Specifically, the TPDP stipulated an “Exotic Asia” theme for future tourism efforts, according to which Singapore’s “Oriental mystique” would help define it as a destination. Meanwhile, the Conservation Masterplan divided heritage districts according to ethnic themes: Chinese (Chinatown), Malay (Kampong Glam), and Indian (Little India). Thus, the “colonial grid” for ethnicity was reinscribed upon the urban landscape, regardless of its heterogeneous reality.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the continuing importance of this policy is evident on the tourism board website:

*The mission of Culture & Heritage Department is to develop and promote the cultural and heritage experience of offerings in Singapore — namely Chinese, Malay, Indian and Arab. The department is responsible for the overall strategic planning and product enhancement of Singapore’s ethnic areas such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam. It also oversees the organisation of festive light-ups in these ethnic areas. . . . [emphasis added]*<sup>6</sup>

The reinvention of heritage in Singapore along ethnic lines has involved a series of operations that are here termed “hyper-tabula rasa.” Koolhaas and Mau have described the tabula rasa of redevelopment in Singapore as a “clean sweeping” to “displace, destroy, replace.”<sup>7</sup> By comparison, the creation of ethnic heritage districts has entailed clinical sterilizing — a complete physical overhaul involving operations to *displace, reinvent* and *sell* under the aegis of conservation and aesthetic enhancement.

This article retraces these operations with regard to Kampung Gelam and Geylang Serai. It describes the heritage lost in the original expunging of these settlements. It examines the process by which selected areas of them have since been reinvented through the implantation and framing of physical signifiers of ethnicity. And it critiques these pro-

jects by comparing state revaluations of historic resources to the actual value placed on them by locals and visitors. The article concludes by reviewing the underlying ideological impetus and political-economic motives behind these policies.

## DISPLACE — THE EXPUNGED SETTLEMENTS

Kampung Gelam and Geylang Serai occupy a special position as sites scarred by Singapore’s earliest and most comprehensive expunction schemes. However, despite the selective reinvention of portions of them as tourist sites (where their diverse facets have been flattened into simplistic Malay rural or regal narratives for the purposes of cultural tourism), they were once very different places.

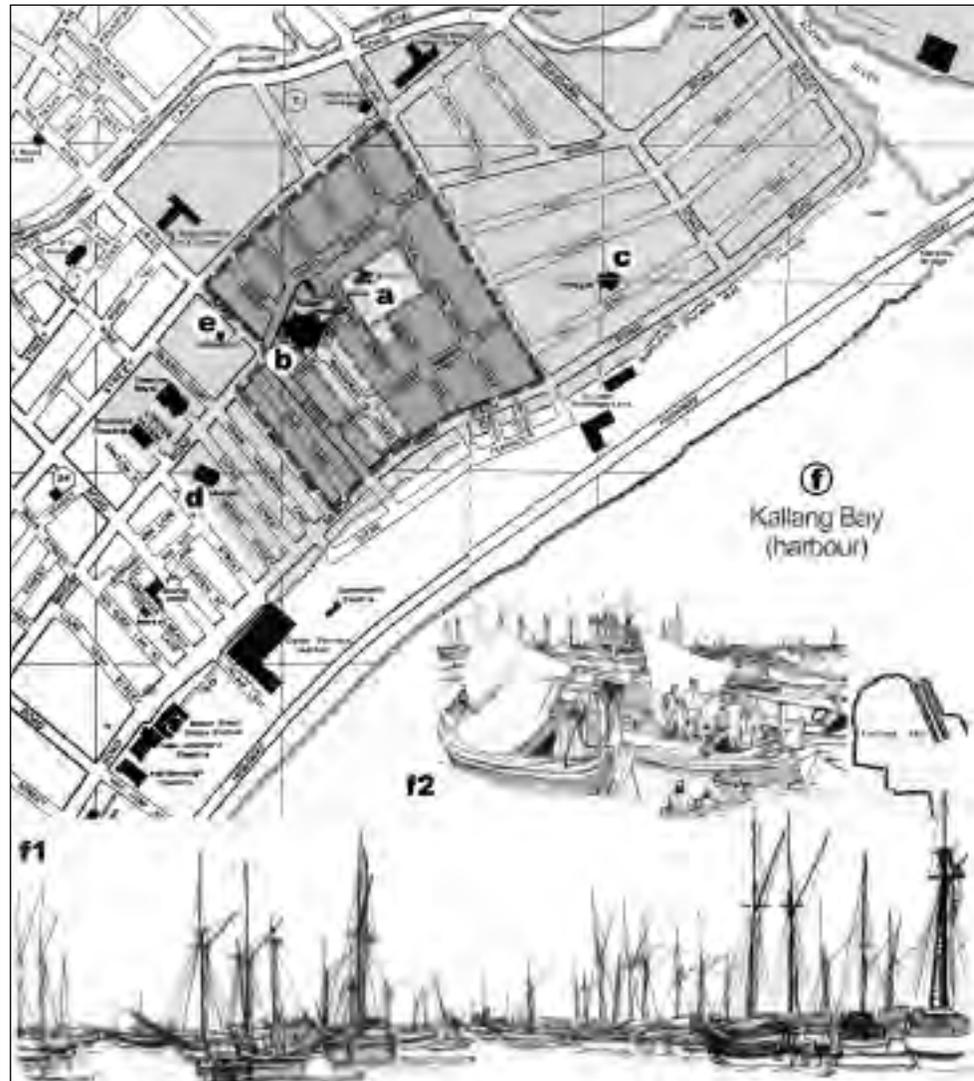
Old Kampung Gelam was colonial Singapore’s regional port.<sup>8</sup> Its various wards also bore the appellation *kampung*. In the 1820s it comprised a palisaded royal town, around which merchant compounds were found. The latter were labeled “Bugis Town” on a British map of 1822. Then, in 1824, these merchants were relocated to a new “Bugis town” laid out at Kampung Rochor, which came to form Singapore’s oldest merchant district (FIG. 2). However, following independence, Kampung Rochor became the first portion of old Singapore town to undergo wholesale demolition. Ignominiously labeled Precinct N1 in the urban renewal program, it was expunged in its entirety in the 1960s.

Waterfront settlements were also found at Kampung Bugis and Kampung Kallang, which comprised one of Singapore’s shipbuilding areas. This harbor area was visited by trading vessels from around the region. However, the distinctive waterfront houses of Bugis and Palembang merchants found there were demolished in the 1930s to make way for an airport (and many residents moved upriver to Geylang Serai). Afterwards, port facilities for regional maritime traders were twice relocated to isolated, concealed areas of the island.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, by the late 1960s little remained of nineteenth-century Kampung Gelam’s port district. Aside from Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, built circa 1840 by a wealthy female Melakan Malay trader, an entire network of streets and its fabric of buildings had been erased. This had included a mix of shop-houses and rowhouses interspersed with bungalow forms, from simple warehouse-dwellings to elaborate compound houses. In its place the government constructed a collection of public housing complexes, the residents of which largely come from elsewhere (FIG. 3).

The next large-scale demolitions came in the 1980s. At the southern extremity of Kampung Gelam, the area called Kampung Masjid Bahru (New Mosque Compound) formerly comprised five distinctive streets, three of which were just three meters wide. The last of these terminated at the front pavilion of a mosque, Masjid Bahru, built in the 1870s with a three-tiered roof. This marked the outer limit of the old port town (beyond which one arrived at Japanese and Chinese brothels in

**FIGURE 2.** *Old Kampung Gelam Port Town, 1966. In what is the Conservation District today: (a) Istana (Palace), 1840s; and (b) Sultan Mosque, rebuilt 1924, in Kampung Kaji (Bussorah Street). In Kampung Rochor: (c) Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, 1840s, dome 1932. In Kampung Masjid Bahru: (d) Bahru Mosque, 1870s, expunged 1980s; and (e) Tomb (keramat), expunged 1980s. Drawing by author, based on Singapore Street Directory 1966. The historic images show local trading ships in Kampung Gelam harbor in 1957. (f1) Bugis vessels; and (f2) Madurese vessels. Drawings by author based on photography by Gibson-Hill in G. Hawkins, Malaya (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1957), pp.18,19.*



the neighboring streets) (FIG. 4). As part of the district for the pilgrimage trade of Muslim Southeast Asians, Kampung Bahru was initially built by pilgrim brokers who were mostly of Javanese origin. However, along with its century-old mosque, it too was expunged in the 1980s. Only one street and half of another remain today; the rest is empty state land.

Following this extensive demolition campaign, the small portion of Kampung Gelam that remained, consisting largely of the port town's dismembered center, was gazetted in 1989 as a historic district. Yet even within this area important buildings continued to be demolished. As a residential area, it had been forcibly depopulated in the 1980s, but its final demise as a community came when the government acquired the former palace, or Istana, in 1995. This led to the expulsion of the descendants of the Johor-Riau prince, first installed by the British as Sultan in Singapore in 1819.

