'There are enough historic buildings to provide the background for a rich texture of architecture, and the juxtaposition between the new and the old creates a new sense of urban space.'

- MR JOHN TING, immediate past president of the Singapore Institute of Architects

'They look huge and loud, like giants plonked in a charming town.'

- HOUSEWIFE ALICE CHAN

'We have destroyed the mental mapping of the city that we grew up with. Of course we should progress, but there is no need to do so at the expense of our sense of history.'

- MR TAY KHENG SOON, pioneer architect
Blots on our charming cityscape?

Critics say three new buildings mar historical appeal of civic district but others disagree

Sarah Ng

IF BEAUTY is in the eye of the beholder, many Singaporeans would like to give an extreme makeover to three new buildings in Singapore’s historic civic district.

Even some architects say they are ugly. Their bulky, daunting and loud designs are out of place in a district remembered fondly for its charming colonial buildings, many say.

Pioneer architect Tay Kheng Soon was particularly harsh. “We have destroyed the mental mapping of the city that we grew up with. Of course we should progress, but there is no need to do so at the expense of our sense of history,” he said.

The troubling trio shaping up in the district bounded by Bras Basah and Bugis are: the $426 million Singapore Management University (SMU), the $115 million Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) and the $200 million National Library.

They send shivers down the spines of passers-by like housewife Alice Chan, 60: “They look huge and loud, like giants plonked in a charming town.”

She is among 17 out of 30 people interviewed, who find it hard to say anything nice about the new buildings. Their owners and architects disagree, naturally.

The beauty of SMU is still hidden behind the hoardings, said Mr Tan Teck Kian, principal architect in ENYA Architects, its designers.

The hoardings are set to come down in a week’s time.

“When they are down, the public will see that there are vantage points, such as public squares with reflective pools, which allow people in Stamford Road to look across to the Singapore Art Museum in Bras Basah Road,” said Mr Tan.

The past was an integral part of the design, he added. “The driving force behind the project is to return the green lung to the public — to create spaces that people can come and use, just like how people used to use this area for leisure activities.

“This is a reference to the place’s history.”

The civic district is Singapore’s historical birthplace, where the early settlers worked and lived. It is home to many landmark buildings, including the Singapore History Museum, Singapore Art Museum, Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, the Armenian Church and Raffles Hotel.

There’s no quarrel with the need for a city to rejuvenate to stay progressive, said the architects interviewed. However, it should be achieved with architectural sensitivity to the area’s past.

Describing the buildings as nondescript and uninspiring, Singapore Heritage Society president Kevin Tan said: “If the relationship between the new and old buildings is like a conversation, then the new ones are shouting at the old buildings.”

Their common flaw lies in the scale, said architect Goh Chong Chia, co-chairman of the Feed- back Unit’s sub-group on housing, transport and environment.

The buildings look out of proportion, a result of building right up to the edge of the site, he said.

The Urban Redevelopment Authority, which approves building plans, said developments in the city have to meet its guidelines on building height, providing open spaces and ensuring good pedestrian connectivity.

One architect who is convinced the buildings’ designers had also taken pains to connect the new with the old is Mr John Ting, the immediate past president of the Singapore Institute of Architects.

“I see that there are vantage points, such as public squares with reflective pools, which allow people in Stamford Road to look across to the Singapore Art Museum in Bras Basah Road,” he said.

The newly opened Nafa’s headquarters and School of Visual Arts building have art galleries that are open to the public.

While SMU and the National Library, which will open in July, have courtyards and gardens on the ground floor for the public to use at all times.

Disagreeing, cabbie Sam Tan, 50, a bookshop assistant in Bras Basah Complex, said: “This area has a lot of old buildings with uninteresting design, so it’s nice to see a new building here. It’ll freshen up the tired look and feel of this area.”

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Disagreeing, cabbie Sam Tan, 44, is convinced the district’s history will eventually be forgotten.

“It looks like the memory of Singapore’s early years will die with the older generation,” he said.