

Singapore: Food Centres

The Street Tradition

To Singaporeans, and more particularly, perhaps, to Chinese Singaporeans, the street and the activities which take place in it, is the 'way' of life. All streets are used in much the same way and, usually, there is no hierarchical structure within the street pattern.

In many instances in Singapore, the sense and use of the street is further enhanced by two unique factors: the traditional "5-foot way" and the lack of footpaths. The former is the result of an edict by Raffles to his Town Committee in 1819 and, to this day, still adds another dimension to the street space and is usually an extension of both the street and the activities within the buildings. The lack of footpaths is a legacy of British colonialism, perhaps as a recognition of both the indigenous use of the streets for pedestrian movement and, of the troops who marched down them; the footpath, as such, was obviously not needed.

Of all the many, rich and diverse activities which used to take place in Singapore streets and add so much excitement to them, none was more satisfying to the food-loving locals than the itinerant hawker's stall, the traditional cart where food was served in great quantities, very fast and very cheap. These stalls had been in Singapore for as long as any one could remember.

There are over 3,000 street hawkers still left in Singapore but itineracy is now illegal, as government policy demands static and controlled locations.

Some of these locations are almost as old as Singapore itself, and some are so

popular that they seem to have been there forever, like the compact group of stalls at Wayang Street, where descendants of the original owners still ply their freshly-roasted chestnuts and seasonal lichees from China under shaky, seemingly ephemeral awnings; also those at Newton Circus.

Others are new, as the one at the Funan Centre where, on the 7th storey, shiny stainless steel and aluminium stalls have screened-off separate preparation, cooking and serving sections and where, by the time the trip around the vast, multi-coloured, glass-reinforced plastic, high-back swivel seats and airconditioned space is made (a first for Singapore), the allotted lunch-hour period is far too wasted.

Transition

The first stalls in Singapore were built lightly of timber and were itinerant; their daily and nightly street locations were determined by circumstance and opportunity. These were followed by the Hawkers' Centres, still in the open air but consisting of a collection of individual (and still often itinerant) stalls mostly made of metal. Today, as a continuation of government policy, there is the Food Centre. Here, the stalls are constructed of concrete, heavy and immovable but, sometimes, visually relieved by the ap-

These food stalls in Wayang Street still look temporary although there have been hawkers in this same location almost since Raffles' time. As the name implies, the area is part of the old theatre district of Singapore. Photograph: Andy Lai.



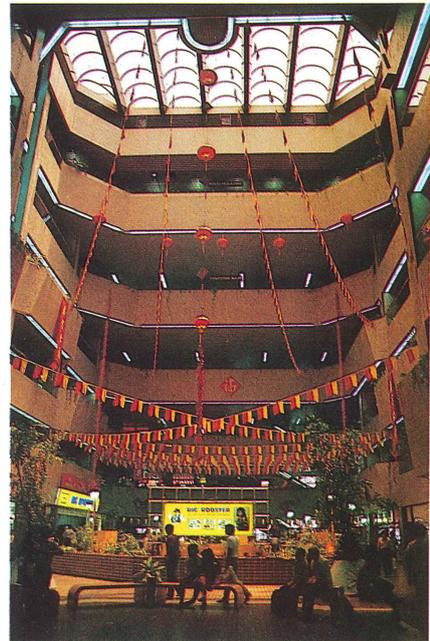
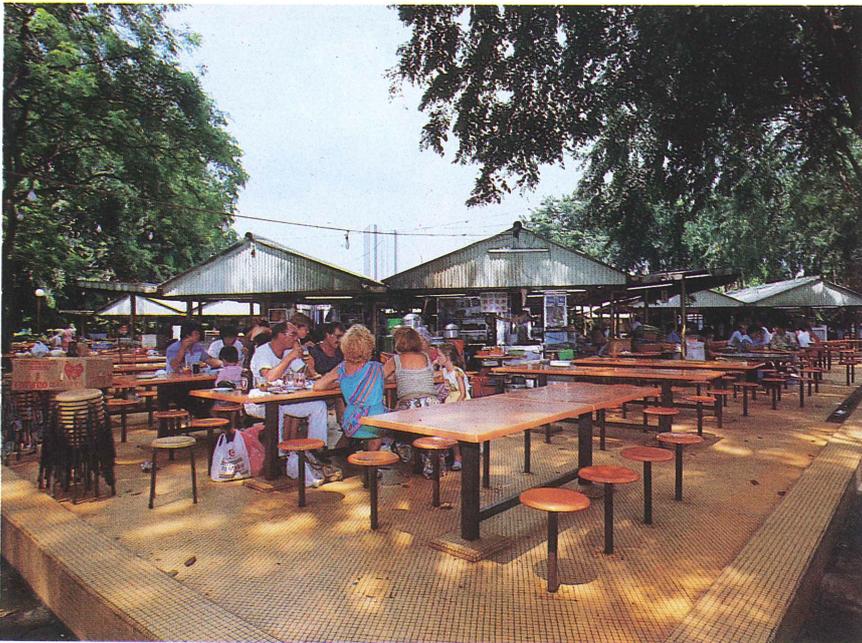
Text by
**Peter Keys and
M. Gretchen.**



