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INTRODUCTION



Aerial view of Empress Place, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

From the northern bank of Singapore River to Fort Canning Park and down Bras Basah Road to the Padang, the Civic District is where Singapore's story began more than 700 years ago.

Before it became known as the "Civic District", the civic centre, home to Singapore's key government and public buildings, formed the core of the settlement since its early days as "Temasek".

Historical accounts from the 13th and 14th centuries describe a thriving port settlement here, bounded by the Singapore River and present-day Stamford Road. Though the port was destroyed by the late 14th century, the area remained inhabited on a smaller scale till the 1600s.

When the British arrived in 1819, it was here that they first settled. Though the new establishment quickly expanded beyond the original boundaries of former settlements, it was in this civic core that the British built important government buildings such

as the former Empress Place and City Hall buildings, while the Padang became the focal point for recreation and public life.

This area also bore witness to historical milestones in Singapore's journey to nationhood, from the formal Japanese surrender in 1945 and post-war political rallies to the first sitting of Singapore's parliament in 1965.

Today, the Civic District remains Singapore's seat of governance. It has also since transformed into a vibrant cultural and lifestyle destination with world-class museums, arts and cultural institutions and exciting placemaking developments along the waterfront.

Read on to uncover these transformations and discover what makes the birthplace of Singapore so special through our curated trails: Explore the tales from pre-colonial times, British entrepot days and Singapore's journey to nationhood.

FROM TEMASEK TO SINGAPORE

Much of Singapore's early history is shrouded in mystery. Archaeological findings and a handful of records tell us that a trading settlement existed here in cycles since the late 13th century. By the 1600s, the settlement was no longer flourishing in trade, only to be revived when the British arrived in 1819. Read on to find out how the civic centre formed the core of the settlement, from its early days when it was called "Temasek".

RECORDS OF THE EARLY DAYS

Historical records about the settlement in Singapore prior to British arrival are scant. In the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay: The Malay Annals), we find stories of Malay kings in Singapore and memories of the island, such as a large plain next to the mouth of Singapore River and the hill behind the river, or present-day Fort Canning Hill.

One account was how Palembang prince Sang Nila Utama first spied the white sands of a place called Temasek in 1299 while on an expedition. After seeing the *singha* or lion, Sang Nila Utama renamed the island Singapura (Sanskrit: lion city) and established a new kingdom.

Altogether, based on the *Sejarah Melayu*, there were said to be five kings who ruled in Singapore. During the golden age of Singapore (late 13th to 14th centuries), the *Sejarah Melayu* wrote, "Singapore became a great city, to which foreigners resorted in great numbers so that the fame of the city and its greatness spread throughout the world."

A HILL FOR THE ROYALS

Records and archaeological findings suggest that Fort Canning Hill formed the heart of



Map showing the boundary of a former settlement in Singapore, indicated as "Old Lines of Singapore", 1825
Courtesy of The British Library

governance where the ruling elite stayed while the Singapore River and the plain formed the main settlement area.

The hill's significance persisted in social memories. When the British arrived, they were told by locals that the hill was known as Bukit Larangan (Malay: Forbidden Hill) as it was the abode of royalty and no man should ascend it without the king's summons and the nearby spring was called Pancur Larangan (Malay: Forbidden Spring), a bathing place for the king's consorts.

On the lower slopes, groves of old fruit trees pointed to a former royal orchard. John Crawford, second Resident of Singapore (1823-1826) wrote, "Here we find the durian, the rambutan, the duku, the shaddock and other fruit-trees of great size; and all so degenerated, except the two first, that the fruit is scarcely to be recognized."

Archaeological findings from 1985 and 1988 found a high concentration of glass fragments, beads, ceramic moulds and resin on the lower reaches of the eastern slopes, suggesting that the area was used by artisans.

These various accounts point to a strong likelihood that Fort Canning Hill was once home to a Malay-style royal precinct with areas that were off-limits to commoners, including dwellings, a royal garden, an artisans' quarter and a royal bath.

SINGAPORE RIVER'S NORTH BANK, THE KEY SETTLEMENT

Historical accounts point to the fact that the main settlement of the pre-colonial era was founded around the river mouth. Though a key artefact in today's context, an inscribed sandstone monolith called the "Singapore Stone" was destroyed in 1843 before it was deciphered. Additionally, archaeological findings on the north bank offer a glimpse into what life was like in the past.

Ceramic sherds revealed local production and imports from southern China, the Malay region and present-day Thailand. The highest quantity of storage jar sherds was found at Empress Place and present-day The Arts House, suggesting that this area was used for loading and unloading of goods, as well as storage. The variety of ceramics also suggests that Temasek, or Singapura, was part of the network linking regional trading ports and China.

Further inland, iron and copper finds point to commercial transactions in areas such as present-day St Andrew's Cathedral and Singapore Cricket Club.

These findings support the conclusion that Temasek, or Singapura, was an important regional trading port during the late 13th and 14th centuries. With the rise of Melaka in the 14th century and later the Johor Sultanate in the 16th century, the port dwindled in significance till the British arrived in 1819.

JAVANESE LINKS IN THE 14TH CENTURY

In 1928, during excavation works to build a service reservoir on Fort Canning Hill, workers came upon a cache of gold ornaments lying just five to six feet below the ground level.

The remarkable find included a pair of gold armlets, seven gold rings, an ornament set with a ruby and a jewelled clasp.

Only an armlet and two earrings remain in the collection housed at the National Museum of Singapore today. The style and make of the jewellery are of Majapahit origin, a Hindu-Buddhist empire based in East Java during the 13th to 16th centuries, which suggests that Singapore then was within the Majapahit empire's political and cultural sphere of influence.



Gold jewellery found at Fort Canning Hill, c. 14th century
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

THE KERAMAT ON FORT CANNING HILL

On Fort Canning Hill is a *keramat* (Malay: shrine) believed by some to be the tomb of the last Malay king of Singapore, Sri Sultan Iskandar Shah.

The earliest known written record of the place was by John Crawfurd, who wrote in 1822, "Another terrace, on the north declivity of the hill...is said to have been the burying place of Iskandar Shah, King of Singapore. This is the prince whom tradition describes

as having been driven from his throne by the Javanese, in the year 1252 of the Christian era and who died at Malacca, not converted to the Mohammedan religion, in 1274; so that the story is probably apocryphal. Over the supposed tomb of Iskandar, a rude structure has been raised, since the formation of the new settlement, to which Mohammedans, Hindus, and Chinese, equally resort to do homage."

The claim is contested as the king was said to have fled Singapore after an invasion and escaped north to found Melaka. Writing in 1613, explorer Manuel Godinho de Eredia, also reported that the grave of Melaka's founder was located at Tanjong Tuan, Melaka. It has also been suggested that the grave on Fort Canning belongs to that of Sang Nila Utama or Sri Tri Buana, as the *Sejarah Melayu* reported that he was buried on the hill.

While it remains unclear if the site is indeed a grave and if so, whose, this place has always held significance for locals, whether for those



Grave believed by some to be the burial place of Sri Sultan Iskandar Shah, last king of Singapore, c. 1950s
George Tricker collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

paying homage to a royal grave, or devotees praying for intercession.

THE SINGAPORE STONE

At the mouth of Singapore River, near present-day Fullerton Hotel Singapore, once stood the earliest known written record found in Singapore.

Called the "Singapore Stone", it was a sandstone block measuring about three metres tall and 2.7 metres wide, split in half with both sides facing each other. On the surface were about 50 lines in a script, likely East Javanese. Experts have dated it between the 10th and 14th century.

Based on the location, scholars suggest that the stone served to inform visitors of the port they were visiting and its regulations. The stone was also mentioned in the *Sejarah Melayu* in the story of a strong man, Badang, who picked the stone up from the king's court and "threw it out into the mouth of the river and that is the rock which is at this day visible at the point of Singhapura or Tanjong Singhapura."

Before the script could be deciphered, the British blew it up in 1843 to make way for construction works. Fragments were salvaged but only one, now housed at the National Museum of Singapore, is known to have survived.



Fragment of the Singapore Stone, c. 10th to 14th century
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

A NEW TRADING POST

On 28 January 1819, a British East India Company expedition led by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles landed on the banks of Singapore River. The island they arrived on, though no longer prosperous, was still inhabited. Near the river mouth where present-day The Arts House stands, they found the local Malay chief, Temenggong Abdul Rahman and his followers, who had moved to the island in 1811. The river and its north bank were populated by Orang Laut (Malay: sea nomads).

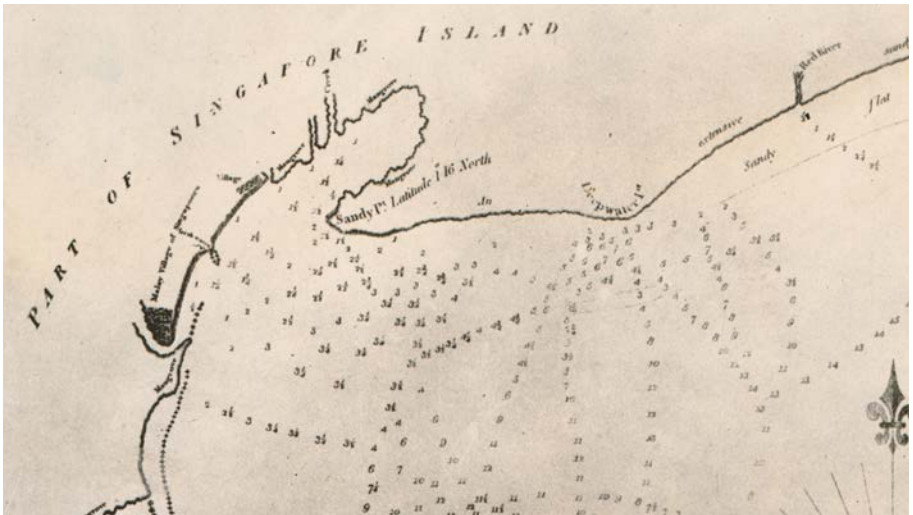
Wa Hakim, an Orang Laut, recalling the settlement at Singapore River when the British arrived. He was then around 15 years old.

"At the time when Tuan Raffles came, there were under one hundred small houses and huts at the mouth of the river; but the Raja's (referring to the Malay chief, Temenggong Abdul Rahman) house was the only large one and it stood back from the river, between the sea and the river, near the obelisk (Dalhousie Obelisk). About thirty families of Orang Laut also lived in boats a little way up the Singapore river at the wide part. About half the Orang Laut lived ashore and half in boats

... . The place where the Orang Laut lived was called Kampong Temenggong and it faced the river. There were a few Malays who lived near, their huts facing the sea. Our boat lay where the Master Attendant's Office (site of Fullerton Waterboat House) now is"

Convinced that Singapore was the ideal location for a new British trading post, Raffles and his subordinate, Major William Farquhar, set up camp near the Temenggong's settlement and began negotiating for the right to establish a British "factory", or trading post in Singapore, then considered a possession of the Malay Johor Sultanate. The Temenggong arranged for Tengku Long, whom he regarded as the rightful Sultan of Johor, to be brought to Singapore for the signing of a formal treaty.

On 6 February 1819, the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance was signed between Raffles, representing the East India Company, Temenggong Abdul Rahman and Tengku Long, who was declared Sultan Hussain Mahumud Shah, Sultan of Johor. The trading post was thus established, marking the start of a new era.



Detail of hydrographic chart indicating the presence of a Malay settlement along the north bank of the Singapore River drawn by Captain D. Ross, who was on the expedition to Singapore with Raffles, 1819
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

THE CORE OF THE COLONY FROM THE 1800S TO EARLY 1900S



Detail of Singapore's first town plan drawn up by Lieutenant Philip Jackson, 1828
Singapore Land Authority collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Singapore's transformation into a bustling entrepot began with Raffles' bold decision to challenge Dutch monopoly by exempting ships from port and customs duties. This strategic move quickly diverted maritime traffic from Dutch-controlled ports, leading to explosive population growth from 10,683 in 1824 to 35,389 by 1840. The civic centre, located around today's Padang, became the heart of this remarkable evolution as explored in this section.

A NEW SETTLEMENT IN THE MAKING

The area's transformation began immediately after British arrival. William Farquhar, appointed as Resident by Raffles in June 1819, cleared the plain near the river, established the

first roads and constructed the Residency (site of former Supreme Court), which housed his dwelling and office. High Street, likely the first established road in Singapore, soon became lined with houses and godowns while troops camped at the foot of Bukit Larangan (now Fort Canning Hill).

When Raffles returned in 1822, he found construction in areas he had reserved for government use. He established a town planning committee to reorganise the settlement, maintaining the plain (now part of Padang) as the nucleus and reserving the area bounded by present-day Bras Basah Road, Coleman Street, the waterfront, and Bukit Larangan for government offices. On



View of Singapore and its waterfront from Government Hill, 1828
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



View from Government Hill. Raffles' wooden bungalow could be seen on the right, as well as the flagstaff which signalled the arrival of vessels, 1828
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Bukit Larangan, which had become known as "Government Hill", Raffles built his residence, a wooden bungalow known as "Government House".

John Crawfurd, who replaced Farquhar in 1823, implemented Raffles' town-planning vision of "beauty, regularity and cleanliness". In 1824, Crawfurd signed a new treaty with Temenggong Abdul Rahman and Sultan Hussein on Government Hill, whereby the East India Company took full possession of Singapore and its surrounding islands. By this time, Temenggong Abdul Rahman and his followers had been relocated from the north bank of Singapore River to Telok Blangah while Sultan Hussein was moved to Kampong Gelam.

FROM TRADING OUTPOST TO CROWN COLONY

Despite its commercial success, early Singapore struggled with infrastructure and

administration. The free port status, while attracting trade, limited revenue, and attempts to introduce new taxes faced fierce resistance from merchants. This led to chronic funding shortages for public works.

The company resorted to acquiring private buildings for public offices, including merchant John Argyle Maxwell's mansion (present-day The Arts House) on the grounds that it was built on land designated for public purposes. Built in the 1820s, Maxwell's mansion remains one of Singapore's oldest surviving buildings and provides visitors today with a rare glimpse of early colonial architecture.

A turning point came in 1867 when the Straits Settlements was transferred to the Crown. This change brought increased investment in public works, including Singapore's first purpose-built courthouse (former Empress Place Building).



Purpose-built courthouse completed in 1867, later known as the Empress Place Building, c. late 1800s
Courtesy of The National Archives, United Kingdom



Map showing Fort Fullerton, 1862

Singapore Land Authority collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

FORTIFICATION OF EARLY SINGAPORE: FORT FULLERTON AND FORT CANNING

Singapore's early defences comprised just two small batteries initially, one at the river mouth and another near Connaught Drive. As the colony's importance grew, two forts were constructed in the civic centre in the 1800s. At the Singapore river mouth, Fort Fullerton, named after Robert Fullerton, the first governor of the Straits Settlements (1826–1830), was built in the 1820s and ultimately demolished in 1873 due to its non-strategic location where defensive fire risked destroying trading vessels and warehouses instead of hostile ships.

On Government Hill, a new fort was built in the 1850s. Named after Governor-General of India Lord Charles Canning, the hill became known as Fort Canning Hill thereafter. Fort Canning provided amenities for the military stationed in Singapore, with quarters for both married and single men, offices, stables. Furthermore, the guns of the forts were used to signal the outbreak of fire, arrival of dignitaries by ship, and to fire the royal salute as part of welcoming dignitaries.



Fortifications on Fort Canning, c. 1860s–1870s

National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Barracks at Fort Canning, c. late 19th century

National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

DALHOUSIE OBELISK

Singapore's first public sculpture was installed in 1851 on the Esplanade to commemorate the visit of the Governor-General of India, Marquess of Dalhousie in 1850. For the mercantile community in Singapore, the visit was particularly significant as it was a chance to showcase Singapore's prosperity and convince the Marquess to allocate more funds for infrastructural works such as a dry dock and better shipping amenities.

