

Designing, building and launching a home for three art collections

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Resumo

Este artigo descreve o planeamento, construção e inauguração de um complexo museológico (*NUS Museums*) destinado a acolher três colecções de arte pertencentes à Universidade Nacional de Singapura. Inclui pormenores relativos à logística e estratégia da transferência de cerca de 10 mil objectos que se encontravam dispersos pelo campus universitário. A iniciativa foi precedida de medidas de estabilização e conservação de todas peças de tecido, papel, madeira e pintura. São ainda discutidas questões relacionadas com a gestão, o planeamento estratégico, administrativo e operacional, bem como aspectos relacionados com a educação e interpretação.

Abstract

This paper proposes to share our recent experience in Singapore in the design, building and launch of a purpose-built museum complex to house four exhibition galleries and other facilities of NUS Museums, National University of Singapore. Included is a segment on the logistics and strategy of the move and relocation of close to 10,000 objects from various points of location on-campus. This exercise was preceded by the conservation of all works of textile, paper, wood and paintings. Curatorial as well as management, strategic, administrative, operational, education and outreach considerations are discussed.

Introduction

The building programme to house three art collections from the Lee Kong Chian Art Museum, the Ng Eng Teng Gallery and the South & Southeast Asian Collection under one roof in a building named NUS Museums cost the National University of Singapore (NUS) S\$12 million. The museum building project did not originate as one project to place all three collections together. The decision to do so evolved, even as the building project took shape, over a period of five years from 1996 to 2001. It is interesting to note that right from the start, the three-storeyed building was intended only to be a two-storey one just to house our largest art collection, the Lee Kong Chian Art Museum collection of Chinese art.

Therefore, whilst having all three galleries together made the most astute management and

museological sense, the credit for striking on such a brilliant scheme goes not to the management, the administration nor the architects, but to the wonderful twist of circumstance and developments which brought on the decision to do so.

What were some of these developments, which made the housing of three collections under one roof a foregone conclusion? I suggest the following:

- a) A strong conviction that this was advantageous, cost-effective and the most responsible way to manage them.
- b) The awareness and regard for the nuts-and-bolts aspect - the logistics and mechanics - of growing, administering and running not just art, but human and other precious resources.
- c) External circumstances - outside of NUS Museums but occurring within the NUS. A clear case in point is this one: The Ng Eng

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Teng Gallery was previously located at Central Library Building, but because of the Library's major upgrading exercise which is currently taking place, we were served notice to vacate. To relocate somewhere apart from the new building that we were building would be asking for the impossible and to invite adverse publicity.

- d) Opportune developments. An audit undertaken on our oldest and longest-displayed collection, the Lee Kong Chian Art Museum collection, revealed the need to exclude a fair amount of artworks from display. This presented the opportunity to have our third collection to be presented for the first time after being in storage for the last 20 years.

The one roof referred to as NUS Museums also alludes to the office, which runs the University's art, heritage and social history collections. There are, however, other collections on-campus. A major and outstanding collection started by Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore, is that of natural history. This is the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, a research and teaching collection, much published and managed by the Department of Biology at the Faculty of Science. As NUS Museums does not manage these resources, they will not be included in this discussion.

Background

The NUS Museums building project complements the performing arts wing of Hall and Theatre in the University Cultural Centre (UCC) of NUS. With visual and performing arts in place, the NUS provides a hub for students, staff and the community to enjoy artistic expressions of all forms from music, dance, drama, and film to art exhibitions. Both wings of the UCC are considered world class by many: the performing arts wing cost the NUS S\$60 million to build and was inaugurated in September 2000, a year and a half earlier.

National University of Singapore acknowledged that the NUS Museums building project and official launch was a landmark event for the institution and a highlight of the University's calendar in the last financial year. Professor Shih Choon Fong, NUS President, included this as one of several high-points in the video presentation of his annual State of the University Address in July 2002.

