



What about a shophouse with giraffes and elephants?

What would heritage conservationists say to the outlandish facade of this jungle-themed restaurant?

Named Jungle Tandoor, the North Indian restaurant's decor features protruding heads of giraffes and elephants, while life-sized figurines of Red Indian men guard its entrance.

But the look of this Little India conserved shophouse is one which meets Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) guidelines.

"We evaluated this case and allowed it because the decorations do not cover or obscure the key architectural features of the building such as the windows, window canopies, columns, and ventilation vents.

"The decorations such as the artificial rock and the animals are located where business signs are normally allowed," URA tells The New Paper on Sunday.

We asked members of the public what they thought.

Says Miss Grace Ho, 29, an undergraduate: "I don't like this (Jungle Tandoor's design). I like the Blu Jaz graffiti more because I think graffiti shows an expression of vibrancy.

"But I feel that as long as (the jungle theme) is not demeaning, people should be able to do what they want."

She adds that while the call that the authorities have to make is "a tough one", not allowing shophouse owners to customise their own property makes it seem like we're living in a "gated community".

Mr Adrian Lim, 35, editor of a trade publication, agrees.

"Personally, I don't like things which are sterile-looking, and this includes rows of shophouses which look exactly the same.

"To me, that has no character. Even if



APPROVED: The decor of this North Indian restaurant, which is within a conserved shophouse, meets the URA guidelines.

you paint the shophouses back to pastel shades, you can't truly bring the past back.

"I think artists and shophouse owners should be able to express themselves," he says.

Travel agency owner Anna Koh finds Jungle Tandoor's design "eye-catching" and "bold".

"I like it! Who could miss or forget a place like this? It looks bold, creative, and fun. We should support expressions of creativity, as long as they aren't offensive.

"Perhaps the Government can retain a few shophouses in its original state, but they should mean something - maybe they were once the homes of famous people?"



HISTORY IN COLOUR: Shophouses done up with bright murals, like the Blu Jaz Cafe (far left) in Haji Lane.

TNP PICTURES: MOHD ISHAK

Colour me confused

Blu Jaz Cafe's bright blue mural pits the idea of identity against modernity

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Colour, it seems, is only tint-deep.

It changes the complexion of a structure. But scratch deeper, and it also evokes emotion.

This was the case in the kerfuffle behind a bold mural painted on one structure in a district rich with heritage.

The shophouse, Blu Jaz Cafe, stood out - as a sore thumb or as a symbol of creativity, depending on which side of the fence you're on.

The appropriateness of a bright blue mural, which covers the Haji Lane shophouse, has split heritage conservationists and lovers of modern culture down the middle.

And it has prompted the Urban Redevelopment

Authority (URA) to re-think its guidelines on what is acceptable - or not - for conserved buildings.

In January, the URA issued new guidelines for the conservation of shophouses, encouraging owners or occupiers to consider pastel shades to reflect the look of the buildings in previous eras.

In the online document, the Blu Jaz mural was used as an example of strong patterns or murals which obscured the architectural features of the building, which is not recommended.

URA can impose a fine of up to \$200,000, a jail term of up to a year, or both, if the guidelines are breached.

Two days ago, the URA came out to say that there are exceptions to the guidelines, and the Blu Jaz mural would be one of them.

Now, the guidelines have been sent back to the

drawing board. The online document has since been taken down.

A URA spokesman said that the online guidelines are currently being refined to clarify some issues that have been brought to their attention.

In re-looking the guidelines, policymakers would have to grapple with a tough issue: Identity or modernity?

What does conserving elements of Singapore's history really mean, and how should it be regulated?

The URA has gazetted more than 7,000 buildings for conservation, including the entire historic districts of Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Little India. About 6,500 of these are shophouses.

Besides the historic districts, conservation shophouses can be found in many parts of the island, including Jalan Besar, Joo Chiat and Katong.