During the visit, the merchants took the Marquess on a tour of the settlement. The Marquess promised to give Singapore his personal attention and subsequently brought the Straits Settlements directly under his control. However, other than a salary increase for the governor, little else materialised. Newspapers wryly observed that Singaporeans were left only with "the staring evidence of the Governor General's virtues (the obelisk), which frightens every pony on the Esplanade," even as hopes lingered for more responsive governance.

The obelisk was later relocated to its current site in 1911. Though proposals for its demolition surfaced during reclamation works to extend the Esplanade in 1890, it was preserved for its heritage value. Along with Fort Canning's flagstaff, it served as a navigational marker.



The Dalhousie Obelisk, c. 1900s
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

REALISING RAFFLES' VISION: THE FIRST BOTANIC GARDEN, SCHOOL, LIBRARY AND MUSEUM COMPLEX

Raffles' vision for Singapore encompassed education, culture and science as well. In 1823, he initiated the Singapore Institution (later Raffles Institution) at Bras Basah Road, though construction delays meant classes did not begin immediately. Meanwhile, Singapore Free School opened on High Street in 1834, and moved into the completed Institution building in 1837. It was renamed Raffles Institution in 1868. Raffles Girls' School was later officially founded in the same campus in 1879.

As part of the school, Raffles also envisioned a library and museum, though these were realised much later. The Singapore Library opened within the Singapore Institution in 1845, and plans for a museum followed in 1849. The museum finally materialised in 1874 when the government took over the library collection, creating the Raffles Library and Museum. Initially housed in the Town Hall, it moved to the Raffles Institution before receiving its own purpose built building at Stamford Road in 1887.

Raffles also established Singapore's first botanic garden in 1822 with botanist and surgeon Nathaniel Wallich. The garden



Raffles Institution, c. 1890s
Lim Kheng Chye collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Raffles Library and Museum, c. early 20th century
 Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

stretched from present-day Fort Canning Hill to Mount Emily. Despite planting over 900 trees by the mid-1820s, the East India Company deemed it unsuccessful and repurposed the land in the 1830s. The concept was only revived in Tanglin during the late 1850s.

Remembering Raffles

In the civic centre, there stands two statues of Sir Stamford Raffles: a bronze statue which was unveiled in 1887 and a white polymarble statue of Raffles. The bronze statue was originally located at the Esplanade before it was relocated to the front of Victoria Memorial Hall in 1919. In 1972, a polymarble copy was made and installed on the north bank of Singapore River to mark what is believed to be his landing site.

ENTERING THE 20TH CENTURY

By the turn of the century, Singapore was a world-renowned port, dubbed "Liverpool of the East" due to its role as the nexus of sea trading routes. In the early 1900s, the government expanded the civil service, increased military spending, and invested significantly in public infrastructure. The civic centre around the Esplanade also took the shape Raffles had envisioned decades earlier.

FULLERTON BUILDING: BRINGING POSTAL SERVICES INTO THE 20TH CENTURY

In the early 1900s, the government embarked on transforming the waterfront by replacing the individual buildings including the post office with a "modern structure worthy of one of the largest seaports and centres of commerce in the East".

Completed in 1928 at a cost of nearly \$5 million, the Fullerton Building housed the General Post Office as its main tenant. To modernise operations, it was fitted with



Singapore's busy waterfront, 1937
 Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Fullerton Building, c. 1930s
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of
National Archives of Singapore

cutting-edge equipment such as parcel chutes and automated conveyor belts. An underground tunnel linked the post office to the pier so that postal workers could bypass Collyer Quay's traffic.

Fullerton Building also housed the Master Attendant, Imports and Exports department, Singapore Chamber of Commerce and Singapore Club. The club occupied most of the third and fourth floors, which included luxuriously fitted bedrooms for visiting members.

Designed by Major P. H. Keys and F. Dowdeswell, Fullerton Building symbolised Singapore's ambitions, as *The Straits Times* declared: "... the new Post Office building is not only a political and economic symbol but a landmark in local history."



Bar and lounge of the Singapore Club, c. 1928-1930
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Municipal Building, 1930
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

THE MUNICIPAL BUILDING: A CIVIC CENTRE "SECOND TO NONE"

Erected to house the Municipal Council, which was established in 1856 to oversee public infrastructure and utilities, the Municipal Building (present-day National Gallery Singapore) embodied the council's vision for a world-class civic centre. Completed in 1929 and opened by Governor Hugh Clifford, the \$2 million building was designed with the civil service in mind. Typists' rooms were built to minimise the noise of typewriters, engineers were provided with changing rooms to facilitate their movements between office and field work, special glass was installed to reduce heat and glare and rubber tiles paved the corridors to reduce noise. With its imposing façade of Corinthian columns, the edifice was "a constant reminder to the resident of Singapore that he is a "citizen of no mean city".

THE SUPREME COURT: A NEW HOME FOR JUSTICE

Built on the site of the former Hotel de l'Europe, the former Supreme Court was completed in 1939. Frank Dorrington Ward's masterful design merged classical architectural elements with modern functionality. The building's most striking feature, its copper-green dome, became an instant landmark in Singapore's skyline. The central rotunda served both practical and symbolic purposes, while allegorical sculptures representing

WORLD WAR I IN SINGAPORE

Though World War I (1914–1918) was distant from Singapore, the colony felt its impact nonetheless. With troops sent to the frontlines, Singapore was left under the watch of one single Indian regiment, the 5th Light Infantry, made up of Punjabi Muslims.

Tension ran high among these soldiers amid rumours that they would be deployed against fellow Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. On 15 February 1915, the regiment mutinied, releasing German prisoners-of-war and killing Europeans. Chaos ensued. With only a band of volunteers and some British officers, it took ten days to quell the uprising. Memorial tablets to those killed in the uprising were later installed at Victoria Memorial Hall and St Andrew's Cathedral.

World War I finally came to an end on 11 November 1918. Two days later, Governor Arthur Henderson Young pronounced the armistice in front of Singapore Cricket Club. To honour the 124 men from Singapore who died in action during the war, the Cenotaph was installed at the Esplanade.



Unveiling of the Cenotaph by Prince of Wales Edward VIII, 1922
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

NAMING STREETS AFTER ROYALTY

Empress Place and Connaught Drive were both named in 1907. Empress Place was named in memory of Queen Victoria who was also Empress of India (1876–1901). As time passed, the building there which housed public offices became commonly referred to as the Empress Place building.

Connaught Drive was formerly known as “New Esplanade Road” and was renamed as the Duke and Duchess of Connaught were the first to use the road publicly during their visit to Singapore in 1890. In 1929, after Fullerton Building was completed, Tan Kim Seng Fountain was relocated from Fullerton Square to the Esplanade along Connaught Drive. It was a three-tiered fountain installed by the government in 1882 to honour merchant Tan Kim Seng’s \$13,000 donation for water supply improvements.



Connaught Drive and Tan Kim Seng Fountain, 1933
Lim Kheng Chye collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Empress Place with the Public Offices on the right, Dalhousie Obelisk to the left and the statue of Raffles on the bottom right, 1928
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Supreme Court, 1939

Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum: Donated by Prof Cheah Jin Seng, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Allegory of Justice panel on the tympanum of the Supreme Court building, 1939

Lina Brunner collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

justice and mercy adorned the building's exterior, reinforcing its role as the colony's highest court of law. The courtrooms themselves represented the latest in judicial architecture, providing dignified spaces for the administration of justice.

CENTRAL FIRE STATION AND HILL STREET POLICE BARRACKS: MODERNISING POLICING AND FIREFIGHTING

The early 1900s marked a significant transformation in Singapore's firefighting and policing services. Before this period, firefighting relied heavily on volunteers, policemen, convicts and soldiers, with limited resources and outdated equipment, hampering their effectiveness.

In 1904, Superintendent Montague William Pett arrived from England and revolutionised firefighting in Singapore. He introduced motorised fire engines, enhanced communication systems and expanded the number of street hydrants from 961 in 1908



Interior of Central Fire Station, c. 1930

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Hill Street Police Station and Barracks, 1934

Mrs J A Bennett collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

to 10,000 in 1912. Pett also oversaw the construction of the Central Fire Station in 1909, which included modern facilities such as a gymnasium, living quarters, a watch room and a training and drill ground. The chief officer's quarters were constructed on Fort Canning just behind the station. The station's lookout tower, then Singapore's tallest structure, allowed fire to be spotted from afar.

In 1934, the Hill Street Police Station and Barracks was constructed as part of a modernisation scheme for the police force. The six-storey building, featuring 927 windows, was the largest government building in its time. It housed nearly 1,000 personnel and included facilities such as barracks for married and single policemen, flats for inspectors, servants' quarters, canteens, garages, recreational spaces for the policemen's families and even on-site medical facilities. This strategic location enabled quick response to unrest and crimes in the area.

RAFFLES LIBRARY AND MUSEUM: "A STORE-HOUSE OF WONDER"

In 1823, Raffles proposed to the Bengal government a library with an attached museum. In 1845, a private subscription-based Singapore Library was opened at the Singapore Institution (present-day Raffles Institution). A resolution to start a museum attached to the library was passed in 1849 after Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim donated two gold coin artefacts unearthed at Telok Blangah. Due to funding challenges, no further action was taken.

In the 1870s, interest in a public library and museum revived after a series of exhibitions in London showcasing products and images of British colonies. The government thus approached the Singapore Library to explore the idea of establishing a public library and museum. By then, the library, severely mismanaged and in neglect, was in debt and lacked subscribers. The government thus took formal possession of the library's collection in 1874, catalogued, and repaired the books, and officially opened the new Raffles Library and Museum.

The new library first operated at the Town Hall before moving back to Raffles Institution due to lack of space. Though a dedicated building was planned in 1874, the government only approved the budget and plans for "an elegant house for this institution" at Stamford Road in 1884.

Designed by colonial engineers and administrators Sir Henry McCallum and Major J. F. McNair, Raffles Library and Museum was officially opened on 12 October 1887 by then Governor of the Straits Settlements Sir Frederick Weld. The library occupied the right wing on the ground floor while the museum occupied the upper storey.

By the early 1900s, Raffles Library and Museum had established an international reputation, attracting thousands of visitors, particularly during Chinese New Year when attendance regularly exceeded 10,000.



Library wing in Raffles Museum, 1910
National Museum of Singapore collection, gift of Sam Kai Faye,
courtesy of National Heritage Board



Interior of the museum, c. early 20th century
National Museum of Singapore collection, gift of Sam Kai Faye,
courtesy of National Heritage Board



Skeleton of a blue whale at the museum, 1910
National Museum of Singapore collection, gift of Sam Kai Faye,
courtesy of National Heritage Board

To accommodate its growing collections, a rear block was completed in 1916, followed by a south wing extension completed between 1924 and 1926.

The museum's scientific focus was shaped by its early leaders, beginning with Scottish botanist James Collins, followed by ornithologist William Ruxton Davison. Dr Karl Hanitsch, a distinguished entomologist, became the first Director in 1895 and enhanced the museum's prestige by expanding collections and implementing classification systems. This scientific excellence continued to be upheld by Hanitsch's successors.

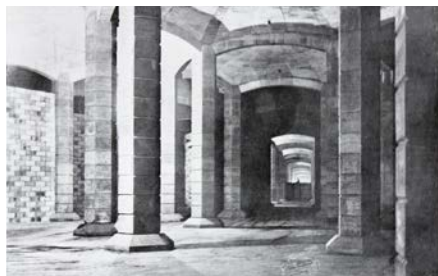
FORT CANNING TRANSFORMED: UNDERGROUND SERVICE RESERVOIR, MILITARY BARRACKS AND RECREATION

In the 1900s, Fort Canning Hill underwent another transformation when the municipality constructed an underground service reservoir on the hilltop in the 1920s to address the growing demand of water in the town. Meanwhile, Fort Canning was demolished and up-to-date military buildings were built on the lower slopes. By 1926, new military facilities, including headquarters (now Hotel Fort Canning) and a barracks for 100 soldiers (now Fort Canning Centre) were built. As the administrative seat of the military, Fort Canning was where high-level military talks

and conferences were held and regular exercises involving volunteer forces were carried out.

The service reservoir, completed in 1929, was one of the largest covered reservoirs in the world then and increased the town's reserve of water from half a day to two days. An engineering feat, the reservoir spanned 7½ acres underground and comprised 264 hexagonal domes forming a roof, supported on 462 concrete block columns. The top was covered with turf.

The hill gained a recreational use as well. Between 1937 to 1939, the government built King George V Jubilee Park at the foot of Fort Canning Hill to mark the king's silver jubilee.



Fort Canning service reservoir, 1928
Courtesy of The National Archives, United Kingdom

SETTLING DOWN IN SINGAPORE

For many early settlers, Singapore, known then as "Queen of the East", represented opportunities for the bold. The promise of riches drew immigrants from around the world. These diverse communities left a legacy that can still be seen in the civic centre today.

The traders who arrived established their agencies on the south bank of Singapore River while building homes in the civic centre. Up to the mid-1800s, the area was largely residential, characterised by European houses with large compounds. By the late 1800s, these houses started making way for shophouses. The few



Detail of map illustrating the buildings in the town, c. 1860s
The National Archives United Kingdom, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



By the late 19th century, the civic centre had transformed dramatically, as shophouses took over the area, 1893
Hon Sui Sen collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



View of Singapore from the harbour with the white houses of merchants and St. Andrew's Church along the waterfront, c. 1850
Asian Civilisations Museum collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

remaining European houses were altered for use as hotels. Apartment blocks were built in the 1920s and 1930s as well, such as Eu Court at Stamford Road, and Meyer Mansions and Namazie Mansions at North Bridge Road.

For many who arrived, Singapore was often seen as a sojourn before they returned home. Yet, these immigrants built more than just businesses; they also formed vibrant communities which left lasting legacies, especially religious buildings where they practised their faith, strengthened community ties and continued their cultural traditions.

THE SIAM HOUSE AT NORTH BRIDGE ROAD

On the site of present-day Peninsula Plaza used to be the home of merchant Tan Kim Ching, also known as "Siam House".

Built in the 1870s, Siam House earned its name from Tan Kim Ching's ties to the Siamese royal court and business networks. As Siam's Consul-General and Special Commissioner, Tan famously recommended Anna Leonowens, who inspired the musical *The King and I*, as governess to King Mongkut in 1862. In 1890, King Chulalongkorn and Queen Savang Vadhana stayed at the mansion during their visit to Singapore.

Later, the mansion became a centre for Chinese cultural reform. Tan's grandson, Tan Boo Liat, a friend of revolutionary Dr Sun Yat Sen, opened Siam House to reformist efforts such as English classes by lawyer Song Ong Siang; music practice sessions by the Straits Chinese Philomathic Society, which was founded by Straits Chinese men who had studied in England; and the first

Hokkien school in Singapore, Tao Nan School, before its move to Armenian Street.

Siam House stood till 1913, when it was sold after the Tan family's fortunes declined. It was demolished to make way for an apartment block built by the Jewish Meyer brothers.



Tan Boo Liat (1874-1934), like his father and grandfather Tan Tock Seng, was the leader of the Hokkien Chinese in Singapore till the family's fortunes declined, c. 1910-1930

Lee Brothers Studio collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) was the first Thai ruler to travel outside his kingdom, and his first stop was Singapore, followed by Java, c. 1870

National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH OF ST GREGORY THE ILLUMINATOR

Singapore's first Christian church, the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator, has its origins dating back to 1821, when Armenian settlers held their first services in a room at present-day Raffles Place. Religion was deeply embedded in their culture, and in the early days, a priest would travel from Penang to conduct services.

Though small in size, the community decided to establish their own church and successfully petitioned for a site in 1833. Funded mainly by the Armenian diaspora, the building, designed by G. D. Coleman, was completed in 1835 and consecrated in 1836.

