



NUMBER 82

4th Quarter, 2018

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New TICCIH president Miles Oglethorpe (right) congratulates his predecessor Patrick Martin. Congress reports and organisational updates from Santiago de Chile below.

OPINION

SINGAPORE

THEATRES OF MEMORY AND INTANGIBLE INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE IN SINGAPORE

By Dr Kah Seng Loh, The University of Western Australia

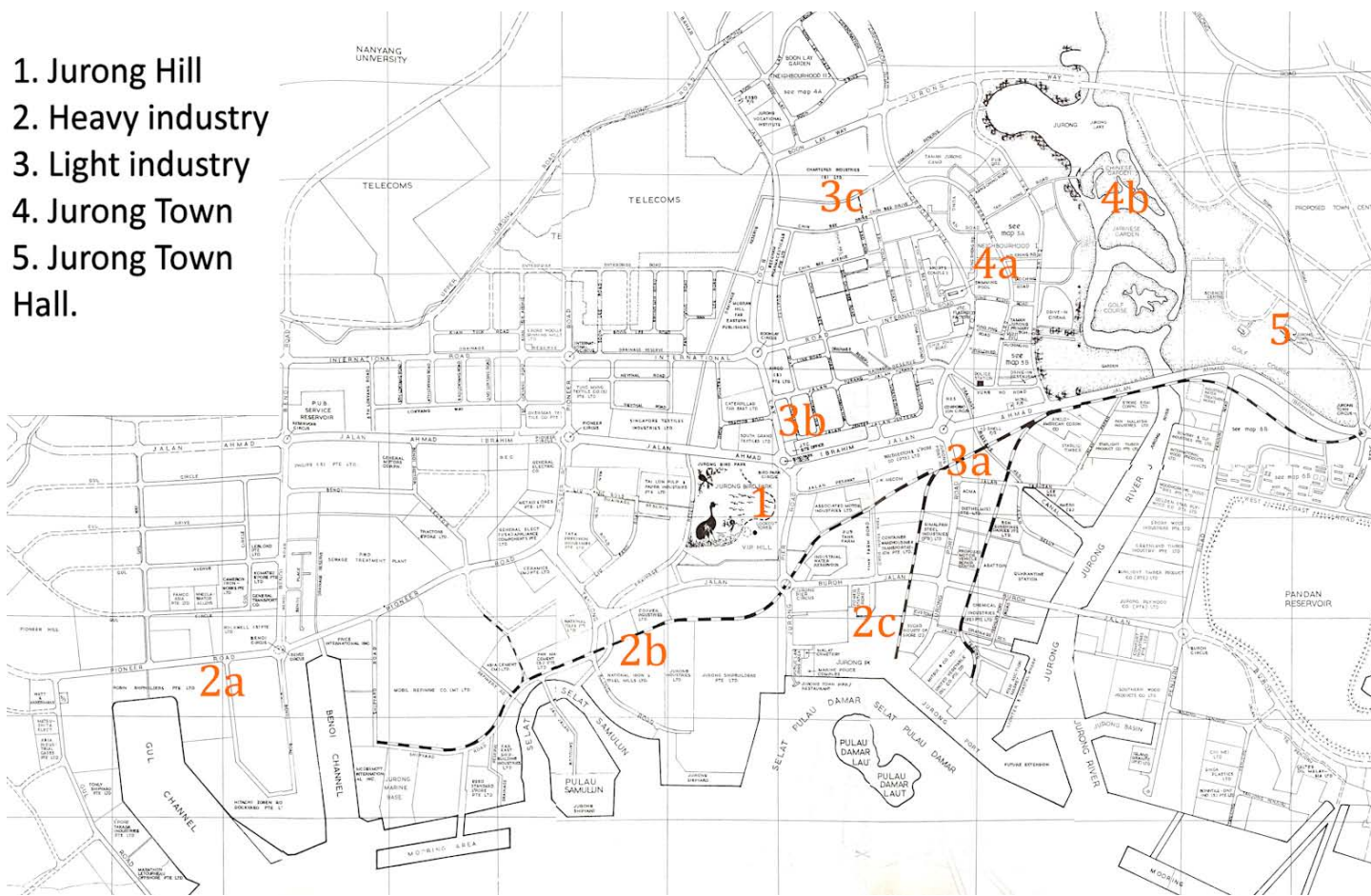
Theatres of History and Memory: Industrial Heritage of 20th Century Singapore is a research project which seeks to traverse new ground in the field of industrial heritage. Drawing from historian Raphael Samuel's useful concept, 'theatres of memory', the project makes the case for an intangible form of industrial heritage.

It is therefore the enduring memories of industrial sites, work and experiences that form the core of industrial heritage in a city-state like Singapore, where land is scarce and economic change unceasing. Focusing on memories not only makes industrial heritage viable, but also deeply meaningful to the people who played important roles in it.

