

**Historic Building Appraisal**  
**Former State Theatre,**  
**Junction of King's Road and Tin Chong Street, North Point, H.K.**

The Empire Theatre (璇宮戲院) was opened on 11 December 1952 by Sir *Historical* Arthur Morse (摩士爵士) (1892–1967), Manager of the Hong Kong and *Interest* Shanghai Banking Corporation. It was built at a cost of HK\$2.5 million by the Commonwealth Enterprises Corporation, Ltd. (萬國影片公司), the Managing Director of which was Harry Odell (歐德禮, 1896–1975).<sup>1</sup> The Empire Theatre changed to State Theatre (皇都戲院) in 1959.

The Empire Theatre was equipped with the state-of-the-art sound and projection equipment, giant screen, spacious seats, air-conditioned foyer for patrons and back-of-stage facilities, with a capacity of 1,046 seats, and a dress circle with 406 seats. It was constructed in an atmosphere that there was a surge in the provision of large cinema halls with multi-purpose flexibility. There were about 20 theatres by the 1950s having over 1,000 seats, equivalent to the scale of the Empire Theatre.<sup>2</sup> The opening ceremony of the Empire

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Oscar Odell arrived in Hong Kong after 1918, when he started an import-export business and also served as a volunteer with the Naval Reserve. He was wounded during the Battle of Hong Kong in 1941 and became a prisoner-of-war. At the end of the war, he started a film distribution business and became a Hong Kong theatre impresario. He was awarded Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1969 in recognition of his contribution to Hong Kong's cultural life.

<sup>2</sup> By the 1950s, there were about 20 theatres on Hong Kong Island. Ten of them, which had a capacity of over 1,000 seats, were established between the late 1940s and 1950s. They included the Roxy Theatre (樂聲戲院) (1949–1974 with 1,713 seats), Capitol Theatre (京華戲院) (1952–1977 with 1,187 seats) and Hoover Theatre (豪華戲院) (1954–1981 with 1,483 seats) in Causeway Bay, China Theatre (中華戲院) (1948–1952 with 1,200 seats), Globe Theatre (環球戲院) (1950–1971 with 1,158 seats), New York Theatre (紐約戲院) (1955–1982 with 1,409 seats) and Hong Kong Grand Theatre (香港大舞台) (1958–1976 with 1,243 seats) in Wan Chai, Kam Ling Theatre (金陵戲院) in Sai Ying Pun (1951–1973 with 1,411 seats) and Winner Theatre (永華戲院) (1954–? with 1,134 seats) and Golden Star Theatre (金星戲院) (1954–1972 with 1,160 seats) in Shau Kei Wan.

In addition to these theatres, around 10 theatres, all equipped with over 1,000 seats respectively, and opened before the war, including the Queen's Theatre (皇后戲院) (1924–1958 with 1,000 seats), Ko Sing Theatre (高陞戲院) (1928–1972 with 1,722 seats), Central Theatre (中央戲院) (1930–1971 with 1,296 seats), King's Theatre (娛樂戲院) (1931–1962 with 1,200 seats) and Tai Ping Theatre (太平戲院) (1932–1981 with 1,738 seats) in Central, Lee Theatre (利舞臺) (1927–1991 with 1,267 seats) in Causeway Bay, Oriental Theatre (東方戲院) (1932–1981 with 1,106 seats) and National Theatre (國民戲院) (1940–1973 with 1,058 seats) in Wan Chai, were still operating at that time.

Theatre was attended by some 1,000 guests who saw the debut Hollywood film “Just For You” (高歌艷舞樂璇宮) starring Bing Crosby (冰·哥羅士比) and Jane Wyman (珍·惠文).<sup>3</sup>

Between 1957 and 1959, a major extension was built immediately adjacent to the theatre building, comprising a multi-storey residential block, shops on G/F, a night club and a pedestrian corridor connecting the new multi-storey block with the theatre.<sup>4</sup> After renovation works, the renamed “State Theatre” (皇都戲院) re-opened on 14 February 1959 with the debut movie “Spring Song” (青春兒女) starring Grace Chang (葛蘭), Lin Chui (林翠), Chen Ho (陳厚) and Chiao Hung (喬宏).

