Back to school, to where I once lived

Don’t be googu - shoot the breeze
with Paik Choo in this fortnightly column

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Everybody almost knows everybody else.

For matters involving the police, you went to see “tua kow” (big dog, for police inspector) in 38C. If it was some health advice, then ask “missy” (nurse) in 58A. To buy “chap ji kee” (illegal lottery), well, you knew who ran numbers in which block.

When it came to deciphering words, words, they expected the neighbour working for the “poh chua kwan” (newspaper company) to draft the petition.

The postman would slip letters under the front door, and small packets through the roof, almost, by dropping them in the space between the door and the ceiling.

For as long as I can remember, this was the method of delivery for mail to our low-rise government flats. I can still hear the swoosh of thin envelopes (bills) and dull thud of little parcels (presents from Penang cousin). The church building next door, where I went to kindergarten, is on the heritage list and has been preserved, but alas, not our two-rooms, one-hall homes.

The egg lady would come to the door with her trays of our daily protein, as did the bread man with his cottony sliced white, and the newspaper man with The Straits Times.

One day the mailman stopped coming up to our apartments. (The hawkers were long gone.) Moreover, we noticed he operated from a bicycle, and all the envelopes were forced through the individual slots in the four-tiered mailboxes installed on the ground floor.

We missed giving him his annual ang pow packet for Chinese New Year and Hari Raya, but did not miss finding week-old letters under the sofa, where they’d slid to when he used to “campak” (throw) them under the door.

And then the large thick envelope arrived. A sheaf of papers, blurry with small print — all print is lived for 50 years, I explained. My neighbours already had, knocking on my door even as I tried to flip through the wad of legalese. In a compound of seven four-storey blocks, I tried going home again the other day, but was prevented by a security guard doing his job. Security guard doing his job.

Now here I was, inadvertently propelled to the rest in the world of HDB loans, feng shui fountains and letters of grant and contractor flooring woes. Meanwhile, we heard this and that about Prinsep Street: “Prime location what, sure going to demolish, making way for new campus”. Eventually we moved out, many old neighbours to become renewed neighbours again in the new place a couple of MRT stations away from the old. I Googled Prinsep Street and realised that three of the seven blocks had been spared the demolition.

My block is still standing, and not only, but it is now home away from home for students of SMU. In fact the district of my growing up years is now an art precinct. Who would have thought?

In the very flat where my brothers and sisters and I used to terrorise our parents, now live young people, each apartment divided into four rooms, space enough to swing a laptop. I tried going home again the other day, but was prevented by a security guard doing his job. I just want to see the place where I lived for 50 years, I explained. He was sorry. Couldn’t be done.

And then a voice rang out from the now gentrified grounds. “Miss Choo, what can I do for you?” One of the site engineers then let me take some pictures.

I’ll just have to go back to school so I can come back here and live, I told him.