

Churches of Chinatown

Chinatown's two main churches tell an interesting history, not to mention a diversity of architectural styles.

Fairfield Methodist Church

There is more than meets the eye when it comes to the building that houses Fairfield Methodist Church: Hong Kong film starlet Nancy Sit Ka Yin (薛家燕) has made appearances here, as have dignified pastors buttoned up in dark suits. Once bearing billboards depicting the latest box-office hits, the building is now draped in banners with messages of love and peace.

Now a place of worship for Protestants, the semi-circular Modernist-style building at the intersection of Maxwell and Tanjong Pagar roads was formerly a cinema called Metropole. One of three famous movie theatres in Chinatown that screened Mandarin flicks – including Majestic Theatre and Oriental Cinema – it was graced by the then-16-year-old Sit in 1967, who was on a promotional tour for her latest films.

Designed by local architect Wong Foo Nam, the landmark was completed in 1958. One of the earliest cinemas in Singapore to be air-conditioned and feature a subterranean carpark, it embodied the “form follows function” Modern tenet. And though the structure underwent a multi-million-dollar overhaul in 1986 to become a church, it remains ahead of its time in its re-adaptation of space.

Many of Metropole's original features have been preserved, from its spiral staircase to its spacious main auditorium and glass-panelled exterior. And whether hosting kungfu movies or worship services, the building is still very much a community space.

Formed in 1948 by Texan missionaries Reverend and Mrs H.F. Kuehn, the Fairfield congregation was previously quartered in Neil Road. Since it was established, its congregation has grown from just 20 to over 800 members today, and reaches out to marginalised individuals through various programmes. For instance, the church provides support to injured migrant workers, as well as offers day-care services to dementia patients. It is also home to a kindergarten.

The services at Fairfield Methodist Church are delivered in English and Mandarin to serve different linguistic and ethnic groups.

Telok Ayer Chinese Methodist Church

Similar to Fairfield Methodist Church, its architecture does not conform to that of traditional churches. With its Oriental-style pagoda roofs and louvred doors, people have mistaken the national monument for the headquarters of a Chinese clan association.

Closer inspection reveals an eclectic mix of Eastern and Western features: a five-foot-way flanked by Byzantine-style columns and piers marked with crosses. Within the second-storey sanctuary are round stained-glass windows, as well as an altar wall with four timber panels bearing the Chinese characters “God is love” in gold leaf. These were discovered when the building was undergoing restoration, shortly after it was gazetted as a national monument by the National Heritage Board in 1989. Other interesting architectural details include a pavilion on the rooftop with a Chinese-style roof – a first for Chinese churches in Singapore.

The church was founded in 1889 by Dr Benjamin Franklin West, an American doctor and missionary who ran Sunday worship services for Chinese migrants from a shophouse in Upper Nanking Street. As his clinic and as the congregation grew, a larger space was needed to accommodate its parishioners, comprising mainly

Hokkien and Foochow Chinese.

In 1913, the church's pastor, Reverend F. H. Sullivan, purchased the land it now stands on, and conducted services in a tent and, later, a wooden hut. It was not until 1924 that construction for the current building – designed by Denis Santry of Swan & Maclaren – began. This was the same Irish architect who designed Sultan Mosque and the now defunct Tanjong Pagar Railway Station.

A refuge for the underprivileged, Telok Ayer Chinese Methodist Church – commonly known as the Hokkien church – once provided services such as helping the illiterate to write letters to their families in China. During World War II, when Singapore was attacked by the Japanese, it offered shelter to about 300 people from stray bullets and shrapnel by the building's thickened exterior walls.

Today, the church holds services in Hokkien, Mandarin and English, from an 800-seat sanctuary equipped with modern audio-visual features.

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