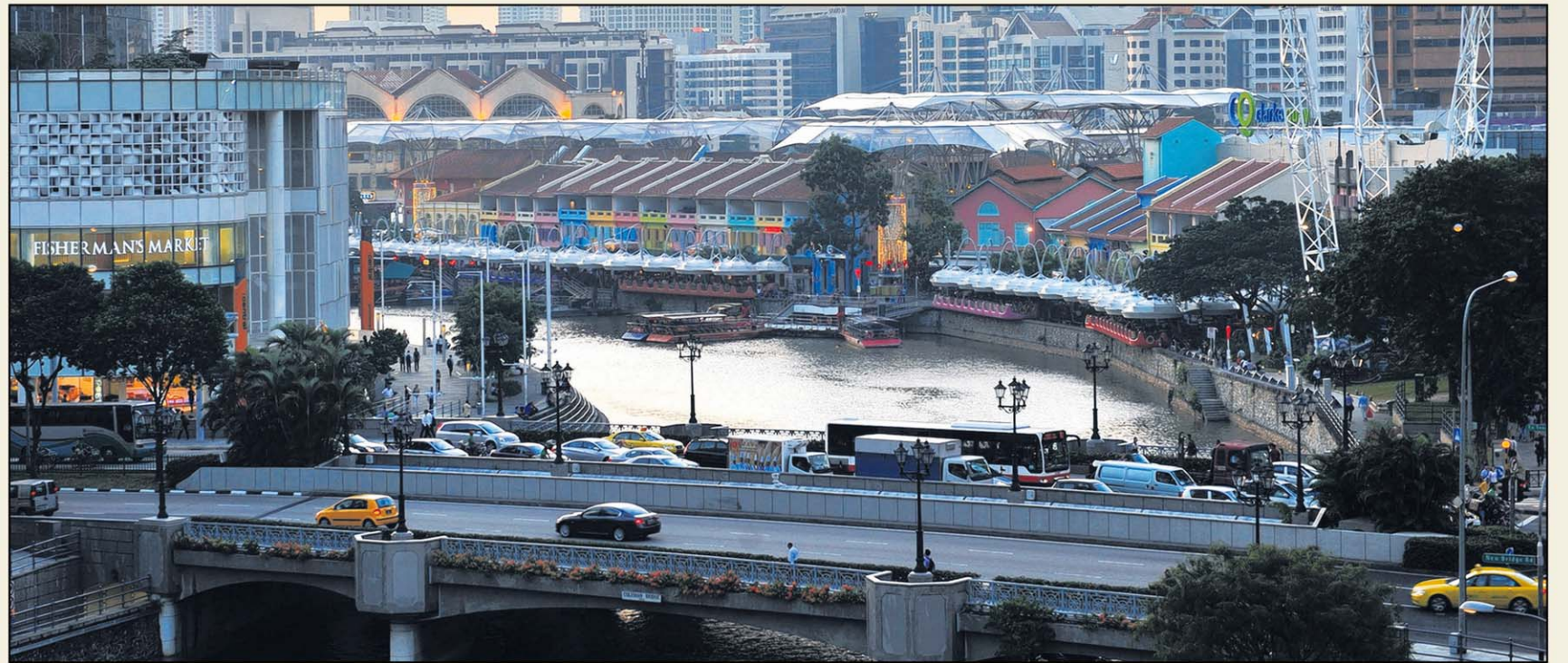


Diversion of river yields gem of a chance

Archaeologists expect to find artefacts in part of Singapore River to be drained for MRT line



BY CHERYL ONG

ARCHAEOLOGISTS here are hoping to get the go-ahead to see long-buried artefacts in the bed of the Singapore River when one part of it is temporarily drained and diverted later this year.

The diversion is to build an MRT tunnel beneath it, but Associate Professor John Miksic and his colleagues also see it as an unprecedented chance to take a peek at what lies beneath the murky silt of the waterway that was the backbone of the nation's maritime past.

The treasures they expect to unearth from plumbing the depths of the river bed could include ancient coins, shards of pottery and even the remains of boats used by the riverbank settlers from as far back as hundreds of years ago.

Prof Miksic told *The Straits Times* that he and his team are planning to approach the Land Transport Authority (LTA) for clearance.

He is optimistic that artefacts lie buried there, having overseen past excavations at Empress Place and Pulau Saigon, an island in the Singapore River which no longer exists but used to sit between the banks of Robertson Quay.

He explained that objects buried in mud can stay preserved because they are protected from damage by marine life; additionally, the rate of decay in such a low-oxygen environment will be slow.

He said: "Maybe we could offer to help the authorities record the items found. We could provide extra manpower to sort through the items without charge."

The LTA had announced last week that part of the river and the nearby River Valley Road will be realigned temporarily in the third quarter of the year for the MRT works.

A canal will be dug to divert the river. The drained portion will then be cleared of debris and filled with a stabilising material. Two train tunnels will then be bored under it, after which the diverted part of the river will be returned to its original position.

National University of Singapore (NUS) history lecturer Kwa Chong Guan also believes the river could well be a site of archaeological significance.

"There should be an archaeological survey done before the diversion is done. It will be worthwhile to have Dr Miksic and his colleagues have an excavation there."



The Singapore River, circa the 1910s (left) and today (above).

PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN, WONG HAN MIN

He noted that the Pulau Saigon archaeological site had yielded European and Chinese ceramics, glassware, toothbrushes and opium vials when digging was done there in 1990, and that stoneware and porcelain had been found at the Empress Place site in 1998.

Prof Miksic's colleague Lim Chen Sian said that even well-preserved discards from long ago would serve as a window into Singapore's past as a trading post and a port city.

"Singapore prides itself on being a maritime port. A large portion of our nation's memories are associated with the river and part of our identity is buried under it," he said.

He added that he recalls seeing abandoned old boats on the river banks in the 70s and 80s, which later sank.

"If we find them, they can provide insight into the years past," he said.

Trading settlements along the river go back more than 700 years, to the time Sin-

gapore was a port settlement called Temasek.

NUS historian Donna Brunero points to the 14th-century gold ornaments of Majapahit origin that were found in 1926, when a service reservoir was being built atop Fort Canning.

The artefacts, one of the oldest found here, are regarded as one of Singapore's most significant national treasures, which enable scholars to piece together a more detailed picture of Temasek-era life, she said.

Nanyang Technological University assistant professor Goh Geok Yian, who does archaeological research, said it will now depend on whether the authorities will give the archaeologists clearance to survey the soil below the river bed.

The archaeologists may not have the luxury of time to do their work, and it is work that definitely cannot wait until after the river is filled back up.

She said: "We'll try to rescue as many of the artefacts, make records of them as precisely as we can in the time we have. We'll probably have to work within a time limit."

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