By 1950, North Point had become a popular place for entertainment, having the nickname “Little Shanghai” (小上海) as a result of the southern migration of Shanghai refugees who brought with them not only capital but also varied forms of entertainment. This created a favourable environment for the operation of the Empire Theatre and later the State Theatre. From 1960, the State Theatre showed first run English language films which were particularly more affordable<sup>5</sup> and thus popular among the better-off with higher education level. Films such as Lawrence of Arabia (沙漠梟雄) and The Sound of Music (仙樂飄飄處處聞) were shown at the State Theatre. The theatre, however, faced strong competition from other similar size theatres. In October 1966, for instance, the State Theatre was ranked the tenth in box-office records

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<sup>3</sup> Bing Crosby (1903 – 1977) was an American actor and singer whose trademark bass-baritone voice made him one of the best-selling recording artists of the twentieth century; whilst Jane Wyman (1917–2007), the first wife of the former US President Ronald Reagan, was a singer, dancer and actress.

<sup>4</sup> Compared to the former Empire Theatre, the floor area of the newly-renovated theatre was smaller than before because its ground floor was converted into arcade shops and offices with a small part remaining as a theatre lobby that was connected with the shopping mall in the adjacent block. The auditorium is set back from the site boundary, the intervening space being taken up by shops, the main foyer, ticket booths and staircases.

<sup>5</sup> The ticket rate of a first run English film at the Empire Theatre in 1956 was: Lodge Seats (箱座) for \$3.5, Dress Circle (超等) for \$3.0, Dress Circle Back for \$2.4, Stadium Seats (廳座) for \$1.7, Back Stall (後座) for \$1.2 and Front Stalls (前座) for \$0.7; that of the State Theatre in 1968 ranged from \$1.5 to \$3.5..

In 1956, the daily wages of a skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workman were approximately \$7.00 – \$12.00, \$5.00 – \$8.00 and \$3.00 – \$6.00 respectively. In 1968, the daily wages of a skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workman were approximately \$11.00 – \$33.00, \$6.40 – \$24.00 and \$5.60 – \$14.50 respectively. Some highly skilled workers in engineering and other trades approximately received from \$15.00 to \$18.00 a day.

among other theatres showing first run English language films on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon, or the fifth coming after the top four on Hong Kong Island, namely Hoover Theatre (豪華戲院), Lee Theatre (利舞臺), Queen's Theatre (皇后戲院) and King's Theatre (娛樂戲院). From the 1970s until its final closure on 28 February 1997, movies produced in Mandarin and Cantonese sound-tracks were the main features of the State Theatre.

Apart from showing films, the Empire / State Theatre was also a venue for a variety of performance. Due to the lack of other international quality concert halls in Hong Kong until the opening of the City Hall in 1962, the Empire / State Theatre was an important venue for recitals. The ticket price for a recital in 1953, for instance, ranged from around \$5 to \$20, equivalent to almost the daily salary to weekly salary of an unskilled worker of the 1950s. Famous visiting artists of the Empire Theatre and later the State Theatre included: British tenor Peter Pears (accompanied by Benjamin Britten, piano), Katherine Dunham's Broadway dance company and the Taiwanese pop singer Teresa Teng. It was also a venue for charity fundraising films and performances, occasionally with the then Governor of Hong Kong, for example, Sir Alexander Grantham (1947-57) and Sir Robert Brown Black (1958-64), being the guests.

In fact, Cantonese opera was also performed in the Empire Theatre and later the State Theatre. However, with its focus on Western performances, neither the Empire Theatre nor the State Theatre was expected to be a popular venue for the performance of Cantonese opera, even though Cantonese opera was a popular folk art in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup>

The joint architects of the Empire Theatre were George W. Grey, FRIBA, FRICS and S.F. Lew (劉新科).<sup>7</sup> Architecturally, the most

*Architectural  
Merit*

<sup>6</sup> The Lee Theatre (利舞臺), Hong Kong Grand Theatre (香港大舞台) and Ko Sing Theatre (高陞戲院) on Hong Kong Island and Po Hing Theatre (普慶戲院) in Kowloon were the major theatres for the performance of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong before City Hall (大會堂) was opened in 1962. City Hall also became one of the important venues for Cantonese opera in 1963.