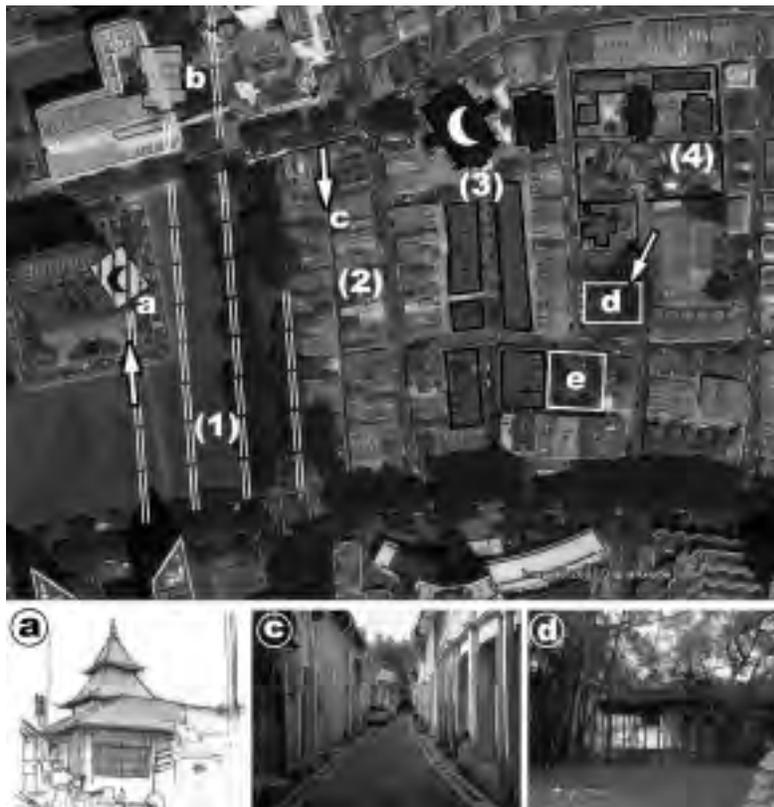
Pondok Jawa, the community and cultural hall of Javanese immigrants situated close to the Istana, was then

demolished in its entirety (including its brick walls) in 2004 — ostensibly, to fight a termite infestation. Earlier, the Melakan trading and lodging house compound, Pondok Melaka, had also been demolished to make way for a car park.

In contrast to the tight settlement of Kampung Gelam, old Geylang Serai was a sprawling suburb (FIG. 5). It was formed by hundreds of traditional Malay raised-floor timber houses, of which several styles could be found. Many of these were well constructed, built to plans submitted to and approved by the colonial authorities.

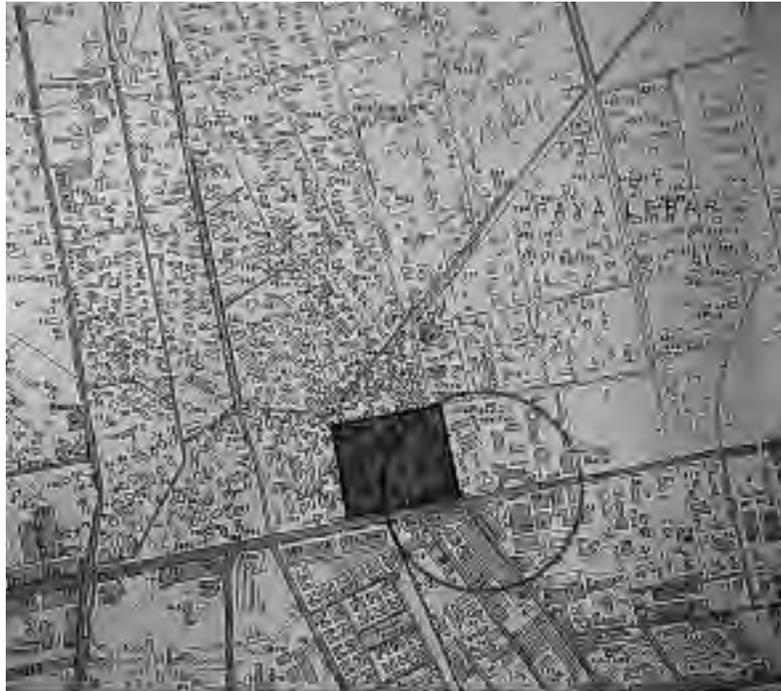
According to conventional history, the settlement began with the dispersal of a village at the mouth of the Singapore River. This had been inhabited by followers of the Temenggong, or chief of security, and included both boat-dwelling Orang Laut aboriginals and land-dwelling Malays. Some time in the 1830s the land at Geylang Serai was bought by Hajjah Fatimah, the same trader who built the mosque in Kampung Rochor. When she died, it was inherited by her

**FIGURE 3.** Present-day Kampung Gelam. (1) Kampung Gelam Conservation District, with (a) Malay Heritage Centre; and (b) Sultan Mosque and Bussorah Mall. (2) Kampung Rochor (Crawfurd Estate and retail blocks today), with (c) Hajjah Fatimah Mosque. (3) Kampung Masjid Bahru, now largely void, with (d) Kampung Masjid Bahru Mosque site (highrise tower and empty land); and (e) Tomb site (hotel and mall). Graphic by author, based on Google Earth image. The photos show the Hajjah Fatimah Mosque before and after demolition of surrounding urban fabric. (c1) Mosque with other buildings along Java Road in 1950. Drawing by author based on M. Doggett, *Characters of Light* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1985), p.43. (c2) Mosque in 2006 after all other buildings in Kampung Rochor, and Java Road itself, were expunged. Photo by author.



**FIGURE 4.** Kampung Gelam Conservation District and Kampung Masjid Bahru area today. (1) Expunged streets of Kampung Masjid Bahru; (2) “Arab Street” and Haji Lane (Kampung Jawa); (3) Sultan Mosque and Bussorah Mall (Kampung Kaji); and (4) Palace and Heritage Centre (Kampung Dalam). The letters and historic photos indicate significant features of the area that have been demolished: (a) Bahru Mosque, built 1870s, expunged 1980s; (b) Theatre Royal, expunged 1960s; (c) Haji Lane; (d) Pondok Jawa, expunged 2004; and (e) site of Pondok Melaka, now a car park. Graphic by author based on Google Earth image. Drawing (a) by author based on Doggett, *Characters of Light*, p.40. Photos (c) and (d) by author.

**FIGURE 5.** Old Geylang Serai, 1954. The box indicates the present-day site of the Malay Village. The circle marks the pekan (commercial nucleus) of old Geylang Serai, which contained the site of the Great Eastern Trade Fair, two theaters, a bus terminus, a market, and shops. Graphic by author based on historic map courtesy of NUS Geography Department Maps Resource Centre.



son-in-law, of the Hadhrami-Arab family of Alsagoff, her neighbors in Kampung Rochor.

The original settlement at Geylang Serai had a linear-radial street pattern, with the main streets leading off from a central point. For years this had served as the east terminus of trams, and later trolley buses, connecting to the commercial center of the colony. It was also the site of the Eastern Trade Fair, as well as a cinema. However, in 1960 this central area was selected as the location for the Geylang Serai Housing Scheme, and by 1963 a program of demolition had begun to make way for what would become the first public housing estate built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in the eastern part of Singapore island (FIG. 6). Construction of this project eventually necessitated the removal and relocation of 125 families, 73 shopkeepers, eleven hawkers stalls, four stores, and three offices from a 400,000-sq.ft. (9.2-acre) site. In September 1971 the government then announced its intent to acquire the adjacent 359 acres of land. By 1973 this had been accomplished, and the last remaining families were removed to make way for redevelopment in the 1980s.

Eventually, all the houses of Geylang Serai were demolished, including those built with official plan approvals. The old community was dispersed, and the land was earmarked for lowrise industrial workshops. However, the new Geylang Serai Market Complex and its bazaar shops, completed in 1967 and accommodating the relocated traders, soon became a weekly pilgrimage spot, earning it the epithet “Malay emporium of Singapore” (FIG. 7).<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, until a decade ago, most of the outlying land in the former settlement of Geylang Serai remained vacant state property.

