

Icons of the Times

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“In this forward-looking state of mind and in our enthusiasm for urban renewal, we may wake up one day to find our historic monuments either bulldozed or crumbling to dust through neglect. As new Singapore is being built, we must not let the worthwhile part of older Singapore disappear, and the time has therefore come for us to take stock of what we have of the past and seek to preserve objects and buildings that will remind us of our heritage...this piece of legislation will, we hope, assist in preserving for the benefit of our future, the buildings, monuments and sites that have been associated with people, events and periods in our history.”

Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker, 4 November 1970, at the second reading of the Preservation of Monuments Bill

The Preservation of Sites and Monuments was established in 1971. It was then known as the Preservation of Monuments Board, tasked with identifying structures of national significance to be recommended for gazette as national monuments. In 1973, the first gazettes took place. Forty-eight years later, 72 national monuments attest to Singapore’s diversity as well as to its progress. This assortment of built tangible heritage traces the transition from early beginnings; its colonial settlement to sovereign state.

While there is evidence of 14th century establishments, the island had approximately a thousand inhabitants by January 1819, mostly from riverine settlements (Turnbull 2009, 24–25). On 6 February 1819, Stamford Raffles met with Temenggong Abdul Rahman and Sultan Hussein Shah of Johor to secure the rights for the British East India Company to establish a trading post in



Figure 1. Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, 2012. The mosque was among the eight national monuments preserved in the first ever gazette in 1973. The others were The Armenian Church of St Gregory the Illuminator, Sri Mariamman Temple, Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, Thian Hock Keng, St Andrew’s Cathedral, Former Telok Ayer Market and Former Thong Chai Medical Institution.

Image courtesy of Preservation of Sites and Monuments, National Heritage Board.

Singapore in exchange for monetary compensation (Turnbull 2009, 29–30). This set the trajectory for the island in terms of infrastructural development and systems of governance that would enhance its ambitions.

The bulk of the gazetted monuments from this phase of early Singapore was constructed as a result of colonial planning, while others came to exist with the influx of communities of immigrants over time. The latter would have included the diaspora of Armenians, Chinese, Indians, Jews, and the diverse peoples such as Malays, Bugis, Javanese from the surrounding archipelagos. There would have been a natural, if not spiritual instinct to build a house of worship, on what was one of the original shorelines at Telok Ayer Street. Today, this street bears witness to that transplanted devotion of the early diaspora as well as to their respective sense of community and brotherhood. The Al-Abrar mosque (built 1850–55), Thian Hock Keng (built 1839–42), Nagore Dargah (built 1828–30), and Telok Ayer Chinese Methodist Church (built 1924)

are all located within a few steps of one another. Perhaps we could infer that racial and religious tolerance had early roots.

Members of the Western community, including the elite who were appointed to their duties under the colonial government would have worshipped at St Andrew's Cathedral (originally built 1835–36, rebuilt 1856–64). Apart from the architectural language and tropical synthesis, a number of these buildings responded to the functional needs of the time. Singapore was a fast growing entrepôt. As a nascent port city, the notion of making it liveable as part of its burgeoning success as well as its imaging was a strategic vision. The iconic landmarks that necklaced the Padang would impress any approaches by sea to the island. The 1822 Raffles Town Plan envisioned the area along the Singapore River for public offices, and allocated land use along ethnic lines (Buckley 1965, 74–79). While the town plan was never realised in full, elements of it were to shape the urban development of Singapore. Today, these



Figure 2. Former Parliament House, 1954. Important Acts passed in parliament include the National Service (amendment) Bill introduced by Dr Goh Keng Swee in 1967, the Women's Charter introduced by Kenneth Byrne in 1961 as well as the Preservation of Monuments Act introduced by E. W. Barker, passed in 1970 and commenced in 1971. Image from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

sectors of British town planning are landmarked by various monuments—remnants of a much more sprawling, though segregated, historic urban development.

The best of plans do fail, and due to administrative disagreement, Scottish merchant John Argyle Maxwell's house, which had been intended as his residence, ended up being rented to the government for various uses, including as courthouse and public office. Built in 1827, it stands as the oldest structure in existence today in Singapore, albeit with major alterations over time (Buckley 1965, 74–79).

In 1955, when Singapore achieved partial self-governance, the building underwent renovation and became known as the Assembly House. When Singapore became independent in 1965, it became known as the Parliament House. The first parliamentary session was opened by our

first President President Yusof bin Ishak on 8 December 1965. Within the building is a room that was originally painted blue. Here, our founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, held less formal meetings with his cabinet members. It was also a space to relax in between debate sessions. Today, this building is referred to as “Old Parliament House” (since the “new” Parliament building started operating from 1999), or OPH—conveying its new and hip function as a cultural and performing centre. On the second floor lies a symbol of peace, the Tudor rose carved out of a sandstone block, from Victoria Tower in the Palace of Westminster, which had seen World War II damage. Colonial-Secretary in London, A. Lennox-Boyd, presented it to David Marshall in 1955. He expressed that the stone would be a “political symbol of the close and affectionate understanding between the British and Singapore people.”

