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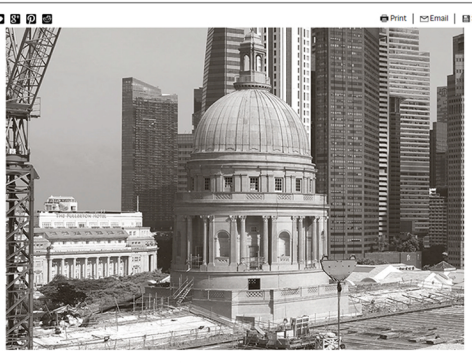


1 Roof structures under construction and view of the former Supreme Court dome.

Surrendering To Memory, Art, And Life

The National Gallery Singapore

Text by Lilian Chee and Tan Qian Rou
Photography by Fernando Javier Urquijo/ Courtesy of studioMilou Singapore Pte Ltd
Additional photography as credited

Nearly eight years since the design competition, the newly restored and converted National Gallery Singapore by studioMilou Singapore and CPG Consultants gears up for its opening later this year. With an interest in the building's new role as a public space, Lilian Chee and Tan Qian Rou review and reflect on the delicate and public transformations of two national civic monuments—the City Hall and former Supreme Court—into the single new icon for Singapore and her art.

PROJECT CREDITS

Architect
studioMilou Singapore Pte Ltd (studioMilou architecture) and CPG Consultants Pte Ltd

Client
National Gallery Singapore, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

Site Area
17,200 m2

GFA
64,000 m2 (including existing floor area of 38,000 m2)

Project Cost
S$530 million

Completion Date
Mid-2015

Sub-Consultants
Civil Engineer
Batiser Ingénierie
Façade
Société Européenne de Mécanique and Arup Singapore Pte Ltd **Lighting**
Lighting Planners Associates (S) Pte Ltd
Landscape
ICN Design International Pte Ltd
Acoustics and AV/IT
Shen Milsom & Wilke LLC
Signage
The Press Room
Security Consultant
Certis CISCO Security Pte Ltd
Structural Engineer
CPG Consultants Pte Ltd
Mechanical & Electrical Engineer
CPG Consultants Pte Ltd
Quantity Surveyor
CPG Consultants Pte Ltd
Sustainability Consultant
CPG Consultants Pte Ltd
Conservation
Architectural Restoration Consultants Pte Ltd

Contractors
Main Contractor
Takenaka-Singapore Piling Joint Venture (TCSP-JV)
Façade/ Roof
Jangho Group Co Ltd (Singapore Branch)
Interior Design
Sunray Woodcraft Construction Pte Ltd
Landscape
Flora Landscape Pte Ltd **Lift/ Escalator**
KONE Pte Ltd
Mechanical (ACMV)
Kurihara Kogyo Co Ltd **Fire Protection**
Deluge Fire Protection (SEA) Pte Ltd
Electrical
Ngee Cheng Electric Co Pte Ltd
Special Lighting
Kristine Pte Ltd
AV Equipment
NCS Communications Engineering Pte Ltd
Office Furniture
Innoplan Technology Pte Ltd
Signage Fabrication
Crimsign Graphics Pte Ltd
IT Network/ Telephony
Stone Forest IT Pte Ltd **Security**
Singapore Technologies Electronics Ltd

A site is often understood in physical terms; the implication is of architecture's negotiation with its physical landscape or its urban context. Within that understanding, memory becomes an aspect of the site often seen as necessary for resolution. Yet with the new National Gallery Singapore, a project that revitalises two of Singapore's most important civic monuments, memory is not so much a byproduct of site as it is the site. The memory of these two monuments—the City Hall building and the former Supreme Court—is collective and plural but also particular , specif ic, and personal.

"Re-member-ing" implies a bodily and visceral relationship to that which is being committed to one's consciousness. Because "memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects," these two buildings can only be remembered as part of one's lived experience during specific moments of one's existence: as a space of work (here, hundreds of civil servants reported for work daily); as a site of celebration (here, countless wedding and graduation photographs were taken); as a place of national reverie (here, the nation-state's National Day Parades took place). 1 In these instances, the historical weight of these buildings is held in equilibrium with the fragile phenomena of personal memory. In these moments, the two buildings are of one's own as much as they belong to a nation.

