

SM Lee sees old and new of Shanghai

► Chua Mui Hoong
SHANGHAI

EVEN as Shanghai's development proceeds at a breakneck speed, the city is trying to preserve historical buildings and memories, which Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew caught a glimpse of yesterday.

He visited the Shanghai Urban Planning Department yesterday, where he was briefed by deputy director Wu Jiang on the booming city's master plan for development in the years ahead, including a spurt of development to prepare the city to host the World Expo in 2010.

The city's planners are also trying to preserve its past, and Mr Lee visited a re-creation of an old Shanghai street yesterday.

On Friday afternoon, he visited Xintiandi, where historic *shikumen longtang* (stone gate alleyways, the equivalent of Singa-

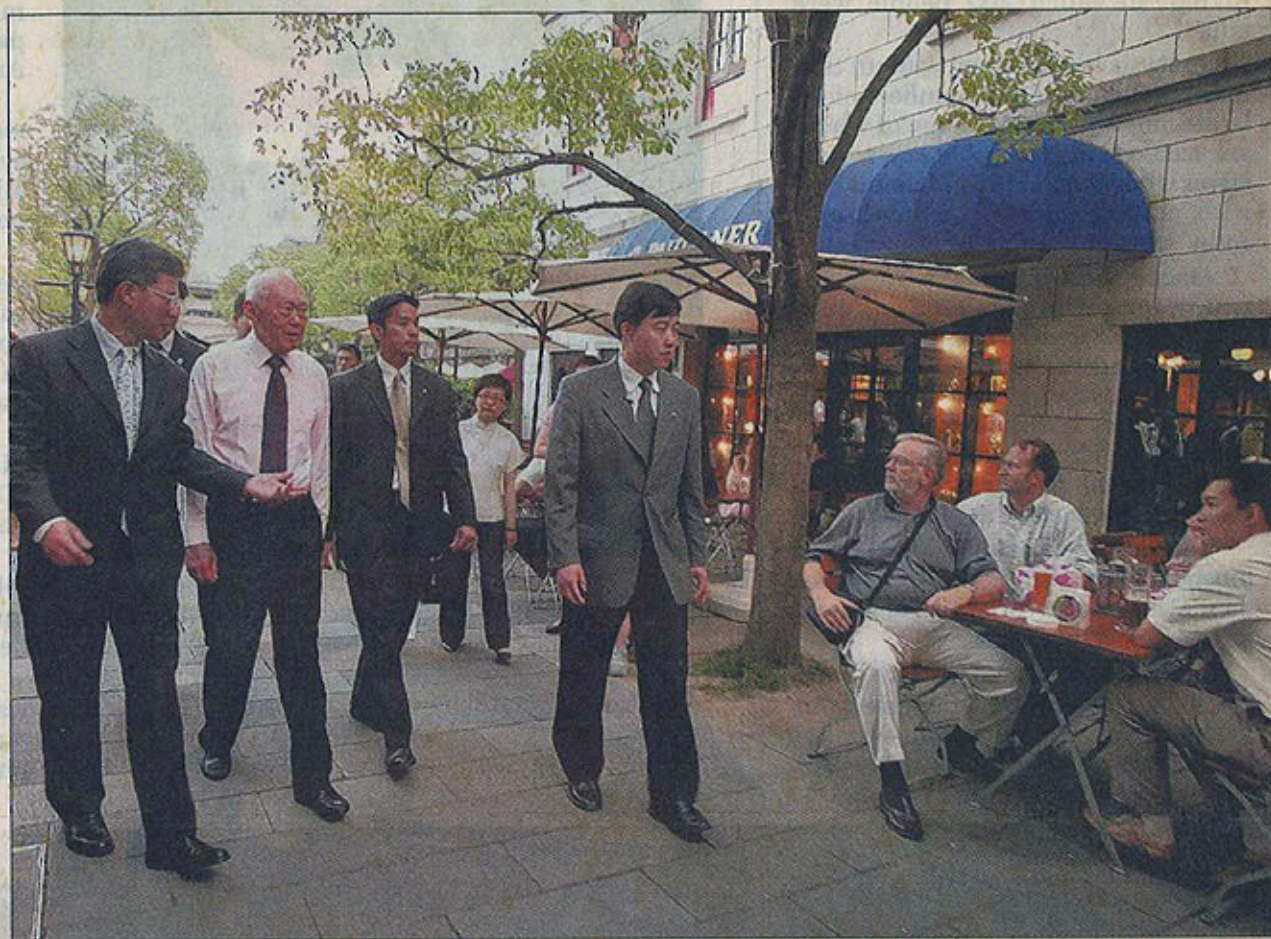
pore's shophouses) had been turned into trendy cafes and avant garde restaurants drawing Shanghai's young people.

Nestled amid them is the Party Hall, where the first meeting of the Chinese Communist Party's congress was held in 1921. The building is now a museum.

