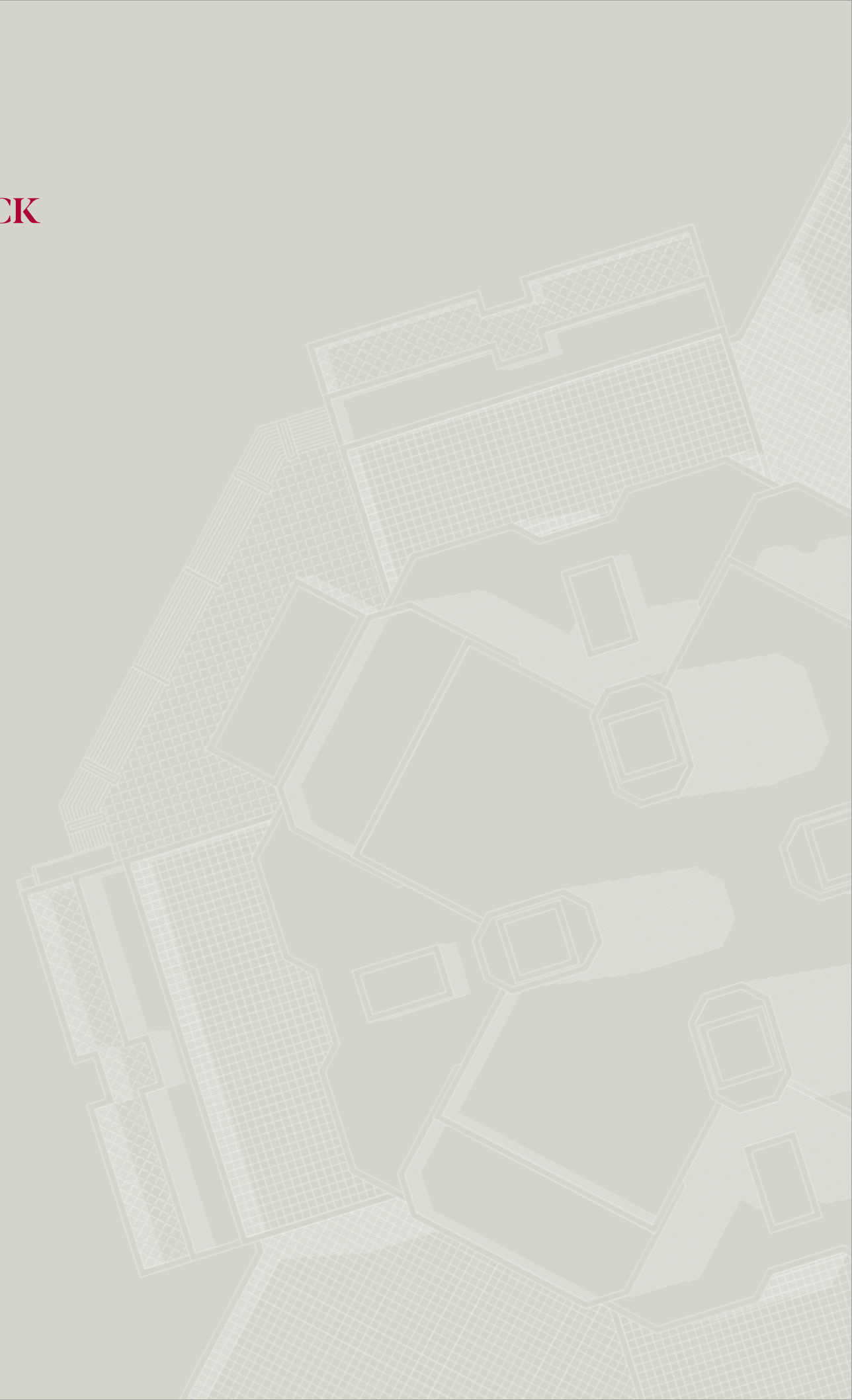


**ONE
HAVELOCK
SQUARE**



**ONE
HAVELOCK
SQUARE**

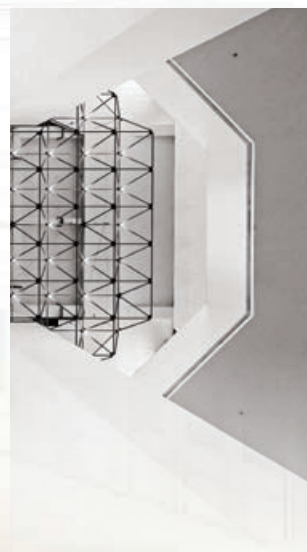




PHASES

12

FROM COLONY
TO MODERNITY



SPACES

40

EIGHT SIDES
OF THE
STATE COURTS



FACES

78

BETTER
TOGETHER



FACES

106

PEOPLE
BEHIND THE
STATE COURTS



SPACES

136

TWO NEW TOWERS,
ONE HAVELOCK
SQUARE



PHASES

162

ON TO
GREATER HEIGHTS





Since 1975, the State Courts have made our home in an eight-sided building in Chinatown. The building has borne witness to historical changes and prominent cases. Over time, the growing demand for court services has required an increase in capacity.

In December 2019, the State Courts Building was vacated. We shifted a short walk away, to a pair of striking towers: the State Courts Towers. These towers, a modern landmark in Chinatown, offer more courtrooms, hearing chambers and services. More significantly, the open concept design reflects the transparency and accessibility that the State Courts represent.

As we bid farewell to the State Courts Building, we welcome a new beginning in the State Courts Towers where the State Courts will continue to serve Singapore by upholding the highest standards of justice.



THE JUDICIARY OF SINGAPORE

Singapore’s judicial system is closely woven with the country's colonial past. The application of English law during the colonial period moulded Singapore’s legal system along the lines of the English legal system.

Prior to that, Singapore had been under the rule of the Sultan of Johor, under a mix of Malay customs and traditional laws that provided a basic legal framework.

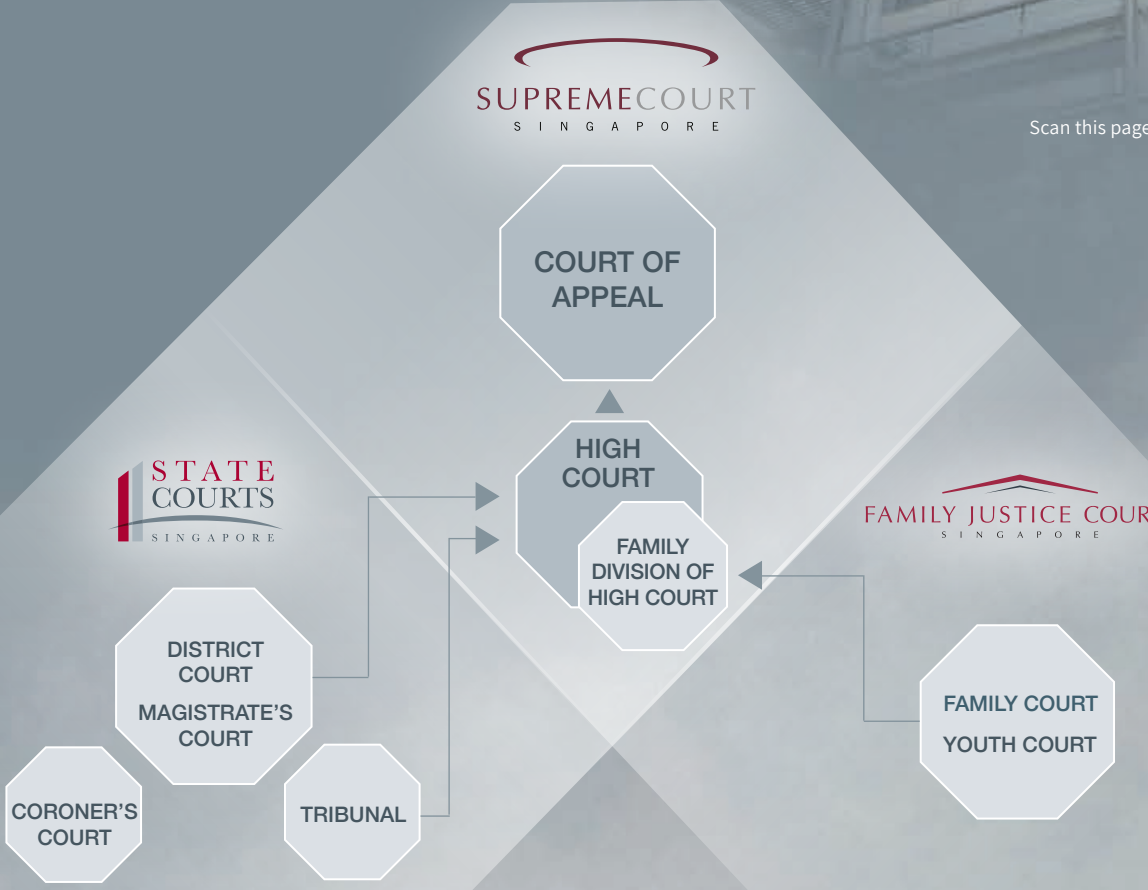
The Singapore judicial system has since undergone changes and updates to keep pace with the developments of the day. Key historical milestones which have shaped the Singapore judicial system include the Japanese occupation,

merger and separation from Malaysia, and independence in 1965.

Today, the Singapore Judiciary comprises the Supreme Court, the State Courts, and the Family Justice Courts.

The Supreme Court consists of the Court of Appeal, which is the apex court in Singapore, and the High Court. Because of this, the State Courts, which comprise District Courts and Magistrates’ Courts, are sometimes referred to as the “lower courts”.

The State Courts also house the Coroner’s Court, the Small Claims Tribunals, the Employment Claims Tribunals, and the Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals.



Scan this page for AR experience

Before the Subordinate Courts were set up, Singapore had several courthouses spread across the island. From the Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts to the Traffic Courts, these courthouses were legacies of the legal system that Singapore inherited from the British.

It took visionary leadership to bring all these courts together under one roof. And on 15 September 1975, the Subordinate Courts Building opened along Havelock Road.

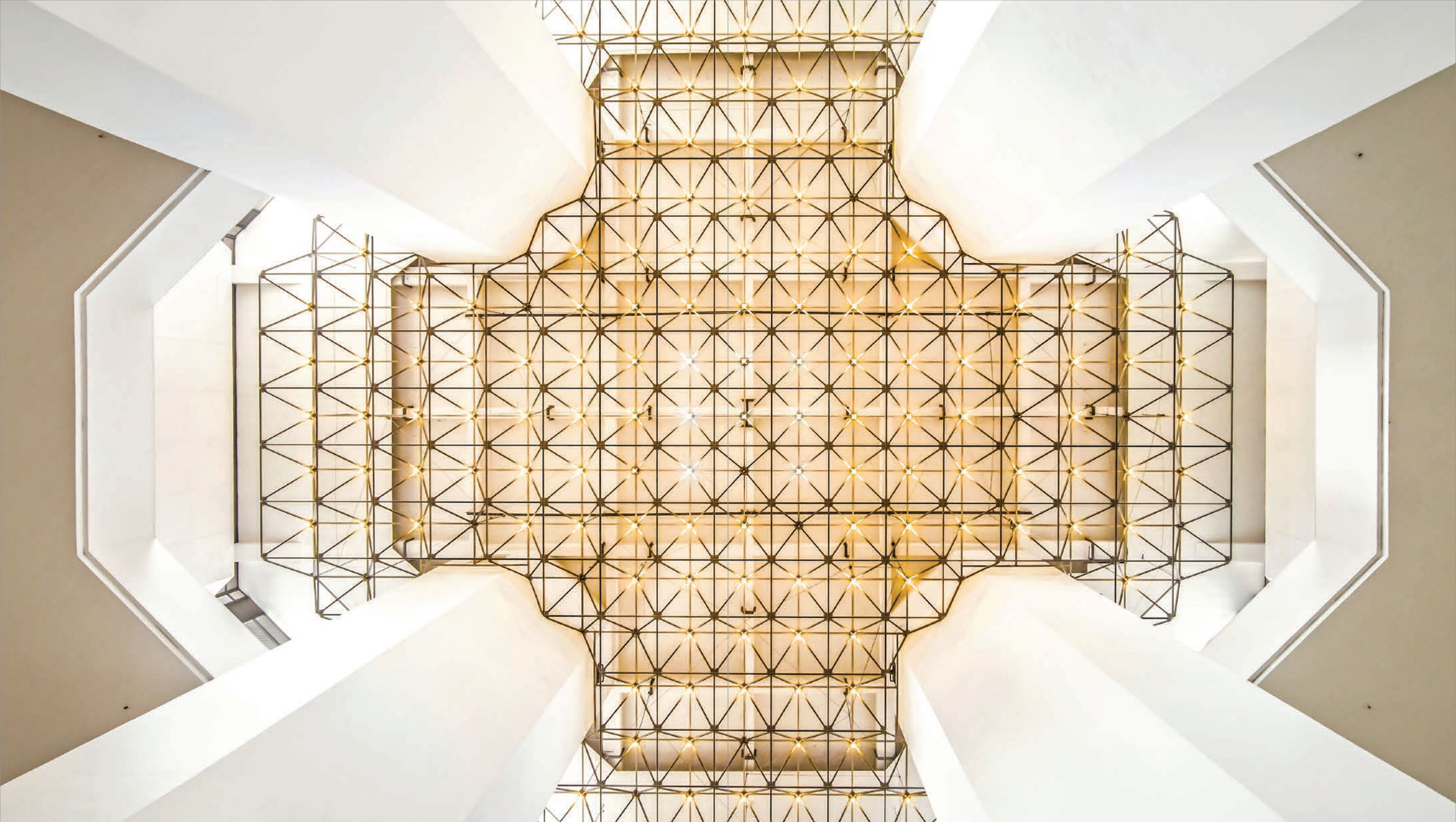
For the next 44 years, the building was the workhorse of the country's legal system, handling approximately 90 per cent of all court cases in Singapore.

Over the years, changes were made to strengthen the organisation and enhance its standing – including a name change from the “Subordinate Courts” to the “State Courts”.

PHASES

FROM COLONY TO MODERNITY







“The move to centralise all the courthouses constituting the primary trial courts in one building was not merely a practical one; it spoke of our intent to ensure that justice would be easily and readily accessible, flowing from the recognition that the courts exist for the people.”

CHIEF JUSTICE SUNDARESH MENON

Chief Justice of Singapore



The groundbreaking ceremony of the new State Courts Towers in 2014.



Under the scorching sun, the zinc roof gleamed and trapped the sweltering heat. Inside the single-storey Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts building, the ceilings were low, air-conditioning was absent and its occupants were often bathed in sweat.

It may have been a courthouse, but veteran members of the Judiciary nicknamed parts of it the “cowsheds”.

“On a bright and sunny day, it was very hot. Sometimes proceedings had to go on with permission granted to the lawyers to take off their jackets,” recalled Mr Khoo Oon Soo, a Magistrate at the Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts from 1973 to 1975.¹



Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts

Downpours were a dampener too. While they lowered the temperature in the courtrooms, the sound of the rain hitting the zinc sheets was distracting.

“On a rainy day, you could hardly hear the parties because there was this pitter-patter on the zinc roof,” added Mr Khoo.

The rest of the courtrooms were no better. Mr Francis Remedios, a former District Judge, recalled that Court 6 was never used because it was believed to be unsafe.² Court 9, which housed the lock-up, was “literally an enclosure [covered] with chicken wire”.³

The other courthouses across Singapore then, such as the Civil District Courts at the old Parliament House in Empress Place and the Traffic Courts at the former Sepoy Lines Police Station in Outram, were also cramped and crumbling.



Traffic Courts



Civil District Courts

¹ Oral history interview, 8 November 2016.

² State Courts Building 40th Anniversary sharing by Mr Francis Remedios.

³ Singapore Academy of Law (2018). *Legal Legacies: The Storeys of Singapore Law*. Singapore: Academy Publishing.

COOL AIR, FINALLY

A new chapter began on 15 September 1975. The various courthouses came under one roof at the Subordinate Courts Building in Havelock Square. For the judges and court officers, the highlight of their new workplace was the air-conditioning.

Mr Khoo still remembers the welcome relief of being greeted by cool air once he stepped into the partially air-conditioned building.⁴ Others were impressed with the roomy interiors and modern decor.

“Our registry was built-in and spacious, and the storage space was enormous,” said Mr James Chuah, who served as a Bailiff and was later appointed as an Assistant Registrar of the Small Claims Tribunals.⁵

“We were supplied with brand new furniture and comfortable upright chairs. Gone were the colonial rattan seats with semi-round wooden armrests.”



Theft at the courthouse

It was not just the lack of air-conditioning that was problematic in the old courthouse. Security was lax too – so lax that some thieves had stolen from the courthouse in broad daylight.

Senior Counsel Michael Khoo, then a Magistrate in the Criminal District and Magistrates’ Courts, shared: “Once, some people said that they were coming by to replace the wall fans. So they came and took off the fans, and later it transpired that they had stolen the fans! Those were in fact not the people who were supposed to replace the fans.”

Looking back, the crime was almost comical. But it was reflective of the simpler times when the majority of court cases involved people’s livelihoods – or lack of it.



⁴ Mr Khoo’s last position before retiring was Commissioner for the Maintenance of Parents in the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

⁵ Oral history interview, 15 November 2016.

UNDER ONE ROOF

The Subordinate Courts, which were renamed the State Courts in 2014, once occupied separate courthouses in various locations around Singapore. The courthouses were legacies of the British Empire, and were built between the 1880s and the 1920s.

Together, these courts handled the vast majority of legal issues faced by residents. Their separate locations, however, made the system confusing and inefficient. Hence, plans were drawn up to consolidate these first-instance courts so that they could be more accessible to the public.

The calls for a new building also intensified due to the poor condition of the old courthouses in various locations, which had become run down over the years.



1

Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts

SOUTH BRIDGE ROAD

Also known as the Police Courts, the Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts building housed four District Courts and five Magistrates' Courts. The compound also had two single-storey court structures, which were popularly referred to as the "cowsheds" due to the poor ventilation and low ceilings.

2

Traffic Courts

OUTRAM ROAD

These courts at the junction of New Bridge Road and Outram Road occupied the former Sepoy Lines Police Station. First known as the Traffic District and Police Courts, they were renamed as the 1st and 2nd Traffic Courts on 10 February 1950. In 1970, they were re-designated as the 9th and 10th Magistrates' Courts.

3

7th and 8th Magistrates' Courts

NEW BRIDGE ROAD

Situated next to each other along New Bridge Road opposite Singapore General Hospital, the two courts underwent a few re-organisations.

The 7th Magistrate's Court originally served as the 3rd Traffic Court, when it opened on 19 October 1967, before it was renamed to 11th Magistrate's Court on 1 June 1970 and later 7th Magistrate's Court in 1971.

The courthouse adjacent to it opened on 2 January 1970 to house the Juvenile Court and dealt with non-Muslim maintenance cases. On 13 February 1971, it was gazetted as the 8th Magistrate's Court, to deal with traffic and other departmental cases. Non-Muslim maintenance cases were transferred to the Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts at South Bridge Road.

4

Coroners' Courts

OUTRAM ROAD

The Coroners' Courts operated out of the Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts till 1956, when they moved to a single-storey compound in Outram Road, close to the Singapore General Hospital.

5

Civil District Courts

EMPRESS PLACE

The Civil District Courts were housed in the Old Parliament House in the early 1900s. In the 1930s, the Civil District Courts moved to Empress Place.

26 MARCH 1970

provided with more reasonable and suitable accommodation.

The Minister for Law and National Development (Mr. E. W. Barker): Mr. Speaker, Sir, the need for a new building to house our subordinate courts, i.e., the Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts, the Traffic Courts and the Civil District Courts, have been felt since 1963. However, for one reason or another, it was not possible to implement the proposal until now, when opportunity has been taken, with the proposed redevelopment of the existing adjoining District and Magistrates' Courts in South Bridge Road under the urban renewal scheme, to provide a site approximately 92,000 square feet in area for this new building within the present Ministry of Labour within the area bounded by Park Road, Pearl's Hill Road, Havelock Road and New Market Road. The new building will be a 14-storey one designed to cope with the needs of the next 50 years. It will have a floor area of about 200,000 square feet, of which a little more than half will be air-conditioned. Besides 25 ante-chambers, witness rooms and a big general office.

The building, which is estimated to cost \$65 million — and this excludes furniture and equipment — is expected to be completed by 1975.

