



# Living History

As Singapore celebrates its 48th National Day this August, we look at structures from its architectural legacy that are still vital and relevant in the 21st century.

BY DESIREE KOH

Nestled within Singapore's oft-photographed modern skyline, among gleaming new landmarks such as Marina Bay Sands and the Singapore Flyer, are imposing structures that hark back to an earlier time, some as far as the island state's founding almost 200 years ago.

These have been lovingly conserved and bestowed with new roles. Where colonial clerks, postal workers and missionaries once went about their business, contemporary art, restaurants and five-star suites now reside. Step inside and feel the vigour of these old buildings, which are as dynamic now as when they were new.

"It is these buildings, more so than modern buildings, which distinguish our city from others in the world," says architect Liu Thai Ker, former chief planner at the Urban Redevelopment Authority. "To have historical buildings amid our skyscrapers enriches our urban texture and gives us an urban image unique to Singapore – a rich visual history."





## Singapore Art Museum

When French missionary Father Jean-Marie Beurel laid the cornerstone for St Joseph's Institution (SJI) in 1855 he said, "A church without a school is like a king without progeny." And thus, one of Singapore's pre-eminent educational institutions began service under the De La Salle Catholic order in a majestic European Renaissance edifice, a style typical of 19th century French religious structures.

After a six-year, S\$30 million (US\$23.5 million) conservation effort, the landmark once regarded as the most beautiful building in the East reopened in 1996 as the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), home to an outstanding collection of contemporary South-east Asian art. Its iconic dome and sprawling dual-storey colonnade were preserved, while 10,000 sq m of classrooms, administrative offices and living quarters were turned into 18 climate-controlled galleries with new walls boasting insulation and vapour barriers. Other enhancements included a colourful installation of glass flowers in the former school hall, which had

been restored to its original state based on a drawing found on-site.

"Our mission as a contemporary art museum isn't that different from the old SJI because we're still in the business of opening minds, and innovating, educating and informing people," notes curator Tan Siu Li.

"The old and the new can coexist beautifully and it's the contrast that often brings attention to both," she adds. "Sensitive selection ensures that the art and the space enhance each other."

This can be seen especially in the chapel where curators often strive to work with the symbolism of the space – with its holy water basins and plaques representing the stations of the cross. Displays such as Chinese artist Li Hui's "V" installation, which used lasers, mirrors and smoke to project a spiritual and transformative experience, made the most of the unique setting to invoke a post-modern interpretation of the candles and stained glass associated with a place of worship. ➔

**A** For over a century, till 1987, this European Renaissance building was occupied by St Joseph's Institution, a boys' school.

**B** The facade is similar but the place is home to the SAM now.

**C** Contemporary art is SAM's speciality.





**D** As the headquarters of the traffic police, this building was a landmark in its time.

**E** The Red Dot Design Museum is unmissable with its bright red facade.

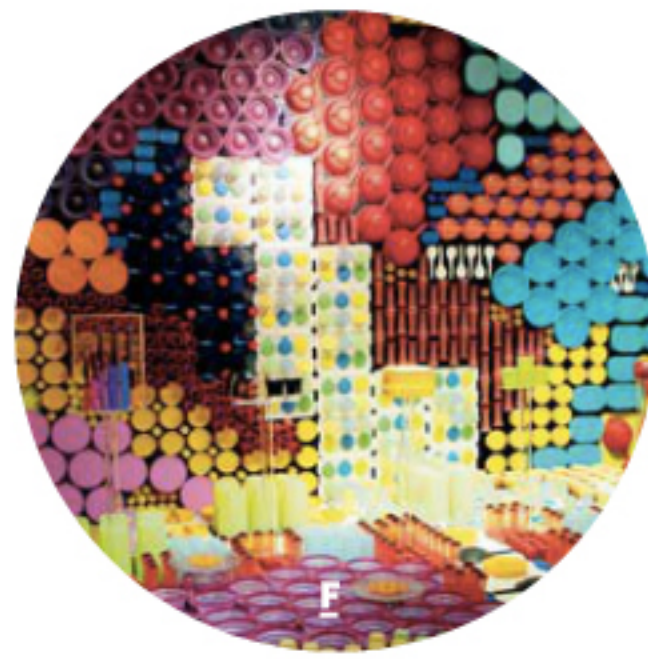
**F** Award-winning products like Tupperware are showcased at the museum.