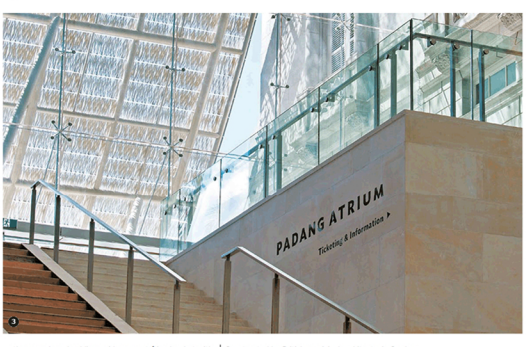
The recent restoration, conversion, and extension of the two civic buildings into the new National Gallery Singapore reanimates the tense relationship between memory on the one hand and history on the other. The project brief called for the revivification of these long dormant monuments by introducing a new programmatic content of art. Newly configured state of-the-art gallery spaces will showcase Singapore's own artistic lineage and national collection and at the same time transform the city into a leading global venue and serious contender for the promotion and cultivation of Asian art from the region and further afar. The new architecture would ostensibly have to prioritise the two existing monuments and work around strict conservation guidelines. But in actuality, it had to do a great deal more.

The National Gallery Singapore is not just a new gallery to house Singapore's national art collection. It is also not just a heritage project. The Gallery is crucially located at the nexus of several often contradictory relationships: national history and personal memory; heritage and the quotidian; the state and the public; and culture and life, to name a few. The new galleries would have to change the relationship between these monuments and the city. Where there was once a clear divide between the city and these buildings, the National Gallery Singapore would seek to heal this separation and return the spaces to the city and its publics. The use of art and the foregrounding of Singapore's national art collection as a mediating strategy is nevertheless a calculated gamble, given the developmentalist nation's still tentative interest in art. So here is another demand: that the Gallery nurtures a sensibility and sensitivity for culture and art.

The importance of heritage, particularly within Singapore's tenuous architectural history, has created an urgency for the preservation of historically important buildings like the City Hall and former Supreme Court. And in a way these buildings are treated like archaeological objects: carefully dusted off, set upright, each little chip painstakingly patched over. As a consequence, any sort of new space interjected into or, in the case of the Gallery, between the buildings defers first and foremost to these spaces as memorials. By interacting with, building around, gently touching, and showcasing the conserved chambers, the Gallery as an entire institution encompassing new and old architecture becomes a self-referential being, engaged primarily with itself, to reassert and reinterpret the existing architecture through the new.

Raising the stakes further is the architecture's programmatic shift from private, governmental buildings to the creation of a bold new public realm. People are meant to use this space, and once again, like before, to start to make it their own. There is an expectation that visitors will enter and browse the galleries, enjoy the rooftop views and gardens, take leisurely walks along

2 The new roof terrace at the former Supreme Court



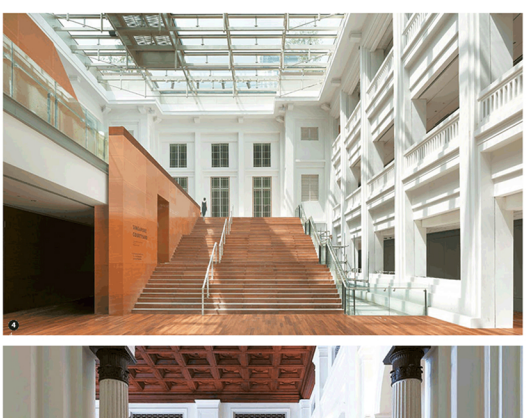
3 Connection of the veil with the existing former Supreme Court facade.

the many broad public corridors, meet friends, chat with one another, take afternoon tea or dinner, educate young children about art and the city, celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, and willingly return again and again over the weeks, and months, and years. The National Gallery Singapore is thus a site where the quotidian rhythms of everyday experience must coalesce alongside the burdens of heritage and history. It is where history is embedded, but it is also where the constant renewal of life and personal memory must flourish. As opposed to history, which is "intellectual and secular," memory is "affective and magical." 2 Consequently, the Gallery must take on these opposing atmospheres. It is a tall order.

