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'I can't work 10 hours a day and scrub the floors as well'

Novelist Barbara Taylor Bradford, who has a major-domo and three housekeepers for her apartment

'I don't read criticism. The only critic I have is myself. I'm pretty tough with myself'



Film-maker Ridley Scott (above)

'I didn't want people coming in saying, "Oh, so this is Ben Affleck's movie, huh? Right, let's see what kinda job he did"'

Actor Ben Affleck (below), who wanted to remove his directing credit from the thriller *Gone Baby Gone*



PHOTO: AFP

Reuse, but keep the soul

London's Tate Modern is an excellent example of recycling an old shell into a dazzling new art hub



cultureculture
Ong Sor Fern

REDUCE. Reuse. Recycle. City planners in Singapore seem to have taken the green mantra to heart. Especially when it comes to finding new uses for old buildings in this garden city.

The latest instance is the new National Art Gallery, which is to be housed in the old Supreme Court and City Hall buildings. The final design for the gallery was unveiled last week after a lengthy selection process that included a competition and a public exhibition of the shortlist.

France's Studio Milou Architecture, in collaboration with Singapore's CPG Consultants, won the competition with a draped canopy that connected the two buildings.

Discreet and elegant, it is perhaps not as strong a design statement as I had hoped for. After all, if a building is to be not just an art gallery but the National Art Gallery, I would expect it to make a bold statement.

Given that the designers were constrained by the need to respect the exterior structures of the gazetted buildings, I suppose a compromise was inevitable.

But I wonder if this is just the first in a series of concessions that will damage the integrity of the gallery space.

At first glance, converting old buildings for arts purposes seems like a very practical thing to do.

After all, it reduces the cost of having to build from scratch. The budget for the gallery is \$320 million, practically half of what it cost to build the \$600-million Esplanade.

Reusing old buildings is a sensible way to maximise real estate in land-scarce Singapore.

Recycling them means that Singapore's architectural heritage gets a new lease of life instead of being demolished summarily to make way for some hideously anonymous new mall.

Having seen the architectural landmarks of my childhood disappear faster than I can say bulldozer, I am always grateful for every little bit that is saved.

But I have to confess to feeling seriously ambivalent about the plans for the gallery. Singapore's track record when it comes

to repurposing old buildings is not exactly stellar.

The beautiful Chijmes building, now a tourist-trap collection of eateries and night-spots, has strayed very far from its convent roots. Every time I pass by the complex, I feel a twinge at how crassly commercial the building has become and wonder if it was worth preserving at all if the result is this soulless shell.

The Old Parliament House, now home to the Arts House, is rather more dignified, housing a modest clutch of art spaces and eateries. But it is a living example of the many pitfalls of converting old spaces to new uses.

The Parliamentary Debating Chamber is now an incredibly awkward performance space. While perfectly serviceable for spoken-word events, the acoustics are a nightmare for music-related performances.

Elsewhere in the complex, spaces are shoehorned into tight boxes because the structure, built in 1826 as a personal residence, was obviously never intended to accommodate performers and audiences.

Even the Singapore Art Museum, one of my favourite gallery spaces, has to contend with curved walls, box-like galleries that sprout like unwieldy mushrooms from the main spaces and detached spaces converted from offices.

Of course, successful conversions are possible. Look at the gorgeous Tate Mod-



ST FILE PHOTOS



POWER PLAY: The Tate Modern art gallery in London was transformed from an old, disused power plant (above) into a cavernous space for modern art (left), rejuvenating the city's dilapidated South Bank area.

ern in London. Architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron proved naysayers wrong when they turned an old, disused power plant into a spankingly beautiful space for modern art.

In its first year alone, the Tate Modern attracted a staggering five million visitors and it has been credited with rejuvenating the formerly derelict South Bank area, which now also houses the Saatchi Art Gallery and the London Eye.

The two architects won the coveted Pritzker Prize for their work, which combined a respect for the structural integrity and unusual aesthetics of the building with an understanding of how it could serve the practical needs of a gallery.

They regarded the building as a challenge and an inspiration rather than as an obstacle. As they have said in interviews: "Our strategy was to accept the physical power of Bankside's massive mountain-like brick building and to even enhance it rather than breaking it or trying to diminish it."

"This is a kind of Aikido strategy where you use your enemy's energy for your own purposes. Instead of fighting it, you take all the energy and shape it in unexpected and new ways."

Let's hope the architects building Singapore's new National Art Gallery approach their project with the same verve that the Tate designers did.

> sorfern@sph.com.sg

Hougang gets its first art market

Tara Tan
ARTS REPORTER

HOUANG Central Hub will turn into a bustling art market at the end of this month.

