

design anthology

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Cinematique Fantastique

Text / Jennifer Choo Images / Staek Photography

In today's era of watching YouTube videos on tablets and laptops, the sense of occasion of going to the cinema has all but disappeared. But in Penang, Malaysia, a theatre with a distinguished past is poised to bring the magic back. Meet the Majestic Theatre, a glorious cinema dating back to 1926.

Originally built to be a live performance theatre, the colonial-style building was named in honour of then-sovereign King George V. The Majestic became an immediate landmark and in 1937 was one of several prominent buildings in then-Malaya to be photographed as 'A Coronation Souvenir' in conjunction with King George VI's ascension to the throne. As sound films came onto the scene, the Majestic was the first theatre to show them and was renamed the Shanghai Sound Theatre.

For the next 50 years, the theatre was a popular venue for dating couples and kung fu fans, as Chinese movies by the Shaw Brothers became the main draw. The area where the Majestic is located was then the West End of George Town with glitzy theatres lining the street, but this gradually changed in the 80s and today, many of the buildings have been torn down or converted into furniture stores and smoky pool halls.

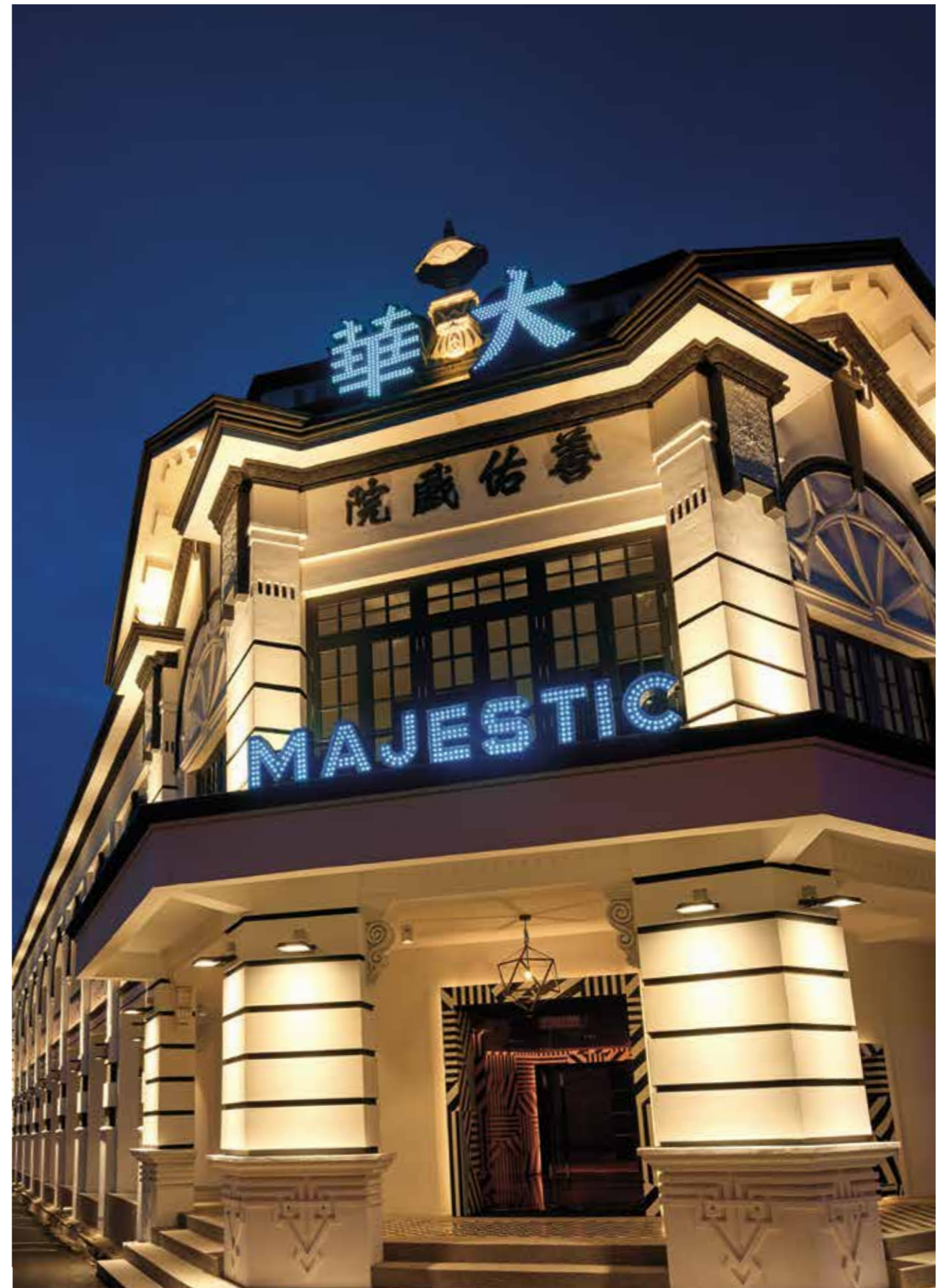
When Jonathan Foo, CEO of developer 1919 Global, first laid eyes on the site, the once-beautiful building had gone to seed. Foo, who had successfully restored and now runs Loke Thye Kee restaurant and boutique hotel, had acquired the properties including the Majestic and the adjoining 12 shophouses on Jalan Phee Choon prior to their UNESCO World Heritage Site listing. 'The grand vision was to recreate an ecosystem within this block of properties, where people would live, work and play again in the centre of George Town,' he says. 'With the Majestic, many ideas were floated in the planning stages, but eventually it was the grand old dame that told us what to do. She was originally built to offer an escape through entertainment, so we decided to restore the Majestic into George Town's first real heritage event venue.'

