



Model neighbours

Part Two of our two-part series on the culturally tangible net worth of national art institutions ends with a peep over the national borders

MODEL NEIGHBOUR I National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum

ESTABLISHED IN 1997, NUS Museum is today located in the University Cultural Centre in Kent Ridge campus, managing a growing number of collections, with permanent and temporary exhibitions housed under one roof. The museum is a part of NUS' Center for the Arts (CFA), a multi-faceted arts agency that 'aims to create an enriching experience of the social history and the art of Asia through strategic acquisitions, exhibitions and research'.

National University of Singapore (NUS)



Left and above Scenes from the NUS Museum

was formed in 1980 through the merger of Nanyang University and the University of Singapore, the latter established in 1962, having originally been the Singapore campus of University of Malaya. The Museum and its collection have therefore undergone a series of changes. It essentially grew out of University of Malaya's Art Museum, whose original aims included the provision of 'a centre for the study and enjoyment of art'; to complement an art history programme; to facilitate 'research into the art and archaeology of Southeast Asia'; and to gather a 'representative collection of art of those civilisations that have chiefly contributed to the creation of Malayan culture'. NUS Museum inherited half of the pioneering art collection put together by University of Malaya in the 1950s, while the Lee Kong Chian collection came to the Museum in 1980 with the merger of Nanyang University and University of Singapore. Over the years, the collection grew to include a comprehensive set of works by Singaporean sculptor Ng Eng Teng.

When Ahmad Mashadi became head of NUS Museum in 2007, he was faced with creating a functioning institution from scratch out of the various collections, which were barely catalogued and valued, no established policy and a skeletal staff. Today NUS Museum may be of a modest size and located in a far corner of the island but it



is arguably one of the most impressive art museums in Southeast Asia in terms of its programming, presentation of its collection and management.

It has helped perhaps that its Head comes from a curatorial background, fully aware of the imperatives of presenting art works and artefacts in an institutional setting – its creative potential and its impact. He has spoken of ‘reflecting history on the contemporary’, of negotiating a role in dialogue with the university, and finding new strategies to engage museum audiences in a way that is ‘emancipative’, divesting the assumed ‘authority’ of the museum to the individuals who come to it. (Visitors are presumably encouraged to explore for themselves what the museum presents as fact – Ed.)

With its commitment to its collection and role not only as a university museum but an entity of its own, NUS Museum has embarked in transforming its space ‘so as to project a unique conceptual proposition where collections, exhibitions (both permanent and temporary) are rendered as interrelated to one another, to provide a congruous experience for the visitor while maintaining the inherent diversity of materials and perspectives.’ Key exhibitions held at the Museum’s temporary exhibition spaces include ‘Strategies Towards the Real: S. Sudjojono and Contemporary Indonesian Art’, Wong Hoy Cheong’s solo exhibition ‘Bound For Glory’ held in conjunction with Singapore Biennale 2008, ‘Archives & Desires: Selection from the Mohd Din Mohd Collection’, Ahmad Zakii Anwar’s ‘Being’ as well as Jendela Group’s ‘Play of the Ordinary’. NUS Museum programming also includes publishing and working with NUS students through curatorial workshops to stimulate experimental approaches in curating Singaporean art and generate awareness about the possibility of curating, and its role in exhibition production, among emerging graduates.

Issues of funding and having continually to validate the Museum’s role and activities (yes, even in Singapore) have meant that its management has constantly to reframe and rethink its approach to programming. Its success perhaps lies in its policy of putting art, audiences and education first and administrative issues second.

NUS Museum
University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent
National University of Singapore
Singapore 119279

Tel: (65) 6516 8817

Opening Hours
10am to 7.30pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays)
10am to 6pm Sundays

Closed on Mondays and Public Holidays

Free admission

MODEL NEIGHBOUR 2 Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre

WHILE THAI SOCIETY is dogged by rampant consumerism and factional politics, a healthy culture of protest exists here in which artists and the art community play a key role in waging philosophical and psychological battle against such forces. Thailand is unique amongst its regional neighbours for having an Office of Contemporary Art and Culture under its Ministry of Culture, headed by renowned curator Apinan Poshyananda, who is also Chairman of the Executive Committee of the new Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre (BACC).

