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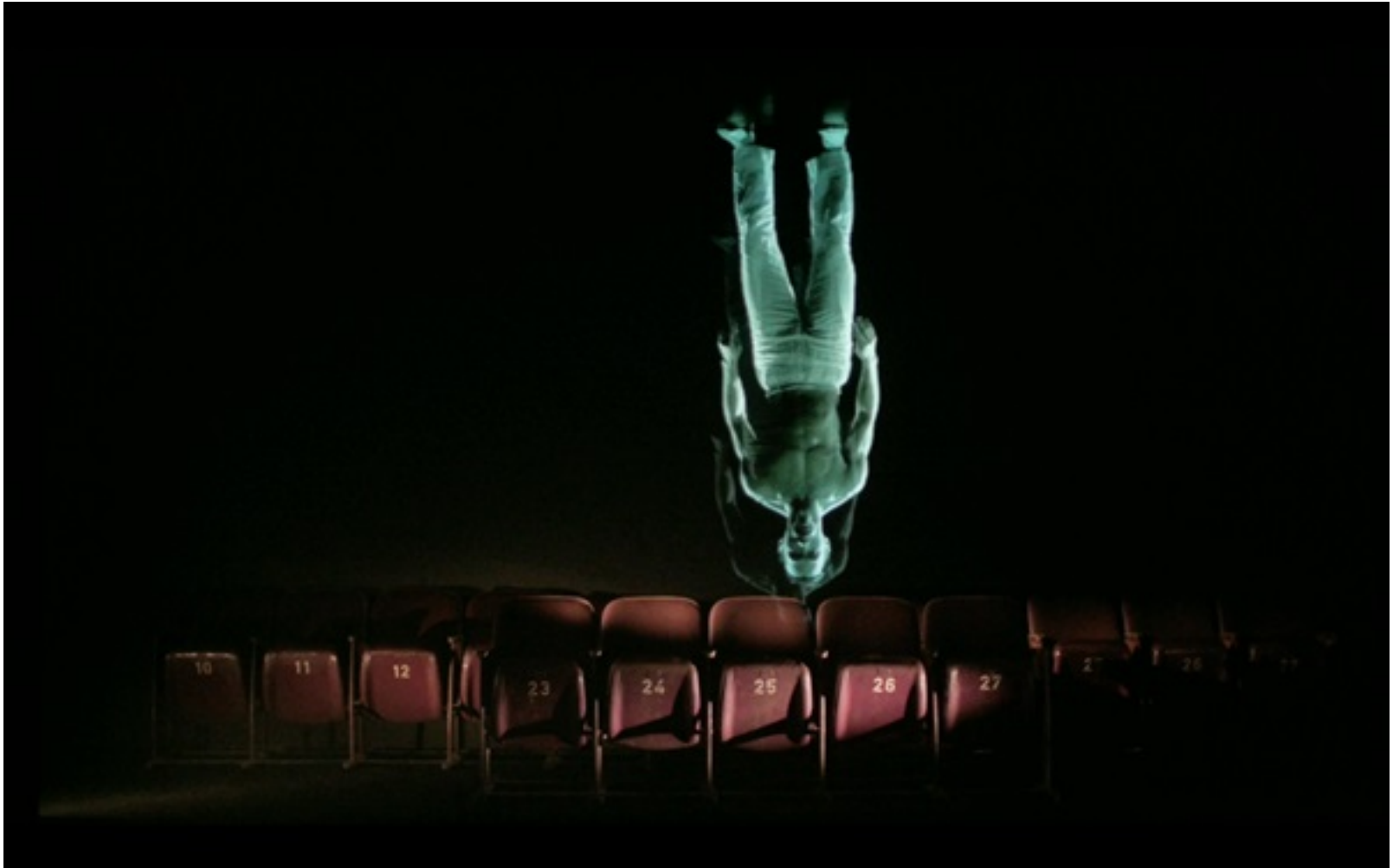


## A labour of love

We trace the painstaking restoration work to restore the beloved Capitol Theatre building

By Yang Vicki | 27 Nov 2015

In filmmaker Royston Tan's 2013 video installation work with T.H.E Dance Company, titled *Ghost of Capitol Theatre*, the faded white silhouettes of dancers twirl across a row of old seats from Capitol Theatre. Rescued by the director before the famed cinema shuttered in 1998, the seats are numbered, starting from 10, 11, 12. The count then jumps to 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 — almost reflective of the wrinkles in time in the theatre's history.



Opened on 22 May 1930, the old Capitol Theatre granted audiences its last screening on 29 December 1998. Slated for redevelopment, the theatre sat empty until restoration work began in October 2013. It was not until May 2015 that the theatre once again opened and welcomed audiences, under the aegis of Capitol Investment Holdings.



