Taylor & Francis Online

Fabrications ›
The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand
Volume 28, 2018 - Issue 2

247 Views | 1 CrossRef citations to date | 0 Altmetric

Articles

The Coliseum Theatre, Kuala Lumpur: A Site for Collective Engagement, A Space of Urban Imagination

Simone Shu-Yeng Chung

Pages 212-234 | Published online: 18 Jun 2018

Cite this article https://doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2018.1446657

Check for updates

Sample our Built Environment Journals
>> Sign in here to start your access to the latest two volumes for 14 days

Full Article Figures & data Citations Metrics Reprints & Permissions

Read this article Share

Abstract

Completed in 1920, the Coliseum Theatre holds the distinction of being the longest-running cinema in Malaysia. Located on a main thoroughfare in downtown Kuala Lumpur, it sits strategically on the territorial boundaries of the Indian Muslim textile trade, Chinese retail shops, and neighbourhood mosques. Throughout its near-centennial existence, the striking neoclassical building and its compound have continuously served as a social hub for British officers who patronised its eponymous café during the colonial era, the street vendors that occupied its square in the mid-twentieth century, an active migrant community of cinema-goers and, more recently, as a space of gathering for local supporters when the cinema came under threat of compulsory purchase by the federal government. The Coliseum's urban and social

history discloses its capacity to perform as a site showcasing a politics of accommodation behind this façade of modernist consumption. At the same time, visual spatial analysis demonstrates how its iconic architecture continues to exert a presence beyond its immediate surroundings, serving as a landmark for wayfinding at street level. This case study adumbrates the heterogeneous layers of unspoken tensions and sensitive negotiations that enrich our understanding of a historic building such as the Coliseum and its sociocultural significance beyond the architectural fact.

Acknowledgements

Research on the Coliseum cinema was conducted as part of the project Re-mappings, Re-constructions, Re-layering and Re-visits: Cinematic pasts as urban cultural resources at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. I wish to thank Khor Joo Saik Sdn. Bhd. and Coliseum Cinemas for furnishing me with vital information on the Coliseum, access to archival photographs and allowing me to conduct interviews with their staff, and Coliseum Lotus Five Star for permitting my team to survey the building. Fieldwork would be incomplete without consulting literature held in the Badan Warisan Negara’s Chen Voon Fee Resource Centre.

Notes

1. Covering the Malay Peninsula and island of Singapore, British Malaya formed part of the British colonial empire from the late eighteenth to mid-twentieth century. It consisted of: the Straits Settlements of Penang, Melaka and Singapore which were consolidated by the British East India Company in 1826 before becoming a Crown colony under direct British control in 1867; the Federated States of Selangor, Perak, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan collectively under British protection (1895–1946); and the Unfederated States of Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu. With the exception of Singapore (which briefly joined the federation of Malaysia in 1963 before becoming a republic in 1965), the remaining territories transitioned into the Malayan Union in 1948 after the Second World War prior to achieving independence in 1957 as the Federation of Malaya.

2. Public disquiet that led to the founding of the Badan Warisan Malaysia emerged to raise public awareness about the irretrievable loss of many historic buildings as a consequence of unchecked urban development, spurred by the construction boom in Kuala Lumpur during the late 1970s and peaked in 1983. Zuraini Md. Ali, Mubin Sheppard: Pioneering Works in Architectural Conservation in Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2016), 206–207.

3. J.M. Gullick, A History of Kuala Lumpur 1857–1939 (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2000), 190.

4. Andrew Barber, Kuala Lumpur at War 1939–1945 (Kuala Lumpur: Karamoja Press, 2012), 122.

5. Barber, Kuala Lumpur at War, 214–215.

6. An article in the Malay Mail from 1913 notes, “At the commencement of Batu Road, the rickshaw puller had his residence. Here, while waiting for fares, he could be seen having a little smoke and doze …” Penerbitan Puteries, Album 100 Tahun Kuala Lumpur Menjadi Penguasa Tempatan (Album of Kuala Lumpur: 100 Years as a Local Authority) (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Puteries, 1990), 71.

7. Times of Malaya, November 19, 1929. Cited in Penerbitan Puteries, Album 100 Tahun Kuala Lumpur, 123.

8. Gullick, A History of Kuala Lumpur, 283.

9. Kuala Lumpur’s ethnic composition in 1970. Manjit Singh Sidhu, Kuala Lumpur and its Population (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1978), 13.

