

# No. 93 STAMFORD ROAD

Renaissance of a Grand Dame



**Owner:**

National Museum of Singapore  
a National Heritage Board Museum

**Architect:**

CPG Consultants Pte Ltd in collaboration with  
W Architects Pte Ltd

**Engineer:**

CPG Consultants Pte Ltd

**Contractor:**

Sato Kogyo (S) Pte Ltd

Affectionately termed the 'grand dame of Singapore's architectural heritage', this two-storey 19<sup>th</sup> century building of British colonial architecture has taken on various roles and undergone several face-lifts over the years. However, her latest reinvention into National Museum of Singapore, complete with a reflective makeover and its park setting, may be her finest yet.

### A National Treasure

The museum originally comprised just the front block with its central rotunda crowned by a dome and its main portico flanked by two wings of equal length. It was officially opened in October 1887 as Raffles Library and Museum. Over time, numerous modifications were made, including the addition of a rear block in the early 1900s and the construction of a new wing in the 1950s that connected the front and rear blocks.

In the current restoration project, architects found the museum generally well preserved. Using the 3R principle and top-down approach, they gave priority to retain the inherent fabric, spatial quality and spirit of the monument. Ad-hoc alterations that were done over time and found to be inconsistent with the architectural language of the original building were removed. They included the external fire escape staircases and the baroque staircase carpets which were stripped to expose the original terrazzo steps. Windows that had been concealed were reinstated to original.

### Reviving Beauty

Decorative steelwork, like the spiral staircases and cast-iron columns, had their layers of paint removed and were repainted. The exception was the balustrade at the second storey of the rotunda, which was only given a clear



Sensitive makeover of 19<sup>th</sup> century building within a park setting

coat of varnish, to highlight its original beauty.

The zinc fish-scale tiles of the dome were carefully taken down, cleaned and checked for damage or cracks. If there were cracks, they were repaired and spray-coated thrice. Damaged ones were replaced with new fabricated tiles. These were reinstalled from bottom-up in original order with rusty screws replaced.

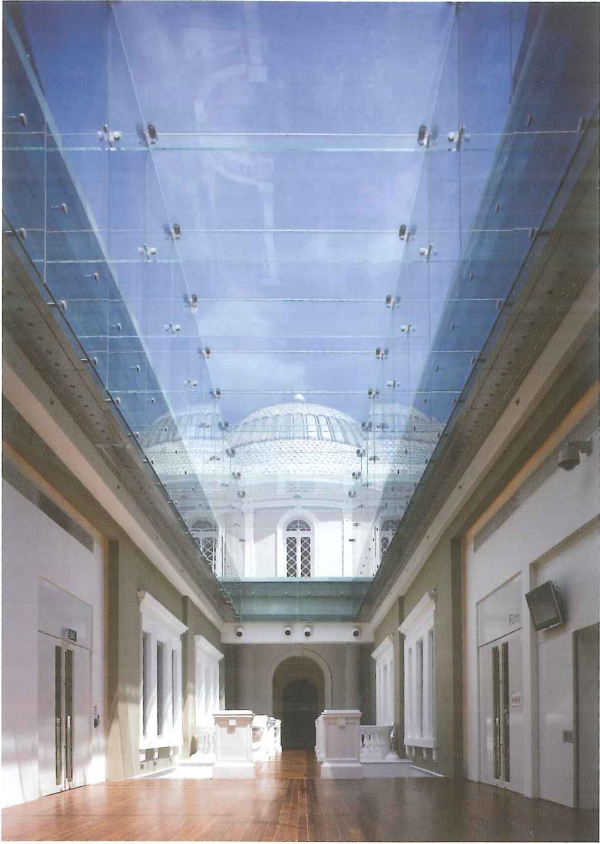
A professional stained glass artist was called in to meticulously remove and restore the 50 delicate pieces of Victorian glass panels on the dome. After extensive polishing and buffing, the original vibrant colours of the floral and grid patterns shine once more.

Paint layers were carefully stripped from the façades which were cleaned, repaired and restored. Rising damp was treated with pressure-injection of chemicals into both sides of exposed walls.

In a somewhat bold move, part of the original tiled roof was cut away to incorporate a glass connector between the front and rear blocks of the old building. Sensitive executed, this glass passage now gives visitors an unhindered view of the museum's historic dome, and functions as a visual link between the past and present.

### Ageless and Timeless

This national monument has not only regained the grandeur of her noble past but has been invigorated to meet modern challenges. Its new rear extension, which has been intentionally set back to create an atrium, serves to complement the old dame. This contrast of modern and old heavy masonry construction embodies the spirit of the different eras.