#### REINVENT — ARCHITECTURAL STEREOTYPES, ORCHESTRATED PERSPECTIVES

In the aftermath of these comprehensive programs of demolition and eviction, the Singapore government was left with large areas devoid of community, streetscape or buildings. To restore these for cultural tourism has subsequently required the reinvention of Geylang Serai and Kampung Gelam as “ethnic areas.” Since the 1980s both areas have thus witnessed various projects aimed at resurrecting a “traditional” past according to images of essentialized ethnicity, represented by ethnic markers inscribed by state agencies. In the words of Yeoh and Lau, this has meant replacing a former heterogeneous “lived culture” with ideological expressions.<sup>11</sup>

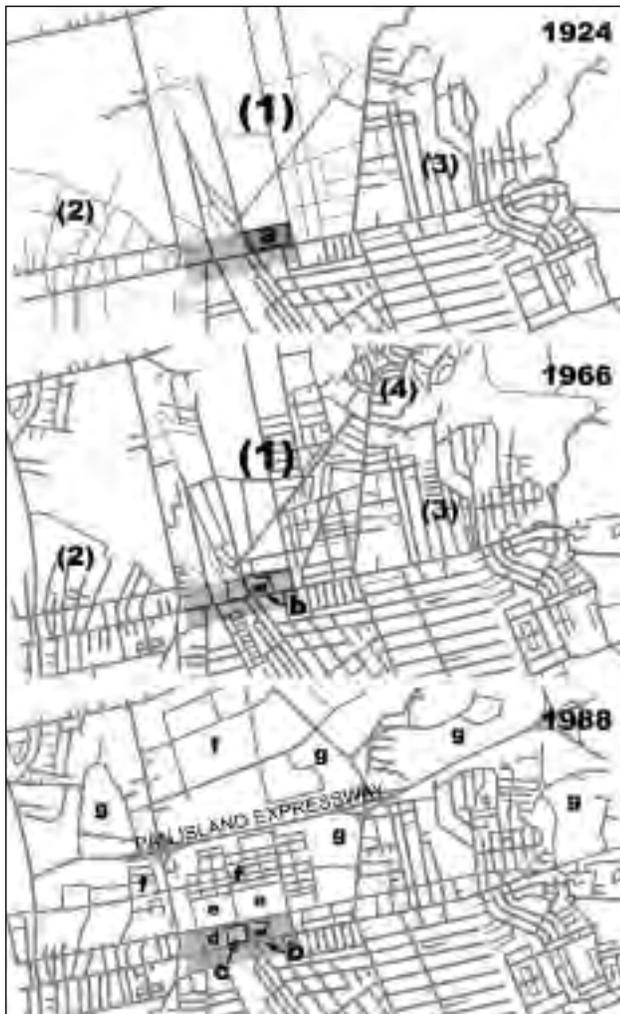
The images of ethnicity used in such superimpositions articulate and support what Brown has called “ethnic management policies.”<sup>12</sup> In the cases of Kampung Gelam and Geylang Serai the images have been directed both internally at the ethnic group concerned (by defining their position within national ideology), and externally to tourists and visitors as part of the “exotic East” image stipulated in the Tourism Product Development Plan of 1986. In both locations this has meant the orchestration of tour routes and views, shaped by architectural and landscaping design, to frame stereotypical notions of ethnicity.

In Geylang Serai the idea of a “Malay Village” was first suggested and approved by the Minister for National Development in 1981. At the time it was seen as a way to counter repeated pleas by the Malay Affairs Bureau to preserve remaining settlements containing vernacular Malay

**FIGURE 6.** Public housing and new Market Complex in central Geylang Serai. (1) Geylang Serai Housing Estate, 1966 (source: Singapore Street Directory 1966). (2) View of the Market Complex, 2001: food, fresh and live produce and bazaar stalls (photo by author). (3) The bazaar within the Market Complex, 2001: Javanese jamu (medicines) and fabrics (photo by author).



**FIGURE 7.** Geylang Serai today: (a) Malay Village, Phases I and II; (b) Geylang Serai Market Complex; (c) Joo Chiat (retail) Complex; (d) Haig Road Market Complex; (e) Tanjong Katong (retail) Complex; and (f) a large parking area, a rarity in Singapore. Graphic by author, based on Google Earth image.



**FIGURE 8.** Geylang Serai and the Malay Village, urban history and context. (1) Geylang Serai settlement. (2) Kampung Wak Tanjong. (3) Kampung Kembangan. (4) Jalan Eunus Malay Settlement, gazetted 1929. Important locations: (a) Great Eastern Trade Fair and Bus Terminus; (b) Geylang Serai Housing Estate and Market 1966; (c) Malay Village; (d) parking lots; (e) empty state land; (f) industrial estates; and (g) public housing estates. Graphic by author.

architecture (FIG. 8). Intended as a generic representation of expunged Malay *kampungs*, it was designed and finally completed by the Housing Development Board in 1989. However, since 1991 the HDB has contracted its management to Ananda Holdings, a Hong Kong-based tourism conglomerate. An extension was then built in 1995, containing ethnic-themed entertainment elements, proudly billed as “Singapore’s newest theme park attraction.”<sup>13</sup>

Geylang Serai comprised two socio-cultural features: a *pekan* nucleus, or market-bazaar center; and an adjoining *kampung* or residential settlement. However, it is the latter, “vernacular settlement” aspect of Geylang Serai that the

Village’s design seeks to represent. Built on a site adjacent to the Geylang Serai Housing Scheme and its market, the original goal of the Malay Village was to be a “recreation of a typical Malay Kampung to serve as a tourist centre, commercial centre, and a cultural showpiece.”<sup>14</sup> This last ambition has, however, been marred by an aggressively profit-driven strategy on the part of the HDB. Thus, Kong and Yeoh noted that “while the [HDB] has put in significant effort to approximate an authentic kampung, respondents [of surveys] did not always feel it was sufficient.”<sup>15</sup> Such dissatisfaction is justifiable considering how the village has failed in both architectural and cultural-cum-commercial terms.

Architecturally, the Malay Village attempts to represent Malayness in a manner similar to that of a nineteenth-century colonial exposition or World’s Fair. Yet, even by these standards, it is degenerate. Whereas nineteenth-century open-air museums displayed actual or accurately replicated specimens, the Malay Village’s architectural reconstructions do not even approximate the actual forms of Singapore’s historic Malay settlements. The “typical Malay Kampung” envisioned thus shows off a mix of irrelevant architectural models pilaged from the Malay Peninsula. And even these are not properly replicated, since there is much bastardization of detail and building form (FIG. 9).

One dissertation on the Malay Village contains the following explanation:

*According to the architect [of the Malay Village], ideas for the kampung were not taken from local examples which were mere “urban slums” lacking in any formal language. Instead they were adapted from site studies carried out in Malaysia and Indonesia and books on layout, building materials, construction techniques, landscape and cultural heritage. The Singapore Tourism Board was also consulted for advice.<sup>16</sup>*

Evidently, no research was done by HDB architects on actual houses in Singapore’s *kampungs* (FIG. 10). Thus, the hybrid Malay-type houses that were such a ubiquitous feature of Singapore’s late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century landscape, and which cut across ethnic boundaries, were ignored in favor of models from neighboring Peninsular Malaysia that were never a feature of the Singapore landscape.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the rarer Bugis and Palembang house types originating from South Sulawesi and southeastern Sumatra (which were found downriver from Geylang Serai) and the Bumbung Limas and Bumbung Perak houses that were more prevalent were ignored. For these reasons the Malay Village is a clear expression of ethnic essentialism and irredeemable cultural amnesia.

Two comments (presumably uttered in irony) by a member of Parliament involved in formulating the project in 1984 further expose its underlying absurdity. First, he said, “it is not a conservation of heritage . . . it is just to remind us of

**FIGURE 9.** Malay Village buildings. (1) Phase II main entrance from car park. (2) typical shop buildings with concrete screed floors. (3) Gaudy pastiche as ethnic décor: Phase I hall incorporating a Melaka-style staircase in a Terengganu-style building. Photos by author.



**FIGURE 10.** Historic examples of Malay-type houses in Singapore. (a) Gable-on-hip model (Bumbung Perak) from Geylang Serai area (caption: “Old-type bungalows, now a rare sight and fast giving way to modern housing development”). Source: Singapore Street Directory 1966. (b) Hipped-roof model (Bumbung Limas); and (c) gable-roofed model (Bumbung Panjang). Photo by author of a postcard, captioned “Native Village,” displayed in the Malay Village Gallery.

our past. It is essentially a commercial premise, which is Malay in nature.” And, second, “the facade is more important than its content.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, in the Malay Village’s “Art Gallery” — which claims to present “a stroll down memory lane with black and white pictures of the pasts [sic], of old buildings steeped in history, for visitors to reminisce” — one finds no information on actual *kampung* of Singapore.<sup>19</sup> The only photograph of actual *kampung* architecture shows a particularly dilapidated house (which appears abandoned), cursorily captioned “Native Village” (REFER TO FIG.10).

Ironically, the role of a typical Malay *pekan*, or market and bazaar district, does live on in Geylang Serai. But it does so, commercially and culturally, not at the Malay Village, but in typical modern, non-Malay buildings erected by the state, where hawkers and shopkeepers have been relocated. Among these are the Geylang Serai Market Complex (1965), the Haig Road Market Complex (1976), the Joo Chiat Complex (1983), and the Tanjong Katong Complex (1984). There is also an annual night bazaar held throughout the fasting month leading up to Eid-ul-Fitr (Hari Raya Puasa) — which has been supported by the tourism authority since

1984 as one of its ethnic “offerings.” In other words, by the time the proposal for the Malay Village was officially announced in August 1984, Geylang Serai had already reestablished itself as a shopping district for Singaporeans of Malay-Indonesian descent — even attracting visitors from Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia.