The title of the opening exhibition at the BACC in September 2008, ‘Traces of Siamese Smile: Art+Faith+Politics+Love’, might be said to describe quite aptly the story of the institution itself.

The art centre project was initiated in 1997 by artists and art lovers, with the backing of the then Bangkok governor, Pichit Rattakul, and spearheaded by his advisor Kraissak Choonhavan. They felt that, as a metropolitan centre, what Bangkok somehow lacked was art centres and museums. Allocated a prime location by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), they were in a position to counter consumerist culture with the arts, giving the citizens of Bangkok an alternative to the shopping mall. Unfortunately, the subsequent governor, Samak Sundaravej, preferred the idea of a multi-storied car-park

with a tiny art centre on top of it. He was taken to court by the artists, and the project was suspended. Four years of active protests followed, and during the 2004 gubernatorial election, the artist network launched an ‘Art-vote’ campaign for the building of the centre, in which most prospective candidates came to vote for it, among them Apirak Kosayothin, who would become the next governor. He gave the go-ahead to the project within ten days of winning the election.

When BACC finally opened its doors last year, it would have seemed to outsiders that art had triumphed. The art centre stands 11-storeys proud at the Pathumwan Intersection on Rama I Road, just opposite



Outside the BACC **Below** Visitors inspecting an artwork by Pinaree Sanpitak at the BACC



the mammoth MBK shopping mall. The opening exhibition featured over 300 works by 109 artists, with major international names (including Marina Abramovic, Louise Bourgeois, Yue Minjun and Pierre et Gilles) showing alongside Thai artists. It marked the biggest showcase of modern and contemporary art in Thailand to date. Acting director, Chatvitchai Promadhattavedi, claimed BACC, 'puts art where it belongs in a society' and that it was to be 'a meeting place for the arts, infrastructure for the intellect.' The Centre promised shops and eateries, and 'exhibition and events not only involving art but also theatre, film, writing, music and design; the place will become a creative hub, an 'art junction' where all can cross paths and meet'.

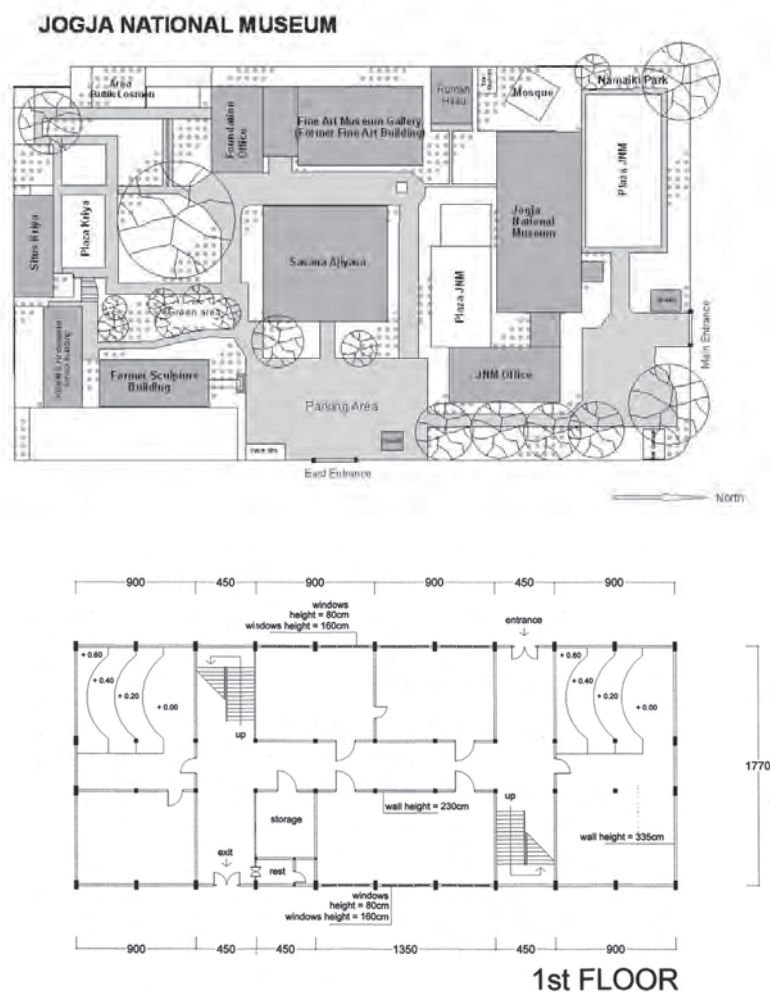
The Thai art community, however, was still holding its breath. Those involved with the centre talked of the red tape and policy issues holding back the institution. Having built BACC, the BMA seemed to want to have full control over its management through its culture, sports and tourism office, at odds with the Foundation of Bangkok Art and Culture Centre which had been set up by the project founders, resulting in a standstill in programme and infrastructural funding. Meanwhile, BACC has still managed to host short film and design festivals, as well as 'Bangkok... Bananas!' a multimedia arts festival, conceived as a tongue-in-cheek answer to the Venice Biennale (around 15 million baht was spent by the Ministry of Culture for this event to bring art to the masses).

