Capitol in colour

Arc Studio's multi-hued proposal for the landmark site would have been my choice

viewpoint

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Well, the old lady is about to be dusted off and have a new life – the grand dame of Singapore's cinema scene, the Capitol Theatre, that is.

The once-glorious theatre and sister heritage buildings Capitol Building and Stamford House are to be transformed in a $500-million makeover, to be completed by 2014, that will result in a magnificently restored cinema, a luxury hotel and 15-storey retail and residential complex.

But I am not feeling the excitement. The winning concept, which beat 13 other submissions, by American firm Richard Meier & Architects meets the design criteria but it doesn't evoke any emotion.

Under its design, the theatre will become a new cinema and performance venue, Capitol Building and Stamford House restored into a hotel with about 200 rooms and Capitol Centre replaced with a sleek building of shops and about 70 apartments. There will also be a public plaza with a glass roof.

Sure, the overall concept is pleasing to the eye and well-crafted, but the new building looks like any other glass-clad one around town.

Yes, it has that "hip" feel but it looks insipid. Is this the new image we want for a reborn, architecturally significant site – that our city can have only ubiquitous contemporary-style glass buildings?

Something else could have been picked from the submissions and refined to make the site better.

All 14 designs are on show at an exhibition at the Urban Redevelopment Centre in Maxwell Road that ends on Wednesday. They are a mixed bag of designs but they include some that show far more exciting choices could have been made.

But first, some background into how the process of choosing the design came about.

The site was sold by the Urban Redevelopment Authority via its Concept Price Revenue tender system. "Concept" proposals that met the evaluation criteria were shortlisted to the second stage, where the site was awarded to the tenderer with the highest bid. Three of the 14 submissions made the cut.

A consortium of Perennial Real Estate Group, Pontiac Land and Top Property Investment put in the winning bid of $250 million for the land itself. It appointed Richard Meier & Architects to come up with a design proposal, which is why the American firm was the final winner.

The evaluation criteria were clear. The form and massing of the new building had to be appropriate and relate well to the conserved buildings. There had to be a sensitive interface between the conservation buildings and the new one. The placement of uses had to be well-planned and there had to be appropriate adaptive reuse of the conservation buildings.

The criteria were strict but even so, the jury could have picked a proposal that could make a statement in the urban landscape of the area.

After all, this historically rich site should be a place that Singaporeans want to flock to again, like they did in its heyday. In the 1960s, the Capitol site was the choice venue for entertainment, leisure and shopping.

The new building should have a dynamic design that will draw curious crowds, rather than just have the average Singaporean label it as yet another shopping mall or condominium.

So it should be a building that stands out. While I don't mean that it should rival the iconic Capitol Theatre and the nearby St Andrew's Cathedral, it should catch your eye in some distinctive way.

Take local firm Ministry of Design's proposal of two oval-shaped buildings instead of one singular mass. This could have added a refreshing dimension to the area, which has mostly angular buildings.

Splitting the block into two smaller ones also means that there would be less of a chance of the new building overwhelming the conservation ones.

Its facade is different from the all-glass cladding most buildings in Singapore adopt. It is layered – think of that traditional cake delicacy, kueh lapis – which gives the building an unusual look.

Or what about adding some colour to an area where the surrounding buildings are either off-white or grey? Arc Studio's proposal could literally have provided a colourful solution.

The local firm's proposed facade for the new building is "a vibrant explosion of coloured glass", inspired by the stained-glass windows of St Andrew's Cathedral opposite.

Arc Studio's proposal included a colourful facade for the new building (far left) on the Capitol site, while Heatherwick Studio left a deep impression with its 'flying box' design (left). ST PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN

I can imagine the multi-hued building becoming a popular photo spot, had it been picked. The conservation buildings would remain off-white or beige so there would not be a clashing riot of colours.

A truly impactful design was British architecture firm Heatherwick Studio's design. It had a series of stacked boxes wrapping around Capitol Theatre. The firm described the boxes of apartments as flying across the theatre roof.

Initially, I hated it. It was too messy. The "flying boxes" resembled an arm reaching across to grab Stamford House. It was too overwhelming and trying to be different for the sake of it. But on a second look, I found it breathtakingly different. It would be a building that will draw much praise and criticism.

Still, creating an outstanding new building isn't enough. How it relates to the older buildings must also be considered.

Some concepts show a dialogue between the old and new. Others seem to not have given much thought to this and the results are disappointing, especially when the firm is a well-respected one.

The fine balance of how old and new come together harmoniously is apparent in Meier's design, so it is not difficult to see why it was the eventual winner. Still, it lacks the wow factor.

So which one would I have chosen? Well, perhaps the one by Arc Studio. With its curvy and colourful facade, it would have brought vibrancy to the area.

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