The other main failing of the Malay Village project, therefore, is that it has failed to benefit from Geylang Serai’s existing character as a market and bazaar district. From a practical standpoint, its success depends in part on attracting walk-in customers to its 40 lock-up shops, eleven kiosks, five eating houses, one restaurant, and three coffeehouses.<sup>20</sup> Yet, its buildings are set far back from the street, accessible only via winding paths that connect to gates in a continuous perimeter fence. Predictably, such physical separation from neighboring markets and retail complexes contributes to its present, largely desolate quality (FIG.11).

To make matters worse, an official HDB statement explains how its layout provides “a planned randomness in an attempt to capture the atmosphere of additive village growth.”<sup>21</sup> But this notion is misinformed on both historical and practical grounds. The houses of old Geylang Serai, like

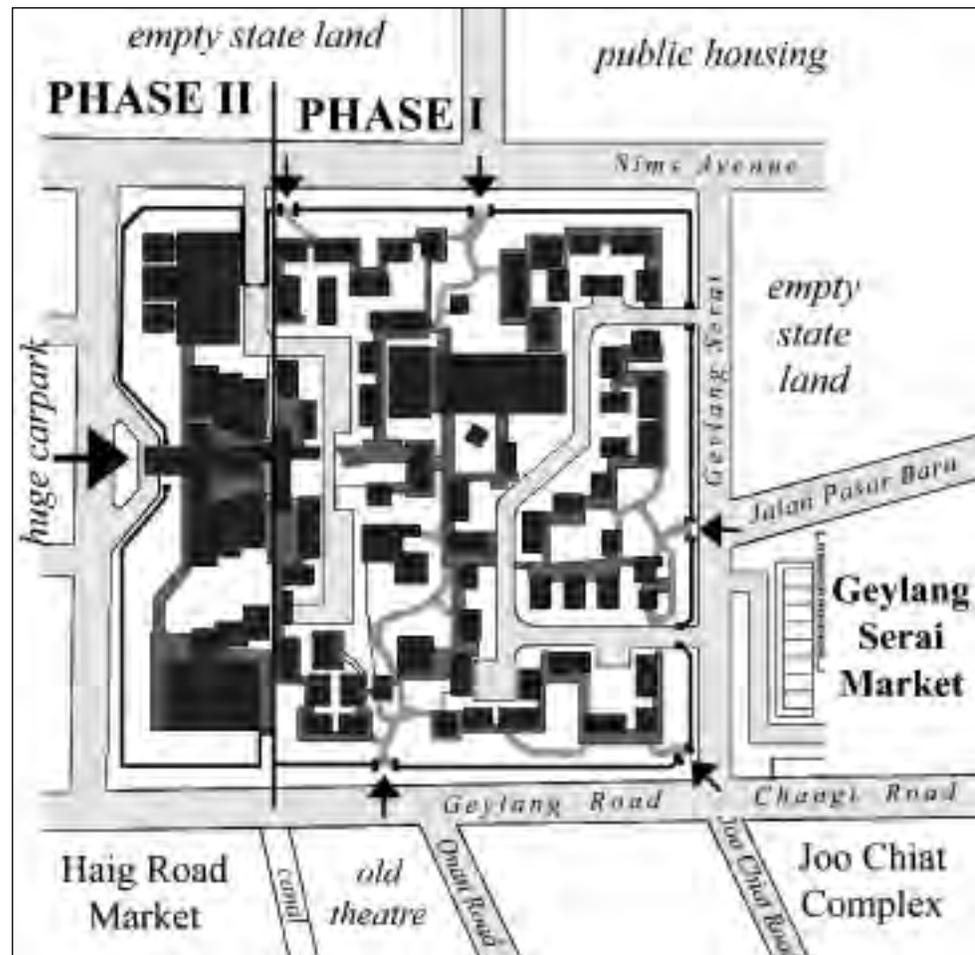


FIGURE 11. Geylang Serai Malay Village, showing its “planned randomness,” building orientations, linkway (selang) labyrinth, and winding paths. Graphic by author.

many other *kampung*s, were laid out in a fairly regular manner, facing onto streets, or else aligned in rows along paths. Thus, the Malay Village's labyrinthine *selang*, or covered passageways, which link clusters of single-story shop-buildings, all oriented in different directions, has no architectural precedent. The sense of having lost one's direction, or having reached the end of a cluster, also sets in fairly quickly.

The orchestration of visits to the Malay Village further segregates it from its surroundings. Visitors are typically led directly from tour buses through the main entrance to the large ethnic-themed attractions that face a car park. This allows neither visual, physical, nor experiential connection with the other lively market, restaurant, and bazaar complexes of Geylang Serai. Instead, the layout is designed to frame only the ideological constructs portrayed in the village's buildings, ethnographic dioramas and displays, and staged performances. No recognition is given to the everyday culture of Singapore's Malay-Indonesian community.

This fabrication is echoed in the narrative for "Ethnic Quarters: Geylang Serai" from the tourism authority's website:

*At the Malay Village, go back in time and discover the traditional "Kampung Days" lifestyle of Malays in the 1950s and 1960s! Or experience traditional Malay arts and crafts like batik painting, kite-making and kampung games such as top spinning.<sup>22</sup>*

The Village's attractions also give physical expression to ethnic stereotypes. Tan has noted how Singapore's mass media routinely express "Malay separateness" via an "association with the pre-modern, nature and even the supernatural."<sup>23</sup> The same can be said for the original attractions included in Phase II of the Village, which opened in 1996. These included an "Arabian Nights" genie to welcome visitors to "Lagenda Fantasi," a 25-minute multisensory show which presented the myths connected with fourteenth-century Singapore. Another attraction was "Kampung Days," a nostalgic, lyrical portrayal of a carefree village where the visitor could savor "life's simple 'treasures'."

Kong has described the value of invented cultural traditions arising from an emphasis on "traditionalism" as a way for Singapore to respond to the "disjuncture with the past," caused by globalization. In this regard, he has cited a desire to "actively seek to recover heritages, as if to return to some unproblematic golden past."<sup>24</sup> Nowhere is this more blatant than in the invention of various ethnographic embellishments at the Malay Village to represent "Malay culture." Thus, it has featured a *gasing* (spinning-top) pavilion, a restaurant mimicking aspects of a fishing village, and a coffeeshop with a rice-field theme.<sup>25</sup> All these play on an equation between Malay culture and rural life first propagated during the colonial era.

Where the Malay Village at Geylang Serai emphasizes a humble, rural tableau, the reinvention of Kampung Gelam has been based on images of exotic Arabia and Malay regal splendor. As explained earlier, the amputated core of the old

port town was gazetted as a conservation district in 1989. As such, it became one of three "ethnic areas" designated for conservation in the TPD of 1986.

At the time, the modest plan for Kampung Gelam was to (a) "retain Sultan Mosque"; (b) "rehabilitate the Sultan Palace building and grounds and adaptively reuse them as a Malay cultural complex cum historical park for cultural performances and festive celebrations"; and (c) "provide a clear pedestrian network to link the major buildings and open spaces." However, since then, the plan has spawned two hyper-traditional projects that go far beyond these simple principles: the extensive restoration and beautification of Bussorah Street to create "Bussorah Mall," and the embellishment of old Istana to create a "Malay Heritage Centre" (FIGS. 12, 13).

In general terms the two projects illustrate the "landscape spectacle" strategy employed by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) in its pilot conservation project in Singapore at Tanjong Pagar. Yeoh and Lau have described how this intended to "demonstrate the economic and practical viability of restoring [old buildings] to their previous grandeur."<sup>26</sup>

Toward this end, Bussorah Mall was conceived and completed by the URA in 1992 with help from the tourism board (STB). A preoccupation with spectacular restoration is palpable in the URA's work here on the old shophouses.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, Bussorah Mall also fulfills objective (c) of the TPD, by converting a road to a pedestrian mall. However, this has also entailed the landscape "beautification" of a space which leads directly to, and dramatically frames a postcard-perfect view of, the Saracenic-themed, colonial-era Sultan Mosque. Interestingly, this structure never reflected local culture. It was built in 1924 to the design of an Irish architect to replace a century-old, tiered-roof, Southeast Asian-type mosque (FIG. 14).

Similarly, the colonial-era street names that were officially conferred on the area around 1910 — Baghdad, Muscat, Kandahar, Bussorah — have created a popular misperception that the area was predominantly "Arab." In fact, Singapore's Arab community originated in Yemen's Hadhramaut Valley, and the names reflected the popularity of Perso-Arabian romances in the Malay *bangsawan* theater of the era (whose actors were mostly Javanese). Indeed, alternative vernacular place names in Fujianese (Hokkien), Cantonese, Malay and Tamil emphasized the district's actual Javanese community and its Malay "compounds," or *kampung* morphology. The Fujianese called Arab Street "Javanese Street," or "Jiawa Koi." Malay-Indonesians called Bussorah Street "Kampung Kaji" ("Haji Compound"), and they referred to Baghdad Street and Sultan Gate as being located in "Kampung Tembaga," or "Copper Compound."