Left: Chinatown's street hawkers were a part of the Singapore landscape, particularly at night, for as long as anyone could remember. Their street-side atmosphere and good food drew both tourists and Singaporeans for years until they were re-housed in a nearby, new residential development. Photograph: Arthur Lee.

Below, left: Newton Circus is the food centre most frequented by tourists, in spite of its comparative inaccessibility and its rather ramshackle appearance. Its success is more due to its size and diverse food delights than to anything else.

Below: The Funan Centre contains the latest food centre in Singapore. It is located on the 7th storey, around an atrium and is air conditioned. Although the spaces provided are generous, and the traditional stools have been replaced by differently coloured high back chairs, both the compactness and immediacy usually associated with food centres are missing. Photographs: Andy Lai.



plication of coloured tiles. They are now all roofed over and the moveable feast of the open air day-time carpark-cum-night-time hawkers' centre of yesteryear has been replaced largely by the contrived and the closed-in fast 'food' eating factory of today.

There are now over seventy food centres located around the 600 square kilometres island republic serving the 2.5 million population. They are built either by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the Housing and Development Board (HDB) or, in a few cases, by private enterprise. Their variety of choice, ease of selection, speed of serving, as well as their strategic locations and economic food, invariably ensure their success.

In Singapore where eating out is a way of life, restaurants are hard put to match Food Centres in popularity. These

old-fashioned, fast-food bazaars now housed under a modern roof, contain dozens of individual chefs still cooking their rich and varied and tasty and inexpensive, popular cuisines, from noodles (Chinese, Indian or Malay style), to fish and chips, turtle soup or a seafood dinner. They are convenient to nearly every household and are open for business most hours of the day.

The story of the evolution from itinerant hawkers to permanent food centres is really part of the larger story of the Singapore government's massive urban renewal and public housing programme which has transformed the city's skyline so radically in such a relatively short time.

Since Singapore's independence in 1959, when it faced a severe housing shortage, the HDB has provided homes for lower and middle income families.

Today, more than 80 per cent of the country's population live in high-rise apartment blocks built by the HDB and nearly three-quarters of these housing units are located in the New Towns.

There are now six New Towns, each housing between 125,000 and 250,000 people in between 25,000 and 50,000 dwelling units. The newer housing areas, in an attempt to improve their human scale, are subdivided into neighbourhoods which are further subdivided into precincts and the heart of the New Town is the Town Centre, usually located at its geographical centre; it contains shops, markets and, of course, the hawkers' centre. Hawkers' centres are also sometimes located in the neighbourhood centres so that each home is no more than a few minutes walk away.

