

SINGAPORE PTE. LTD.: THE NATION'S NATIONAL GALLERY

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LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Ideas of livable are explored through notions of reclamation and limits that pertain to Singapore's physical size, resources, short history and especially the city's ability to reinvent. The Singapore story from colonial administration to sixty years of independence is recounted through the National Gallery, that comprises of the former City Hall, 1929 and Supreme Court, 1939. The Gallery is located within the Civic District, bordering the Marina Bay financial area that is built on fully reclaimed land and encompasses the city's financial heart, cultural sites and entertainment quarters. Discussions concerning repurposing began in 2005 and the Gallery was inaugurated and opened to the public in 2015 as part of Singapore's Millennial celebrations.

The conversion of these government and judiciary buildings into a public Gallery reveals leadership attitudes concerning cultural manifestoes, land use and economic policies that also correspond to the gradual transition from hard to soft power. Here, architecture and ideology are allowed to simultaneously perform as microcosms of the city that explore questions of identity, conservation, heritage and adaptability through overlooked interventions that celebrate nuanced, layered and fragmented qualities. This requires reevaluating existing predominantly highly stratified top-down governing establishments to incorporate bottom-up strategies that harvest the potential of people and their contributions.

These ideas of non-hierarchical structures are further reimagined through Manfredo Tafuri and Walter Benjamin's discourse regarding montage, dialectics and the juxtaposition of material finds and intellectual dialogues that enable user specific creative interpretations. The arguments in Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's *Collage City* (1978) are revisited to critique existing and traditional methods of urban development and, readings of architecture and enclosures as static entities. Multidisciplinary ideas of bricolage and polyvocality are deployed as catalysts to facilitate additional user-led, transitional methods of habitation and use to address new attitudes toward living that respond to an evolving demographic, a maturing civil society and uncertain geopolitical challenges. Here, the Gallery is further articulated as a metaphor that alludes to Singapore's past, present and future as the architecture is absorbed by the city through the dissolution of physical and conceptual boundaries. These ideas, manifested tangibly and intangibly, reflect Singapore's ability to circumvent existing limits, enabling new and original meanings of livable to be reclaimed, and defined by the people.

SINGAPORE PTE. LTD.: A QUESTION OF TANGIBLE LIMITS

Like the way land is efficiently reclaimed, discussions of Singapore's ability to circumvent issues pertinent to a small and young country include the use of cultural manifestoes. The Gallery serves as the most recent and ambitious example of how the island's desirable architectural assets are augmented and multiplied through reclaiming, repurposing and reinvigorating monuments. The Civic District that the former City Hall and Supreme Court are located within is part of Sir Stamford Raffles 1822 town plan from which modern Singapore grew.¹ To this day, the pair of buildings overlook the country's first open public recreation space, an expansive lawn known as the Padang where the colonial elites as well as non-Europeans used to gather, and where Singapore's first National Day Parade was held on 9 August 1966.² Prior to land reclamation, these buildings that are now best viewed from the Padang also served as front pieces of the Singapore skyline. Their neoclassical facades were part of the seafront of grand colonial buildings, positioned to herald the power of the British Empire to vessels approaching the harbour or sailing past. These buildings, and especially City Hall are pivotal to Singapore's history. In World War II, the Chambers were used during the Japanese Occupation between 1942-45. Most importantly, the declaration of full internal governance occurred on its steps in 1959 prior to independence on 9 August 1965. Hence both buildings were gazetted by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) as National Monuments in 1992.³ Here, this recognition regarding built heritage meant the preservation of distinctive material aspects that include the facades, domes, rotunda, City Hall's Chamber and ceremonial front steps, Supreme Court's Chief Justice's Office, Chambers and main courtrooms.⁴

Discussions regarding the need for a world class cultural institution to display the national collection, research and showcase the largest body of nineteenth-to-twentieth-century Southeast Asian art, and accommodate international art exhibitions started in the late 1980s. The intent to transform the former City Hall and Supreme Court into a National Gallery and the recognition for the cultivation of arts and culture as integral aspects of a global city were further reinforced in the then Prime Minister's National Day Rally speech. This announced the government's plan for a vibrant makeover of the Civic District into a place 'where people want to live, work and play, where they are stimulated to be active, to be creative and to enjoy life'.⁵ However, despite the seemingly strong support, the decade long project faced consideration challenges and competing proposals for historic buildings to become heritage tourism and/or commercial developments that could be justified by economic returns.⁶

