

# South Beach chic for former NCO club



The hotel rooms have a muted design for restful sleep. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

🕒 PUBLISHED NOV 21, 2015, 5:00 AM SGT

---

The former Beach Road Camp-turned-NCO club is now the South Beach development comprising apartments, offices, shops and a hotel

---



Natasha Ann Zachariah (mailto:natashaz@sph.com.sg)

Singaporean men of a certain generation would be familiar with the cluster of military buildings known as Beach Road Camp.

From 1967, new recruits had to enlist for duty there, and the practice eventually spawned the saying: "First to Beach Road, then to army".

While some of buildings on site have long been torn down, three pre-war buildings, Blocks 1, 9 and 14, still stand.

They have been revamped as part of the South Beach, a 3.5ha mixed-use property that includes residences, a hotel and offices and restaurants and cost \$3.5 billion to build.

South Beach has four heritage buildings. Three are from the former Beach Road Camp, and the last is the former Non-Commissioned Officers' (NCO) Club.

The South Beach, a new 654- room five-star hotel, is designed by famous French designer Philippe Starck.

Starck has also been hired to give the gazetted buildings a new lease of life by jazzing up the interiors. Meanwhile, architectural restoration and research consultancy Studio Lapis was in charge of restoring key elements of the buildings' architecture.

For example, Block 9, once the headquarters of the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force, is now known as The Grand Ballroom, an event space open for hire. It features a stunning light installation by Starck, comprising thousands of lights strung from the ceiling like stalactites.

At the former NCO Club, there is an "underwater" restaurant where diners can look at swimmers in a 3.8m-deep pool situated next to the eatery.

Bounded by Beach Road, Bras Basah Road, Nicoll Highway and Middle Road, South Beach is a joint venture between City Developments Limited and IOI Group.

Life provides a sneak peek of the restoration work done to the buildings and their new design features, and takes you on a tour of the swanky new hotel.

**Next Saturday, find out how South Beach's green features enable it to be self-sustaining**

---

### **Armoury now houses hip bars and eateries**

Once used as a place where weapons were kept, the oldest heritage building on the South Beach property has been turned into a hip lifestyle spot.

The pristine white, two-storey building, formerly known as Block 1, is now home to South Beach Quarter, comprising a club, a bar and two restaurants.

It is run by lifestyle group Massive Collective, which is behind other entertainment spots such as Bang Bang in Pan Pacific Singapore hotel and Empire, a penthouse bar lounge at 50 Raffles Place.

The renovation work done to the 13,000 sq ft building is similar to Assembly or the former Block 14 - part of the second floor was removed in the middle of the building to create a spacious, high-ceilinged grand entrance.

Inside, a bridge links the newly separated wings.

The original building was actually built in two phases, said Mr Ho Weng Hin, 41, a partner of Studio Lapis, the firm which consulted on the restoration of South Beach's heritage buildings.



Cocktail lounge Vanity (above) has an old-school glamour theme.

The first half of the building, which sits at the junction of Middle Road and Beach Road, was built around 1908.

Later, it was extended out towards Middle Road.

After the construction of the new portion, the existing building sank and caused a crack in the roof. The renovation involved reconstructing the cornices and eaves which had been damaged down the middle.

South Beach Quarter has already been attracting some buzz on the weekends.

Drinkers have already been checking out cocktail lounge Vanity on the second floor.

The bar has an old-school glamour theme, featuring blue velvet sofas, tinted mirrors and a women's powder room with bright Hollywood mirrors and vanity tables.

Clubbers in the know have been going to Suite26, a private, members-only club open on the weekend.

Next Friday, a new restaurant called Vatos Urban Tacos, a popular Korean-Mexican restaurant brand from South Korea, will open.

On the menu are fusion dishes such as Galbi Short Rib Tacos, which come with marinated short rib and Asian slaw, and Spicy Chicken Quesadillas, which are topped with arbol chile sauce, a chilli-and-garlic mix.

Last to open is a gastropub named The Armoury on the first level. From late next month, it will serve American pub food and craft beers.