Also since 1967, the face of down-



Left and above: Toa Payoh Food Centre, built in 1968 is one of the earliest ones in Singapore. Below, left and below: Queenstown Food Centre, built in 1981, is unusual because of its hexagonal plan shape. Photographs: Arthur Lee.



town Singapore has been transformed, first by the Urban Renewal Department of the HDB and from 1974, largely under the auspices of the URA. The procedure is that small plots of land are acquired by the Authority, consolidated into larger sites and either developed by the URA itself or auctioned for redevelopment.

In the townscape-changing process, the street hawkers are re-accommodated. It is argued that, as picturesque and convenient as they are, they are also disorganised, difficult to supervise, often unhygienic and they make inefficient use of limited and valuable land.

The first step, taken in the late 1950s and early 1960s' was to create hawkers' pitches; these were designated open areas where hawkers were allowed to bring their carts; water and refuse collection were provided. The first, permanent food centres were an extension of this pitch concept. The carts became a string

of cubicles linked under one roof with common tables set out in front.

In 1959, in Queenstown, which was the first of the new towns to be developed, a hawkers' centre was built above the wet market in the town centre. This concept was tried in several other new towns but was ultimately discarded because it was found that people disliked walking upstairs. Nevertheless, hawkers' centres are usually adjacent to the wet markets in the new towns.

Throughout the 1960s, hawkers' centres continued to be built both in the housing estates of the new towns and in the city but it wasn't until 1970, with the building of the second of the new towns, Toa Payoh, that a set of planning guidelines was drawn up by the HDB; these guidelines are still observed today. They include the ratio of stalls to dwelling units. In new towns, this ratio is one hawker's stall to 100 dwelling units; hawkers' centres which serve the whole town have

a ratio of one stall to 800 dwelling units.

The stalls are divided into morning and evening use: those for morning have a minimum of 15 stalls and, for evening, a minimum of 40 stalls. The gross area of the centre is based on 18 square metres per stall and the floor area of each stall is between 5 to 8 square metres per stall. A fixed 1.5 metre high service counter (often covered in tiles) is provided for preparing and displaying the food, with a storage compartment below.

Thus, the design of hawkers' centres has evolved from their humble beginnings to the more ambitious demands for quality and spaciousness. The early permanent structures were essentially cubicles linked under a common roof and ventilation was a problem; later, the cubicles were discarded in favour of partitions which allowed for a better flow of air.

Attention has been given, also, to the roof construction. The architects in the HDB, responsible for the design of hawkers' centres, faced the problem of allowing adequate air to circulate and letting light in while keeping out direct sunlight; at the same time the heat and fumes from cooking had to be allowed to escape, while giving patrons adequate protection from the weather.

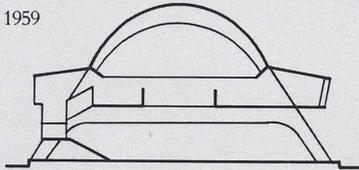
A common solution which was found

Evolution of Hawker Centre and Market Designs

Year completed/Form

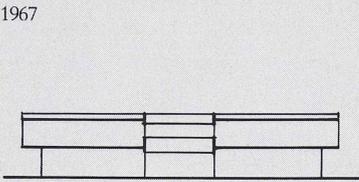
Remarks

1959



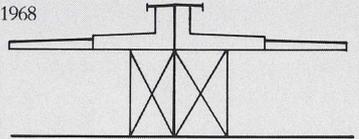
2-storey with reinforced concrete and metal roof. Food stalls are at both the longitudinal outer sides on the second storey. Location: Queenstown Duchess Estate.

1967



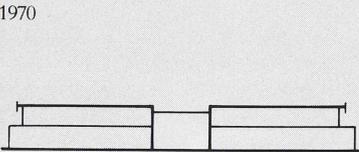
2-storey reinforced concrete structure with food stalls on both floors. There is an air well in the centre. The upper floor facade is of pre-cast grille blocks all round. Location: Redhill Extension.

1968



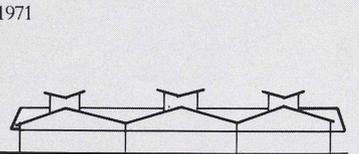
Single storey reinforced concrete shed with stalls back to back and steel cantilevered extended roofs on both sides to refreshment areas. Location: Toa Payoh.