As mentioned, these areas were predominantly populated by Javanese, who worked as coppersmiths, pilgrim brokers or tailors, or who operated bookstores and lodging-houses catering to Hajj pilgrims from the region en route to Mecca. However, there remains no palimpsest of this literate urban



**FIGURE 12 (ABOVE).** Reinvented landscapes of the Kampung Gelam Conservation District today: (1) Mosque and Bussorah Mall; (2) Istana and Heritage Centre. View (a) shows Bussorah Mall leading to Sultan Mosque. Its palm trees, dome-shaped lights, and “Islamic” paving patterns are designed to evoke a Middle Eastern ambience. Photo by author. For view (b), see Figure 13. For view (c), see Figures 17 and 18.

**FIGURE 13 (RIGHT).** Tourist sign at the Malay Heritage Centre in the former Istana (Palace). The new construction includes the large landscaped forecourt with its formal circular walkway and fountain, and ancillary buildings. The aerial view approximates view (b) in Figure 12. Photo by author.

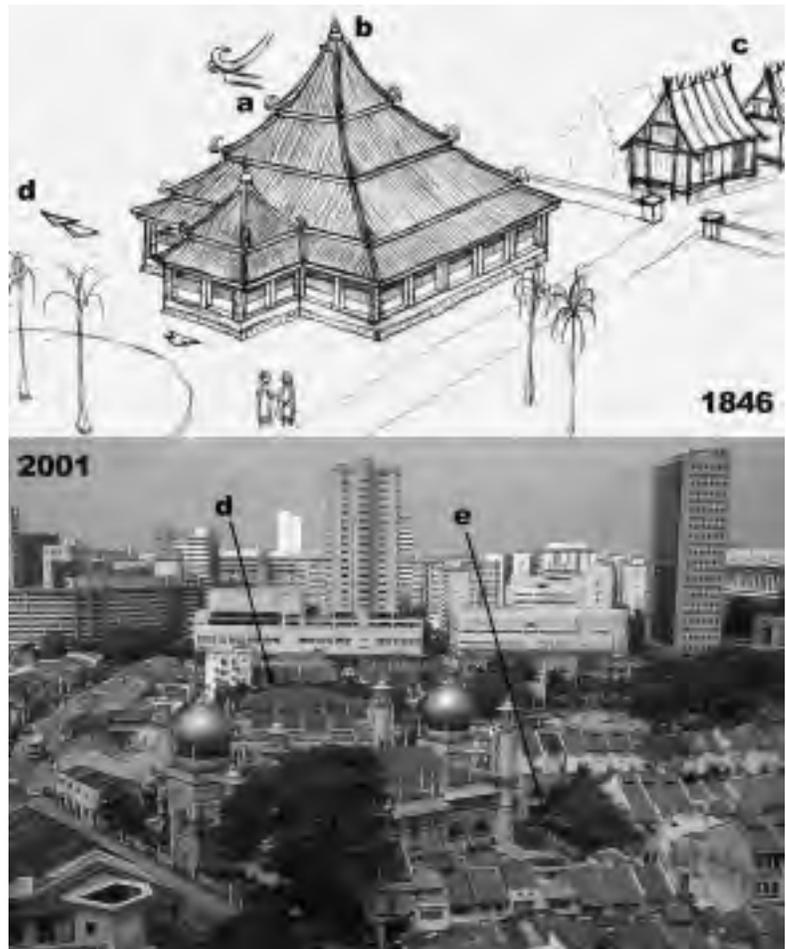
Javanese community, nor any trace of their former activities and enterprises. Even Pondok Jawa, their cultural and community hall, where *wayang wong* (classical opera), music, and shadow theater were staged, has been demolished. The expunction of streets at Kampung Rochor with such names as Jalan Bugis and Palembang, Java and Sumbawa Roads means that any previous memory of these various Malay-Indonesian communities has likewise been erased.

Moreover, Bussorah Mall is today “enhanced by various cultural embellishments” which extend the Saracenic fantasy of the colonial era. According to one newspaper account, these include “dome-shaped lampshades to bring out the Islamic flavour of the area and the planting of palm trees to evoke a Middle Eastern ambience.”<sup>28</sup> The fabricated Middle Eastern character has even been extended to the touting of “Arabic cafes [sic]” in brochures produced by the tourism board. Several new Middle Eastern eating places have indeed opened since 2001, among them a Lebanese and a Turkish restaurant and Moroccan- and other Arab-themed cafés (FIG.15). But, historically, South Indian Muslim coffee shops, Minangkabau (West Sumatran) Nasi Padang restaurants, and Javanese Nasi Rawon eateries have been the predominant eating places in the district for several generations (FIG.16).



Kampung Gelam’s second architectural project, the Malay Heritage Centre, is one of four “ethnic heritage centres” approved in Parliament in January 1993.<sup>29</sup> It today occupies the Istana, a modest two-story Palladian bungalow built around 1840 by Sultan Ali (son of the sultan installed by the British) to replace an earlier timber palace. Work by the CPG with assistance from the STB to restore, alter, and add to this building began soon after it was acquired by the Singapore

**FIGURE 14.** *Sultan Mosque.* Top: original tiered-roof mosque on the site, begun circa 1824, showing (a) roof ridge sular bayung ornamental ends, (b) finial, (c) buildings of Kampung Kaji (today's Bussorah Mall), and (d) direction of the Palace. Drawing by author based on J. Perkins, *Kampong Glam: Spirit of a Community* (Singapore: Times Publishing, 1984), p.12. Below: Present-day Saracenic mosque, begun in 1924, showing (d) the Palace, and (e) Kampung Kaji (Bussorah Mall). Photo by author.



**FIGURE 15.** *Baladi Lebanese Cuisine* is one of several new hyper-traditional Middle Eastern-themed restaurants that have appeared in Kampung Gelam since 2001. They are allied through the Kampong Glam Business Association, whose “overall aim is to showcase Arab culture.” See K. Husain, “Arabian Nights in Kampong Glam,” [app.amed.sg/internet/amed/spoesm/MidFlavor.asp](http://app.amed.sg/internet/amed/spoesm/MidFlavor.asp). Photo by author.



**FIGURE 16.** Examples of older eating places in Kampung Gelam: (a) a Minangkabau (West Sumatran) Nasi Padang eatery; and (b) an Indian Muslim eatery. Photos by author.

government in 1995, and the center officially opened in 2005.

In a manner similar to the creation of “landscape spectacle” at Bussorah Mall, the Istana was stripped of all accretions. Lean-tos added beneath its eaves to shield its windows from the sun and rain (which once resembled a lower roof tier) were removed, and an annex built to one side was demolished. All accretions to the palace compound and its perimeter walls were likewise removed. This cleansing of actual living conditions was extended to the Istana’s large forecourt, which was eventually rebuilt with elaborate “formal landscaping,” paved walkways, and a central fountain that doubles as a stage for cultural performances when the water is turned off (FIG.17).<sup>30</sup>

So carefully constructed is this reinvented landscape that even the discovery of old boulder foundations within the compound during an archaeological dig has not been accorded the degree of importance it deserves.<sup>31</sup> Evidence of this dig and its findings were not allowed to be left exposed, or interfere with the immaculately landscaped grounds. The restoration project has, in sum, exceeded any effort to simply return the palace to its former grandeur; it has added new signifiers of regal splendor and exclusivity that never existed.

The stated purpose of this transformation was to create “a visitor centre and museum to showcase Malay history, culture and heritage, as well as the contributions and aspirations of the community towards nation-building.”<sup>32</sup> This goal was additionally seen to justify construction of “new ancillary amenities” flanking the main building (FIG.18). The architect’s statement concerning their design described typical tropical buildings with “pitched roofs and a continuous veranda edge with generous eaves.” To complement this pristine, abstract “tropical” aesthetic, two diminutive, obscure timber pavilions were also built in opposite corners of the large, heavily landscaped compound. The architect claimed these were “designed with the vernacular architectural style of Johor and Riau” — a rather questionable claim. The statement further declared:

*Thus the redevelopment of the Istana Kampong Gelam into the Malay Heritage Centre was not only about the restoration of a historical landmark, but also provided the opportunity to revitalise, reconnect and integrate the historic core of the Kampong Gelam area to its hinterland.<sup>33</sup>*

Exactly what ideological hinterland is being hinted at is anybody’s guess. Historically, the Kota Raja Club on the palace grounds once organized social events such as weekend singing performances by local and invited foreign artists in the palace grounds. There was a weekly ritual of giving of alms to children during the sultan’s walk to the mosque for Friday prayers. And shelter was provided by the royal household for the wounded during World War II, among others. But none of these vital connections to Singapore’s history and local culture have been provided space in the Istana’s spectacular, reinvented landscape.

