In tune with its surroundings

To appreciate the new SMU campus, one must understand how the buildings relate to their context, says ARTHUR SIM

After the Esplanade and the new Supreme Court building, the new Singapore Management University campus must be the most anticipated work of architecture to be built here.

But almost as soon as it was made public in 1999 that the SMU would be sited at Bras Basah Park, and that the old National Library would be demolished in the process, the proposed campus has been shrouded in controversy. It polarised groups of conservationists, architects and policy-makers. It was supposed to be the Wharton of the East but became a cause célèbre instead. Now that it is finally completed, all that SMU architecture architect Tan Teck Kiam of KNTA Architects wants is for the “public to decide” whether it was worth it or not.

“At the end of the day, it is about how the space is used,” he says. While in monetary terms, the campus is said to be worth $426 million — not a lot considering that The Esplanade cost close to $700 million. Still, when it was first announced in 1999, the proposed budget was reported to be $1.5 billion.

In 2000, however, when British firm, Edward Cullinan Architects, and Singapore’s KNTA Architects were appointed after winning the SMU design competition, the figure had dropped to $1 billion. It is not known if or how the budget has changed but the design of SMU has certainly evolved since the drawings from the design competition were revealed. Mr Tan, who has been involved from the very beginning, says the main changes are in the lecture rooms that were initially conceived for stepped seating. The tiered structure that would have been needed to create this also gave the building its pod-like, space-age look.

At SMU’s request, the tiered structure was given up in favour of more flexibility and a more conventional concrete structure superseded the pods. The rest of the design for the campus followed.

With so much public outcry (by Singapore standards anyway) over the loss of Bras Basah Park and the old National Library, it is not surprising that the SMU campus shaped up the way it did. Hearing Mr Tan describe the concept behind it, the design is almost all about views to trees and space to walk. And why not? “The public spaces at SMU campus are more important than designing a masterpiece,” he says. Taking a side swipe at monumental buildings like Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, he says: “That type of building would be good in an isolated site.”

The Bras Basah site is, of course, not an isolated one. It’s an area that many Singaporeans have an affinity with, not just old boys of St Joseph’s Institution or diehard National Library fans. In fact, understanding how the SMU buildings relate to their context is the only way to appreciate the architecture.

For instance, the facades of the buildings may appear at first glance to be a strange assemblage of glass, marble and creeping vines but actually, each element relates to either a corresponding element in the surrounding site, or is a symbolic reference to the history of the place. For example, the architect explains that columns around the campus are designed to pick up the “rhythm” of the colonnades in the surrounding neo-classical buildings (the old St Joseph’s and the Singapore History Museum). At the entrance to the School of Accountancy, the curved ceiling, finished in mosaic tiles, responds to the tropics and in perhaps the most costly and extreme of design gestures, the whole campus has been raised one floor up, and sunk one basement-level down, so that a semblance of the old park remains. There are no academic spaces on the ground level.

If the architects can be faulted at all, it might be that they were perhaps a little too carried away with trying to respond to the surroundings. The result is that SMU buildings almost do not have a character of their own. The upside to this, however, is that the campus feels extraordinarily well integrated within that urban context.

Unlike many monumental buildings, the campus has a very human scale — quiet areas for sitting, textures that make you want to reach out and touch, many courtyards and lots of natural light. The campus is a pleasure to walk through. You may even walk through it and never realise that you have been to the SMU, but perhaps, this is what everyone wants.