**Vanity is open from 5pm on weekdays and 8pm on Saturday, while Vatos Urban Tacos opens from 11.30am to 11pm on weekdays and from 11.30am to midnight on Saturday**

---

## NCO Club gets a makeover

In 1952, when British Commissioner-General Malcolm MacDonald opened the recreational Britannia Club in Beach Road, he declared it "the Far East's most luxurious club" for the British armed forces.

Standing opposite the iconic Raffles Hotel Singapore, the three-storey clubhouse drew British servicemen and their families looking to enjoy a day off. It had amenities considered luxurious at that time: an air-conditioned pub, a polished teak dance floor, a billiards room and a music room with a piano.

About 60 years later, the building has been given a makeover that make nods to its history, while new features are added to give a cutting- edge touch.

Renamed the South Beach Club, the building houses several dining spaces and their owners and management are studying how best to use the space. But what is sure is that superstar French designer Philippe Starck brings his unique, quirky aesthetic to the table.

For example, one of the restaurants on the second level features gigantic black teapot lanterns hanging over tables of mismatched chairs.

A private dining room, which has a full view of the chefs at work behind the glass, is bathed in warm light from a chandelier created from spoons and teapot parts.

Paying homage to the Britannia Club's former Olympic-sized pool, which had three diving boards at various heights, a new 3.8m-deep diving pool has been built inside the South Beach Club.

Next to the pool is an "underwater" restaurant. Through a clear glass partition, diners can watch divers and swimmers moving in the water like fish in an aquarium.

In 1952, the original Britannia club cost \$1.3 million to build and was funded by the British Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes.

It closed in 1971 but reopened three years later as a recreation centre for Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) from the Singapore Armed Forces.

Renamed the NCO Club, it had hawker stalls and cheap beer as well as a no-frills supermarket, Safe, which sold everything from groceries to electronics. Courses such as social dancing and music lessons for children were also run there.

The club closed when the land was handed back to the Urban Redevelopment Authority in 2000.

Along with Blocks 1, 9 and 14 within the former Beach Road Camp next door, the building was given conservation status in 2002.

Ironically, a large part of the restoration work was to undo the modifications that the Singapore Armed Forces had made along the way.

Thick paint had been slathered on the facade, for example, hiding the beautiful beige Travertine marble, a beige limestone rock considered luxe at that time.

After removing the paint, American conservation and cleaning specialist Gustavo Vasquez spent about nine months treating defects such as drilled holes and cracks in the marble.

Important vintage features were carefully researched and reinstated. For example, the old doors to the verandahs on the first and second levels are made of a thin, mild steel frame from Crittall, an English manufacturer.

There was only one specimen of the original door left, and the contractors got a factory in China to fabricate new ones to near-likeness.

Another major project was retiling the verandah on the second level. Terracotta tiles had been put in during the 1990s, with a small portion of the original three-tone mosaic flooring still intact. They were replaced with white, chocolate and light brown replicas truer to the original style.

Beautiful corals housed in tall glass cases also line the hallways of the club. They come from a collection of corals discovered during land excavation on the South Beach property - a reminder that the site sits on a reclaimed sea bed.

---

## Summon to Court

True to its military past, Assembly is the new name given to Block 14, a two-storey building that used to have offices and a drill hall for the Malay volunteer regiment. There was also a garage for armoured vehicles and ambulances.

After the building's revamp, it now has a bar called Court Martial Bar - a reference to the former military court housed on the second level - and several meeting rooms named after call signs such as Alpha, November and Lima.

The Court Martial Bar preserves some elements of the old building, such as the old vehicle maintenance pit.

As patrons drink on the first level, they can look down into this tiled narrow space carved into the ground.



NOTE: Entrance is located along Nicoll Highway.

PHOTO: SOUTH BEACH

Original roller shutters from the garage still remain, though they are not in use.

Operated with a manual crank, they had been one of the first roller shutters in Singapore at that time and were specially ordered from Britain.

The window outside the bar - which is made up of a grid of different-coloured glass - also has a story.

Over the years, the Singapore Armed Forces had installed different window panes into the building, which did not match.