When NUS Museums was launched with hype and hoopla on 26 February 2002, its final shape and form was a three-storey complex, which was five-storey high. This is on account of its largest gallery, the Lee Kong Chian Art Museum, occupying 1000sq metres, featuring an extravagant three-storey high ceiling. It houses four galleries, a multi-purpose seminar room, a conservation workshop, a resource centre, a members' room for the exclusive use of our docents, a temporary holding area, a rest and refresh area, and administrative and curatorial offices. At the beginning of the project in 1996, there were six full time staff members (myself included and one part-time consultant curator). When we officially inaugurated NUS Museums on 26 February 2002, there were 27 staff members, all full-time, nine were operations staff members, three administrative staff members, 10 curatorial staff members and three outreach officers.



Fig. 1 – NUS Museums (Photo © NUS Museums).

The gala opening in February 2002 celebrated several important events:

- a) it unveiled the South and Southeast Asian Gallery, after having been in storage for 20 years;
- b) it relaunched the Lee Kong Chian Art Museum and the Ng Eng Teng Gallery;
- c) it inaugurated the Visiting Exhibition Gallery which had, as its opening exhibition, black-and-white woodcut prints from the 1950's and 1960's, a show which was intensely and intentionally Singaporean in content and flavour;
- d) two naming opportunities were realized: the ST Lee Atrium was named in honour of Dr Lee Seng Tee, who pledged a substantial financial benefaction. The Arthur Lim Concourse was named in honour of Professor Arthur Lim, who pledged a gift of artworks valued between S\$3 to S\$5 million.

For a university which did not conduct any degree course in fine art or museum studies, the commitment to support NUS Museums' growth as an innovative intellectual, artistic and cultural show-case must seem all the more extraordinary. With this as the back-drop, it is easier to appreciate that NUS Museums behaves and postures itself very much as a public museum, except that our first catchment or captive audience would be our NUS students, academics and staff members, who visit us because we have well-researched exhibitions which are creatively presented, stimulating outreach programmes which in turn enhance these exhibitions and a high standard of maintenance and upkeep which add to the museum encounter.

Guidelines and Gridlines

At all times, the development of NUS Museums, the building and the department which it houses, was guided rather than constrained by gridlines predetermined by our vision and mission, budget and finance, and time frame.

Vision and Mission

Our vision is to be a university museum *extraordinaire*, befitting a global university and reflecting the NUS mission, which is: advance knowledge and foster innovation, educate students and nurture talent, in service of country and society.

NUS Museums has interpreted this as a five-point mission addressing excellent exhibitions, acquisitions, conservation, research and education. Taking these objectives to heart, we translated and incorporated them into the planning of the three-storey building so that rooms and spaces were carved to meet not just curatorial needs but also those of a museum, sensitive and responsive to the visitors, to education, research and teaching, to preservation, safety and security of our resources and operational considerations. In summary, our brief to the museum designer, a UK-based firm, was to propose the design and usage of exhibition spaces, taking into account our mission and our requirements for interactivity, visitor comfort and a quality museum experience.

Let me expand on the requirements foremost in our minds. Interactivity in museums - and certainly more so in the context of a university art museum - is an innovation. It purposes to reach out to any visitor, be he/she a student, staff, tourist or just a member of the Singapore public to engage and interact. We had been impressed by the way public museums approach this aspect of the total museum experience and made it a point to spell this out as a desired trait. Our discussions with the designer yielded some pleasing results. Apart from the usual text panels and object labels, we have incorporated the following interactive features as integral trademarks of our presentation and display:

- a) Showcases for ceramics, the largest component in our Chinese art collection, especially designed with hand-rests to facilitate taking a closer or longer look at the object;
- b) Drawers with handles for textile display: altogether we have 18 of these in the South & Southeast Asian Gallery for visitors to open, inspect (and close). These are popular with visitors, space-saving for display, conversationally-minded for the artefact and give the desired impression that NUS Museums is user-friendly, service-conscious, and posturing itself as being accessible in more ways than one;
- c) Sculptures in the open where touching is not discouraged - there are no signs saying 'do not touch' nor the more poetic 'touch with your eyes only' - and sculptures which are shaped and created into *mobiles* and what we term as 'rockers' are either suspended from the ceiling well within reach or are left exposed on the ground - not even on a plinth or mount - in the open and not enclosed in showcases to

