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New indie cinema The Projector woos hipsters with original, retro seats and specially curated indie films

December 13, 2014

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The Mothership Team

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By Uday Duggal

I knew absolutely nothing about Golden Theatre when I first stepped into it. I didn't know about its long history, or anything at all about the stories it held. But there are certain, timeworn places that carry a sense of importance about them, places don't require posters or placards to inform visitors of their vivid, rich pasts.

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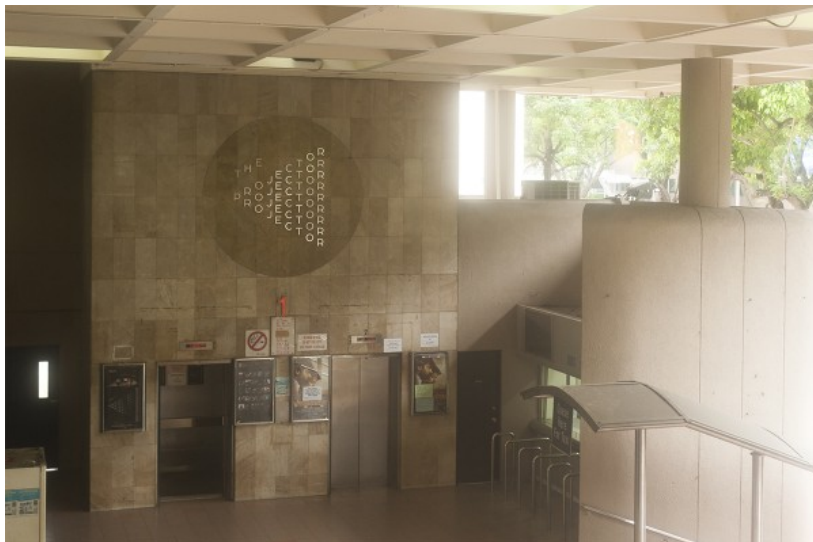


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The old Golden Theatre is one such place.

Standing in the old cinema, glancing around at the cavernous walls and the creaking, antiquated chairs, I could still picture the old lady playing host to hordes; I could almost hear the ringing laughter, the gasps that might've risen to the rafters, fathom what the place used to be like before the throngs turned into a trickle, and then, gradually, vanished altogether-

Look, it's a pretty cool place, that's what I'm trying to say.

The history of Golden Theatre

Situated in the Golden Mile Tower at Beach Road, Golden Theatre was the largest cinema in all of Singapore and Malaysia upon its completion in 1973. It held an incredible 1,500 seats, all contained inside a single, massive, movie theatre. Golden Theatre screened mainly Mandarin films in the '70s and '80s, but its popularity gradually waned in the '90s as moviegoers steadily began to flock to newer halls, in newer malls.

As attendance declined, the large theatre was then split up into smaller, separate halls. The third-floor main hall, Golden Digital Theatre, seats 1,000 and still continues to screen Tamil and Hindi movies under the management of Ayngaran International. However, on the less-used fifth floor, there remained two smaller halls, Golden 1 and Golden 2, slowly sinking into disrepair.

Enter Karen Tan and Pocket Projects

Pocket Projects, a creative development consultancy and management company, specialises in 'adaptive reuse', or finding ways to breathe new life into old, derelict and often historic spaces (such as the Golden Theatre).



Pocket Projects previously enjoyed success with 'The Lorong 24A Shophouse Series', in which the company partnered local architects to creatively renovate eight shophouses in Geylang's Lorong 24A, winning several design awards and receiving attention from publications such as The Wall Street Journal.

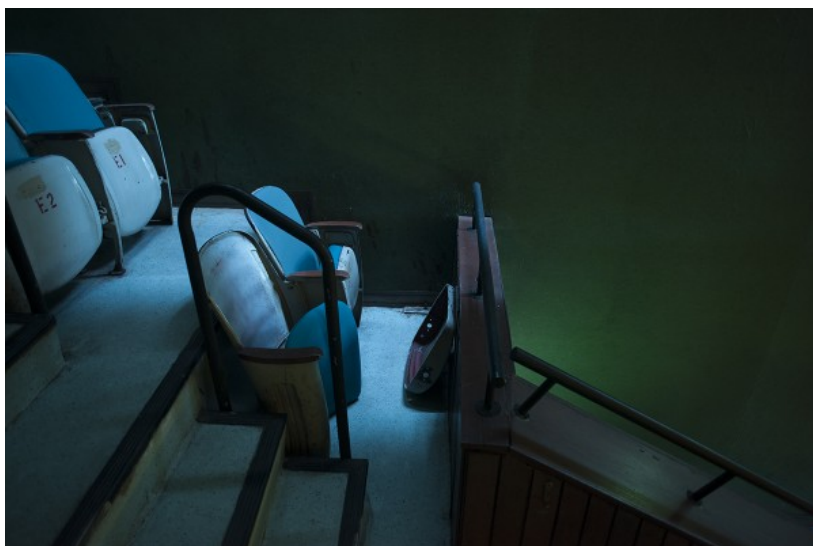
Karen Tan, founder of Pocket Projects, discovered the cinema halls of Golden Theatre in early 2014 after a tip-off from a friend. Pocket Projects fell in love with the space, steel frame seats and all, and began plotting an audacious restoration project.