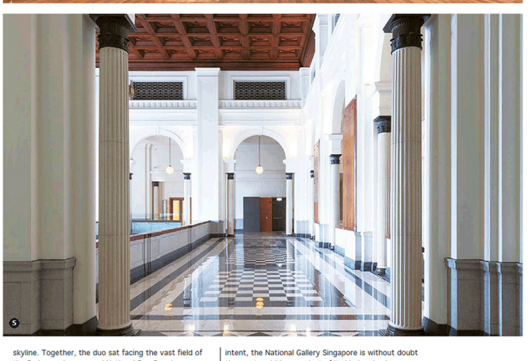
The responsibility towards history and heritage weighs heavily on the new architecture. This is both expected and understandable; the City Hall building and former Supreme Court are the cornerstones of the civic district, the seat of power first for the British colonial administration and later Singapore's own government post-independence. The architecture of City Hall itself is inscribed with deep political significance.

Constructed by British municipal architects A. Gordon and F. D. Meadows between 1926 and 1929, the neoclassical building was incomparably monumental in the emerging colonial port-city of Singapore. The sheer volume of the building with a total floor area of 23,800 square metres, its classical proportions, and its triple-storey Corinthian columns asserted British colonial authority. For its perceived symbolism, City Hall became the site of the Japanese surrender to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten after the Japanese Occupation of World War II. City Hall would witness several other historic events, including the declaration of Singapore as a city in September 1951 and the oaths of the first two prime ministers of independent Singapore.

The second of the pair to be constructed is the former Supreme Court, designed by Frank Dorrington Ward and built between 1937 and 1939. The two buildings must be considered a pair; the former Supreme Court was specifically built to respond to City Hall, continuing the same neoclassical style and rhythm, with the 3 addition of a large dome, which dominated the Padang



4 The courtyard of City Hall leading to the City Hall Chamber.



5 The former Supreme Court lobby after conservation works.

skyline. Together, the duo sat facing the vast field of the Padang, where annual National Day Parades celebrating Singapore's independence took place with two civic monuments as their backdrop. As it was named, the former Supreme Court housed the pinnacle of Singapore's judicial system. 3

The civic district, where these two buildings are located, has also been actively developed in recent years to accommodate more artistic and cultural venues; just down the road is the recently refurbished Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall, and next to that the Arts House, which took over the Old Parliament House. This is the context in which the National Gallery Singapore was conceived: within a precinct housing Singapore's oldest, grandest, and most significant historical monuments, a burgeoning interest in the arts, and a growing desire to reconcile colonial architecture with culture for the people. Such a conservation-conversion endeavour is by no means new; the previously mentioned Arts House and Victoria Hall conversions were followed by the transformation of the former Methodist Girls' School on Mount Sophia into Old School in 2007 and the conversion of Gillman Barracks from a former military camp into gallery spaces in 2012. But in terms of scale, historical impact, and programmatic intent, the National Gallery Singapore is without doubt the most ambitious project of its kind, poised as a vehicle for Singapore's impending transformation into a regional art hub.

When French architectural firm studioMilou architecture in conjunction with CPG Consultants were announced as the winning architects for the National Gallery Singapore design competition in 2008, the challenge faced was how to preserve and revitalise these historical monuments while infusing them with new programmatic content and simultaneously introducing a new public space. In sum, the design proposal aimed to offer what studioMilou describes as "a radically different experience of these familiar buildings." Principal architect and founder Jean François Milou explains the design direction as "add[ing] layers to rather than alter[ing] essential aspects of the monument in the name of creating one institution."

Consequently, the main element in the design is a veil-like metallic roof structure supported by large tree-like columns. This gossamer roof appears to float above the existing monuments, barely touching but unifying them under a blanket of filtered sunlight. The delicate roof is counterbalanced by a weightier

6 The entrance veil or canopy on St. Andrews Road.

intervention: a new basement concourse, slid underneath the two buildings to provide a coherent public circulation between both sites.

The design concept produced three major considerations: the construction of a new basement under existing historical foundations, the simultaneous preservation and updating of the existing buildings for new purposes, and the careful calibration of the veil-like roof. Each element posed a different technical challenge. Due to the variant nature of the soil and thus differing foundation systems under each building —shallow under City Hall, but much deeper under the former Supreme Court—the construction of the new basement meant that the weight of both structures had to be transferred from existing structural supports onto a new system of pile foundations. This new system would hold up and stabilise both the new concourse and existing monuments. The long and arduous process of excavating the foundations without compromising the buildings themselves began in 2011. Yet this was just the beginning of the extensive conservation works done in the construction of the Gallery.

