



D+A Issue 020 | 2004
 Design and Architecture [Asia]
 Text : Ling Hao
 Photography : Alex Heng

P R O F O U N D A D A P T A T I O N

Cafe Society at The Arts House, Singapore

SECTION

In Peter Greenaway's movie, *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*, the camera moves horizontally displaying the section of the set; you move from the backyard car park, to the kitchen, to the dining hall and back and forth. The stories of the movie are told in relation to these different settings with the different goings on juxtaposed dramatically. The light conditions, the sounds, music, and activities simultaneously belong to each part and to the whole operation of the place, the movie.

Cafe Society sits in the Annex Building to one end of The Arts House @ Old Parliament, facing the Singapore river. It is surrounded by a relatively calm promenade facing the back of the Victoria Theatre to one long side, the river on the thin side and a kind of a breathing but secluded space next to the new parliament house on the other long side. If you stand at the promenade space, you can survey as it were the section of the building. And like the movie, it comes alive at night with big framed windows of the Annex building formed like screens filled with lights and activities.

On the river front, bar chairs and cafe seats form on a hot night, a languid but quiet setting. From there one moves through an entrance foyer to a boisterous theatre-kitchen dining space. A low serving counter demarcates this kitchen island at the same time pushing the eating activities to around the edge and up close to the screen-like windows. You continue through a passageway framed by another big window and a full height chalkboard door wall to the other side. At this point you are at the other entrance foyer space, with a grand staircase leading you to the Bar upstairs.

So the section extends..., dark candlelit tables on the river front, to bright yellow columns of light for the kitchen, a less bright passageway, a foyer space with 3 LED [Light Emitting Diode] chandeliers, a blue passageway to the toilets to one side and a blue and red stairway. Up the stairways, a passageway brings you to the outdoor terrace energized by patrons mixing in the moonlit space. Or, into a bar where a series of intelligent and ambient lighting animate what used to be The Attorney General's court room. The last point of this journey is a back room where the lighting is intimate and low.

The design comes through successfully in setting up the different areas and conditions. There are other lives, the place functions during daytime, the bar has been used as banquet hall for corporate lunches and so on. There are many who will experience this survey. If you work here, you will experience these differences, from the cellar to the bar, and get to know the intimates of the place, the situations and postures of each setting. If you were a visitor, you will also form a relationship, the seat next to the dj looking at the stage, or in the ex Magistrate's room where it is dark and private yet so public. The cook, the waiter, the hostess, the visitor all have a place and role in the new cafe.





INTIMATES

In leading and talking me through the spaces and rooms on the opening night, the narrative of Ed Poole, the designer, is like that of parentage. He knows how the place sounds, how it reverberates, and the successes and the ongoing trials.

There are various levels of relationships formed with the old Neo-Palladian house. The covered up entrance to the theatre-kitchen dining hall from the river front was recreated based on a study of the symmetrical other wing of the building, now used as a Yoga Studio. While it was befitting to resimulate the doorway, the conversion of the dining hall into a theatre-kitchen required a different strategy. Fully open cooking takes over the hall. A rich textured surface fronts the serving counter. They are futuristic cast aluminum tiles. The floor tiles are Javanese compressed volcanic ash. The new lowered ceiling is of coffered cast aluminum. Here, the patterns and scales of the old are appropriated and played with into making something new. The coffer refers directly to the ceilings at The Chamber of the Main Building while the dimensions of the tiles of 100mm and 200mm x 200mm were deliberate efforts to play with hand held scales of the Victorian era.. It is also of note that the cast aluminum were all recycled from old BMW car parts and cast using sand moulds in a kampung outside of Yogyakarta. The palette of grays and glass however present unmistakably contemporary effects.



This new ceiling hides a layer of new services. As you move through, you also gradually realize the skill and energy that has gone to this new layer of infrastructure for its new role. And that is perhaps a strange way to describe the interior design but the particularities of each part relate to this.

INFRASTRUCTURE

At the foyer, three crystal "Rambutan" chandeliers energize and set the tone. To the left, a blue glowing passageway leads to the toilets which are lit similarly. Blue and red LED lights, selected to produce a purple tone flattering to the skin, wash the walls of the staircase. The regularity of the blue next to red lend a certain formality to the process of moving up and down the staircase and made me think of the colors of a flag washing over the space. The interventions here are mainly in terms of these effects as the hallway falls outside the Cafe Society lease zones. But, as the hallway served to connect the lower and upper parts of the cafe, the landlord was however convinced of the need to have a sense of continuity in the experience without much change to the existing provisions.



In the bar, its previous role as a courtroom commandeered the whole set up and experience. The position of the judge was central with a stage and semicircular backdrop. In its present reincarnation, the new is mixed directly with the old. The judge's bench becomes a performance stage for a live band. Directly opposite, a new leather padded wall and projecting ceiling layer over an existing blank wall. In between, it houses vertical ducts from the kitchen and serves to distribute a whole set of wires and services to the hall. At this area is a raised platform for the dj console and seating overlooking the restored timber floor, and looking at the performance stage.

A critical act was to remove the old plaster ceiling of the new Bar. While it served the previous role of enhancing the singular sounds emitting from the judge's position, it would have made the new entertainment hall unworkable in terms of the acoustics. Coincidentally, the newly exposed underside of the pitch roof has the effect of recreating an old dance hall ambience. If you look closer, there is however a new layer of focus and performance lighting and projectors fit into the lower layer of the exposed roof structure. There is an easy fit that appears in the junction between the different parts. The design approach has been infrastructure like.



SOCIETY

If you were to extend the survey beyond the river, you would see the towers of Shenton Way. Compared to the horizontal and stately nature of The Arts House, the office buildings with their machine scaled curtain walls and energy saving fluorescent lighting appear full of tension, ready to push their way on to the river. The new postcards of Singapore will carry this juxtaposition, the stately buildings of The Arts in relation to the commercial centre, as she moves to rebranding herself as a global hub of various sorts.

Project Design Team :
Poole Associates Private Limited
Ed Poole, Wong Kim Mei
e:mail poole@pacific.net.sg
T 65 | 6536 | 3928

Ed Poole talks about the negotiations that were and are being carried out with the landlord and authorities to mould the building to its present function of Cafe Society. He sees that it needs to extend outwards onto the promenade which is currently hot and fully exposed to the sun. Shade and appropriate intimacy for the restaurant to operate on a certain economic scale has been addressed, but this does not meet with the authorities present guidelines. However, this space between guidelines and operators or users is very alive and full of possibilities. The role and contribution of the Cafe Society to the idea of The Arts House and so on is still at a nascent stage. The further transformation of space based on arising situations may be the necessary steps in the future of this new enterprise.