10. Ken Yeang, The Architecture of Malaysia (Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, 1992), 267.

11. Norsidah Ujang, “Place Meaning and Significance of the Traditional Shopping District in the City Centre of Kuala Lumpur,” International Journal of Architectural Research 8, no. 1 (2014): 66–77.

12. Norsidah Ujang, “Place Meaning and Significance,” 71.

13. Lisa Peattie, “Convivial Cities,” in Cities for Citizens: Planning and the Rise of Civil Society in a Global Age, eds. Mike Douglass and John Friedmann (London: John Wiley, 1998), 247–253.

14. In 1975, there were 368 cinemas operating throughout Malaysia, with at least one in every urban area. Nick Grenfell, Switch On Switch Off: Mass Media Audience in Malaysia (Petaling Jaya: Oxford University Press, 1979), 152.

15. Shanika Abdullatib, “Coliseum Tidak Pernah Mati,” Kosmo, February 25, 2007, 12.

16. Chandran Jeshurun, Kuala Lumpur: Corporate Capital, Cultural Cornucopia (Kuala Lumpur: Arus Intelek, 2004), 291.

17. Per. comm., K. Velu, who has worked as a projectionist for thirty-four years of which the last twelve have been at the Coliseum, to the author, September 5, 2016.

18. Mahen Bala, “KL’s Old Cinemas: A Long Goodbye,” TimeOut Kuala Lumpur, March 30, 2015, accessed September 25 2017, https://www.timeout.com/kuala-lumpur/things-to-do/kls-old-cinemas-a-long-goodbye.

19. Bill Hillier, Space is the Machine: A Configurational Theory of Architecture (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 188.

20. “Kuala Lumpur Coliseum,” Malay Weekly Mail, July 14, 1921.

21. Believed to have been inspired by Bombay-based Parsi theatre that was popular in Malaya in the 1880s, the Bangsawan is an entertainment-oriented opera performance constituted in the early twentieth century from an amalgamation of Malay, Western, Indian, Chinese, Javanese and Middle Eastern elements but conducted in Malay. See Tan Sooi Beng, Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993).

22. Rahmah Haji Bujang, “Ancient Tales–Modern Plots,” in Cintai Filem Malaysia: Love Malaysian Films, ed. Baharuddin Latif (Ampang: Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional (FINAS), 1989), 53–55.

23. Chris van Uffelen, Cinema Architecture (London: Braun, 2009), 6.

24. In the United Kingdom, this was addressed legislatively through the Cinematograph Act of 1909. See Richard Gray, Cinemas in Britain (London: Lund Humphries Publishers), 22.

25. Cycle and Carriage was a family business founded in Kuala Lumpur in 1899 focusing on the distribution of a wide range of products.

26. Sound was successfully incorporated into film with the release of The Jazz Singer in 1927 and rapidly became the norm by the 1930s. Prior to this, dialogues in silent films were visually supplied as intertitles, and a film screening was usually accompanied by live music from an orchestra or gramophone track, and in situ dubbing of dialogues were not uncommon.

27. “Kuala Lumpur Coliseum”, Malay Weekly Mail, July 14, 1921.

28. The moniker comes from the monograph authored by Jeffery Richards, The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009).

29. Siegfried Kracauer, Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 323–328.

30. Andrea Kuhn, An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory (London: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 2002), 121.

31. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Disenchanted Night: The Industrialisation of Light in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995), 221.

32. Giuliana Bruno, “Motion and Emotion: Film and the Urban Fabric,” in Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis, eds. Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson (London: Wallflower Pres, 2007), 17.

33. William van der Heide, Malaysian Cinema, Asian World: Border Crossings and National Cultures (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), 141.

34. Hamzah Hussin, Memoir Hamzah Hussin: Dari Keris Film ke Studio Merdeka (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1997), 84.

35. The café and cinema shared the same series of owners over the century. Having opened the same year as the cinema, both premises have been registered under Coliseum Cinemas Sdn. Bhd. since 2009. However, the café’s proprietor was shrewd enough to register the copyright of the name Coliseum 1921 separately. Whilst the original restaurant remains, Coliseum Café now has two other outlets in the capital. Pers. comm., Yapp Hock Hoe, long-time employee for the Chua family and company secretary of Khor Joo Saik Sdn. Bhd., to the author, July 18, 2016 and December 6, 2017.

