



[Home](#) > [Resources](#) > [Ideas and Trends](#) > [30 Years of Conservation in Singapore since 1989: Merci, Didier](#)

# 30 Years of Conservation in Singapore since 1989: Merci, Didier

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## **He awakened many to the charm and beauty of the old shophouses.**

10 days, 14 craftsmen. That was what French architect Didier Repellin had in 1987 to restore an old shophouse along Armenian Street back to its former glory. His contributions did not end there – in 1996, he made sure the iconic stained glass windows of the CHIJMES that we know today were restored to their original appearance, sending them to Lyon, France.

Chief Architect for Historic Monuments and Inspector General of Historic Monuments in France, Didier was involved in various early conservation projects in Singapore. He has a soft spot for Singapore, having first set foot here back in 1987, after a series of encounters with Pamela Lee from the Singapore Tourism Board.

### ***First encounters***

He recalls sitting in his office one morning when he received a fax from her asking for his resume, due to a recommendation of then Tourism Consultant Robbie Collins. He did, and soon, Pamela replied: “I am going to do a tour in Europe to see how you deal with heritage. I will spend one day in France. Please show me the restoration works in France within a day.”

Tickled, he did so and evidently left a good impression as he received a flight ticket to the island three days later. This was when he still had no inkling about the country. “To tell [you] the truth, I had to buy a guide book at the airport because I had no idea where I was going,” he said.

Venturing into the unknown, it was his love for conservation that brought him beyond his home country and led to his involvement in many key projects as a conservation consultant in the 1980s and 1990s, namely, the Armenian shophouses, CHIJMES and Empress Place Building.

When he first arrived in 1987, he was given only three days by Pamela to explore Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Gelam, the shophouses, as well as 20 other historic buildings before presenting his findings to her. "When I was in the lift [after leaving Pamela's office] I thought to myself that I was going to write a note to say that I am going back to my mother's house. I was scared. I was totally scared," Didier recalled.

### ***Restored in 10 days***

Of all the buildings he explored, it was the Armenian shophouses that inspired him the most. "Every one [the shophouses] was different. The engravings [ornamental mouldings] were beautiful, so spontaneous."

The shophouses were not in the greatest shape though – being held up by beams and proppings with green plants growing all over them due to Singapore's tropical climate.

Despite the dismal plight they were in, he saw their beauty through the damage. "There was so much personal and local expression behind them and I was very touched by the qualities. I wondered who was behind them." Inspired, he requested to work on one 19th century house as a sample to be turned into a showcase of good shophouse restoration work.



*The restored Armenian Street shophouse*

Rather than using powered tools, traditional conservation techniques – such as that used on historic buildings in France – were employed in the restoration of the shophouse. Seven layers of paint and cement cladding from the side of the shophouse were stripped off and replaced with porous mortar. The roof was also replaced with exact copies of the traditionally used V-shaped tiles, which were made in France.

There was an underlying conviction behind this process: educating locals on traditional conservation techniques and getting them to care about Singapore's heritage. "The [local] people will have to do it [participate in the rebuilding of the shophouses]. It is their heritage." Seven local building instructors from the Construction Industry Development Board were thus brought on board, where they worked hand-in-hand with skilled conservation masters from France and learnt from each other.



*Didier Repellin (in bow tie) with the French conservation masters and the local team at the completion of the restoration project*

“Restoration is a science,” Didier stated to The Straits Times in 1987, “It has to be taught, it has to be learnt.”

Between meals and laughs, the shophouse was restored in 10 days – a stunning feat, considering a project of such scale and scope could have easily taken a month. It also sparked awareness about the art and science of restoring shophouses.

### ***The CHIJMES calling***

Didier’s next project, CHIJMES, had origins that were close to his heart. Like him, Father Jean Marie-Beurel – who purchased the land for the convent school – hailed from France. Representing a significant chapter in Singapore’s colonial history, the convent school features a neo-gothic chapel with finely carved column capitals and stained glass windows.



*CHIJMES, undated*

For Didier, his role as restoration consultant went beyond advising: he also got his hands dirty. Scraping paint off the sides of the chapel's walls, he found inscriptions that eventually became his motto for the restoration of the building, 'Come along with me and be perfect.'



*Inscriptions found on a wall in CHIJMES after scrapping paint off the chapel walls that means, come along with me and be perfect*

His idea of perfection meant restoring CHIJMES to its most authentic form. In sharing his expertise for the S\$65 million project undertaken by local architecture firm Ong & Ong Architects, careful steps were taken to ensure maximum retention. For instance, broken pieces of the stained glass windows were never replaced, only repaired – even if it meant sending the fragile glass windows all the way to Lyon for restoration.



*One of the CHIJMES' stained glass windows restored*

Under his advice, the scale of the restoration and its sensitivity to the original structure and history of the iconic building were eventually what clinched CHIJMES the Architectural Heritage Award in 1997.

On his approach to conserving buildings, Didier feels that respect for their heritage is key. “It is not about duplicating the space as it was in the past because society is different today. It is about respecting the space through simple ways. If the space has a long gallery with a nice promenade for instance, the latter should not be split into two parts. Furthermore, the culture and history of the area should be preserved and reflected in the new ways the building is used.”

It does not matter what project or building he is working on. From small chapels and iconic buildings like the Chateau de Versailles in France, to the colonial structures and shophouses in Singapore and Penang, he stresses the importance of what he affectionately terms, the “human dimension”. To him, behind the pile of bricks

and stones of buildings is a greater story to tell – that of the people who built it, wandered through it – and ultimately, one that is to be preserved for generations to come.

*This article is part of '30 Years of Conservation in Singapore since 1989', a special supplement that presents 30 reflections and stories of personal and collective struggles and triumph in charting Singapore's conservation efforts in the last 30 years. The complete supplement will be coming to our website soon.*