After the tour of Shanghai old and new, Mr Lee penned this description in the guest book at the urban planning office: "Creative capture of a bygone age of Shanghai plus a vision of a modern megapolis of the 21st century."

Mr Lee, accompanied by Mrs Lee, leaves for Beijing today for a week-long visit, where he is scheduled to meet the country's top leaders.

He was in Suzhou for three days last week for the 10th anniversary celebration of the joint Singapore-China Suzhou Industrial Park.



SM LEE RECEIVES A GUIDED TOUR of Xintiandi from Mr Vincent Lo (left), chairman of Shui On Holdings. The historic stone gate alleyways have been turned into trendy cafes and restaurants frequented by young people.

PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Shanghai's Xintiandi

The S'pore connection

THAT BUILT

'Heaven and Earth'



HOME-GROWN EXPERTS involved in the restoration included (from left) landscape architect Lim Swe Ting, engineer Hedrick Lo and project head Kevin Sim. The team spent time chatting with residents of the houses and observing their way of life before work began.

PHOTO: ENRIQUE SORIANO

\$172m makeover turns century-old houses into famed tourist spot

► Ignatius Low
DEPUTY MONEY EDITOR

THE next time you visit the nearly century-old restored houses in the heart of Shanghai known as Xintiandi, take a closer look around you.

For what is much less well-known about the world-famous Xintiandi shopping and eating district is that the men and women behind it came mostly from Singapore.

At the helm of the US\$100-million (S\$172-million) project was Mr Kevin Sim, who was head of the Singapore office of Japanese architects Nikken Sekkei at the time. He has since left Nikken Sekkei to start his own company, called New Space International.

When he heard that Hong Kong developer Shui On was looking for an international team to restore the houses and turn them into trendy shops and restaurants, he decided that Nikken Sekkei should make a bid for the job.

Mr Sim, 49, thought that he had an edge over his competitors because his company had already done one project in Shanghai — a serviced

apartment complex called the Somerset Residences, which is next to Xintiandi.

The firm also knew architect Benjamin Wood of the United States who was famous for giving old buildings like Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace a new lease of life, turning them into retail malls.

Says Mr Sim: "We sold ourselves on the basis of local knowledge of the area, plus Ben's expertise in retail consulting, and we got it."

Being overall coordinator, Mr Sim assembled a team which included Mr Callan Lam and Mr Hedrick Lo from the Singapore office of mechanical and electrical engineering firm Meinhardt, and Mr Foo See Lim from the

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— MS LIM SWE TING,
Cicada's landscape
architect

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Singapore office of structural engineers Maunsell.

For landscaping, he used homegrown Singapore firm Cicada and for lighting, he roped in Swedish-national Bo Steiber, who has set up his office in Singapore.

They started work in July 1998 and at the peak of construction, at least 20 full-time staff were stationed in Shanghai. That was a lot of resources for a plot of land just slightly larger than a football field.

Though the Singapore team had worked on conservation projects before, Xintiandi posed a unique set of challenges.

The houses were built in the 1910s and 1920s, so digging up the original architectural plans was a challenge, recalls Mr Foo. He says: "We had one guy whose job was to track them down. Luckily, the plans were still in good condition and in English, even though they were drawn up by the French!"

Mechanical and electrical engineers had to contend with the usual task of equipping each house with electricity, water, air-conditioning and other modern amenities. But the catch was that every single cable, handle and compressor had to be hidden to "preserve" the original atmosphere of the houses, says Meinhardt's Mr Lo, who ended up putting thrice as many people as usual on the job.

Cicada's Ms Lim Swe Ting, the landscape architect, says: "There was a clear need to preserve the historical context of the place and not turn it into a caricature or a mini-Disneyland."

"We were working at a heritage site, where the first meeting of the Communist Party took place."

This was why the whole team did nothing for the first two weeks but just chatted with the residents of the houses, who would eventually be re-settled, and observed their way of life.

Ms Lim says: "We met a lot of people with fascinating histories like a brush-and-ink maker who had lost his fortune in the Cultural Revolution. There was a place where women used to gather to talk in the evenings, and that was coincidentally where we sited the entrance to the place."

Most of the shophouses were built of stone, so her team visited old parts of Beijing and Suzhou to study the traditional methods used to shape stone in building construction.

Restoration work took about 3½ years and the effort spent on what is now considered one of the jewels of Shanghai tourism has paid off for the team.

Developer Shui On was so happy with the final product that it gave Nikken Sekkei a new project every year after that. Ms Lim has gone on to work on other landscaping projects in China with traditional stone craftsmen.

But more importantly, their work left a lasting impression. Ms Lim says: "Xintiandi may be a retail concept but I think even if you take away the shops and the restaurants, you still have a museum of sorts. That's what we achieved."



IT MAY BE A RETAIL CONCEPT but the team has taken pains to preserve the historical context of Xintiandi by creating moods in Oriental dynamism in the interior.