The second challenge of the project lay in the City Hall and former Supreme Court buildings themselves. Aside from the difficulty of converting the specifically designed spaces of both into more public and appropriate contexts for a gallery and museum programme, the buildings had also suffered the effects of time. City Hall had sunken slightly, such that one end of the building sat approximately one metre lower than the other end. These changes in the levels have not been erased and may indeed be keenly experienced within some of the new galleries' public circulation.

In addition, the architectural details on both buildings had weathered and warped at their individual paces, such that no two features were consistent with each other. In their attempts to not only conserve, but also even simply restore the architectural integrity of these structures, the architects from studioMilou were forced to consider each window, column, and beam separately. The same consideration was extended to the timber ceilings, wall panels, and furniture, which were removed, restored, and reinstalled. Other features such as the rubber tiles of the Supreme Court lobby were replaced with marble in the exact same pattern.

Beyond restoration, the buildings had to be reconciled with their intended use. Infrastructure and mechanical systems adhering to building codes, gallery use, and fire safety were discreetly inserted without compromising the expansiveness of the space and integrity of the historic interiors. Construction relied on an artful strategy of hide-and-seek: fixtures hidden behind columns and beams, latched onto less obvious surfaces, and pipes and structural reinforcements creeping between newly thickened walls, all painstakingly done to maintain an illusion of timelessness.

Juxtaposed against the seeming inertia of the City Hall and former Supreme Court is the new roof of the National Gallery Singapore. It is a simple concept to grasp: a new, singular structure of glass, aluminium, and steel that would formally and spatially assimilate both buildings into one cohesive institution. But as with the basement concourse and conservation works, the roof structure constituted a complex series of technical problems that had to be resolved in order to achieve minimal intervention.

The roof, described as a veil by both the architects and the press, is less a thin film than a layered assembly, comprising glass, glazing, sunscreens, and interfaces, which gives the overall structure a volume appropriate for the heavy materiality of these conservation buildings. Its layers create a canopy effect, filtering Singapore's harsh sun into soft dappled light and shade. The bringing of natural daylight into these monumental interiors produces a liberating and magical effect—akin to the feeling of a secret interior revealed by illumination. Massive, tree-like columns ascend to support the canopy, mimicking in metal the familiar image of tropical greenery but also maximising structural support with minimal footprint.

The roof turns out to harbour the largest spatial profit margin. By not only enveloping the existing buildings, but also positioning the veil above the current roof level, the previously unusable gaps and alleyways between the City Hall and former Supreme Court become viable interior space. The rooftops of the old are now transformed into terraces, and a total of approximately 4,000 square metres is conjured from thin air. Accompanied by the sunken level of the new basement concourse, all these in-between spaces take on new life, becoming a main circulatory path for the Gallery, reinterpreting and consolidating the previous circulation hierarchy of the historic buildings.

The shift in spatial hierarchy is further established through studioMilou's careful use of materials with their inherent colours and textures. The historic interiors are distinct in their specific construction: marble columns, brass capitals, and teak ceilings, complemented by traditional Shanghai plaster and granite of the exterior. Alongside these, the new architectural intervention is a seamless flow of wooden flooring, light in contrast to the distinguished weight of the dark teak. Further complementing this is the gold of the aluminiumpanelled roof, spanning three different shades and extending to the new metal columns. All these are rendered in a matte rather than metallic finish, such that the new constructs appear separate from the heaviness of stone, but not distractingly so.

The clear difference between the distinctly colonial spaces, with their myriad finishes and intricate craftsmanship, and the new space, identifiable by the modern aesthetic of minimalist, contemporary materials in clean, uniform finishing, adds further layers of importance and distinction between old and new. Rooms of historically significant use, highlighted through their lavishness, once again emerge as key spaces within the new gallery. The most distinctive achievement is perhaps how intricately the new architectural intervention has woven itself into both monuments in terms of structure, services, and space, yet also managing to stand apart from the old. More importantly, this spatial strategy has liberated the bulk of the two monuments for public use. There is also a sense that the integrity of each element—wall, floor, roof, window, façade, railing, signage, lighting, and services—has been wrestled with and retained. This integrity will be how this architecture will come to be defined in the future.