#### SELL — RESALE VALUE, AND VALUED SELLING POINTS

The prime motivation behind this skewed approach to heritage conservation is revealed in the Singapore government’s “Committee on Heritage Report.” It outlines how the aim of heritage conservation should be to create “an ambience of enchantment,” and “a cultural environment which will stimulate and sustain intensive creative efforts in business, management and leisure.”<sup>34</sup> Heritage, in other words, relates to business and leisure, tenants and tourists — not community or social formation, let alone street trading or maintaining a lively bazaar atmosphere. According to Yeoh and Lau, the content of heritage districts is thus reduced to “architectural merit and visual integrity,” with an emphasis on spectacle.<sup>35</sup>

Artificiality can thus be seen as deriving from a state obsession with economic return. Yeoh and Lau have argued

**FIGURE 17.** *The distractions of “spectacle”: a dance performance in the Malay Heritage Centre’s landscaped forecourt, 2006. Photo by author.*



**FIGURE 18.** *Transformation of the Istana into a Malay Heritage Centre. (1) New ancillary buildings. (2 and 3) Timber pavilions in the landscaped forecourt. Photos by author.*

this first became apparent in the URA's Tanjong Pagar pilot project, where old shophouses, restored to "pristine beauty," were "specially packed, designed and presented," and where "ethnic look" bus shelters were built.<sup>36</sup> This project has served as a precedent for other heritage districts, they argued, with subsequent policies seeking to foster "architectural splendour" and "economic viability," and engender "a new sense of envisioned, conceptual community as opposed to one that is lived or substantive."<sup>37</sup>

At both Geylang Serai and Kampung Gelam, government agencies have similarly focused on real estate value — with revenue generation serving as the ultimate indicator of success. According to Leong, this is perhaps inevitable, given that "the Singapore state operates its agencies as if they were economic enterprises." He also pointed out that these agencies are called "statutory boards," and that they are responsible for their own marketing strategies and generation of profits.<sup>38</sup> Above all, reinvented heritage sites must make money for the agencies concerned.

Nonetheless, the degree to which the state has disallowed community involvement or stakeholding, to avoid any interference with money-making, appears rather too driven by greed. Thus, newspaper accounts in the 1980s described how the HDB ignored early inquiries concerning tenancy at the Malay Village by the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce, directing it instead to await release of retail units through open bidding.<sup>39</sup>

Reputedly, plans for the Malay Village once envisioned a balance between culture and commerce. "[T]he kampung will have a mix of traditional and commercial activities," one newspaper account reported. "It is the latter, with restaurants and different types of shops selling various wares, which will keep the kampung economically viable."<sup>40</sup> However, this aim proved untenable in the face of insistence by the HDB that it make as much as possible from the project through competitive bidding for all shop spaces. Thus, the initial cultural-cum-commercial ambitions of the Malay Affairs Bureau, "to have a typical Malay setting in which the traditional arts and craft would be made and sold and where cultural shows could be held" (as well as naïve hopes for displays and demonstrations of traditional craft doubling up as retail ventures) were out-priced.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, in Kampung Gelam, where historic reinvention involved expelling existing residents, the URA announces each sale of a restored building in a section of its newsletter jubilantly titled "On Sale . . . Selling . . . Sold!"

Profits aside, the official view of the STB is that heritage districts should primarily serve to titillate tourists. This was first outlined in the TPDP, which contained the STB's plans for the years 1986 to 1990. It argued that "an appropriate definition of Singapore as a tourist destination may be as follows: 'Singapore is a composite microcosm — a unique destination combining elements of modernity with Oriental mystique and cultural heritage.'"

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Singapore Tourism Award for Best Sightseeing/Leisure/Educational Programme 2004 was conferred on an Orientalist-flavored tour called "Sultans of Spice™ — A Kampong Glam Walk." This regaled tourists with the story of "royalty snatched away too quickly," and with "curios" from a "hidden cultural enclave where Singapore's indigenous culture still thrives."<sup>42</sup>

However, despite this optimism for the value of its chosen theme, an STB survey on "appealing aspects of Singapore (1990 and 1991)," showed that less than 2 percent of respondents viewed Singapore's "exotic multi-cultural/multi-racial Oriental background" as a significant selling point.<sup>43</sup> The same document reported that the Malay-Indonesian region constituted the largest source of visitors to Singapore in 1992. And even the TPDP conceded that planned tourist attractions should be enjoyable to Singaporeans, since tourists are not inclined to visit places specifically created for them. Given such views, it is puzzling how the tourist board can still believe attractions touting "Malay ethnicity" sell.

Likewise, the management of the Malay Village may honestly believe its theme-park fabrications reflect the cultural inheritance of Singapore's Malay-Indonesian community, but discerning tourists appear unimpressed. Several websites carry unflattering reviews of the Village from backpackers and independent travelers. Published and web travel guides dedicated to independent travelers (as opposed to package-tour participants or "hyper-tourists") instead celebrate the unpretentious everyday structures of Geylang Serai and recommend visits to its market halls and alleys, brimming with goods and crowded with small shops, itinerant peddlers, and small-scale food vendors.

A contrast between two narratives on Geylang Serai is illustrative of the power of lived or experiential culture to displace the constructed sense of *kampung* nostalgia. First is a conventional portrayal of Malayness for corporate clients of a trade mission:

*This evening we transfer to Malay Village for dinner. Idyllic, serene, and high on nostalgia. . . . The culture and tradition [sic] come alive . . . the traditional abode of the Malays, the village has been touted as the only living kampung in urban Singapore. . . .*<sup>44</sup>

Compare this to *The Economist's* opinion at the "City Guide: Singapore" portion of its website:

*Avoid the Malay Village, a centre aimed at tourists, and head for Geylang Serai, with its brightly painted shophouses and lively fresh produce market. Stay near the market for Malay and Indonesian delicacies. . . .*<sup>45</sup>

Such a culture of the everyday has also begun to disrupt certain official constructs of Malayness at the Malay Village. With declining attendance at the multimedia "Legenda

**FIGURE 19.** “Everyday” transformations of the Malay Village. (1) Former “*Lagenda Fantasi*” hall, now the Good Luck Supermarket. Just above the market sign, a trace of the genie’s-head image that once promoted the show is still faintly visible on the timber-panel wall. (2) Extension sheds constructed by tenants. Photos by author.



Fantasi,” the large hall where it was once screened has now been rented to the Good Luck Supermarket (FIG.19). Its *gasing* (top-spinning) pavilion has likewise been converted into a *surau*, or small Muslim prayer house, utilized by visitors to the area, especially for congregations during the fasting month. Shopkeepers have also begun appropriating space by constructing extension sheds for shop displays, epitomized by the large tents erected at the new supermarket. For these stakeholders, the Malay Village’s ideological version of Malay “living culture” is irrelevant. Geylang Serai’s living culture is for them represented by Malay-Indonesian shoppers and market-goers who are potential walk-in customers.

Indeed, a gradual move back to an older bazaar culture can now be discerned at the Malay Village. Borrowing Yeoh and Peng’s terms again, the attempt to foster an “envisioned, conceptual community” has failed, and the “lived, substantive” community of the area is gradually taking its place within the project’s fences. Thus, state attempts to reinvent heritage at the Malay Village have not been able to displace the conduct of daily life, and people have begun to use it in ways that test the limits of its constructed imagery.

A similar contest is evident in different forms in Kampung Gelam. For example, Kampung Glam Cafe serves as a base of sorts for the association of former residents of Kampung Kaji (Bussorah Mall). It is a coffee shop run by a member of this group. Together with other older coffee shops, this neighborhood institution has tried to negotiate a

continued presence for itself within the new upmarket consumption milieu emerging as a result of the URA’s high-priced open-tender practices.

Kampung Gelam’s character as an old, heterogeneous Muslim district is also constituted partly by such socioeconomic holdovers as its remaining Minangkabau, Javanese and Indian Muslim eateries. However, as noted earlier, these are now being threatened by a new pseudo-tradition of boutique Middle Eastern-themed restaurants and cafes. The Saracenic fabrication initiated by the landscaping of Bussorah Mall has also spawned other businesses which reinforce this invented history.

#### POLITICAL-ECONOMIC BASES OF THE HYPER-TABULA RASA OF HERITAGE

The reinvention or outright fabrication of ethnic heritage in Geylang Serai and Kampung Gelam — imposed by the Ministry of National Development and HDB in the Malay Village, and by the URA and STB in Kampung Gelam — clearly supplanted other possible uses for these areas which could have been more representative of local concerns. Nevertheless, after making clear that its fabrications were official policy, the state moved to co-opt members of the Malay political and cultural elite to “conceive of” and implement, or otherwise endorse, them. In this manner it has

tried to authoritatively reinscribe a notion of *kampung* culture in these project areas that is synonymous with a synthetic Malay race and connected to value structures that are stereotypically either rustic or regal. In the process, they have obscured the dynamic multiethnic communities that once actually existed in these places.