36. Pers. comm., Yapp Hock Hoe, to the author, July 18, 2016, substantiated by copies of transfer of land title certificates supplied by the current owner.

37. Pers. comm., Yapp Hock Hoe, to the author, December 6, 2017.

38. Thean Lee Cheng, “Mistress of the Coliseum,” The Star: Section Two, May 25, 1989, S1.

39. Pers. comm., Yapp Hock Hoe, to the author, December 6, 2017.

40. For more on the evolution of cinemas and genesis of their designs based on their itinerant and vaudevillian predecessors in the United States, see Charlotte Herzog, “The Movie Palace and the Theatrical Sources of its Architectural Style,” Cinema Journal 20, no. 2 (1981): 15–37.

41. Edwin Heathcote, Cinema Builders (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2001), 10.

42. The Coliseum Theatre is categorised as a commercial property in the British colonial style in Ghafar Ahmad’s survey. A. Ghafar Ahmad, British Colonial Architecture in Malaysia 1800–1930 (Kuala Lumpur: Museums Association of Malaysia, 1997), 4 and 65.

43. M. Krishnamoorthy, “Why Acquire the Coliseum Cinema?” The Star, August 6, 2006, accessed 25 September 2017, http://soc.culture.malaysia.narkive.com/xRUONAsb/star-why-acquire-coliseum-cinema#post2.

44. M. Krishnamoorthy, “Rais to Meet Coliseum Owner,” The Star, August 10, 2006, accessed 25 September 2017, http://soc.culture.malaysia.narkive.com/839qS22b/star-rais-to-meet-coliseum-owner.

45. Nurulhuda Adabiah Mustafa and Nuraisyah Chua Abdullah, “Preservation of Cultural Heritage in Malaysia: An Insight of the National Heritage Act 2005,” Proceedings of International Conference on Tourism Development, Penang, Malaysia, February (2013), 407.

46. The Star, “Let the Cinema Stay Open for Its Memories, Say Readers,” August 10, 2009, accessed 25 September 2017, http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2006/08/10/let-cinema-stay-open-for-its-memories-say-readers/.

47. Azrul Affendi Sobry, “Kacang Vijaya: Sinonim Kaki Wayang,” Berita Harian, March 10, 2009, 17.

48. Per. comm., Sofie bin Babu, last manager of the Coliseum when it still operated as an independent cinema, to the author, July 18, 2016.

49. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Lieux de Mémoire,” Representations 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.

50. Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” Sociological Theory 17, no. 3 (November, 1999): 333–348.

51. The Star, “Government Won’t Be Acquiring Coliseum as a Heritage Building,” August 16, 2009, accessed 25 September 2017, http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2006/08/16/government-wont-be-acquiring-coliseum-as-a-heritage-building/.

52. Per. comm., Yapp Hock Hoe, to the author, July 18, 2016.

53. Mahen Bala, “KL Cinemas.”

54. Pers. comm., Yapp Hock Hoe, to the author, December 6, 2017.

55. Trianna Leong, “Kuala Lumpur’s Heritage Buildings under Threat,” The Straits Times, August 8, 2017, accessed 16 February 2018, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/kuala-lumpurs-heritage-buildings-under-threat.

56. M. Krishnamoorthy, “KL’s Iconic Hub for Culture,” The Star, August 31, 2006, SP23.

Related research

People also read | Recommended articles | Cited by 1

Information for

Authors

R&D professionals

Editors

Librarians

Societies

Open access

Overview

Open journals

Open Select

Dove Medical Press

F1000Research

Opportunities

Reprints and e-prints

Advertising solutions

Accelerated publication

Corporate access solutions

Help and information

Help and contact

Newsroom

All journals

Books

Keep up to date

Register to receive personalised research and resources by email

Sign me up

Copyright © 2026 Informa UK Limited Privacy policy

Cookies Terms & conditions Accessibility

Registered in England & Wales No. 01072954
5 Howick Place | London | SW1P 1WG

Taylor & Francis by informa