- facilitate interactivity. These modern sculptures are in the Ng Eng Teng Gallery;
- d) Multimedia kiosks for all three main galleries, with the most extensive programmes on Chinese Ceramics and Chinese Painting in the Lee Kong Chian Art Museum. To get these programmes off the ground, we engaged with media students from a local polytechnic and with the general public through a multimedia competition for the programme for the Ng Eng Teng Gallery (as things would have it, the winner was an NUS student, which went extremely well with us). In both, we were successful in achieving what we aimed for as an end-result, yet along the way collaborating intimately with students to realise and produce the end-product;
 - e) In the two larger galleries, benches are provided for comfort, relief and ease of viewing of paintings and sculptures.

For visitor comfort, apart from the above, we carved out a small room for 'rest-n-refresh' on the ground level, next to the main entrance of the museum complex. This we have called the *Laughing Camel*, named after a Chinese ceramic model of a Tang *sancai camel*, conspicuously displayed as the main decorative feature of this room which has a soft drinks vending machine, plasma TV publicising our events and placed adjacent to the locker room for visitors to deposit their bags.

With interactivity and visitor comfort in place, the researched exhibition displays which we believe are well-interpreted and communicated as well as captured and documented on show catalogues, friendly and helpful front-line museum staff which include wardens or security personnel trained to be vigilant yet non-threateningly in the background, we believe we have achieved much towards delivering a quality museum experience to visitors on their first or repeat visits.

Visitorship is naturally multi-levelled. To address the different expectations, we decided that the most astute and responsible philosophy to subscribe to was that which provided 'something for everyone'. Our text panels and labels, for instance, are relatively easy to understand for a university museum. We left the scholarly tone, shade and depth for those who seek these out to find them in exhibition catalogues, which are for sale at below-cost selling prices. Our choice of objects for display, while focussed on the rare, the important and those with research and pedagogical relevance, also took into consideration that which would appeal

to the wider public, e.g., Chinese bird- and animal-shaped ceramic whistles from Changsha several hundred years in age; Ng Eng Teng marquettes shaped with a sense of wit and fun, Southeast-Asian paintings which have a sense of humour, juxtaposed with those with higher aesthetic ideals, short-running exhibitions for the Visiting Exhibition Gallery selected for their broad-based outlook or quality as much as their intellectual appeal.

Budget and Finance

As with all other NUS projects, the Office of Finance sets financial limits within which we had to work creatively. This meant having to make decisions - small or big - which impact on each other. Very often it meant that we had to negotiate rather than to assert, and to gun for win-win solutions and situations whether these were decisions affecting the quality of showcases or type of floor treatments, etc. Financial limits, while enabling discipline in spending, did not always allow for the latest and best technologies to be incorporated into the building programme.

Time Frame

Working within a given time frame impacted on choices and selections, plans and strategies. Settling for options requiring the least demand on time was quite often the way out of tight situations, given a scenario where various deadlines mish-mashed with each other.

Working with the architect and designer

Right from the start, RSP Architects & Planners, our main contractor made it easy by instituting weekly Friday-morning site-meetings. Every issue was thrashed during these half-day meetings, which could also involve sub-contractors and what we term sub-sub-contractors. As the project evolved over the years, these meetings became the vehicle during which a new direction or idea was communicated and translated into brick and mortar. All meetings were minuted without fail.

NUS Museums' requirements for a purpose-built museum were presented prior to, and reinforced during, these site-meetings. These requirements include building as few windows as possible, high

ceilings, temperature and humidity controlled.

From the experience of working with an overseas designer, we learnt that it was neither cost-effective nor expeditious. One of our greatest worries was the non-compliance of deadlines or the stretching of it.

On ground level, our education officers experienced very real anxieties when wall texts laid out by the overseas designer got lost, diluted or delayed in transit. However, having said all of that, our UK consultants were true-blue professionals who understood our requirements, interpreted our brief to them astutely, translated this into not just workable but pleasing results and provided expertise, which met with our expectations.

