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A towering achievement

By Daven Wu

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Rising above a relatively flat neighbourhood of colonial-era houses and low-rise office and residential blocks, the Pearlbank condominium has been a Singapore landmark since architect Tan Cheng Siong unveiled it in 1976.

In so many ways, the building was a first, not least for its unusual hollow circular shape. At 38-storeys, it was also, at the time, the tallest residential building in Asia.

"Pearlbank bears the trademarks of early modernism. Le Corbusier's influence is written all over its façade," says Tai Lee Siang, president of the Singapore Institute of Architects. "It's also remarkable that it was designed at a time when computer-aided design was non-existent in Singapore. As a result, it reflects a greater awareness of co-ordination and sense of beauty."

Pearlbank owes much of its sleek linearity to Tan's careful resolution of space. He recalls that his inspiration for the building "came from the shape of the site, which resembles the vertical tail fin of an airplane, the panoramic views of the city centre, the nearby harbour and the sea."

Though modern architects often eschew circular-form housing, the shape has the smallest wall-to-floor ratio, making it very efficient materially. Tan says that the round form "provided, in one stroke, all the answers for a rather extreme, functional, aesthetic and formal building". Like the spokes on a wheel, Tan rotated Pearlbank's 272 units around 10 vertical walls that rise through its entire height. Along with structural columns and lift cores, this configuration facilitates the intricate massing of the internal living spaces. Tan also oriented the building's aperture – around which the service areas and cantilevered staircases are clustered – towards the west. This minimises direct penetration of the afternoon tropical heat into the building while keeping the interior hollow well-ventilated.

Though its once pristine façade is now scarred by ugly crusts of air-conditioning units, the building retains a muscular vibrancy that has not dated. American interior designer Ed Poole has lived in Pearlbank on and off since 1990. "I've always liked its brutalist look," he says. "No fake pediments, columns and frivolous decoration. It's a hard-working honest expression."



The London-based Singaporean architect Voon Wong applauds Pearlbank for being "a model for high-density living in Singapore that doesn't sacrifice views, light and air. The building is both well-considered and heroic. The arrangement of the apartments means that cross-ventilation and optimum sun-shading is achieved. What's more, its communal recreation facilities set the benchmark for later condominium developments."

Poole especially loves the window system, which "has an odd repeat pattern that expresses the internal layout of the flats within. In turn, the interlocking split levels of each flat offer spaces that overlook others, letting light enter from multiple exposures."

Still, all these architectural niceties might count for little if a proposal to sell Pearlbank goes through. For the past couple of years a battle has been waged between residents who want to sell and those, such as Poole, who want either to stay or to preserve the building. The reserve price for the sale is set at S\$500m and each owner stands to make an average 90 per cent return on investment. To go ahead,

the sale requires the consent of 80 per cent of residents and the number currently stands at just over 70 per cent. In all likelihood, if the sale proceeds, Pearlbank will be demolished and a gleaming skyscraper condominium will take its place.

The fight to preserve Pearlbank coincides with a growing sense among Singaporeans that a good part of their recent historical architecture is being lost to the booming property market. The economic pressures have stirred up strong emotions on both sides of the debate.

One of the members on the residents' sale committee reportedly said: "We don't need this kind of building. And we can't keep coming back to antiques – that's not progress." Then there are those for whom the issue must transcend profit. "Architecturally, Pearlbank represents the change from a colonial past to a modern future," Poole says. "There are very few buildings like this left from the 1970s."

For his part, Tan, now 70 and still actively designing, hopes the building will be preserved. "A large part of what we build is replaceable and mundane. But each era has its memory and icons and architecture is the proud expression of the time. Pearlbank is unique and special to me in many ways. It was born of a heroic period when Singapore was searching for its place in the sun."

There are plenty who share Tan's views. Wong believes that progress does not always involve new buildings. He says that while many architects have tried to replicate the building's design, "no development has ever been as convincingly resolved. Singapore has an exemplary record of preserving buildings from its colonial past. It is now time to review buildings from the more recent past with the same sensitivity and respect. Pearlbank is a prime candidate for such a review."

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