**G** The displays include multimedia and interactive elements.





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## *Red Dot Design Museum*

Some might think it ironic that the Red Dot Design Museum – an icon for bending the rules of convention – is housed in a former police station, a symbol for law and order.

Ken Koo, Asia president of the Red Dot Design Award, the prestigious prize for product design, doesn’t agree. “The only boundaries a good designer needs to break from are his own perception and imagination,” he says.

And in turning the Traffic Police headquarters into Asia’s first museum for contemporary design, Koo did exactly that.

The landmark at one end of Singapore’s Central Business District (CBD) was originally built by the British government as barracks for married junior officers in 1928. Later, the traffic police occupied it and many older Singaporeans remember braving driving tests there as a rite of passage.

When Red Dot took over the colonial era structure in 2005, two open courtyards were converted into the main gallery of the museum, while adhering to conservation regulations. Feeling that a “breakthrough” was needed in the building’s facade to draw attention to and complement the creativity within, Koo decided to push the boundaries of what was thought to be permissible, and painted it red. Today, Red Dot is a standout amid the greys of neighbouring office towers.

At the museum, visitors are encouraged to interact with the more than 1,000 exhibits on display, each an award winner. This front row preview of the future – some of the revolutionary designs showcased could well become part of our daily lives in time to come – has put Singapore on the global design map.

“We are very lucky to have the opportunity to use this landmark – it’s not just a Singapore landmark, but known throughout the world with a strong reputation in the creative industry,” says Koo. ➔

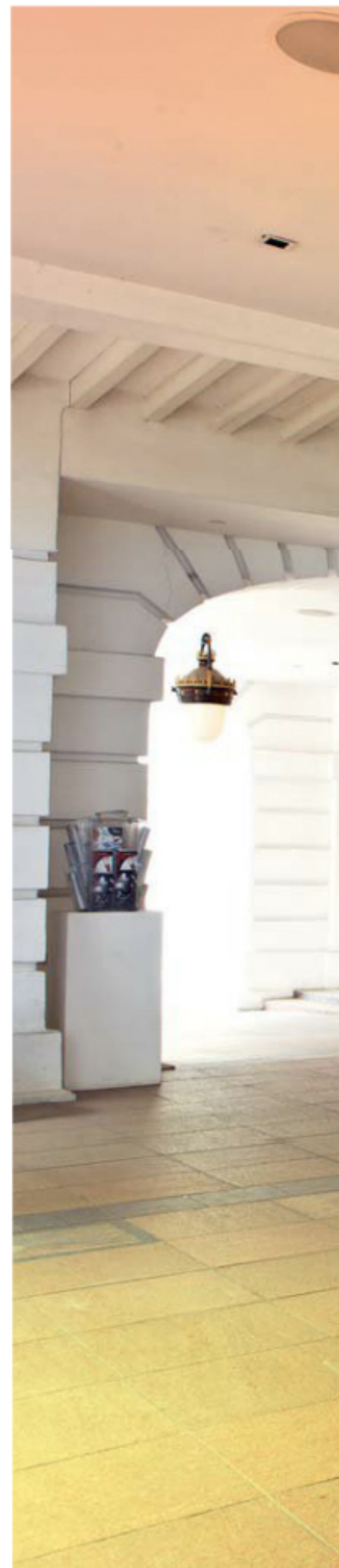




**H** For decades, affairs of the state were decided here when it was Singapore's Parliament House.

**I** The centre is a hub for literary events like dialogues with authors.

**J** As The Arts House, the place is now more accessible to the public.



## *The Arts House*

From courtroom to parliament house, this building has served some of the country's most important civic functions. It is possibly the oldest surviving structure in Singapore; parts of it were built in the 1820s, not long after Singapore's founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, landed on its shores. In its early years, it functioned as a courthouse. Major expansion work between 1901 and 1912 added Victorian features to the original neo-Palladian design.

In 1954, the building became the place where affairs of state were decided – as the home of the Legislative Assembly. Then, when Singapore became an independent country in 1965, it served as the nation's Parliament House until 1999. In 2004, after a S\$15 million restoration, it reopened as The Arts House, a literary arts centre that provides a platform for the interpretation of local works in forms such as theatre, film and music.