Mr. Lim Cheng Lock (Kampong Kapor): Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to move, That the sum to be allocated for Head 10 of subhead 101.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is acknowledged that over the past ten years, Singapore has made considerable progress economically, socially, industrially and politically. New laws have been introduced and passed and existing laws have been revised and brought up to date. But I must say that reasonable and suitable accommodation for the administration of justice does not keep pace with other fields of progress that we have made. I refer to the Criminal District and Magistrates' Courts at South Bridge Road. It is stated in the Memorandum on the Development Estimates (Misc. 2 of 1970) that the building is very old and dilapidated. In fact, the conditions are considered unsatisfactory and overcrowded.



“The Chief Justice tells me that some of the buildings are not only old and dilapidated but [also] a danger to their occupants,” said then Finance Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee, in his 1970 Budget speech to Parliament, where he announced plans for a new court complex, which became the Subordinate Courts Building.⁶

In 1973, construction of a contemporary courthouse began. The nine-storey building, costing \$18 million, would come to be known for its modern design and iconic octagonal shape – which some affectionately call the “Octagon”.

⁶ Goh Keng Swee, 9 March 1970. Annual Budget Statement. Speech presented at Parliament, Singapore. Retrieved 11 July 2019, from <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/PressR19700309.pdf>



1973

construction of a contemporary courthouse began

\$18 million

for a nine-storey building



A COURT FOR THE PEOPLE

Since their establishment in 1975, the Subordinate Courts, later known as the State Courts, have been hearing approximately 90 per cent of civil and criminal cases in Singapore.

The sheer breadth of cases spans the entire spectrum of society, making the State Courts the heart of Singapore’s legal system. Cases range from mundane traffic offences to high-profile crimes committed by corporate chiefs, religious leaders, civil servants and politicians.



The City Harvest case: The State Courts’ most challenging trial

A queue had formed overnight, snaking around the building. It was not the launch of a new smartphone or the opening of a new mall. The crowds had come to witness a dramatic trial involving a megachurch and its leaders.

In 2012, Singapore was stunned by a scandal involving six leaders of City Harvest Church, including founder Kong Hee, who were found to have misused millions in church funds through sham bond investments. The funds were channelled towards the secular music career of Kong’s wife, singer Ho Yeow Sun.

Apart from the gravity of the offences, the sheer scale of the case was a logistical nightmare.

Justice See Kee Oon, who presided over the case when he was Senior District Judge of the Criminal Justice Division, called it his “most challenging trial” due to its complexity and length.

The 142-day trial – the second longest in the history of Singapore – stretched over two-and-a-half years. In all, some 10,000 documents and exhibits were analysed, along with 1,000 emails. The State Courts also struggled to accommodate the crowds vying to observe the trial in Court 1 – the largest courtroom – in addition to the large number of lawyers and accused persons.

“The first priority was to ensure that counsel for the accused persons as well as the prosecution team had sufficient space,” recalled Justice See, who became the Presiding Judge of the State Courts in 2014.

To ensure fair seating allocation, the State Courts issued tickets to the public on a first-come-first-served basis. “Ultimately, we ran out of tickets. The queues had formed, as far as I know, even overnight during the first day of the trial,” he shared.

The Rogue Trader

In 1995, one man brought down Barings Bank, England’s oldest merchant bank, through a series of fraudulent transactions from Singapore that resulted in £800 million in losses.

Rogue trader Nick Leeson then fled Singapore to Germany, only to be caught and extradited back to the city-state to face charges of cheating and criminal breach of trust at the Subordinate Courts.

His case was presided over by then Senior District Judge Richard Magnus, who convicted and sentenced the Briton to six years’ imprisonment.

“Lawyers told me later they expected about two to three years,” shared Mr Magnus, who retired in 2008.

After the case, Mr Magnus went to London to attend a meeting and watched a BBC episode on Nick Leeson. The discussions turned to the sentence and the moderator posed a question: was the sentence too harsh?

“Most of the participants in this particular BBC conference felt that the sentence was too stiff,” shared Mr Magnus. “If it had happened in England, it would have been about four to five years, not six years. Then one of them made this comment, ‘this senior district judge in Singapore – his name is Richard Magnus and his nickname is Maximum Magnus.’”

Mr Magnus disagreed with these sentiments.

“They were completely misaligned with what was happening in Singapore at that time. This was a man who single-handedly brought down an entire institution which had been around for 150 years – purely out of greed,” he explained.

“And he had run away from Singapore and from the criminal justice system as he did not want to face his wrongdoing. We had to spend effort and resources to extradite him to Singapore.”

In fact, the case went up for appeal and the High Court agreed with Mr Magnus’ decision. “It affirmed that you can impose a maximum sentence even though the accused pleads guilty in the first instance.”

Leeson was released from prison in 1999, after he was diagnosed with colon cancer. While in prison, he wrote a book *Rogue Trader* that was later made into a movie.





Over the past 44 years, the State Courts have stayed true to their mission – to enhance access to justice. Whilst the State Courts administer justice, they strive to do so with compassion.

“This means that when you sentence offenders, you do it humanely. We have a duty to punish them, but we can do so in a humane and decent way,” said Justice Tan Siong Thye, who served as Chief District Judge from 2008 to 2013.



This refers to even simple gestures such as addressing accused persons by their names. Previously, the State Courts addressed them simply as “accused person”, but Justice Tan believed that everyone ought to be called by his or her name – even those accused of crime.

When he instituted this change, he recalled how an accused person was overwhelmed with gratitude when a court interpreter addressed him by his family name. Being a repeat offender, he knew how it was like in the past when he was treated as if he had no name. **“I had to change that culture and bring people on board,”** said Justice Tan. **“Believe it or not, small gestures like that matter a lot to the accused person.”**



NO LONGER “SUBORDINATE”

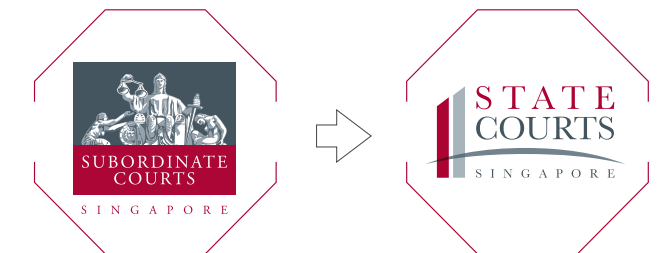
Given the fundamental role which they have in Singapore society and the judicial system, the Subordinate Courts were renamed the State Courts in 2014.

The new name **“reflects the important national function that the State Courts perform in adjudicating disputes and dispensing justice, and combines dignity with gravitas”**, said then Senior Minister of State for Law Indranee Rajah.⁷

Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon explained that the name change was a deliberate decision. A crucial reason was that the word “subordinate” did not seem appropriate. **“In its ordinary usage, the term ‘subordinate’ signifies something inferior or something that is not important, and that seemed to carry a real disconnect with the role that was played by the State Courts in the administration of justice in Singapore,”** he explained.

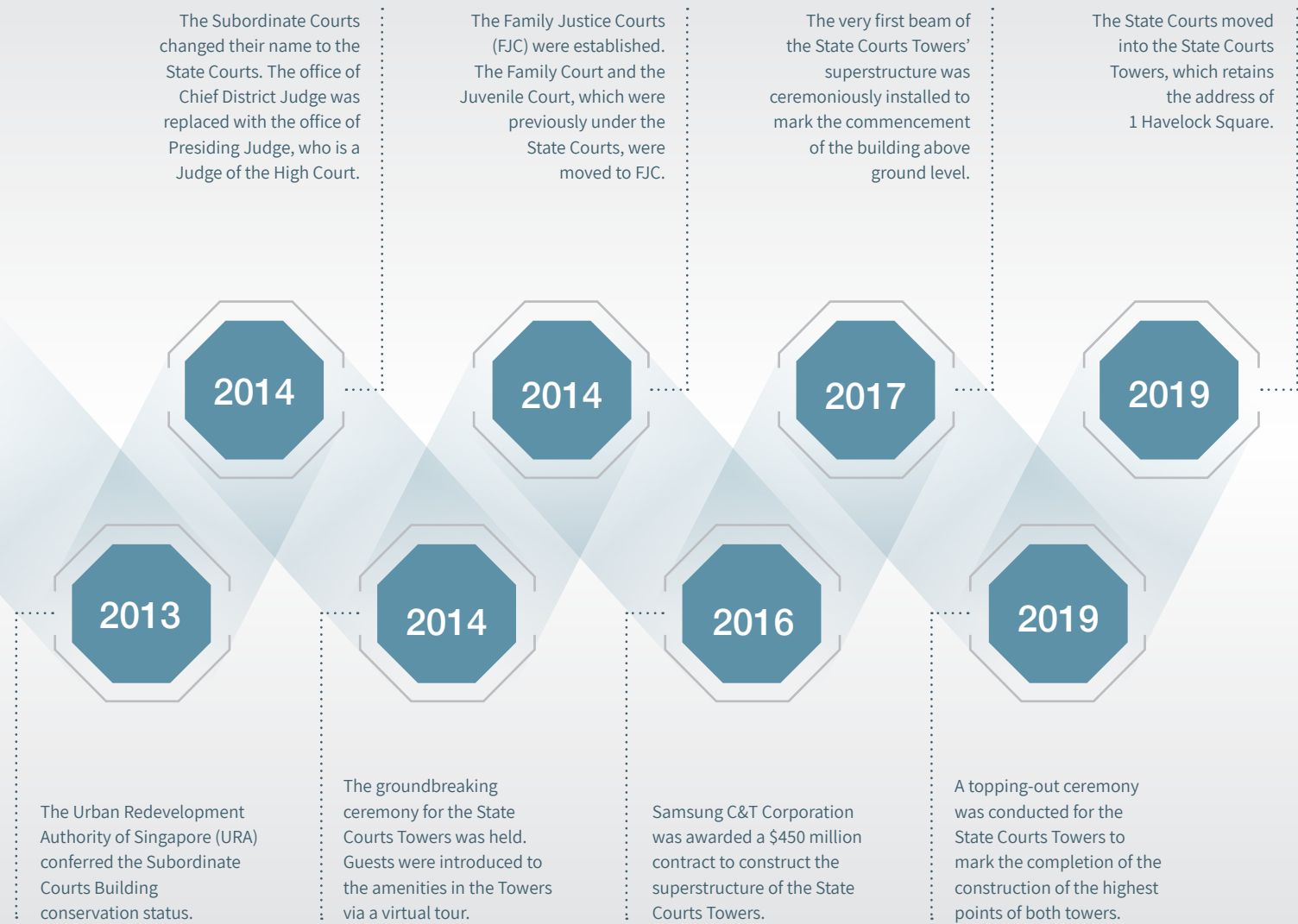
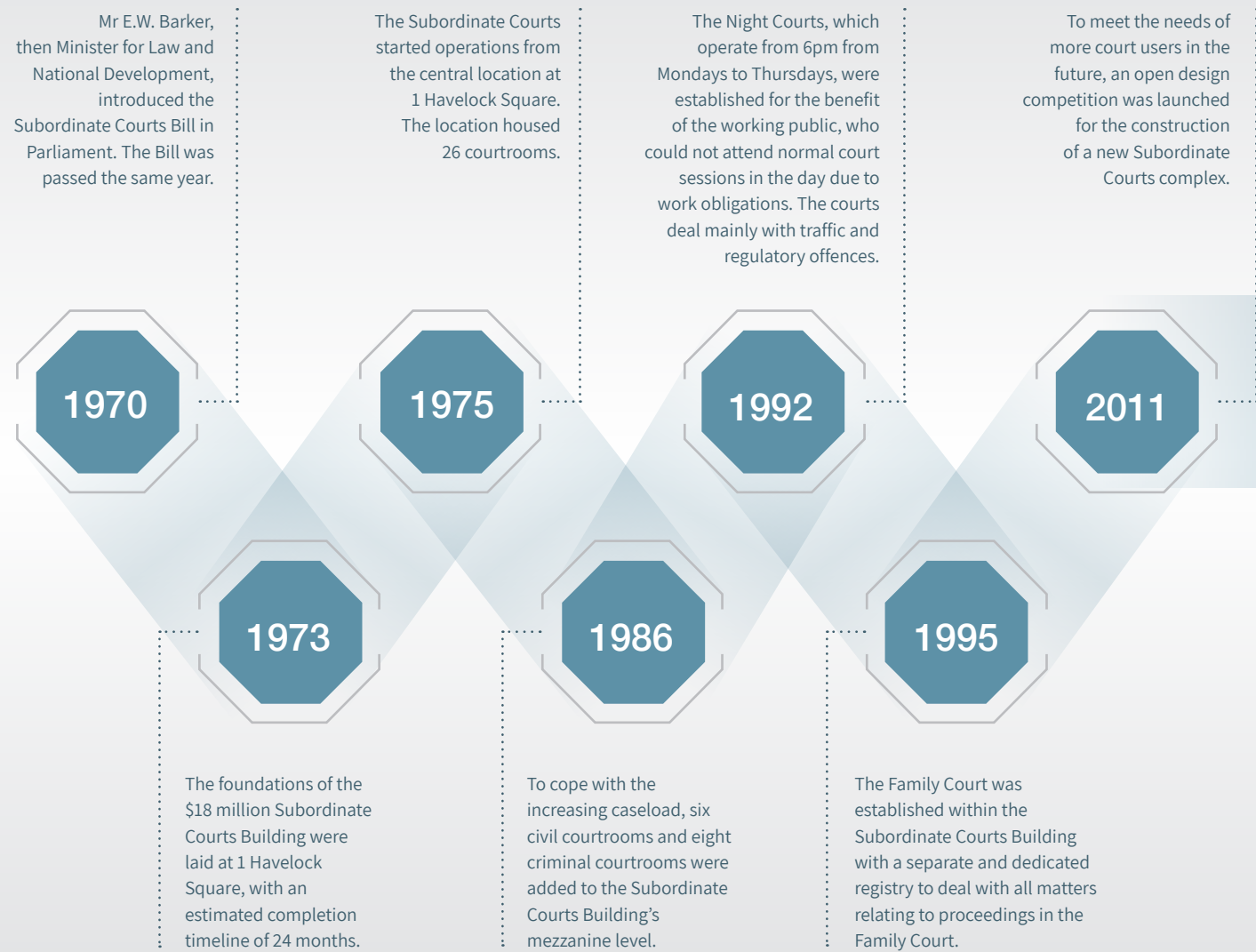
As the vast majority of cases are heard in these courts, **“it seemed wrong to have them carry the name ‘Subordinate Courts’ as if the primary court that deals with the day-to-day judicial needs of our people is somehow inferior or somehow less important,”** he added.

“When we renamed it the State Courts, I think it did capture the central role of these courts...where people go for the resolution of their disputes.”



⁷ Goh Chin Lian, 21 January 2014. Subordinate Courts renamed, to be led by High Court judge. Retrieved 11 July 2019, from <https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/subordinate-courts-renamed-be-led-high-court-judge>

FROM THE
SUBORDINATE COURTS



TO THE
STATE COURTS

COMMITMENT TO INNOVATION

Courts are often not the first to adopt new technologies and practices. In Singapore, however, the State Courts have often been at the forefront of innovation and reform. This is aligned with the country’s constant drive to remain competitive and relevant.



In the 1990s, Mr Richard Magnus, then Senior District Judge, began to adopt technology for a number of work processes. **“In those days, we used to write in longhand and that was time-consuming. So I introduced technology into the system and that cut down the time,”** shared Mr Magnus. **“I remember groups of judges had to learn how to operate a simple PC and it was fun to see them working, because they were of one mind, one spirit to want to clear the cases.”**

At that time, the Subordinate Courts had been trying to clear a backlog of cases – a task that fell on Mr Magnus who marshalled all the judges and lawyers to work faster and longer. Court sessions started earlier, and Night Courts were introduced. Technology played a critical role too.

The challenge was to get everyone to embrace the changes. For the judges and

court administrators, they had to learn to use the technology. For the lawyers, they had to become familiar with filing their pleadings, briefs and bundles of documents through computers.

There was a technological gap among court users, as some of the accused persons or witnesses were not familiar with the new systems. Efforts were made to bridge the gap. **“We established a special lab for them, where we invited them to come and test out the system that was used by the court,”** said Mr Magnus. **“We did not want them to feel distant to the justice system.”**

Video conferencing was also introduced for the Mentions Courts, where all persons who have been arrested are produced before a Magistrate within 48 hours of their arrest to “mention” their cases.

“Quite a number of accused persons were coming in from the prisons, and it would take a bit of time for them to come all the way to the Subordinate Courts and then be brought back,” remarked Mr Magnus. Through video conferencing, the accused persons’ cases could be mentioned from prison and they would no longer need to make the trip to the courthouse.

Over the years, the State Courts made many more updates to simplify workflows for judges, court administrators, as well as court users. The Integrated Case Management System (ICMS) is one example. In 2013, when the first phase of ICMS was rolled out, enforcement agencies could start criminal prosecutions electronically without making a visit to the courts.



DIGITAL UPDATES

1996

THE **AUTOMATED TRAFFIC OFFENCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (ATOMS)** WAS SET UP, ENABLING FIRST-TIME OFFENDERS OF MINOR TRAFFIC OFFENCES TO SETTLE FINES THROUGH AUTOMATED KIOSKS.

1999

THE JUDICIARY WENT ELECTRONIC WITH THE LAUNCH OF THE **SINGAPORE CASE RECORDING AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (SCRIMS)** FOR CRIMINAL CASES, A DIGITAL FILE TRACKING AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM.

2000

THE **ELECTRONIC FILING SYSTEM (EFS)** WAS IMPLEMENTED IN THE SUBORDINATE COURTS, ALLOWING COURT DOCUMENTS IN CIVIL LITIGATION TO BE PREPARED AND FILED ELECTRONICALLY.

2010

THE **DIGITAL AUDIO RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION (DART)** INITIATIVE WAS PILOTED IN FOUR CRIMINAL COURTS. DIGITAL RECORDING CAPABILITIES FACILITATED COURT TRANSCRIPTION, AND LAWYERS AND PROSECUTORS COULD REQUEST TRANSCRIPTS OF THESE COURT RECORDINGS.

2011

THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE DIVISION STARTED THE **REGULATORY OFFENCES CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (ROMS)**, A FULLY COMPUTERISED AND PAPERLESS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR REGULATORY OFFENCES. IT GATHERS ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES UNDER A ONE-STOP PORTAL, STREAMLINING THE MANAGEMENT OF REGULATORY OFFENCES.



INTEGRATED CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (ICMS)



e-Court
Administration



e-Case File



e-Filing



Case Outcomes

By 2015, when ICMS was fully implemented, it was a platform that could be accessed by enforcement agencies, investigation officers, prosecutors, and defence counsel. The various agencies could file applications, submit documents and pay court fees via the system.

The State Courts' use of technology is guided by a goal – to provide more accessible, affordable and efficient services. **“It does not matter what kind of fancy new building you have or whether you have the latest technology,”** Justice See Kee Oon, the Presiding Judge of the State Courts, noted. **“Technology is not an end in itself but a means. It is something that facilitates how we do our work, how we serve the man on the street who comes here.”**

Some of the innovation stems from simply restructuring the procedures to expedite processes.

Justice Tan likened such multi-faceted innovation as *kaizen*, a Japanese word meaning continuous change and improvement. **“You need to have an open mind. You need to identify where the unproductive parts are, the wastage,”** he said.

He described, for example, how he sought to reduce the time taken to process bail. It originally took six to seven hours, which he found unacceptable. **“The Bail Section very earnestly explained to me why it took six to seven hours. It was very logical and convincing,”** Justice Tan recounted. **“So I decided to do a *kaizen* for that project.”**



Justice Tan worked closely with the bail officers to examine the procedures behind the process. Many unnecessary steps were removed, including a mandatory video link with the accused person in the remand centre. As a result, the time taken to process bail was slashed to a mere 15 minutes.

This consistent commitment to innovation led to the Subordinate Courts clinching the Singapore Quality Award with Special Commendation in 2011. This was the highest honour a Singapore organisation could receive for business excellence. With this, the organisation demonstrated that the Judiciary could indeed drive change for the benefit of the public at large.



2013

THE FIRST PHASE OF THE **INTEGRATED CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (ICMS)** BEGAN. THE PAPERLESS SYSTEM ENABLES ALL ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES TO START CRIMINAL PROSECUTIONS AND OTHER CRIMINAL MATTERS ELECTRONICALLY WITHOUT A COURTHOUSE VISIT. ICMS ALSO ALLOWS THE PROSECUTION AND DEFENCE TO FILE APPLICATIONS AND RECEIVE COURT ORDERS AND DOCUMENTS ONLINE.

2013

THE CIVIL JUSTICE DIVISION LAUNCHED THE **INTEGRATED ELECTRONIC LITIGATION SYSTEM (E-LITIGATION)**, THAT REPLACES EFS AND PROVIDES COURT USERS WITH A ONE-STOP PORTAL FOR ALL CIVIL CASE-RELATED INTERACTIONS WITH THE COURTS.

