



CASE STUDY

Singapore | Bras Basah.Bugis

Breathing Life Back into BBB

Rapid redevelopment in the 1980s improved the quality of life in Singapore but the changes also led to a loss of vibrancy to formerly bustling districts. To inject life back into the Bras Basah.Bugis precinct, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) embarked on a 20-year plan, with a focus on encouraging walking, to bring life back to the streets again.

The Challenge

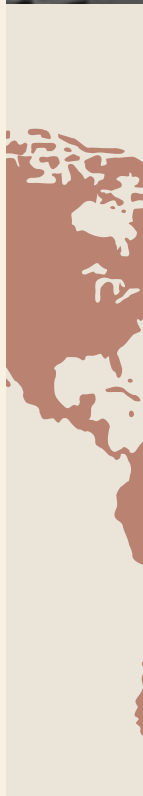
Bras Basah and Bugis are adjacent neighbourhoods in downtown Singapore. Since the mid-19th century, Bras Basah has hosted a high density of religious and educational institutions. Up till the 1970s, students thronged its myriad book shops and cinema. In contrast, Bugis was most well known in the 1950s for the spirited nightlife on Bugis Street, where locals, tourists, sailors and, most famously, transvestites gathered to eat street food, people-watch or carouse till the wee hours.

Both districts were abuzz, but like other inner city areas, the streets were congested and housing overcrowded with poor sanitation. To address these issues, the government started, from the 1960s, to demolish the city's ubiquitous but

dilapidated “shophouses”. Residents were relocated to improved public housing—sometimes within the area—while the land was redeveloped as offices, hotels and malls.

The urban renewal efforts culminated in the 1980s. Most schools left, leaving empty structures behind, while Bugis Street was levelled to build the underground MRT (mass rapid transit) system, marking the end of the street's rowdy revelries.

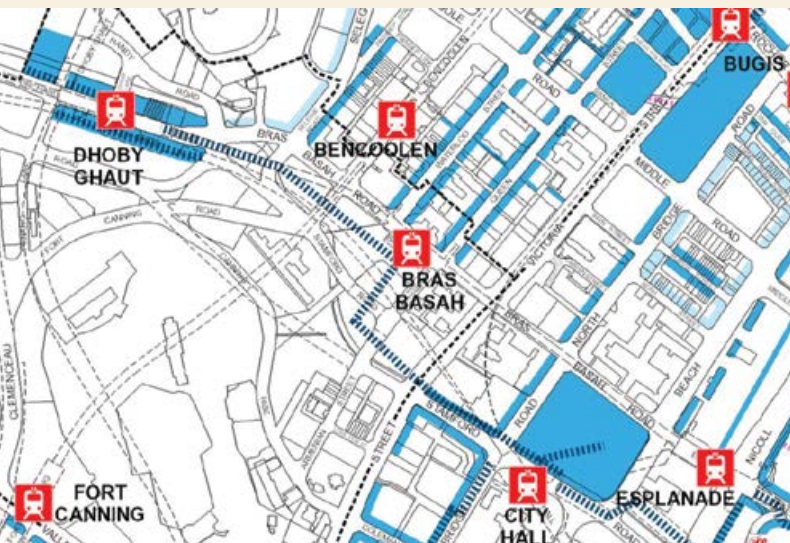
By the late 1980s, both districts had developed a new shine but were discernibly quieter and less vibrant than before.





Bugis Street undergoing redevelopment in the late 1980s.





01 The entrance of Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple after pedestrianisation of Waterloo Street.

02 Areas where "activity-generating" uses are required are indicated in blue.

03 A street party and bazaar during the Singapore Art Week.





The Solution

To rejuvenate the area, URA decided to develop it into a lively heritage, arts and learning enclave. To this end, the districts were branded as a single Bras Basah Bugis (BBB) precinct. A master plan was also drawn up to guide its development.

A key strategy to enliven BBB was to get people to walk from place to place. Measures were explored to create a pedestrian-friendly precinct with friendly, active and vibrant streets. The vision was to link up BBB by a network of pedestrian malls, covered walkways, laneways between buildings and even second-storey links, where street-level crossings are not possible, so that pedestrians can move easily and comfortably.