1970



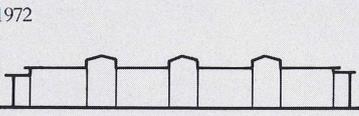
2-storey reinforced concrete structure with market on lower floor and food centre on upper floor. There is an open court in the centre of the building. Location: Queenstown.

1971



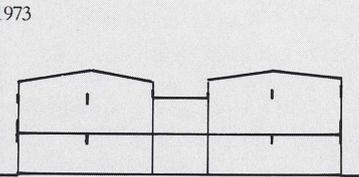
Single storey steel portal frames and metal roof with butterfly roofs and inclined metal fascias all round to the main roof eaves. Rectangular plan. Location: Kallang Basin.

1972



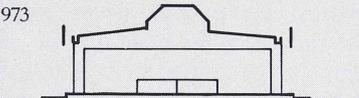
Reinforced concrete columns with steel roofs and canopies. Rectangular plan. Location: Bukit Merah Redevelopment.

1973



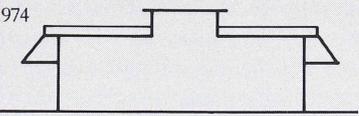
2-storey reinforced concrete structure with metal roof and fascias all round. Lock-up shops on the upper floor and food stalls on the lower floor. Location: Kallang Airport Redevelopment.

1973



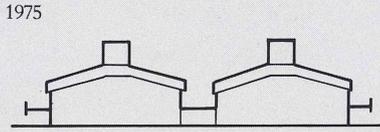
A long stretch of stalls under a steel portal frame and metal roof. Location: Henderson Hill.

1974



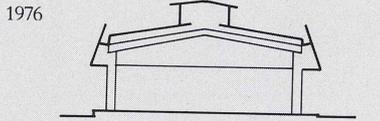
Reinforced concrete frame and roof with additional metal hoods extended all round. Location: Covent Garden.

1975



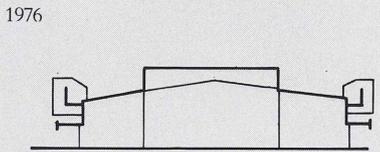
Reinforced concrete columns with steel trusses (saw tooth) and metal roof and fascias all round. Square plan. Location: Telok Blangah.

1976



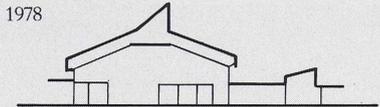
Single storey steel portal frame and metal roof with metal fascias all round. Location: Balestier Estate Redevelopment.

1976



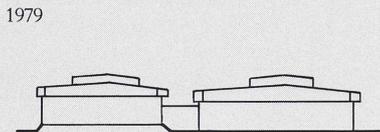
Reinforced concrete structure with fascia, canopies and metal roof. Market stalls in one half and food stalls on the other half of the rectangular building. Location: Farrer Road.

1978



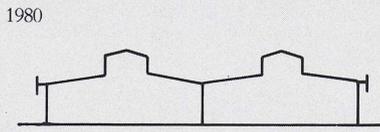
Single storey rectangular building. Location: Clementi.

1979



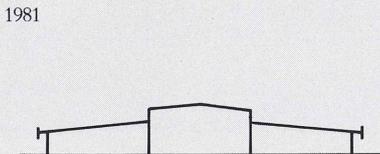
Single storey reinforced concrete columns with steel trusses and metal roof and fascias. Food centre on higher level. Location: Bedok Town Centre.

1980



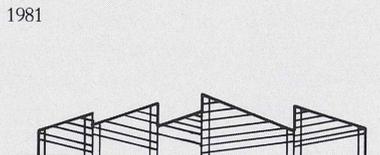
Circular reinforced concrete columns with steel trusses and metal roof and fascias. Hexagonal plans linked together. Location: Ang Mo Kio Town Centre.