<sup>7</sup> George W. Grey, Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects (FRIBA) and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (FRICS), was President of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (Hong Kong and China Branch) in 1950. He was also a member of the Institute of Structural Engineers. Since 1926, Grey was in charge of the Architectural Department of the Hongkong Realty and Trust Co. Ltd. This firm designed the Exchange Building in Des Voeux Road Central in 1924 (now demolished and become the site of The Landmark) and the Peninsula Hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui in 1928. It also constructed

remarkable features are the reinforced concrete arch beam roof structure and its vertical hangers,<sup>8</sup> which suspend a reinforced concrete paneled roof over the auditorium; an unusual treatment is that the arch beam structure above the roof is left exposed to the weather.<sup>9</sup> The convex-shaped concrete roof is specially designed to improve the acoustics of the hall, while the arch beam system will enable the large span of the auditorium to remain clear of any obstructive interior pillars. Also the construction was intended to isolate the auditorium and projection room from outside traffic noise and vibrations. The provision of covered car parking facilities for customers was also a “first” in Hong Kong (but these car spaces were later converted to shops in the major alteration work in 1959).

The exterior of the building is in the Modernist style, of reinforced concrete frame structure and about seven-storey high, with long span curved beams suspending the roof to the auditorium. Flat roofs to the minor rooms around the perimeter. The dominant feature of the front elevation from street level, is the curved corner frontage, with a large decorative panel in high relief (浮雕), and projecting concrete frames, which resembles the form of a proscenium arch surrounding a cinema screen.<sup>10</sup> This design of the facade can maximise the impact of such a visually important corner site.

The main facade was symmetrical with wings on both sides of the central panel, the whole section being curved to follow the wide-angled street frontage.

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bungalows at Repulse Bay. S.F. Lew had pursued architectural studies in Britain and the United States.

<sup>8</sup> Some may like to describe this curved roof structure as “parabolic roof trusses”. For instance, an article entitled “The New Empire Theatre,” in Henry Graye (ed.) *The Hongkong and Far East Builder*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (July-September 1951) reads, “There are two points of particular interest about this Empire Theatre:- 1) that it will be the first cinema which will provide underground parking facilities for its patrons; and 2) type of construction, the use of parabolic roof trusses to carry the reinforced concrete roof slabs over the auditorium.”

<sup>9</sup> “The use of parabola-like arches to hold up a roof by hangers in a formally free way was early proposed by Le Corbusier in his competition entry for the Soviet Palace (Moscow, Russia 1930, not executed)”. Report on Preservation of the State Theatre in Hong Kong and its possible nomination on a Heritage List, Prof. Jos Tomlow. (Docomomo Specialist Committee) 10 March 2016.

<sup>10</sup> The high relief above the front entrance of the State Theatre depicts the ancient Chinese story of “The imperial warlord Dong Zhuo and the legendary beauty Diao Chan” (蟬迷董卓). It was designed by Mui Yu-tin (梅與天), a prominent local artist and a master of the Lingnan School of Painting (嶺南畫派) who was reputed for his success in combining Chinese painting with Western techniques, to develop a unique personal style.

Unfortunately, the right-hand wing of the façade containing three rows of three square windows, was covered up after the alterations in 1959 (perhaps as a rain-proofing measure), and this has affected the symmetry of the façade. These small square windows with projecting concrete frames are very typical of the 1950s Modernist architecture. The existing condition of the building external is rather dilapidated although the roof structure and remainder of structural elements appear in good condition.

The main internal space is the auditorium on the first floor which is approximately 20 metres high from the stage level to the ceiling, and it incorporates the main stalls seating area and a dress circle above. The original inclined floors for the seating have been boarded over to make level for the snooker tables, which occupies the whole length of the main auditorium to serve the new use as a snooker centre. However, the old dress circle is no longer in use.

On second floor, there still exists the former Empire Billiard Saloon which was in operation prior to 1958, and is now known as the VIP snooker room which is still in use. There are four main staircases serving the building, together with a passenger lift. The original plasterwork is still in place at various locations, which features a simple shallow stepped cornice decoration, typical of Art Deco design. Nonetheless, there are also many cover-ups by new furnishings and false ceilings.

