

Oct 23, 2006

From disused state sites to private schools

Conversion lauded as old buildings 'age' less when used, and schools incur lower start-up costs

By [Tan Hui Yee](#), THE STRAITS TIMES



NEW USE: Restoration work is under way at the former dental institute site, now occupied by the SP Jain Centre of Management. -- LAU FOOK KONG

DOWN with the cobwebs, up goes the fresh paint - that's the new lease of life some historic buildings are getting.

Since 2003, some 13 disused state properties have been, or are being converted, into private schools. Another is in the pipeline.

Conservationists laud this make-over into facilities like classrooms and design studios for pre-war structures such as the former Institute of Dental Health off Alexandra Road and the former Central Police Station along Beach Road.

These two are, in fact, heritage buildings.

The former dental institute, which dates back to the 1930s, has since this year become the SP Jain Centre of Management. Some restoration work on its 1930s, neo-classical style block - the older of the two blocks in its compound - is still going on.

In Beach Road, the former Central Police Station is likely to house the Raffles Design Institute from next year, once an agreement is finalised.

The complex, also of 1930s vintage, was used by the police up till 2001. In its new life, it will become a campus complete with wireless Internet access and a gallery showcasing students' design works in its courtyard.

The plan by the Singapore Land Authority and the Economic Development Board to let out old state properties to private schools - some foreign - is part of Singapore's drive to give a fillip to its education industry.

Both sides benefit: Old buildings 'age' less when used, and the schools incur lower start-up costs.

SP Jain declined to reveal how much it is spending on rent and renovation work, while the Raffles Design Institute is still working out its rental and renovation bill.

Typically, leases on such state properties are short - three years renewable twice, which still leaves the Government enough flexibility in its future plans for the buildings.

Most of the other 12 buildings are also former government offices or schools.

Singapore Heritage Society president Kevin Tan likes the idea. He said it helps conserve the old buildings and 'keep the spirit of the place'.

'It's very important, if we want to keep old buildings, that they should not be abandoned or used as museums all the time,' he said.

Dr Tan added that an old building 'ages much less' when it is renovated and maintained.

Under current rules, the facade and major structures of conserved buildings cannot be altered but internal spaces can be reconfigured for new uses.

Raffles Design Institute's marketing and operations manager, Mr Ong Kai How, said the old police station's offices, with their high ceilings, were ideal for the school's design studios.

It wants to retain the buildings' 'old charm and former image of authority' and yet create a vibrant environment for its students, he said.

At SP Jain's campus, renovation at its older, neo-classical style block had to follow strict guidelines applying to conserved buildings, even though it has not been officially conserved.

Its faded white facade has been given a fresh coat of white and beige paint, while its wooden arched doors are being painstakingly restored.

Part of that block is being used as a library and cafeteria.

The vice-president for corporate relations at SP Jain, Mr Suresh Kumar, said the lush 2.8ha compound, with its many mature frangipani, banyan and rain trees, was the biggest draw for the school.

'We certainly didn't want to operate out of a shopping mall,' he said. The school will landscape the compound to create outdoor classrooms.

tanhy@sph.com.sg