1981



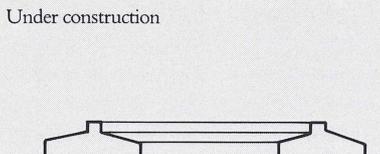
3-Hexagonal plans designed separately in a staggered manner. Circular reinforced concrete columns with steel trusses and a metal roof with metal louvred fascias all round. Location: Queenstown.

1981

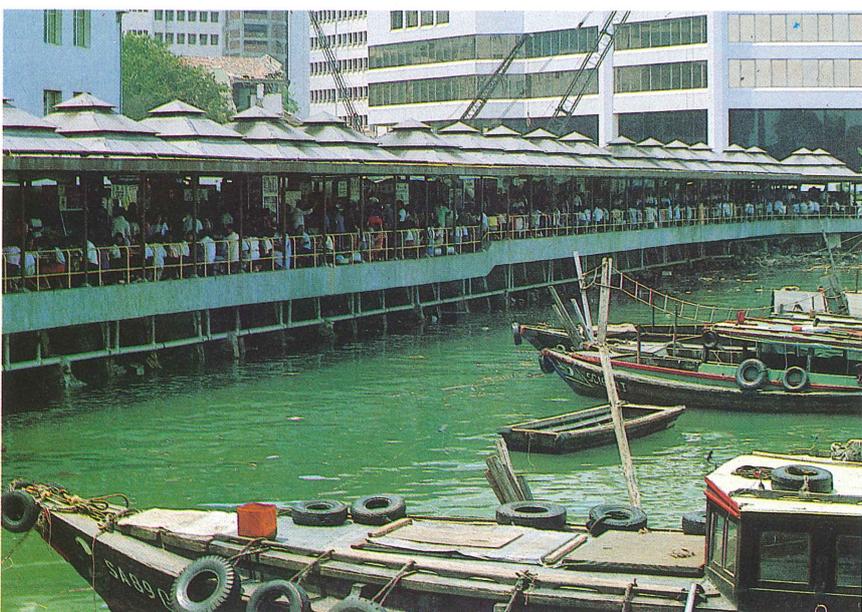
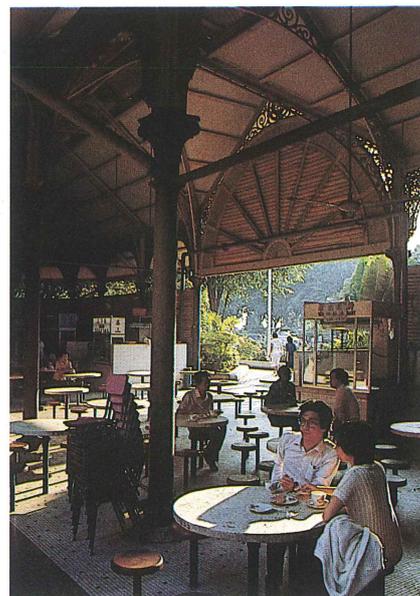
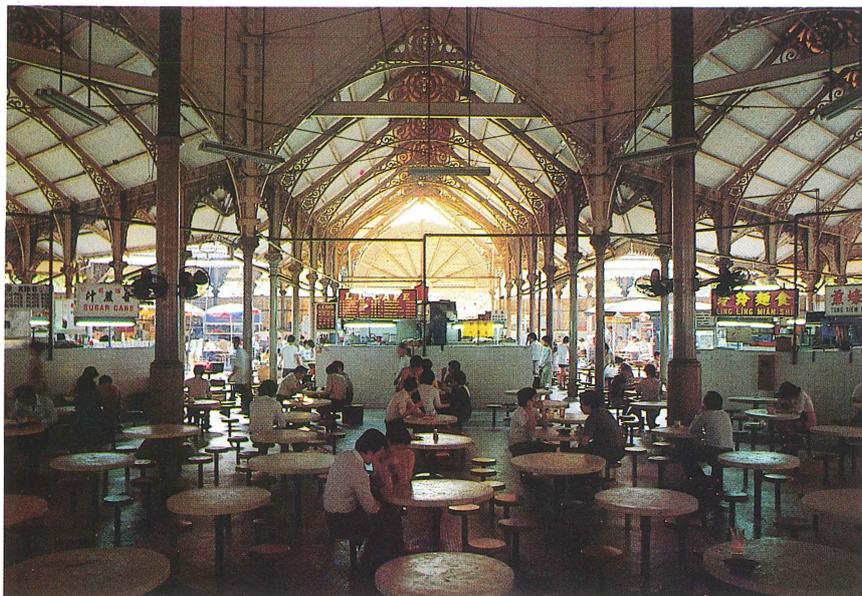


