

Historic Building Appraisal

Yau Ma Tei Theatre

Waterloo Road, Yau Ma Tei, Kowloon

Built around 1930, Yau Ma Tei Theatre (油麻地戲院) was one of the precursors in the film industry. In its early days it featured silent films before 1935 when sound movies were not introduced to the industry. Over the years, the theatre had long been targeting at the grassroots because the area was a community consisted of lower class people such as coolies working in the adjacent Wholesale Fruit Market and boat people living in the nearby typhoon shelter.

***Historical
Interest***

The theatre kept running during wartime. At the beginning of the Japanese Occupation (1941 – 1945), most of the cinemas were temporarily closed down. By 1943, 28 of them were reopened but the films were censored by the Japanese. At that time, the owners of these 28 cinemas formed a group called "Hong Kong Kowloon Cinema Group" (香九戲院組合). They divided the cinemas into five categories aiming to schedule the sequence of films showing and to fix ticket prices. Yau Ma Tei Theatre was on the lowest fifth class.

The theatre reached its peak in the 1960s when movie-going became a prime leisure activity in Hong Kong. It was one of the cinemas showing the very popular Shaws (邵氏) productions of the time, and had to employ more than 20 staff for daily operation. The final years of the theatre saw its decline into a tawdry and disreputable establishment which finally closed its doors for the last time in 1998. It has been restored and undergone adaptive re-use.

The theatre is a pitched roof single-storey building consisting of a long auditorium with a two-storey entrance hall or foyer and projection room at the front facing Waterloo Road. Interesting architectural features are the gables and the front pediment which is decorated by Art Deco adornments. The front facade facing Waterloo Road features an interesting Neo-classical round-arched Palladian style Diocletian blind or blank window with stepped voussoirs. Concealed classical style columns featuring performance masks have been discovered on either side of the main entrance.

***Architectural
Merit***

The theatre is the only surviving pre-World War II cinema premises known in Kowloon. Its rarity and the fact that it still survives give it built heritage value. It is also one of the few historic buildings and landmarks still left in Yau Ma Tei. The theatre has been restored, with the historical ambience retained.

***Rarity, Built
Heritage Value &
Authenticity***

The theatre's social value and local interest lie in its importance as a place of

Social Value

entertainment for the working classes and residents in the area. Its role as a centre of entertainment was particularly significant in the 1950s to the 1970s when the Hong Kong film industry was at its peak. It had great recreational, cultural and leisure significance to the local community. ***& Local Interest***

Yau Ma Tei Theatre is within walking distance of other historic buildings, such as the Yau Ma Tei Wholesale Fruit Market (油麻地果欄, Grade 2), the former Pumping Station of Water Supplies Department (舊水務署抽水站, Grade 1), Yau Ma Tei Police Station (油麻地警署, Grade 2), Tin Hau Temple (天后古廟, Grade 1) on Temple Street and Tung Wah Museum (東華三院文物館, Declared Monument). ***Group Value***