The church served as the heart of the community where ties were strengthened



Lithograph of Government Hill and the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator at the foot, 1840
Courtesy of the S. P. Lohia Hand Coloured Rare Book Collection



Church after a steeple was added, c. late 19th century
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

and children grew up together. The community played an active role in supporting Armenian causes outside Singapore, such as raising funds for Armenian schools in Persia. The street behind the church became known as Armenian Street due to the community's presence.

A SMALL BUT REMARKABLE COMMUNITY

The Armenian community in Singapore had always been small and numbered just 81 in 1891. However, their legacy far outweighed their numbers and can still be seen today,

from street names such as Armenian Street to Singapore's national flower.

The Armenian community, which originally hailed from Julfa (then part of the Persian empire), had established themselves in India and Southeast Asia by the 1600s and 1700s. When Singapore was founded, they were among the earliest to arrive and set up successful trading houses. Beyond trading, the Armenians also ventured into other businesses. Merchant Catchick Moses (1812-1895), for instance, co-founded *The Straits Times* in 1845, and in 1887, the Sarkies brothers started the Raffles Hotel, building a prestigious institution that outlasted the Hotel de l'Europe.

Another iconic Armenian contribution to Singapore is the Vanda Miss Joaquim orchid. Created by Agnes Joaquim (1854-1899), an accomplished Armenian horticulturalist who bred the hybrid in 1890, the flower was named Singapore's national flower in 1981 due to its vibrant colours, hardiness and resilience.



Agnes Joaquim, c. late 1800s
The Joaquim collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

ST ANDREW'S CATHEDRAL

St Andrew's Cathedral's history began when Raffles designated a site for an Anglican church on the Esplanade. The church, named after



St Andrew's Cathedral, c. 1880s
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Interior of St Andrew's Cathedral, c. 1880s
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Scotland's patron saint, St Andrew, was built in 1837 to G. D. Coleman's design. A tower and spire were added in 1842. The tower, however, was struck by lightning in 1845 and 1849, causing structural damage to the building such that it was deemed unsafe by 1852.

In 1856, construction on a second building began, using stone shipped from the limestone hills of Kent in England, the same source of stone used to build the Canterbury Cathedral, the seat of the Anglican archbishop. Designed by Colonel Ronald MacPherson and built by Indian convict labour, the church opened for service in 1861 and was fully completed in 1865. It was consecrated as a cathedral in 1870.

The cathedral served both as the Anglican community's spiritual centre for life events and



St Andrew's Church, on the right, shortly after it was completed, 1837
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

celebrations, and as a venue for official state functions, including special services for events like Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations.

MASJID AL-BURHANI

By the late 1800s, Dawoodi Bohras, a Muslim denomination hailing from Gujarat, India, had established themselves in Singapore, setting up businesses at the south bank of Singapore River, especially along Malacca Street and Market Street. They engaged primarily in entrepot trade, dealing in commodities such as tin, rubber, spices and timber.

As the community grew, the community needed a place of worship to anchor their spiritual and communal life. Prominent businessman A. M. Essabhoy, built a new mosque at Hill Street with \$20,000.

On 26 May 1897, Masjid Al-Burhani officially opened. As the sole place of worship for the Dawoodi Bohras, it became a gathering point for the community. The Dawoodi Bohras would walk from their shops across the Singapore River to the mosque to pray, socialise and receive religious instructions.

"DAWOODI BOHRA" AND ITS COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE

The term "Dawoodi Bohra" is an amalgamation of two words. "Dawoodi" is taken from the name of the 27th *Da'i al-Mutlaq* (highest office bearer in the denomination), Syedna Dawood bin Qutubshah. "Bohra" comes from the Gujarati word for traders and businessmen.

In Singapore, Dawoodi Bohras were dubbed "Bombay merchants" in the past even though they hailed from Gujarat. This was because many of the Dawoodi Bohras had strong family and trading connections to Bombay, a key commercial hub and port in India.

For many years, the Dawoodi Bohras in Singapore were mainly merchants. Today, the few hundred members include both professionals and business owners. The Dawoodi Bohras speak a unique language called *dawat nizaban*, which is based on Gujarati and combines elements of Arabic, Persian and

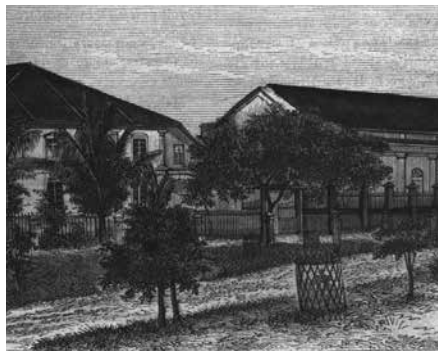
Urdu. The Dawoodi Bohras also introduced an attire for its members to distinguish themselves from other communities. Men wear the *Libas al-Anwar*, comprising a white outfit and a white-and-gold hat. Women wear a bright outfit called *rida*, which has two outer layers and decorative borders.



Hatim Nakhoda, son of the co-founder of F. M. Noordin & Co, one of the oldest Bohra trading companies in Singapore, wearing a traditional Dawoodi Bohra costume known as Libas al-Anwar, c. early 20th century.

Amena bai Sk Hatim bhai Nakhoda, wife of Hatim Nakhoda, as a young girl, wearing traditional costume including a jhabala (tunic) and topi (cap), c. early 20th century (Right)

Gift of Mr. Hatim Nakhoda, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Church of the Good Shepherd, before it was granted the status of a cathedral, 1850

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ), c. 1911

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

CATHOLIC MISSIONS IN THE CIVIC CENTRE

Catholic missions established significant roots in Singapore's civic centre, beginning with their first wooden chapel on Bras Basah Road in 1832. French priest Father Jean-Marie Beurel later secured land at the junction of Queen Street and Bras Basah Road, where the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, Singapore's oldest surviving Catholic church, was built in 1847. The church was given cathedral status in 1888.

Father Beurel also founded St John's School (later renamed St Joseph's Institution) in 1852 on the original chapel site. Run by the De La Salle Brothers, the school's enrolment grew from 75 to 145 students within a year.

In 1854, the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus established the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in the former home of H.C. Caldwell,

a magistrate's clerk. Located along Bras Basah and Stamford Road, the convent, then popularly known as "Town Convent", grew steadily and became a sprawling complex over time comprising a girls' school, an orphanage, a chapel, and a boarding house.

THE METHODIST MISSION IN SINGAPORE

The Methodist mission arrived in Singapore in 1885 and grew rapidly. The first Methodist chapel was established on Coleman Street in 1886. Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church (later renamed Wesley Methodist Church) was built at Fort Canning Road in 1908 to accommodate its growing congregation.

To disseminate its teachings, the Methodist mission's publishing arm, Methodist Publishing



Methodist Publishing House, 1927
Andrew Tan Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

House, was established in 1890 at Sophia Road. It relocated to a new three-storey Edwardian building on Stamford Road in 1908, which housed a bookshop, a printing press, and shops for rental. The press published religious literature, translated books, maps, schoolbooks, and academic journals.

The commercial success of the press led to the creation of a separate business entity in 1928, the Malaya Publishing House. Often referred to as “MPH”, the company was known for publishing translated literature, memoirs of residents and textbooks. Its bookshop was also a thriving centre for readers in Singapore, with popular titles imported from overseas regularly.

THE BIBLE HOUSE

The Bible House, completed on Armenian Street in 1909, served as the British and Foreign Bible Society’s regional headquarters, overseeing operations across Malaya, the Philippines, and parts of present-day Indonesia. The non-denominational society was founded in 1804 in Wales to translate and disseminate the Bible, and a local branch was officially established in 1837. New translations and editions of the Bible would often be printed and bound at the nearby Methodist Publishing House.

Beyond its role in Bible distribution, the Bible House also functioned as a key meeting place

BUILDING FRATERNITY ACROSS OCEANS: THE FREEMASONS

Freemasonry, one of the world’s oldest fraternal societies, started in Singapore in 1845 with the founding of Lodge Zetland at Armenian Street. The lodge operated from various venues in the early years.

The Masonic network was closely tied to British imperialism, with lodges established wherever the empire spread, providing support for members abroad. Membership was male-only and by invitation.

Singapore’s Freemasons included prominent persons such as Sir Stamford Raffles, Superintendent of Police Thomas Duncan, Attorney-General Thomas Braddell and Admiral Henry Keppel. Non-Europeans were admitted too, such as Parsi merchants Frommurzee Sorabjee and his son Cursetjee Framjee.

Charity was a key tenet of freemasonry and its members contributed to causes like the Chinese Pauper’s Hospital (present-day Tan Tock Seng Hospital). They also performed ceremonial foundation-laying rites for public works such as Horsburgh and Raffles Lighthouses. In 1878, the freemasons were granted land at Coleman Street. The Masonic Hall, designed by engineer Thomas A. Cargill, was completed in 1879.



Masonic Hall, c. 1880s
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Bible House, c. 1910

Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum: Donated by Prof Cheah Jin Seng, courtesy of National Heritage Board

for various Christian groups, including the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Church Workers' Association.

SINGAPORE CHINESE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Established in 1906 by leading Chinese merchants, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC) served to represent the interests of the Chinese business community and act as a bridge between the Chinese government and British colonial administration. The chamber leased the two-storey Hill Street mansion that belonged to merchant Wee Ah Hood as its headquarters, before purchasing the site later.

SCCC played a crucial role in leading Singapore's Chinese community and its work included liaising with the Qing government in China, mediating disputes and fundraising for



SCCC's committee at its Hill Street premises, 1937

David Ng collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

charitable and public causes. After the 1911 Chinese Revolution, the chamber supported the new government by purchasing China's bonds and offering financial aid. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, it contributed generously to Chinese war efforts.

Beyond business, the chamber was involved in philanthropy both in Singapore and China. It was also called upon by the British administration to assist in keeping the peace when there was communal unrest, such as during the 1906 Hokkien-Teochew riots.

SCHOOLS IN THE CIVIC CENTRE

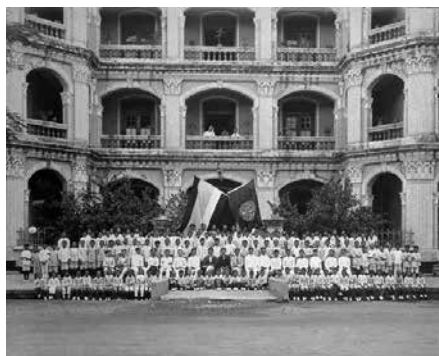
The civic centre saw various schools operating during the 1800s and early 1900s. There was Anglo-Chinese School started by Reverend Oldham for the sons of Chinese businessmen in 1886 at Amoy Street. It moved next to the Methodist chapel at Coleman Street the same year.

In 1862, St Andrew's School was started by St Andrew's Church Mission at Chin Chew Street to spread Anglican teachings and advance education in Singapore. It relocated to Stamford Road in 1900 before moving to Woodsville in 1940. St Andrew's House, a boarding house for boys, was also built in 1891 along Armenian Street.

In the same time period, the schools in the area included Raffles Institution, Raffles Girls'



Raffles Institution, 1905
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Students and staff at Tao Nan School, c. 1920s
Francis Lee collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

School (which moved to Queen Street in 1929), St Joseph's Institution and CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School (originally called Victoria Girls' School) on Stamford Road.

The Chinese established at least three schools in the civic centre. Singapore Chinese Girls' School, the first secular Chinese school for girls, was established in 1899 at Hill Street by a group of progressive Chinese residents including Dr Lim Boon Keng, Sir Song Ong Siang and scholar Khoo Seok Wan. Between 1907 and 1925, the school operated in a former government building next to the Central Fire Station. After the government took back the land to extend the fire station, the school relocated to Emerald Hill.

Another Chinese school was Khee Fatt School (present-day Qifa Primary School) founded in 1906 at Loke Yew Street by Char Yong Association, the clan association for Hakka immigrants from Dabu, China. The school moved to Cairnhill after World War II.

Nearby at Coleman Street, Tao Nan School was established by the Chinese Hokkien



Anglo-Chinese School, c. early 20th century
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

community. Initiated by businessman Tan Boo Liat and supported by the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, the school originally only accepted Hokkien students but later opened to those of other dialect groups in 1909. To accommodate its student population, Tao Nan School moved to a new school building at Armenian Street in 1912, constructed with donations from the Hokkien Chinese. Lessons in English were introduced in 1914 and the medium of instruction changed from Hokkien to Mandarin in 1916.

THE UNITED CHINESE LIBRARY

The Chinese diaspora in Malaya played an important role in supporting the revolutionary movement led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, which culminated in the 1911 revolution that ended imperial rule in China.

Recognising the need for political education to secure more support in modernising China, Dr Sun encouraged the establishment of reading rooms and libraries to provide revolutionary and modern literature.

The United Chinese Library was one such institution founded at the guidance of Dr Sun Yat-sen. Started in 1910 at North Boat Quay, the library was initially called Thong Tek Che Poh Soh (同德书报社). It moved to 51 Armenian Street in 1911. In 1917, Dr Sun personally penned the signboard and gave the library its English name: United Chinese Library.



Chinese wedding at United Chinese Library, 1936
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

By 1941, the library housed over 50,000 books and saw over 200 readers daily. Though initiated by the Teochew community, the library also attracted revolutionaries from other dialect groups, serving as a hub to nurture Chinese political activism and patriotism.

ENTERTAINMENT, SPORTS, SHOPPING AND FOOD IN THE CIVIC CENTRE

The civic centre formed the heart of European social life and leisure in Singapore for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the early 1800s, evenings were usually predictable for European expatriates: work ended at four o'clock, followed by early dinners, then strolls or pony rides around the Esplanade. Fives, a racket and ball game, was played at courts located at present-day Empress Place and Armenian Street.

Residents gathered at the Esplanade to enjoy the band and gossip, which gave rise to the



Esplanade, c. late 19th century
Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum: Donated by Prof Cheah Jin Seng, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Esplanade after further land reclamation, with the Dalhousie Obelisk in the background, c. 1890s
Gretchen Liu collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Oil painting by John Turnbull Thomson of a view of the social scene at Esplanade (now Padang) from Scandal Point, 1851
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

nickname “Scandal Point” for a knoll near the present-day Connaught Drive.

Such scenes gradually disappeared by the turn of the century as recreation in the civic centre evolved over time, with sports, cinema and shopping redefining leisure in the colony.

VICTORIA THEATRE AND VICTORIA MEMORIAL HALL

The first Town Hall in the settlement was constructed in 1862 using both public donations and government funds.

Apart from housing public offices, the Town Hall was also the key venue of European social and cultural life and was where dances, public meetings, arts performances and receptions for dignitaries were held. For instance, to honour the first visit of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) of Siam to Singapore in 1871, a ball was thrown at the Town Hall. The king’s gift to commemorate the visit, a bronze statue of an elephant, was installed in front of the building in 1872.

Following Queen Victoria’s death in 1901, the municipality planned a memorial hall adjacent to the Town Hall to commemorate her reign.



The Town Hall, built by Indian convict labour, in the early years, c.1880
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



View of the bronze elephant in front of the Town Hall (later Victoria Memorial Hall), c. 1880s. The elephant was moved to its present position at the courthouse in 1919.
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Public preference for a theatre led to a revised plan: the Town Hall was converted into Victoria Theatre, while the new Victoria Memorial Hall was completed in 1905. The two buildings were connected by a clock tower, featuring a climate-adapted clock donated by the Straits Trading Company. The renovated Victoria Theatre reopened in 1909.

CAPITOL THEATRE: THE LARGEST CINEMA IN THE EAST

Capitol Theatre opened in 1930 as the largest and best-equipped cinema in the East, featuring state-of-the-art acoustics and soundproofing for talkies, which were films with a soundtrack, then a novelty compared to earlier silent films. The 1,600-seat venue also boasted innovative features including an advanced cooling system and a retractable dome with a 40-foot-wide aperture.

The theatre was financed by wealthy businessman Mirza Mohamed Ali Namazie, who was of Persian origins. Next to the theatre, Namazie commissioned an apartment and retail block, Namazie Mansions, often referred to as “Capitol Building”.