The employment of adaptive reuse to preserve the nation's history was initiated through a two-stage open competition and the physical conversion had to address the requirements of a large-scale institution as well as conservation guidelines. The winning proposal by the French practice studioMilou Architecture addressed the competition brief by creating a central atrium as the new main entrance with a pair of link bridges suspended in the open space between the two existing buildings. This is roofed over by a draped canopy supported by tree-like columns. Additionally, a basement concourse runs across the entire length of the Gallery encompassing the courtyard of the former City Hall, and a new roofscape with an extensive garden and views of the skyline and main dome.⁷ On top of the listed conservation features, the main lobbies of both buildings and the original profile of the courtyard of the former City Hall were restored and previously hidden spaces like the roof deck and internal courtyard of the former Supreme Court have also been designated for public enjoyment. The user experiences are enhanced in the extensive retention of original features and materials like the copper domes, teak ceilings, terrazzo finishes, Shanghai plaster and the historic floor patterns on the second floor of the former Supreme Court, as well as the marble flooring on the grand staircase of the former City Hall. Primarily, the two existing buildings are seamlessly connected at the lowest and highest levels to facilitate public access and encourage the appreciation of the architecture.

The corollary is a modern architectural icon that thoughtfully underscores its colonial heritage and the Gallery was awarded the Architectural Heritage Awards (AHA) in 2015.⁸ The contrast between the neoclassical language typical of colonial public buildings of the period and the new contemporary structure results in a new landmark where the palimpsest of history is present in the ‘significant historical spaces that allow important narratives of the nation’s past to have a place in her present and future’.⁹ Through a reactionary change-in-use that embraces Singapore’s propensity for conspicuous consumption, the supplementary programmes of shopping and dining are taken on as constructive entities and critical design probes to transform the Gallery into new indices of Singaporean culture. While this display of confidence alludes to the fact that Singapore’s independence and success has facilitated the critical revaluation of history on her own terms, the potential of intangible assets that are responsive to the fluid, uncertain socioeconomic and cultural conditions of a nation-state-city deserves substantial attention.¹⁰ The affirmation of architecture’s role in weaving disparate opinions, requirements and programs into existence must be put into practice. Hence the introduction of ground-up ideologies through unexpected programmatic spaces and landscapes of varying scales to counterbalance existing approaches are crucial for sustained success.

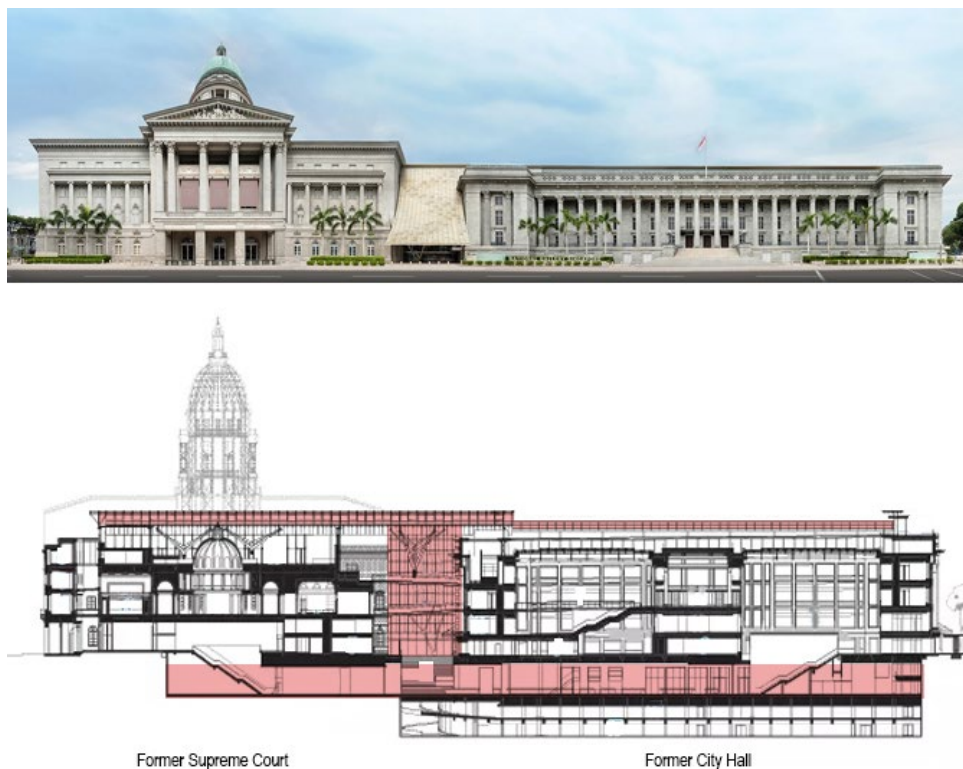


Figure 1. The winning design proposal and architectural section of the National Gallery showing the significant connecting features of entrance atrium and canopy roof, basement concourse as well as roofscape.



