

The Victoria Theatre and Memorial Hall (维多利亚剧院及维多利亚纪念堂): Architectural and Cultural Icons

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The Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall symbolises Singapore's ambition to establish itself as a global city of culture and entertainment. Here are the stories of the two architectural icons, which have borne witness to many cultural and arts performances and key historical moments in Singapore.

Early History

The Singapore Town Hall was erected in the second half of the 19th Century as a “place of public meeting and social reunion”. Besides public meetings, dances and other social functions, the old Town Hall served as a popular venue for amateur theatricals while the acoustic quality of its upper room made it ideal for concert performances. Till 1905, the Town Hall was the centre of social and cultural functions, particularly theatricals, both professional and amateur.

With the passing of Queen Victoria in 1901, authorities in Singapore decided to build a new building next to the Town Hall in her memory. The foundation of the Victoria Memorial Hall was laid in 1902 and the building was officially opened by the Governor of the Straits Settlement, Sir John Anderson on 18 October 1905. The Hall, designed by Major Alexander Murray and the Public Works Department, was meant to be linked to the Town Hall, a feat completed by 1909 after renovations to the latter to convert it into a theatre. The first event held at the Hall was a gala ball to celebrate King Edward VII's birthday.

World Wars

In the early 19th century and during World War I, the Victoria Theatre was used for various purposes. Charity and fund-raising concerts were quite common as were film screenings, plays and concerts by travelling soloists and local troupes.

The St Clair organ, named after Major W. G. St. Clair, founder of the old Philharmonic Society and the first editor of the *Singapore Free Press*, was installed in the Victoria Memorial Hall and officially launched in a grand opening concert in 1932, which involved a chorus of 130 and an orchestra of 40.

The opportunity of having a new location for musical activities and the inspiration from the installation of the new organ, brought about the rebirth of the old Philharmonic Society as the Singapore Musical Society. With its 616 comfortable “tub” chairs, broad elevated platform that ran the entire width of the hall, and pipe organ at the rear of the platform, the Victoria Memorial Hall was an ideal location for musical concerts involving a large number of performers. The earliest music making in Singapore can be attributed to the colonial society, which met regularly for rehearsals and concerts at the old Victoria Memorial Hall.

In 1935, the Education Department engaged Glan Williams, the first Master of Music to oversee music teaching in schools. Although there was a shortage of music teachers (and many schools could not teach the subject), music was made available to the young through regular concerts for schools held at the Victoria Memorial Hall.

In 1937, the theatre was entirely renovated and fitted with a new curtain, switchboard and concealed lighting to make it more attractive.

During the Japanese occupation the Memorial Hall was used as a hospital for victims of bombing raids by the Japanese forces.

Post World War II

The Victoria Theatre and Memorial Hall continued to play a crucial role in the cultural life of the local population. They were the venues of prominent cultural and arts events like the annual Festival of Arts as well as the Cultural Festival.

They were also featured in the political scene as well. On 21 November 1954, the People's Action Party was founded at an inaugural conference held at the Memorial Hall that was attended by 1,500 supporters and trade unionists. The party went on to contest the 1955 elections, winning three seats, including one for its leader, Lee Kuan Yew. The Hall also hosted the first party conference and anniversary celebrations in 1955.

In 1954, plans to modernise the Theatre and Memorial Hall were put in place. Due to delays in the construction, the opening day of the new theatre was postponed several times until late 1958. The new theatre, which retained its older façade, was described as the finest in the East, with a 45-foot wide stage and air-conditioned hall that could seat 900.

In 1958, Ong Pang Boon, the Deputy Mayor of the City Council of Singapore, approached Zubir Said, then a score arranger and songwriter with Cathay-Keris Film Productions, to compose a theme song for the Council's official functions. The song was titled *Majulah Singapura* (Malay for "Onward Singapore"). The phrase was chosen as it was a motto to be displayed in the Victoria Theatre after its renovations in 1958.

The completed composition was first performed on 6 September 1958 by the Singapore Chamber Ensemble during the grand finale of the official opening concert in Victoria Theatre. When Singapore attained self-government in 1959, the City Council song was selected to be the national anthem as it was already popular then.

In August 1968, the National Theatre Company made its debut at the Victoria Theatre with a concert that featured the 35-piece Singapore National Orchestra, the 27-member National Theatre Company Chinese Orchestra and the 50-voice strong National Theatre Company Choir.

Its patron, the then-President Yusof bin Ishak, said in a message, "This event marks an important milestone in the road toward realising a music of our own which will be truly reflective of our peoples' mood and aspirations."

In 1979, the Memorial Hall was renovated again to accommodate the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), and was then renamed the Victoria Concert Hall. Additional works continued up to the 1980s, which saw the addition of a gallery to the Concert Hall, an increase in seating capacity (to 883), a stage could hold a 100-member orchestra as well as enclosing the second storey balconies on the front and back facades with glass. The SSO's

first concert was held at the Hall on 1 October 1980 with the then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew gracing the occasion as guest-of-honour.

The Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall was gazetted as a national monument on 14 February 1992. Hence, its façade and internal structures have to be preserved.

Present

By 2009, about 180 concerts by various orchestras and school groups had been staged at the Concert Hall, while the Victoria Theatre had hosted about 200 shows a year by local and foreign groups as well as school and community groups.

The Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall were closed for refurbishment in 2011. The National Arts Council (NAC) announced that Victoria Theatre would undergo extensive refurbishment costing S\$180 million that would conserve the building's heritage elements while providing improved facilities and performance spaces for the artists at the same time. However, it was revealed that the major overhaul in the 1950s had significantly altered the 150-year-old building's facade and interior. The design unveiled in July 2011 paid homage to the building's original design with a modern, 21st century touch. The refurbished theatre will be able to seat about 600 people and maximise the performers' engagement with audiences. To enhance the theatre's acoustic feel, parts of the chairs will be dismantled and used to form horizontal bands across the timber walls. Unlike the theatre, the Concert Hall will undergo minimal restoration, as it is still in relatively good condition. The project is expected to be completed by October 2013.

Benson Puah, Chief Executive Officer of the NAC and the Esplanade, said, "Victoria Concert Hall and Victoria Theatre have been such strong visual monuments for all Singaporeans. Part of what we hope to achieve in the rejuvenation of this cultural civic district, is [so] Singaporeans can enjoy this entire precinct."

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