The theatre was managed by the Fisher brothers, Jewish businessmen with deep roots in the cinema industry who secured first-screening rights for major productions. Under them, Capitol Theatre quickly became the premier cinema of Singapore, where Hollywood celebrities would make appearances on occasion, such as Charlie Chaplin in 1932 and Douglas Fairbanks in 1935.

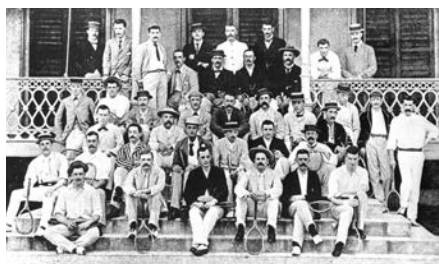


Capitol Theatre and Namazie Mansions, 1938
National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

FROM THE ESPLANADE TO THE PADANG

Through the 1800s, the Esplanade was very much the centre for sports and recreation for the European community in Singapore. It was here that sports in Singapore had their beginnings: the first sailing and rowing races along the waterfront in 1834, and the first recorded games at the Esplanade—cricket (1837), lawn tennis championship (1875) and hockey (1892). At both ends of the Esplanade, two sports clubs were established: Singapore Cricket Club in 1852 and Singapore Recreation Club in 1883, which primarily served the European and Eurasian communities respectively.

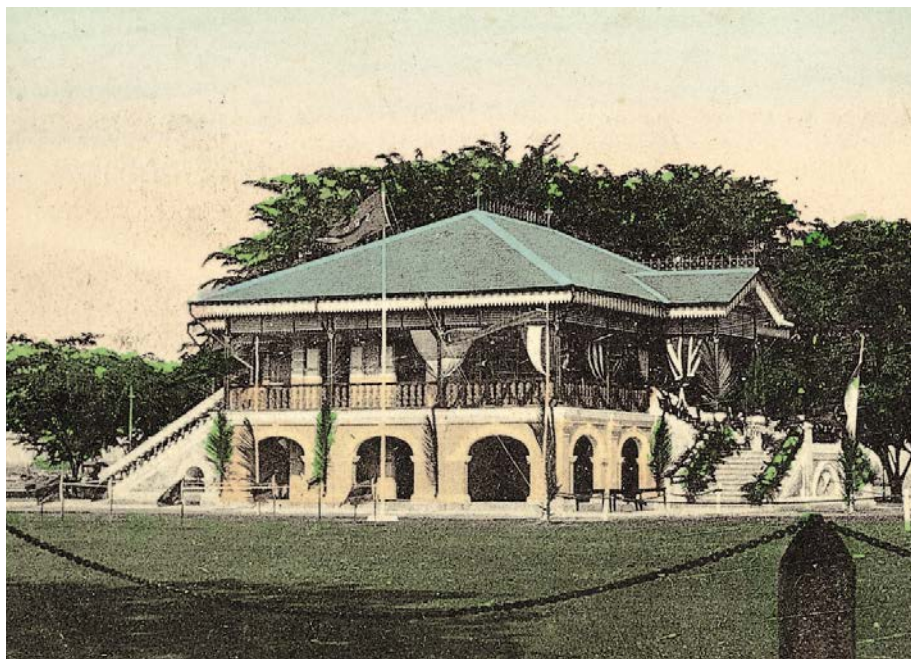
By the 1900s, the Esplanade gradually transformed from the preserve of Europeans to become a more inclusive space. Increasingly



Competitors of the Singapore Cricket Club's lawn tennis tournament, 1894
Courtesy of Singapore Sports Council



Former Singapore Lawn Tennis Association president, Chua Choon Leong playing at a tournament at the Padang, 1928
Courtesy of Singapore Sports Council



New pavilion of the Singapore Recreation Club, 1909

Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum: Donated by Prof Cheah Jin Seng, courtesy of National Heritage Board

called the “Padang” (“field” in Malay), it was noted in 1907 that “it is now quite the exception to see European women there assembled at their once fashionable resort. The Chinese flock to these places ... Hadjis and others also assemble in considerable numbers...”

The Padang also hosted various community celebrations, notably Thaipusam processions and Chinese New Year festivities, particularly the night of the 16th day, or Chap Lak Meh. It was believed that if a Chinese girl “went out on this night, good luck would fall to her, in the shape of a good and faithful husband.”

The prospects often materialised shortly after, as Lim Koon Teck (b. 1904), who grew up at St Gregory’s Place, recalled, “the young men used to sit round looking at the girls in the open horse carts. And then if they spot one, they follow to the house and report to the mother who will send a matchmaker to try to make a match.”

HOTELS, SHOPPING AND FOOD

Since the 19th century, the civic centre was already established as Singapore’s commercial hub, noted for its prestigious hotels and shopping.

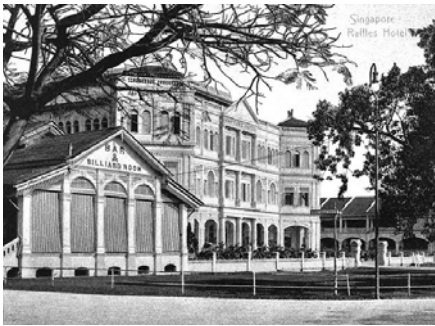
Exclusive establishments like Hotel de la Paix (at the former house of G. D. Coleman); Adelphi Hotel (site of present-day The Adelphi); Hotel de l’Europe, and Raffles Hotel catered to officers, traders, planters and royalty. Raffles Hotel, established by the Armenian Sarkies brothers in 1887 along Beach Road, grew to become one of Singapore’s top hotels by the 1900s. The Adelphi Hotel on Coleman Street hosted notable guests like Charlie Chaplin and was a gathering place for “the cream of the town.”

The civic centre was known for its range of shopping options. High Street, in particular, featured everything from French confectionaries, tailors and jewellers to textile retailers and souvenir shops. In 1938,



Hotel de l'Europe, c. late 19th century

National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Raffles Hotel, c. 1905

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Adelphi Hotel, c. 1910

National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

the Batavia-based (present-day Jakarta) Aurora Department Store opened a branch on High Street, selling Dutch East Indies goods and boasted of store assistants who could collectively converse in eight languages, reflecting the diverse nature of shoppers.

Stamford Road was another shopping belt lined with various retailers. In 1904, Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co., a premier British India department store chain that sold European goods, occupied a purpose-built structure at Stamford Road later known as Stamford House. After the department store moved out in 1915, the building was converted into a hotel called The Grosvenor and later Oranje Hotel.

Capitol Building was where Thomas Bata, a shoe manufacturer who was born in Prague (in present-day Czech Republic), opened his first store in Singapore in 1931. The business grew rapidly to sell 1.5 million pairs of shoes annually in Malaya. In 1940, Bata built Bata Building next to Capitol, and a new factory at Prince Edward Road.



Polar Café, on the right, at High Street, c. 1930s
Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Shophouses lining High Street, c. 1900s
Lim Kheng Chye collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Aurora Department Store at the junction of High Street and North Bridge Road, c. 1945
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The area was also known for dining, from hotel restaurants to street hawkers on Hock Lam and Chin Nam Streets. Famed for its curry puffs and cakes today, Polar Cafe originated as an American-styled milk bar on High Street in 1925. Started by merchant Lim Yew Chye whose adjoining provisions store carried fine European foods such as sausages and chocolates, Polar Café sold ice cream and “American” drinks to battle the tropical heat. Lim even engaged a milk bar expert from New York to supervise the café.

However, by the following year Lim had gone bankrupt and Polar Café was sold to the Chan family, proprietors of confectioner Luna Café located at Dhoby Ghaut. Under the Chans, the café grew to serve generations of Singaporeans. Betty Chen (b. 1926) recalled that her father would bring her for a movie at Capitol Theatre every Saturday, and “... then we would go to the Polar Café and have an ice cream after that. That was great.”

THE CIVIC CENTRE DURING WORLD WAR II

Singapore, promoted as the “Gibraltar of the East,” appeared impregnable with its military facilities, imperial troops, and local defence forces including the Malay Regiment and Straits Settlements Volunteer Force.

Fort Canning served as the headquarters of the Malaya command till late 1941, when the command moved to Sime Road. Between 1936 and 1941, the British built an underground bunker network here. The Air Raid Precautions (A.R.P.) Department, established at Fort Canning in 1938, conducted drills and installed sirens at key locations including Hill Street Police Station.

After Japanese troops landed in Malaya in December 1941, the government established emergency measures. Victoria Theatre became the central registration office for civil defence efforts, while the Casualty Bureau, which registered civilian casualties, operated from Fullerton Building. Buildings were repurposed: Capitol Theatre hosted Singapore’s first communal kitchen, Wesley Methodist Church served as an ammunition depot, and the Armenian Apostolic Church housed British artillery units.

Despite growing threats and refugee influx from Malaya, many maintained faith in British power. Joseph Seah (b. 1924) recalled, “We said, ‘Not to worry. The British can repel these people.’ That was how I felt at that time ... I remember with the bombs falling down ... we still carried on as normal.”

FALL OF SINGAPORE

As Japanese forces landed on 8 February 1942, bombing intensified, destroying structures and claiming lives. Makeshift hospitals were



Japanese troops marching entering the city, in front of Fullerton Building, 1942
Chin Kah Chong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

established in multiple buildings across the civic centre, including schools, places of worship and the Fullerton Building.

On 11 February, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival moved command operations to the Fort Canning bunker. Four days later, on 15 February, facing critical shortages of supplies, Percival and Allied commanders decided to surrender. After informing Governor Thomas Shenton, who had taken refuge at Fullerton Building, Percival led the surrender party to Ford Factory at Bukit Timah to sign the documents.



Parade of Japanese forces at the Padang, 1942
Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

THE CIVIC CENTRE DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

Under Japanese rule, Singapore was renamed Syonan-to (Japanese: Light of the south). There was also extensive renaming of places in Japanese. The Japanese established the Municipal Administration at Municipal Building and ordered local public officers to return to work. Operations at Hill Street Police Station and Barracks and Central Fire Station resumed. Patrick Mowe (b. 1937), who sheltered at Supreme Court (renamed Syonan Kotohoin), remembered Japanese soldiers demanding keys from his grandfather, Gilmore D'Silva, the building's caretaker and took over the building.

With the European public officers imprisoned, locals were often appointed to take over their roles. Alfred Devadasan Ponnambalam (b. 1920) worked at a new department called the Custodian of Enemy Property located at the Supreme Court. He shared, "We were collecting rents from any property, those people who moved away from Singapore Some were Jew properties, Allied properties, local people's properties."

Public spaces were repurposed. Capitol Theatre became Kyo Ei Gekijo, screening approved productions and propaganda. The

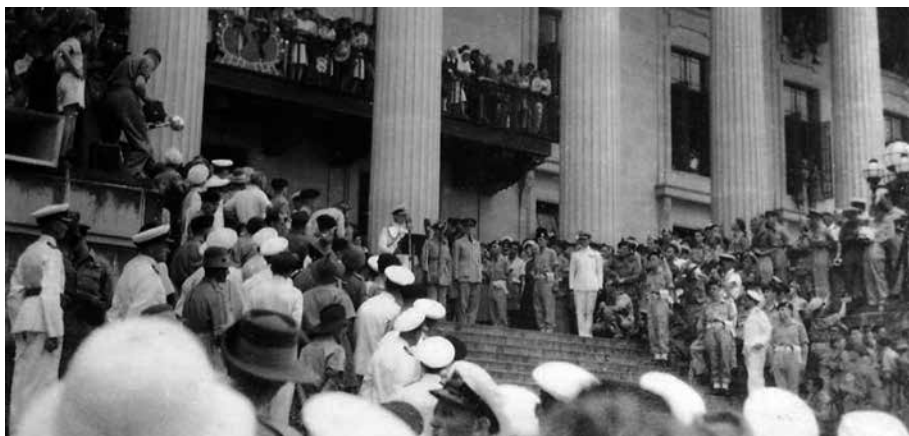


Japanese officials with locals, likely employees of the Syonan Tokubetushi (Syonan Special Municipality), at Municipal Building, c. 1942-1945
Heng Teck Kim Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Padang hosted Japanese celebrations such as the anniversary of Syonan-to's founding in February and Meiji Setsu (birthday of Emperor Meiji) in November. These occasions would be marked by grand parades, sports meets and rallies.

Gay Wan Leong (b. 1930), one of the school children who took part in a 1942 procession at the Padang, remembered learning Japanese marching songs. He shared, "Three abreast, we were marching ... when we reached the City Hall (Municipal Building), the band stopped there and played the tune ... we were singing and screaming all along... "

Religious life, though restricted, continued. St Andrew's Cathedral, Wesley Methodist



Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, addressing the crowd from the steps of the Municipal Building, 1945
Dr Khoo Boo Chai Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Church, and Cathedral of the Good Shepherd remained open through the occupation. Though the Armenian Apostolic Church stopped services, its premises were used by other Christian communities.

Education was disrupted as many teachers were imprisoned. For example, Khee Fatt School, Tao Nan School, and Anglo-Chinese School were closed while Raffles Institution was used as a military camp.

To keep hope alive during such harsh times, Patrick Mowe's family tuned into news in secrecy, using a hidden radio. Patrick Mowe, who stayed at Supreme Court with his family, shared, "There was an iron ladder, some 20-30 feet long straddling the space across the top floor to the top of the cupola, so that the workers could get out to place the flag during special occasions. If you fell, it would be all the way down the building. So my uncles hid a radio there during the occupation and secretly retrieved it in the evenings to listen to the news. The Japanese did not figure it out as none of them would want to climb that dangerous ladder."

As the war continued, food shortages became more severe. Green spaces in the civic centre such as St Andrew's Cathedral's grounds and the Padang were converted into vegetable



War crime trials at Victoria Memorial Hall, 1947
Tham Sien Yen Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

gardens. Ho Meng Jang (b. 1938) who stayed at Colombo Court, remembered his informal garden at the Padang, "We take this tapioca stick, go to the field, just stick it to the ground, then let it grow."

THE END OF WAR

By 1944, the tide of war was turning and Allied powers had started air raids on Singapore. The Japanese constructed shelters and established the Forward Service Corps to assist in passive

defence. Chia Boon Leong (b. 1925), one of the recruits, recalled, "I remember we had to dig trenches at the Padang ... the size of it about ten feet by four ..."

Following Japan's surrender on 2 September 1945, a formal surrender ceremony was held at the Municipal Building on 12 September. Japanese POWs were made to fill in the Padang's trenches and remove crops before the ceremony.

The British Military Administration, which served as the interim government till civilian rule was restored in 1946, worked to restore services and infrastructure. Schools reopened and war crime trials were conducted at various locations including Victoria Theatre, Victoria Memorial Hall and Supreme Court.

THE INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY

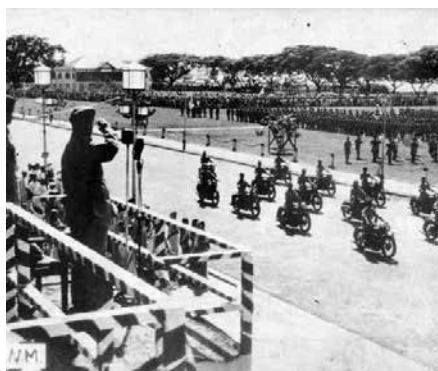
The Indian National Army (INA) was established after Singapore's fall to fight for India's independence from British colonialism, with Japanese support. It gained momentum after politician Subhas Chandra Bose took over the leadership in 1943.

Under Bose's leadership, INA expanded, forming the all-women Rani of Jhansi Regiment and establishing the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Hindi: Free India) at Cathay Building on 21 October 1943. After a failed military campaign in Burma, Bose returned to Singapore and laid the foundation stone for an INA memorial in July 1945 at Connaught Drive to honour fallen soldiers.

