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Make it new

Renewing—rather than razing—heritage buildings whose original functions have expired will ensure their legacy and history aren't reduced to footnotes.

By Iliyas Ong | 27 Mar 2014



When a Portuguese missionary opened a school for poor parishioners in a compound along Middle Road almost 150 years ago, he had no idea it would eventually become the home for cutting-edge Singaporean design. The site went through a series of changes, from St Anthony's Convent to the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts to the brand-new National Design Centre, but one thing endured the war and the overhaul of the Bugis district: the buildings themselves.

This evolutionary process, by which the programmes of buildings metamorphose over time, is known as adaptive reuse. It's an elegant alternative to siccing the bulldozer on such storied structures—a kiss of life that creates rather than destroys. Singapore has employed that technique to ensure 21st century relevance and vitality for its built heritage.

There is a long list of art centres housed in decades-old buildings: the Singapore Art Museum was once St Joseph's Institution, The Substation a power sub-station, the Red Dot Design Museum the traffic police headquarters, and the Arts House the old parliament chambers, to name a few. Even Wessex Estate, a sprawling residential enclave for artists, is annexed from black-and-white colonial bungalows.

"These heritage buildings provide rich backdrops, stirring the imagination with their historical stories and distinctive architecture, and inspiring both the creators and viewers of art," says an Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) spokesperson.

"On the other hand, functionally, we believe that the buildings allow sufficient flexibility in terms of layout for arts venues for varying audiences."

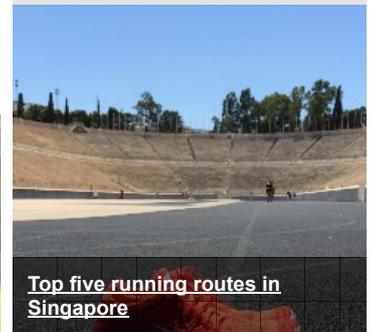


Given the breakneck speed at which Singapore develops her urban landscape, why is there this push for adaptive reuse? Isn't it more feasible to raise buildings designed specifically for their new programmes?

Finding roots

The impulse behind adaptive reuse can be traced to the increasingly loud voices—especially from a swelling middle class in Asia—calling for conservation of monuments, historic areas and environmental contexts, says Jean François Milou, Principal of studioMilou. The French architecture firm, which has an office in Singapore, is responsible for transforming the former Supreme Court and City Hall into the National Art Gallery, soon to be the city-state's biggest arts venue.

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"This tendency also represents a turning point in the ways in which people are seeing unlimited urbanisation," says the 60-year-old architect. "It is part of a desire to think about other dimensions of development, including the development of urban areas in which history, landscape and inherited rituals have their roles to play in contributing to the development of the urban framework."



StudioMilou is no stranger to adaptive reuse. It has completed similar projects around Europe and Asia, such as the Carreau du Temple, a converted 19th century market in the centre of Paris. For the National Art Gallery, which is scheduled to open next year, the practice aimed to "radically transform the visitor experience while changing very little in the buildings themselves", reveals Jean Francois. "We strive to respect the integrity and

meaning of original buildings for local populaces while offering innovative and contemporary solutions."

His submitted design is smart and unobtrusive: the studio unites the Supreme Court and City Hall with a new glass-and-steel roof canopy, buttressed by tree-like columns. The rooftop will also serve as an open public terrace where performances, exhibitions and events sidle alongside F&B destinations. A new basement level rounds off the major structural changes studioMilou made. And as you'd expect, the façades of both heritage buildings will remain as they have been for decades.

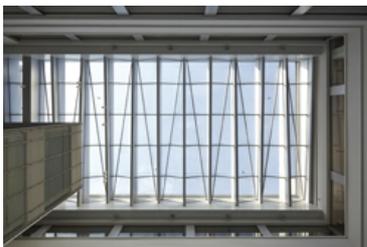
Given a project of this scale and the age of the structures, it isn't surprising that the challenges studioMilou faced fell on the technical side: fire safety regulations, acoustic and environmental performance, and so on.