*Sensitive insertion of glass connector for unhindered view of historic dome*



*Restored dome*



*Entrance to museum retained and restored*



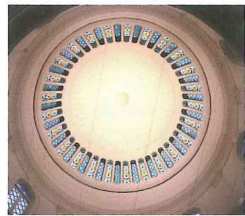
*Decorative ceiling and pilasters kept*



*Opening up of original niches of rotunda for visual connectivity*



*Seamless timber floor finish matching second storey central circulation*



*Restored Victorian floral and grid patterned glass of dome*



*Balustrade at second storey stripped of paint and given coat of varnish*



*Unique zinc fish-scale tiles repaired and spray-painted*



*Restored spiral staircase leading to roof*



*Contrast between modern and heavy masonry construction*

## **HISTORY**

The former Singapore History Museum at Stamford Road was conceived by the then Public Works Department (Architects H. E. McCallum and Major G. F. McNair) and started off as the Raffles Library and Museum in 1887 with only the Front Block of the building crowned by a silver dome. Strategically located in the heart of the Civic District, previously the seat of the colonial government in the early days of Singapore, it was opened by the then Governor of the Straits Settlement, Sir Frederick Weld, in October 1887 and was known for its natural history collection of Southeast Asia, ethnology and archaeology collections.

Subsequently, additions and alterations were carried out to the original building, although archival records may not have captured the exhaustive list of such works. In 1906, the middle portion of the Rear Block was added, followed by the extreme right wing (Library Block) in 1916 and the extreme left wing (South Wing) in 1926.

During the tumultuous years of World War II from 1942 to 1945, the Raffles Library and Museum received several shell hits, but these only affected the Library Block. In the 1950s, renovation works and reconstruction were carried out to the South Wing of the Rear Block, including the addition of the "bridge-wing" connecting the Front and Rear Blocks at the end of the Library Block. In 1960, the Museum separated from the Library and was renamed the Raffles Museum. Following Singapore's independence in 1965, the name, National Museum, was adopted in 1969 to reflect the Museum's pivotal role in nation-building, with its collection focus changing to complement Singapore's nation-building-oriented culture policy. More renovation and reconstruction of various parts of the building followed from the 1950s to the 1970s, with the addition of fire escape staircases in 1992.

On 14 February 1992, the National Museum was gazetted a national monument. The following year, the National Museum came under the wing of the National Heritage Board (NHB), a statutory board that was formed that same year. At that time, in line with the government's vision to create an era of museum-building, it was planned for a number of museums to be set up in the museum precinct based on different themes. It was during this period of museum-building that the National Museum was renamed Singapore History Museum, with its main focus being on Singapore's political and social history.

Redevelopment works for the National Museum eventually began in 2003. For the first time in 2004, it was announced that the redeveloped museum would be known as the National Museum of Singapore.

## **ARCHITECTURE**

A typical example of 19<sup>th</sup> century British Colonial Architecture, the National Museum building has a symmetrical and formal layout comprising 2 rectangular blocks. The Front Building consists of a central Rotunda crowned by a dome and Main Portico

flanked by 2 wings of equal length, with Queen Victoria's Coat-of-Arms adorning the pediments on each end of the building.

The Rear Building also has a Portico at the Library Block reminiscent of the pedimented façades of Palladian Temples. This pedimented façade is replicated at other parts of the Rear Building. Regular repetitive bays of windows with triangular and semi-circular pediments or with keystones and rusticated blocks, doors, large pediments, pilasters and other intricate details such as carved floral motifs adorn the façades of both buildings.

## **PRE-EXISTING CONDITION**

As the former Singapore History Museum had been operating from the existing buildings, they were not found to be in a badly dilapidated condition. However, due to wear and tear over the years, some parts of the existing plaster were found to be decaying and some of the architectural mouldings were damaged. There had also been many ad-hoc additions and alterations that were inconsistent with the original spatial fabric of the buildings.

One obvious example of such works was the addition of a "bridge wing" that had been constructed between the 1960s and 1970s at the second storey between the Front and Rear buildings. While windows on the external elevation of the first storey of this addition attempted to replicate the similar existing ones with arch-shaped plaster frames with keystone, those on the second storey directly above were out-of-place with the rest of the fenestration designs. In addition, when this addition was built, the original pediment with Queen Victoria's Coat-of-Arms on the rear elevation of the Front building had been obliterated.

Another example was the addition of the fire escape staircases in the courtyard next to the "bridge wing" and behind the extreme left wing of the Rear Block. Not only were these not congruent with the architectural language of the historical Front and Rear Blocks, they also obscured the significant decorative features of the original buildings.

Internally, some of the ad-hoc partitions covered windows and architectural motifs within the building. In addition, it was noted that the windows at the rear facades of both the Front and Rear Buildings were originally sealed off. Windows at the existing Conference Room had aluminium frames and dark tinted glazing that were incompatible with the rest of the windows and the architectural language of the buildings.

Existing exposed cast iron rainwater downpipes were found to have deteriorated with age, with leaks found at the joints. Evidences of leaks from those concealed in walls also caused cases of peeling or debonded plaster.

Some of the existing spaces were covered with carpet. One case in point was the Grand Baroque Staircase at the Rotunda, and the original terrazzo finish of the steps was concealed. Upon removal, carpet glue was found to have caused discolouration to the terrazzo and some of the steps were also damaged.

Common to old buildings, there were many incidences of termite infestation in the existing timber windows and doors, timber ceiling, timber decorative features as well as some of the timber structural members.