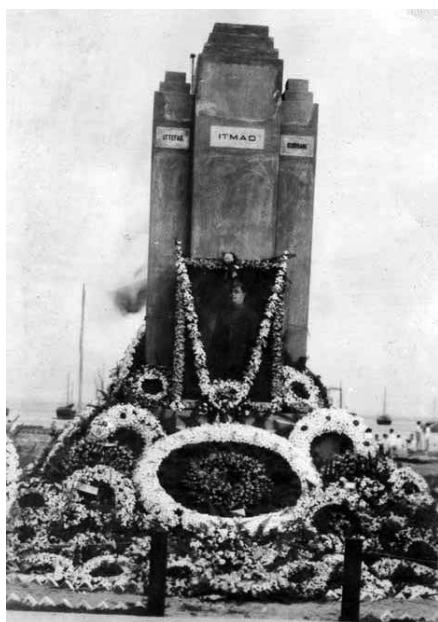
Though British Indian Army soldiers destroyed the memorial after Singapore's liberation, the site remained significant for Indian nationalists, who gathered monthly there until India's independence in 1947.

In 1995, the National Heritage Board installed a historic site marker at the location to recognise

the historical events associated with the site. The new marker was officially unveiled by S. Dhanabalan, then Member of Parliament for Toa Payoh.



Subhas Chandra Bose taking salute from INA at the Padang, July 1943.
Nirvan Thivy Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Wreaths were laid at the INA memorial at Connaught Drive when news of Subhas Chandra Bose's death in August 1945 reached Singapore, 1945
Nirvan Thivy Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

REMEMBERING THE WARS

The civic centre was a focal point for remembering the wars and those who lost their lives. On 11 December 1945, Armistice Day was commemorated, this time marking the end of both World Wars. Two minutes of silence were observed at the Cenotaph and a special memorial service was held at St Andrew's Cathedral.

The cathedral added a war memorial wing in 1952 and installed a plaque in 1988 to honour members of the Malayan Civil Service who perished in the war. As for the Cenotaph, its steps were extended in 1951 to include the years 1939 to 1945. Two urns, one containing the remains of an unknown civilian, were added to the base.

On 13 January 1946, the funeral of war hero Lim Bo Seng, who had perished in Malaya in 1944, was held on the steps of the Municipal Building. Officers from Force 136, Lim's unit, stood as the guard of honour. The casket was taken to MacRitchie Reservoir, where he was buried with full military honours. In 1954, a memorial designed by local architect Ng Keng Siang was unveiled by General Sir Charles Loewen, Commander-in-Chief of Far East Land Forces, at Esplanade Park to honour Lim Bo Seng.



Navy march past on Remembrance Day at the Cenotaph, 1953
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

In 1967, the Civilian War Memorial was unveiled at Beach Road. Set in a park, the memorial is dedicated to civilians who died during the occupation and was built on a chamber housing urns containing the remains of unknown civilians exhumed from mass graves. Annual memorial services are held here on 15 February.

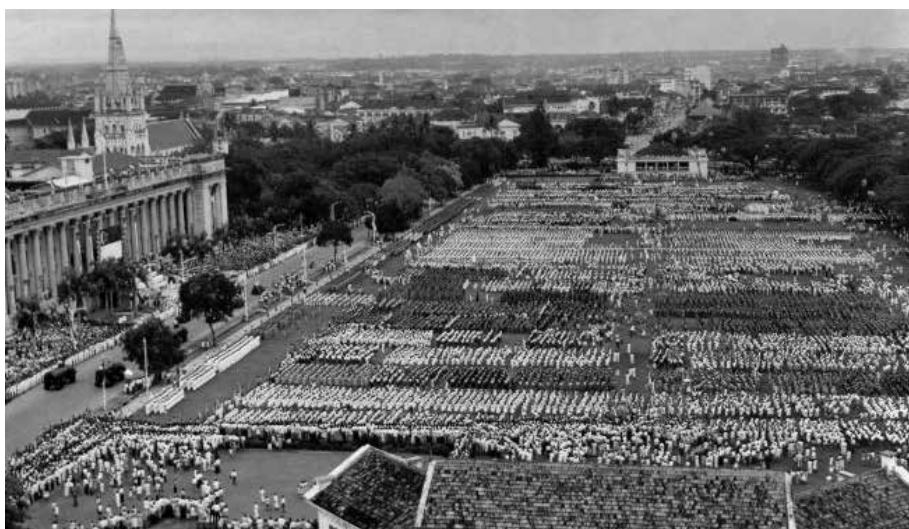


Funeral of Lim Bo Seng, attended by his family and prominent members of the Chinese community, 1946
Tham Sien Yen Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Public at the unveiling of the Civilian War Memorial, 1967
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

THE CIVIC CENTRE: STAGE FOR SINGAPORE'S ROAD TO NATIONHOOD



The Padang on the morning when Singapore's Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State), Yusof Ishak, was installed, 1959
Yusof Ishak collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

In the post-war years, the civic centre began evolving from the heart of colonial administration into the stage for the island's push for self-governance.

From self-government debates at Victoria Memorial Hall and fiery Merdeka rallies at Empress Place and Fullerton Square, to the first National Day Parade at the Padang, the civic centre was where Singapore's political awakening unfolded, milestone by milestone.

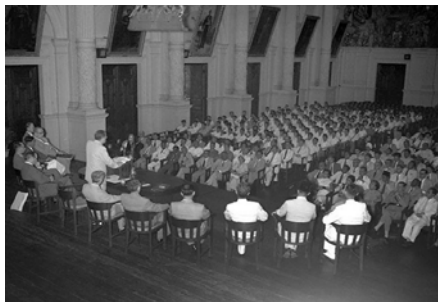
DREAMING OF SELF-DETERMINATION (1945–1959)

Post-war Singapore saw significant political developments. The fall of Singapore had deeply disillusioned the populace and nationalism began gaining traction.



Launch of PAP at Victoria Memorial Hall, 1954
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Singapore's first political party, Malaya Democratic Union, was formed in December 1945. More parties followed, such as Singapore Progressive Party in 1947 and Singapore Labour Party in 1948. In 1954, a group of young nationalists launched the People's Action Party (PAP) at Victoria Memorial Hall.



Inaugural meeting of the Rendel Commission at Victoria Memorial Hall, 1953
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Though these parties held different views on Singapore's roadmap to independence, they shared a common vision that Singapore should merge with Malaya, especially after the self-governing Federation of Malaya formed in 1948 and became independent in 1957.

Though the British agreed to transfer power gradually to the locals, progress was slow. In 1953, the government appointed diplomat Sir George Rendel to lead a commission to review Singapore's constitution, as part of the efforts for the colony to achieve internal self-governance. Meetings of the commission were held at Victoria Memorial Hall, and the commission proposed bold changes, including the establishment of a Legislative Assembly with 25 elected seats and a Council of Ministers.

General elections for the new Legislative Assembly were announced for April 1955, sparking political activity across the island. Jewish lawyer David Marshall, who led the Labour Front, emerged as a prominent figure known for his fiery rallies at Empress Place, under a tree that became his signature spot. On 2 April, over 53% of registered voters cast their votes. That night, some 20,000 people gathered outside Victoria Memorial Hall to await election results. Marshall's Labour Front won 10 seats, emerging as the biggest winners. Meanwhile, a young lawyer named Lee Kuan Yew from PAP clinched the highest individual majority of the election.



David Marshall and Lee Kuan Yew exchanging greetings on polling day at Victoria Memorial Hall, 1955
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The atmosphere was electric. Marshall, appointed as Singapore's first Chief Minister, addressed the crowd, "I believe the landslide to Labour was born under that old tree in Empress Place ... Tonight has been a victory for the people. By electing a member of the smallest domiciled community here they have proved that Singapore can work, think and act non-communally." The new Legislative Assembly held its sessions at the old house of Maxwell, which was extensively renovated to become the Assembly House.

In April 1956, Marshall led the Singapore all-party delegation to London, demanding full internal self-governance by April 1957. The talks broke down when both parties could not agree on defence arrangements and Marshall resigned as Chief Minister on 7 June 1956. Despite his short tenure, Marshall had accelerated Singapore's path to independence, pushed for labour reforms and championed multilingualism in the assembly.

Marshall's successor, former trade unionist Lim Yew Hock led a second delegation to London in 1957. This time, terms for full internal self-government were successfully negotiated. A third mission followed in 1958 to finalise the details of the new constitution, which would create a fully elected Legislative Assembly. General elections were planned for 1959, this time for a fully elected government for internal self-rule.



Marshall rallying his supporters at Empress Place under the iconic tree, 1956

Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission



First delegation to London at Marshall's office in the Assembly House, 1956

Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission

TAKING OVER EMPRESS PLACE: MALAYANISATION

After the war, the idea of Malayisation, that locals rather than European expatriates should run the public administration, began to gain momentum. Joseph Seah (b. 1924) summed up, "... we felt that all the plum jobs were given to the British people and whatever we did, however smart we would be, we would still be, shall we say, playing second fiddle." Dr Benjamin Chew (b. 1907) elaborated, "Because of the experience we had under

enemy occupation ... everywhere, there is a new sense... newfound sense of people who could carry on, on their own In Singapore definitely we had the men who could run the place, run it well."

A 1946 White Paper acknowledged the necessity of local staffing for self-government, but progress remained slow till 1955. The Labour government established the Malayisation Commission, holding consultations at Empress Place and the Assembly House. In May 1956, the commission laid out a two-year road map to fully Malayanise.

Empress Place, which was dubbed the "control room" as it housed important government offices including the Colonial Secretariat, was central to the fight for operational power, leading parliamentarian Lee Kuan Yew to declare, "let us take charge of the control room."

Despite resistance from expatriates and claims of insufficient qualified locals, progress continued. The appointment of Singapore's first local Chief Justice, Wee Chong Jin, in 1963 marked a significant milestone. By then, Malayisation had become routine in public administration.



Governor John Nicoll visiting the government offices at Empress Place, 1952

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

MEETING THE PEOPLE

When Marshall introduced “Meet-the-People” sessions at the Assembly House in 1955, critics called it “a waste of time and public money”. Held daily at first, Marshall later switched to weekly Saturday sessions. More than 150 citizens would attend each session, seeking help from welfare aid to housing. Within six months, it was reported that more than 2,000 unemployed people had requested assistance at the sessions. The press also changed its mind, calling these sessions “the best machinery so far in bringing about a closer harmony between the Government and the people.” “Meet-the-people” sessions eventually evolved from a novel idea into a mainstream channel for politicians to understand issues faced by the populace.

SELF-GOVERNING AT LAST (1959-1963)

On 30 May 1959, Singapore went to the polls. PAP won 43 seats and held its victory rally at the Padang. Lee Kuan Yew was sworn in as Prime Minister at City Hall (formerly Municipal Hall, renamed in 1951), deliberately moving the government’s centre from Empress Place to symbolise the break from colonial rule. Prime Minister Lee and Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye also chose to set up office in

City Hall. The news remarked, “... the nerve centre of all official activity was no more in Empress Place, for so long the traditional seat of government, but had been moved to the City Hall.”



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew with newly elected Ministers and Assembly men in front of City Hall, 1959

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



First sitting of the fully elected Legislative Assembly, 1959

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



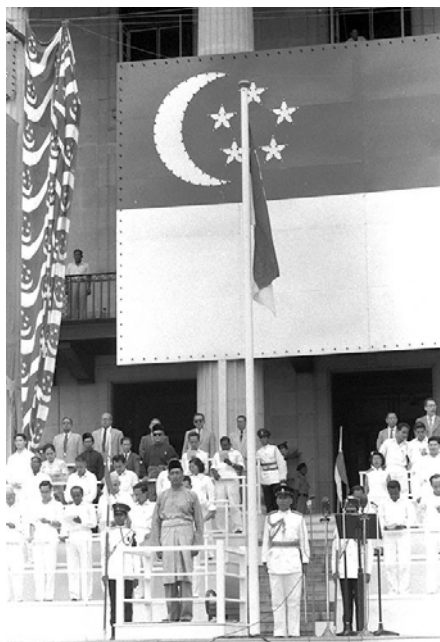
PAP election rally to packed audiences at Fullerton Square, 1959

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

BUILDING A NEW NATIONAL IDENTITY

In building a national identity for Singapore's diverse communities, Singapore's new state symbols, Singapore's flag, crest and anthem, were passed into law on 11 November 1959 at Assembly House. These symbols were publicly unveiled during the installation of Singapore's first local Yang di-Pertuan Negara, Yusof Ishak, on 3 December 1959 at City Hall. The government declared 3 June as Singapore's National Day and the first National Day Parade held on the Padang in 1960.

Raffles Library and Raffles Museum were renamed National Library and National Museum respectively in 1960. The library and museum had split earlier in 1957, each with its own administration. The National Theatre at the foot of Fort Canning Hill was another significant project. Designed by local architect Alfred H.K. Wong, the theatre, partially funded by public donations, was officially opened by Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak on 8 August 1963. It went on to be a key venue for cultural and nation-building events, including National Day rallies and cultural concerts.



Unfurling of the new flag at City Hall during the installation of Singapore's first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara, Yusof Ishak, 1959

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Minister for Culture Sinnathamby Rajaratnam on the steps of City Hall with young performers during Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat, concerts which were organised to showcase the cultures of the four major groups in Singapore, 1960

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

INDEPENDENCE THROUGH MALAYSIA, LEAVING MALAYSIA (1963-1965)

Between 1961 and 1963, Singapore was swept up in the battle for merger with the Federation of Malaya. Following intense debates over the merger at the Assembly House and a national referendum on the issue, the merger of Singapore with the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and North Borneo (now Sarawak) to form Malaysia finally took place on 16 September 1963. Singapore was finally independent from colonial rule. Brian Ang (b. 1955), then attending Anglo-Chinese School at Coleman Street, remembered, "Suddenly, we had to sing two national anthems in the morning — *Negaraku* and *Majulah Singapura*." But the excitement of merger quickly dimmed. Promises of prosperity were slow to materialise, and social unrest, most notably the racial riots in 1964, broke out. The last straw came in May 1965, when Singapore brought together the non-Malay political parties in Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah to push for a new "Malaysian Malaysia" where non-Malays had equal rights as Malays.

Eventually on 9 August 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia. The bill was passed in the Assembly House that day and the heads of consulates and the press had to attend the briefing by the cabinet at City Hall.

It was a moment of anguish for many. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew recalled, "I had let

down many people in Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak. They had responded to our call of a Malaysian Malaysia... Because they rallied round and felt as passionately as we did about a Malaysian Malaysia, we were expelled. By accepting separation, I had failed them. That sense of guilt made me break down."

In Chinatown, however, the air was joyous. Firecrackers were let off as people celebrated the separation. Singapore had become an independent republic and would now chart its own path.



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's moment of anguish as he announced the separation on television, 1965
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Heads of consulates in Singapore arriving at City Hall to attend briefing by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, 1965
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew reading the proclamation of Malaysia at City Hall at a ceremonial rally, 1963
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

THE CIVIC CENTRE DURING THE 1960S TO 1980S

After Singapore's separation, the civic centre remained the heart of governance. Assembly House was renamed Parliament House, and the first parliamentary sitting was held on 8 December 1965.

City Hall housed the Prime Minister's office, cabinet and key government agencies including the Elections Department, the Public Service Commission, Ministry of Communications and Information, the Ministry of Law and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Though the Prime Minister's office relocated to the Istana in 1971, cabinet swearing-in ceremonies continued at City Hall until 2001, while the Padang hosted National Day parades annually until 1975. Today,



Yang di-Pertuan Yusof Ishak inspecting the guard of honour outside Parliament House during the ceremonial opening of the Parliament, 1965

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak (left) calling on Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (right) and Minister for Defence Lim Kim San (centre) at City Hall, 1968

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Over 7,000 people turned up to queue for the new \$10 silver coins issued by the Singapore Currency Board at Empress Place, 1972

Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission

National Day Parades are still regularly held at the Padang.

