Preserving our legacy

UCSI University lecturer Teoh Chee Keong believes that architectural conservation is not solely about nurturing appreciation for heritage buildings.

"It’s also about sentimental value," opines Teoh, who teaches at the UCSI School of Architecture and Built Environment. "Each building represents more than just its market value.

"It’s about creating a collective memory in a community that recognises a common building which existed in the time of our forefathers, one that provides a connection to each member of that community."

Teoh’s passion for architectural conservation has rubbed off on his students, who voluntarily join him on some of his projects, such as the Knowing Our Neighbour project.

"Before proposing this project to my students, I visited the olden houses in the Hulu Langat area to check if the residents there were willing to host our students for three days.

"Three households – one Chinese and two Malay families – agreed to my request and I proposed this idea to my students," he explains. The project necessitated students to measure, sketch and photograph their temporary "home" as well as conduct investigation surveys before presenting their artwork in an exhibition to their host family at the end of their stay.

"Such hands-on projects not only enable students to feel a sense of ownership in their learning, it also opens up their minds to a world of opportunities in terms of architecture-related careers," says Teoh.

Teoh also took under his wings the Sungai Buloh Leprosy Control Centre. Known as the Valley of Hope, the centre, one of the largest leper settlements in the world, was set up in the early 1930s and was about to be relocated due to redevelopment plans.

"Generally, leprosy sufferers are treated like exiles because of the disease. They are forced to live in isolation from the rest of society," says Teoh, expressing his concern over the issue.

"After visiting the site, I did my best to create awareness – by organising public talks and publishing articles – that the centre is a heritage site. The effort paid off and many international scholars visited the place during the campaign.

"Our students were required to investigate ‘problem areas’ in the settlement and to use their creativity to design concepts and models for the residents.

"If the centre is preserved as a heritage site, it needs to be opened to the public. And if there are tourists, the centre would need a museum to educate visitors about its history and perhaps even a café.

"I am certain that our hard work paid off as our presentation gave the residents a sense of pride and appreciation for their community and the place they call home."

Teoh describes the project as a great experience for his students, as it allowed them to develop a better grasp of cultural preservation and to work closely with members of a community.

"Through such assignments, students become better architects because they are exposed to other elements like historical value, social implications and cultural significance," he adds.

Commenting on his efforts, Teoh explains that social engagement is pivotal for the advancement of knowledge.

"Many institutions equip their students with professional knowledge and skills. However, I believe that the love for humanity is just as important," he says.

"One may be an expert in his field – for example, an architectural conservation professional – but may not know how to mingle with others or to reach out to society."

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