2016

THE **AUTOMATED COLLECTION SYSTEM KIOSKS**, WERE LAUNCHED TO ALLOW COURT USERS TO MAKE PAYMENT FOR FINES, BAILS AND COURT FEES. CALLED THE AUTOMATED COLLECTION SYSTEM, THE KIOSKS ARE INTEGRATED IN REAL TIME WITH THE STATE COURTS' FINANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM. COURT USERS CAN MAKE PAYMENTS AS SOON AS A CASE CONCLUDES.

2017

THE **COMMUNITY JUSTICE AND TRIBUNALS SYSTEM (CJTS)** WAS SET UP TO DIGITALISE THE CLAIM PROCESSES IN THE SMALL CLAIMS TRIBUNALS, THE COMMUNITY DISPUTES RESOLUTION TRIBUNALS AND THE EMPLOYMENT CLAIMS TRIBUNALS. THE ONLINE CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM INCLUDES SERVICES SUCH AS PRE-FILING ASSESSMENT, CLAIM FILING, DOCUMENT SUBMISSION, ONLINE PAYMENTS, COURT DATE SELECTION AND ONLINE SETTLEMENT NEGOTIATION AT THE CONVENIENCE OF COURT USERS.

2019

TRIALS FOR THE **INTELLIGENT COURT TRANSCRIPTION SYSTEM (ICTS)** BEGAN IN TWO COURTROOMS. THE SMART TRANSCRIPTION SYSTEM RECOGNISES HUMAN SPEECH AND INSTANTLY CONVERTS ORAL EVIDENCE INTO TEXT WITH PUNCTUATION, ALLOWING JUDGES TO VIEW TRANSCRIBED ORAL TESTIMONIES IN COURT IMMEDIATELY DURING PROCEEDINGS.

HOUSING TOMORROW'S JUSTICE

As Singapore’s demand for court services grew, it became clear once again that the State Courts needed a new home. Construction of the State Courts Towers began in 2014.

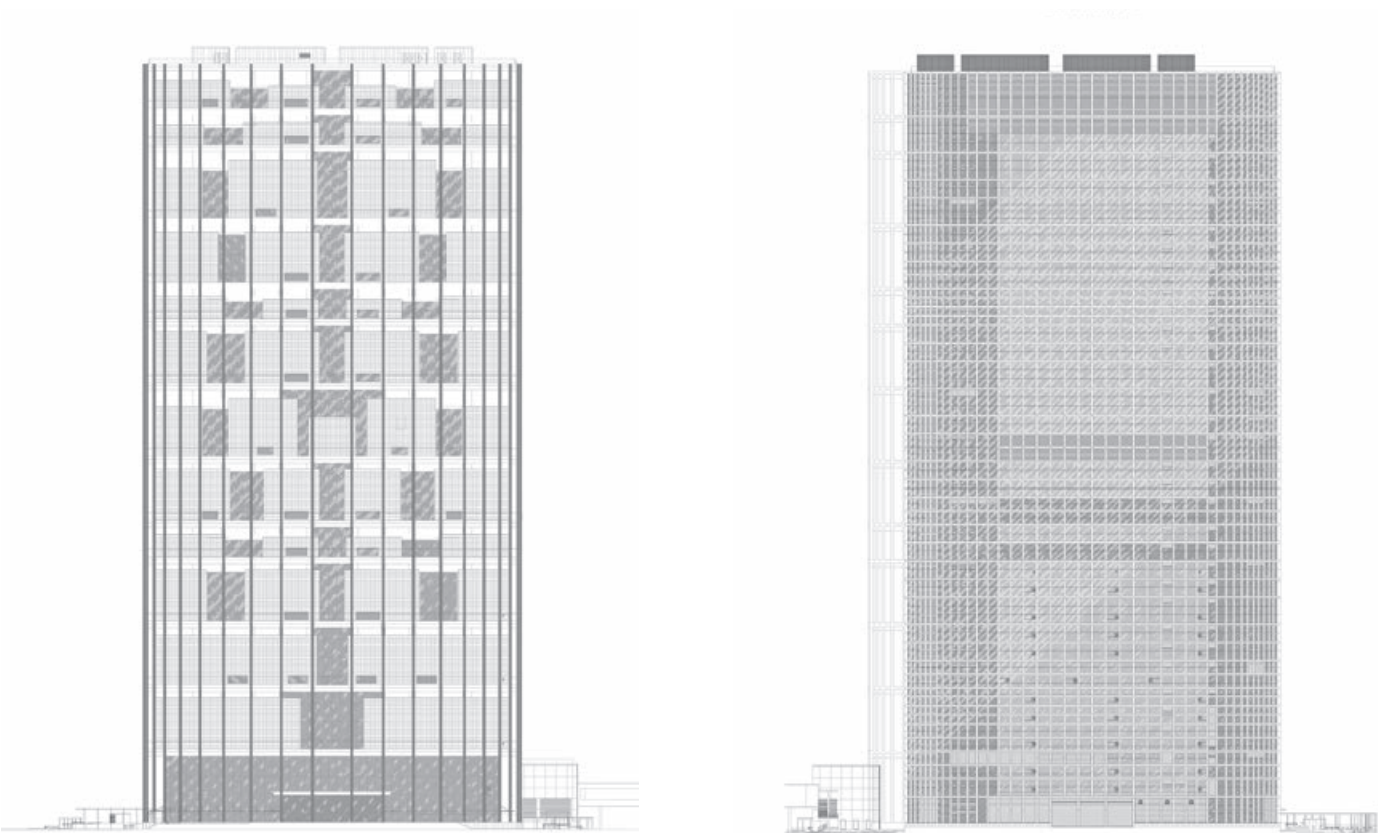
The State Courts Towers is located next to the original building and retains the address of 1 Havelock Square. At 178m, the State Courts Towers, which began operations in late-2019, is the tallest government complex in Singapore.

The State Courts Towers houses 53 courtrooms, up from 37 in the previous building. It also boasts the latest technologies, including instant transcribing systems and a co-working space for lawyers and technology startups. The towers are also designed to be environmentally

friendly, complete with solar panels and rainwater harvesters.

“The first thing which I hope people will appreciate is that it is fully air-conditioned,” Justice See said with a smile, a reference to how the courts have evolved from “cowsheds” without air-conditioning to a partially air-conditioned “Octagon”.

Further, technology is used to make processes more user-friendly and efficient. For instance, a number of courtrooms are fitted with video screens to help court users track the ongoing cases in the Mentions Courts.



But Justice See is clear that no matter how advanced the technology may be in the new towers, the State Courts’ mission of putting court users at the heart of its work must not change.

“As far as the use of technology goes, it is important to ensure that those who need help will still get the assistance they need. We do not want technology to be the barrier instead. The digital divide is still there, and we must help people bridge that divide,” he said.

The State Courts Building, which holds countless fond memories for legal and judicial veterans, has been given a new lease of life.

With its special place in Singapore’s history as a symbol of the Judiciary’s first step from colonial antiquity to a progressive era, the State Courts Building gained conservation status in 2013. The building will house the Family Justice Courts, which are currently operating from an adjacent building in Havelock Road.



53
Courtrooms

178m
Tallest government
complex in Singapore



HEADS OF THE STATE COURTS THROUGH THE YEARS

T S SINNATHURAY

1971 – 1978



The late Mr Sinnathuray began his career at the Subordinate Courts first as a Magistrate, then as a District Judge, and finally as the Senior District Judge. He left the Subordinate Courts in 1978, following his appointment as a High Court Judge – a position he held until his retirement in 1997.

Prior to Mr Foenander’s appointment as the Senior District Judge, he headed the Crime Division in the Attorney-General’s Chambers. During his tenure as the head of the Subordinate Courts, he oversaw the establishment of the Small Claims Tribunals.

ERROL FOENANDER

1984 – 1992



MICHAEL KHOO


1978 – 1984



Before serving as the Senior District Judge, Mr Khoo, S.C. had been the Registrar of the Supreme Court. In 1987, he founded his own law firm. He was among the first batch of lawyers appointed as Senior Counsel in Singapore in 1997.

RICHARD MAGNUS


1992 – 2008



Mr Magnus is often credited as the man who transformed the Subordinate Courts, to rid the backlog of cases that had accumulated over the years. He retired as Senior District Judge in 2008, and has since gone on to hold several other prominent public service positions, such as the Chairman of the Public Transport Council and Temasek Foundation Cares.

TAN SIONG THYE

2008 – 2013



Justice Tan headed the Commercial Affairs Department for a decade before he was appointed Senior District Judge in 2008. Thereafter, he was appointed the Chief District Judge in 2010. He became a Judicial Commissioner in 2013, and then a High Court Judge the following year.

Justice See joined the Subordinate Courts in 1991 and was subsequently appointed District Judge in 1998. In 2007, he headed the Insolvency and Public Trustee’s Office. He rejoined the Subordinate Courts in 2009. In 2013, he became the Chief District Judge, now known as Presiding Judge of the State Courts. He was appointed a Judicial Commissioner of the Supreme Court in 2014, and appointed a Judge of the High Court in 2017.

SEE KEE OON

2013 – PRESENT



The office of the head of the State Courts was re-designated twice.

1970	2010	2014
Senior District Judge	Chief District Judge	Presiding Judge of the State Courts

It was the 1970s, and a wave of Modernist architecture known as Brutalism swept across Singapore. The Subordinate Courts Building was a prime example, with a design that was imposing, geometrical, and largely devoid of decorative elements.

Some saw it as an interpretation of Singapore's post-independence judicial system – modern, efficient and transparent. While the building exhibited a solid and powerful exterior, the interior was vastly different – airy, light-filled and with an open atrium that served as the focal point of the courthouse.

The layout of the eight-sided, nine-storey complex was also intricately detailed. It housed three separate circulation paths, catering to the public, judges, and accused persons. The paths allowed the different groups to move about safely and securely, without crossing paths.

SPACES

EIGHT SIDES OF THE STATE COURTS





“The Subordinate Courts Building is actually affectionately known to some as the “Octagon”. But you will see what seem to be stacks, layer upon layer, so some [also] call it the *kueh lapis** structure.”

JUSTICE SEE KEE OON

Judge of the Supreme Court
Presiding Judge of the State Courts



*Referring to a well-loved multi-layered Indonesian cake.

The brief from the client, then Minister for Law E.W. Barker, was specific and complex. The Subordinate Courts Building had to accommodate 26 courtrooms to cope with projected future demand. It had to have separate walkways for judges, accused persons, and the public. The design also had to have gravitas.

Mr Barker had approached one of the founders of homegrown architecture firm Kumpulan Akitek, Mr Victor Chew, for help with the design. The two had met in their younger days at Cambridge University, where Mr Barker read law, and Mr Chew, architecture.



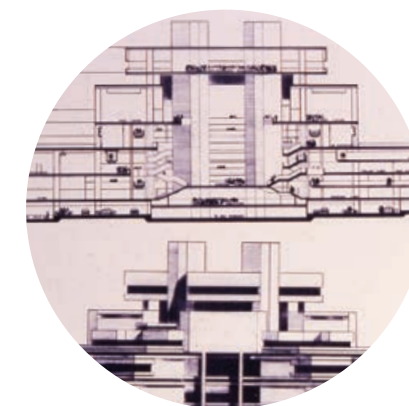


The project then landed on the desk of Mr Sonny Chan, a young architect and partner of the firm. Together with his colleagues, they got to work designing the ideal building that would bring together all the disparate courts – ending decades of decentralisation.

Singapore, then a newly independent nation, was growing steadily and finding its footing on the world stage. It needed a quality Judiciary that would inspire public confidence and trust. A complete remake was in order for the old courthouses.

“The imagery of the building mattered. Mr Barker wanted a building with gravitas – not be just another generic form,” said Mr Chan, now 78, and the founder of architectural firm CSYA.

He ruminated on the brief, and decided to arrange the courtrooms in pairs along an octagonal perimeter. In the centre, he designed a raised atrium that extended to the full height of the building. This created a circular walkway on the ground floor.



It was not Kumpulan Akitek’s first experiment with an octagonal structure. In the 1960s, the firm had designed an eight-sided 17-storey residential property named the Hilltops Apartments in Cairnhill Circle. On every level, seven apartments took seven of the eight sides, with the lifts taking the last side. This high-rise development has since been demolished.

Mr Barker approved the octagonal design, and left the design team to finesse the details of the intricate building.

The blueprint was then given to the Public Works Department (PWD), a public agency that oversaw all government building development and infrastructure. Construction began in 1973. PWD supervised the construction, and managed the implementation of the design. It was the first public-private partnership in Singapore, and the first of many such collaborations to come.

But even before the building had been erected, Mr Barker could already visualise the structure standing tall at the corner of Upper Cross Street and Havelock Road. In 1971, he told Parliament that the new complex, when completed, would be a building “of grandeur and dignity”.

Indeed, almost 50 years on, the eight-sided complex – affectionately known to court staff and judges as the “Octagon” – has become an iconic landmark of Chinatown and a symbol of fairness and justice.

Brutal beauty

Architect Sonny Chan had designed the Subordinate Courts Building in Brutalist style. The name Brutalism comes from *béton brut*, which means raw concrete in French. It is an architectural style characterised by geometric structures, and features heavily the bare building materials with no ornamental adornments.

The Brutalist aesthetic is authentic, straightforward and strong.

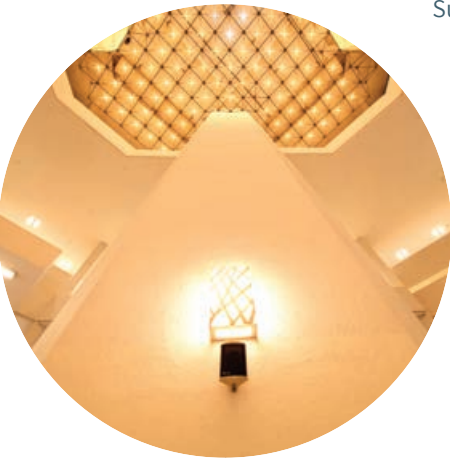
“Brutalism started as a reaction by architects in the West against the neoclassical style, where buildings are primarily decorative,” said Mr Chan.

Examples of neoclassical architecture in Singapore include the old Supreme Court and the National Museum of Singapore.

“Brutalist architecture is honest about the building. It reflects the materials being used, and strips away all the unnecessary decorations. There is honesty in structure, and honesty in the use of materials.”

The building shows off its concrete geometric exterior proudly, without any non-functional adornments. Due to its unique octagonal shape, it looks the same when seen from the front and the back.

It is a most apt metaphor for the institution, the very seat of justice where everyone is equal in the eyes of the law.



THE INSIDE STORY

Constructed in the early 1970s, the eight-sided State Courts Building was a unique development. It came at a time when Singapore was working on urgent national needs, to build more public houses, schools and army camps.

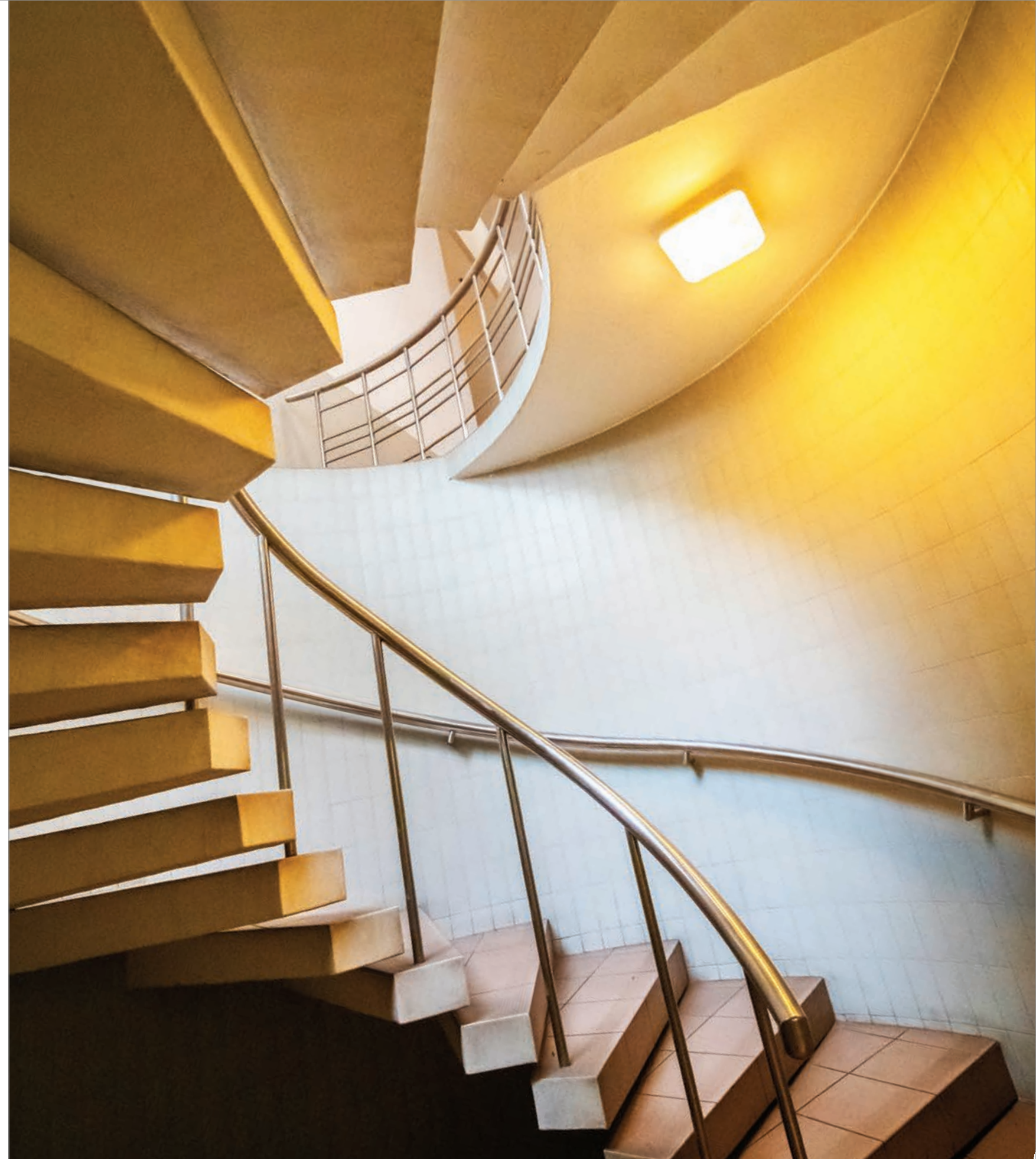
In a 2015 interview, architect Lee Kut Cheung, one of the PWD consultants who oversaw the construction of the building, credited the government of the time for having the foresight to devote time and money to build up Singapore's legal system, by first giving the State Courts a respectable home.

"Of course, the need was there as the courts of that time were in pretty poor condition. [But] the idea of bringing all the courts into

one complex was quite a visionary decision," he said, adding that in one leap, the government had advanced Singapore's legal system from third world to first world.

The complexity of the building was a new challenge for both the consultants and the contractors. "One of the challenges was the coordination of the mechanical and electrical services – the air-conditioning system, the security system and the fire protection system and so on," he shared.

"Today we take these things for granted, but you can imagine then, there was a lot of effort from both the consultants and the contractors to make sure everything was properly executed."





For Mr Chan, designing the State Courts Building remains a fond memory.

“In our profession, it is rare to have a serendipitous moment, where you start something and you end with what you had in mind at the beginning. The State Courts Building is one of those happy incidents,” he said, referring to how the building had turned out exactly as he had envisioned.

He had used the octagonal formation to create an inner and outer ring as well as several split-levels, a hallmark of the building today, to organise the space.

The building has a total of nine levels including four further split-levels. There is also a basement level, where the lock-up area and carpark were, that the public could not access.



Scan this page for **AR** experience



Scan here for video

The building has a total of six lifts: Lifts A to F. Four are located in the four main columns of the building (Lifts C to F), while the other two are behind two of those columns (Lifts A and B). Only Lifts E and F were accessible to the public. Lifts C and D were for the judges' use. Lifts A and B were secured lifts used by prison officers to escort persons-in-custody to courtrooms.

Mr Chan had also cleverly used the split-levels to assign exclusive walkways so that persons-in-custody, judges, and members of the public would be kept separate from each other as they navigated the space.

There were two entrances on the ground floor, which took up two of its eight sides. On entering the building, visitors would find themselves standing in a circular corridor, looking towards the steps leading to the atrium – a light-filled open space with marble flooring.

Ms Lucy Goh, who started working at the courthouse at South Bridge Road in 1967 as a typist, recalled that navigating the new building took some getting used to. **“The [circular] structure meant that no matter where I walked, I would come back to the same place, because I just went round and round,”** she said.