Empress Place remained an important centre for the civil service, housing agencies such as the Immigration Department, Singapore Registry of Births and Deaths, Singapore Currency Board, National Registration Office, Legal Aid Bureau and Ministry for Social Affairs. The complex regularly saw long queues, particularly during currency issuances or document registration deadlines.

Fullerton Building became fully occupied by government departments such as the Economic Development Board and Ministry of Finance after the Singapore Chamber of Commerce and Singapore Club vacated in 1959 and 1960 respectively. Establishing international trade agreements was part of Singapore's economic strategy and important

agreements were signed at the Ministry of Finance at Fullerton Building. The adjacent offices of Hammer & Co., a supplier of fresh water to ships, were taken over by the Port of Singapore Authority subsequently and renamed Waterboat Office.



First National Day Parade as an independent republic held at the Padang, 1966
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

BEACH ROAD CAMP AND THE BRITANNIA CLUB

The Beach Road camp located near Bras Basah Road used to house different units of voluntary forces. After the Singapore Military Forces was established in 1953, the camp became its headquarters and served as the main registration centre for National Service recruits and training camp for National Servicemen.

Next door, the Britannia Club was opened in 1952. Managed by the British Navy, Army, Armed Forces Institution and the Women's Voluntary Service, the club was a popular recreation and social site for military personnel and their families. After the British military withdrew from Singapore in 1971, the government bought over the premises and turned it into a club for Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and their families. Opened in 1974, the club was once named SAF Warrant Officers and Specialists Club before adopting its current name The NCO Club.

COMMUNITIES OF THE CIVIC CENTRE

Following the war years and Singapore's independence, the communities around the civic centre saw growth and transformation as Singapore continued to develop.

As the centre of the Anglican community in Singapore and seat of the bishop, St Andrew's Cathedral continued to be where key life events—baptisms, weddings, and funeral services—took place. In 1983, the cathedral added a \$3 million wing to serve its growing congregation. The cathedral continued to honour its heritage, such as holding special services to remember those who died during World War II. The link with England was underscored as well when Queen Elizabeth II and Duke of Edinburgh attended service at the cathedral during their official 1972 state visit to Singapore.

Singapore's oldest church, the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator emerged from World War II in a state of disrepair. Despite their dwindling numbers, the community rallied to repair the church building. When Bukit Timah Christian and Bidadari cemeteries were redeveloped in the 1970s, American-Armenian Levon Palian salvaged the headstones of Armenians and sent them to the church grounds, including those of well-known persons such as Catchik Moses and Agnes Joaquim.

Wesley Methodist Church also suffered damage and looting during the war. Through the generosity of the members, the church was restored. Refurbishment works were completed in 1948 and the buildings were rededicated. As the congregation grew, the church opened a new six-storey wing in 1979.

During the mid-1950s, part of the campus at Anglo-Chinese School was demolished for the construction of a bigger, modern campus as school enrolment grew. The new school building located at Coleman Street officially opened in 1959.

The former buildings of St Andrew's Mission and School at Armenian Street were used to



Queen Elizabeth II and Duke of Edinburgh attended service at St Andrew's Cathedral during their visit in 1972
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

house different organisations such as the British Council and the headquarters of the Scouts. The building used by the Scouts was renamed Sands House. Across the road, the new six-storey Bible House was completed in 1974.

At Hill Street, the building of Masjid Al-Burhani was demolished in 1955 to make way for a new structure. Dr Sardar Taher Saifuddin, spiritual leader of the Dawoodi Bohras, had suggested the construction of a new mosque during a visit in 1953 and laid the foundation stone in 1954. Construction of a four-storey building began in 1956. On 6 March 1959, the new mosque building was officially opened.

Next door, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (formerly called Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce until 1977) continued to advocate for the Chinese community. For example, through the 1950s, the chamber lobbied for Chinese residents born in China to be given citizenship.

The chamber redeveloped its site in the early 1960s, demolishing the mansion of Wee Ah Hood and erecting a new building designed by architect Ee Hoong Chwee. Opened in



Anglo-Chinese School's new building at Canning Rise, c. 1960s
Tan Kok Kheng collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Governor John Nicoll visiting Sands House at Armenian Street, 1954
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Lion dance performance at the opening of the new Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry building at Hill Street, 1964

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

1964 by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the building blended Chinese cultural elements such as a Chinese palace-style roof and two nine-dragon relief walls.

During the ceremony, then-14-year-old Teo Peng Hoe (b. 1950), a resident living along Hill Street, presented the chamber with a 3-dimensional architectural model of the new building. Recounting his initial curiosity with

the construction of the new building, Teo said, "I was living on Hill Street since about 1959. I live on the fourth floor of a shophouse at the corner of Hill Street and Loke Yew Street. It just so happened that this building faced the chamber and ... I always took the shortcut past the chamber on my way home. I became curious about the construction of the chamber because of my interest in architecture."



Building of Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1960s

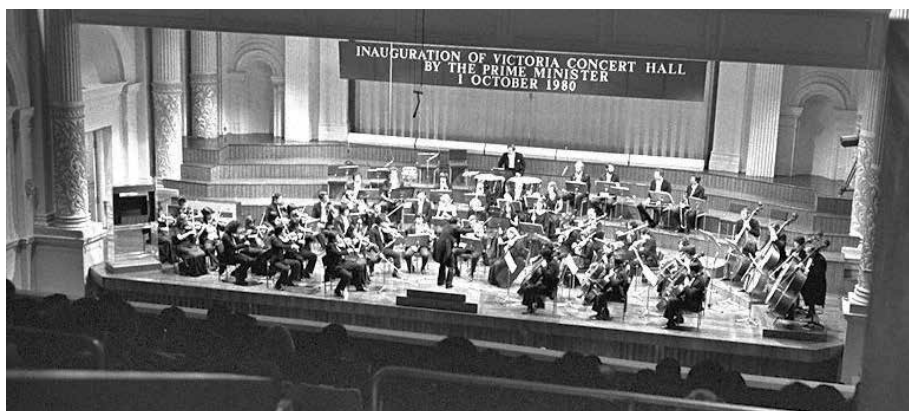
SCCCI Collection, courtesy of Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry



Teo Peng Hoe posing with the 3-dimensional architectural model of the new building which he constructed, 1964

Courtesy of Teo Peng Hoe

THE CIVIC CENTRE AS AN ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE DISTRICT



Performance by Singapore Symphony Orchestra during the opening of the refurbished Victoria Concert Hall, 1980
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

For many Singaporeans growing up in the 1950s to 1980s, the civic centre was the go-to destination before it was eclipsed by Orchard Road. It was the heart of city life, a vibrant place where families, friends, and couples went for dining, recreation, and shopping. Through institutions such as Victoria Theatre and Victoria Memorial Hall, the National Museum, and other cultural venues, arts and culture continued to thrive in the civic centre.

HOME TO THE ARTS AND CULTURE

Victoria Theatre and Victoria Memorial Hall, which underwent rounds of renovations, were important spaces for local artists and groups to rehearse and perform, including Singapore Musical Society, Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra, and Goh Soon Tioe Orchestra, which was founded by the violinist in 1953. In 1980, after extensive restoration, Victoria



Full dress rehearsal for the Peranakan play Pileh Menantu at Drama Centre, 1984

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Memorial Hall was officially reopened as Victoria Concert Hall and became the home of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

At Loke Yew Street, famous piano teacher Lucien Wang (1909–2007) taught generations of musicians from her home studio, including renowned pianists Ong Lip Tat, Toh Chee



Showroom for local artists to display and sell their artworks, set up by Tay Long at Eu Court, c. 1950s-1960s
 Courtesy of Straits Art Co.



Tay Long with artist Lim Cheng Ho at the shop, c. 1950s-1960s
 Courtesy of Straits Art Co.

Hung and Lim Jing Jing. Wang would also hold student recitals at Victoria Theatre and Victoria Memorial Hall. Her contributions to music education were widely recognised: composer Leong Yoon Pin even wrote a piece 6B-0617, the address of Lucien Wang's home at Loke Yew Street, in tribute.

The Cultural Centre, first completed in 1957 at Canning Rise to be a key hub in organising Singapore's cultural activities, was transferred to the Ministry of Culture in 1980. The Ministry

then transformed it into the Drama Centre, a dedicated space for drama activities. For many decades, Drama Centre was an important base for local theatre groups.

The civic centre was also a hub for the developing visual arts scene in Singapore. In 1947, former Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts student Tay Long, co-founded Straits Commercial Art Company at Eu Court along Stamford Road as a commercial graphics studio and arts supplies shop. Over time, the business became the major fine art supplies store in the region and the go-to place for local and regional artists. During the 1950s and '60s, Tay Long rented a unit on the third floor of Eu Court to display and sell the works of local artists, with the aim of filling a gap in the years when Singapore had few formal art galleries.

Tay Nam Seng (b. 1950), son of Tay Long, recalled, "My father was on close terms with many local and regional artists, like Cheong Soo Pieng, Lim Hak Tai and Chen Wen Hsi. They would come and chat for hours with him;

the shop was like a meeting place for them. Up to the 1980s, we were the only shop in Singapore selling professional art supplies and even the pioneering Indonesian artist Basuki Abdullah was a frequent visitor."

The National Library also contributed to the cultural landscape and hosted exhibitions by local artists regularly. Its programmes served to nurture local arts and culture. Shalini Lalwani (b. 1970) shared, "The library had a drama kids programme, which my siblings and I joined. Growing up, we would be involved in the Christmas skits and drama productions. My sister, Malti Lalwani, went on to become an actress when she grew up!"

The National Theatre and National Museum played an important role in fostering a Malayan and later, Singaporean culture and consciousness. The National Theatre was where generations of local arts and cultural organisations staged their performances. In 1965, following Singapore's independence, the National Museum was tasked to focus on telling Singapore's stories, a mission it continues to uphold today.

A HAVEN FOR FOOD, LEISURE AND SHOPPING

Between the 1950s and 1980s, the civic centre was Singapore's lifestyle destination before it was eclipsed by Orchard Road. This section explores the memories of the people who lived and worked in the civic centre.

FROM STREET HAWKERS TO ICE CREAM PARLOURS

Hock Lam and Chin Nam Streets were known for their hawker fare. Mary Law (b. 1945) who lived at Hock Lam Street, recalled, "Because the whole street a lot of Hainanese there ... there's a stall which sell the beef noodle, very famous one." Brian Ang (b. 1955), who grew up at Hill Street, remembered having supper with his family at a Teochew porridge place at Hock Lam Street regularly, "The bills would be tallied only once a year and passed to my grandfather for payment." For Gerardine

Donough-Tan (b. 1955), it was the curry puff that she missed most, "It was crispy and the filling was very hot because they put green chili inside. It made me tear but I loved it."

The people selling the food were just as memorable. Ronni Pinsler (b. 1950) remembered coffeeshop *Hock Hiap Leong* at Armenian Street, "The *char kway teow* (Hokkien: fried flat noodles) master there knew my order by heart: a bit more *see ham* (Hokkien: cockles), a bit more chili."



Hawker stalls at Hock Lam Street, 1975
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Hock Lam Street, 1977
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The cook, Tan Chong Chia, had been frying up noodles there since 1949. His son, Tan Boon Kiat (b. 1958), started helping out in 1979 and reflected, "It was tough at first. There were customers who only trusted my father and refused to let me fry. I also made deliveries to nearby offices, such as the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The alley behind the coffee shop was lined with mobile hawkers selling laksa, sweets, cigarettes...."

Pinsler fondly remembered another spot, "There was Ujagar Singh on the second floor of a shophouse at St Gregory's Place. He served the best brain masala, made from sheep's brains. We used to call it "Ujagar Singh Upstairs". He'd pull out a bottle of whisky on the house when I dropped by and his Chinese wife would look annoyed as he was spending more on us than we were spending on the food!"

For those who preferred air-conditioned comfort, there was Magnolia Milk Bar, later renamed Magnolia Snack Bar, at Capitol Building. Opened by Cold Storage, it was the largest creamery in Singapore in its time, drawing crowds of 2,000 during peak hours. Peggy Evelyn Nicholas (b. 1954) recalled of the occasional visit, "My parents would buy just one Knickerbocker sundae for me and my two siblings to share. My brother called it "Knickerbocker Skyscraper" because we had never seen such a tall glass of scooped ice-cream, topped with cherry, chocolate sauce, nuts and a wafer!"

Another iconic eatery was Polar Café. The lunch spot of professionals, Polar Café was then known for its Hainanese-styled Western food, curry puffs, pastries and ice-creams. Ang Chor Khoo (b. 1953) shared, "It was not a place we could go every day; just once or twice a year for special occasions like birthdays." Or a special first date. For Chow Chew (b. 1925), having lived through the horrors of war, Polar Cafe was a cherished memory, "I took my girlfriend, later my wife, there on just one date and we had an ice-cream."

PARKS AND RECREATION

The civic centre was a popular recreational destination as well. "We would go to City Hall and the Padang for evening strolls," Chow Chew recalled of his dating days. Along the sea front, a new park was reclaimed and officially opened in 1953. Named Esplanade Park and its promenade christened Queen Elizabeth Walk, the park was a popular haunt, especially with its food centre. In 1970, the food centre was redeveloped to become Satay Club, housing satay sellers relocated from Beach Road. For many years, Chinese singles would flock to the park and toss oranges and apples into the sea on the 15th day of Chinese New Year, believing it would bring good luck, health and love.

The park was not the only place associated with romance. Charlie Khoo (b. 1945) shared that Magnolia Snack Bar was a lovers' spot as well, "All the lovers will go there ... have some drink, then after that they will cross over to the church ... St Andrew's Cathedral ... there was the Lovers' Ground. And the Padang also the same. That was the Lovers' Ground. Can see every Saturday night." In 1966, St Andrew's Cathedral decided to fence off its grounds, putting a stop to nocturnal visits.

The Padang continued to be a sports hub, especially for rugby and cricket. As for the two clubs, Singapore Cricket Club and Singapore Recreation Club, membership was opened to all communities from the 1960s.



Queen Elizabeth Walk at Esplanade Park, 1966
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of
National Archives of Singapore



Fort Canning Park, 1985

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

At the foot of Fort Canning Hill, the city constructed a public swimming complex along River Valley Road between 1957 to 1959. During the 1970s, the government integrated King George V Jubilee Park, Fort Canning Hill and the surrounding greenery along River Valley and Clemenceau Roads to create "Central Park", renamed "Fort Canning Park" in 1981. It included amenities such as Singapore Squash Centre, children's playgrounds and a skating rink. The graves in the former Christian cemetery were exhumed to make way for the park.

Singapore's first public aquarium, Van Kleeef Aquarium, officially opened in 1955 at the foot of Fort Canning Hill. It was named after Dutch businessman Karl Willem Benjamin van Kleeef, who bequeathed his estates of around \$165,000, to the municipal government for the "embellishment of the town" upon his death in 1930. Works on the aquarium started in the 1930s but were disrupted due to the war and only restarted in 1953.

With more than 6,500 fishes, the aquarium was a huge draw for locals and tourists. As a schoolboy, Lawrence Ang Poh Siew (b. 1940) recalled that the eel was the most exciting exhibit, "... that attracts lot of local people.

