


# Heritage Websites as a Useful Addition to the Planning Toolkit in Singapore

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the extent to which heritage websites serve as a useful addition to the heritage planning toolkit in Singapore. Drawing on questionnaire surveys and interviews with 26 public servants in Singapore's public planning offices, a group of respondents usually difficult to access, this study reveals how and why this group of planners utilize heritage websites. Using Singapore's prevailing '3R' heritage conservation principle as a metric, this study also explores whether the information on heritage websites addresses heritage planning needs. Implications for heritage website design and use for other countries and the broader planning context are also outlined.

## KEYWORDS

conservation principle, heritage planning, heritage websites, planners, Singapore

## SECTION ONE: HERITAGE WEBSITES AS HERITAGE PLANNING TOOLS

The integration of information and communications technologies (ICTs) into the urban planning process is a long-standing and continuing trend. Two types of ICTs—software-based and web-based—have been incorporated into the field of urban planning. Geographic Information System (GIS)-based planning support systems and Building Information Modelling are notable examples of the former. On the other hand, web-based ICTs are characterized by the Internet as the access vehicle and encompass social media and mobile ICTs. Another form of web-based ICTs that has the potential to be integrated into urban planning is *heritage websites*, which refer to “digital platforms that document heritage architecture ... [and are developed by] the government and public enthusiasts” (Widodo et al., 2017).

This paper examines the extent to which heritage websites serve as a useful addition to the planners' toolkit to engage in heritage planning, defined as “the application of heritage conservation within the context of planning” (Kalman, 2014). The understanding of heritage conservation has evolved over the years. Originating from nineteenth-century Western contexts, heritage conservation

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was initially “synonymous with preservation”<sup>1</sup> (Blackburn & Tan, 2015), as espoused in early conservation charters (i.e., the 1964 Venice Charter). The 1970s saw the notion of heritage conservation expanded to include management of change, namely sensitive restoration/replacement of historic fabric, particularly in Asia and Africa (Yeo, 2018). The consideration of intangible cultural heritage elements associated with built heritage was subsequently added to the scope of heritage conservation via the Burra Charter drafted in 1979.

Heritage conservation is a vital consideration in strategic spatial planning at the city or national scale because it is not only an instrument of urban regeneration (Pendlebury, 2002) and sustainable development (Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2018) but also contributes to the distinctive character of a country or city, thereby engendering a sense of belonging (*Past, Present, and Future*, 2019). This paper argues that the information on these websites can help planners better understand the significance of built heritage, which, in turn, facilitates successful conservation of these places (Clark, 2001). This paper goes even further to call on planners to utilize existing heritage websites in a structured way and potentially develop these websites into an essential component of the heritage planning toolkit.

This paper aims to examine Singapore’s incorporation of heritage websites into its planning processes by: (a) understanding the patterns and purposes of heritage website use among public servants in public planning offices and (b) uncovering how the information on these websites addresses Singapore’s heritage conservation principle. In doing so, this paper directly answers Van Der Hoeven’s (2018) call for more research on how the content of heritage websites “can be used in applications that give . . . *urban planners* access to historic information about specific locations” (emphasis added) (p. 142).

Considering Singapore’s small geographical size (~728.3 km<sup>2</sup>), the existence of numerous heritage websites—set up by both government agencies and non-governmental stakeholders—is exceptional. This study focuses on six publicly accessible heritage websites, which include five government websites (see Table 1 for an overview), namely *My Conservation Portal*, *One Historical Map*, *Roots.sg*, *Archives Online*, and *Singapore Memory Portal*, as well as a general category of webpages/blogs<sup>2</sup> created by non-governmental stakeholders and heritage enthusiasts.

The remainder of this paper is structured across seven sections. The subsequent section looks at the use of web-based ICTs in urban planning before Section 3 delves into studies on heritage planning

**Table 1. Overview of five government heritage websites considered in this study**

Heritage website	Who is responsible for the website?	When was the website launched?	What content does the website cover?	Heritage website URL
<i>My Conservation Portal</i>	Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)	2013	Conservation maps, photographs, and guidelines	<a href="https://www.ura.gov.sg/conservation-portal/intro">https://www.ura.gov.sg/conservation-portal/intro</a>
<i>One Historical Map</i>	Singapore Land Authority (SLA)	2015	Street maps and photographs	<a href="https://ohm.onemap.sg/">https://ohm.onemap.sg/</a>
<i>Roots.sg</i>	National Heritage Board (NHB)	2016	Repository of information on national monuments, historic sites, heritage trails, artefacts, and videos/multimedia	<a href="https://www.roots.gov.sg/">https://www.roots.gov.sg/</a>
<i>Archives Online</i>	National Archives of Singapore	2015	Photographs, maps, plans, oral history interviews, and audio-visual recordings	<a href="https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/">https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/</a>
<i>Singapore Memory Portal</i>	National Library Board (NLB)	2011	Memories (deposited in the form of texts, audio/video files, images)	<a href="https://www.singaporememory.sg/">https://www.singaporememory.sg/</a>

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