E and F
for the public

A and B
security-controlled
lifts for prison officers
to escort persons-in-
custody to courtrooms

C and D
for the judges



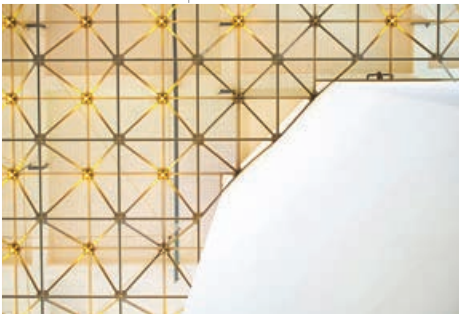
The centrepiece

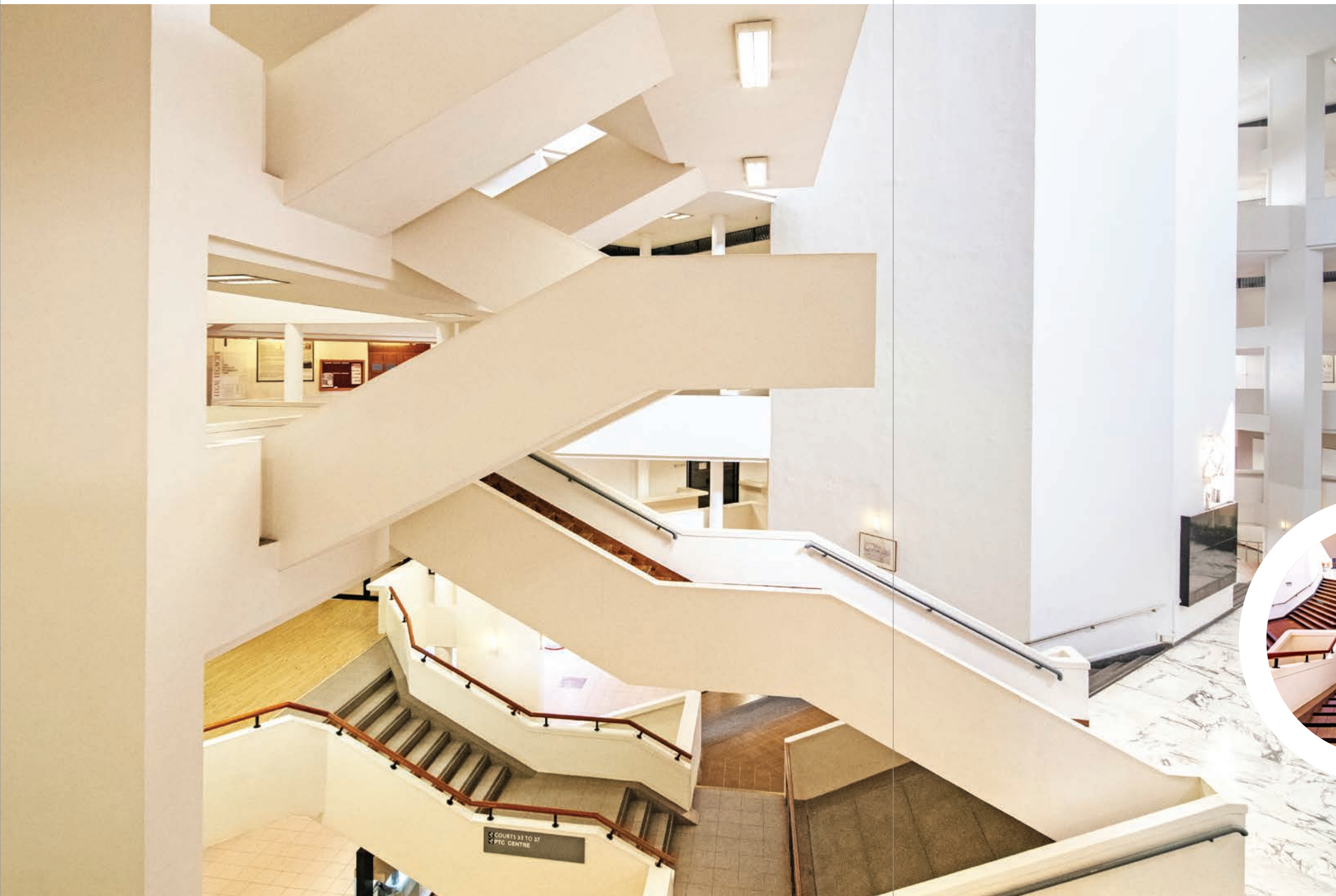
The eight-storey high atrium was the centrepiece of the building, with offices and courtrooms organised around it. It was the first thing people saw when they stepped into the space. The stairs to the atrium could be accessed from any point of the circular corridor, encouraging people to use the space.

The atrium offered court users a clear, open view of the surrounding corridors and staircases. It was a deliberate design because Mr Chan wanted to encourage people to use the stairs to access the higher levels, instead of the lifts. The lifts, he believed, should be used by people with disabilities. **“I think a lot of people complained about using the staircases,”** he chuckled.

Windows and aluminum louvres at the top provided light and ventilation to the atrium. The marble flooring and high ceiling allowed for natural air movement, which kept the atrium cool. In fact, there was no air-conditioning at the atrium. For many years, there were no fans either. Fans were installed at the atrium only in 2011.

“The atrium, being in the heart of the building, was insulated by the ring of courtrooms around it, so there was not much heat gain,” said Mr Chan.





Stairs on air

Ms Chan Wai Yin, Senior Director of the Criminal Justice Division, remembers her first day at work at the Subordinate Courts clearly. It was a day in November 1994, and she had walked up many flights of stairs to find her office, the statistics department.

“My first impression of the Subordinate Courts was really the number of steps in the building,” said Ms Chan.

The staircases were a key design element of the building’s interior. From the atrium, the stairs, which rose up to the fifth level, look suspended in mid-air.

Floating stairs are an engineering feat. It took much thought and planning to conceal the support systems for the stairs, to create a neat structure that is also a piece of art.

The floating stairs began from the atrium and provided access to Levels 2, 3 and 5.

Visitors would get different perspectives of the State Courts Building by standing at different points on the steps. One could catch a glimpse of how the inner ring on the fourth floor was structured to create a pathway for persons-in-custody, and get a sense of the thought and effort put into the design of the building.

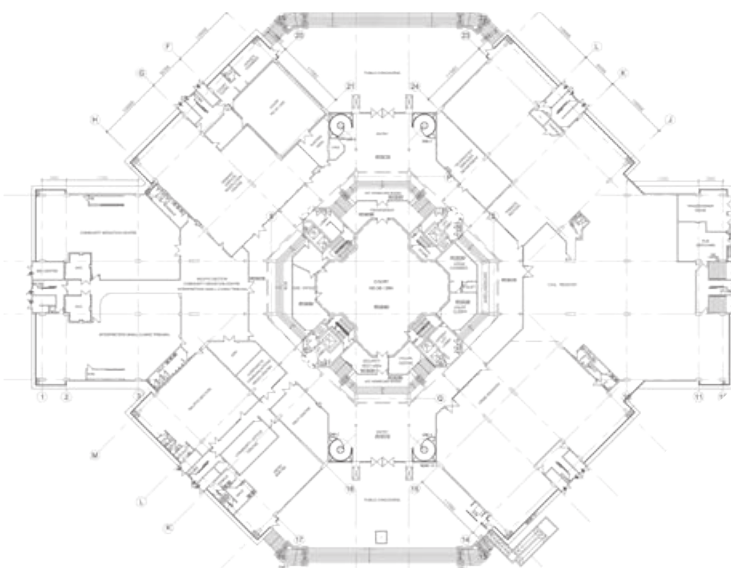
The atrium looked striking from above. It stepped up like a modern-day pyramid, its marble flooring a nice contrast to the dark brown of the steps that led up to it.



On the ground floor were offices as well as two courtrooms – Courts 25 and 26. While Court 25 was on the ground level, Court 26 took the split level between the ground floor and the basement, and was situated right below the atrium. Prison officers and persons-in-custody could enter Court 26 by a short flight of stairs from the lock-up area in the basement.

As a Criminal Mentions Court, Court 26 was the first court most accused persons would attend to be formally charged. Mr Chan had placed the court in the middle of the building as it marked the start of court proceedings. **“Everything started from Court 26,”** he said.

Indeed, even for criminal cases that went up to the High Court, the accused person would first be charged there. Because of the sheer number of people who went in and out of the doors of Court 26 every day, it earned the nickname of “Market Court” among prosecutors, lawyers and judges.



Court 26: The first order of business

When the Subordinate Courts began operations, Court 26 took over the functions that were previously managed by the 1st Magistrate’s Court.

The first person to be charged in this courtroom was an 18-year-old teenager, accused of stealing a pair of jeans at the Peninsula Shopping Complex. The teenager pleaded guilty before Senior Magistrate Kan Ting Chiu, who retired in 2011 as a High Court Judge. The teenager was jailed for a day and fined \$300.

The courtroom began operating at 9am every day. For many years, people were told to turn up at that time to wait for their names to be called. If they missed their turn, it would mean they had failed to attend court, which could result in a warrant being issued for their arrest.

This caused a long queue outside the packed courtroom every morning, as everyone was there at the same time. But it changed in 2008 when Justice Tan Siong Thye, who took over as Chief District Judge that year, introduced staggered timings and each accused person was assigned a timeslot. This eased the congestion.





Level 2 was filled with more offices and an exclusive concourse for judges. The concourse sat on the same plane as the atrium, but was not joined to it. This meant that people in the atrium could see and hear the judges going about their day, but could not reach them.

Level 3 housed 12 courtrooms – Courts 13 to 24. This was achieved by placing six pairs of courtrooms on six sides of the octagon.

Four pairs were on the inner ring, and two pairs – Courts 15 and 16 and Courts 21 and 22, sat on the outer ring. Judges would access the courtrooms on Level 3 by taking the stairs from the judges’ concourse on Level 2.

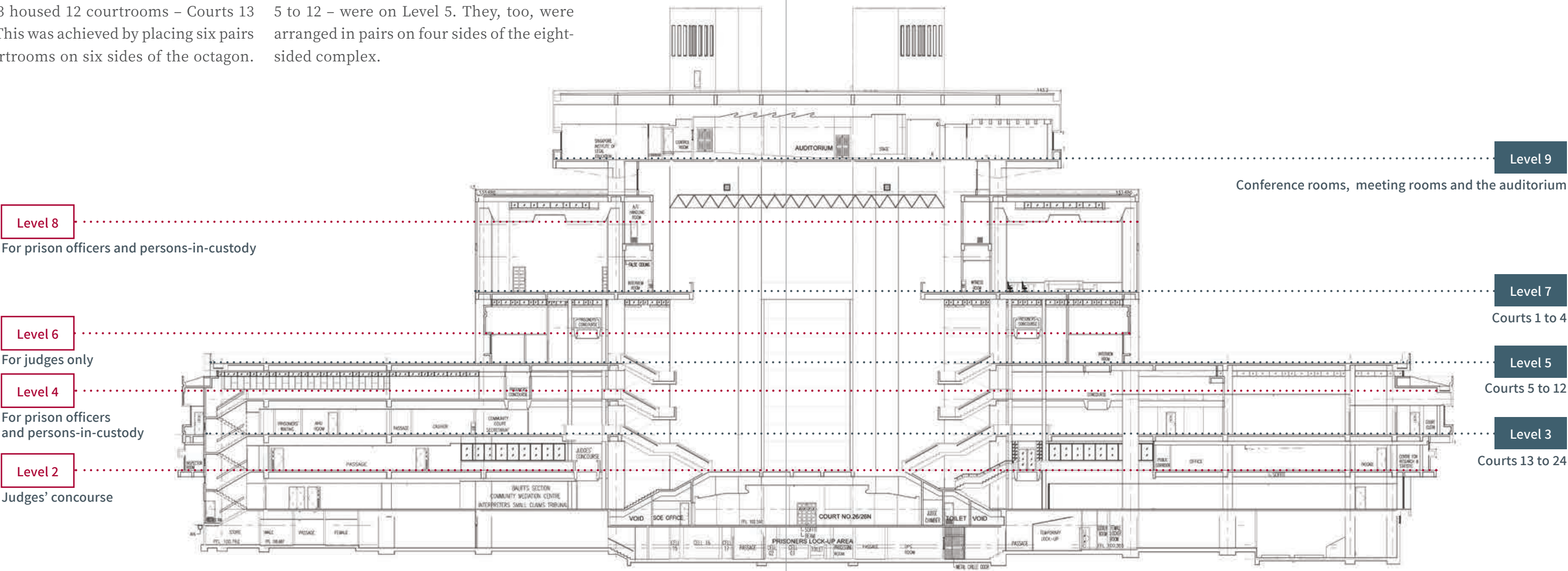
The next set of eight courtrooms – Courts 5 to 12 – were on Level 5. They, too, were arranged in pairs on four sides of the eight-sided complex.

On Level 7 were the four biggest courtrooms, Courts 1 to 4, and they each spanned two sides of the octagon.

There were no courtrooms on Levels 4, 6 and 8. Level 6 was accessible only to judges, who could use it to enter the courtrooms

on Levels 5 and 7. Levels 4 and 8 were for prison officers and persons-in-custody, who were led to courtrooms on Levels 3, 5 and 7.

Level 9, the topmost floor, was reserved for conference rooms, meeting rooms, and the auditorium.

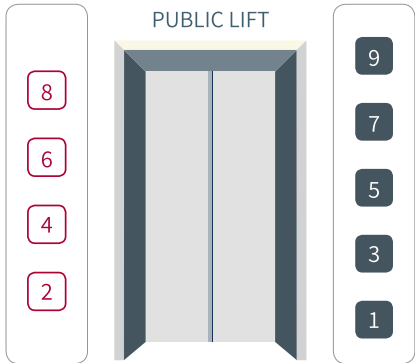




All 26 courtrooms featured elevated benches for the judges, which provided them with a clear view of the happenings in court, while conveying the solemnity of judicial proceedings. These benches, as well as the tables for the litigants, were also curved. This allowed each litigant to be equidistant from the judge.

The courtrooms also extended outwards, and at the end of them were the judges’ private chambers, with windows that offered views of the surrounding street.

The public lifts went only to the odd-numbered levels, as the even-numbered floors were out-of-bounds to the public. Yet, the private walkways, especially those for persons-in-custody, were slotted into the building so inconspicuously that people might go about their day without noticing them. The only clues were the visible iron grilles on Level 4, and the occasional clanging sounds of leg shackles as persons-in-custody moved about.



Even-numbered levels were out-of-bounds to the public.

The public lifts went only to the odd-numbered levels.



Conserved charm

The unique octagonal-shaped building was gazetted for conservation on 10 July 2013.

Built during Singapore’s post-independence period, the building is a symbol and landmark of Singapore as a modern and forward-looking nation.

The Urban Redevelopment Authority, the conservation authority, described the building as having a “**powerful timeless exterior while having a well-considered internal layout that combines functional needs...within a restrained and dignified aesthetic**”.

Mr Chan’s use of natural lighting and ventilation for the central atrium was considered a pioneering attempt at creating an environmentally-sensitive building in a tropical city.



DRAMA WITHIN THE COURTS

While the State Courts have witnessed their share of dramatic cases, there were many more heart-thumping experiences that happened outside the courtrooms – including an escape from the lock-up.

In 2008, two detainees attempted a prison break from the State Courts’ lock-up. The duo did not succeed, and were quickly rearrested.

One of them did not make it out of the building, as he tripped and fell near the security checkpoint at the entrance. He was immediately pinned down by uniformed officers and brought back to the lock-up, said media reports.

The other made it to the driveway of the nearby Furama Hotel, but was caught by the security guards and police officers who were chasing him.

Both men had been in court for separate charges related to robbery with hurt. After their court session, they were brought back to the lock-up to be transferred to the Queenstown Remand Prison and were placed in the same cell.

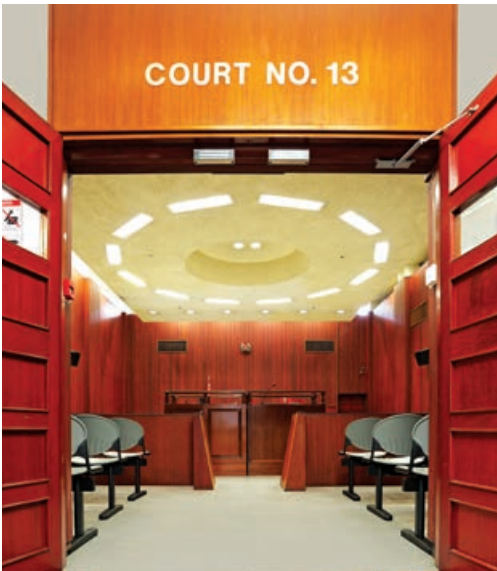
One of them then asked for water, and a police officer opened the cell gate to hand it to him. But once the gate opened, the two men pounced on the officer and escaped.

For attacking a police officer and attempting to escape, both men faced additional charges.

Tragedy played out in the chambers of the State Courts Building too, when a long-serving judge died at work.

Mr Richard Magnus, who spent 16 years at the helm of the Subordinate Courts, still remembers the day vividly.

“In Court 13, one of the district judges heard a case, felt unwell, adjourned the case, and went down to chambers,” he recalled.



“Subsequently, the court officer called me and said, ‘I can’t move my judge.’ I ran to the court and found that he had passed away. It was too late to do resuscitation.”

He also shared about another judge, who had collapsed in his chambers in a separate incident.

“I saw him foaming at the mouth, then I realised that something was wrong when I saw an open can of Coke that was not drunk on his table,” he said.

Mr Magnus rang the judge’s wife and found out that he had been suffering from diabetes, and had forgotten to take his insulin that day. The judge had collapsed from low blood sugar levels, as he did not get the chance to drink the Coke in time.

Immediately, Mr Magnus performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) on the judge and managed to revive him. He was then brought to the hospital in an ambulance.

When the State Courts played Cupid

The State Courts Building has seen its fair share of drama, tragedy, and even love.

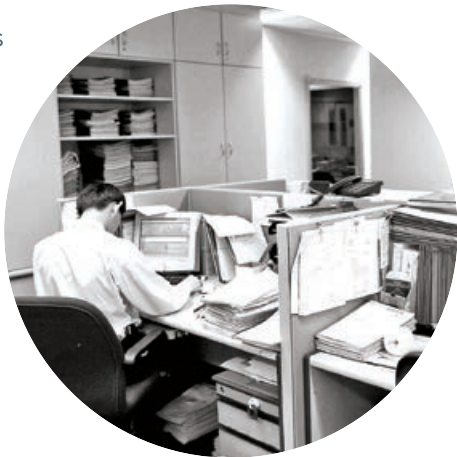
Due to the demands of work, employees often stayed late to complete their tasks. The workplace inevitably became fertile ground for office romances to bloom.

Mr Magnus’ fondest memories of his tenure at the State Courts are of the romances that blossomed between colleagues.

“I think my judges married their colleagues. That’s because we had to work late at night,” he quipped.

Seeing how employees were often clocking long hours, Mr Magnus decided that everyone should bring their children and family members to the workplace on a Friday afternoon – once every three months.

“It was a very joyful activity. We had tea and some cakes, and [the guests] were brought around the courts. So that the children and parents would know why their mother, father, or child was always coming back late,” he explained.



MORE COURTROOMS, PLEASE

When the Subordinate Courts began operations in 1975, only 19 of the 26 courtrooms were in use.



Senior Counsel Michael Khoo, who served as the Subordinate Courts’ Senior District Judge from 1978 to 1984, recalled that Courts 1 to 4 on the seventh floor were closed due to a lack of volume of work. There were also not enough District Judges and Magistrates then.

But the situation had changed by the end of his tenure. By 1983, cases were heard in all the 26 courtrooms. In the eight-year period since the various courts were centralised, workload had increased significantly with a five-fold jump in criminal and civil cases.

This would prove to be a consistent trend with the Subordinate Courts.

As Singapore’s economy and population grew, business activity increased too. This led to new laws

being enacted, and the Subordinate Courts found themselves hearing more business and commercial disputes.

The 26 courtrooms quickly became inadequate and plans were made to create more courtrooms. In 1986, six more were built, bringing the total number to 32.

Still, the increase in the number of courtrooms lagged behind the number of cases that were brought before the courts. In 1989, the 32 courts dealt with more than 200,000 cases. By 1991, the number of cases had jumped to 300,000. A drastic solution was needed.

Ms Papinder Kaur, Senior Director, Corporate Services Division of the State Courts, said: **“We needed to build more courtrooms quickly to clear the backlog that had accumulated over the years.”**



In 1989, the 32 courts dealt with more than
200,000 cases

By 1991, the number of cases had jumped to
300,000



There were two approaches – finding external space to house more courtrooms as well as making more space within the existing building.