Reinforced concrete structure with steel trusses and metal roof. Longitudinal external metal fascia and inclined horizontal metal louvred cladding at the gable end. Location: Kampong Java.

Under construction



Reinforced concrete structure and fascia with metal roof and roof tiled hood all round. Circular plan and roof with open court in the centre of the building. Location: Tampines.



Above, left and above: The Telok Ayer Food Centre is still the most architecturally beautiful of them all. It has been providing fast and cheap food since 1973 when it was sensitively transformed from a wet market.

Left: Food stalls at Boat Quay on the southern banks of the Singapore River.

Below: Laguna Park Food Centre is unique because of its siting; it is in a park which is built on reclaimed land. Photographs: Arthur Lee.



is a combination of a jack-roof, louvred vents, hood and flue and/or a system of mechanical ventilation using ducts and exterior fans; eaves overhangs are very generous. After much experimentation, the minimum height is now not less than 5 metres from the floor to the underside of the roof.

Some centres are built around a courtyard, an innovation which prompted one of Singapore's most prominent food critics to write: "The winning points — high ceilings and a central courtyard which lets in light. The HDB has finally got the right idea — that a vast hawkers' complex needs to be open in the middle to avoid that feeling of impending doom and gloom while you eat."

Today, about two thirds of the food

centres are built by the HDB; the balance is mainly built by the URA or the Ministry of Environment (MOE). The hawkers themselves, now numbering over 26,000, are licensed by the MOE.

Unique Centres

There are many unique centres in Singapore. The one at Boat Quay used to meander along the south shore of the river in the heart of the downtown area and was therefore a popular lunching place. It has been relocated temporarily at the Empress Place Transit Food Centre while work on the MRT is in progress.

Also in the downtown area is the Telok Ayer Food Centre, an elegant, Victorian cast-iron structure which was originally fabricated in Scotland and

assembled in Singapore in 1894. Once a market, it was given a facelift by its owners, the Ministry of Environment and is now a food centre; it was gazetted as a National Monument in 1973. The 150 hawkers operate against an elegant backdrop of Corinthian and Ionic columns supporting trusses with filigree infills. The integrity of the building has been retained in the facelift and the changes were carried out in a manner sympathetic to the spirit of the original. Soon, it is to be dismantled to make way for the construction of the Mass Rapid Transit system and it will be later relocated, hopefully, in the same place.

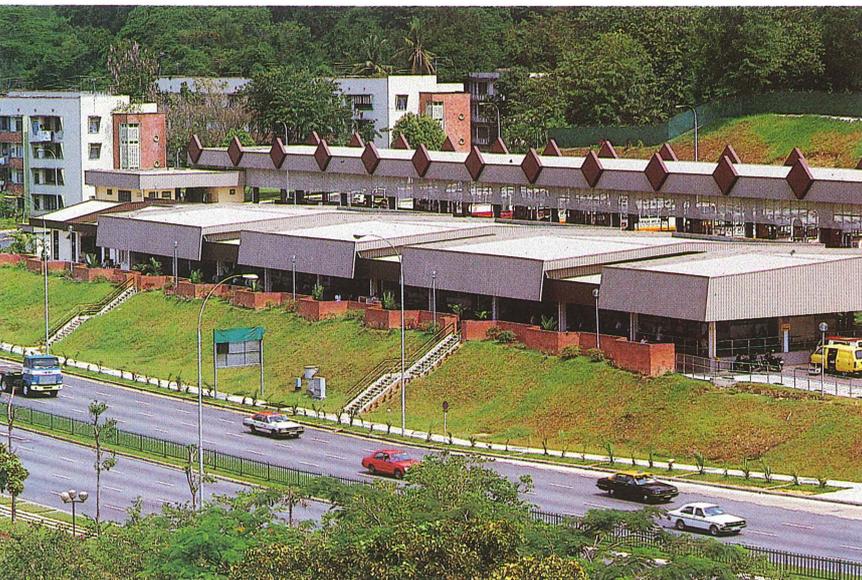
Another unique centre is at Laguna Park. It is sited in a park built on reclaimed land, along the east coast of the



