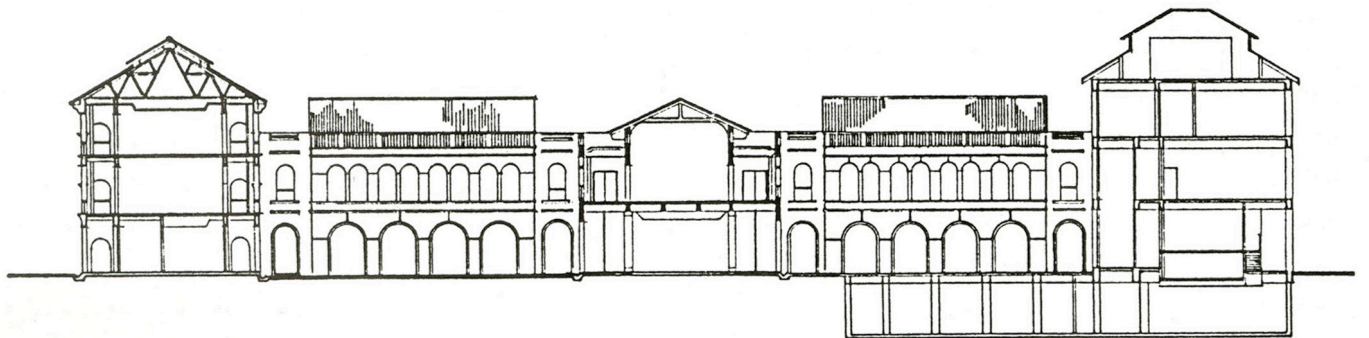


project

Play It Again SAM Singapore Art Museum

Architect: Public Works Department
by Chee Li Lian



Section



Photographer Albert Lim KS

In the early nineteenth century, the public museum was founded upon a “crusade against ignorance” and charged with the responsibility of disseminating academic taste and new values of progress to the masses. Even then, it had an agenda beyond mere vanity of display. Today, the museum continues to play an inextricable role in the physical, psychic, and ceremonial life of the modern city. More than a civic monument, it must serve many needs other than simply providing uninterrupted visual access to art. Indeed, it ruminates a

Above: The Singapore Arts Museum, formerly St Joseph's Institution, a Catholic boys school.

different agenda for a different party. For the city, it is a crucial jigsaw, the missing piece that assumes the part of a city square, one that physically reinstates a newfound cultural sensibility and urbanity. For the masses and for the policymakers, it represents the very essence of their being, a culture that is made transparent by objects put up on display.

The opportunity to review the latest addition to Singapore's cultural virility, the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) at the old and much loved St. Joseph's Institution

on Bras Basah Road, is an exciting prospect. The scope here extends far beyond space and form. It deals primarily with the question of what conservation and revitalisation should and should not encompass. And, in relation to this, how old and new architecture responds to the newly adopted programme of a museum. Finally, as we look to the next century, there is also the future of the museum as a building type. All these are searching questions that the article does not pretend to answer. It cannot. Instead, it attempts to provide an impetus, letting each individual appropriate a response founded upon the impact that SAM has on each one of us.