In 1992, PWD began converting an old building in Paterson Road, which at one point housed Raffles Junior College, into 16 civil and family courts. At the same time, renovation works to build more courtrooms in the Subordinate Courts Building also began. By 2019, there were 37 courtrooms in the building.



1986
six more courtrooms were built, bringing the total number to 32

37
courtrooms by 2019

Every case a chance to learn

On the eve of National Day in 1996, Judicial Commissioner (JC) Tan Puay Boon, who was then a District Judge, was presiding over one of his most difficult cases – an interim custody application involving a suicidal mother.

“It was not an easy decision because if interim custody was granted to the father, the mother might end up killing herself; but if the order was not made in the father’s favour, she might have killed both her three-year-old son and herself,” he explained.

As the welfare of the child is paramount under the law, his decision was to grant interim custody to the father. Thankfully, the matter was resolved without any harm to anyone, and custody of the child was eventually returned to the mother some months later after matters had calmed down.

“We were all looking forward to a peaceful National Day but this case kept us very concerned with what could have happened,” he shared, with the memory of the case from over two decades ago still fresh in his mind.

But while the proceedings were tense, the courtroom was a tranquil setting.

When he joined the Subordinate Courts in December 1995, after four years with the Attorney-General’s Chambers and four years with the Supreme Court Registry, his place of work was at Paterson Road. The former site of the Teacher’s Training College had become the interim premises for 16 civil and family courts due to a lack of space in the main Havelock Road building.

“Those courtrooms felt more like the classrooms that they originally were, and were much smaller compared to those in Havelock; witnesses were as close as an arm’s length away,” he recalled.

“When you looked out of the window, there were trees and greenery, and you could see squirrels and birds.”

In 1998, however, nature was replaced by concrete when he moved to the Havelock Road building after a change of duties. There, he presided over a wide range of criminal cases in Court 6 and then Court 4 for eight years before his posting to the Legal Aid Bureau in 2007.

Having undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in Civil Engineering in addition to his legal qualifications, he drew on his engineering training in one case that involved allegations of inadequate foundation being provided for a building in the Central Business District (CBD).

“To establish whether the charges were made out, I needed to know about the ground conditions in the CBD. It allowed me to apply my knowledge to make a decision for that case,” he noted.

In other cases, he learnt new things – from the art of making kimonos to how bluefin tuna caught off Australia were transported to Japan.

“It was interesting to learn about things that I would not have known about before these cases,” said JC Tan, who re-joined the State Courts in 2015 and left for the Supreme Court in March 2018.



JUDICIAL COMMISSIONER TAN PUAY BOON

Judicial Commissioner of the Supreme Court
Former Principal District Judge
Civil Justice Division of the State Courts



Scan this page for AR experience

Scan here for video





Night Courts

introduced in 1992, and function on Mondays to Thursdays from 6pm

The additional courtrooms were created from spaces that used to be store areas and offices, and hence were smaller, had low ceilings and limited public seating.

They were also not as easily accessible. Courts 27 to 37 were clustered with offices, such as the media room for journalists and the Bar Room operated by The Law Society of Singapore, and had to be accessed by a narrow flight of steps tucked in the office area.

The Night Courts, which function on Mondays to Thursdays from 6pm, were introduced in 1992. The aim was not only to offer greater convenience to various accused persons who could not attend the courts during the day due to work, but also to ease the backlog of cases that weighed down the Subordinate Courts.

Ms Kaur, who joined the organisation in 1993, came just in time to manage the converted courtrooms at Paterson Road, as well as the move for the judges.

By 1999, the backlog of cases had been largely resolved. Commercial cases that once took five to six years to conclude during the late-1980s, were wrapped up within one-and-a-half years by the mid-1990s. More than nine in 10 civil and criminal cases were cleared within the first year as well.

But as Singapore's judicial system and processes evolved, the space had to keep up with the times as well, shared Ms Kaur.

When the Subordinate Courts began adopting IT solutions to help with their daily work, such as electronic filing of court documents and video-conferencing technology to communicate with accused persons, the courtrooms had to be retrofitted to accommodate the new systems.

"Over the years, we have also had to change our courtroom setting as we introduced mediation," she added, referring to how some court proceedings were moved to be heard in the mediation rooms and tribunal hearing rooms.

Security at the building was also beefed up after the 9/11 terrorist attack in the US. Airport-style screenings with walkthrough metal detectors were introduced. **"We wanted to provide court users, judges and staff with a safe environment,"** Ms Kaur shared.





NEW BEGINNINGS

By 2011, it became clear that the building would no longer be sufficient for the volume of work handled by the Subordinate Courts.



The various improvements and enhancements to the interior and facilities were unlikely to adequately support the organisation's long-term demands.

At the same time, a space planning consultancy had advised that many more courtrooms would be required by 2050. There was a need to create new spaces and amenities.

Yet, retrofitting the space was not an ideal solution. Over the years, the configuration and layout of the building had been tweaked several times to add more courtrooms

and office spaces. With the State Courts' workload increasing, it became clear that the lack of usable space within the building meant that no amount of retrofitting would help. The best solution was to construct a new building. It would cause the least disruption to court operations, and would take the shortest time to complete too.

The State Courts' move to a new home marks a new beginning for the organisation. But the story of the eight-sided Brutalist building continues on. Following refurbishments to its interior, it will serve as the new home of the Family Justice Courts.

The State Courts do not work alone. We are supported by many partners who share a common goal – to uphold the rule of law with fairness and empathy.

From the Singapore After-Care Association that reintegrates offenders into society, to the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management that mediates employment disputes, these partners come together to offer a wide spectrum of support and services. Their diverse contributions have enabled us to provide holistic solutions to legal problems.

FACES

BETTER TOGETHER





MISSION

To provide an effective and accessible system of justice,
Inspiring public trust and confidence.

SHARED VISION

A leading subordinate court serving society:
With

- quality judgments
- excellent court services

a variety of processes for timely resolution of disputes
· our people as the most valuable asset
· the innovative use of technology

CORE VALUES

Fairness
Accessibility
Independence, Integrity, Impartiality
Responsiveness

COMPASSIONATE CONVERSATIONS

As a Court Liaison Executive Officer from the Probation and Community Rehabilitation Service (PCRS) of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), Ms Lim Peiyi’s empathy for people from different walks of life is clear from the work she does.



LIM PEIYI

Ministry of Social and Family Development

Once, when speaking to an offender’s next-of-kin who suffered from partial hearing loss, she made a conscious effort to engage the next-of-kin by writing, as well as by gesturing and speaking louder.

“Although I was unsure of how to communicate, it was important to include her in the conversation so that she could be involved in the rehabilitation journey,” recalled Ms Lim.

“I shared the process with her, and put her mind at ease. I was delighted when she smiled and said that the information shared was very clear.”

PCRS has been running the Probation Intake Office in the State Courts Building since the 1990s. However, it was only in 1998 that full-time officers were located in the building.

PCRS conducts interviews with offenders and their families to assess the risks and needs associated with their rehabilitation. The PCRS officers’ assessments of the offenders are compiled in pre-sentencing or community service order reports, which allow the courts to make informed decisions in line with each offender’s rehabilitation needs.

Having an office in the State Courts Building has enabled PCRS officers to provide timely and accurate

information to offenders and their families to help them understand what a probation or community service order entails.

If the courts subsequently place them under such orders, PCRS will work closely with the offenders, their families and the community to support their rehabilitation journey.

“I often encourage offenders and their family members to be honest and share their experiences so that PCRS can realistically and comprehensively assess their needs and recommend appropriate interventions,” explained Ms Lim, who joined PCRS in 2016.

Interacting with offenders and their families has been an eye-opening experience. Many of them face a myriad of issues that often require different types of assistance. It takes sincerity and care to understand their plight, shared Ms Lim.

“As I look back, I have learnt the importance of treating each one of them with respect and dignity,” she added.

“Seeing how even a short interview can reduce the clients’ anxiety and stress made me realise how important it is to address their concerns with clarity and empathy.”





GUARDIANS OF THE STATE COURTS

Wading through a flooded basement was the last thing Deputy Assistant Commissioner of Prisons (DAC) Soh Beng Koon expected during his first month at the lock-up located in the basement of the State Courts Building.

It was January 2017, and a heavy downpour had caused flooding in the basement of the State Courts Building, where persons-in-custody (PICs) are held before and after their hearings. However, that did not dampen the spirit of DAC Soh and his team from the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) as they went about their business as usual.

Working closely with the State Courts Infrastructure Directorate and Corporate Services Division, SPS ensured PICs were brought to court on time amidst the flood.

“It was an unforgettable experience,” recalled DAC Soh.

Rainy weather will no longer be an issue in the State Courts Towers. Moving from the depths of the State Courts Building to a new home, DAC Soh shared that it was “very exciting” to get the chance to help in planning the lock-up operations.

This included streamlining processes to make work smoother – an important consideration as SPS clocks long hours daily.

A typical work day begins at the break of dawn, when PICs from law enforcement agencies such as

the Central Narcotics Bureau, the Singapore Police Force (SPF), as well as from Changi Prison Complex, are prepared for their journey to the State Courts.

After an entire day of escorting PICs to court hearings and assisting them with the bail process and fine payments, SPS concludes its duties in the Night Courts, ending the day as it started – in darkness.

“In order to carry out our duties effectively, we maintain close working relationships with both the State Courts and SPF, bridging gaps to ensure that the judicial process is carried out in a safe and timely manner,” explained DAC Soh.

Technology has also provided a much needed helping hand over the years – paper-based systems have given way to online systems, while PICs can now appear in court virtually via video-conferencing from the lock-up or prison.

“The introduction of technology has greatly changed the way we work. All these technology-based initiatives have helped to make us more effective and efficient, saving much time and resources,” he added.



SOH BENG KOON

Singapore Prison Service



NO LAWYER, NO PROBLEM

Navigating the legal system can be stressful, but the Community Justice Centre (CJC) ensures that court users are not left without a lifeline.

Executive Director of CJC Leonard Lee recalled a poignant case involving a single mother of two children who had been found to have misappropriated \$30,000 – money she desperately needed to pay her mother’s medical bills and grandmother’s funeral costs.

CJC was called into action. It quickly assigned her a pro bono lawyer and even found her a job when she was in prison.

“What was fantastic was that she came out with a positive attitude and managed to get back on her feet,” said Mr Lee, adding that CJC also provided financial support to the single mother’s two daughters during her imprisonment.

Established in 2013, CJC is a charity that offers a mix of socio-legal services such as free legal consultations, victim assistance and practical support in the form of volunteers who accompany self-represented individuals (Litigants-in-Person, or LIPs) to hearings.

Its formation was due to the rising numbers of LIPs in the early 2010s.

A centre known as the “HELP Centre” – Helping to Empower Litigants in Person – was initially set up to offer basic information and directions about court processes to the public. But as LIPs increasingly required greater

social and economic support, CJC was created to meet their needs.

“Many times, when people come to us, they are down to their last dollar. We not only cater to legal problems, but also offer a social-centric type of help,” explained Mr Lee.

The one-stop centre within the State Courts Building makes it convenient for LIPs to seek assistance. And CJC staff are well-equipped to handle a multitude of cases.

“My staff are expected to know everything under the sun because we are a charity – we don’t have the luxury of a structure with specialised roles,” said Mr Lee.

While he described his work as a **“humbling experience”** and hoped to make CJC’s services even more diversified, he acknowledged that not all who come to them leave satisfied.

“In court, there is always a winner and a loser. You just cannot please everyone, and you have to move on,” he shared.

“But the most important thing is all of us – lawyers, judges and those providing administrative and social services – play a crucial role in weaving a fabric strong enough to support the justice system.”



LEONARD LEE

Community Justice Centre





A CORRIDOR OF CONVERSATIONS

Facing his first trial at the Subordinate Courts in 1993, Senior Counsel Gregory Vijayendran recalled that his anxiety was replaced with relief. It helped that he was able to reach a settlement with his counterpart on the very first day of the trial.

The newly-minted lawyer was representing a client who was suing for the intentional interference with his personal property.

The settlement deal was a positive outcome for his client. But what was most memorable for Mr Vijayendran, who is now the President of the Law Society, was the “judicial demeanour and patience” of District Judge Ibrahim Burhan, who made his first trial a pleasant experience.

Over the next few trials, he would come to realise that this was a characteristic of the State Courts, where young lawyers were given the space to grow.

“The stand out feature for me, among all the State Courts judges that I have appeared before, is that I did not feel for even one moment daunted or treated disrespectfully, even though I was a junior lawyer who was wet behind my ears,” said Mr Vijayendran, now a Senior Counsel and partner at Rajah & Tann Singapore LLP.

His fondest memories of the State Courts can be traced back to the corridor outside the hearing chambers, where he queued up often to attend hearings.

“Those were places of convergence, conversation and camaraderie for

litigation lawyers, where we built deeper relationships with other members of the Bar, including our opponents.”

Today, he contributes to nurturing the next generation of lawyers as the President of the Law Society, which is the professional association for lawyers in Singapore.

A key initiative by the Law Society is the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS), which provides criminal legal assistance to the poor and needy who are facing non-capital charges. In 2007, following recommendations by the Law Society that pro bono work should be more structured, it worked with key partners to set up a Pro Bono Services Office (PBSO) in the Subordinate Courts Building.

“The pro bono movement has been revolutionised in the State Courts. While we still have some way to go, today, CLAS has increased access to justice for indigent accused persons,” said Mr Vijayendran.

“With the setting up of PBSO, (the office) has become a nerve centre bringing ‘just-in-time’ synapses of delivery of justice right at the heart of the ecosystem of justice at the courts.”



GREGORY VIJAYENDRAN, S.C.

The Law Society of Singapore



THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE BENCH AND THE BAR

For Mr Michael S Chia, the State Courts Building symbolised not just the effective delivery of justice. It was also a place where bonds are built and relationships nurtured.

In the early 1980s and 1990s, before he was called to the Bar, he worked as a court clerk for various law firms in Singapore.

As part of his job, he often had to bring hard copy documents to a stamp office at the Subordinate Courts to obtain the right revenue stamps before filing them at the relevant registry counters.

“Whilst things moved at a much slower pace back then, there was a lot more human interaction,” said Mr Chia, now the Chairman of the Court Practice Chairpersons Committee (CPCC), which is part of The Law Society of Singapore.

Later on, after he became an advocate and solicitor, he would head to the Bar Room whenever he had to visit the State Courts Building. The Bar Room was where members of the Bar caught up during breaks or after court sessions **“over a cup of tea, coffee, or a refreshing glass of iced honey”**.

“The Bar Room was a good place for younger lawyers to meet their seniors for guidance or advice. Before the Internet or online research tools were widely used for legal research, the Bar Room was a place to get quick answers or get pointed in the right direction for questions on law or procedure,” he said.

Now, in his role at CPCC, he ensures that there is effective communication between the Bench, in particular, the State Courts and the Family Justice Courts, and the Bar.

CPCC holds regular dialogues with the management of the State Courts and the Family Justice Courts to address any concerns, and organises overseas mission trips to engage foreign bar associations and law societies.

Mr Chia hopes the tradition of open and cordial partnership between the Bench and the Bar will continue, even as the State Courts move to their new premises.

He was also part of the Assessor Evaluation Panel that picked the winning design for the State Courts’ new home.

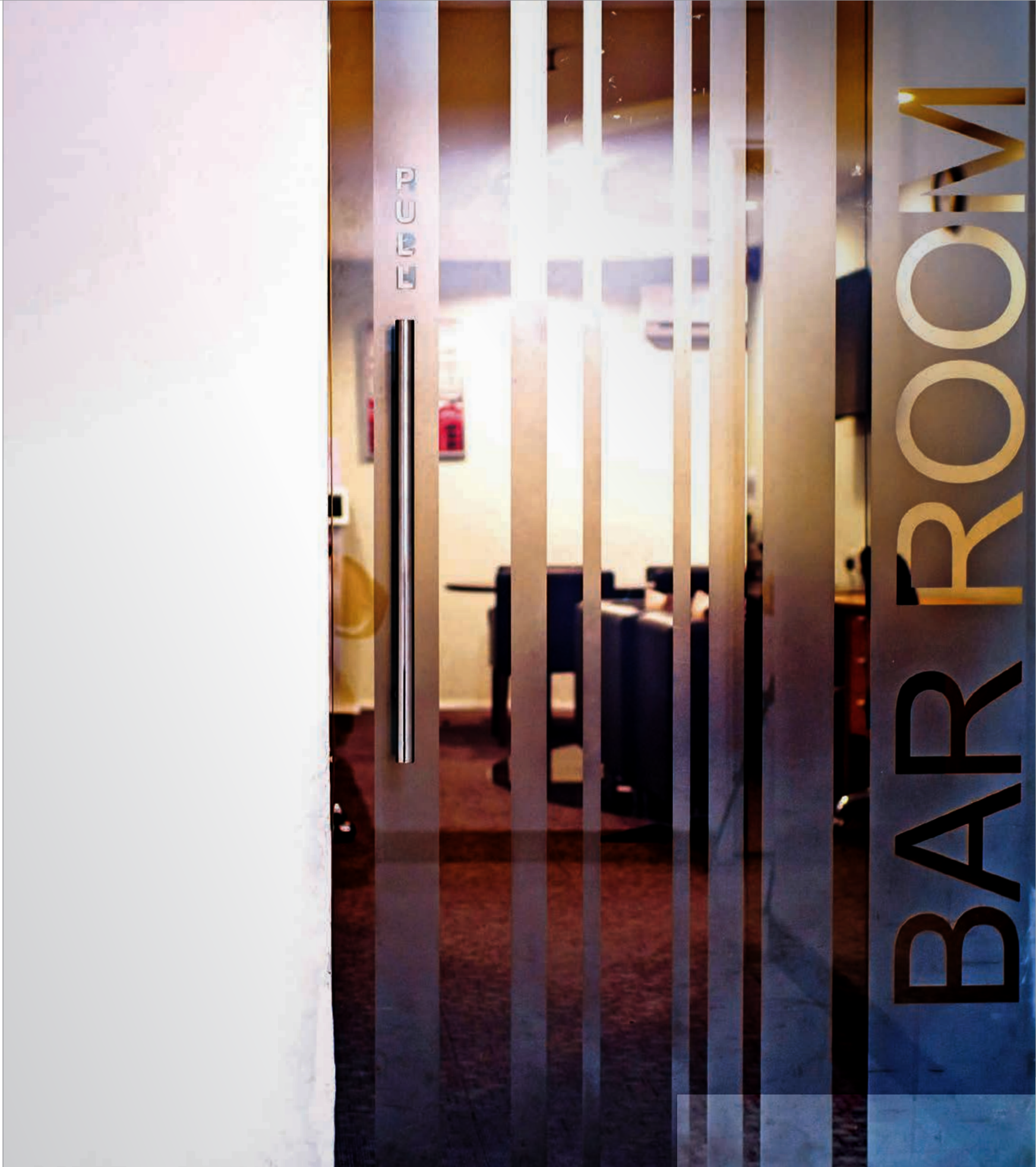
“I love the metaphors the design conveys. The open frame of the building speaks of the transparency of our courts,” he said.

“The courtrooms being cladded in materials reflective of the surrounding environment speaks of our courts not being out of touch with the environment they exist in.”



MICHAEL S CHIA

The Law Society of Singapore





A CLAS ABOVE THE REST

Mr Gopinath Pillai’s first visit to the Subordinate Courts was for a school excursion, but this experience would leave a lasting impression on the teenager who would go on to become the Director of the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS).

As part of his General Paper class in junior college, his teacher had arranged for him to witness a criminal trial at the Subordinate Courts.

“I remember being in awe of the room, with its high ceiling and spaceship-like lights,” shared Mr Pillai.

The lure of the building meant that it did not take long for him to return to the Subordinate Courts. In 1995, he made his second visit as a law student attending the Postgraduate Practical Law Course. He has since made many more visits as a lawyer, and now as CLAS director.

An integral partner of the State Courts, CLAS offers pro bono criminal legal assistance to poor and needy accused persons – with a focus on non-capital offences.

This scheme is administered by the Law Society Pro Bono Services Office, and comprises volunteer lawyers from local firms, and full-time fellows and advocates.

Mr Pillai’s most memorable case at the State Courts was in 2019 when the CLAS team helped to prove the innocence of an accused person

who had been charged with causing grievous hurt with a deadly weapon, and wrongful restraint.

Meticulous case preparation by the CLAS lawyers revealed inconsistencies in the victim’s evidence, which led to the accused person being acquitted of his charges.

But the highlight was when the judge praised the work ethic of the lawyers and the efficiency of the legal aid system in helping the marginalised.