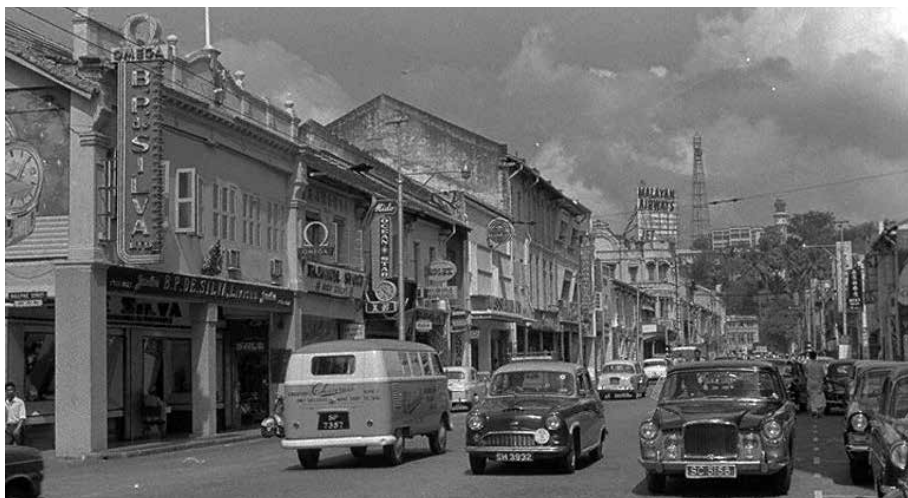


Van Kleeef Aquarium, 1963

Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Village people who want to go there and see ... It's a big fat eel ... all the children never seen that."

Capitol Theatre and Building were sold to the Shaw Organisation after the war. Capitol Theatre became the company's flagship cinema while the apartment block was renamed Shaws Building. The theatre also hosted performances by local and international artistes and events such as beauty pageants. Charlie Khoo, who worked as a projectionist at the theatre, stated, "Nobody can beat Capitol Theatre ... the '50s, '60s stars all came down



High Street, where Jeweller B. P. de Silva's shop could be seen on the left, 1962
 Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

... no matter what show you put down there it sure will be crowded." The shows were so popular that a booming racketeering market emerged where gangs would instruct young boys to queue and buy out the tickets. Then at the back lanes near Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Khoo described, "They will resell it ... every day you can see black market down there. Those were the days where the black market boomed ..."

NEW AGE OF SHOPPING IN THE CIVIC CENTRE

From tailored clothes to diamonds, vinyl records and the latest novels, the civic centre was one of the island's main shopping districts up to the early 1980s. High Street and North Bridge Road were popular for clothes shopping. Gerardine Donough-Tan reminisced, "High Street was the main shopping street in Singapore then. My parents would take me there to shop for clothes when there was an occasion to dress up, such as Christmas or Easter. The big stores were Metro, Aurora and Hilda's; then Cortina Department Store opened in the early '70s. In my late teens, I would go there to window-shop with friends."

The high-end appeal of High Street drew Indonesian businessman Ong Tjoe Kim to

set up the first Metro store there in 1957, which specialised in textiles for cheongsam and sarong kebaya, appealing to well-to-do housewives and Indonesian tourists. Ong explained, "I felt that High Street was more up-market. Many government institutions were located there. It was more upmarket than Chinatown It was also a tourist belt."

High-end jewellery stores were a highlight. For diamonds, one would head to Flinter & Grinberg, one of the top diamond traders in Singapore, located at Eu Court. Moritz Flinter and his partner had moved here after the war from Raffles Place. Ronni Pinsler, Flinter's grandson, recalled the shop's high-profile customers, "They were usually the Chinese towkays, from here and Penang, and Chettiaris. We also had high-ranking civil servants, ministers, coming to us. The Sultan of Brunei was also one of our clients and we would have to present our diamonds to him at his palace."

The city centre was home to major records shops such as Kwang Sia, Sing Records and Roxy Records. Kwang Sia, established in the 1940s by the Ang family, was one of the largest stockists in Singapore, carrying records from Teochew opera and A-go-go (a fusion music

genre popular in Singapore during the 1960s and 1970s) to Western classical music and pop. Brian Ang, son of founder Ang Keng Hui, shared, “The area was the hub of the elite of Singapore then. There were the civil servants and professionals who worked here. We also had the Chinese merchants who would buy Teochew opera records from us. I remember when it was Chinese New Year, families would put the opera records to play while setting off fireworks.” According to Kwang Sia, among the shop’s regular clients were Mrs Lee Kuan Yew and Attorney-General Tan Boon Teik.

By the 1960s, the business had ventured into recording under its label Star Swan, recording local artistes such as Charlie and the Swan Orchestra and even produced a Mandarin version of *The Sound of Music*. Roxy Records, set up in 1962 along Hill Street, likewise produced records under its label, Precious Urn, which specialised in Teochew opera, Mandarin hits and A-go-go. It also recorded popular local Mandarin singer Zhang Xiao Ying.

Paul Lim (b. 1953), whose family owned Roxy Records, recalled, “Rediffusion used to hold singing contests and our staff would attend the shows to sign up potential artists. They signed Zhang Xiao Ying before the finals because they were sure she would win. We wouldn’t stand a chance by the time she won!”

For students at the city centre’s schools, the two most important stops were MPH and Bata. Malaya Publishing House officially became MPH Limited in 1968. In the 1960s, an Indonesian business bought over MPH, pivoting it to sell school textbooks, toys, stationery and sports goods. The array delighted students such as CHIJ student Peggy Evelyn Nicholas, “MPH was where I would go to get the latest copy of the *FanFare* magazine on music and to browse the latest novels, detective stories, comics. The prices of art materials were out of league, but it was great fun hanging out there.”

She would go on to become an employee of MPH at the subscription department from



Jewellery craftsman sorting diamonds at Flinter & Grinberg, 1980

Ronni Pinsler collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Kwang Sia at 104 Hill Street, undated

Courtesy of Kwang Sia

1979 to 1982, learning how to put magazines together for titles such as *Female*, *Living*, and *SilverKris*. She described it as a “vibrant industry” when there was no digital print back then.

Bata Building, the brand’s flagship store was where school children in the area flocked to for shoes. Gerardine, another CHIJ student, said, “I grew up with Bata shoes. Most of us who went to city schools wore Bata shoes because the shop was here. And it was always ‘first to Bata, then to school’ - the brand’s famous tagline.”

In the 1960s, the shophouses of the civic centre began making way for modern skyscrapers, starting with the demolition of G. D. Coleman’s house. The house, then a residence for some 1,000 tenants, was torn down in 1965 for the development of Peninsula Hotel and Shopping Complex. A resident of Coleman’s house



Cortina Departmental Store at Colombo Court, where a monthly Singapore Sweep draw would be held at the open space in front of the building, 1976

Ministry of Culture collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

remarked, "In this commercial centre of South-East Asia, shopping facilities are obviously regarded as more important to the tourist than a mere historic landmark."

Over the next two decades, the civic centre's older structures were demolished in phases. Hock Lam Street, Chin Nam Street and Hill Street were cleared of their shophouses by the early 1970s while those along High Street were progressively acquired in the 1970s and 1980s.

In their place, modern commercial complexes rose: Colombo Court and High Street Centre in the early 1970s, Capitol Shopping Centre in 1976, Peninsula Plaza in 1979 and Excelsior Hotel and Shopping Complex in 1983. Adelphi Hotel, which was Singapore's oldest surviving hotel then, closed its doors in 1973 and was demolished in 1979. On its site, the Adelphi Complex (now The Adelphi) was built in 1985, the same year Funan Centre was constructed at Hill Street.

The schools moved out one by one as the civic centre's population declined. Raffles Institution moved to Grange Road in 1972 and Raffles City, a shopping and hotel complex designed by architect I. M. Pei, was built on its former site. By the 1980s, the schools of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, St Joseph's Institution and Tao Nan School had also moved to the suburbs. In 1993, Anglo-Chinese School followed suit.

The new skyscrapers ushered in an era of modern retail. Colombo Court became home to upscale retailers like Cortina Departmental Store. Kwang Sia, whose shophouse at Hill Street was acquired by the government, took up most of the ground floor and thrived as a records shop and later video store till the late 1980s, when it pivoted to other businesses. High Street Centre became known as a fashion hub. When High Street merchants were evicted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many relocated to the shopping centre. Others, like Metro, exited the civic centre.

The booming tourist trade in the civic centre drew new businesses. Tay Nam Seng recalled, "The stretch of shops from Stamford Road to North Bridge Road were focused on tourists, such as souvenir shops and a crocodile skin products shop."

Gobind Bherumal Lalwani was one such entrepreneur drawn to set up a new business. The Lalwani family had arrived in Singapore from Sindh (in present-day Pakistan) shortly after the Partition of India in 1947, fleeing the violence. Gobind's father had established a successful trading business at High Street earlier and in 1963, the family purchased Oranje Hotel at Stamford Road, renaming it "Stamford House".

On the ground floor, Gobind opened the popular Bobby-O department store in 1971,

selling everything from jewellery and tailored clothes to hi-fi equipment and watches. Bobby-O became a popular stop for tourists. Tour guides were paid commissions to bring shoppers and Bobby-O operated its own shuttle vans to ferry customers from hotels. Celebrities such as Lata Mangeshkar and Paul Anka were among its visitors.

Shalini Lalwani, Gobind's daughter, remembered, "My father tried hard to create employment for fellow Sindhis who had been uprooted after the Partition. I remembered he hired one man just to open the door for shoppers and another to pour orange squash when tourist groups came. People often referred to him as 'Mr Bobby-O'."

Following its acquisition by Thai-Chinese businessman Jack Chia in 1972 and under its new General Manager Patrick Mowe, a former Straits Times executive, MPH was transformed from a textbook retailer into a modern publisher and major bookseller in the 1970s and 1980s.

"There was something very special about MPH," Mowe recalled. "It was the first purpose-built bookstore in Southeast Asia and in those days, it was considered very genteel to be associated with the book trade. MPH was also the largest bookstore in Singapore then." With a keen marketing sense, Mowe moved MPH into trade publishing, launched magazines such as *Female*, inked deals with companies such as Singapore Airlines and opened more branches across the island.



Bobby-O at Stamford House, 1971
Courtesy of Shalini Lalwani



MPH, with the motto coined by Patrick Mowe "Where the book people are", c. 1970s
Courtesy of The Mowe Mobile

LIFE IN THE CIVIC CENTRE

Until the 1970s, the civic centre was highly residential as its shophouses served as homes for families and workers. The housing varied widely, from overcrowded shophouses to spacious apartments in buildings like Capitol Building and Eu Court.

At 104 Hill Street, the Ang family stayed in the upper storeys of the shophouse above their shop, Kwang Sia. The family was more well-off, but living quarters were as cramped. Ang Chor Khoon recalled, "My grandparents, two uncles, six aunts, my father and three siblings had to share the space. We had to set up two tables for meals and it would take two rounds for everyone to have their meals, as we had to feed workers as well."

Despite the crowdedness, childhood was memorable. "Our shophouse had a courtyard and after school, the children in the neighbourhood would come over to play marbles. We also carried lanterns during the mid-autumn festival. It was fun," Ang recalled.

Some parts of the civic centre were known to be rough neighbourhoods. "Like Hock Lam and Chin Nam Streets," Ang shared. "We were told to avoid those areas. Sometimes we would see fights break out, with knives and blood, just like in the movies!"

Despite this, the sense of community was strong. Her brother, Brian Ang, remembered,



Chinese opera performance at Chin Nam Street, 1971
Paul Piollet collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

"The best thing about growing up at Hill Street was that all the families along the street had many children. You were never short of friends. We would also look forward to festivals like the seventh month. The Teochew and Hokkien merchants in the area would pool their funds to put up a wayang show along the streets. There would be Teochew opera and a lot of feasting."

For Shalini Lalwani, who grew up at Eu Court, childhood games were a highlight too. She recalled, "During the March school holidays, I would organise the 'Annual Eu Court Sports Day' for my siblings and neighbours. We would have all kinds of races along the corridor and the winner would get a trophy made from a carton wrapped in foil! I would also sponsor \$5 as cash prizes."

The civic centre had a distinct character unlike any other part of Singapore, its institutions sites of unique childhood memories. Peggy Evelyn Nicholas' prank, for example, depended on the zoological collection at National Museum, which was later transferred to the University of Singapore (now National University of Singapore) in 1972.

She shared, "I would bring my friends to visit the whale at the National Museum and tell them to look through the magnifying glass from a specific spot. When they looked up, they would be shocked to see the whale's head just above and looking like it was going to eat



The Lalwanis and a neighbour's kid during the Annual Eu Court Sports Day, 1983
Courtesy of Shalini Lalwani

them and they would scream! It was a trick to pull on friends."

Growing up here also meant having front row seats to national events. Shalini shared, "Before the Central Telephone Exchange was constructed, we could see the fireworks from the rooftop during National Day. One year, I remember my cousin took part in the parade and we screamed his name from the window when the parade passed by!"

Shalini reflected, "Magnolia Snack Bar was where I would have my hot dog, Knickerbocker Glory and Merry Widow! My favourite place was MPH, with its first floor for stationery and books and board games on the second floor and snack bar on the third. The National Library was another favourite haunt. I was so lucky to have grown up in the civic centre."

GOVERNMENT OFFICES, OLD AND NEW

As Singapore's civil service expanded, the need for more office space led to repurposing of buildings, relocations and construction of new offices at the civic centre. The area continued to be a key administrative centre where government offices and public service institutions clustered.

Colombo Court became home to government agencies including the Registry of Companies and the Registry of Business Names and Singapore Telephone Board. In 1971, the Attorney-General's Chambers moved from

Havelock into the late 19th century annexe building next to the Parliament House.

The 1980s brought further changes. In 1984, the new Hill Street Centre became home to Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). The complex also had a food centre to house resettled hawkers. Wee Keng Lock Raymond (b. 1967), who joined CPIB in 1990, remembered, "There was the famous Hill Street Bak Chor Mee, Hokkien mee and *teh tarik* stalls relocated from Capitol Theatre's back lanes. There was also a braised duck rice stall which operated late into the night, catering to taxi drivers and night shift workers. During operations, CPIB officers would ask one another if we were having 'duck rice' tonight, meaning the case would end late or extend overnight!"

While the Central Fire Station continued to be in service, the Hill Street Police Station and Barracks were vacated by the police force in the early 1980s. The building was then repurposed to house the National Archives of Singapore, the Oral History Department and the Board of Film Censors. As for Empress Place and City Hall, a fundamental shift took place in the 1980s as government agencies began moving out, marking the end of an era.

For many public officers who worked in the civic centre, the area was more than just a workplace; it was also a place filled with memories of camaraderie. Mohamad Safaie Bin Mohamad Hussin (b. 1962), who worked at Central Fire Station from 1980 till 1988, recounted, "Every Tuesday morning, as part of our fitness training, the firefighters run from the station to Fort Canning Hill and back to the station. If there was a major fire incident, all firefighters including those off-duty personnel would be called back to be on standby at Central Fire Station. The firefighters would be rotated on shifts due to the prolonged incident, and we will eat and rest in the station until the incident was mitigated."

His fellow officer, Roslie Bin Dollah (b. 1963), who was stationed at Central Fire Station from

1982 to 1986, recalled bonding with fellow firefighters after work, "There were lots of food stalls and push carts in those days at the back lanes behind the Capitol Theatre and Stamford Road. After duty, we would also hang out at Satay Club for supper, go window-shopping at Peninsula Shopping Centre, or catch a movie at Capitol Theatre."

For CPIB officer Sathiabalan Veerapillai (b. 1962), camaraderie extended beyond his own agency, "Due to the proximity of the fire station, friendships between CPIB and SCDF were formed, and we would occasionally organise games such as football – although, CPIB being a smaller unit, always lost to the extremely fit firemen!"

TRANSFORMATIONS

With the shophouses and apartment blocks demolished from the 1970s, the civic centre ceased to be a residential area. In the late 1980s, the news remarked that "the district appears dead, especially at night." Its splendid buildings had deteriorated; traffic congestion was serious; and its once bustling streets had turned quiet as residents were resettled. Rival developments at Orchard Road and Marina Centre pulled people away from the district. This would begin to change in the 1990s.



Shophouses at Hock Lam Street being demolished, 1977
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

REIMAGINING THE HEART OF THE CITY

REVIVING THE CIVIC CENTRE

With urban renewal came a growing awareness: if historical buildings kept disappearing, so would the physical links to stories that shape the nation's identity.

