New faces at Heritage Board

BY AKSHITA NANDA

THE National Heritage Board (NHB) has named a new chairman: auditor Ernst & Young’s executive chairman Ong Yew Huat (right), who takes over on Monday.

Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh, 74, steps down after nine years at the helm.

Professor Koh will no longer sit on the board, though an NHB spokesman yesterday said the board hopes to tap his “wisdom, experiences and networks” when needed. She also explained the choice of the new chairman by citing Mr Ong’s “deep interest and passion in heritage and the arts” and related experience.

The 55-year-old chairs the Singapore Tyler Print Institute and has served on its board since 2003. He also chaired the Singapore Art Museum’s art acquisition committee for six years until 2009, moving on to a similar post with the National Art Gallery. He gave up that role last month.

A press release yesterday from the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (Mica) also said the board will now have 15 members instead of 22.

Eleven board members are retiring and being replaced by only four fresh faces: history professor Chua Ai Lin from the National University of Singapore; hotelier Loh Lik Peng; Mr Paul Ma, chairman of Mapletree Logistics Trust Management; and Olam International non-executive chairman Rangareddy Jayachandran.

Each will serve for two years, as will Mr Ong. The chairman’s term used to be three years. A Mica spokesman said the reduced term and numbers bring NHB in line with other statutory boards.

In the press release, both Mica Minister Yaacob Ibrahim and NHB chief executive Michael Koh paid tribute to Prof Koh’s contributions. Dr Yaacob said he “brought NHB closer to realising its vision of making heritage an enriching part of everyone’s life”, while Mr Koh lauded “his unwavering passion for our heritage”.

Prof Koh spoke of his term via e-mail as “a very happy journey”: “I am proud that new museums, heritage centres and festivals have been added over these years to add breadth and depth to the once-derided notion that Singapore has a history worth telling or museums worth visiting.” Museum visitorship more than trebled from 1.98 million in 2003 to 7.61 million last year, according to Mica.

Said Mr Ong: “I’m very lucky to be going on board at this time, when we’ve seen a great surge of interest in all things heritage.” Married with three grown children, he says all family holidays involve “culture” and trips to museums.

He hopes to support grassroots efforts to preserve heritage during his term. Referring to the recently opened Ang Mo Kio Heritage Trail, developed by NHB with residents’ help, he said: “These are the projects I would like to encourage, besides the big mega-projects like the National Art Gallery.”