While he finds meaning in his work with the State Courts, he is also thankful for the learning opportunities along the way.

He recalled the Bar Room on the first floor of the State Courts Building as a space where lawyers would gather for casual meet-ups and share professional advice.

On one occasion, a senior practitioner came up with a mock trial to guide Mr Pillai through a particular area of cross-examination.

“It was a hub and enabled me to make many friends over the years, many of whom I still catch on the way in and out for a quick chat,” he said.



GOPINATH PILLAI

Criminal Legal Aid Scheme



A HELPING HAND FOR EX-OFFENDERS

Second chances can be few and far between for offenders just released from prison.

However, the Singapore After-Care Association (SACA), which is the State Courts' adopted charity, helps to rehabilitate them into society.

"Most people do not hear about us, but we are actually the leading rehabilitation agency for former prisoners," said SACA Chairman Jeffrey Beh, who assumed the role in 1999.

The voluntary welfare organisation provides various services such as career guidance and counselling to over 2,000 ex-offenders annually, laying the foundation by engaging them even before their release.

SACA is also part of the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-offenders Network, a multi-agency group behind the Yellow Ribbon Project.

Founded in 1956, SACA originally comprised a hostel for ex-prisoners without a home. With 21 beds and a handful of volunteers, its building on Dunlop Street provided a temporary reprieve for those in limbo.

Today, the beds have given way to an office space that houses a counselling centre. The organisation is also supported by 30 full-time staff and 250 to 300 trained volunteers.

A notable achievement for SACA is the Volunteer After-Care Programme. Initiated in the early 2000s, it helped to educate the public and remove the stigma against former offenders, encouraging more to volunteer.

"For years, we lacked volunteers because people were uncomfortable helping family members or relatives who were ex-offenders. But now they are more accepting and realise these people deserve a second chance," explained Mr Beh, a partner at law firm Lee Bon Leong & Co.

SACA's work does not just involve former offenders. Volunteers and staff at its family-connect booth on the ground floor of the State Courts Building provided support and information for distressed families, whose loved ones are behind bars.

"We have to be seen as an independent body and not part of the courts. This is how we earn the trust of the accused and their families," he added.

Over the years, SACA has to adapt to cater to the changing prison population. Some plans on the horizon are managing ageing prisoners and including programmes that help prisoners with mental illnesses.

Mr Beh's long standing association with the State Courts is set to continue, more than 40 years after he was called to the Singapore Bar.

"We want to have more presence and impact. It's an ongoing process but our work has led to the public having a better understanding of the help these people need."



JEFFREY BEH

Singapore After-Care Association





THE LONG AND WINDING CORRIDORS OF THE STATE COURTS BUILDING

An ode to modernist architecture, the State Courts Building’s clean lines and geometric forms have garnered many fans over the years, including Mr Daniel Chiah, the Deputy Director of the Family Protection and Support Division of the Family Justice Courts.

But Mr Chiah had an issue during his first few visits to the building between 2011 and 2012 – he always lost his way.

The octagonal design of the building meant that its interiors could sometimes seem identical from corner to corner, making it a labyrinth to navigate for the unacquainted.

“Architecturally, it intrigued me but I did lose my directions a couple of times as I made my way around the corridors when I first joined”, quipped Mr Chiah, who had worked in the State Courts Building when the Family and Juvenile Justice Division was a part of the Subordinate Courts.

On 1 October 2014, the former Family and Juvenile Justice Division became a part of the Family Justice Courts (FJC), which consolidate all family-related cases under one roof, including divorce, family violence and adoption matters. They work closely with the State Courts, as family cases sometimes have related issues that are under the purview of the Justice Divisions in the State Courts, such as the Community Justice and Tribunals Division and the Criminal Justice Division.

For example, there was an incident involving an unmarried couple who

wanted to seek a Personal Protection Order (PPO) against each other. By law, only parties who are related family members are eligible – so Mr Chiah and his team redirected them to the State Courts.

This means court users who go to FJC may find themselves redirected to the State Courts to complete certain procedures.

“We work in close partnership with the judges to support court processes at various stages, and to enhance psycho-social outcomes for litigants,” said Ms Sophia Ang, Senior Director of the Counselling and Psychological Services office at FJC.

As part of her work, she regularly discusses with other staff and judges how to manage high-risk and difficult cases. She also supervises a team that conducts family conferences for divorce cases, Youth Court cases, as well as cases involving family violence and personal protection orders.

Coincidentally, Ms Ang also recalls losing her way during her first few visits to the State Courts.

“Specific offices are often located in the winding passages hidden behind public spaces,” she said.



DANIEL CHIAH

Family Justice Courts



SOPHIA ANG

Family Justice Courts

THE GIANT BOOK OF COURT 14

In 1989, when Mr Lau Wing Yum prosecuted cases at the Subordinate Courts, the disposition of cases was not only determined by the acumen of lawyers and the prudence of judges.



LAU WING YUM

Attorney-General's Chambers

A colossal court book was also a key part of proceedings.

Used as a record book in Court 14 to schedule upcoming trial dates, the tome was instrumental in helping judges allocate slots for court proceedings.

But fixing trial dates was often a tedious and time-consuming process, as the entire booking process was done manually. It did not help that cases were often adjourned, further compounding the long waiting time.

As Mr Lau explained, it was not uncommon for trial dates to be scheduled more than a year later due to packed timetables.

“Fixing trial dates for just one case took quite some time,” recalled the Senior Director of the Crime Division at the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC).

Another memory that stood out involved the break-down of air-conditioning midway during trials.

“When that happened, the trials still went on. We were drenched in perspiration even with the fans switched on at full blast,” he remarked.

But there was one feature of the State Courts Building that kept the prosecutors happy – the Senior Deputy Public Prosecutor's (DPP) office on the first level.

The office served as a conducive space for prosecutors to work on their cases whenever court sessions were stood down for a short period. This saved them the time and hassle of having to head all the way back to the AGC office.

“We prosecutors deeply appreciate the State Courts in providing us with this facility,” said Mr Lau, who is part of a team responsible for all criminal prosecutions in the Court of Appeal, the High Court and the State Courts.

As someone who has witnessed the evolution of the State Courts over the years, Mr Lau shared his observations on how the role of the courts have changed – from punishing offenders to adopting a problem-solving approach by working tirelessly with key stakeholders.

He cites the establishment of the Community Court as a prime example of this transformation.

The Community Court uses a non-traditional, multi-disciplinary approach to deal with offenders by exploring sentencing alternatives and community-based sanctions with in-court assessments.

“I am happy to note that through the years, the State Courts have made great improvements in providing access to, and the quality of, criminal justice in Singapore,” he said.

COURT NO. 14





A STORYTELLER AT THE STATE COURTS

As a court correspondent for almost 47 years, Ms Elena Chong has documented some of the most heinous as well as quirky cases – from murder to molest to the macabre – including that of a man charged with slapping a corpse.

Yet, more than the nature of the crimes, it was the larger-than-life characters that remain firmly etched in her memory.

She recounted one such individual – a well-known judge at the State Courts – who would berate accused persons for dressing shoddily when attending court.

He was especially critical of people who turned up in shorts and slippers, going so far as to stand down cases until the accused person changed into something more acceptable.

“I can safely say that no two days were ever alike,” said Ms Chong, who retired in 2018 after a long career covering court cases that predate the State Courts Building. **“You never knew what to expect and that was the best part of this job.”**

To decide which cases to cover for the day, she would head down to the State Courts Building every morning to check on the daily trial schedules. On any day, she could be observing as many as three to four hearings.

In between hearings, she would be in the Media Centre on the ground floor. Furnished simply with a single long desk, a corded telephone, a few chairs and a large wooden cabinet, the

room served as a workspace for local journalists to file their stories.

The room was also an impromptu meeting point for the legal fraternity and the press.

“The lawyers and the reporters spent a lot of time in the building and over time, this became a spot for us to catch up in between cases,” she said.

Despite covering several iconic trials over the years, the 2012 online vice ring scandal involving 51 men and an underaged social escort remains one of her most unforgettable.

The sheer number of accused persons involved meant that tracking their trials and capturing their photos was no mean feat.

It did not help that they tried to hide their identities by donning caps and face masks, and some even used umbrellas to shield their faces.

Despite this, she managed to document each of the accused persons by working closely with the court-based photographers.

“It was extremely hard work but when the piece finally came out in print, it was definitely a proud moment to see that justice had been served,” she said.



ELENA CHONG

Veteran Court Reporter



FIRST TIME IN THE COURTS, FIRST TIME ON THE WITNESS STAND

When Mr Kandhavel Periyasamy made his first visit to the Subordinate Courts in 2009, it was also the first time in his career that he had to take the stand.

As a witness representing the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) in an industrial dispute, he had just begun blazing through his account when the judge stopped him in his tracks.

“I remember him telling me to slow down several times because he had to write everything down verbatim,” said Mr Periyasamy, who is now the Director of Industrial Relations at MOM and General Manager of the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM).

These days, there are no longer handwritten court transcripts. But the State Courts have retained one key feature – a determination to deliver justice effectively and efficiently.

In his role at MOM, Mr Periyasamy works closely with unions, employees and employers to solve industrial disputes.

“We make sure things do not escalate, and we try to resolve and arrive at win-win situations,” he noted.

And as General Manager of TADM, he mediates employment disputes by working with the State Courts Employment Claims Tribunals (ECT). The ECT hear cases involving salary-related and wrongful dismissal claims.

Working alongside the State Courts has helped him and his team broaden their horizons when it comes to resolving employment disputes.

In fact, they make it a point to head down to the State Courts to sit in for selected cases. “Hearing the judges deliver the grounds of judgment allows us to learn and understand the rationale, the thinking and the interpretation behind the judgments,” he said.

MOM has also been working with the State Courts to enhance the court experience for the man on the street.

For example, they created a more user-friendly and accessible framework to improve the court registration process for migrant workers. His team also updates and informs judges of new legislation.

When the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act was passed in 2015, his team briefed judges on the policy and rationale behind the law, and key insights.

As the State Courts move into a new chapter, Mr Periyasamy is certain that the streamlined services and improved court processes will benefit the public.



KANDHAVAL PERIYASAMY

Ministry of Manpower





HELPING COURT USERS FIND MENTAL SOLACE

In the late 1990s, Dr Daniel Fung evaluated a 12-year-old girl who had accused her grandfather of sexual abuse. The grandfather was eventually acquitted.

“She saw me after the hearing and asked why the court did not find him guilty,” recalled Dr Fung, who is now Chairman of the Medical Board at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

“The passing of the verdict does not mean everything is over; the person who has suffered has to deal with the trauma after the trial.”

This encounter motivated Dr Fung to create a support system in 2010 for young offenders, at-risk youths and victims of child abuse.

Called the Forensic Rehabilitation, Intervention, Evaluation and Network Development Services, or “FRIENDS”, it is a comprehensive and integrated multi-disciplinary assessment and intervention service.

This programme is in tune with his belief that **“justice must be dispensed with a heart”**.

With more than 20 years of experience at IMH, he has been involved in numerous collaborations with the State Courts. Apart from FRIENDS, he has partnered the State Courts in the Mandatory Treatment Order (MTO) framework. MTO is a community-based sentence for offenders suffering from psychiatric conditions that have contributed to their commission of the offence.

“We need to get them treatment, if not they may commit further

offences,” he explained. **“This will be a more humane sentence and it shows the compassionate side of the courts.”**

Another programme offered at the State Courts is the On-site Psychological Services, where a psychiatrist assesses court users who are suspected to have mental health issues.

“Through an almost immediate preliminary assessment, we can point them in the right direction to seek appropriate professional help where necessary,” said Dr Stephen Phang, a Senior Consultant at IMH.

As a psychiatrist who has provided evidence in court over the years, Dr Phang revealed that such testimonies assist the court in reaching accurate judgments on difficult issues better.

To do that, psychiatrists have to **“be honest and strive for objectivity”**, meaning that the traditional doctor-patient confidentiality does not apply in court – a disclaimer that is communicated to litigants before their evaluations.

“Forensic doctors have, more importantly, an overarching responsibility to societal protection and safety,” he said. **“We are not doing this on behalf of ourselves, or even on behalf of an organisation – rather it is on behalf of the State.”**



STEPHEN PHANG

Institute of Mental Health



DANIEL FUNG

Institute of Mental Health

An institution is only as good as its people. This is especially true of the State Courts, where many officers have made a difference in modernising the court processes, adjudicating cases, and serving court users.

FACES

PEOPLE BEHIND THE STATE COURTS





JUSTICE BEST SERVED WITH THREE Cs

Fresh out of law school in 1986, a young Sundaresh Menon spent several months attending a practical law course in the Subordinate Courts, in preparation for his call to the Bar.

There, he watched lawyers, magistrates and district judges going about their day, offering him a glimpse of a life in the law.

“You felt you were going through that transitional stage...moving away from your previous life as a student and reaching your new life as a lawyer,” he shared.

Soon after that, he was back at the Subordinate Courts as a rookie lawyer to conduct his first trial. **“It was a very small matter, but...it was the first time you got up and did your own cross-examination, you did your own submissions to the court, and those memories don’t leave you,”** he recalled.

Over the years, he continued to deepen his connection with the Subordinate Courts, first as a lawyer, then as the Attorney-General, a Judge of Appeal and finally as the Chief Justice of Singapore (CJ).

In fact, one of his priorities when he became CJ in 2012 was to enhance the standing of the Subordinate Courts. He recognised that the term “subordinate” could contribute to a misconception that the Subordinate Courts were somehow unimportant or second-rate. This led to the renaming of the Subordinate Courts as the “State Courts” in 2014 to reflect the indispensable contributions of the State Courts as the “engine room” of our judicial system.

The move of the State Courts to its new building marks another important chapter in its history. CJ Menon defines this new era in terms of three “C”s.

The first “C” is “capacity”. At 178m high, the twin-tower complex is the tallest government

building in Singapore, housing 53 courtrooms and 54 hearing chambers.

“That is a reflection of the greater capacity that we anticipate we will need in the years to come, to deal with the litigation needs of our country,” he explained.

The second “C” is “concept”. That highlights the open design of the towers which lacks any enclosed façade and symbolises the principle of open access to justice.

“It is a powerful metaphor for the idea of open justice and free access to justice. We want these towers to be that icon for reflecting the value of open justice in our society,” he noted.

The third “C” – “collaboration” – goes beyond the physical aspects of the new building. It emphasises the State Courts’ belief that the quality of justice can be enhanced by bringing together lawyers and non-lawyers with complementary skills and expertise in a single facility, within which they work in tandem to achieve better outcomes for court users.

Finally, technology will continue to have a dramatic impact on the work of the State Courts.

For example, the State Courts are developing an Online Dispute Resolution platform for motor accidents. The platform features an outcome simulator that will provide litigants with an idea of their likelihood of success at trial as well as the likely award of damages.

“That information will greatly enhance the prospects of the parties achieving an agreed settlement,” he said.

We want these towers to be that icon for reflecting the value of open justice in our society.

CHIEF JUSTICE SUNDARESH MENON

Chief Justice of Singapore



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Scan here for video



COURT NO. 20

What is more important is that the needs of the court users are being served, and whether we are delivering justice adequately to them to the best of our ability.

JUSTICE SEE KEE OON
Judge of the Supreme Court
Presiding Judge of the State Courts



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COURT 20: A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Justice See Kee Oon has presided over several high-profile court cases throughout the years. But one of his most memorable moments involves him assuming the role of a witness, not a judge.

It was during his time in Court 20, located on the third level of the State Courts Building. From his chambers, he would soak in the greenery, concrete and road between the State Courts and People’s Park Centre — a visual respite from the reams of court documents.

This vantage point also provided a view of the popular open-air public car park located nearby. He would observe harried-looking vehicle owners pleading their innocence with traffic attendants over parking summonses, and lawyers hurrying towards the courts.

Once, he witnessed a lawyer manoeuvring his car into a lot a little too quickly and reversing into a parked car not just once, but twice. “I was tempted to leave a note and let the person know who knocked into his car. Those were the days before you had in-vehicle cameras,” shared Justice See with a slight chuckle.

The neighbouring Court 19 was the setting for one of his most challenging court cases when he presided over a white collar crime trial as a junior district judge between 1998 and 1999.

Spanning almost 50 days, the lengthy trial involved two formidable senior counsel defending their clients. “It was certainly a privilege to be able to see them in action and witness the quality of their oral advocacy, and their preparation for trial work as well,” he said.

Over the years, Justice See, who is now a High Court Judge, has been an advocate for innovation in the courtroom. He proposed video-linked trials in 1994, an initiative which allowed vulnerable witnesses to testify without having to physically appear in the courtroom.

Video links could be the precursor of a virtual courtroom of the future where people do not have to be physically present in court to testify.

Even as Justice See is keen to tap on technology to transform court processes, he is clear that the Judiciary must never diverge from its core purpose: to serve and uphold justice for everyone.

“What is more important is that the needs of the court users are being served, and whether we are delivering justice adequately to them to the best of our ability,” he said.

COMMUNITY

A COURT THAT SERVES THE PEOPLE

Justice Tan Siong Thye is a firm believer that a person deserves to be treated with compassion and dignity in court, no matter what crimes he may have committed.

The court is a place which dispenses justice fairly with compassion to all people who come before it,” he said.

Explaining how that translated to actions, he added earnestly: “You must have eye contact with the parties – that is basic. For instance, when the judge sentences an accused person, he has to look at him to explain in simple terms the reasons for the sentence that is about to be meted out. Each case deserves its due attention.”

In his time at the Subordinate Courts, he had sought to nurture a service-centric culture. This led to the establishment of the HELP (Helping to Empower Litigants-in-Person) Centre.

Set up in 2010, the Centre provided basic information on court processes, procedures and practices to court users who are unrepresented. The Centre also showed them avenues where they could obtain legal advice and assistance, as well as social support and financial aid.

“There is a large number of people who are not legally represented as they are impecunious, and many of them have not been to the court. Thus, even stepping into the court building is a daunting experience for them,” said Justice Tan.

“If you try to explain to them the legal procedures, they will be completely lost in the labyrinth of rules, processes and legal jargon. Even if there are merits in their case, they will not know how to bring them across to the judge. These issues concern accessibility to justice. Access to justice is critical and a major concern for me.”

But as the HELP Centre was part of the State Courts, it could not offer legal assistance and advice as there would be a conflict of interest. “Furthermore, the State Courts have to maintain neutrality and independence,” he noted.

The next strategy was to transform the HELP Centre into an independent charity well supported by the public sector, the philanthropic sector and the legal profession.

Today, the HELP Centre has evolved into the Community Justice Centre (CJC), an independent charity that delivers a comprehensive range of services. It runs legal clinics, offers support for families of incarcerated persons, and accompanies litigants-in-person to attend court hearings.

Though Justice Tan is currently in the Supreme Court, he is heartened by what CJC has achieved and he is confident that it will soar to greater heights.

...when the judge sentences an accused person, he has to look at him to explain in simple terms the reasons for the sentence that is about to be meted out. Each case deserves its due attention.

JUSTICE TAN SIONG THYE

Judge of the Supreme Court
Former Chief District Judge of the Subordinate Courts



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COURT NO. 1



Tough and exhausting, but in retrospect, quite exciting days too.

DEPUTY PRESIDING JUDGE JENNIFER MARIE

Deputy Presiding Judge and
Registrar of the State Courts



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THE TOUGH TRAINING GROUND OF COURT 1

Barely two months after becoming a Deputy Public Prosecutor (DPP) in 1983, Deputy Presiding Judge Jennifer Marie was assigned her first prosecution, a corruption case. It was to be presided by then Senior District Judge (SDJ) Michael Khoo in Court 1 – the largest courtroom.

“With a lot of trepidation I came to the Subordinate Courts, not knowing what to expect,” she recalled.

Adding to her nerves was her drive to the Subordinate Courts by the investigation officer of the case, which was the norm back then.

But her anxiety abated when she stepped into the lift as she was greeted warmly by Mr Saini Haji Siraj, one of two lift operators who worked in the building.

“The lift attendants are two faces that have remained with me all these years. Very welcoming, reassuring smiles that brought me up to Level 7 where Court 1 was,” she said.

Their smiles got her through the many times she returned to Court 1, where she prosecuted several high profile cases – including a doctor who was found guilty of cheating his patients, in a six-month long trial involving hundreds of charges.

“For six months, I had to appear in Court 1. The SDJ had a very stern demeanour and was pretty exacting. It was a challenging case made more so by the attention that it

drew. The police prosecutors – there was a ‘resident’ police prosecutor assigned to each criminal trial court – will sit in and observe the DPP prosecuting the case.”

In 2011, she was under a different spotlight. After 28 years as a prosecutor, she joined the Subordinate Courts as their Registrar and Deputy Chief District Judge.