The latest good news though is that, as we know, the Thais just won't give up. In July, the Network of Artists for the BACC and Bangkok Theatre Network announced that they would not give any cooperation to the centre that was operated under tight BMA control. The BMA seems to have agreed to permanently keep its hands off the art centre, allowing a restructured Foundation to take over BACC management. If anything, the BACC shows us that with a good dose of faith and love, and even some stubborn politics, art might triumph to the benefit of civil society. We hope we can now truly look forward to a new institutional forerunner in the region.

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939 Rama I Road,
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- An 11-storey mid-town cultural facility. Total square-metres: 25,000
- Gallery space: 3,000 sq.m. (7th, 8th, 9th galleries approx. 1,000 sq.m. each) Extended exhibition space 1,000 sq.m.
- Other facilities: 222-seat auditorium, 300-seat multi-function hall, 350 sq.m. studio space, meeting rooms, 600 sq.m. library, 200 sq.m. art conservation area and 1,250 sq.m. 34 commercial outlets (shops and restaurants), outdoor plaza.



The floor plan of the Jogja National Museum

MODEL NEIGHBOUR 3 Jogja National Museum

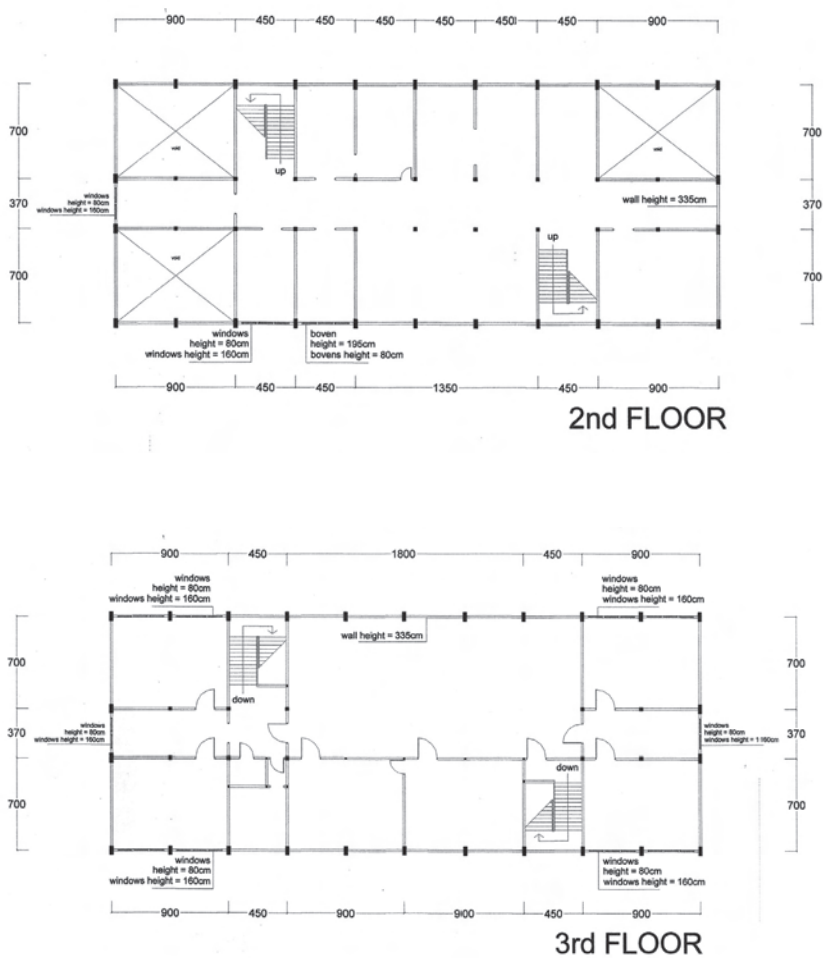
JOGJA NATIONAL MUSEUM (JNM), known as 'Gampingan' by the locals, sits on Asri (Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia) or Indonesian Academy of Fine Art's historical Gampingan campus. Built with the help of the Americans in the 1950s using prefabricated structures, this legendary campus was home to Asri's Faculty of Fine Art, a breeding ground for some of Indonesia's most seminal artists, including Widayat, Djoko Pekik, Edhi Sunarso, Heri Dono and Butet Kertaradjasa. The school was later renamed Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI, or Indonesian Art Institute) in 1984. Gampingan was abandoned when the Faculty of Fine Art was relocated to the southern part of Yogyakarta in 1995, an effort to consolidate the different faculties and campuses in a larger premise. It became a student stronghold during the lead up to *Reformasi* as students took over and squatted in the compound until early 2000, by which time Gampingan was in a state of serious disrepair.

Recognising its rich history and

