

Thumbs up for new twist in heritage awards

Is it possible to step into a conserved building and find the old and new residing harmoniously together? Absolutely, judging by the recent winners in the new Category B of URA's Architectural Heritage Awards (AHA) 2003.

Be delightfully surprised to uncover a refreshing juxtaposition yet harmonious blend of the historic and modern in some of this year's AHA-winning projects.

Now into its ninth year, the URA AHA 2003 was expanded to include a new category. Apart from judging on the quality restoration of the old elements in architecture and design, the new Category B also assessed conservation projects on the architectural excellence of the new elements, how they draw inspiration from the past and are innovatively combined with the old.

Presenting the awards at Asian Civilisations Museum at Empress Place on 16 October 2003, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister of State for National Development and Trade and Industry, shed light on the motivation for creating the new category. "While conservation is about keeping the achievements of our past alive, it is not about freezing development in time. It is about progress and moving forward, but to do so without destroying the past and with sensitivity and innovation," said Dr Balakrishnan.

Category B met with much positive response, not least from the four pioneer winners. Mdm Diane Lim, owner of winning 50 Emerald Hill Road, registered her support: "I think it's terrific! Blending the old and new is a most practical and realistic approach, especially in the case of residential dwellings, where we need to take into consideration today's lifestyle and modern conveniences...For example, we can now have roof-top gardens and spiral staircases, elements which are not originally part of a traditional terrace house."

“Not only can the "new" and the "old" co-exist harmoniously together, but they also act as wonderful counterpoints...We are finding new ways to give relevance to architectural traditions in a modern life setting.**”**

- Mr Guillaume Levy-Lambert, owner of 64-1 Spottiswoode Park Road, one of the winners in the new Category B of the URA AHA 2004, on the potential of integrating old and new in heritage buildings.

Let us now take a tour of the winners, and delve into their history and winning qualities (with quoted extracts of the Assessment Committee's citations).

And the winners are...

Category B

NO. 64-1 SPOTTISWOODE PARK ROAD MORE LIKE A HOME

Estimated to have been built between 1940 and 1960, this shophouse at Spottiswoode Park Road was used as a warehouse prior to its recent restoration. Cold concrete floors and foreboding metal folding doors have since given way to a vision of an old-world style residence for modern living, realised in the middle of a bustling city.

"The new courtyard between the old and new buildings brings air and light into the house as well as the use of a new amenity - a pool. The smooth flow of spaces is an engaging interpretation of the original spatial quality, while the natural ventilation serve as a reminder of the heritage home's tropical design."



Linking the rear of the house to the front, a glass linkway lets in the light and adds a touch of modernity to the house.



The heart of the house comes alive with an unobstructed central courtyard that joins the main conserved house to its rear extension on all levels.

NO. 153 NEIL ROAD TWO HOMES IN ONE

Located at what used to be a residential neighbourhood where rich Chinese businessmen or 'towkays' lived, 153 Neil Road has been restored from decades of uninspired renovation work to a newfound glory that accentuates its past.

"The introduction of two units into a traditional terrace house is innovative in its ability to make both units equally attractive without losing the spatial quality of the shophouse. The transparency of spaces is maintained on the first storey and the loftiness of the second storey space is retained."

The size and location of the original air-well are retained, contributing to the sense of being in a traditional terrace house. The facade is also carefully reinstated to reveal the original calligraphy."



The forecourt of the house has been modified into a driveway to re-establish it as a welcoming private yard leading to the main door of the two dwelling units created from this traditional two-storey terrace house.



The facade today features reinstated timber carved posts, rail balustrades, decorative plasterwork and painstakingly re-created Chinese characters above the top storey windows.

NO. 50 EMERALD HILL ROAD RECOVERING A RARE GEM

In 1908, a Chinese cloth merchant built a row of eight double-storey terrace houses for gracious living at Emerald Hill Road. No. 50 was one of them. Through the years, time and changes rubbed away much of its traditional ornamentation and charm. In 1995, a new owner began an impassioned journey to recover and restore it to its present-day grandeur.

"The facade and the interior space of the house were already altered by the previous owner, before restoration was carried out by the present one. Commendable effort went into reinstating the original window design, wall mouldings and pintu pagar for the main entrance."

The modern design language used to create a bright contemporary living space also made references to the original spatial quality of a heritage home. There is a skylight and coral stone wall, for example, at the traditional location of the air-well."



One of the most impressive re-created features of No. 50 is a pair of swing doors or 'pintu pagar' framing the front timber doors. They feature ornate carvings of flora and fauna reminiscent of front doors of the pre-war era.