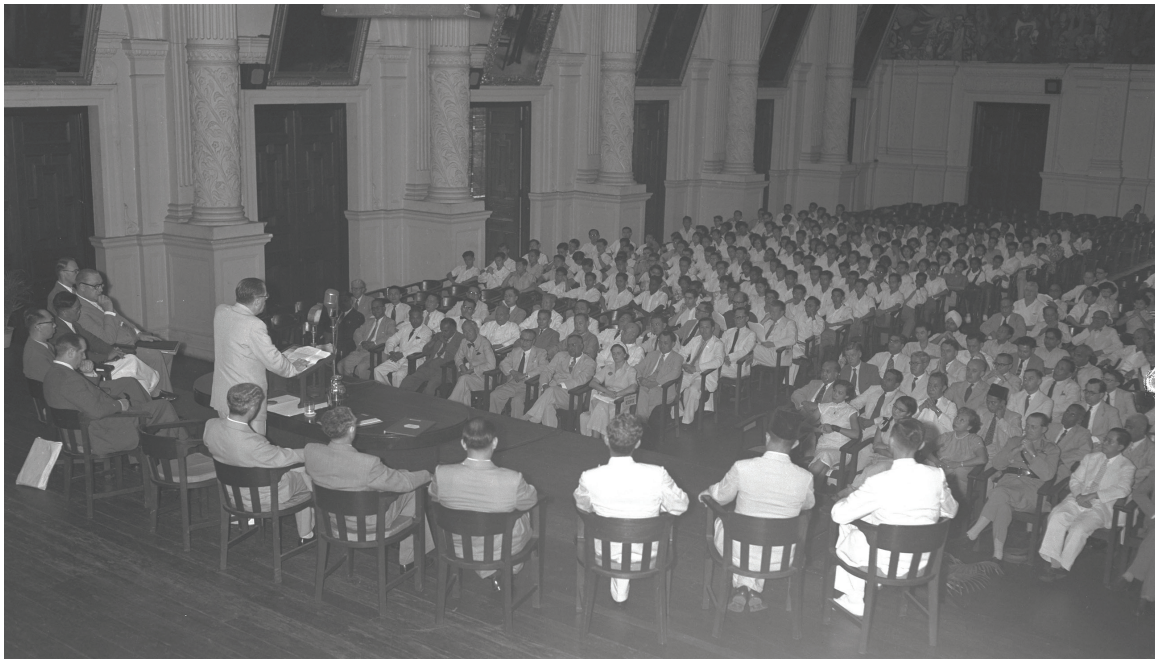


Figure 3. Victoria Concert Hall, 1953. On 11 November 1953, the Rendel Commission (nine-men team reviewing the constitution of Singapore) held its inaugural public meeting in Victoria Memorial Hall (now Victoria Concert Hall). Image from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

A stone's throw away is the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall (Theatre (originally the Townhall) built 1855–62, Concert Hall (originally Memorial Hall) built 1903–05). Its 54-metre¹ clock-tower is juxtaposed between its near-symmetrical wings, belying their independent origins and the 40-over years between them. The Victoria Theatre was originally the Town Hall. It was only when a decision was made to commemorate the life of Queen Victoria, who had passed away in 1901, that a foundation stone was laid during King Edward VII's coronation celebration on 10 August 1902 for a separate and additional building. Upon the completion of this Memorial Hall, the Town Hall was modified to align with the design of the new wing.

During the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945), the Victoria Theatre was the venue for Japanese cultural entertainment. Post-war, the Memorial Hall witnessed war crime trials from 1946–47. Of the many important meetings held there, there were two public meetings of the Rendel Commission in 1953 and 1955, which reviewed the Constitution of the Colony of Singapore and ultimately paved the way for Singapore's independence.

On 6 September 1958, the original version of *Majulah Singapura* debuted at a concert to celebrate the re-opening of the Victoria Theatre. In 1980, the Victoria Memorial Hall was re-opened as the Victoria Concert Hall by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, signalling its current use as the home of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

This neo-classical building with elaborate mouldings of fruit, floral garlands, and Latin monogrammed cartouches for “Victoria, Regina Imperatrix” witnessed key milestones in the transition to Singapore's independence.

Another monument viewed in this light is the former Government House—known as the Istana—

and the office of the President of Singapore today. Government House had been the official residence of a succession of colonial governors (Tyers 1976, 156). William A.C. Goode was Singapore's last colonial governor, serving from 9 December 1957—June 1959. He became Singapore's first Yang di-Pertuan Negara (head of state) when Singapore achieved internal self-government on 3 June 1959 and was succeeded by Yusof bin Ishak, later to be Singapore's first President.