Four years of restoration work to bring back 85 years of history, plus the push for its continued future for centuries to come — that was the ambitious scale of the project. It was a collaboration between the Urban Redevelopment Authority, developer Capitol Investment Holdings, architectural firm Architects 61 and architectural conservation specialist consultancy Studio Lapis, each playing a critical role.



### Grande old dame

Informally known as the Grande Old Dame, Capitol Theatre was once the premier cinema in Singapore, deemed as “a thing of romance, a dream solidified, a battle won” by a *Straits Times* reporter in 1930. The building has also witnessed the biggest changes in the country’s history, such as the Japanese Occupation.



According to writer Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, the settings of North Bridge Road and Stamford Road made Capitol Theatre the place to go to in the 1930s. Then located just 30 metres from the waterfront, Capitol Theatre and its entertainment offerings made it a landmark destination for tourists. Visiting British military servicemen heading to the Union Jack Club nearby were equally entranced by the theatre’s distinct green and red signage.

Swanky hotels such as Raffles Hotels just down the road and the higher-end stores in the Capitol also ensured a steady stream of patrons. The stars of the silver screen made appearances, too, such as Ava Gardner, Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin. When Shaw took over and made Capitol



Theatre its flagship cinema, Hong Kong film stars became favoured guests.



Regular patron of the old Capitol Theatre, Kwan Gek Lian, 57, shares her memories of her outings there: “Back in the eighties, Capitol Theatre was rather famous among my social circle. It was a ritual for my friends and I to go down to Capitol Theatre and dine at the food stalls next to it, before or after catching a show.

“It was not like the neat hawker centres of today. It was a messy affair of single food stalls squeezed together, each offering their own seating,” she recalls fondly, adding that the Capitol Theatre was also pivotal to her horror movie “education”.

### **Retaining the pegasuses**

Restoring the conserved Capitol Theatre, Capitol Building and Stamford House, wasn't just about replicating the historic carapace and interiors. Its future as a surviving business is also dependent on appealing to the more demanding patrons of today. Architects 61 and Studio Lapis had to consider what aspects of the Capitol could be brought back and what had to be made anew.

The definition of “the old” was sometimes tricky for the team. Reigning in the memory of audiences who once thronged the Capitol Theatre are the Pegasus and maiden statues beautifully flanking the stage. While the team realised the great importance of public memory placed on the Pegasus statues, the very history of the statues also posed a conundrum. The statues were post-war ornamentations and so technically never had a place in the original impressions of Capitol in the 1930s.



In a talk on Capitol Theatre’s social history given by writer Yu-Mei Balasingamchow in 2015, URA’s Director of Conservation Management Kelvin Ang gave an insight on the eventual decision to preserve the two statues: “The two horses were not part of the original, but [they are] part of our memory. If conservation is also to capture public memory and the sense of place, then those two horses have to be retained.”

Allowing the winged horses to take flight from their deteriorating state became a process of physically peeling away history. Through their years in the public eye, up to eight layers of paint had been added with good intentions of refurbishment. The unintended side effect? The paint masked the contours and muscles that so animated the horses in the first place.

“We carefully peeled away the thick paintwork back to the substrate. You could see the fine original workmanship like the sinewy musculature of the winged horses and the hair braiding of the Muses,” recalls Ho Weng Hin, director of Studio Lapis and the leading conservation specialist of the project. “The sculpting tools used by the artisans became apparent.”

### **Animals in the sky**

If one icon of the theatre concerned the dilemma of removal, another became about additions. While many remember the set of zodiacs circling the dome above the seats, the actual state of the zodiacs was as fuzzy as a half-formed memory. Upon closer inspection, the team saw that the zodiacs were latter-day repainted versions where only the outlines remained, with no details of their anatomies apparent. Water seepage nearby also threatened the star signs and acoustic panels in the dome they had been painted on.

“One of the most interesting aspects about this project was to try to have an educated guess of what the original zodiac design was possibly like,” recalls Weng Hin with a laugh. This resulted in a whopping eight rounds of revisions to arrive at the Persian artwork-inspired zodiacs seen today, gleaming gold where the eye line travels upwards. “Even the fingers, the hairdo and the nose had to be carefully detailed and in the right proportions.”





To get the stars in their right places up above, a draft was projected onto the acoustic panels. Parts of a star sign were numbered, referencing the shade of colour it was to be painted in, “like the classic children numbers colouring game,” says Weng Hin. “We would scale the scaffold once a week to inspect each zodiac sign up close as they were being painted!”

### **Palimpsests of the past**

The stars may tell us of the future but the aspects clustered around the zodiacs were more likely to hide secrets of the past — the original lines and work of the Capitol’s builders. The surrounding ceiling posed a major challenge for the team. The coffer work of the 1930s seemed to be long gone or scraped away as it passed from the hands of the owners, the Namazies family from then-Persia (now Iran), into the film and cinema empire of Shaw Organisation in 1946.