A cantilevered staircase in the middle of the house anchors an air-well that floods the house with light. The absence of walls between the living and dining rooms add to the sense of spaciousness.

NO.66 EMERALD HILL ROAD MODERN TWIST TO A TREASURED GEM

At the turn of the 20th century, No.66 Emerald Hill and the houses in its vicinity were addresses to the wealthy Chinese and Peranakan elites. Half-renovated when the current owner took over, it was a three-storey house squeezed into a two-storey building space. Removing part of the second floor and centralising the main staircase restored a sense of spaciousness to this Peranakan house.

"There was close attention to details, for example, in the use of glass and indirect light for the attic. And commendable effort went into restoring the facade as well as the maximum retention and re-use of the floor joists and boards. The choice of traditional colours for the facade successfully highlights the three-dimensional qualities of the decorations while enhancing the heritage feel of the street."



The front of house painted in white-ochre-mustard scheme, evoking the Peranakan feel.



Visually stunning use of space for living areas as demonstrated with these dramatic, enlarged interior windows with a courtyard view.

In addition to the four winners in the new Category B, five winners were named for Category A, in recognition of quality restoration works for national monuments and conservation buildings in the historic districts of Singapore.

Category A

NO. 1 EMPRESS PLACE A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

Empress Place Building has been adapted for several uses in its 139-year history. First used as a Court House for about a decade, it then became 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 including one in 1988 to turn it into an Art Museum and most recently in 2002, to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Empress Place.

“Restoration work came with a demanding brief to house a new museum. The efforts successfully met specific environmental requirements while retaining much of the original spatial qualities. Important architectural and structural elements, such as the existing pillars and the timber structural floors, were not only retained but also creatively integrated.”

The Assessment Committee also commended the extensive research and proper testing of methods such as waterproofing and plaster repairs to ensure the restored works would last.



Lending a modern touch to the historic building is a Restaurant/Viewing Gallery block (foreground) created for public enjoyment of the Singapore River waterfront and to enliven the river promenade.

NO. 175 TELOK AYER STREET A WORK OF ART

Circa 1870, the land upon which 175 Telok Ayer Street now stands was a waterfront property known as the Telok Ayer Basin. Before being acquired by its present owner, the shophouse was used by a paper merchant. Today, this three-storey shophouse has been bestowed the new role of a modern office-cum-art gallery.

“A combination of careful restoration principles was used in the retention of the original timber beams, in exposing the detailed carvings of the granite corbels and in the bold introduction of a feature such as the raw steel spiral staircase.”

The project demonstrates an ingenious use of interior spaces in a historic shophouse while allowing a generous inclusion of natural light. This bold and balanced approach has updated the appeal of this heritage building in a timeless modern style.”



Restored and rejuvenated three-storey shophouse which retains most of the original elements of its facade.



Still fine after years of wear and tear, original timber beams and carvings on granite corbels are revealed.

NO. 50 KEONG SAIK ROAD GOING BY BASIC INSTINCTS

Built in 1929 and used at separate times as a trading house, rental apartments and a budget hotel, 50 Keong Saik Road is now home to a boutique hotel with an edge. Not just because its entire structure is of an unconventional triangular shape, but also because a bold and instinctive architectural design has filled it with delightful surprises and added life to the neighbourhood.

“There was maximum retention of key architectural features and elements, and a commendable effort to reduce the number of rooms from the previous layout. Each room now relates better to the facade, and offers the occupant a more experiential appreciation of being in a heritage building on a historic street. There is also an interesting use of the rear court to house a roof garden and a jacuzzi for the guests.”



Night lighting brings out the building's splendid, original facade and its new life as a hip boutique hotel.

Inspired by the vibrant street life in the area, each room was made to relate better to the facade and offer views onto a historic street.



NO. 2 DALVEY ESTATE BLACK, WHITE AND GLORIOUS

This welcoming, single-storey Black and White bungalow, with a basement and pool looking out over an undulating plot of land, is the envy of many today. It is a testimony of how painstaking restoration efforts can blend gracious modern living with old world charm in a seemingly effortless way.

“Conservation came mixed with a contemporary approach that was commendable for its maximum retention and re-use of the original timbers, and the slightly slanted doors and windows. There was good use of space, and a pleasing sensitivity in the design of the new extension where scale, proportion and choice of material did not distract or overwhelm the conserved building.”



Balance in scale, form and material between the restored old bungalow and the new kitchen-cum car porch extension



Balance in scale, form and material between the old bungalow (left) and the new extension (right).

This year's AHA also celebrated a first-time win for a mosque. Turn to the back page for more about Abdul Gafoor Mosque, the fifth winner in Category A. 