Its director of programmes and marketing, William Phuan, ponders the significance of the centre being located in a building where the country's direction was once debated and charted, "The Arts House continues the whole tradition of discussing and sharing ideas... because this is a place for expressions of different forms of the arts."

Many nooks in the building have stories to tell – a corridor that once held prisoners awaiting trial is now a film gallery, and iron bars from the old jail remain in the kitchen behind Earshot Cafe, a venue for literary events and musical performances. In the Chamber, the centre's most historically significant space, visitors can settle into the seat that Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew occupied for almost 40 years.

"When it was Parliament House, not many visitors were able to come in but now it's open to everyone," says Phuan. ➔

"The Arts House continues the whole tradition of discussing and sharing ideas..."







## DINING WITH HISTORY

With eating being a national pastime in Singapore, it is not surprising that many storied architectural gems have been turned into restaurants and cafes.



### THE WHITE RABBIT

Inside this 1940s British military chapel, original details such as the mosaic floor and stained glass panels (above) are now complemented with a modern bar counter and wine cellar. In this atmospheric setting, you can savour dishes like tagliatelle with Alaskan king crab and char-grilled Mangalica pork collar with warm compressed apple and celery root puree – taste combinations as delightfully surprising as its Alice In Wonderland inspiration.  
[www.thewhiterabbit.com.sg](http://www.thewhiterabbit.com.sg)



### MASONS

With circa-1935 colonial motifs like lazy whirling ceiling fans and retro black and white floor tiles, you wouldn't miss the fact that this French-influenced bistro is housed in a heritage structure (above). The building is part of Gillman Barracks, formerly home to a British military regiment. Where army officers used to shoot the breeze, guests now relax with casual plates such as beer battered fish and chips or a luxurious afternoon high tea.  
[masons.sg](http://masons.sg)



### ONE ON THE BUND

Bumboats used to dot the view from Clifford Pier, back when it was known as Red Lantern Pier – an allusion to the red lamps hung there to help vessels navigate. Today, instead of boat passengers, tables of diners fill the cavernous space under the roof held up by arched concrete trusses (above). The restaurant, One On The Bund, invokes the spirit of another historic Oriental gem – old Shanghai – while serving up dishes such as Peking duck.  
[www.wws.com.hk/ootb](http://www.wws.com.hk/ootb)



**K** Inside the rooms, it's all mod cons.

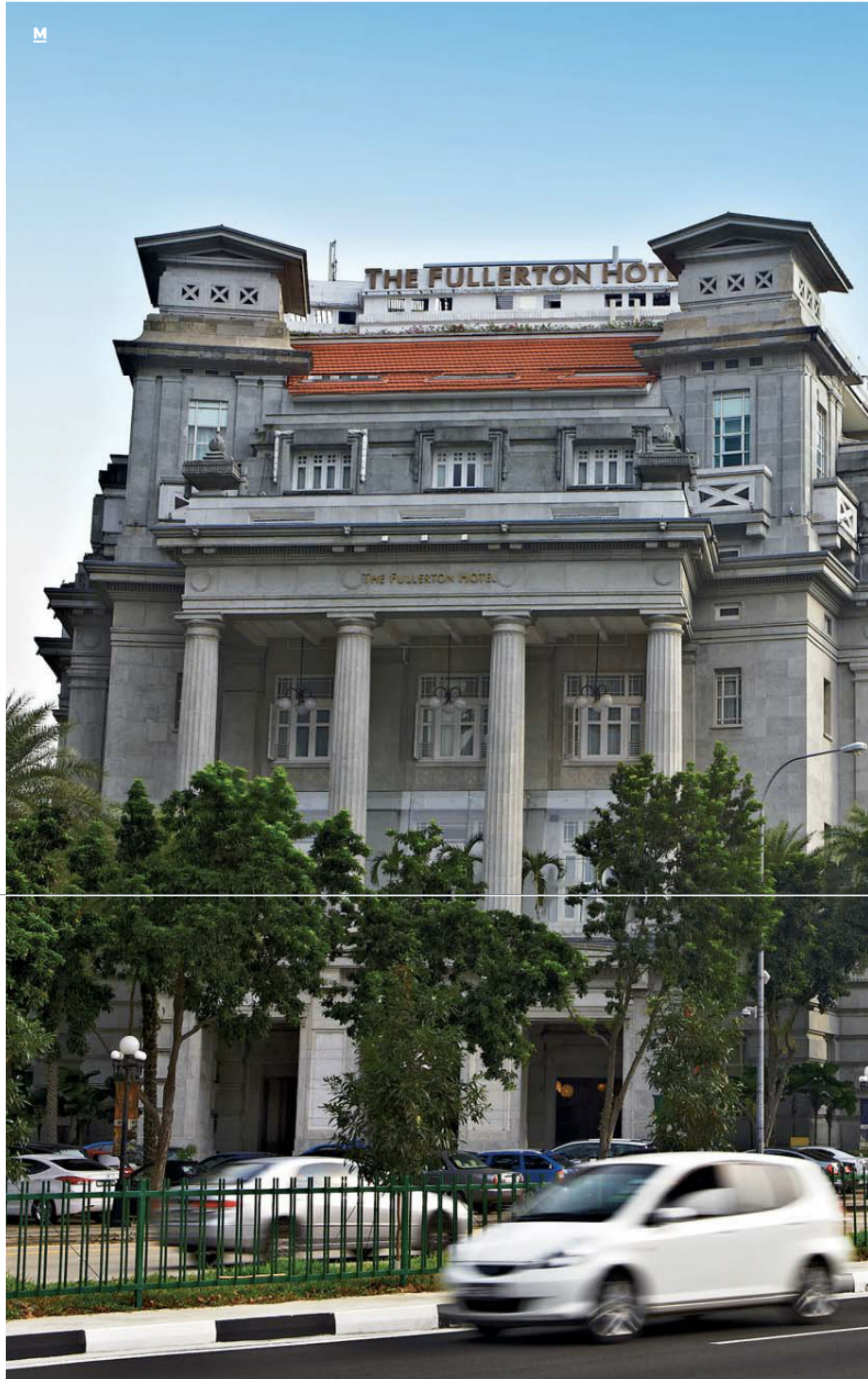
**L** The sweeping staircase within the hotel.

