

No. 1 EMPRESS PLACE

A New Lease Of Life



Owner:
National Heritage Board

Architect:
CPG Consultants Pte Ltd

Engineer:
CPG Consultants Pte Ltd

Contractor:
Singapore Piling & Civil Engineering Pte Ltd

Declared a monument in 1972, the Empress Place Building is an architectural treasure that has been adapted for several uses in its 139-year history. Built in 1864-65 and used as a Court House for about a decade, it was also home to several government offices for the better part of the next hundred years. Now, considerably bigger than it was in the past, the building has undergone a series of renovations and extensions including one in 1988 to turn it into an Art Museum and most recently, in 2002 to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Empress Place.



Architectural treasure adapted for reuse

The main causes of these defects were due to infiltration of ground water and rainwater.

A Regal Restoration

Working top-down, the architects went beyond the 3R's conservation strategy of maximum Retention, sensitive Restoration and careful Repair. They kept the inherent spirit, spatial quality and fabric of the monument.

Timber roof trusses infested by termites were replaced. Roof tiles were cleaned up. Parapet walls were clad in stainless steel cover flashings to prevent water intrusion.

A Classic Adaptation

Through the years and changes, the Empress Place Building has been kept true to its original Neo-Classical Palladian architectural style. This time was no exception.

The main challenge was to create 5,000 square meters of additional space for the museum. To do so, two structures which were not compatible to the monument were demolished.

In their place, a two-storey extension with a basement was added to one wing of the main building to house a function hall and a cafe. A second extension, near the Victoria Theatre, was added for a covered loading bay and upgraded M&E services. An open courtyard was created with a new basement to house,

among other things, an auditorium. A Restaurant/Viewing Gallery block was created as an identifiable new addition to the building for public enjoyment of the waterfront and to enliven the river promenade.

A Challenging Start

Though structurally sound and in overall good condition when work began, some structural strengthening was done to areas bearing the new additional loads. Deteriorated plaster and paintworks, build-up of efflorescence, wall cracks, wet rot of timber planks, localised termite infestation as well as spalling of concrete as a result of a steel-bar corrosion, were some of the challenges faced. There was also a leak in one of the basement walls.

Full-height drywalls were incorporated creating a space between them and the external surfaces of existing perimeter walls. This void was useful not only for concealing M&E services required to keep a stringently-controlled environment, but also to prevent serious condensation and moisture movement as a result of 24-hour air-conditioned galleries as well as paint and plaster flaking, mouldiness and efflorescence.

Today, the seemingly effortless existence of the building gracing the Singapore River belies the efforts put in by the architects to balance the modern demands while preserving historical values. This commendable effort results in the restoration of a national treasure and a world-class museum.



View of the restored monument from the Singapore River



Elegant twin pilasters and dentils



Circular masonry Doric columns



Original timber balustrade at central staircase



Wide rectangular windows and plastered architrave



Strong Room at basement adapted to a display area



New single-storey terrace extension



Door with arch-shaped fanlight