Behind the Turnstiles: Previewing SAM

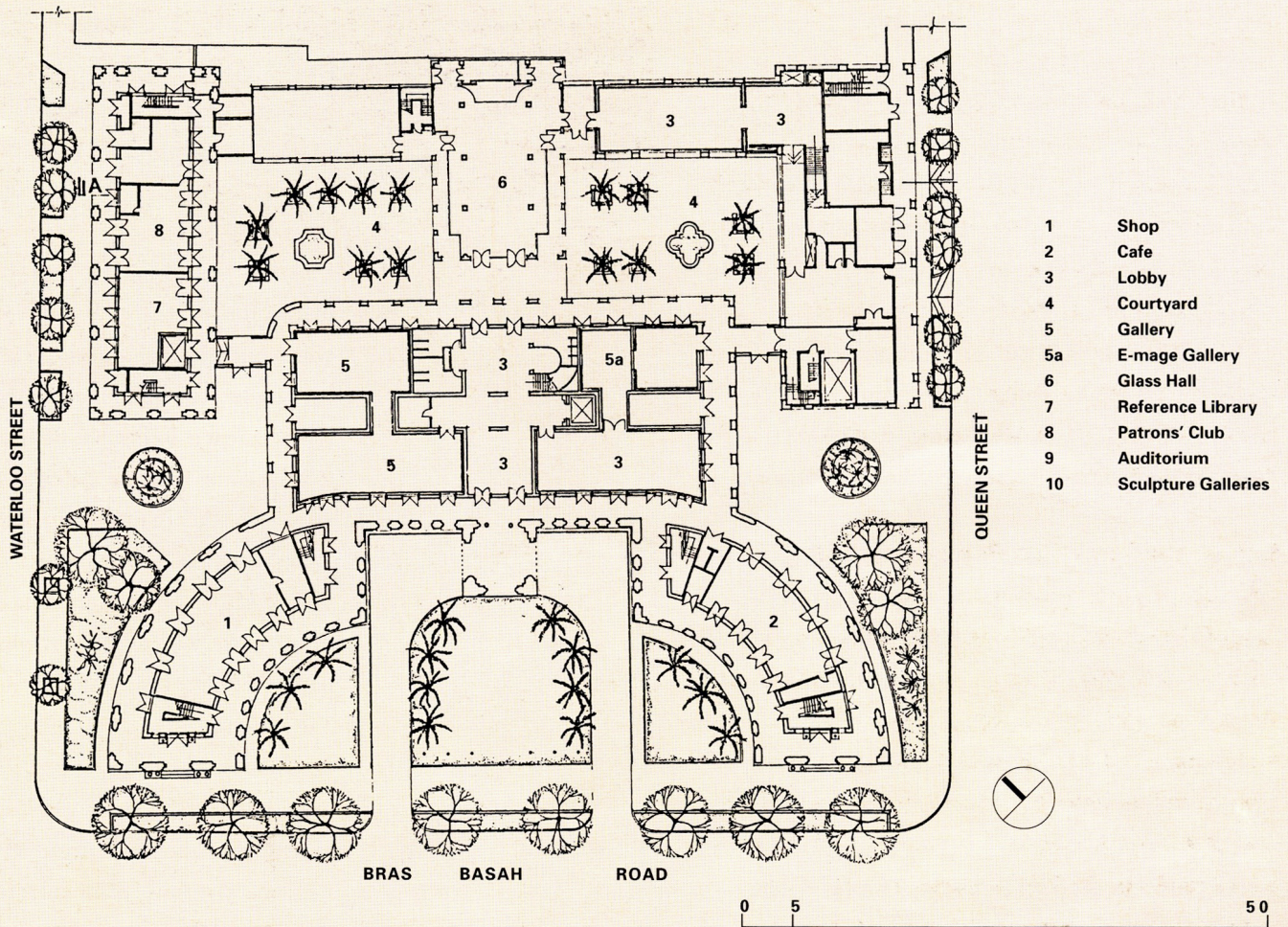
After 28 months of painstaking on site work and to the tune of S\$30 million, SAM opened its doors to the public on 20 January 1996. During this time, the Public Works Department (PWD) architectural team under the able leadership of architect Mr Wong Hooe Wai had repaired, restored and converted three buildings and built two new ones at the old St Joseph's Institution, a Catholic boys' school run by the La Salle brothers since 1855. Gazetted as a national monument in 1992, it was decided that the educational institute (also the site of Singapore's first Catholic chapel) would be given a new lease of life as home to Singapore's art collection and also for promoting regional and international contemporary art.

Occupying an area of approximately 10,000 square meters, the museum boasts of thirteen exhibition galleries, all fully equipped with state of the art climatic controls and lighting. These take up about a third of the total area. A mere 1,200 square meters has been devoted to the museum's "backstage": for storage, conservation and examination of art pieces that find their way to the SAM. One wonders if such lean proportions are adequate for an ever-increasing collection. Supporting the existence of these primary functions are a museum shop, a café, an E-mage gallery, an auditorium and a multi-purpose hall, all for public usage and, a reference library and patron's club for restricted use.