Figure 2. The National Gallery, 2015, Singapore.



Figure 3. The Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) urban planning model showing (L-R) the Civic District, as well as current and future proposals on reclaimed land.



Figure 4. Detail showing the site of the National Gallery and Padang, with the red dots indicating the natural shoreline prior to 1843.

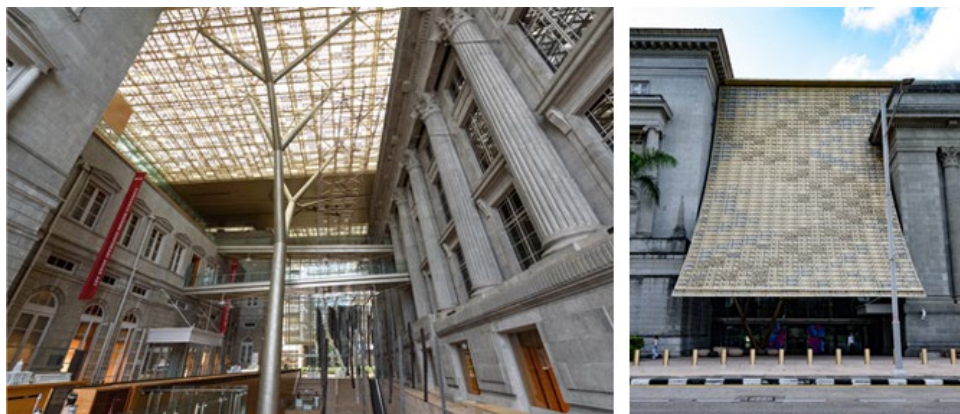


Figure 5. The main entrance space consisting of an atrium supported by tree-like columns with suspended linking bridges and a roof covering that is likened to a 'veil'.

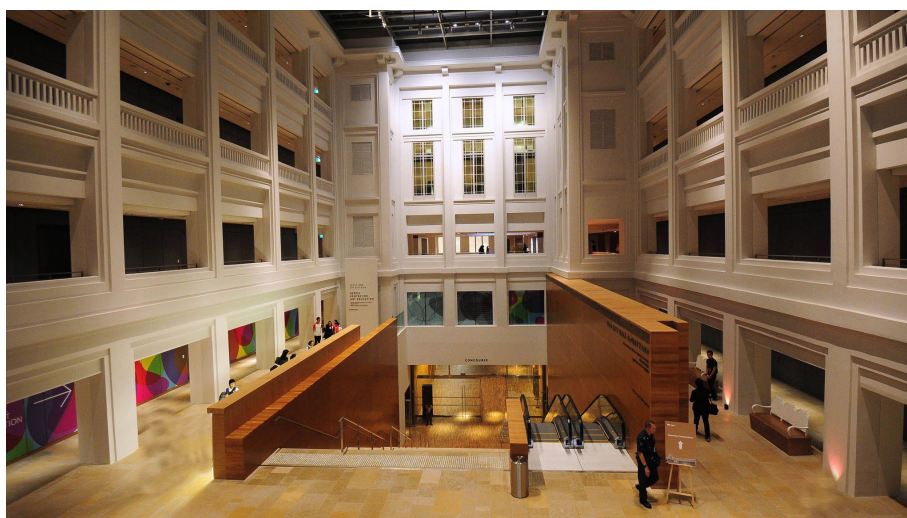


Figure 6. The basement concourse with the courtyard of the former City Hall as a main feature.



Figure 7. The new roofscape with a view towards the dome of the former Supreme Court in the distance and the disk-like roof form of the current Supreme Court on the right.



Figure 8. The former City Hall and the Padang as centre pieces of SG60 National Day celebrations.