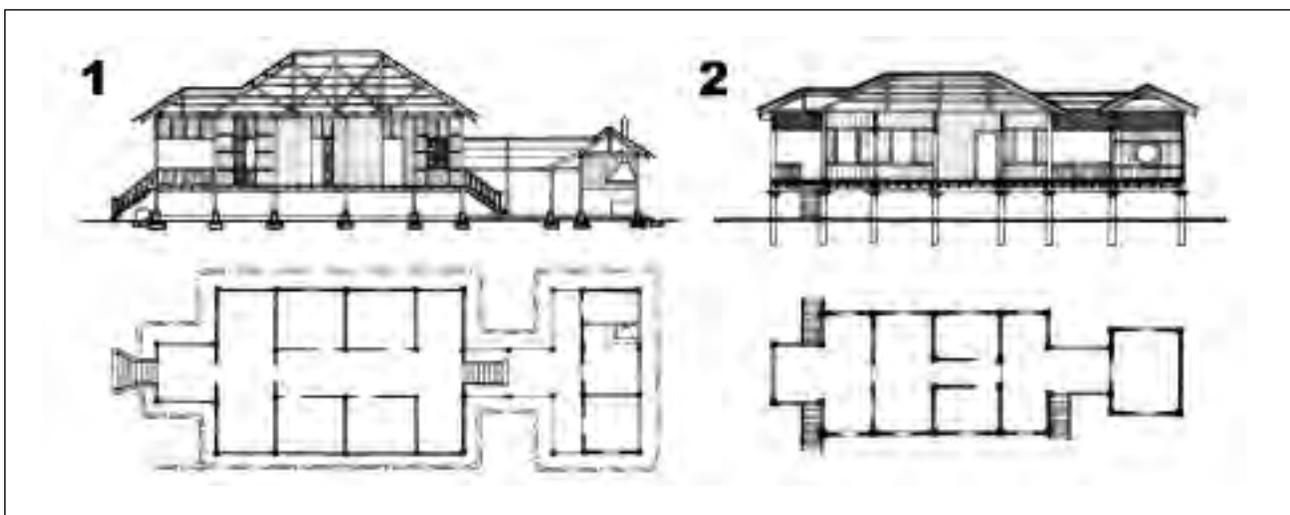
As Hadijah's extensive study on *kampungs* in Singapore has amply demonstrated, the old settlements were neither socioeconomically inert nor ethnically homogenous. Thus, many suburban *kampungs*, today glossed as "villages," were in fact pioneered by merchants or begun as residential enterprises with land purchased from the colonial municipality and Malay-type houses constructed according to formal building plans. Geylang Serai's community, like other "Malay *kampungs*," also included many Chinese. Similarly, in settlements glossed as "Chinese farming villages," Malays may have comprised as much half or more of the population.<sup>46</sup> Kampung Gelam, being Singapore's oldest urban quarter, was particularly heterogeneous. Its cosmopolitanism within the Muslim community was enshrined, for instance, in the composition of the Board of Trustees for Sultan Mosque, which included representatives from its Bugis, Javanese, Malay, North Indian, South Indian, and Arab communities.

Another body of evidence that belies the state's essentialist narrative is in the role of the Malay-type house in Singapore's residential architecture (FIG. 20). A search through building-plan archives reveals that houses of Malay typology constituted a shared formal and spatial vocabulary for architects of different backgrounds who designed for clients of a variety of ethnic groups — including Europeans living in ethnically mixed middle-class areas. In their reinvented forms, however, state agencies have constantly re-pre-

sented Malay-Indonesian historical districts and vernacular architecture as ethnically exclusive. The primacy of these "shared forms" in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Singapore, and their position as the common architectural language of Singapore houses across ethnic and socioeconomic lines, has thereby been rendered impotent. It has now even become possible, and somewhat customary, to portray these common older forms as of interest only as evidence of ethnic heritage.

Through their architectural and landscaping choices and manipulations, state-sponsored ethnic districts have thus created ideologically inflected portrayals of Malay-Indonesian urban space which seek to selectively erase or obscure history by over-writing the built landscape. As Upton has pointed out, the various choices of "traditional values, authentic forms, [and] undiluted identities" in portrayals of "heritage" and "tradition" are all in truth shaped by "strategic political positions." As he then concludes, "the focus of critical analysis begins to shift away from cultural effects [of notions of authenticity] and to move toward political-economic causes."<sup>47</sup> As Leong has pointed out, this is especially the case in Singapore, where "government, public bureaucracies and political party are virtually synonymous institutions," to the extent that "the state eventually dominates every institutional sphere of social life."<sup>48</sup>

In particular, official policies of "multiculturalism" implicitly emphasize ethnicity as an important category of identity, fostering essentialist notions to ensure the distinctiveness of each group — a condition Benjamin has termed "cultural involution."<sup>49</sup> Such efforts can also be interpreted according to AlSayyad's three discrete phases of attitude change toward heritage and tradition. In this sense, the divi-



**FIGURE 20.** Examples of Malay-type houses in Singapore: (1) built in 1920 at Lorong 18 Geylang Road (eastern suburb) for M. Salleh (Malay) by architect H.A. Puteh (Malay); and (2) built in 1895 at Tajong Rhu (in Kallang Bay, opposite Kampung Gelam port town) for Lim Tay Yam (Chinese). Graphic by author based on Singapore Building Plans 1884–1946, collection, Central Library, National University of Singapore.

sive portrayals of Malay-Indonesian identity being perpetuated in Singapore — via nostalgic notions of rural *kampungs*, “exotic” Arab-Oriental imagery, and former regal splendor — are merely extensions of colonial stereotypes, wherein “local identity [is] violated, ignored, distorted or stereotyped.”<sup>50</sup>

The stereotypes perpetuated in these cultural tourism districts implicitly situate Malays as the “other” to the practical Chinese. But, more generally, they illustrate AlSayyad’s claim that, between the two possible cultural outcomes of globalization, “capitalism thrives on the construction of difference, [and] the present era of economic universalism will only lead to further forms of division, in which culture will become the globally authoritative paradigm for explaining difference and locating the ‘other’.”<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the Malay Village’s invented rural environment crystallizes an imagined Malay rural idyll that articulates a nostalgic-generic social memory of *kampung* life. And the restored Istana and Bussorah Mall give the false impression that Kampung Gelam was once a settlement centered on a dominant royal court and a Saracenic mosque. This not only allows erasure of its history as the earliest port town in nineteenth-century Singapore, but allows removal of all reference to its vital community of Malay-Indonesian merchants, whose remembrance would require discomfiting reference to Kampung Rochor’s expunction.

In the architectural choices and the framing of tourist experiences at both Geylang Serai and Kampung Gelam, Malay identity is also recast in ways divorced from any urban economic milieu, echoing colonial-era stereotypes of the “lazy native.”<sup>52</sup> In its place, a picture of traditionalist stasis is inserted. Like the Malay Village’s orchestrated experience, the recentering of Kampung Gelam around a former sultan’s palace thus frames an obliquely derogatory view of what a government website calls “Malay traditions and lifestyle practices [which] have stood strong against modernisation.” Meanwhile, fabricated notions of a spectacular regal culture there are contrasted with the “toil and tribulations” of the Chinese, as emphasized in Singapore’s Chinatown Heritage Centre.<sup>53</sup> Such emphasis on royal pomp and the framing of a Saracenic landmark at Kampung Kajai using Bussorah Mall’s fabricated Middle Eastern ambience leaves no room for social memory of an actual urban Malay-Indonesian maritime-trading community.

On the one hand, these fabrications that willfully ignore history and exaggerate the Malay as the “other” may simply be the outcome of the expedient cultural abbreviations needed to project the naive “Oriental mystique” demanded by the tourism board’s Exotic Asia theme. Yet one might also see more deliberate motives behind these fabrications that supplant a particular history of urban economic enterprise and heterogeneous lived culture with simplified notions of the rural and the regal.

First, such reinventions serve the state’s interest. The expunction of these neighborhoods can be made to seem justifiable if they are posthumously remembered — even cele-

brated — as ethnic enclaves that were anomalous within an emerging modern milieu.

Second, the stereotypical reinventions help create a fiction of Malay geographical separateness. Several writers have described a “Malay cultural-weakness orthodoxy” or a “cultural-genetic deficit thesis” by which the state persuades Malays “to see their internal cultural attributes as responsible for their socio-economic problems.”<sup>54</sup> In this regard, ethnic-district narratives help support attribution of blame for the present peripheral position of Malays on “Malay culture,” rather than what Chih has called “structural constraints upon their geographical and economic mobility as an ethnic group.”<sup>55</sup>

Third, the state’s “corporatist management of ethnicity,” as Brown has described it, relies on the state’s ability to engineer for itself a role as the sole, indispensable arbiter of ethnicity. As this article has tried to demonstrate, reinvented “ethnic districts” may constitute the physical counterpart of the socio-political bodies which, Brown has noted, have been “isolated, engineered, then reassembled.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, their reinvention results in a deemphasizing of the significance of alternative, vernacular contexts of interethnic intercourse; or, better still, in a re-presentation of them as ethnically pure entities in the name of cultural tourism. Ethnic affiliation is thus restructured from being fundamentally behavioral (embedded in living culture), to being ideological (tied to a set of designated symbols).