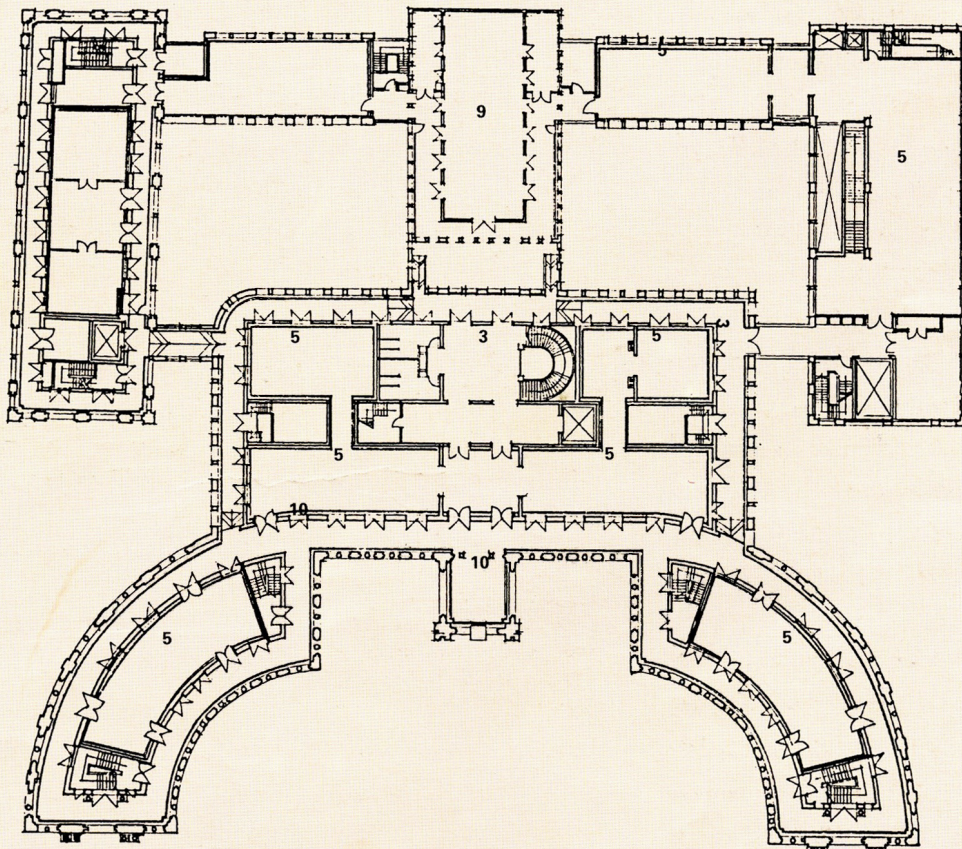
One senses the public's protective attitude towards this old school upon entering the museum. From commemorative plaques and leaflets reminding one of its past, to an informative account of the restoration process lining the courtyards' corridors, it is clear that much ground work had been laid before any brick was touched.



The planning of the building is by its nature, suitable for a school but it raises some problems as a Modern Art Museum. The visitor is tempted to skip the initial four galleries and proceed directly to the open courtyards.



First storey plan



Second storey plan

The architects confirm that the policy of maximum retention was pursued, with doors, roof and floor tiles, intricate plasterwork and pressed steel ceilings, amongst other things, being carefully restored and retained. To create a Modern Art museum of international standards, gallery areas were also equipped with a double wall system for stringent environmental standards as well as new electrical and mechanical systems. Having played host to at least two major collections (Leonardo da Vinci's work on loan from the Guggenheim and recently Roy Lichtenstein's Landscapes in Chinese style), SAM is setting its sights on putting Singapore on the great circuit of art movement. It has proven capable of handling international masterpieces. The gallery spaces too have earned praise from visiting exhibitors who are pleased with the lighting and environmental standards of the museum. Yet, beyond the technical chutzpah and SJI's restored dignity, how does SAM really fare as a contemporary art museum? And will it have, so to speak, enough steam to lead the pack into the new century?