A short distance away sits the colonnaded former City Hall (built 1926–29). As the largest colonial neo-classical icon to have ever been built in Singapore at that time, it functioned as the municipal building of the colonial office. On 12 September 1945, the Japanese military surrendered to the Allied Forces in the boardroom of the building, commonly referred to as the “Surrender Chamber”, ending the terrible Occupation that had begun on 15 February 1942. In 1951, when Singapore was proclaimed a city by the Royal Charter granted by King George VI, it was renamed City Hall. Years later, this was where Lee Kuan Yew established his nascent government. This was also where he employed his oratorical skills to inspire the public, punching the air with his fists and igniting the aspirations of nationhood with cries of “*Merdeka!*” (Malay, “to be independent or free”).

The former City Hall and the former Supreme Court (b.1937–39) are the last two vestiges of colonial grandeur. These buildings, which contributed to the dignity of the civic district and the British-defined image of the city, are the two largest monuments standing today in the civic district. They are both clad with Shanghai plaster—a unique type of plaster finish composed of granulated granite, sand and cement. From a distance, this building surface treatment would have given the impression of an expensive building, when in fact, the *faux* stone was a very economical material, never requiring painting.

However, unlike the City Hall, the Supreme Court introduced elements of tropical design. So classical western architecture—the dome (there are in fact, three), the sculptured tympanum, loggias, pediments, balustrades and statuary—contrasts with bas-reliefs documenting colonial life in the tropics. These bas-reliefs are a departure from Greek frieze tradition, which tend to feature mythical figures or which commemorated epic battles and their respective victors.

The bas-relief panels wrap around the porch of the Supreme Court and offer visuals of the businesses that contributed to the early economies of the time: fishing, trade, agriculture and farming, rubber tapping etc. All these activities are keenly supervised by colonial figures. There is one panel that is pertinent to 2019. It features a scene of possibly Raffles or Farquhar being rowed ashore by locals. The next scene illustrates the meeting of the Temenggong and/or Sultan Hussein Shah with the British to establish a settlement on the island in 1819, with the last panel interpreting this as paving the way for trade to grow (Wee and Foo 2016, 34). We know from the documentation that the sculpting of these bas-reliefs were by Alex Wagstaff, son of a pre-war Shanghai sculptor, W.W. Wagstaff (Wee and Foo 2016, 34). He had captured the multi-racial demographic through

facial features and clothing, as well as representations of people from all walks of life. Perhaps this reflected the spirit of the times, where recognising local contributions, skills, labour, and artistry facilitated a greater sense of integration. However, after the war, the spirit of the times had evolved, and the clarion calls for independence grew incessant. The former Supreme Court stands as the final grand built legacy of the British.

On the remains of Fort Fullerton sits the Former Fullerton Building (built 1928). It had been commissioned in 1919 as part of the centenary celebration of Singapore's founding (*The Straits Times* 1919; *Singapore Centenary: A Souvenir Volume* 1919). This neo-classical building's angularity allows it to fully maximise its tight footprint at the mouth of the Singapore River. An imposing structure which also functioned as the General Post Office, it was ahead of its time on many fronts. Its lower levels comprised a cavernous interior that had natural air wells for ventilation and light. It had 14 lifts and an automated mail-sorting system, complete with a conveyor belt to efficiently direct mail packages to the basement. There was also a 35-metre-long subway, linking the basement floor to the Post Office Pier at the waterfront where overseas mail could be expediently brought to shore (*The Straits Times* 1928).



Figure 4. Former Supreme Court, 2015. The 1819 Treaty of Singapore in bas-relief Shanghai plastered panels at the former Supreme Court. Image courtesy of Preservation of Sites & Monuments, National Heritage Board.

The Singapore Club, located on the upper floors of the building, was the exclusive reserve of the British upper echelon. In the lead-up to the Japanese Occupation, it served as shelter for Sir Shenton Thomas, the last governor, as Government House was affected by air raids. It was also here that A.E Percival conveyed the humiliating news of the decision to surrender to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. The rest of the building served as a makeshift hospital in the last days before the surrender. During the Occupation, the Chinese presented a cheque of \$50 million here as part of the demands for recompense by the Japanese. Following Singapore's self-governance, the Deputy Prime Minister's office, as well as many important civil servants' offices, were located there. This included the Economic Development Board, which was formed in 1961 to strategise Singapore's economic development, and the Inland Revenue Department.



Figure 5. Former Fullerton Building during the 1920s.
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore,
National Heritage Board.



Figure 6. Former Fullerton Building, 2015. Projections on the façade of former Fullerton Building during Singapore's Jubilee celebration in 2015.
Image courtesy of Fullerton Hotel Singapore.

Any preservation effort should aim for a comprehensive historical storyline reflective of the urban development of a city. Our monuments tell of unique as well as collective histories, referencing contexts and people of those times. Almost all of them offer public engagement opportunities and access to explore them afresh. The bicentennial offers us the opportunity to look into their past even as we move into the future. For as important as they are as national treasures, it would auger well too, if they are also venues for personal milestones for generations of Singaporeans to come. □

More information on National Monuments
can be found on roots.sg website.

Notes

- ¹. 53.536 m based on the approved Urban Redevelopment Authority drawings for Victoria Theatre.

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