In effect, then, cultural commodification for tourism provides justification for extending an initially colonial discourse on the “native.” As Kahn has written, this has been internalized, naturalized and disseminated by colonial-educated Malay elites.<sup>57</sup> In Singapore, it has also become atavistically propagated as part of a “cultural and heritage experience of offerings.” These stereotypes, which apparently also coincide with certain notions essential to political expediency, are knowingly or unknowingly abetted by the state agencies involved in producing ethnic districts. As Ooi has observed:

*. . . although [the tourism board] does not have an explicit social engineering agenda, it works closely with other state institutions . . . to allow or promote certain tourism activities . . . [and] economic and institutional resources are mobilized to achieve and maintain [its] goals.<sup>58</sup>*

#### ORCHESTRATING A SENSE OF LOSS

As this article has tried to show, recent tourist-oriented projects in Geylang Serai and Kampung Gelam have selectively applied generic Malay and Arab symbols to the reconstruction of important historical sites. These seek to materially express official constructs of ethnicity that reinforce and solidify latent stereotypical imaginings about Singaporeans of diverse Malay-Indonesian descent and varied economic backgrounds. This effort is intended to be both instructive and authoritative.

Initially, such efforts to redefine the sense of Malay ethnic heritage were coercive. But, by default, these impositions now possess legitimacy and increasing potency as important expressions of identity, situating the Malay ethnic group within the national image and imagination. For this state-sponsored fabrication, the Malay community is expected to be rightfully grateful.

The following comment in 1996 by a 39-year-old Malay sales manager, who admonished Malay readers of the official English-language daily, *The Straits Times*, to help the Malay Village, provided a chilling illustration of the pangs of guilt that fabrications of ethnic heritage can induce:

*It is high time we accord the village the status of a symbol of the Malay culture. It is no point labelling it as a white elephant when we, on our part, have not done anything to contribute towards realising the dream of a cultural showcase. If the existing management is serious in realising this dream, then the Malay community should support it.<sup>59</sup>*

Meanwhile, in a section titled “About Us” on its website, the Malay Heritage Centre declares its indebtedness for the

preemptory move by a visionary government benevolently concerned about culture, heritage and history:

*With the main focus of today's society on development and industrialisation, the loosening of cultural roots and diminishing of historical links are inevitable. The Government had foreseen this detrimental trend and has encouraged the various communities in Singapore to establish their own cultural heritage centres to showcase their heritage, culture and history, especially targeting the future generation.<sup>60</sup>*

It appears that hyper-traditional fabrications attain greater persuasive power, and can be compellingly and wholeheartedly enjoined, in precisely such conditions of cultural amnesia where a pervasive sense of loss exists, or is perceived to exist. Incidentally, as the case of Geylang Serai and Kampung Gelam shows, invented representations of identity which contradict or ignore historical reality can be aided by the passage of several decades between original expunction and eventual reconstruction.

## REFERENCE NOTES

1. The English “compound” is etymologically derived from *kampung*. It entered English via earlier Dutch and Portuguese versions. In British colonial documents it was initially spelled “campong.”
2. Linguistically, for example, most have now adopted the Malay language (formerly the region’s and colonial Singapore’s *lingua franca*) as a mother tongue. Three generations ago, other languages, such as Bugis, Javanese, and Baweanese, were still spoken. Indeed, in 1833 an English-Malay-Bugis dictionary was deemed sufficiently necessary that one was published in the fourteen-year-old colony of Singapore. This interesting dictionary was called *Vocabulary of the English, Bugis, and Malay Languages: Containing about 2000 Words*. See the PDF available online from National Library Board, “Singapore Heritage Collection,” Singapore Pages, [www.nlb.gov.sg/CPMS.portal?\\_nfpb=true&\\_pageLabel=CPMS\\_page\\_RL\\_LKC\\_singaporeSEA](http://www.nlb.gov.sg/CPMS.portal?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=CPMS_page_RL_LKC_singaporeSEA).
3. B. Yeoh and W.P. Lau, “Tanjong Pagar as Landscape Spectacle,” in B. Yeoh and L. Kong, eds., *Portraits of Places* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995), p.55.
4. See B.H. Chua, “Nostalgia for the Kampung,” in *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.152–67.
5. The phrase “colonial grid” was used by the photographer Simryn Gill, in a conversation about the murals of Singapore’s Tanjong Pagar Railway station, which portray ethnic groups according to stereotypes about their geographic habitat and activities.
6. “Sightseeing and Cruise,” Singapore Tourism Board, <http://app.stb.com.sg/asp/str/stro1.asp>.
7. R. Koolhaas and B. Mau, “Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis . . . or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa,” in *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam: OIO Publishers, 1995), p.1035.
8. For the early nineteenth-century history of Kampung Gelam, see Imran bin Tajudeen, “Reading the Traditional City in Maritime Southeast Asia: The Port Town of Gelam-Rochor-Kallang 1810–1842,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture*, 8 (2005), pp.1–25.
9. For a discussion of this, see K.H. Toh, “Spatialization of Power,” *Architecture Journal*, 5 (1991), pp.78–87.
10. See P. Devasahayam, “Geylang Serai: The Malay Emporium of Singapore,” B.A. thesis, National University of Singapore, 1985.
11. Yeoh and Lau, “Tanjong Pagar as Landscape Spectacle,” p.54.
12. D. Brown, “The Corporatist Management of Ethnicity in Contemporary Singapore,” in G. Rodan, ed., *Singapore Changes Guard* (Melbourne & New York: Longman Cheshire, St. Martins Press, 1993).
13. K.S. Yap, “Malay Village Should Take Cue from Hawaii,” *The Straits Times*, July 2, 1993, Forum section, p.36.
14. Statement from AKTC, quoted in ArchNet Digital Library: Geylang Serai Malay Village, [http://archnet.org/library/sites/one-site.tcl?site\\_id=4096](http://archnet.org/library/sites/one-site.tcl?site_id=4096) (accessed Oct. 12, 2006).
15. L. Kong and B. Yeoh, “Urban Conservation in Singapore: A Survey of State Policies and Popular Attitudes,” *Urban Studies*, Vol.31 No.2 (1994), pp.247–65.
16. M.R. Haryati, “Geylang Serai Malay Village: Conservation or Theme Park?” Ph.D. diss., National University of Singapore, 1999, p.44 and footnote 68.
17. A specific form of the bungalow in the “Malay type” existed in the Straits of Melaka

- region. The Malay vernacular dwelling combined traditional form, layout and construction with modern materials and new social needs and form. See Figs. 10a, 10b and 20.
18. Haryati, "Geylang Serai Malay Village," pp.39,34.
19. Quoted from the brochure, "Malay Village: Geylang Serai, Colors of Our Kampung," Malay Village Pte. Ltd. (undated).
20. Data from Haryati, "Geylang Serai Malay Village," p.39.
21. Statement from AKTC, quoted in ArchNet Digital Library: Geylang Serai Malay Village, [http://archnet.org/library/sites/one-site.tcl?site\\_id=4096](http://archnet.org/library/sites/one-site.tcl?site_id=4096) (accessed Oct. 12, 2006).
22. Singapore Tourism Board, "What To See: Ethnic Quarters — Geylang Serai," [http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what\\_to\\_see/ethnic\\_quarters/geyland\\_serai.html](http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what_to_see/ethnic_quarters/geyland_serai.html) (accessed Oct. 11, 2006).
23. K.P. Tan, "Ethnic Representations on Singapore Film and Television," in A.E. Lai, ed., *Beyond Rituals and Riots: Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004).
24. L. Kong, "Inventing Cultural Heritage in Singapore," in L. Jodogne, ed., *Views on the Urban Landscape* (Antwerp: Pandora, 1998), pp.114–24.
25. Haryati, "Geylang Serai Malay Village," p.46.
26. Yeoh and Lau, "Tanjong Pagar as Landscape Spectacle," p.51.
27. "Bussorah Shophouse Buzz," and "Kampung Glam Historic District," *Skyline* (URA), (Sept./Oct. 2004), pp.11–13.
28. *The Straits Times*, April 18, 1992; also quoted in Kong and Yeoh, "Urban Conservation."
29. At that time the Singapore government had pledged to "provide buildings charging a nominal rent to Singapore's Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian communities for heritage centres," and had agreed to support their endowment on a dollar-for-dollar basis up to stipulated limits. "The Chinese will receive up to \$5m, the Malays \$2m, the Indians \$1m and the Eurasians \$250,000." See "Will It Become a White Elephant?" *The Straits Times*, Feb. 22, 1993.
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32. "The Istana Kampong Gelam Malay Heritage Centre," p.105.
33. Ibid.
34. "The Committee on Heritage Report," 1988, p.26, as quoted in Yeoh and Lau, p.58.
35. Yeoh and Lau, "Tanjong Pagar as Landscape Spectacle," p.58.
36. *Skyline*, Jan/Feb 1989, p.9, as quoted in Yeoh and Lau, "Tanjong Pagar as Landscape Spectacle," p.59; and *Skyline*, Nov/Dec 1988, pp.6–7, as quoted in *ibid.*, p.53.
37. Yeoh and Lau, "Tanjong Pagar as Landscape Spectacle," p.54.
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39. Z. Ibrahim, "Malay Cultural Village to Open Soon — But Some Businessmen and Community Leaders Say They Still Do Not Know How It Will Be Run," *The Straits Times*, Nov. 22, 1989, p.25.
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