There'll be over 26 stalls selling art and handicrafts, a 60m-long Art Wall featuring the works of over 40 artists and even a graffiti wall for artists and members of the public to leave their mark.

The Singapore Arts Street will take place during the last two weekends of this month.

Now in its third year, the event, which spreads out over 5,000 sq ft, was set up to give artists a free arts space to display and market their art. It is co-organised by North East Community Development Council, so artists do not have to pay a cent for the stalls and exhibition space.

Organiser Christopher Tong, 36, says: "We want to create a very casual event where anyone and everyone can join in and enjoy various forms of art and handicrafts."

Pointing out that some art galleries may be unsuitable for certain groups of people, such as children, he adds: "We strongly believe that art should be for all."

Mr Tong, who owns a design business, says he is doing this out of his passion for art.

With no participation fees or exorbitant exhibition space rentals, the event has attracted about 100 artists, ranging from four-year-old painter Amy Yum to visually impaired print-maker and Cultural Medallion winner Chng Seok Tin, 62.

Budding artists such as Lasalle College of the Arts graduate Mardiene Jamanudin appreciate such events.

The 22-year-old, who does abstract paintings, says: "Renting a gallery space roughly the size of a four-room flat would cost about \$10,000 for a week."

"And people like us, who don't have much income, won't be able to afford that. The Singapore Arts Street gives us the opportunity to exhibit our works which we are very grateful for."

This is the first time the art market is going to the heartlands.

Mr Tong says: "Previously, we held the art market at the pavement outside Tanglin Mall, where it was mostly a city-residing, expatriate crowd. It's great to be able to bring art out to the heartlands."

> The Singapore Arts Street @ North East is on at Hougang Central Hub on June 21, 22, 28 and 29, from 11am to 6pm. Admission is free. For more information, log on to www.singaporeartsstreet.com

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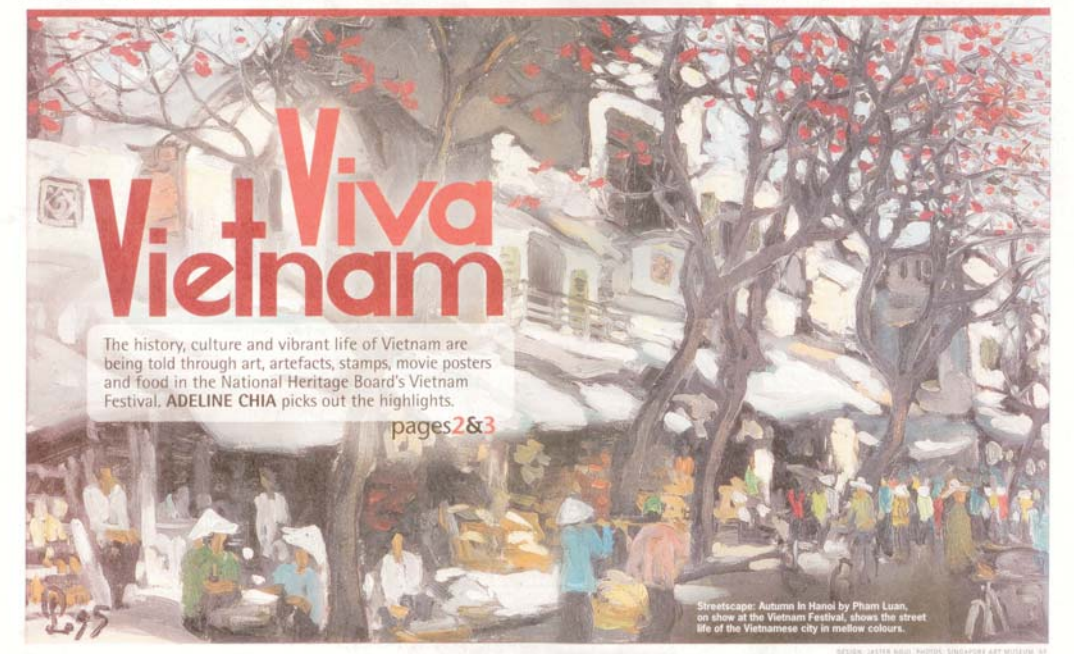
SHORT & SWEET
Very short plays in competition
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ACTOR WARDED
My Magic star had mild heart attack
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THE STRAITS TIMES THURSDAY, JUNE 5 2008

life!



Viva Vietnam

The history, culture and vibrant life of Vietnam are being told through art, artefacts, stamps, movie posters and food in the National Heritage Board's Vietnam Festival. **ADELINE CHIA** picks out the highlights.

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Streetscape: Autumn in Hanoi by Pham Luon, on show at the Vietnam Festival, shows the street life of the Vietnamese city in mellow colours.

Singapore
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MEDIA FEATURES