The group sought to create, within the bones of the grand old theatre, a new, independent cinema, one that would screen a mix of foreign, arthouse, cult, classic, and local films, many of which might never otherwise get a release in Singapore. Naming the cinema 'The Projector', Pocket Projects worked in tandem with FARM, a cross-disciplinary design practice and architecture studio, to refurbish the space while also respecting and preserving elements of the past.

Aiming for a launch in January 2015, the team have been working to install digital projectors and reupholster seats, while also retaining the old cinema's original features, such as the old cinema's signage and floor lettering, along with the original wooden armrests and steel seat frames.

New names. Old school furniture

Golden 1 and Golden 2 received new names, too, along with their new lease of life at The Projector. One became the Green Room, a single screen hall with 230 seats, and the other the Redrum (a nod to Stanley Kubrick's classic 'The Shining'), which will serve as a smaller, more flexible events space. Redrum also features original cinema seats, floor seating, tables as well as a small stage, making it suitable for private events or screenings.



The group also roped in Luna Films, a film consultancy that has curated local film festivals such as the Japanese Film Festival, to help select and bring in films to be screened at The Projector.

"Many good films are produced internationally," explained Gavin Low, the programme curator. "But only a small fraction get seen in Singapore on the big screen."

He added: "I believe The Projector can provide a different perspective, broaden the tastes of audiences here, and help develop a community who can call this cinema home."



To complete the movie-going experience, the team also made provisions for a concession café at the cinema's foyer, operated by Group Therapy Coffee. Named A La Cart, the café will feature classic movie snacks like popcorn, but will also feature burgers, pies, cake and so on, along with sodas, juices and their own coffee blends.

Challenges ahead

Naturally, the costs involved in transforming the old Golden halls into a new, independent cinema have been high, and while the team has raised most of the money on its own, they have turned to a crowdfunding campaign to help ease the burden of costs.

As of this article's publishing, the campaign has raised around 80% of the US\$50,000 target, with the campaign currently closing at the end of December.

Beyond the financial costs of refurbishing and starting up, though, another likely concern will be sustainability.

Singapore has not been kind to cinemas exclusively featuring independent or arthouse works. Attempts like Cathay's The Picturehouse and Golden Village's Cinema Europa eventually proved to be unsuccessful and were converted to commercial halls. The similar Sinema now only exists as a brand after its lease on Mt Sophia ended in 2012. The Projector will now be, as Luna Films' page puts it, "the only indie cinema on the island".

And yet the folks behind The Projector remain optimistic. Blaise Trigg-Smith, a co-founder of Pocket Projects, acknowledged several challenges that the Projector will have to face head-on, including having to compete with the rise of online streaming and piracy, and forgoing certain ticket revenues by not showing the latest blockbusters. However, she added, "While these could seem daunting, we think that being independent and focusing on everything but the mainstream will be our biggest strength."

Paging all hipsters

Well, we'll have to wait and see if the hipsters do emerge from their various, still-relatively-unknown hiding holes and cafes, if the film buffs do arrive in droves, and if The Projector's unique, captivating location, varied selection of films, and tasty café treats will indeed allow it to buck the trend of doomed non-mainstream cinemas. As you might have guessed, I found the space fascinating, perhaps even as captivating as the movies to be screened there, and well worth a visit.



Although the cinema will begin screening its own programme of films only in January, The Projector has already been opened to the public for this year's Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF), as one of the five venues where festival films are being screened. Interested moviegoers can make their first visits to The Projector now. The festival runs till the 14th of December.

To learn more about The Projector, and to contribute to the crowdfunding initiative, click [here](#):



The Projector - Join us in bringing it to life!

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