The big move

NUS Museums' move can be described as a multi-level exercise requiring excellent coordination, time and

human resource management. Because we had three collections to be moved from three locations - some for display in the new complex, the rest for storage in four different facilities - and administrative and curatorial offices to boot, the exercise took four weeks to complete. To add to the extravagance (or confusion), all art objects of textile, wood, paper and painting were first treated by fumigation.

For this to take place, the art works in Ng Eng Teng Gallery had first to be packed up, non-paper and painting items removed, leaving behind those requiring treatment. The gallery then became the venue of the exercise, with art objects of like media from the other two collections added. Making it all the merrier was a collection of art books and journals numbering into the two thousands.

Installation of the exhibitions

NUS Museums appointed a mount specialist to



Fig. 2 – Lee Kong Chian Art Museum, lobby level, ceramic display (Photo © NUS Museums).

facilitate the display of rare Indian sculptures and other rare classical sculptures. Guest curators appointed for the opening exhibitions were present to install the various sections of the exhibitions. 3DC, our UK consultant, made a special trip to dress up the cases, adjust the lights and put finishing touches to each and every gallery. Education Officers vetted texts and labels and assisted in the placement of these labels and texts.

Launching NUS Museums

Three months after our move into the new museum complex, on 26 February 2002 NUS Museums was officially launched by Mr S R Nathan, President of the Republic of Singapore, and Chancellor, National University of Singapore. The gala event, the culmination of a year's planning, creativity and hard work, involved many other NUS departments, e.g. Office of Corporate Events, University Cultural Centre, Centre for the Arts and President's Office. It was attended by 650 guests, i.e. about 45% of those receiving an invitation. As it was a landmark event and a significant achievement for the NUS, very little was spared to make it memorable. Some of the evening's highlights were:

- a) An opening with pomp and pizzazz, officiated by our Guest-of-Honour, President SR Nathan;
- b) A grand buffet dinner with food laid out on four stations to service 650 diners;
- c) A fashion show utilising motifs from fabrics from our textile show at the South & Southeast Asian Collection;
- d) An exclusive guided tour by Head of Museum to VIPS, led by President SR Nathan;
- e) A live jazz band providing music and atmosphere before the arrival of President Nathan and during dinner.

Also launched at the Official Opening were three exhibition catalogues, NUS Museums' new corporate logo and video, NUS Museums' Volunteer Guides programme, and a multimedia project for the Lee Kong Chian Art Museum and the South & Southeast Asian Gallery. The entire Opening Ceremony was recorded by our Centre for Instruction Technology and beamed live via NUSNET.

Conclusion

As this conclusion is written almost exactly a year after the official launch of NUS Museums, it makes it easier for us to estimate where we have gone right or wrong with the design and building of the museum complex as well as the team and system which drive its strategies, activities and growth. Where we could have improved are building features sensitive to visitors with disabilities, for example, our toilets for the disabled are not as user-friendly as we thought. We would have provided more space for the growing collection of reference books in our Resource Center. We could also do with a display system, which allows for panels to be configured in any manner to suit the need of every type of exhibition.

We have however done some things well and benchmark our performance along the following lines:

- a) Visitorship figures: 25,000 (compared to 5000+ in year 2001 at the old premises);
- b) Seven exhibitions mounted in the first 12 months (compared to four exhibitions over the last six years);
- c) four research publications relating to exhibitions in the first 12 months (compared to four over the last six years);
- d) Regular teaching/tutorial projects with students from Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences;
- e) Regular outreach programmes;
- f) Six new major initiatives: volunteer guides program; memorandum signed with Fukuoka Asian Art Museum; started an outreach programme with clients of the Singapore Association for the Visually Handicapped; collaborations with other local and foreign universities; fund-raising; and the generating of income and revenue with the leasing out of facilities, e.g. the Visiting Exhibition Gallery;
- g) Accident- and loss-free year, with the safety and security of all art, human and other resources of property and premises uppermost in our minds and heart.

The impact of NUS Museums on the University since its presence as a museum complex is undeniable. It is now fully accessible, relevant and value-adding to the variety of experiences available at the National University of Singapore to students, staff and wider community. In many ways, we have met our own targets and kept faith with our vision and mission.