The Theatres project investigated three research questions:

- Who were the various actors in the industrial history of Singapore?
- What are the rich memories of this monumental history?
- How can people shape and participate in industrial heritage programming?

1. Jurong Hill
2. Heavy industry
3. Light industry
4. Jurong Town
5. Jurong Town Hall.



Jurong Garden Industrial Town tour:

Singapore was one of the first Asian countries to make the transition to an export-led industrial economy in the 1960s and 1970s. The Theatres project's first major finding was that this was made possible by 'a thousand different hands', as Samuel put it. The government built the infrastructure and established a favourable environment for industry, while international organisations and advisers offered technical expertise. In addition, multinational corporations invested in manufacturing, creating jobs and training people for industrial work. Also important were local industries which provided support for the multinationals, and the numerous people – local and foreign – who performed, supervised and managed production work.

The project unearthed theatres of rich industrial memories. We conducted oral history interviews with former production line workers, technicians, supervisors, and managers involved in industry. Conversely, we shared the research on a **Facebook group** which became a forum for recalling past industries and industrial lives. These insightful responses brought us to the project's second conclusion: that people warmly remember industrial history and were likely to participate in industrial heritage programmes.

People notably expressed their pride in industrial work. One of our interviewees, Mdm Supammal Peramal, was a production worker who spent nearly a decade at Fairchild Singapore, a semiconductor firm, on the night shift. She told us that 'not one unit of her wiring has been rejected' and that she was the only person at Fairchild to have received two pay increments within a year.

Our participants told us much about Singapore's industrial heritage and what they found meaningful. They reminisced not only about their work and pay but also the intangible elements of history, such as their aspirations. Women, who formed a vital part of the workforce, spoke about working shifts around their families, while their children lauded their work ethic and endeavour for the family. Angie Dierl wrote on Facebook:

Thanks Kah Seng for taking me back in time. My 93 year old mum was a *longsai* worker [local corruption of 'alongside' or ship cleaners, who were women] who worked (in 1960s) to support her young brood of 5 children while we were living in Jalan Bukit Ho Swee's 1-room flat (with communal toilets on each floor, and staircase). Today she's well taken care of by her filial sons. God bless.

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Women production workers of Fairchild Singapore. Photograph courtesy of Ms Vasanthara Devi.

These memories highlight the third and final finding: that industrial heritage should encompass 'big narratives' which extend beyond factories and production to the intangible cultural relations which underpinned industrial life. Relations with one's family were key, as were the bonds between colleagues, who often became lasting friends (see photo 3). These bonds made routine industrial work tolerable, sometimes even enjoyable.

Two of the project's efforts were especially insightful. We organised a sharing session in April 2018 by a panel of former employees of Rollei, the well-known West German camera-maker which operated in Singapore in the 1970s. The ex-Rolleians spoke fondly of their eventful days of training in Germany, of hard work and play when back in Singapore, and of their ventures after Rollei closed down in 1981. What was just as significant was the interested audience of both the young and old, who remained behind to speak with the ex-Rolleians after the panel ended.

The project's documentary research, oral history and photo-

documentation also encouraged us to propose a Jurong Garden Industrial Town heritage programme. Jurong was the largest industrial estate in Singapore, built in the 1960s and 1970s without a catchment workforce living nearby. It's difficult early history and subsequent success and expansion into a garden town with social amenities and green areas is a metaphor for the remarkable industrial history of Singapore.

Our proposed itinerary for Jurong consists of a theatre of memory deeply remembered by people we interviewed or on Facebook (see map on page 2):

- Starting point: Jurong Hill with a lookout tower and the historic Garden of Fame, with trees planted by foreign dignitaries.
- Coast and original heart of Jurong: heavy industries, such as National Iron and Steel Mills, shipyards, Sugar Industries of Singapore, Jurong Port.
- Interior of Jurong: light industries, such as electrical products

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Industrial oral history: Mdm Noorsia recalling her work in a flatted factory in the 1980s, 2018. Photograph by Juria Toramae.

(Acma), automobiles (Associated Motors and Bridgestone), textiles (South Grand), Chartered Industries of Singapore (maker of coins and ammunition).

- Garden Industrial Town: the flats of Taman Jurong (the first neighbourhood of Jurong), drive-in cinema, sports complex, the sole flatted factory, Chinese and Japanese Gardens.
- End point: Jurong Town Hall, former headquarters of the Jurong Town Corporation, the statutory board which developed Jurong into a garden town in the 1970s.

This article draws from the research project, 'Theatres of History and Memory: Industrial Heritage of 20th Century Singapore,' which is supported by the Heritage Research Grant of the National Heritage Board, Singapore. The research team consisted of Dr Kah Seng Loh (Principal Investigator), Mr Alex Tiong Hee Tan (Co-Investigator), Dr Keng We Koh (Co-Investigator), Dr James Ang (Co-Investigator) and Ms Juria Toramae (Photographer).