Whenever she walked by Court 1, it brought her back to the times when she was a DPP. **“Tough and exhausting, but in retrospect, quite exciting days too,”** she said.

While Court 1 holds precious memories, it is her chambers – her room – that she misses most when she moved to the new premises, the State Courts Towers.

“That room has doubled up as my meeting room. It was also my chambers where I worked on civil cases and criminal case resolutions,” she said of her room on the first floor that looked out to Upper Cross Street.

“It was public-facing, but it was also my private sanctuary.”

THE MAN WHO MODERNISED THE SUBORDINATE COURTS

Former Senior District Judge Richard Magnus has
a way with numbers.

That is why he remembers the Subordinate Courts had amassed 30,000 criminal cases, 190,000 regulatory violations, and 40,000 traffic offences back in 1992, when he took the helm. Some of those cases were four to five years old.

“Justice delayed is justice denied,” he explained.

At the time, Mr Magnus was tasked with a special mandate to clear the backlog of cases. His goal was to prove to the world that Singapore meant business when it came to the administration of justice.

He set off to work right away, mobilising judges, the Attorney-General’s Chambers, lawyers and the police.

Court hearings started earlier and ended later, while new initiatives such as Case Management Conferences, Pre-Trial Conferences, and technology-related systems were rolled out under the inaugural Subordinate Courts Workplan to transform processes.

The result was tremendous.

Within six months, the Subordinate Courts cleared the regulatory and traffic offence cases that had accumulated over the years.

By the time Mr Magnus stepped down as Senior District Judge in 2008, Singapore’s judicial system was ranked No.1 in Asia and among the top in the world, and had been cited by the World Bank as a model for judiciary-led reforms.

“If the courts in the building could speak and be a witness to what was happening at that time, it would speak of the various tremendous efforts that have been put in by its people,” said the retired judge, who continues to hold prominent roles such as Chairman of the Public Transport Council and Temasek Foundation Cares.

From his many years with the Judiciary, he knows too well how the work of a judge must be carried out with wisdom.

“At the end of the day, the judge has to make his own decision. Impose a sentence with one day more, and it is an additional day of loss of liberty for that person. But sentence one day less, and you are doing injustice to the judicial system. So you need to be right all the time, and that is a heavy burden. It is a lonely job.”

But the work of a judge also comes with meaning. **“I had a great sense of purpose (knowing) that justice is being done within our country, and that I had contributed in some way to that success,”** he added.

So you need to be right all the time, and that is a heavy burden. It is a lonely job.

RICHARD MAGNUS

Former Senior District Judge
of the Subordinate Courts



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They looked to me probably as a mentor and somebody who could give them guidance...

MICHAEL KHOO, S.C.

Former Senior District Judge of the Subordinate Courts



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GOING FROM HIGH-STAKE CASES TO UNOFFICIAL COUNSELLING

Senior Counsel Michael Khoo has a long and illustrious legal career that spans half a century – in both public service and private practice.

But one date stands out for him – 12 October 1978.

It was just a few days after he was appointed the Senior District Judge of the Subordinate Courts. A Greek tanker – S. T. Spyros – undergoing repairs at Jurong Shipyard had exploded, killing 76 people and injuring 69 others.

It was Singapore’s worst post-war disaster in terms of lives lost. He was appointed to chair a Committee of Inquiry to look into the cause of the accident.

Until today, the Spyros accident remains his most memorable case, albeit an unpleasant one.

“I do not think I would like to visit such a scene again. The entire fuel tanks had been ripped apart, the insides of the vessel had been burnt, completely gutted,” said the 75-year-old founder and principal litigator at Michael Khoo & Partners.

In the span of over 20 days, 87 witnesses testified, and 176 exhibits were presented. Eventually, the committee concluded that the presence of explosive vapour on board the Spyros was a result of the contamination of its fuel oil with crude oil.

“Unfortunately during that time, a welder was doing welding works at the top of

the ventilation pipe. That sparked off an explosion which went all the way down the fuel tanks, and into the cargo hold,” he said, with remarkable clarity for a case that happened 41 years ago.

During his leadership at the Subordinate Courts from 1978 to 1984, he presided over his fair share of high profile cases – from lawsuits involving opposition politicians to a \$23 million ship-scuttling fraud case. After leaving for private practice, he continues to return to the State Courts to represent litigants in cases, including the City Harvest trial.

But his fondest memory of the Subordinate Courts was playing unofficial counsellor to young, newly-minted lawyers, many of whom were former students he had taught at the former University of Singapore.

“They looked to me probably as a mentor and somebody who could give them guidance to alleviate the insults they had faced, thrown at them by some of the judges,” he said.

Very often, they would enter his chambers crying. And he was always well-prepared to comfort them.

“My box of Kleenex tissues was on the table for them,” he said with a chuckle.

THE EXPLOSION AND FIRE
ON BOARD S T SPYROS
12TH OCTOBER 1978

THE INQUIRY REPORT

with the carriage and working of such cargoes
the dangers attendant with vessels that have
as cargo. It would therefore seem irrefragable
bunker tanks from the regulations, although
contain Class “C” petroleum which is less
100°F (38°C).
it was not the practice of the Port
before vessels were allowed entry into
regulations we therefore recommend
the word “petroleum” and substituting
word “vessel” in regulation 11 should
a vessel that require examination and
still not preclude the possibility of
retaining a high concentration of
we further recommend that bunker
cans in order to ascertain their
necessary.
Report.
MICHAEL KHOO KAH LIP
Senior District Judge
CAPT FOO SEE JICK
Assessor
CHUA TECK HOCK
Assessor

CHAMBERS J, K & L (SMALL CLAIMS TRIBUNALS)

TRIBUNAL HEARING ROOMS 4, 5 & 6

THE SMALL CLAIMS TRIBUNALS FOR THE MAN ON THE STREET

When Mr James Chuah helped an American tourist recover his money from an errant shop owner in the early 1990s, the last thing he expected was to be featured in a New York-based newspaper.

At the time, Mr Chuah was an Assistant Registrar with the Small Claims Tribunals (SCT). He remembered being approached by the distraught tourist who had been conned into buying a faulty video camera from an electronics shop.

After being denied a refund, the American tourist immediately filed a complaint with the SCT.

Within hours of making the complaint, he was awarded full compensation of his losses – a swift and effective deliverance of justice that garnered Mr Chuah the attention of the US press.

“We were very happy and that gave us the encouragement to work harder. That is why I stayed on for so long in the Tribunals,” he shared.

We were very happy and that gave us the encouragement to work harder. That is why I stayed on for so long in the Tribunals.

JAMES CHUAH

Former Assistant Registrar
Small Claims Tribunals of the State Courts

Established on 1 February 1985, the SCT provide a quick and inexpensive avenue to resolve small claims. The SCT were located in the Ministry of Labour building at Havelock Road and Apollo Centre until their relocation to the State Courts Building in 2005.

A key feature of the SCT is the absence of lawyers. This helps level the playing field, as some private individuals may not be able to afford legal fees.

For Mr Joseph John, the former Registrar of the SCT and a key member of the pioneering team, being accessible and affordable to the man on the street has always been a hallmark of the SCT.

In fact, these were the founding principles that he remembers when he was handed the task of putting together a team 35 years ago.

“The SCT are one of the best legal [innovations]. They reduced the number of civil cases going to court, with lawyers,” he said.

“Most importantly, we help small businesses and consumers — everyday persons who might not have been able to afford a lawyer or seek other avenues of redress for their problems,” he said.

...we help small businesses and consumers — everyday persons who might not have been able to afford a lawyer or seek other avenues of redress for their problems.

JOSEPH JOHN

Former Registrar
Small Claims Tribunals of the State Courts



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BREAKING AND ENTERING – ALL IN A DAY’S WORK

Of all the high-risk situations that Mr Mohd Hatta Razak has had to face as a court bailiff, the memories that still get his heart racing are the times when he had to break into debtors’ homes.

He had to seize items that would be used as assets to settle a debt owed to a creditor. If the debt was not settled by a certain period, the seized items would be auctioned off to pay the debt.

To prepare for the actual seizure of items, Mr Hatta would head down to debtors’ homes a few days before and create a physical inventory of items, including furniture and electrical appliances. The items identified for seizure would then be pasted with sticker seals bearing the State Courts logo.

Even though he was authorised by the courts to break into their premises if debtors were not present, the idea of entering premises without permission always kept him on his toes.

“It is very risky. What happens if you are in the house and the owner comes back?” he said with an animated smile and a gentle shrug of his shoulders.

Fortunately for Mr Hatta, now an Assistant Director of the Criminal Justice Division, in all his 29 years as a court bailiff, he has never bumped into a debtor while breaking into a home.

Apart from the adrenaline pumping moments, he believes his job offers a front row seat to life.

“If you ask why I have stayed on for so long, it is because bailiff work gives you a different perspective on things. It teaches you a lot about life, and you meet people who face different problems,” he said.

“Some are here because of their own life choices, while others are here because of circumstances. You meet them all.”

His job also taught him the importance of communicating in a way that best appealed to people. This means changing his approach and tone with different individuals.

“Sometimes you can try to be fanciful in your presentation to them but at the end of the day, they do not understand you. You need to be able to speak in their language,” he said.

In a way, he also viewed himself as a spokesperson for the State Courts.

“These processes might not be known to them so while trying to enforce the writ, there is some information you can pass on,” he said. **“This will not only help them but their families as well.”**

Some are here because of their own life choices, while others are here because of circumstances. You meet them all.

MOHD HATTA RAZAK

Assistant Director
Criminal Justice Division of the State Courts



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Court Court 26/26N

...what we can do is to
usher them to places where
they can seek help...

ZUBEDA KHANAM

Senior Executive
Criminal Justice Division of the State Courts



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THE IMPORTANCE OF SPEAKING SLOWLY

Ms Zubeda Khanam remembers a time when it was lawyers — not the accused — who used to be reprimanded in the courtroom.

Their “offence”? Talking too quickly.

Before the introduction of transcription technology in the late 1990s, court proceedings in the Subordinate Courts were recorded entirely by hand.

To ensure that all was in order, judges would meticulously pen down key details as the case unravelled.

Ms Zubeda, currently a Senior Executive in the Criminal Justice Division, recalled instances when overly animated lawyers would blitz through their arguments, leaving the entire courtroom in a heap of confusion.

Unsurprisingly, this earned them the ire of the judges.

“The counsel would be addressing the issue and the judges would try their best to write down the details. More often than not, they would have to tell the counsel, ‘Look, watch my pen!’ because they were talking so fast!” she exclaimed with a hearty laugh.

As a court officer for over two decades, she ensured everything was in order before the

commencement of a court case – from court papers to the presence of the accused person.

While she had to take a neutral stance on court proceedings, she never turned her back on those who needed extra help.

For example, during her time in Court 26, she would direct accused persons without legal representation to Level 5 of the State Courts Building where the Law Society Pro Bono Services Office was located, or to visit the Community Justice Centre to get legal advice from a lawyer.

“We can’t give them legal advice, but what we can do is to usher them to places where they can seek help if they choose to have it,” she explained.

Her actions have touched the lives of many who remember her warmth and kindness. In fact, whenever she is out with family and friends, it is not uncommon to bump into individuals whom she has helped over the years.

“Whenever they thank me, I say ‘I am happy that I am able to assist you’,” she said.

“These are the cases that make you feel good, and make you feel that you can do more for your organisation. This is the reason why I have been here for such a long time.”

We are called in to assist with research when cases involve novel points of law.

TEO JING LU

Judicial Associate
Presiding Judge's Office of the State Courts

ANSWERING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

It seemed like an ordinary case of a man committing offences under the Employment Act. In past cases, most offenders were slapped with a fine.

Yet this time, the prosecution had asked for the man, who had pleaded guilty, to either be jailed or disqualified from acting as a director of a company. A harsher punishment was deemed necessary as it was the offender's fourth time contravening the Employment Act.

The judge who presided over the case asked Mr Teo Jing Lu to undertake some legal research into the background and history of the Employment Act.

"I had to dig into the law to find out why there is a disqualification regime in the first place," said the Judicial Associate, who is part of a small group of legally qualified people who assist judges in the management and disposal of cases at the State Courts.

"This had originated from the Companies Act, so I had to look into the basis on

which directors are disqualified from their companies."

Apart from conducting extensive research, Mr Teo also had several discussions with the judge about his research findings.

"It was an interesting case. The judge shared a lot throughout the entire process – not just about the legal research, but also his thoughts on the case," he said.

Mr Teo knew from the start that his job will not be easy.

"We are called in to assist with research when cases involve novel points of law," he said.

Often, this means there are no clear cut answers.

But he relishes the challenge. **"It is a stressful role, but I would say it is a good kind of stress,"** he said.



CRIME REGISTRY



I also have to identify people who are suitable for such frontline duties, as it can be stressful dealing with difficult court users.

CHAN WAI YIN

Senior Director
Criminal Justice Division of the State Courts

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SERVING COURT USERS

The man was holding a bag of liquid, which he claimed was his urine.

He had turned nasty while filing his request at the Crime Registry and lashed out at the frontline officer serving him. He then stayed behind to harass the officer. Fortunately, security officers stepped in to deal with the incident.

“One of the main challenges is dealing with difficult court users. This is especially true for the frontline staff who manage the counters,” said Ms Chan Wai Yin, Senior Director of the Criminal Justice Division, who manages about 70 court administrators. The Criminal Justice Division has the highest caseload among the four justice divisions in the State Courts. In 2018, it handled over 80 per cent of the State Courts’ caseload – 303,487 out of 359,064 cases.

She notes that even though the officers are trained to deal with difficult court users and to manage work-related stress, the job wears down even the most resilient of staff.

“I have to support them – I would hear them out and counsel them. I also have to identify people who are suitable for such frontline duties, as it can be stressful dealing with difficult court users. Not everyone is cut out for such work,” she said.

Yet, there are some, like Ms Lucy Goh, who have thrived.

Apart from being one of the longest serving court administrators, she is also the only officer who has worked in the three different courthouses of the State Courts.

The octogenarian first joined in 1967, working as a typist at the Criminal District and Magistrates’ Courts along South Bridge Road.

In 1975, she moved to the Subordinate Courts Building at Havelock Square.

Almost half a century later, she shifted to the State Courts Towers.

Her job has also evolved over the years. In the early years, she had to decipher the judges’ handwritten notes and recreate them as notes of evidence using a manual typewriter.

Gradually, this tedious process changed with the implementation of digital transformation initiatives. Typewriters were replaced with computers, enabling her to complete tasks faster.

Today, she has become a service ambassador, assisting court users waiting in line for consultations or hearings.

In this role, she faced a different type of challenge – going up and down the steps daily at the State Courts Building.

“Up and down, it is 22 steps each time. I do it five to 10 times a day,” she said. **“I think the walk keeps me mobile and helps me continue my service.”**

I think the walk keeps me mobile and helps me continue my service.

LUCY GOH

Service Ambassador
Corporate Services Division of the State Courts



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You feel rewarded emotionally when you know that somebody appreciated what you did, although you just did your job.

AJMER SINGH

Former Interpreter
Corporate Services Division of the State Courts



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BRIDGING THE LANGUAGE OF LAW FOR NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Even as English has quickly become the *lingua franca* of most people in Singapore, some still struggle to understand and participate in the legal process that is conducted in English. This is when reinforcements are called into the courts – the interpreters.

They interpret the court proceedings into the language or dialect that the court user is familiar with, helping individuals understand what is going on.

To Mr Ajmer Singh, a veteran court interpreter, there is great satisfaction from helping non-English speakers navigate court and mediation sessions.

“You feel rewarded emotionally when you know that somebody appreciated what you did, although you just did your job,” he shared.

Today, a decade after his retirement, he is still asked to return to the State Courts whenever a Punjabi or Hindi interpreter is needed. These days, he noticed that most of the cases that require his services involve foreign nationals who are working in Singapore.

“This job will never become redundant – you will still require interpreters in spite of the fact that literacy rate has gone very far from what it used to be,” observed Mr Singh, who was once the head interpreter of the Indian section.

For younger interpreters like Ms Tan Siew Hoon who joined the Subordinate Courts in 1999, making non-English speakers feel that they have been fairly treated is what she aspires towards every day.

To do that, she has to think on her feet, ensuring that she interprets accurately and nuances are not lost in translation.

“Sometimes it is not as easy, because some lawyers would expect you to also interpret the nuances of the languages. We will have to see if it is appropriate and decide on the spot,” she said.

Those she helped have been appreciative. She recalled an accused person, who represented himself, expressing his gratitude after she interpreted for him at the trial.

“He was saying to me, ‘I thank you very much, you have been very fair to me, and the judge has been very fair to me. I was given the opportunity to speak my mind and I have said whatever I wanted to say, and for that, I thank you, no matter what the result is’,” she shared.

“If everybody feels that they have been fairly treated, I think we have done our job well.”



If everybody feels that they have been fairly treated, I think we have done our job well.

TAN SIEW HOON

Assistant Director
Corporate Services Division of the State Courts

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My experience at the State Courts has taught me that we can accomplish the difficult and the seemingly impossible with limited resources as long as we keep at it, think creatively, and reach out to the community.

VANITA KANESON

Assistant Director
Centre for Specialist Services of the State Courts



KEEPING THE COURTS IN A HEALTHY STATE OF MIND

When emotions in the courtrooms threaten to boil over, the officers from the Centre for Specialist Services (CSS) are on hand to soothe the distressed or depressed.

The team of six behavioural and mental health professionals provide counselling and psychological services to vulnerable witnesses, distressed court users and bereaved family members.

At times, their job is full of drama. Ms Vanita Kaneson, who leads the team, recalled a harassment case during her first month on the job, where she had to protect a victim who had filed a protection order against a former partner.

“I was basically like a bodyguard for the applicant as I had to help her get to a private room. Even when we were in the private room, the respondent kept trying to pull open the locked door,” she said. **“Eventually the police officers in court had to intervene.”**

Located on the third floor of the State Courts Building beside Court 20, CSS, which began as the Community Court Secretariat in 2011, is not just a place offering counselling and psychological services.

It also bridges the gap between the courts and community agencies on matters of psychological and social issues, and helps court users in their journey to improve their lives.

“The scope of work has changed as we now handle a spectrum of cases and helm many programmes and initiatives that are tailored to meet the specific needs of court users,” said Ms Vanita, who joined in 2014.


She is usually in the office by 8.15am. Within an hour, she is at the Community Justice and Tribunals Division or one of the courtrooms to attend to her morning cases.

“The nature of our work requires a lot of discussion with not just the litigants or offenders, but also their family members, judges, lawyers, probation officers or case workers. So, one case can easily exceed an hour,” she explained.

After court sessions, CSS officers have to follow up by referring court users to community agencies, if necessary, and document each session for future reference. They then rush off for a flurry of meetings.

The day usually ends when the team reconvenes to update their community partners on the outcomes of the cases. Despite the difficulties encountered, she remains positive.

“My experience at the State Courts has taught me that we can accomplish the difficult and the seemingly impossible with limited resources as long as we keep at it, think creatively, and reach out to the community,” she said.



Imposing columns, order and symmetry have long dominated the imagery and identity of courthouses. Today, a contemporary courthouse has taken shape at One Havelock Square: a high-rise building that is open and imbued with greenery.

Even as architectural forms evolve over time, a courthouse remains an important symbol of justice to the people and society. The open-frame design of the State Courts Towers is an apt reflection of the transparency, fairness and accessibility of the Singapore Judiciary.

For a quick reprieve, one may retreat to the roof garden or sky terraces and admire how the building harmoniously blends with the terracotta-roofed shophouses of Chinatown.

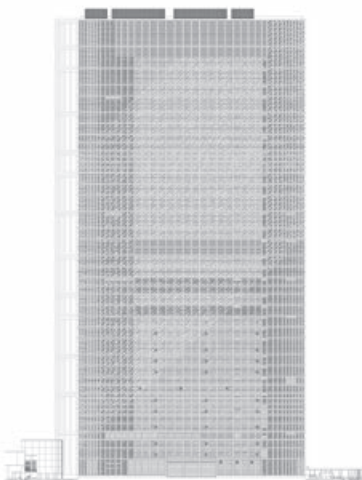
SPACES

TWO NEW TOWERS, ONE HAVELOCK SQUARE





The State Courts Building was fast running out of space, as demand for court services surged year after year. A space planning consultancy had predicted that many more courtrooms would be needed by 2050, and that the gross floor area would need to triple by then.



It was definitely time to expand, but the question was how. The current building was too small to accommodate more courtrooms. A major renovation would also disrupt day-to-day operations.

The solution was clear: it was time to move. But the State Courts did not have to shift too far away. There was an available plot of land right in front of its building – the open-air car park that would be far better utilised by building tall towers on it.