The civic centre, as the home to some of Singapore's most iconic heritage buildings, emerged as a natural focal point for preservation efforts. In 1973, two landmarks became among the first in Singapore to be gazetted as National Monuments: the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator and St Andrew's Cathedral.

To breathe new life into the city's historic core, the authorities launched a master plan in 1988. The Civic and Cultural District Master Plan by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) laid the groundwork to transform the downtown area into a vibrant arts and cultural hub and create a distinct identity for the Civic District, extending up to Fort Canning and the Istana, that would tie the entire district together as Singapore's historical city centre. The newly defined Civic District extends from Fort Canning to Singapore River, Esplanade Park and Bras Basah Road.

Under the plan, various details were considered, from creating and enhancing a distinctive streetscape to improving pedestrian connectivity within the district.

In 1995, URA launched the Civic District Lighting Plan to reimagine the historical quarter after dark and create a distinctive night-time identity.

Over the decades, the civic centre's historic buildings were restored and adapted for new uses.

For example, the former Supreme Court and City Hall building is now a contemporary art museum, National Gallery Singapore. The iconic Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall, originally built as a town hall and memorial hall, is now a venue for concerts and events. These initiatives, together with continuous efforts by various agencies throughout the 1990s and 2000s, transformed the area into a vibrant district where people could gather to enjoy arts and culture, celebrate key national milestones such as the National Day Parade, and to connect with the nation's shared history.



Armenian Apostolic Church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



St Andrew's Cathedral, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

THE CIVIC DISTRICT'S REVIVAL AS A GOVERNANCE HUB FROM THE 1990S

In the late 1990s, the Civic District revived as a hub for governance and civic administration. The new Stamford Court was built on the site of the demolished Eu Court in 1996 and became home to government agencies such as the National Heritage Board (NHB) until 2025. In 1997, the National Archives of Singapore moved to its own building, the wing of the former Anglo-Chinese School built in 1959.

The government officially opened The Treasury on High Street in 1997, bringing key ministries and the Public Service Division of the Prime Minister's Office back to the Civic District.

The nation's lawmakers also received a new Parliament House completed in 1999. The former Attorney-General's Chambers, which had been vacated in 1991, were restored and integrated into the new Parliament House complex.

Another landmark that received a new lease of life was the former Hill Street Police Station, which underwent extensive restoration and reopened in 2000. Today, it is home to the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the Ministry of Digital Development and Information (MDDI). The building, with its distinctive rainbow-painted



Supreme Court, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

louvered windows, quickly became a local icon while new features such as a basement carpark and glass roof modernised the space.

In 2005, a new architectural icon was added when the new Supreme Court was completed. The nearby Colombo Court was demolished to make way for the new Supreme Court, which was officially opened in 2006 by then President S R Nathan.

SERVING NICHE COMMUNITIES IN TODAY'S RETAIL SCENE

By the 1990s, the Civic District had grown into a more distinctive retail enclave, catering to niche communities of shoppers. These evolving uses also give the Civic District another layer of identity: as a dynamic hub of subcultures and community.

Along North Bridge Road, Peninsula Shopping Complex, The Adelphi and Peninsula Plaza formed the hub of camera shops in Singapore, selling everything related to photography from entry level models to magazines and high-end equipment. At its peak, there were around 40 camera shops in this locale alone. The Adelphi also became a haven for high end audio equipment.

Meanwhile, by the early 2000s, Peninsula Shopping Complex and Excelsior Shopping Centre, became clustered with guitar and



Parliament House, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

music shops offering a range of goods from electric guitars to vintage vinyl records. These buildings became cult favourites among hobbyists and Singapore's growing community of indie musicians. Across the road, Funan Centre, which opened its doors in 1985, quickly gained a reputation for selling computers and electronics.

By the 1990s, Peninsula Plaza had also earned the nickname "Little Myanmar" due to the proliferation of Myanmar shops that transformed it into a hub where Myanmar nationals in Singapore could find familiar cuisine, music, and magazines while keeping up with news from home.



Peninsula Plaza, 1993
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Funan located along Hill Street, opposite the Central Fire Station, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

CREATING A CULTURAL DISTRICT, REIMAGINING SPACES

The transformation of Singapore's Civic District into a vibrant arts, cultural and lifestyle district took decades in the making. Over time, URA continued to refine the master plan for the Civic District, with new projects revitalising the district.

In the 1990s, the Civic District also began its transformation into the nation's museum district. Singapore Philatelic Museum, the first such museum in Southeast Asia, opened in 1995 in the former Anglo-Chinese School building along Coleman Street, followed by Singapore Art Museum in the former campus of St Joseph's Institution the year after.

In 1997, the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) was launched at the former Tao Nan School. The museum, developed by National Museum of Singapore, was part of government efforts to give Singaporeans a sense of their roots and "protect us from losing a sense of history and place and becoming deculturalised," as mentioned by then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during ACM's opening.

Subsequently, NHB implemented a series of initiatives to build a museum-going culture in Singapore. To encourage more Singaporeans from all walks of life to visit museums, blockbuster international exhibitions were brought in, engaging programmes were curated regularly and partnerships with schools stepped up to build future audiences.

The museum buildings also underwent a series of redevelopment works. The National Museum of Singapore (NMS) added a modern extension by the W Architects (led by Mok Wei Wei), while the former City Hall and Supreme Court became National Gallery Singapore, home to the world's largest collection of Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art. Former Empress Place Building was subsequently redeveloped and the ACM was relocated there in 2003, while the former Tao Nan School became home to a new museum, the Peranakan Museum - the



Fort Canning Centre, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Children's Museum Singapore, located beside the National Archives of Singapore, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

world's first museum dedicated to Peranakan culture. Nearby, the Singapore Philatelic Museum closed in 2019 and was transformed into the nation's first Children's Museum Singapore in 2022.

Even former military installations were rejuvenated as museums and cultural spaces. Fort Canning's underground bunker was redeveloped as a museum, the Battlebox, in 1997. In 2016, it was revamped to incorporate more artefacts and upgrade its facilities. At the summit, the former military barracks, Fort Canning Centre, became a heritage gallery in 2022, focusing on the history of the hill and park.

In 1989, following recommendations from the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay was conceptualised as the answer to creating a new world-class performing arts centre in the Civic District. Professor Tommy Koh, then Chairman of the National Arts Council, recalled that the then Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, pushed for the arts centre to be built at Esplanade Park, "... he saw that this (the new arts centre), and the Padang and then the City Hall (present-day National Gallery Singapore) would anchor the Civic District."

Satay Club was thus demolished to make way for the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay



Esplanade Park with Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

at Esplanade Park. The iconic twin domes included a 1,600-seat concert hall and a 2,000-seat theatre. The Esplanade officially opened in 2002 and has since become a cultural landmark, dubbed “The Durian” after its semblance to the fruit.

Other historical buildings in the Civic District also underwent a rejuvenation following the Advisory Council’s recommendations. The grand old dames, Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall underwent extensive restoration and renovation from 2010 to 2014, which added smaller rooms for more intimate performances and the reinstatement of the central passageway as a striking grand new entrance. The former Parliament House underwent a \$15.8 million makeover and reopened in 2004 as The Arts House, a multidisciplinary centre for Singapore’s literature, visual arts and music.

FRINGE ARTS IN THE CITY CENTRE: THE SUBSTATION

Singapore’s first independent contemporary arts centre, The Substation, was named after the former function of its shophouse premises, which were built in 1926 at Armenian Street. The centre was the brainchild of Cultural Medallion recipient and playwright Kuo Pao Kun. In 1985, Kuo envisioned repurposing

the substation into a space where artists and audiences could gather, experiment and exchange ideas across artistic disciplines. His vision was radical for its time: to create an open and inclusive platform for the fringe arts in a city where such spaces were virtually non-existent.

The Substation was designed to be versatile, featuring a black box theatre with elevated seating for experimental performances and film screenings, a gallery for visual art exhibitions and a workshop room for talks and community activities. Its garden became a stage of its own as independent musicians and bands such as Humpback Oak, Concave Scream, The Oddfellows, Tweed Burners and Blue Connections cut their teeth there.

The Substation was a home for the fringe and experimental. Contemporary artist Amanda Heng (b. 1951), who worked at The



The Substation, Armenian Street, 1991
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Substation in the 1990s recalled, "It's open for all disciplinary (sic) ... we have the annual dance space, raw theatre, ... other visual arts or theatre experimentations."

Just across the street, *Hock Hiap Leong* coffeeshop served as an unofficial annexe. Before and after shows, artists, writers, musicians and students would spill over to the coffeeshop, discussing life and art over *char kway teow* and wanton noodles. The coffeeshop, which closed in 2001 when Armenian Street was redeveloped, was later memorialised in filmmaker Royston Tan's short film *Hock Hiap Leong*, a nostalgic tribute to the spirit of the era.



Gallery at The Substation, 1991
Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Other buildings in the Civic District were also restored and adapted to new lifestyle uses. In 1996, after the last of government offices vacated Fullerton Building, the historic building was restored and reopened in 2001 as a five-star heritage hotel, The Fullerton Hotel Singapore. To honour its past, a heritage gallery was created within the hotel.

Next door, the former Waterboat Office was transformed into The Waterboat House, a stylish waterfront dining destination. In 2002, the Merlion, a creation by artist Kwan Sai Kheong, was relocated from the mouth of

Singapore River to a pier specially built for it near the Fullerton development.

In 1987, the government had acquired Stamford House, Capitol Theatre and Shaws Building, with an eye towards long-term redevelopment. Capitol Theatre continued operating as a cinema till 1998 while the adjoining Stamford House and Shaws Buildings were revamped in the early 1990s into commercial and retail spaces.

In the 2010s, the three sites were packaged as a single redevelopment site and was turned into an \$800 million integrated complex comprising the refurbished Capitol Theatre, a luxury apartment block, commercial spaces and a five-star hotel.



Fullerton Hotel, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Capitol Theatre, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) site was designated a conservation area and redeveloped into a lifestyle precinct known as CHIJMES, which opened in 1996. The former Beach Road Camp, including the SAF Warrant Officers and Specialists Club, were closed in 2000. The premises were then redeveloped as a mixed-use project called South Beach. Comprising retail, offices, residences and a hotel, the development opened in 2015.

A HOME FOR FAITH AND FRATERNITY: REBUILDING WITH THE TIMES

Like other landmarks around them, the Civic District's religious and social institutions have been renewing as well, keeping pace with change while preserving their timeless spirit.

St Andrew's Cathedral completed a new underground worship hall and a modern street-level centre in 2005, adding space while maintaining the dignity of the historic building and grounds. In 2018, with NHB's support, the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator opened the Armenian Heritage Gallery in the former parsonage, the first Armenian museum of its kind in Asia. The Cathedral of the Good Shepherd also underwent extensive restoration between 2013 to 2016.

Masjid Al-Burhani redeveloped its premises and opened its new ten-storey complex in 2000. Wesley Methodist Church likewise undertook an extension and upgrading project in the 2010s. Along Canning Rise, Bible House was rebuilt in 2011.

The social institutions were committed to upgrading efforts as well. The Masonic Hall underwent renovation between 2009 and 2012, adding a four-storey block at the rear of the historic building. At the Padang, the Singapore Recreation Club completely rebuilt its clubhouse in 1997 while the Singapore Cricket Club completed its extension works in 2006.

Finally, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry modernised its building in 2017, with new glass facades added to the three sides and new facilities incorporated. The revamped headquarters was officially reopened in 2022 by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

A PROFOUNDLY TRANSFORMED CIVIC DISTRICT AND COASTLINE

The lively Civic District and Marina Bay today bear little resemblance to the waterfront which used to run along the Padang. The natural shoreline has been reimagined, reclaimed and transformed into one of the most iconic urban skylines in the world.

By the 1990s, the newly reclaimed Marina Bay spanned 360 hectares and began evolving into a showcase of modern Singapore. Over the decades, the area became home to some of the country's most recognisable landmarks. The 2010s brought another wave of transformation as Marina Bay Sands, the iconic integrated resort, was completed and the award-winning Gardens by the Bay opened.

Revitalising the Civic District was a continuous journey and sustaining its vibrancy remains an ongoing priority. Improving walkability is a key strategy, such as widening pedestrian pathways and pedestrianising areas along Connaught Drive, Anderson Bridge and Fullerton Road. In 2019, Armenian Street was fully pedestrianised and transformed into a promenade lined with heritage buildings and lifestyle stops.

Today, the Civic District and Marina Bay are active stages for community life and national events. Other than hosting the National Day Parade festivities and New Year's Eve Countdown, open areas like Empress Lawn and Armenian Street regularly host cultural festivals and live performances.



Coastline before land reclamation, c. 1970
Ministry of Culture collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Marina Bay reclamation, 1980
Singapore Tourist Promotion Board collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Jubilee Bridge during the SG60 National Day celebrations, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Light to Night Festival at the Padang and National Gallery Singapore, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

For instance, the Singapore Night Festival in the Bras Basah Bugis District turned the Civic District into a nocturnal wonderland of light art, music and open-air cinema. Other events include the Light to Night Festival and i Light Singapore, which light up the Civic District and Downtown areas of Singapore in the dark.

As Singapore continues to grow and evolve, the Civic District and its surrounding coastline remain at the heart of Singapore's story. New projects like the Founders' Memorial at Bay East Garden will soon add another layer of storytelling, paying tribute to the pioneers who built the nation, while inspiring generations to come. From colonial stronghold to cultural

and civic capital, the transformation of Singapore's Civic District is a mirror of the nation's journey: bold, future-ready and constantly reinventing itself.



Artist's impression of the Founders' Memorial, undated
© Image courtesy of Kengo Kuma & Associates

REFERENCE GALLERY FEATURING SELECTED HERITAGE SITES

While the NHB has made efforts to ensure that the information is correct at the time of publication, please refer to the online version for the most updated information:

<https://go.gov.sg/roots-civic-district-heritage-trail>



FORMER CITY HALL AND SUPREME COURT

Now:
NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE



FORMER EMPRESS PLACE BUILDING

Now:
ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM



**FORMER RAFFLES LIBRARY
AND MUSEUM**

Now:
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE



FORMER PARLIAMENT HOUSE

Now:
**THE ARTS HOUSE AT THE
OLD PARLIAMENT**



**CAPITOL THEATRE, FORMER NAMAZIE
MANSIONS AND FORMER STAMFORD
HOUSE**

Now:
CAPITOL SINGAPORE



FORMER ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL

Now:
**CHILDREN'S MUSEUM SINGAPORE,
NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE**



FORMER FULLERTON BUILDING

Now:
THE FULLERTON HOTEL SINGAPORE



**FORMER TOWN HALL AND VICTORIA
MEMORIAL HALL**

Now:
**VICTORIA THEATRE AND VICTORIA
CONCERT HALL**



FORMER HILL STREET POLICE STATION

Also known as:

OLD HILL STREET POLICE STATION



MASONIC HALL

Also known as:

FREEMASONS' HALL



Former names:

METHODIST PUBLISHING HOUSE

MALAYA PUBLISHING HOUSE

MALAYSIA PUBLISHING HOUSE

MPH LIMITED

Now:

VANGUARD BUILDING



FORMER TAO NAN SCHOOL

Now:

PERANAKAN MUSEUM

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Journey to Nationhood

1 to 6 | 0.5 hour

Functions of the Civic District

1 to 8 | 1.5 hours

Seeking Fortunes, Forging New Lives

1 to 6 | 1 hour

Traffic Crossing [Icon]	Water Point [Icon]	Food & Beverage [Icon]	Toilet [Icon]
Gallery/Museum [Icon]	National Monument [Icon]	Suggested Stops/Heritage Sites [Icon]	





Hill Street, 2025
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

The Civic District Heritage Trail is part of the National Heritage Board's ongoing efforts to document and present the history and social memories of places in Singapore. We hope this trail will bring back fond memories for those who have worked, lived or played in the area, and serve as a useful source of information for visitors and new residents.

Supported by



*View of part of Empress Place with clock tower of Victoria Memorial Hall visible, 1930s
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*