

## The New Icons of Singapore and the Loss of the Old



During a recent visit to a shop at the Singapore Design Centre, I picked up a print showing the icons of Singapore and planned to buy it as a souvenir for my children so they would remember where they grew up. As I looked closer, however, they wouldn't even recognize more than half of the sites.

Our children grew up in Singapore during the 1990s. Our daughter headed to college in the US after she graduated in 2006, and our son left for college in 2008. Only after they departed did many of today's icons show up.

The Singapore Flyer was constructed in 2009, the same year as ION Orchard. Marina Bay Sands, the flower-shaped Art Science Museum, and the Helix Bridge were completed in 2010. Gardens by the Bay and the Supertree Grove next door were finished in 2012. While the City Hall and Supreme Court buildings existed, only in 2015 did their doors reopen to the public as the National Gallery. And the Jewel at Changi opened its doors in 2019. While our children would have seen these new icons on a visit to Singapore, they weren't part of their childhood.



Instead, their childhood was dominated by classic places featured less often these days. Victoria Concert Hall, where their parents dragged them to concerts, is still there. The Merlion statue is still around, albeit in a different place than when they arrived. The Raffles Hotel looks almost the same in front, and the control tower at Changi Airport is still in use for now. Whereas these icons would likely have been in a print twenty years ago, most have now been surpassed in prominence by the new icons.

Other structures that were part of their lives, only some of which might have made the famous icons list, are gone. Underwater World at Sentosa, the old National Library building, and the old Funan Center, are among the many places that have disappeared. The Jurong Bird Park that they visited often is closing and relocating.

And along with iconic or better-known buildings, other parts of their childhood are gone, too. The condos they grew up in were sold en bloc, and new ones sprouted in their place. The American Club looks entirely different, and a new building will replace the early classrooms at Singapore American School. Holland Village would be virtually unrecognizable to them.

Indeed, Singapore is constantly rebuilding and it comes at a cost. When a friend visited recently, I asked for his impression of the city. He commented on the new buildings, safety, and fast pace. Yet he also felt a sense of “placelessness.” Not knowing what he meant, I asked him to explain. While he saw the new structures, he said, he didn’t see as many historic buildings or sites as in other cities and had gone to modern replacements such as Marina Bay Sands or Gardens by the Bay instead. He felt the city lacked a sense of history, place, and identity that would create a strong attachment.



While it may seem overly nostalgic, the scale and speed of the change hadn't hit me until I was about to buy that print. For them, it may just be an unpurchased print they don't know about. For some of us, though, the loss of icons and familiar places can make us feel that we have lost a part of our identity that we expected to remain for years to come.

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