

# The Fullerton Building

## A Story of Conservation and Conversion

By Wai Lin Coultas



*The Fullerton Building's east façade as it looks today*

Commissioned in 1919, the Fullerton Building was named after Robert Fullerton, the first Governor of the Straits Settlements from 1826 to 1829. Originally designed as an office building, it initially housed the General Post Office, along with the exclusive Singapore Club. The latter was replaced by the Economic Development Board in 1961, along with other government offices.

When the Singapore government gazetted the building for conservation in 1997, Sino Land (Hong Kong) Company Ltd (part of Far East Organisation) acquired the building from the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) for redevelopment into a hotel. To comply with the URA's restrictions, the building's external façade had to be conserved and any added external structure had to complement this façade.

Therefore, when the architectural firm of Architects 61 put a large canopy into place at the porch fronting the hotel, they ensured that this was a huge expanse of totally transparent glass, allowing guests an uninterrupted external view of the conserved building from their bedroom windows.

At the same time, old blueprints and photos of the Fullerton Building were painstakingly studied so that the replacement of worn-out wooden window frames and shutters would not change the external façade in any way. This attention to detail was also applied to needed re-plastering work using the same Shanghai stone materials. The re-plastering had to be done because some of the Shanghai stones on the façade's panels and also on some of the colonnades and floors had hairline cracks – the result of expansion and settlement. Water incursion had bleached the granolithic plaster on the floors and some of the plastering had developed seepage problems.



*The grand stairs in the hotel's atrium*

The re-plastering also included a cleaning process, the application of a waterproof covering on the Shanghai plaster finish and re-painting. To determine the exact shade of the original colour used, paint scrapings had to be taken off the colonnades.

When the company decided to replace and increase the height

of the building's lighthouse, the architects complied with the URA's restrictions and kept the shape of the demolished original structure. At the same time, the building's existing foundations were reinforced to take the added load from the lighthouse and the internal partitioning into rooms befitting a six-star hotel.

In keeping with the conservation theme, the external addition of the swimming pool was done to complement not only the building, but also the city's skyline. So an infinity pool was included to give guests the impression that they could swim straight into the Singapore River.



*The Fullerton Building's façade today, from the Singapore River*

While the URA had a number of restrictions on what could or could not be done to the hotel's external façade, it gave the architectural team almost free rein to convert the building's interiors. The principal regulation they applied concerned safety issues. Even then, the team decided to retain some of the original construction. After reinforcement beams and columns were put into place inside the building, the engineers found that it was possible to add floors to the Fullerton's original height.



*The Fullerton Building in the late 1920s, with street scene*

Although the building sits on a solid rock foundation, water from the adjacent Singapore River had seeped into some of the foundation's cells, flooding parts of the old basement. As a result, a new pre-cast, waterproofed concrete platform was built over the cells. The pillars supporting the entire building now rest on the platform. The floodwater was fed into new drainage pumps placed under the platform.

In keeping with the intention to ensure that aesthetic internal structures would be retained, the team decided to remove most of the false office ceilings. This exposed the original ceiling designs put in place when the building was first erected.

The determination to conserve the ornate ceiling design on the fourth storey was so strong that the whole of this floor had to be braced for the internal remodelling work that needed to be done. However, safety considerations influenced the team's decision to remove all 14 of the ancient original elevators. This removal gave the company the freedom to repartition the building's interiors to suit its new function as a hotel.

The installation of a new ventilation system made all the former dingy air-wells redundant, so the architects introduced a glass roof to cover the main atrium of the building, rendering the ground floor suitable to function as a lounge and the hotel's reception area.

The creation of the airy atrium enabled the architectural firm to meet the new owner's requirement concerning the installation of the requisite number of guest rooms, all commanding good views. Therefore rooms

facing outward had water views, while those facing inward had pleasant internal views of the atrium.

Ensuring that some rooms had water views was no easy feat. For one, it was found that some of the existing windows were too high above the original floorboards. As a consequence, these floors had to be raised. For another, there were insufficient windows in the building's external walls. Therefore, new windows had to be put in while ensuring that these additions complemented the external façade. The new shutters also kept to the original design.

The attention to detail was so exact that before any demolition work commenced a building survey was conducted to determine if the actual historical building really complied with documented records. This proved to be a wise move because the survey discovered that the floor slabs were not horizontal, but tilted: one end of the building is higher by as much as 120 mm. This discovery meant that the necessary adjustments were made when new floors were added and door openings were put in place.

The conservation and conversion process was so successful that the final result was the old meeting the new and east meeting west. Little wonder the architectural firm received the URA's Architectural Heritage Award in 2001.



*Infinity Pool - The Fullerton Hotel*

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*All photos courtesy of The Fullerton Hotel*