“Everyone was cracking their heads on how to recreate this [as] we only had photographs,” says Weng Hin. There were questions about the depth of the sunken panels, their profile and proportions, and how to recreate them.

But while history can be erased, stories of the past can still find their way back, even if only in fragments. As Weng Hin tells it: “One fine day, very randomly during one of the site inspections, we noticed there were traces of black lines that seemed purposefully made.” Upon joining the lines and comparing their preliminary result with old photographs, the team realised that they had stumbled onto the crucial parts needed to replicate the missing ceiling coffers.

Just like Royston Tan’s imagined ghosts, the architecture had palimpsests from the past written over it. Aside from the ceiling, the walls, too, bore imprints of the theatre’s gilded days. In each decade, the theatre underwent renovations, especially after the Japanese Occupation and when the Shaw Organisation remodelled it as its flagship cinema. The last of the patrons in 1998 would have cast their eyes on a pastel pink and yellow-striped wallpaper, more reminiscent of a gaudy Uncle Ringo’s Carnival.

But nobody knew what lay behind these walls that the last cinema operator put up in the 1980s. It was only after they were stripped away that some of the original mouldings resurfaced. These existing motifs and cornices were restored, and missing ones replicated before new acoustic walls covered them up again. These new acoustic walls were lovingly designed in the same manner as the original interior architecture.

### **Lessons from the past**

With the tracings of the past still evident, the team came to realise that the building, even in its state of disrepair, had much to teach those who work in contemporary times. “It’s a classic example of how an old building completed so long ago, can still manage to amaze us with what was possible back then, with very limited technological resources,” explains Weng Hin. “It’s such an efficiently-designed building. So much so that the building codes that they relied on to build it couldn’t pass our current codes. But it has functioned like that for 80-over years.”