Left and above: Boasting some of the best hawkers in Singapore, Rasa Singapura is the result of a conscious effort by the URA to attract tourists to the nearby Handicraft Centre. It is located on the 2nd storey above a carpark, is easily accessible from a pedestrian mall and has a reasonably pleasant outlook, although the spaces are rather cramped. Photographs: Andy Lai.



Left: The traditional Satay Club, which was extended by the URA last year, is part of the Esplanade Food Centre, at the northern end of Queen Elizabeth Walk; with its parkland setting and open air atmosphere, it illustrates the pleasant qualities which can be achieved. Above: Still a familiar site in Singapore; satay sellers cook their food in the same way it has been done for years. Photographs: Andy Lai.



Left and above: The food centre opposite the World Trade Centre in Telok Blangah Road. The less urban location of this recent development has allowed increased car parking facilities, more generous seating and circulation spaces and more light and air penetrations; there are also shared food preparation areas. Photographs: Andy Lai.



*Beach Road, one of the older areas of the city, yet untouched by urban renewal, street hawkers go about their business as usual.
Photograph: Arthur Lee.*

island next to the sea. Clusters of stalls with covered seating are separated by large open spaces to retain the feeling of outdoor eating. Also, at the Changi International Airport, opened in 1981, there is a food centre, located in one of the basements.

Other popular centres are at the Rasa Singapura (where a conscious attempt was made by the URA to attract tourists by the careful selection of hawkers), the Satay Club (which was added to in 1984 by the URA), opposite the World Trade Centre (where the spaces are so generous and the ambience so light and airy), on Sentosa Island, in Jalan Besar, 2-storey development behind the Ministry of National Development Building, Beach Road (opposite the Golden Mile Complex) Golden Shoe development, High Street Centre and the Cuppage Centre.

When the Marina Square development is completed, it will contain a food centre, to be called Rasa Marina. It will be situated on an upper level, protected by the floor above but completely open on three sides. It will be the first food centre of its kind to be built by private enterprise.

The Future?

Thus an old way of life has been accommodated in the new, urbanised environment and, although it is difficult to imagine a Singapore without its unique fast-food bazaars, their continued existence may be threatened. Architects and planners of the HDB and the URA are

exploring alternatives, as they believe that, in the present arrangements, the centres are too labour intensive, particularly in a country with such a shortage of manpower. One alternative which has been considered is the dispersal of hawkers into smaller coffee shops or sidewalk cafes; an eating house would be rented out to one individual who would then sublet space to half a dozen hawkers. This is already being done in some areas.

In 1982, the government announced that the 'wet' market or fresh food market would be gradually replaced in favour of the air-conditioned, mini-market-cum-dry market to sell fresh and frozen meat and canned goods. Surrounding the mini-market would be a number of market produce stores, each specialising in one type of market produce and run by an individual.

Thus, in a country which has undergone rapid urbanisation and growth and which is still burgeoning ahead with development, the problem of continuing and accommodating an old and established way of life for many, in a completely new physical setting, is a difficult one which planners constantly face.

In the case of the food centres, although we may regret their "passing," we can be thankful, perhaps, that their environment has altered in most cases for the better, their ambience improved and that the food is still just as good and just as popular as ever. What is provided now still reflects an essential part of the daily life of the country.

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