Figure 9. The façade of the National Gallery as part of the Singapore Night Festival and as a momentous backdrop for the Formula 1 Singapore Night Race Grand Prix.

THE INTANGIBLE QUALITIES OF A BRICOLAGE CITY

The Centre for Livable Cities (CLC) was established in 2008 to explore Singapore's evolution in the last five decades to assess future solutions through existing experiences of urban development. The ambition to become a distinctive global city for the arts was progressed through a series of long-term masterplans and the gradual integration of art and cultural related buildings, spaces and activities into the city, culminating with the National Gallery.¹¹ The extent of land reclamation has also resulted in drastic changes to the urban context of the Civic District and the expanding cultural landscape in the reclaimed Marina Bay area houses many of the new establishments.¹² The suggestion by the CLC that 'arts and cultural institutions could also be better planned and integrated with areas in which people eat, work and play', for easy access and as part of normal routines rather than deliberately having to detour' can be read as a step towards relaxing existing zoning regulations.¹³ While the tangible outcomes of Singapore's achievements in the sixty years since independence are evident, new critical and creative strategies that simultaneously counter and compliment the predominantly top-down directives are necessary in times of global uncertainty. To balance the tangible attributes of predestined and unmitigated urban development, a city that is interested in unprecedented growth also needs to duly consider the intangible contributions especially of and from her people, comprising of citizens, residents and visitors, from whom ideas of economic and cultural sustainability can be derived. At present, the punctual delineation of one version of success from all others overlooks the potential of fragments where the whole assembly constitutes of a multiplicity of disparate ideas that are continually revised, and the occurrence of the ensuing gaps are considered advantageous.

This notion of dialectics and techniques of montage foreground the role of the city dweller and enables the understanding of livable to shift through different levels of engagement. These arguments are

especially relevant to a city that is constantly in flux and here, are read against Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's *Collage City* (1978) where overbearing order and uniformity particular to Modernist planning that negates social complexity is critiqued. The diversity and intricacies apparent in different factions of society need to be accommodated to allow for a rich and layered urban experience. Through ideas of bricolage, the concept of polemics is used to highlight the collision of interests between aspects of bricolage and bricoleur, where empirical approaches are pitched against stances of creativity.¹⁴

Advocacy for expanding organically where ideas concerning growth versus change and cultivation as opposed to imposition is prioritised is discussed via the 'grid of freedom'.¹⁵ These are furthered through poetic and analytical qualities that reveal new attitudes through participatory processes and individual experiences which foreground 'the unchecked spontaneity of people'.¹⁶ The lessons derived from these explorations serve to inspire individual interests to initiate multiple interpretations that are continuous, fragmented and juxtaposed. Fundamentally, the work serves as a critique of existing and traditional methods of urban planning as subjective and objective attributes are explored through a diverse range of techniques that include researching, constructing and organising seemingly random fragments of material in a city. These explorations reveal in a multiplicity of stimuli as opposed to a single idea.¹⁷

Similar to recognising the creativity of the user where new understandings and meanings are further devised as dialogues to enhance the polemical and experiential qualities of a bricolage city, here, the idea of a 'questioning and incomplete' approach is fundamental to encouraging the dweller to assume authorship in the processes of contributing to an improved living environment.¹⁸ Most importantly with each transformation, the shifts in opinions are accommodated and the multiple facets, both tangible and intangible, are juxtaposed and exploited to resist fixed meanings.¹⁹ Additionally, the notion of an intellectual montage is employed to encourage active participation in the dynamic process of constructing and modifying the meaning of the spaces and/or experiences.²⁰ This approach is not exclusive nor exhaustive and the ensuing narratives pertain to material, spatial, social and cultural aspects associated with the individual.

Referencing Walter Benjamin's reading of the occurrences under the Parisian arcades as a microcosm of the city of Paris, the Gallery can be used as a model to predict and anticipate future scenarios concerning living in Singapore. This view of cultural sustainability further extends to include the creativity of the visitor where new methods of interactions serve to reveal overlooked aspects of the architecture and site. The qualities specific to the site, building and contents are not seen as absolutes but juxtaposed to create new readings and interpretations. The contradiction between inside and outside being an essential characteristic of urban planning. Hence these working methodologies are utilised to respond to evolving and uncertain challenges as the site of the Gallery is absorbed through the dissolution of physical and conceptual boundaries. The innovative approaches will be extended to simultaneously challenge existing notions of institution and ideas of economic and cultural sustainability through the creative questioning of established ideas and existing practices. The characteristics of open-endedness and adaptability are used to conjure up meaningful and individual experiences through habitation and ensured through active participation.