The building is now the oldest international-class theatre existing in Hong Kong, as well as being the third oldest of all Hong Kong's theatre buildings (please see [Annex](#)). International cinema halls of this scale in a standalone theatre building are now rare in Hong Kong, due to the economic requirements for specialist "mini-theatres" located within mega malls. Within the last 20 years, there were similar size theatres still operating, for example, King's Theatre (娛樂戲院), Queen's Theatre (皇后戲院), Central Theatre (中央戲院), Roxy Theatre (樂聲戲院) and Lee Theatre (利舞臺), but now have been redeveloped.

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

Architecturally, there is no other cinema in Hong Kong that has adopted a reinforced concrete external arch-beam system. Basically, this design of roof structure supports the roof from above by means of hangers, allowing for a pillar-less auditorium. Some believe that it is the only one of its kind known

to exist in South-East Asia and possibly the whole world.<sup>11</sup> Apart from the alterations to the right-hand side of the building in 1959, the external appearance and structure of the building has been largely unchanged.

Regarding the interior, with its conversion into a snooker centre, none of the furnishing or fittings related to cinema screening (including cinema seats, lights, stage, screen and camera equipment, etc.) could now be found. The interior has also received many improvements or alternations required to keep up-to-date with safety requirements. However, such works have not permanently compromised the structural elements of the building and the internal spaces of the State Theatre (including the auditorium, dress circle, lobbies, etc.) remain intact.

The Empire Theatre and later the State Theatre were one of the major Hong Kong venues for concerts and live entertainment, particularly significant in the 1950s, before the present City Hall came into operation in 1962. The other alternative venues for similar entertainment at that time were Po Hing Theatre (普慶戲院) in Yaumatei, Tai Ping Theatre (太平戲院) in Sai Ying Pun and Lee Theatre (利舞臺) in Causeway Bay, but all of which have now been demolished.

***Social Value  
& Local  
Interest***

In North Point, apart from the State Theatre, there were five other popular theatres, namely Metrople Theatre (都城戲院) (1954-63), Odeon Theatre (國賓戲院) (1963-1981), Olympia Theatre (國都戲院) (1965-1995), Sunbeam Theatre (新光戲院) (1972-) and Golden Hung Kai Theatre (金鴻基戲院) (1986-1995). Among them, the State Theatre is the only surviving standalone theatre building. It has been a local landmark along the busy tramway for around six decades and was featured both in a film in 1978, *Game of Death* (Bruce Lee's final film) and a film in 1998 *The Longest Summer* (去年煙花特別多), directed by Fruit Chan (陳果).

The opening of the building in 1952 signified the development of the city moving further eastward to North Point. It also reflected the public's changing taste in cinema films and the emergence of Hong Kong's dynamic film-making industry, starting with mainly Hollywood productions in 1952, and moving on to local Hong Kong productions through the 1970s until 1997, when

<sup>11</sup> Letter dated 23 March 2016 from the International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings of the Modern Movement.

its final film shown before closure was a Golden Harvest production, “Mr Nice Guy” (一個好人), starring Jackie Chan (成龍).

About 25 shops on G/F of the theatre building were converted from the covered car parking facilities of the theatre in 1959. Many of them had changed hands or even closed down over the years. A shoe shop, a tailor shop and an eyewear shop are the oldest shops still operating now: with the former two starting from the early 1960s and the latest from the late 1960s.

The State Theatre is within walking distance from the former Clubhouse of Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club (前香港皇家遊艇會會所) (Grade 2), the Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Building (香港紅卍字會大樓) (Grade 2) and the Tin Hau Temple in Causeway Bay (銅鑼灣天后廟) (Declared Monument).

***Group Value***

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AnnexChecklist of Existing Cinema Halls

(This only includes self-contained cinema/theatre buildings, and not modern-style cinemas that are incorporated within larger building blocks and shopping malls)