Opposite: The courtyards become delightful spaces for the display of sculpture in the open.

Reuse (Refuse?) and Recycle: The New Museum Typology

Though a Modern Art museum may appear to conform to an institutional genre, it is intrinsically more complicated than that. True that both the museum and the school are environments that nurture, yet, the very act of pairing the disparate segments of classroom to artwork can yield surprising consequences. Firstly, how does one reconcile the space for instruction, the school with its enfilade of uniformed classrooms with that of the space for absorption and contemplation that the Modern Art museum strives to be? Secondly, the museum of Modern Art, as the term "modern" connotes, must surely be poised for change. These are issues that are not only embroiled at SAM but symptomatic too of many revitalised buildings elsewhere.

The key to a contemporary museum's success lies largely in its ability to order, classify and celebrate art on a highly public basis. And since it has become desirable, from the age of Pompidou, to make art, especially Modern Art, as accessible, visible and readable as possible, the appeal of SAM to a dramatically changed audience becomes crucial. "True respect for the public consists in allowing us to encounter the full and at times confusing range of artistic production, an encounter that is unique, precarious and begins anew with each visit"¹. In discussing this

perspective, one is compelled to re-examine the physical entities of the old SJI.

Conceived originally as a school, the building exudes a certain formality befitting to an alma mater. Its most distinctive feature, two curved "arms" that extend paternally forward in a welcoming gesture, in fact, becomes the stumbling block to the museum's layout. The planning of the old school is almost centrifugal in nature, with a central point of control branching out to two wings kept under its watchful surveillance. For a school, this arrangement is acceptable, but for a Modern Art museum, it raises some fundamental problems.

The first of these is circulation. While it is desired in this Pluralist age to delineate a museum route that opens up possibilities of discovery and personal foray, SAM seems to lack a clear demarcation of what is the main route, and how this primary route may be deflected, or disobeyed at one's own will. Once the visitor passes through the turnstiles, he is faced with a total of four options: to turn to his left or to his right, to go out into the courtyard or to venture up the stairs. Armed with wall signs, maps and staff advice, it is still a difficult decision. The author, even coming to this place with a purpose, was also tempted to skip the four galleries flanking the foyer making a beeline for the courtyard. Apparently, it is not a difficulty that plagues the user per se. Mr TK Sabapathy, one of the curators for SAM, admits that it takes much imagination to put up a show in this place. How does one signal changing exhibitions? How are points of transition, the beginning of one exhibition and the end of another, denoted? How does one skip the whole ensemble and head for the one masterpiece?

Perhaps, much greater intervention than what has been made is needed to clarify these options. For example, would it have been possible to intentionally lead the visitor to only one area, say the second level for a more controlled palette of possible routes before touring downwards, towards the open court and onward to end at the four galleries on the ground level just before exiting? One may suggest that it is necessary to lessen ambiguity by reducing the apparent equality of all elements, perhaps elevate the importance of one route, or perhaps allow one space to declare its uniqueness, through sheer size or through a different atmosphere as the courtyard presently does. Perhaps. These are but speculations which must be explored, in accompaniment with more sensitively





written conservation guidelines that are meant specifically for a place like SAM and not as part of an entourage of historic monuments.

