My past has class

Was it someone famous who said ‘You can’t go home again’? He can’t have been that famous, or I’d remember.

A photo of a faded blue and pink apartment block (right) which appeared in a Straits Times report two months ago triggered a flood of memories that took me home.

My new year resolution for 2006 is to make that memory come alive.

I intend to set real foot home, again, to that pink and blue building, Block 3 on Prinsep Street, one of three four-storey walk-ups still standing in a now overgrown grassy compound where seven blocks once housed 112 families for five decades.

Blocks 2, 3 and 7 remain — friends, just go to Google Earth to spot them — and by next July will have a new lease on life as student hostels serving the Singapore Management University (SMU).

Shades of Mrs Green Goes To College! (a TV series before the age of landphones, about an old lady going back to school.)

Here, here, I ain’t no lady, and as enough Singaporeans know, I was thrown out of school at 14, from Secondary 2.

Now, not for any heinous crime against an unpopular teacher, but for the plain and simple fact of failing term exams. Look, if you don’t study, you won’t pass. Now I know.

At the time, reading sweet wrappers and store signs and listening to the radio and copying song lyrics were, to me, more vital to my continuing education. Comic books were my university. (And of course my PhD is thanks to television.)

What happened was that instead of handing in my exercise books to the subject teacher, I gave them all away. To the kacang puteh man downstairs in exchange for peanuts.

Regrets, I’ve had a few: like, why didn’t I give him the telephone directory? That would have got me the cashew nuts.

All that’s by the by and now a genuine reason has presented itself for me to truly return to the inhospitable regions of academe.

What I have to do right away is to find an entry route into SMU, perhaps a management course on how to re-manage my life.

And from there, to seek rooms — 17 per cent of places are allotted to Singaporeans, the rest to foreign students; shucks, silly moi, to have given up my Penang papers — in my old home on the fourth floor of Block 3. The corner flat.

Rental rates have not been fixed and that size of HDB flat (900 sq ft) can today fetch $1,000 a month. Wow. My father paid $70 a month, 10 per cent of his civil service wages.

After 20 years’ rent, we could buy it for $20,000.

In 2002, when we were relocated, compensation started at $160,000. Maybe I could do maths or accounts in SMU?

Picture it — going back to the home where I misspent my callow youth, to re-live, near retirement age, as a student. I may be apprehensive about the tuition, and live in the secure hope that the male teaching staff will be hot (anything under 50 automatically is), but this I know: At long last, I will have class.