

BROUGHT TO YOU
BY LIFE & TIMES**PLUSH** *heritage*

IT was the early 1980s. The bell rang to signal recess time in the premier school for girls in Alor Star, St Nicholas Convent. Three girls, no more than 10, skipped to what was affectionately called Sisters' House.

This was the heart of the school and where the nuns of the Holy Infant Jesus order lived. One kindly nun listened to the girls' grievances, such as one girl using another's eraser without permission. The nun comforted the girls and then guided them to the Chapel. All three girls said a penitent prayer according to their own faiths. Duly comforted, the girls went back to class.

Today, all these are but just memories for many of the Old Girls. The entire school complex was razed to the ground after the nuns moved out and the school relocated.

Such is not the case for what was once the premier girls' school in Singapore known as the Convent Of The Holy Infant Jesus. This school, too, has been relocated, but the structure of the majestic building remains. Indeed, on Oct 26, 1990, the Convent was declared a national monument in Singapore. Today, it houses a number of lifestyle retail and F&B outlets and is called Chijmes.

A similar story applies to the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), says Cheryl Koh, director of the National Heritage Board of Singapore (NHB). As we take a tour of the building, she says that once upon a time, Sam was one of Singapore's oldest Catholic schools for boys, St Joseph's Institution. It was converted into a museum in 1987 and featured during the Singapore Night Festival (SNF) last month.

BRINGING BACK THE YOUTH

The NHB is the custodian of buildings like SAM and some of the 70-odd monuments in the heart of Singapore's art and heritage district, the Bras Basah Bugis Precinct (BBB). One of the oldest districts in Singapore, Bras Basah served as a suburb in the 1800s and early 1900s to the busy city centre located around Raffles Place. Bugis, on the other hand, was notorious as a haunt for sailors looking for a "good time".

"We'd like to bring the youth back into the heart of the city and our mission is to preserve our heritage," explains Koh. Unfortunately, when we reach what was once the Chapel of St Joseph's Institution, we cannot enter as there's an artwork being installed.

As we make our way back to the ground floor, Koh continues to share the history of the NHB. It soon becomes evident that underlying its history is also the development of some of the socio-economic landscape of the Singapore people. When the island-nation first became a republic, the primary focus of the entire nation was what Koh calls "bread and butter issues".

Singaporeans focused all their energies on transforming their country from being classified as a third-world nation to a first-world one. Once they had achieved this, there was the realisation that a lacuna in terms of its heritage had also developed. Many Singaporeans were keen to preserve this for their young.

So, on Aug 1, 1993, a statutory board called the National Heritage Board was formed under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. As the custodian of Singapore's heritage, the NHB is "responsible for telling the Singapore story, sharing (its) experience and imparting (its) spirit".



Chijmes, a former convent converted into a classy retail and F&B venue.

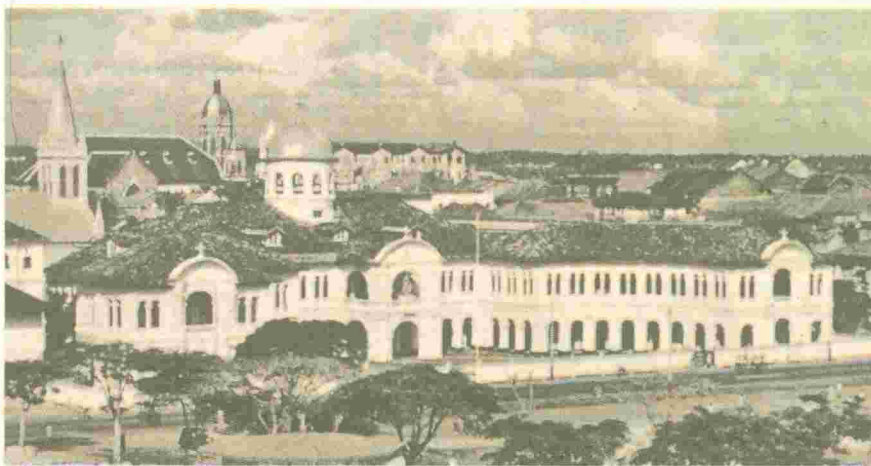
PICTURE BY EUSTAQUIO SANTIMANO VIA WIKIMEDIA

CUSTODIAN OF HISTORICAL BUILDINGS

A statutory body sets out to preserve heritage buildings to tell the Singapore story, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



Cheryl Koh, director of the National Heritage Board of Singapore.



St Joseph's Institution. PICTURE COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

NEW TRADITION

One of the ways the NHB tries to tell the Singapore story is by hosting the annual SNF. As the festival approaches its 10th anniversary next year, there's a desire by all concerned to push the boundaries of what has been done and challenge participating artists and festival-goers to look at things from different perspectives.

Later in the evening, a manifestation of one such differing perspective is the performance called Journey projected onto the facade of SAM. This spectacular work by award-winning creative studio Novak (which is based in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK) used the facade of SAM as its canvas to depict the different landscape found

in Jules Verne's novels and showcase the future of Victorian invention and fantasy.

Such shows are particularly special for Koh. "My 9-year-old daughter loves this festival," shares the mother of two girls. "She says it's one of her favourites. There are no cars on the road. There's music and light. And a lot of excitement."

There's a sense that with festivals like the SNF and proper use of the heritage sites around BBB, a new tradition is being set for young Singaporeans.

COMPLAINTS

No doubt there are challenges to the task of converting and maintaining these heritage buildings. One of the complaints is that

they've been too modernised and include air-conditioning. There wasn't such a need when they were schools. Why is there a need for air-conditioning now? The fact remains that many of the artefacts and exhibits now showcased in them cannot withstand the harsh tropical heat.

Then there are those who insist that these buildings should have continued to be schools. The NHB's response is quite simply that with growing number of students, these smaller premises and lack of facilities can no longer accommodate the needs of the 21st century student.

That said, Koh is quick to add: "St Joseph's will celebrate its 150th year next year and many of the old boys do come back. They're proud of their school."

Indeed, many believe that although the building doesn't go by the name of St Joseph's Institution anymore or function as a school, it still maintains its ethos. By virtue of its present role as the SAM, the building continues its mission of teaching people who walk through its doors.

In spite of all the challenges faced by the NHB, the overall sentiment is one of hope. Indeed, some of the old girls of CHIJ have complained that there's a basement in Chijmes where there wasn't one before. The response from old girls of other Convent schools is to be grateful that there's still a school standing, however much it's been modified, refurbished or converted because, for them, there is nothing left of their old schools.