artistic legacy, KPH Wironegoro, the head of Yayasan Yogyakarta Seni Nusantara (YYSN), conceived and spearheaded the plan to turn the abandoned campus ground into the Jogja National Museum in 2003. Managed by YYSN, this project is supported by Yogyakarta Provincial Government, Gampingan's landowner. The first phase of the project was to restore the campus' main buildings and renovate its interiors into a space for contemporary art. YYSN's major coup was to get PT Carrefour Indonesia to partner this project and dedicate its entire corporate social responsibility budget to the city's culture and arts development. Taiwan Trade and Economic Office and various prominent individuals and organisations also contributed to the renovation. However, renovation plans and sponsorship work came to halt due to the 2006 earthquake, as YYSN immediately shifted its focus to rehabilitation plans for the city and relief effort. Gampingan's sizeable compound became a temporary shelter and school for the surrounding communities.

While the museum only finally completed its first phase of renovation in 2008, the space has hosted a number of outdoor





performances and events since 2006. Plays, music and dance performances, as well as the Ninth Jogja Biennale in 2007, have all been held in its outdoor theatre. Restoration work continues in other areas of the compound even as shows have been held in the main building since 2008, and so JNM remains a work in progress. Upon the completion of restoration works, it has plans to build its own art collection, storage facilities and library.

Despite Indonesia's bustling and dynamic art scene, the nation (like the rest of Southeast Asia) suffers the perennial problem of weak infrastructure and a lack of national institutions. Due to its history, JNM is particularly meaningful to the local art community and its countless alumnae who feel a sense of ownership of this space. The story of its transformation reflects the art scene's tenacious DIY character, which has thrived on independent initiatives and strong community support. Agus Suwage's impressive 20-year survey exhibition, 'Still Crazy After All These Years', was held at JNM in July and silenced critics who were skeptical about the space as a serious site for contemporary art. Suwage had personally contributed to the renovation of JNM's interior his epic show, and purposely chose JNM to present his flagship exhibition before touring a condensed version to other venues. This was his gesture of support for JNM's aim to be one of Indonesia's serious art institutions. ■

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From top, clockwise Floor plans from the Jogja National Museum; the interior and exterior of the museum

