



TOO UGLY TO BE SAVED?

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SINGAPORE — On a balmy Friday night, Zara Tan and two friends went drinking at an open-air pop-up bar in Golden Mile Tower, a 1970s-era building with a raw concrete exterior that overlooks Singapore’s financial district.

Ms. Tan, 24, said the atmosphere at the bar, the Great Escape, was more down-to-earth than what she normally encountered in Singapore’s slick downtown clubs. And that was the point.

“It would be kind of boring if everything was the same,” she said through a thicket of pink and green strobe lights at the bar, which sits in an upper-level parking lot. “That’s why this place is so valuable to people like us.”

Landmarks of so-called Brutalist architecture, like Golden Mile Tower, are emerging havens for the sort of gritty, artsy subcultures that are mostly absent in Singapore, a banking center known for its tidy streets and often-overbearing governance.

Others see them as important markers of national identity because they were designed by a generation of up-and-coming local architects just after the city-state’s founding in 1965, when the area’s growth was fueled by large-scale urban renewal projects.

But a few prominent Brutalist landmarks are on the verge of being sold to private developers, which has prompted a last-ditch scramble by enthusiasts to have the buildings protected by conservation laws. It has also set off a thorny debate about what type of architecture is worth saving in the first place.

Brutalist buildings represent Singapore’s early “hopes and aspirations,” said Darren Soh, an architectural photographer. He said destroying them would add to a sense among many residents of this former British colony that buildings of all kinds are being demolished and replaced too quickly.

“At some point in time, all this glitz is going to become old,” Mr. Soh said at Golden Mile Tower, referring to the glass towers of the nearby financial district. “What are we going to do then?”

Brutalism, once a pejorative term, typically refers to modernist buildings of stark simplicity and raw edges, whose primary feature is unfinished concrete. The style was most commonly used in the design of government buildings and public housing.