**M** The Fullerton Hotel has kept the facade of its historic home.

**N** The old Fullerton Building was where Singapore's mail used to pass through.



PHOTOS VERNON WONG / NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE / SPH LIBRARY / GETTY IMAGES / COURTESY RED DOT DESIGN MUSEUM / THE ARTS HOUSE / THE FULLERTON HOTEL







## *The Fullerton Hotel*

For 68 years, this was where mail going in and out of the burgeoning international hub of Singapore was processed. The General Post Office was then the anchor tenant of Fullerton Building, which was opened in 1928 and named after Robert Fullerton, the first governor of the Straits Settlements.

The landmark of grey Aberdeen granite was reborn in 2001 as the luxurious Fullerton Hotel following a S\$400 million makeover. Guests from all over the world now revel in stylish contemporary rooms with tech amenities including high speed Internet connectivity. But an impressive array of its original elements have been left intact.

Those with an eye for detail will appreciate the engravings of the royal coat of arms on the majestic porte-cochere or carriage porch. The Post Bar, formerly the transaction hall of the post office, is an especially faithful restoration, complete with original wall motifs, pillars, coffered ceilings and a 90m-long bar counter – at one time the longest postal counter in the world. Meanwhile, the building's Doric columns – long a familiar sight beside the Singapore River in the CBD – can be appreciated while enjoying a dip in the hotel's outdoor infinity pool which the facade overlooks.

A heritage gallery within the hotel, as well as weekly guided tours, help keep the stories of this historic building alive, such as the time during World War II when then-governor Shenton Thomas sought refuge there after artillery bombardment

from the Japanese made Government House uninhabitable.

“Giving a new lease of life to this landmark has meant restoring, accentuating and preserving the wealth of history,” says Florence Minjoot, the hotel's heritage guide. “By providing the present generation as well as travellers with an appreciation of the nation's progress and identity, the Fullerton is far more than a hotel.” ■

### Fast Facts

**CURRENCY**  
Singapore Dollar  
US\$1 = 1.27 SGD

**VISA**  
Requirements vary.  
Visit [ica.gov.sg](http://ica.gov.sg) for details.

**BEST TIME TO VISIT**  
Singapore is known for its year-round tropical weather, but keep your broly handy during the year-end monsoon.

**HOW TO GET THERE**  
Changi Airport is the home base of Singapore Airlines.

**MORE INFORMATION**  
[yoursingapore.com](http://yoursingapore.com)