Departing from the issue of homogeneity, one observes that recent contemporary museums are increasingly distinguishing themselves from what was formerly the big and anonymous white box. Spaces are becoming more varied in size, either very intimate or very monumental in scale. The (Post)Modern audience demand diversity. On a more pragmatic level, these inclusive spaces allow objects to come alive and serve also as catalyst for new art. For example, Teo Eng Seng's massive sculpture of three metres high entitled "Five Nails" cannot possibly be subordinated to an environment that is homogenous in scale. Perhaps, this is once again an area that SAM is vulnerable. Of all the galleries, the most successful appears to be the E-mage gallery. A plausible reason is that its space was specifically conceived in relation to its content. Credit should be given to the architects for nudging the spaces so that the monotony of similarly scaled classrooms would be temporarily overlooked. These include the courtyards and the Glass Hall. The former is well conceived and at the inaugural opening, became a delightful setting for sculpture in the open, allowing the works to bask under the palms' dappled shade. The stand-alone Glass Hall too is a rare respite from the regime of SJI's ghost. But with so many constraints, there was only so much that one could possibly avoid. And in the end, the galleries are more or less similar, most different perhaps only by their nomenclature.

Above: The Glass Hall is a respite from the regime of the SJI's ghost.

Opposite: Teo Eng Seng's sculpture 'Five Nail'. For both architects and curatorial staff it has been mind-boggling to 'tame' the curvilinear configuration of the old school into an elegant art showcase.

At SAM, both architects and curatorial staff admit that it was mind boggling to "tame" (as it continues to be) the curvilinear configuration of the old school into an elegant art showcase. It was common knowledge that the school building with its narrow curved wings would be uncomfortable to work with and "appear to be contrary to the requirements of adequate display space for, and movement and display of, environment-sensitive artwork"². Yet, the demanding new role of Singapore's only Modern Art museum was thrust upon this monument. Several measures were taken, some more successful, others less.

The two curved wings on the lower floor were assigned to non-gallery use, for Dome Café and the Museum Shop. Both enterprises have proven to be extremely successful in subtly terminating two problematic ends of the building. More importantly, the café that opens the monument to the street, dances to the market clock and operates beyond museum hours. The insertion of such a programme at this corner allows for a public route to run along the periphery of the museum without compromising its integrity as a treasury. The architects have also achieved, with this single act, the domestication of the museum on the street, psychologically closing the distance between art and life. Here is an example where part of the museum is transformed into a structure paced to the demographics needs of the city, easing itself into the geometry of the urban fabric and fueling its existence on the engines of commercialism.

On the second level, however, the wing galleries do not command similar praise. While it may be said that these galleries are suited for exhibiting long narrow pieces such as Chinese art and smaller sculptures (larger ones tend to promote a sense of vertigo for the viewer!), one asks if these are the only types of artwork that will successfully grace these confines. A recent display of photographs saw the exhibition mounted on what seemed like makeshift panels, standing awkwardly along the curved corridors. It was a disturbing sight.

A Case of Déjà vu: Learning from the Past

Given the difficult mould of SJI as a Modern Art museum, one then turns to examine how the new additions to the old have attempted to address these misgivings. PWD's intervention to the Queen Street Wing reflects the massing, form and scale of the original block. And the conservation efforts are praiseworthy. Yet, it is somewhat disconcerting

that this new wing looks remarkably similar to the older blocks. For instance, new precast concrete panels have been applied much in the same manner as the old walls and there is even the deliberate attempt to mirror the motif of two smaller arches supported by a larger one at the first storey. These issues are raised not merely to question the aesthetics of the scheme. On a more fundamental level, they question the process and rationale of revitalisation practised here in Singapore.

Building a new addition to the old is not an anomaly. In fact, buildings that declare their independence and that stand contemporarily apart from their forbears (e.g. IM Pei's Pyramid at the Louvre or Gwathmey Siegel's addition to the Guggenheim) hardly supplant the old monuments. If anything, these engage the originals in a perceptual and spatial dialogue, adding a layer that is both compelling and clarifying. In the case of SAM, one wonders if the opportunity to rebuild in part could have been used to stretch the limits of the museum programme, thereby countering the inherent difficulties of SJI as a Modern Art showcase. Several issues come to mind.