After a regional search to pick a design team with which to collaborate on 1919 Global's vision, Singapore firm Ministry of Design was chosen for the job. 'MOD's balance of sensitivity to the building's history, while not allowing this to limit their ideas and concepts, was key,' says Foo. 'We believed the team's willingness to push design boundaries would give us a distinct design befitting this icon.'

With only a few rare old photographs to guide them, the team recreated the crumbling and missing plaster mouldings on the front facade and side balconies. The original facade crown, which had been bricked up at the end of the colonial rule of Malaya in the 1950s, was also reinstated. As for the interior, this is where MOD truly transformed the Majestic from a grand old dame into a modern lady.

'Searching for a common thread that transcended genres and decades of movie making, we came across the clapboard, something common on all movie sets whatever the genre,' explains Colin Seah, founder of MOD. 'I was very attracted to the graphical quality of the stripes and extrapolated it to the spatial dimension, making something two-D into three-D. This gesture allowed us to pay homage to the heritage of the cinema whilst contemporising the space and the result is really hypnotic.'

This dynamic clapboard pattern begins in the reception area, flowing through to the hall with its black and white tiled floor, and rising up the ten-metre grand proscenium where it meets with the Majestic's logo above. The original circle seating now features a black-stained wooden deck, and one can admire the 12-metre-high vaulted ceiling with its exposed original English-made iron trusses that still bear the mark of the iron mill where they were forged. Wooden acoustic strips and lime plaster on the walls were removed to expose the original brickwork beneath, giving a warm wash throughout the theatre while simultaneously creating a natural non-reflective surface that gives the theatre its quality live acoustics. And now, finally, the grand old dame is ready for her close-up.



Under the direction of Singapore firm Ministry of Design, the art deco-era Majestic Theatre has been contemporised but still captures the spirit of a bygone era



Traditional architectural features have been retained and restored



Top: The original ten-metre grand proscenium and circle seating inside the Majestic's main hall



Bottom left and right: A dynamic clapboard pattern runs throughout the space, while the exposed original English-made iron trusses overhead still bear the mark of the iron mill where they were forged