In the end, the relevance and success of the National Gallery Singapore cannot be judged simply by evaluating its numbers—how large a national art collection it holds, how many people pass through its doors, its gross floor area, the size of its galleries, the profit it makes—although these numbers will matter to a lot of people. Its real bearing must be how it thrives as a site of public engagement, and this intensity must rival that of the political import of the two historic buildings that have now become something else.

For more information, visit www.studiomilou.fr and www.cpgcorp.com.sg.

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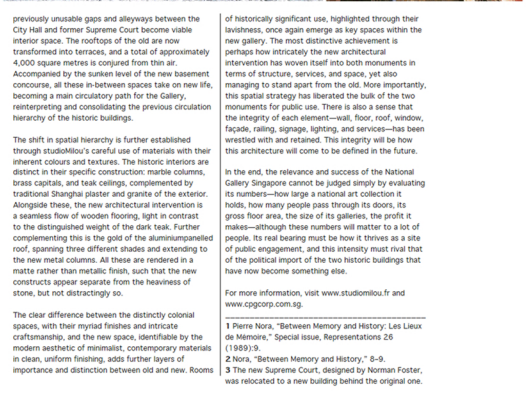
1 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," Special issue, Representations 26 (1989):9.
2 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 8–9.
3 The new Supreme Court, designed by Norman Foster, was relocated to a new building behind the original one.



7 Complex extrication of temporary structures in the basement works of the Gallery

8

Envisioning National Gallery Singapore

Interview with Jean Francois Milou, May 2015

9 Jean Francois Milou on site.

SA In terms of being a new public arena for the city, how do you see the National Gallery Singapore contributing to the notion of "public space"?

JM I see the design of the National Gallery Singapore as offering a large, calm, and welcoming public space, where people can choose to be quiet in a landscape designed with contemplation and with the desire to enchant in mind. The filigree veil covering the monuments, for example, should spread dappled light over the atrium and other spaces to give a sense of wonder. I suppose, in sum, that the studio wanted to create an expansive and peaceful architectural landscape, where we can all reflect on art, and more importantly , on our own selves.

SA Both the City Hall and former Supreme Court have been perceived and have functioned as stand-alone monuments, separate from the public's engagement for a very long time. Is there an intention in the design to repair this rift? How do you approach these monuments spatially and conceptually?

JM When I began the initial conceptual drawings, the notion of uniting them with a more poetic and somehow simple gesture seemed essential. Spatially, we wanted to maintain their grandeur and sense of space, while conceptually softening and lightening the ambience to give visitors a sense of wonder and welcome.

The project is an attempt to create a clearing within this landscape of monuments, through the atrium and its veil of light covering the two monuments. The intention in uniting them with a filigree veil from above was to use a design gesture at once elegant and evocative of the familiar—of weaving, or some kind of cloth, draped gently over each monument—so as to create light-bathed interiors and a new, intimate garden area on the roof. We hope that the people of Singapore will enter under this luminous veil and discover the monuments from another point of view, one that is more dramatic, more spectacular, and at the same time more intimate and less intimidating.

SA The nation's relationship to art, culture, and history is ambivalent. Yet the National Gallery Singapore is perhaps its largest investment or gesture of faith towards this "unknown" direction. Can you say a little about how your architectural approach may positively or critically influence the nation's and public's views toward art, culture, and history?

JM I do feel that if the nation's relationship to art is ambivalent, the government's decision to create a gallery of this scale is a bold one. As for relating to art, history, and culture, I suppose I feel it can only make real sense in terms of how individuals feel about it and interpret it in relation to their own lives. We all need spaces and places that encourage and nurture our relationship with history and culture, and throughout the ages, worldwide, rulers and others in a position to create such places have always done so.

And the accelerated pace of change, increased mobility, and uncertainty in our world means that we architects should create an almost unlimited number of architectural landscapes that may offer environments conducive for one's own quiet reflection. As architects, we cannot provide the massive content a national institution such as this one requires. But we can create a peaceful architectural landscape where the people of Singapore will like to go and where beautiful stories, objects, and images can take root.

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