No.	Cinema Hall	Address	Year of Completion
1	Yau Ma Tei Theatre (Grade 2) 油麻地戲院 (二級歷史建築物)	Waterloo Road, Yaumatei, Kowloon 九龍油麻地窩打老道	1930
2	Cheung Chau Theatre (Grade 3) 長洲戲院 (三級歷史建築物)	San Hing Back Street, Cheung Chau 長洲新興後街	1931
3	State Theatre (named the Empire Theatre) 皇都戲院 (前稱璇宮戲院)	Junction of King's Road and Tin Chong Street, North Point, H.K. 香港北角英皇道與電廠街交界	1952
4	Fanling Theatre (previously called Luen Wo Theatre) (Grade 3) 粉嶺戲院 (前稱聯和戲院) (三級歷史建築物))	1 Luen Fat Street, Fanling, N.T. 新界粉嶺聯發號 1 街	1953
5	Sai Kung Theatre 西貢戲院	Ye Chun Street, Sai Kung, N.T. 新界西貢宜春街	1958
6*	Yuen Long Theatre 元朗戲院	8-12 Yuen Long Pau Cheung Square / 2-16 Fook Tak Street, N.T. 新界元朗炮仗坊 8-12 號 / 福德街 2-16 號	1961
7	Lung Wah Theatre 龍華戲院	79 Yeung Uk Road, Tsuen Wan, N.T. 新界荃灣楊屋道 79 號	1962
8	Isis Theatre 新都戲院	11 Moreton Terrace, Causeway Bay, H.K. 香港銅鑼灣摩頓台 11 號	1966
9	Imperial Cinema 京都戲院	29 Burrows Street, Wan Chai, H.K. 香港灣仔巴路士街 29 號	1969
10	Kwun Tong Theatre 觀塘戲院	9 Tung Ming Street, Kwun Tong, Kowloon 九龍觀塘通明街 9 號	1970
11	Manning Theatre 萬年戲院	68-72 Yuk Wah Street, Tsz Wan Shan, Kowloon 九龍慈雲山毓華街 68-72 號	1973
12	Scala Theatre 帝后戲院	49 Shek Pai Wan Road, Aberdeen, H.K. 香港香港仔石排灣道 49 號	1974
13	Nam Cheong Theatre 南昌戲院	223-239 Nam Cheong Street, Shek Kip, Kowloon 九龍石硤尾南昌街 223-239 號	1974

No.	Cinema Hall	Address	Year of Completion
14	Prince Theatre 華聲戲院	181 Castle Peak Road, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon 九龍深水埗青山道 181 號	1975
15	Princess Theatre 樂聲戲院	162 Un Chau Street, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon. 九龍深水埗元州街 162 號	1975
16	Ace Theatre 帝國戲院	177-181 Ngau Tau Kok Road, Kowloon 九龍牛頭角道 177-181 號	1975
17	Peng Chau Theatre (Nil Grade) 坪洲戲院 (不予評級)	Wai Tsai Street, Peng Chau, N.T. 新界坪洲圍仔街	1978
18	Fortune Cinema 華富閣戲院	4 Wah Lok Path, Pok Fu Lam, H.K. 香港薄扶林華樂徑 4 號	1978
19	Golden Valley Theatre 金茂坪戲院	40 Hiu Kwong Street, Sau Mau Ping, Kowloon 九龍秀茂坪曉光街 40 號	1978
20	Cineplex Theatre 新樂戲院	131-133 Fuk Wing Street, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon 九龍深水埗福榮街 131-133 號	1980
21	Wing Wah Theatre 前榮華戲院	333 Chai Wan Road, Chai Wan, H.K. 香港柴灣柴灣道 333 號	1982
22	Golden Flower Theatre 金花戲院	50-56 Wo Yi Hop Road, Kwai Chung, N.T. 新界葵涌和宜合道 50-56 號	1982
23	Luen Wah Theatre 聯華戲院	11-15 Fung Kwan Street, Yuen Long, N.T. 新界元朗鳳群街 11-15 號	1983
24	Merryland Theatre 美都戲院	22 Fung Kam Street, Yuen Long, N.T. 新界元朗鳳琴街 22 號	1983
25	Acme Theatre 雅都戲院	7 Lek Yuen Street, Sha Tin, N.T. 新界沙田瀝源街 7 號	1984
26	Golden Dragon Theatre 金龍戲院	2 Shui Che Kwun Street, Yuen Long, N.T. 新界元朗水車館街 2 號	1984
27	Triumph Theatre 凱旋戲院	No. 139 Sai Lau Kok Road, Tsuen Wan, N.T. 新界荃灣西樓角路 139 號	1985
28*	Dynasty Theatre 豪華戲院	No. 4 Mong Kok Road, Kowloon 九龍旺角道 4 號	1991

\* still in operation