Firstly, the question of formality. It is arguable if SAM is able to function dichotomously both as the state's authority on Modern Art and also as a cultural venue where discourse is encouraged. As Ian Ritchie succinctly puts, "By contents becoming events, and container becoming catalyst, the contemporary museum is becoming a place, not of study, but of provocation and debate"³. Can the container serve as a catalyst? That the mould of SJI has been faithfully obeyed in the new additions further complicates matters. While the café successfully democratises the world of art to the street, spaces like the auditorium and the multi-purpose hall are nevertheless, buried under the weight of the monument. Could the new additions not have corrected this imbalance, made the museum appear more open in organisation and more populist in image, in place of the staid archives?

Secondly, there is the question of growth. The museum is a creature that attests to ceaseless change. More so for such a young institution like SAM whose funds for collections are yet firmly founded and whose aspirations to amass a growing private collection remains an aspiration. What this entails is a series of temporary exhibitions, moving shows on loan from elsewhere. Has this museum, space that is plastic and malleable enough, to physically (and psychologically) house these treasures? This point

may justify the need to change the scale of the new additions, perhaps make them much larger in proportion to accommodate future expansion of both collection and audience. The architects probably recognised this fact. One notes that effort was made to seal the curved corridors with glass so that these could hold artworks under controlled temperatures. The courtyards were also identified as possible display sites and the blanked out walls at the new Queen Street galleries was yet another bid to salvage more space for art.





Rather than only responding to the static motifs or styles of the old, the question of revitalisation and conservation should accommodate many other factors that are continually in flux. Design decisions should be largely prompted by and defended on the basis of demographics, programme and circulation. By addressing these issues, we can then begin to avoid mere architectural preservation, allowing the quirkiness of the past to be in sync with the demands of the present, and even the aspirations of the future. In the stubborn refusal of policymakers and the public to link recycling and conversion to contemporary needs, SAM may live to bear the difficult consequences of this folly.

Breaking the Box: The Art Museum as Future Tense

SAM must recognise the new conditions under which it must function: at once an archive, a laboratory for the new and a city “square” where public debate is continually fueled. Pregnant in this agenda, is a duality that has both neutral and specific parameters: allow SJI to flourish as a monument and allow the museum to become a catalyst for art but also not to subsume the works. The architects have performed admirably on the first count, giving the nation a piece of history that will continue to be loved and admired for many, many years to come. It is indeed a good feeling to walk into the museum and see such meticulous research and effort manifested on all its surfaces. However, being a relatively new player, only time will tell if SAM can achieve the second criteria.

The future of museums will rely largely upon how well they can cope with their increasingly flexible itineraries, the demands for pluralistically distinctive spaces and the level of spatial unity they establish with their contents and agenda. Having performed favourably in its first two years of inception, SAM would do well to take note. **S | a**

Endnotes:

- 1 Davis, Douglas. *The Museum Transformed: Design and Culture in the Post-Pompidou Age*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), p.7.
- 2 The Singapore Art Museum featured as a supplement to *South East Asia Building*. (Singapore: Trade Link Media), p.6.
- 3 Ritchie, Ian. “The Museum as Public Architecture”. In *MuseumBuilders*. Steele, James ed. (UK: Academy Editions, 1994), p.12.

The author would like to thank Mr Wong Hooe Wai and Mr TK Sabapathy for their insightful comments.



Opposite: The larger galleries. One wonders if the opportunity to rebuild in part could not have been stretched to counter the inherent difficulties of the SJI as a Modern Art showcase.

Above: The cafe successfully democratises the world of art and brings it to the public arena.

Chee Li Lian graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1997 with the Degree of Bachelor of Architecture with Honours. She was awarded the Lee Kuan Yew Gold Medal, the Singapore Institute of Architects Medal and the Board of Architects Prize and Gold Medal. She currently works with DP Architects Pte Ltd.

Project Data	
Client	National Heritage Board
Architect	Chief Architect's Office and Public Works Department
Architectural Team Leader	Wong Hooe Wai
Project Manager	Public Works Department
Civil & Structural Engineer, Mechanical & Electrical Engineer, Quantity Surveyor	
Landscape Design Services	National Parks Board
Main Contractor	Kimly Construction Pte Ltd
Site Area	7,424 m ²
Gross Floor Area	10,190 m ²
Plot Ratio	1.4: 1