

Overlooked Heritage in Chinatown

By Prue Harrison

Who would have thought that a quaint, understated façade hiding along a chaotic main road in Chinatown could have such a rich cultural history behind it? The Majestic Theatre in Eu Tong Sen Street held performances of Cantonese Opera in the early 1930s, showed Cantonese films in the late 30s, Japanese propaganda films in the early 40s and Chinese films until 1998, when theatre operations ceased. The building became a shopping mall, almost became a food court and is now largely ignored, save for the curious few who browse at the curio shop or gaze at the shiny mosaic tiles depicting Cantonese opera scenes, flying dragons and the building's stark architecture.



The Majestic Theatre, as it looks today

The architecture, a mix of Chinese and western, intrigued me. It looked familiar and indeed it should. Its architects, Swan and MacLaren, are Singapore's oldest architectural firm. They also designed the Raffles Hotel, the Victoria Memorial Hall

and most recently, the National Library Building in Victoria Street.

I needn't have looked so far. Standing right next to the Majestic Theatre, although different in appearance, is another imposing Swan and MacLaren building, the once elegant and bustling Nam Tin Hotel, or Great Southern Hotel, which began service in 1936. At six storeys it was then the tallest building in Chinatown and also the first Chinese hotel with a lift, ending at a roof terrace. Home to rich Chinese immigrants and travellers after the 1940s, it was known as the *Raffles Hotel of Chinatown*. Inside these walls travellers and celebrities from China and Hong Kong enjoyed fashionable shopping, dining, cabaret, opera and the finest hospitality. Because of an explosion in the hospitality industry in the 1980s, the hotel lost its edge and became a rest-stop for budget Malaysian and Indonesian travellers, offering 40 rooms, each with just a double bed and ceiling fan. Given over to shopping in the mid 1990s and renamed Yue Hwa Building, it thrives today as an emporium of products from China, with only a small bronze sign indicating its once impressive tourism heritage.

While standing across the street and watching as throngs of people passed by both buildings, I found myself wanting to shout and tell them what gems they were overlooking, what buildings of history and beauty, for no-one seemed to even glance at them.

Down the road is the Swan and MacLaren-designed Telok Ayer Methodist Church. Built in 1924, it is one of the earliest Chinese Christian churches. This building was gazetted as a National Monument in 1989 and carefully restored in 1995. Its strict lines, no-nonsense façade, strip windows and



The Yue Hwa Building, as it looks today

smooth finish link it to the Majestic Theatre and the Yue Hwa Building. Today, a weekly congregation of 1,200 and six volunteer choirs keep the building alive. I asked one lady about the building's rich history as she was walking in and as I suspected, she was totally unaware of its being anything more than "... my church." My spirit was lifted at last. Although its architectural heritage might be

overlooked, its purpose remains true.

That set me thinking: how many historical Swan and MacLaren buildings in today's Singapore remain true to their original purpose? Care to take a walk with me one day and find out?



The Methodist Church, as it looks today

Prue Harrison arrived here from England in 1984 and since then has walked Singapore's streets and seen many changes in the architecture and landscape. Despite Singapore's modernity, it is the old buildings that capture her attention.

All photos courtesy of Attilio Rapisarda