Says specialist consultant in architectural conservation Ho Weng Hin: "The meaning of conserving a historic district is anchored to its heritage character, and to convey the social, cultural significance and unique sense of place to the community and visitors."

Dr Ameen Talib, owner of Middle-Eastern restaurant Cafe Le Caire on Arab Street, agrees: "Conserving an area is more than just preserving the facade of buildings."

"It's about retaining the character of Kampong Glam, which has much to do with the heritage of the Malay and Arab community here."

Earlier this year, Dr Talib spearheaded a no-alcohol movement in the area.

Mr Ho says he is not against public art such as mural paintings. They have a place, he says, in "enlivening the city and heritage quarters, but this is only when sensitively executed in good taste".

He adds: "Artwork on shophouses can work if the mural paintings are done on a blank side and back walls of the historic buildings, and do not obscure the legibility of key architectural features."

The Blu Jaz mural overwhelms the facade, has little to do with the historical context, and may undermine the original intention and efforts of

conservation, argues the adjunct architecture lecturer at the National University of Singapore.

Ms Aileen Tan, who runs Blu Jaz cafe and who commissioned the mural about two years ago, says the piece is an overflow of the cafe's interior design concept.

The theme of Blu Jaz, and two other food outlets she owns on Haji Lane, focuses on "eclectic art".

"We have no more interior walls to work on, therefore, we decided to move the art spaces out onto the exterior walls," she explains.

"We strongly feel that art should not be confined to only the four walls of art galleries, art studios or museums.

"Art must be shared with the people," she says. Others share her view.

If the art piece is well-planned and aesthetically-pleasing, there is little reason why it should not be allowed, they claim.

Blogger Visakan Veerasamy, 22, says: "Architectural anomalies are part of what make urban life interesting.

"Conservation shouldn't mean keeping things in an ancient bubble, artificially frozen in time."

Naval architect Jerome Lim, 47, who loves history and has conducted heritage walks for the National Library Board, says: "In trying to preserve a piece of Singapore's history, we shouldn't stop ourselves

from doing something fun, especially if it reflects what the neighbourhood has become.

"Haji Lane has become a slightly bohemian, quirky, and fun place. I think the mural reflects that.

"We must also recognise that new businesses have moved into these shophouses and they now have new uses."

Associate Professor Margaret Chan, who teaches visual arts at Singapore Management University says: "While URA's efforts to preserve the traditional architecture of old shophouses is to be applauded, we could perhaps be more open to artistic efforts that do not alter the structure of the building," she says.

She questions what it truly means to retain the character of a building. "What is character, and does it necessarily point to a bygone era?"

"Can we not argue that the brightly painted shophouses also reflect the Singapore character - the energy of today's young Singaporean?"

At the end of the day, are neon colours and bright artwork meat or poison to a shophouse earmarked for conservation?

It's a call policymakers will have to grapple with.

- additional reporting by Audrey Tan

Haji Lane: What it could have been/ NEXT PAGE

We ask 50 Singaporeans:

Q: Is the Haji Lane shophouse mural an eyesore?

"It's kind of ugly but I guess it represents the newer generation. This is OUR heritage."
 - Miss Samantha Ann Young, student, 18, student

"Yes, I find the building disturbing. It shows anger."
 - Ms Shalini Duggal, 42, housewife

YES: 18% **NO: 82%**

"It's not an eyesore. If anything, it makes the place even more unique. Street art belongs on the streets, not in galleries."
 - Bonnie Wui, 20, student

"It's more of an art form. Singapore needs to let us express ourselves through our own ways."
 - Tan Lai Yi, 16, student

"I think the way it is renovated is nice. It looks better with a lot of colour and patterns."
 - Mdm Chew Poh Heng, 73, retiree

"It's okay. It's like a cartoon."
 - Mr Teo Tong Soon, 59, bus captain

"It has a very nice, vibrant colour that makes it stand out. I think it'll draw people's attention."
 - Mr Lim B. T., 45, who works in project development