

# ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM



**Owner:**

*National Heritage Board*

**Architect:**

*Public Works Department*

**Engineer:**

*Public Works Department*

**Contractor:**

*Singa Development Pte Ltd*

## 1998 AWARD

Once the former Tao Nan School, one of the earliest Chinese schools in Singapore, this three-storey building was designed in the “Eclectic Classical” style, exemplified by its fluted columns adorned with Classical capitals, the symmetry of the floor plans, front facade balconies and facade fenestrations. It suffered extensive damage during World War II and was rebuilt in 1945. It remained a centre of education till 1983 when the school moved to new premises.

In 1991, a decision was made to convert the building into the first wing of the Asian Civilisations Museum, a new museum under the National Heritage Board. In-depth research and detailed studies were carried out. Much investigation went into studying the best methods of retaining and, where required, replicating original elements. Old photos, original drawings and specifications were obtained to ensure the restoration works were carried out accurately.

Extensive restoration and repair works started in 1994. A temporary roof was erected to protect the building while



*Transformation to a museum of international standard*

restoration works were under way. To achieve a sympathetic design, the spaces within the historic building were respected. For example, classroom spaces were converted to galleries and the triple-volume atrium in the main lobby, the focus of the old building, was retained. Every effort was made to retain

the significant original fabric, the inherent character and the spatial quality of the building while adapting it to museum use. Only elements which were irreparably damaged were replaced. A new three-storey rear extension block with basement, in keeping with the spirit of the old building, was added to cater to the additional needs of the museum. Modern necessities like sprinkler pipes, fire alarms and electrical cables were discreetly hidden within the prevailing thickness of the floor zone. Restoration works were completed in 1996.

The result is the transformation of an old Chinese school into a museum with exhibition and storage facilities of international standard. The building was gazetted as a national monument in February 1998.



*Restored wing at front of building*



*Decorative screens used as partitions in gallery, with exhibits in background*



*New light fitting under skylight over triple-volume atrium*



*View of gallery with artefacts and showcases*



*Restored capital detail*



*Triple-volume atrium at the lobby retained and restored*



*Restored timber doors at balcony*



*Horizontal cornice lines in old building pulled across to new extension*



*Atrium and staircases at main lobby restored to original design*

The original Tao Nan School was one of the earliest Chinese schools in Singapore. The architectural plans at 39 Armenian Street were prepared and approved by the Municipal Engineer's Office in 1910. The construction of the building was completed 2 years later. The building was designed in the "Eclectic Classical" style. This can best be exemplified in the fluted columns adorned with Classical capitals and the symmetry of the building, both being characteristic of Classical architecture, while the balconies fronting the facade are characteristic of a colonial or tropical style. The fenestration on the facade of the building, namely louvred casement windows with fanlights above, was reminiscent of that found on shophouses indigenous in the region.

The original building had a tiled roof supported on timber structural members. It was also constructed of brick piers and load-bearing walls, with exposed steel I-beams supporting timber floor joists and floor boards. Similar I-beams could also be found in the atrium, lining the floors encircling the space above it.

As a consequence of World War II, the building suffered extensive damage internally, was subsequently rebuilt in 1945 and used as a centre for education until 1983. The original internal layout contained a spacious assembly hall with a stage, classrooms, a separate structure housing the canteen, and other related facilities. Due to a need for further expansion, the School moved to new premises and the building was left vacant for the next 10 years. During this period of non-occupation, the condition of the structure deteriorated due to poor maintenance and neglect.