In September 2011, an open design competition for the new courthouse was organised. The intention was to develop a new courthouse by end-2019.

Choosing the winning design, however, was not easy. The nine-member evaluation panel, comprising judges, lawyers and architects, had differing ideas on who the winner should be. In the end, it was world-renowned architect Mr Moshe Safdie,

the designer of the iconic Marina Bay Sands and Jewel Changi Airport, who persuaded the panel to pick a design of two tall towers with interconnecting sky bridges.

The concept of two rectangular blocks seemed a rather simple idea, but it belied a minimalist modernity. The panel described it as **“a simple but dignified design with an unusual and unexpected outcome.”**

BUILDING
FEATURES



AN OPEN CONCEPT

Each of the 19 design entries had its own unique interpretation of what a courthouse should look like. But it was an open and outward-looking design that triumphed.



The winning plan for the new premises, by London-based Serie Architects in collaboration with local firm Multiply Architects, featured two rectangular slab blocks – a Court Tower and an Office Tower – linked by bridges.

Dr Christopher Lee, principal of Serie Architects who led the design of the State Courts Towers, focused on giving the slab blocks a sense of openness and light, a clear departure from the imposing and inward-looking styles typically used for buildings that represent authority.

The most striking feature of the Court Tower is that it has no external façade. Designed as an open frame supporting a series of terraces on which the courtrooms are placed, the public is able to see the inner walls of the building – almost as if they were peering into the cross-section of a skyscraper.

The open façade offers an elegant and subtle way of announcing the function of the building. At the same time, it is an ode to what the State Courts represent – transparency and accessibility.



“The public face of the State Courts is multiple courtrooms...the court boxes (are) a natural way to announce the function of the building,” said Dr Lee.

The courtrooms are located on platforms, which are bedecked with tropical plants – another key design feature. There, people will be able to get a panoramic view of the cityscape while enjoying the greenery.

The green spaces are meant to bring calm and quiet to court users, he shared.

“Court proceedings can get very stressful. So these are the spaces in which the court users could easily retreat into, or to move out and take a glimpse into the open, enjoy the landscape and take in some fresh air,” said Dr Lee, who is also an Associate Professor at Harvard University.

“Despite the size of the building, the user will always have a sense of connection to the outside. So you never feel as though you are trapped within an enclosed space in which you see no natural light at all.”



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A veteran builder of courthouses

The Public Works Department (PWD) shaped much of Singapore’s modern urban landscapes. Set up in the 19th century, years before Singapore attained independence, it built many of the country’s roads and bridges, including the Central Expressway, as well as iconic public buildings such as the old National Stadium.

PWD was also a veteran builder of Singapore’s court buildings, namely, the old Supreme Court building along St Andrew’s Road, as well as the State Courts Building.

In 1999, PWD was privatised, and in 2002 it was renamed CPG Corporation (CPG). A decade later, the 187-year-old agency was tasked to develop the State Courts Towers. Its challenge: to develop a complex design within a relatively short time frame of three years.

“The design has a very slender structure. This was a challenge faced by our engineers – to develop the design, make it stand, yet keep it constrained within these narrow structures,” shared Mr Colin Wu, CPG’s Senior Vice-President of Singapore Architecture.

To overcome the challenge, engineers used an innovative composite structural steel material to substitute the traditional concrete structures of buildings.

“These composite structures – primarily for the columns – give the building a greater rigidity and strength while respecting the sizes that were in the design,” explained Mr Wu.

The use of structural steel had another advantage: it allowed the building to be constructed at a much faster pace, as workers did not have to wait for concrete to harden and set before construction could continue.

“While these steel structures were being erected, other internal fill-out and works could be gradually carried out concurrently. This actually helped accelerate the (building process),” he added.

The project team had to work fast to erect the two towers, taking into account the constraints of high traffic movement in the vicinity as well as the high residential population density in the surrounding neighbourhood.

For that, another innovative technology was adopted to lower the environmental impact while speeding up construction: pre-casting.

Large concrete panels were fabricated off-site before they were transported and assembled on-site, just like Lego bricks.

Pulling off a project of this magnitude was no easy feat. Besides the ingenious use of modern construction methods, collaboration between all stakeholders of the project – from contractors to engineers – was key.

“It was very much a team effort to bring a project of this size and complexity to the end,” said Mr Wu. “Collaboration was very important.”



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A TWINNING SOLUTION

In the State Courts Building, the circulation paths for judges, accused persons and the public were all housed within one building. As a result, the windows, doors, and lifts had to be strategically placed to ensure the three groups would not cross paths.

The provision of the separate pathways is one reason court buildings are often “**incredibly solid and inward looking**,” shared Dr Lee.

In designing the State Courts Towers, he proposed two towers instead of one – to separate the courtrooms from the offices. The Office Tower, which would be used only by judges and court administrators, would be reached via exclusive access-controlled bridges. This arrangement gave him more leeway to think of interesting design features.

The two-tower design also provides clarity to how the building is organised. **“It is immediately clear where the public is at, and where the judges and court administrators are at,”** he noted.

Next to the open and sunlit Court Tower, the Office Tower stands in contrast with its irregular grid pattern. The design may look simple, but it serves a function. The gaps in the grid widen in areas where more light is needed, such as the working spaces, and close up where privacy is required, for example in the restrooms.

“The contraction and expansion of the grid gives an interesting rhythm to the tower – your eyes are naturally drawn from the bottom up, and towards the sky,” he said.

The bridges linking the two towers are constructed with glass.

This gives users the illusion that the bridges are suspended in mid-air as they cross from one tower to the other, and offers a panoramic view – the two towers to their front and back, and the cityscape of Chinatown.

The walk along the bridges also offers the judges and court administrators **“a moment of transition of about five minutes as they leave their private working space and enter the public space,”** Dr Lee shared.





ONE WITH CHINATOWN

What makes a good building? Beyond the aesthetics, Dr Lee believes a good building is one that serves its users well, and is in harmony with its surroundings – in this case, the bustling and vibrant Chinatown.

He pointed out the two dominant building types in Chinatown – the low-rise traditional shophouses, as well as the high-rise buildings standing among them. The design team put in great effort to ensure that the State Courts Towers shares common elements with its neighbourhood, paying attention to even the smallest details such as the choice of colours and texture of the building façade.

“One of the defining textures of the shophouses is the terracotta tiles of the roof. There are some qualities that are incredibly beautiful. One, its varied colour – a sort of a dark red ochre. The other is the undulation that gives a delicate articulation of the roof of these shophouses,” he said.

“We wanted to merge these two and bring them together in a single gesture.”

The high-rise Court Tower is made up of smaller courtrooms that appear as boxes. For the courtrooms, the qualities of the shophouses are reflected in their exterior. Their boxy structures are made of six-metre-tall precast concrete, pigmented and stained in the same colour and texture as the quintessential Chinatown shophouse roofs.

“The Court Tower is composed of several platforms of court boxes. It has that smaller-scale granularity of the shophouses, but at the same time, cumulatively, you get a high-rise tower,” he explained.

“We hope the residents here can see something old in the new – that the new building creates a certain continuity with its surroundings, but at the same time, also has a new voice of its own.”

REINVENTING THE CLASSICS

A popular characteristic found in courthouses around the world is the use of the classical architecture, featuring a portico in the front of the building supported by ornate columns.

In Singapore, the former Supreme Court building – now part of the National Gallery Singapore – is one example of a Neoclassical building with its central dome, Corinthian and Ionic columns and colonnaded space.

While Dr Lee gave the State Courts Towers a modern and refreshing look that emphasised light and openness, he also included classical elements into the design, interspersed with greenery.

“The columns are always detached from the façade, so that there is an in-between space – an environmental buffer that allows landscape,” explained Dr Lee.

Like the veranda of a colonial bungalow, this buffer space offers shade, and is an ideal location for landscaping.

“There is a sense of grandeur, but also a sense of formality that is befitting a courthouse,” he noted.





AN ECO-FRIENDLY COURTHOUSE

The high-rise gardens in the State Courts Towers' outdoor terraces act as natural filters for the afternoon sun, while the open and naturally ventilated corridors bring in daylight and air circulation.

The evaluation panel, when awarding the winning design, had observed that these strategies could create an eco-friendly building.

Right to the core of the building – which is made of environmentally-friendly structural steel instead of concrete – the State Courts Towers boasts many features that possess a lighter carbon footprint.

These include an efficient water-cooled chiller plant, water savings

features as well as an energy-efficient LED lighting system. The site also has a green plot ratio of 2.95 – which translates to green areas occupying roughly three times the plot area of the building.

For its environmentally-sustainable achievements, the State Court Towers clinched the BCA Green Mark Award (Platinum) in 2018. It is the highest accolade attainable for environment-friendly buildings in Singapore.



A NEW CHAPTER: 2020 AND BEYOND

Fitted with 53 courtrooms and 54 hearing chambers, the State Courts Towers is equipped to meet Singapore’s growing judicial needs in the years to come.

The State Courts Towers is home to some of the most cutting-edge solutions and facilities to meet the needs of court users of the future.

Initiatives such as real-time artificial intelligence audio transcription and smart deployment of court interpreters are some of the new technologies that will make court processes more efficient.

Innovation has always been a key part of the State Courts culture – from adopting video conferences to digitising records,



the organisation has always been forward-looking. From the early days, the State Courts have tapped on technological advancements to improve work processes and transform the delivery of court services.

“The State Courts have always embraced technology, and have been ahead of the curve,” said Deputy Presiding Judge Jennifer Marie.

“We recognise we have to bring everyone onboard, so our task for 2019 was to ensure that every officer attended at least

one course on digital science. The idea is to sensitise people to what is happening around us, and to encourage them to pursue courses that will help them meet the challenges of the new Singapore,” she added.

At the State Courts Towers, the technology update is not limited to court processes. Smart building technologies, such as facial recognition and security automation, are also in place to enhance user experience and boost security.

In his keynote address at the State Courts Workplan in 2019, Justice See Kee Oon, Presiding Judge of the State Courts, said that the organisation will continue to study how new technologies, such as artificial intelligence-based prediction systems, legal information retrieval systems and blockchain ledger technologies, may be applied to judicial work.

But the State Courts’ main focus is on the needs of the court users, and whatever technology implemented should enhance their experience of the justice process, Justice See stressed.

“In the delivery of justice, human experience, empathy and common sense reasoning play a critical role. And even as technology is harnessed, our investment in developing human capabilities cannot be neglected,” he reiterated.



**New building,
new technology**

**ASSISTIVE LISTENING SYSTEMS IN
ALL COURTROOMS**

Inclusivity is at the heart of the State Courts. Visitors with hearing aids can experience improved sound quality and clarity through induction loop amplifiers, which send sound without distortions or background noise, in courtrooms.

**COURTROOMS WITH VIDEO
CONFERENCING CAPABILITIES**

The availability of video conferencing capabilities in 19 courtrooms enables vulnerable or overseas witnesses to give testimonies without being physically present in court.

**RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM
(RMS)**

Optimal allocation of manpower and physical resources ensures an efficient justice system. RMS enables staff such as court interpreters to be dynamically deployed where they are needed most in real time.

**SELF-SERVICE KIOSKS PROVIDING
INFORMATION AND PAYMENT
SERVICES ON MULTIPLE FLOORS**

Court users no longer need to travel across several floors to make payment and seek information.

The computer revolution

Mrs Mok Kit Soon fondly recalls the relief when technology was introduced in the State Courts.

In her 42 years at the State Courts, she had witnessed how technology had drastically changed work processes, simplifying workflows and making the Judiciary more efficient.

Mrs Mok, who was previously the Deputy Head of the State Courts Crime Registry, recalls the early days when she worked in the Appeals Section of the Crime Registry.

She was tasked to prepare the Records of Appeal, which had to be compiled and documented in five sets of hard copies: two sets for the High Court, one set for the Attorney-General's Chambers, one set for the Defence and one set for the appeal file.

"All the case exhibits had to be copied and bound before being dispatched to the High Court. For complex and long trials, the documents that needed to be copied could go up to 20 to 30 volumes of a few thousand pages each," she shared.

"Some of the records were so voluminous that we had to dispatch them using vans."

This only changed when the State Courts switched to storing the records in soft copy format on compact discs.

Previously, appeal cases were also recorded manually in a "Demy Book" – a heavy A3-sized book.

"We drew lines across the page to form columns for different case details and registered each appeal by hand," said Mrs Mok, who retired in 2018.

In the 1990s, she went on a Microsoft Excel training course.

"When I saw the columns in the Excel spreadsheet, I knew it was the perfect tool to replace the cumbersome Demy Book," she shared.

A year later, all case recordings were moved to Excel.

"We said goodbye to the Demy Book. Everything was easier after that – details were searchable and we no longer had to flip through the unwieldy pages of the dusty tome," she said.



STATE COURTS TOWERS: THE SEAT OF JUSTICE

For Dr Christopher Lee, who travels from London to Singapore about once a month for work, each trip to Chinatown is a pleasant surprise, as he sees his ideas come to life. **“It is an incredibly exhilarating feeling when you see your design as it is being built,”** he said.

The move to the State Courts Towers also marked the end of a long project for Deputy Presiding Judge Jennifer Marie, who oversaw the implementation and construction of the State Courts Towers.

“There were some dark days... when I first came over (to the State Courts) as a Registrar in 2011, I recognised that this was a massive project and one that would take some time to see through. We had to get the budget and then gather the immediate needs of the various divisions and do a projection of our needs all the way to 2050. There were times we were concerned whether our timelines would be met,” she said.

But bit by bit, as she watched the two towers take shape, she was filled with a sense of pride – and relief.

It was also heartening to see the legal fraternity sharing in the excitement of the new courthouse.

“There’s a lot of excitement as we start to move into the State Courts Towers...everyone feels a sense of ownership,” she said.

“This excitement, I hope, will continue as we commence operations in the State Courts Towers, and everyone will feel a sense of renewal of our vision and mission and look forward to working and serving the people – reinvigorated.”

Like the State Courts Building that has seen justice dispensed in the millions of cases that have come through its doors, the State Courts Towers will continue to see the State Courts dispense justice and uphold the rule of law without fear or favour in the years to come.



Making sure everything works - from lifts to lights

Months before construction on the State Courts Towers was even completed, Deputy Presiding Judge Jennifer Marie had already planned what she would be doing the night before the building opened.

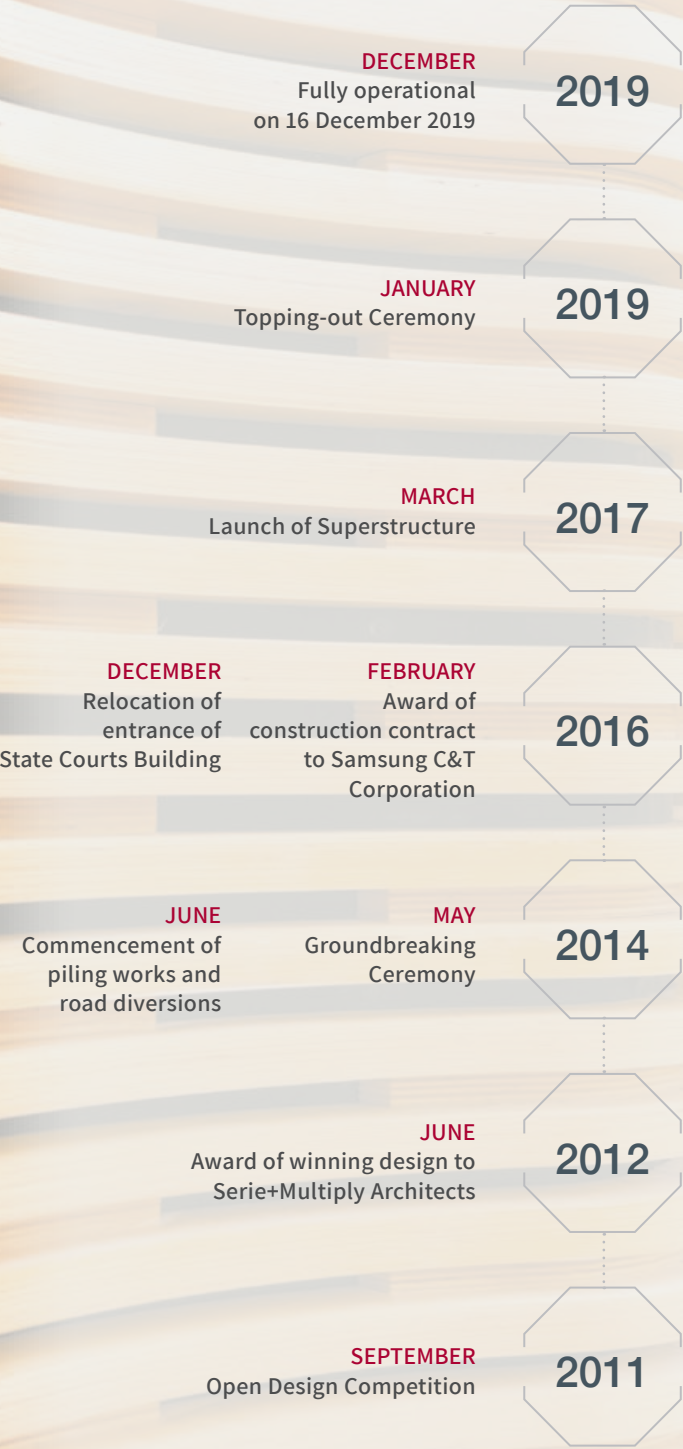
She might go into all the rooms in the building, and test the light switches to ensure they all work. She even wondered about pulling an all-nighter, just to be doubly sure that everything was going well.

“My basic wish was that everything works. The lifts, the lights...everything should work,” she shared.

She was also looking forward to moving into her new office, which sits on the 32nd floor – just three storeys below the highest level – a marked difference from her office in the State Courts Building, which occupied the ground level.

“They tell me it has a breathtaking view,” she said.

STATE COURTS TOWERS:
THE MILESTONES



Continuity amid change. The move to the State Courts Towers represents both progress as well as a strong desire to maintain a fair and accessible justice system. The State Courts carry the weight of expectations of many. And as the historic institution is rejuvenated, its new beginning brings fresh hope for the future.

PHASES

ON TO GREATER HEIGHTS





My wish for the State Courts is that we will fight to retain public trust as a vital institution. The State Courts is a critical player in the administration of justice in Singapore and in that capacity, its most vital currency is trust. In an era of eroding public trust in institutions, it is important that we place that as our uppermost objective. I'm sure that with the colleagues I have, they will make it happen.

CHIEF JUSTICE SUNDARESH MENON

Chief Justice of Singapore



My wish for the State Courts is that we remain adaptive and resilient. We have a strong and dedicated group of people who are fully committed to our purpose: doing our best to serve the public, delivering justice and inspiring trust and confidence in the courts.

JUSTICE SEE KEE OON

Judge of the Supreme Court
Presiding Judge of the State Courts



The State Courts is the face of the Judiciary for many and is an important public institution. As strategic partners of the State Courts in upholding the rule of law, the Attorney-General's Chambers continues to support the State Courts and its judges in protecting the public interest. I am confident that with its new building, the State Courts will be well-equipped to deal with the challenges that may come its way. I wish the State Courts the very best in its new building.

LUCIEN WONG, S.C.

Attorney-General of Singapore



May the State Courts continue to embody state-of-the-art facilities and state-of-the-heart fairness for every single litigant and lawyer, so that they experience justice and mercy in its judicature.

GREGORY VIJAYENDRAN, S.C.

President of the Law Society of Singapore



May the State Courts Towers invigorate and enable us in this next chapter of our transformational journey in the service of justice.

JAMES LEONG

Principal District Judge
Civil Justice Division of the State Courts



May the State Courts continue to be our pride and the beacon of light with justice in sight.

LIM HWEI CHEN

Former Senior Director
Corporate Services Division of the State Courts



I am confident that the judges and staff of the State Courts will continue to inspire public trust and confidence in a world-class Judiciary assisted by the latest in technology in the administration of justice that is accessible to all.

BALA REDDY

Senior District Judge
Presiding Judge's Office of the State Courts



May the State Courts Towers further enhance access to justice and service to society in the administration of justice.

SIVA SHANMUGAM

Principal District Judge
Community Justice and Tribunals Division
of the State Courts





It is here that the vast majority of Singaporeans and residents encounter the law. It is here that the core business of dispensing justice is carried out on a daily basis. And so, it is here that the quest to ensure access to meaningful justice must begin.

CHIEF JUSTICE SUNDARESH MENON

Subordinate Courts Workplan 2013

1 March 2013

ONE HAVELOCK SQUARE

IT IS HERE

FOURTEEN FEBRUARY TWENTY TWENTY

Official Opening of the State Courts Towers



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