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Text : Alan Yeung Woo
Photography : Peter Mealin

P A S T F O R W A R D

Being called to the Bar has taken a whole new meaning since the recent opening of Café Society in Singapore's Old Parliament House. The new F&B concept housed in the former 1826 Magistrate Court – a conserved Neo-Palladian fronting the Singapore River – required a “classic rather than classical approach,” explains designer Ed Poole of local firm Poole Associates.

Classical canons such as symmetry are as Poole asserts, "immediately understood by the brain and so we prefer design that makes you more conscious of a space, enticing you to think. Poole's provocative but simple design interventions shift between contemporary and classic almost seamlessly, making no attempt to mimic the strong historical context.

The two-level restaurant and bar thus resulted in what owner Clark Martin calls "timeless". "Café Society is an up-market but casual place for all sorts of people... it will eventually become an institution. So, we needed a design that was going to last, not just trendy", continues Martin.

"Trends come and go as do many bars here," agrees Poole. "The retro-thing for example has already become tired. We however, approach design in a way that will meet our clients' long term visions."

Achieving an ageless result meant making simple yet significant injections into each unique space and selecting materials that would weather well over time. Finishes such as metal, timber, leather and stone are intended to evolve with use.



The Grand Foyer remains under historical preservation. LED lighting gives the space a jolt of modernity.

The client for example was concerned about the watermarks accumulating on the new copper bar top in what was once the Attorney General's courtroom. "He felt it was making a mess of the clean metal surface, but I told him not to worry. The patina will eventually even out to become even more beautiful... like an antique penny!" describes Poole.

Great attention to surface, texture and details are characteristic of Poole's sense of craft. He is personally involved at every stage of prototyping and production for each piece. For example, he and his artisan-partner David Field sourced and supervised the casting process for the custom-designed aluminum wall and ceiling tiles in an Indonesian village outside of Yogyakarta.

"The furnace was in a grass hut and this guy would take his wooden stamp on a stick and stamp out all the moulds in the ground, in compacted volcanic sand. If the aluminum pour was unsuccessful, he would simply throw the cast back into the furnace and start again... it was amazingly low-tech but the result was fabulous!" recounts Poole.

These richly textured ceiling coffers and wall tiles – polished and portions rubbed with black paint – follow Victorian dimensions of 200mm x 200mm and 100mm x 100mm respectively. This is Poole's subtle but sensitive way of conceiving architectural elements that befits the historical significance of the place, believing that adaptive reuse should never simulate but rather "look as if they've slipped-in."

"The division between what is old and what is new should always remain clear, but it need not be antagonistic either. It is always interesting to make some things seem like they have always been there," adds Poole. "Again, to make people think about a space and add an element of surprise."



There is also a parallel intent in Poole's preferred change of scale, as he explains: "We have a rule in our office that when we can, we try to break away from the current 300mm modular standards set by the construction industry. The entire world is based on these standards, making everything look monotonous.

Many of the loose furnishings also align with this notion of craft. For example, the "United Nations-style" leather lounge settee, crystal LED "Rambutan" chandeliers and a Neo-Victorian teak frame, carved for a large oil painting, were handmade to Poole's specifications. Interestingly, some items are from Poole's own furniture design company One Degree North Limited, established nine years ago to meet demands for his custom furniture designs. "Our leather and timber bar chairs are our best-seller with more than a thousand units sold to date," reveals Poole.

Poole also reveals that the \$10,000 Neo-Pre-Raphaelite portrait became the catalyst and inspiration for the blend of contemporary and classic. "The painting was chosen first, even before we had the building... it became the main focus for the bar, not the stage as one would expect." highlights Poole.

Additional frames – but in cast aluminum to house large mirrors – are intended for the blank facing walls in the central stair off the main foyer.



The Riverfront porte-cochere leads to the theatre-kitchen, while the primary dining is alfresco, adjacent to the spot where Sir Stamford Raffles is said to have landed in Singapore.

"These will have the same Neo-Victorian design as the teak frame but in a modern material... a twist," adds Poole. A formal dining room is planned for the adjoining space when the Arts House Management Office relocates at year end, as a final phase to complete the second floor.

At night, this foyer is animated by a purple wash from combinations of blue and red LED down lights and crystal chandeliers – a swank and clever way of coloring the otherwise non-descript walls that are conserved [and thus sacrosanct].

A centralized open theatre-kitchen takes up essentially the entire lower level, leaving only a lean row of tall deuces inside. Like most open grills, this allow guests to time their "minute steak sandwich" or learn from the chefs as they prepare various dishes". "Our best development is the mirrored, laminated-glass exhaust hood cladding, intended to minimize the obstructive presence of this large bulky item from the room. The custom metal ceiling tiles are reflected in the glass," highlights Poole.

The residual dining corridor within can be either confining or intimate, depending on one's mood, forcing larger parties out into the alfresco deck that is the river promenade. Situated between the preserved colonial façade and the river's edge, a temporary marquee currently demarcates this outdoor space. However, a more permanent theatrical structure has been designed "to create a public outdoor stage to be seen across the river," continues Poole, pending approval from authorities. Crafted in bamboo but taking a contemporary form, the future canopy will weather well over time as Café Society evolves to become an institution here.



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



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DATA

Project Name: Cafe Society, Singapore
Address: 1 Old Parliament Lane - Annex Building
Client: Eat Your Heart Out [SG] Pte Ltd
Interior Design: Poole Associates Private Limited
Site Area: 6,000 sq ft
GFA: 3,000 sq ft
Completion Date: 26 March 2004
Construction Cost: SGD\$750,000
Submission Architect
[of Record]: Urban 3 Architects
Main Contractor: Mason Works Pte Ltd
M&E: WN Consultants
Lighting: Poole Associates Private Limited
Metal Tiles, Teak Frame + volcanic ash floor : Fieldworks International