During the restoration, Studio Lapis standardised all the windows, but kept the old glass panels that were recombined into a special patchwork window that bears the building's memories.

## Grand Ballroom lights up

A dramatic sight greets the viewer once he steps into the event hall known as The Grand Ballroom: A sea of lights - 11,520 of them encased in aluminium tubes - drip down from a 12m-high ceiling like icicles.

Called Forest Of Light, this artwork by French designer Philippe Starck is a dramatic and iconic backdrop for weddings and business gatherings. To create different moods, the ceiling can be illuminated in different colours.

The hall seats 370 guests banquet-style, with 320 guests seated on the ballroom floor and the rest on the mezzanine level.

Bookings for weddings next year are already open: A 2016 wedding package starts at \$1,488 a table for a weekday and goes up to \$1,789 a table on a weekend.

The Grand Ballroom is housed in a former drill hall called Block 9.



The dark outlines on the face of the Block 9 building are Shanghai plaster, the original material used for the military block's facade

The building had been home to the Singapore Volunteer Corps and later the Singapore Military Forces, and its column-free second floor was said to have hosted dinner-and-dances and camaraderie-building exercises.

The building is designed in 1930s Art Deco style with a stepped facade made of Shanghai plaster - a dull grey material with a granite-like finish.

But over the years, the Shanghai plaster had been covered with a cement skin and white paint. This non-breathable coating was painstakingly removed as it had caused deterioration to the original facade.

To recognise the building's history, the architects and Studio Lapis recommended exposing the Shanghai plaster only on the facade borders. The rest was painted in white, in a mineral paint, as an all-grey structure would look too imposing.

Finally, in a nod to the building's military history, the two courtyards on either side of The Grand Ballroom have been named Kiri and Kanan (left and right in Malay), after drill commands.

**Hotel interiors by Philippe Starck**

At the entrance of The South Beach hotel, the interiors of which are designed by top interior designer Philippe Starck, is a 7m by 6.5m video wall.

On it, LED screens become South Korean artist Lee Lee Nam's canvas, as the wall is filled with animated abstract shapes in a riot of colours.

This futuristic and playful atmosphere is consistent throughout the 654-room, five-star hotel that opened in September as part of the South Beach mixed-use development.

The hotel, by renowned architects Foster + Partners together with design firm Aedas, is split into two parts.

In the taller South Tower, it takes up 21 floors. The higher levels, up to the 45th floor, are residential homes, which have yet to be launched.

At the adjacent six-storey-high Padang Terrace, hotel rooms take up four floors, from the second to fifth level.

At the top is an infinity pool.



Visitors check in at the reception area in the South Tower. All of the seven desks are glass-encased, and their respective decor reflects different types of societies, such as European, Peranakan or Moorish.

Communal spaces are a recurring feature in this hotel. Starck's designs of round or long tables mean that strangers at the hotel often have to share spaces.

A stylish spot to hang out at is a 7m-long arabascato marble table in the lobby area, decorated with Starck's iconic Ghost Chairs, barely there furniture made of transparent or lightly coloured plastic.

The rooms, filled with mirrors and metallic surfaces, have a muted design. Room rates start from \$450 a night.

There are also three women-only floors - two are on the 5th and 10th floor of the South Tower, and the third is on the 5th floor of the Padang

At the entrance of the hotel is a video wall on which



LED screens (above) show South Korean artist Lee Lee Terrace.  
Nam's works.

These floors are fitted with double doors that can be accessed only with key cards, and are tended to by female butlers only.



The South Beach

---

SPH Digital News / Copyright © 2015 Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Co. Regn. No. 198402868E.  
All rights reserved | Terms & Conditions | Data Protection Policy

LED screens (above) show South Korean artist Lee Lee Terrace.  
Nam's works.

These floors are fitted with double doors that can be accessed only with key cards, and are tended to by female butlers only.



The South Beach

---

SPH Digital News / Copyright © 2015 Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Co. Regn. No. 198402868E.  
All rights reserved | Terms & Conditions | Data Protection Policy