The earliest effort to create a pedestrian mall was in 1989 when the land above the new Bugis MRT station was sold for commercial development. URA guided the developer to retain the three old streets that intersected Bugis Street in its shopping mall to encourage human traffic and recapture the human scale of the original shophouses in its permanently accessible indoor streets.

This was followed by the pedestrianisation of parts of Albert and Waterloo Streets in 1996. These streets, home to prominent Chinese and Hindu temples, were often congested with cars and people, especially during religious festivals. URA converted

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these streets into a 700-metre pedestrian mall where festival markets and street activities could be held. This encouraged a freer flow of people, adding colour and bustle to the streets.

URA continues to work with other partners to reclaim road space for people and events, especially those with potential to draw vibrant crowds. In 2013, a portion of Queen Street was narrowed by removing kerbside parking to create expanded sidewalks, with attractive seating and paving to encourage people to hang out. The wider sidewalks makes it more conducive for arts and cultural events in the area.

Beyond pedestrian infrastructure, planners know that paths lined with shops and cafes are more walkable than paths without them. URA guidelines therefore stipulate that “activity-generating” uses such as retail, dining and entertainment are to be provided at the ground level fronting pedestrian thoroughfares along BBB’s main roads.

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As part of its conservation programme from the late 1980s, URA decided to retain BBB’s eclectic mix of heritage shophouses, schools and places of worship, alongside modern high-rise buildings and public housing. Many BBB buildings were conserved, thereby preserving the identity, beauty and human scale of adjacent streets. Former schools were also reopened as museums or other public facilities, which expanded and enriched the public realm.

URA also began clustering arts and educational institutions in BBB, reserving several plots of land for such institutions. Planners and architects developed good public places at institutions like Lasalle College of the Arts, School of the Arts (SOTA) and Singapore Management University (SMU).

BBB institutions organise a rich calendar of events, including the Singapore Writers Festival and Singapore Biennale, which draws people into their semi-public areas. In the case of BBB’s eclectic and massively popular signature event, the Singapore Night Festival, events can also spill excitingly into public spaces.

While cultural facilities draw many students, artists, tourists and others to BBB daily, planners also took care to retain BBB’s existing public housing in the master plan. This rooted community contributes to the precinct’s authenticity and vibrancy, especially after hours. Additionally, three blocks of old public flats were refurbished as a hostel for SMU’s students. This further injected a youthful population, making for a livelier BBB at night.



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- 01 The public steps at SOTA are popular with both students and passers-by.
 - 02 The Wheel House performs at SMU Campus Green during the Singapore Night Festival.
 - 03 The Waterloo Street Food Centre is a favourite haunt for locals to eat and mingle.

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The Outcome

Today, BBB is a unique mash-up of old and new. Hipster cafes sit next to traditional coffeeshops or *kopitiams*; conserved shophouses beside high-rises. You are as likely to see arty young types as older Singaporeans who chit chat at *kopitiams* or read the papers at the national library.

URA's 20-year efforts to rejuvenate BBB and to create a strong cultural identity was recognised by the Urban Land Institute (ULI) with the ULI Award for Excellence 2008 (Asia Pacific).

The ULI jury praised URA for “bringing arts, culture and education into an urban area with the combination of conservation practices and modern infill building. The pedestrian life and quality of the public realm was emphasised.”

To encourage stakeholders to make BBB even livelier, the National Heritage Board led a series of visioning workshops in 2014 with 50 commercial and non-profit organisations in BBB.

They discussed future plans, such as allowing more regular activities that spill out onto the streets and public domains, such as busking. One suggestion to close off certain streets for the 2015 Night Festival was done to great success. This has since prompted URA to consider closing parts of Armenian Street to encourage a vibrant street life. 

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- 01 Formerly Tao Nan School, the historic structure now houses the Peranakan Museum.
- 02 SAM at 8Q at Victoria Street boasts an open space that accommodates public events.
- 03 Residents can often be seen lingering in BBB's various public spaces.