The Gallery as a cultural manifesto adapts and accommodates vastly different programs to acknowledge the past, present and future while critiquing existing and limited manners in which knowledge is collected, dissemination and articulated. This becomes a new site from which to imagine and enact new futures through reclaiming and returning this edifice to the Singaporean people and those who have made this city their home. These dialectical design conversations are constantly shifting to enable people to shape and articulate the meaning of this monument in this present day.

THE NATION'S NATIONAL GALLERY OF ASYNCHRONOUS EXPERIENCES

The qualities of bricolage and the creative contributions of people are further discussed in congruence with ideas of multiplicity and community. As Singapore matures, the idea that progress is simply fueled by a single economic or political agency becomes highly improbable. Consequently, the definition of 'local' through an understanding of society and how this informs growth is fundamental to discussions of circumventing limits. As individual ideas of livable adopt different meanings, the implementation of a non-hierarchical and fluid network of systems, interventions and modes that are responsive to the built environment requires a multi-character approach where active dialogue and diverse perspectives enable meaningful changes that are derived from interactions.²¹ Foregrounding participatory practices addresses the notion of polyphony, which means many voices, and in design thinking refers 'to a relational activity between different actions'.²² This is similar to notions of polyvocality where the inclusion of many and different voices are used to shift and sustain narrative change. While this does not condone the total erasure of authority, this spontaneous transformation of the built environment through the active engagement of the user should at times be allowed to take precedence over original intentions and provenance.²³ This facilitates the creation of new, multiple and individual readings where meanings are solely reliant on the users' interpretations and required to complete the work. In these discussions, the 'local' is granted authority through agency as the city continues to reinvent.

The understanding that Singapore consists of many different facets, most of which are continuously in flux is used to formulate speculative narratives through interdisciplinary approaches that embrace multiple perspectives. Hence the necessity for more flexible proto-practices that not only accommodate changes but facilitate responsive interpretations that are subjective and encouraging even, of desires that differ from government mandates. The acceptance of incompleteness and openness as positive attributes will promote permeable and inclusive definitions of livable. This approach is held in tension with the physical and manifest conditions of economic and developmental power which has contributed to the city's exponential growth as evident in the land reclamation projects, urban developments and preservation of historical buildings. The manifestation of the Gallery as asynchronous experiences through ideas of polyphony enables the public to determine new multi-faceted and transitional ideas of habitation and use, where material boundaries are dissolved, and the multiple fragments of the nation's Gallery become part of the city. This further transcends arguments that the Gallery is treated as an object focused on recreating the material qualities while neglecting the intangible essences in the form of history and character.²⁴ Asynchronicity enhances the transitional nature afforded by the new architectural thoroughfares with the deliberate interpenetration of old and new to negate boundaries.²⁵ These tangible and intangible considerations evidently express the country's ambitions of a burgeoning economy and aspirations towards cutting-edge culture entrenched with history as national imperatives to cultivating an emerging Singaporean identity. The ensuing studies centred on the creative user exploit the layers of meaning to shape the meaning of the work and mirror the city's ability to reinvent. While the Gallery as a material entity is reclaimed for the nation, the architecture is not inherently static, but a source to form new knowledge through its engagement with present needs and pleasures of inhabitation to portray a more porous globalised modernity.²⁶ These ideas serve as precedents that inform advanced discussions of livable as Singapore Pte. Ltd. depicts the city as an asynchronous archive that demonstrates how limits are circumvented, even celebrated, through the nation's capacities, ambitions, projections and influences. The idea of montage started with uniting the former City Hall and Supreme Court, creating spatial and theoretical fragments and interstitial spaces that enable new architectural readings to be derived. Pursuing the intellectual gaps and the ensuing individual meanings can become drivers for a maturing and civil society. New impetuses need to come from within the country in the processes of developing her own identity. These are temporal and transitional as the historical past is spatiotemporally still wedded to the contemporary present and Singapore's most

important events are still unfolding in the now. Hence there is no question of limits when the intangible contributions, especially those of her people are optimised. Happy sixtieth Singapore.

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Here, Singapore Pte. Ltd., through the Nation's National Gallery a decade later attempts to transcend these initial arguments.

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