"The application of contemporary regulations in such contexts can involve some compromises relating to the character and authenticity of refined and fragile buildings," explains Jean Francois. "It certainly takes intensive study and rigorous exploration of solutions to avoid any detrimental compromises. We sought to ensure that the new structure and interventions could maintain its light and historical character while respecting the regulations. The building's envelope in its final form required thousands of hours of design work; [it is] a technical tour de force, though we would hope that this is not detectable looking at the project."



Be sensitive

This theme of sensitive architecture is also evident in the National Design Centre (NDC), which opened earlier this year. Designed by SCDA Architects, the four-block complex—three are pre-war Art Deco and one is post-war modern—still bears elements from its original design, but was completely gutted to accommodate offices, gallery spaces, studios, boardrooms and informal meeting spaces.



Perhaps the most significant change to the former convent school was to enclose the open-air atrium on the first floor of the largest block. SCDA Architects installed a glass ceiling that also acts as a sculptural skylight to light up the interior, now a gallery space for exhibitions. Glass outer walls were also added around the first floor to further illuminate the space—but the austere lines of the block's façade remain unchanged.

"Adaptive reuse requires the sensitive insertion of relevant elements and programmes in the old conserved fabric," explains Chan Soo Kian, Principal of SCDA Architects. "The old and the new have to be clearly expressed so that the message is clear. The experience in the building should contain the feelings of enhancement over change."

Soo Kian goes on to say that unlike in new developments, adaptive reuse allows architects to understand the historical layers of a structure and interpret which elements are to be conserved and which are to be refined.

One of those elements that had to be kept in the NDC was the required fire stairs, found at the back of the largest block. Instead of leaving them as-is, SCDA turned them into a design element. The stairs are now enclosed in a perforated metal structure that mimics another new insertion: four cantilevering and overlapping 'boxes' that are stacked in the first-floor atrium.

Originally, SCDA intended those four boxes to be visible from both inside and outside the building, but conservation guidelines prevented the firm from realising the idea. Even the religious reliefs scattered around the complex had to be kept. And the firm's plan to remove the existing concrete vents found along the five-footway on the ground floor was nixed, too. That, Soo Kian says, would have invited passers-by to enter the NDC.

"We did feel restricted," he admits. "We had to restore all the original windows and match the existing mullions."

Furthermore, while surveying the site, the SCDA architects stumbled upon a big problem: the buildings had settled, a few quite considerably so. Says Soo Kian: "Structural underpinning and the

use of raised floor systems were introduced to level the sloping floor slabs and reduce the floor gradients, making them usable floor plates.”

As with the National Art Gallery, these technical concerns were resolved ‘invisibly’, so visitors won’t notice the architects’ intervention.

For art’s sake

With all the challenges of adaptive reuse, why didn’t planners raze these buildings and, from their ashes, erect contemporary glass-and-steel affairs? Surely that would be preferable in land-scarce Singapore.



“It is always a challenge to find that delicate balance between meeting the physical needs of the nation—such as housing for our people and providing land to support economic growth—and that of retaining our natural and built heritage to retain our sense of identity and history,” replies the URA spokesperson.

“Adaptive reuse is one way of ensuring future generations can continue to enjoy heritage buildings while supporting Singapore’s land use needs.”

According to the URA, reusing old buildings allows Singapore to preserve the architecture that cannot be replicated elsewhere, adding to the “distinctiveness and attractiveness” of the city. “If the original use of a building cannot remain, it is good for the building [to] be put to other uses. This allows the heritage building to have continued relevance and use in today’s context.”



For the artists, museums and galleries, heritage buildings have a potent character that fosters the creative spark. The uniqueness of these venues give arts practitioners a connection to the past, which inspires the creative process, says Noor Effendy Ibrahim, Artistic Director of The Substation, which has occupied for 24 years a power sub-station built in 1926.

“More than anything, I feel that the history of these buildings can help to enhance the visitors’ experience of an exhibition of performance,” he adds. “At The Substation, where we often showcase experimental contemporary works, the old and the cutting-edge come together in an interesting tension that I think works very well for us.”

Noor Effendy echoes the URA’s belief that heritage structures elicit a sense of nostalgia and history that new developments do not. But it’s not all rose-tinted. Strict conservation guidelines also mean that customising these buildings for specific functional needs—say, improving the acoustics for a performance space—is a tricky matter.



“At the end of the day,” he sums up, “it’s all about whether the space meets the needs of the artists and the community.”

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