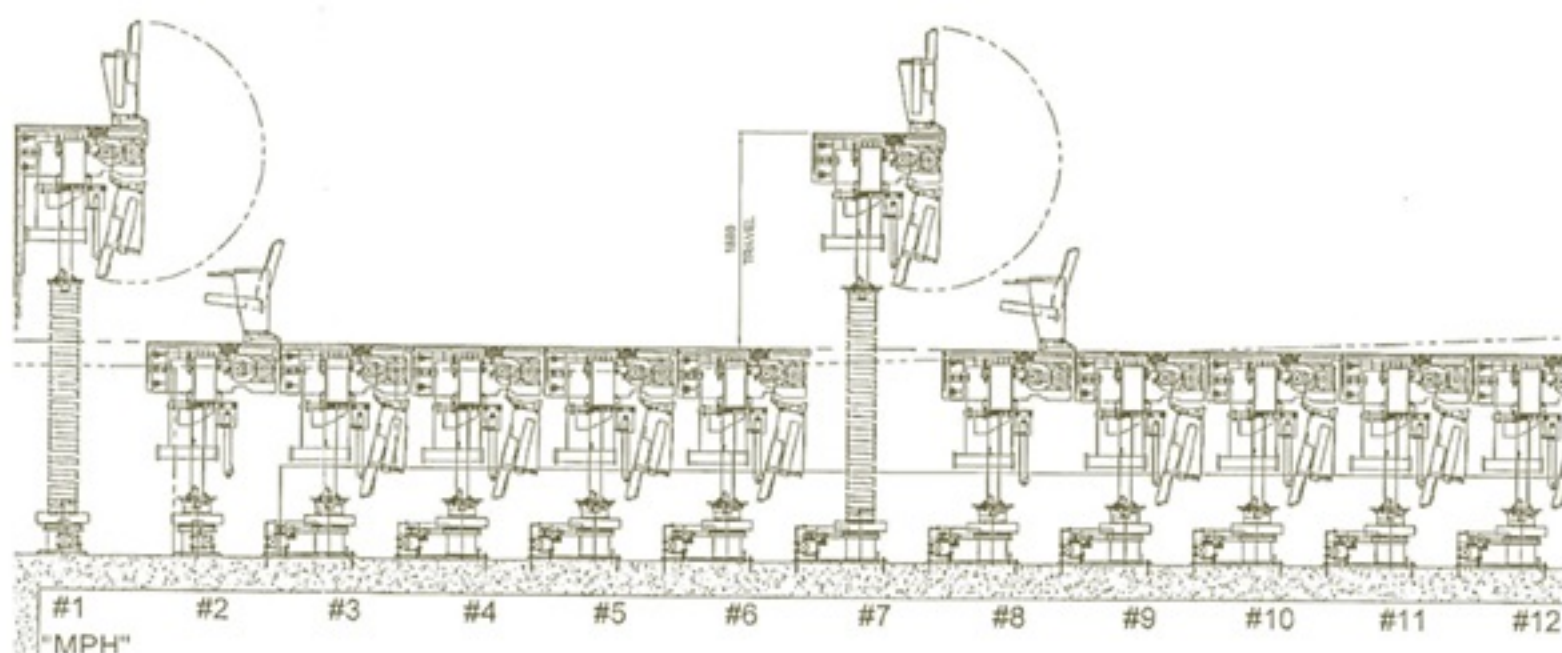


The team's efforts in restoring the auditorium ornamentation, as well as enhancing their safety, were aided by fortuitous events. In particular, out of the many damaged reed ornaments that adorned the internal columns, just a single piece managed to survive the ravages of time. It became the template for replicating the rest of the missing pieces. But the analysis of the surviving piece showed that it was precast in solid concrete, weighed all of 300 kilograms and was only anchored to the wall with thin steel bars. Gulp. "Everyone was thinking 'it's a disaster [waiting] to happen!'" Lucky there are no earthquakes in Singapore!" recalls Weng Hin.

To replicate these reed ornaments, high-tech documentation technology was used. A handheld light scanner recorded the surface and digital information was fed into software to compute its contours. The team also had to find a suitable material to recast the new ornaments that was more lightweight and moisture-resistant for longevity of the structures. The surviving piece still stands today in the theatre, though strengthened and anchored properly onto the wall, of course.

### **Novel floor rotation system**

Bringing back the glory of the Capitol Theatre was not the only consideration of the team. They also wanted to enhance its functionality to ensure continued enjoyment by future patrons and its sustainability, pushing its capabilities as an engaging historical space. Take the brand new floor rotation system installed in the theatre, for example.



Proposed by the developer and the team, the gala rotation system allows the seats to be turned over and tucked under the floor, providing more flexible uses for the theatre space. The first of its kind in Southeast Asia, the system has more than 15 modes. It can be raised to the level of the stage for a flatter surface for multiple types of contemporary events, from seminars to banquets. Given that the installation of this floor plan required the floor to be dug out entirely, this was a major issue that required much discussion between the parties.

"What we want to do is to plan an event in such a way that as many people — whether the younger or older generation — have an opportunity to come back and see what has been done so they can appreciate it," says Dawn Tan, General Manager at Capitol Investment Holdings.

### **One of a kind**



In the gap of time when Capitol was left as it was post-1998 and its fate undetermined, Royston Tan took it upon himself to take five rows of seats from the theatre. “I thought there was a part of myself inside there, so I needed to rescue the seats,” he grins. He cites a cherished memory in his experience of Capitol: the Asian premiere of auteur Wong Kar Wai’s *Happy Together* in the late 1990s.



“Wong said something like ‘there are very few of this kind of cinema in Singapore. And it should be preserved because soon they will be replaced by cineplexes.’ That’s why he chose to premiere the film at Capitol,” says Royston. “I told him, my dream is to have my film premiere here.” Indeed, the filmmaker added another precious memory to his records when the film anthology he produced, *7 Letters*, became the first film to grace the screens of Capitol Theatre — 17 years after its last screening of the American film, *Soldier*.

For more information about the conserved Capitol Theatre, Capitol Building and Stamford House, go to URA’s [conservation portal](#).

Check out photographer Philip Aldrup’s photo collection on the old Capitol Theatre [here](#).

Watch writer Yu-Mei Balasingamchow’s talk given on 18 May 2015, “[See you at the Capitol Lobby, 6 pm](#)” on the social history of Capitol Theatre.

### **A place for performances**

Cinema-goers and theatre audiences enjoying the Grande Old Dame anew – that was the dream for URA’s planners. Their vision: to build on Capitol Theatre’s history, along with Capitol Building and Stamford House, all three conserved in 2007, to create a newly relevant lifestyle destination. To do so, the theatre-use was deliberately maintained. The Concept and Price Revenue tender system – used when the site was sold in 2010 – was chosen to ensure the development’s distinctiveness: tenderers were shortlisted based on their concepts’ quality, before their bid prices were considered. URA’s conservation architects also guided the winning developer on the restoration works. Other requirements set by the planning authority envisaged various ways visitors could relish the site. For instance, the old car park outside Capitol Building was converted into a public square, allowing unhurried appreciation of the theatre and St Andrew’s Cathedral just across.

Consortium Capitol Investment Holdings’ tender eventually topped the 14 submitted to clinch the bid. Today, the three conserved buildings act as the centrepieces of the Capitol Singapore development, adding to the vibrant arts and cultural scene of the Civic District and the nearby Bras Basah.Bugis precinct.