

INTERNATIONAL
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60 ANNIVERSARY

周年

**HONG KONG
CITY HALL**

香港大會堂

#refine/d classic

#歷久·嘗新



6060
慶祝成立 60 周年紀念

**60 Years Of
Cultural Dynamics**



FROM A CRADLE OF CULTURE TO THE YOUNGEST MONUMENT IN HONG KONG



FOR 60 YEARS NOW HONG KONG CITY HALL HAS PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN THE CULTURAL LIFE OF THE CITY. OVER THE FOLLOWING PAGES, SENIOR MANAGER OF THE VENUE **KAREN LAW LOOKS BACK OVER SIX DECADES OF THIS IMPORTANT CULTURAL FACILITY, WHICH HAS ENRICHED THE LIVES OF HONG KONG'S RESIDENTS AND VISITORS**

If you know the Victoria Waterfront area of Hong Kong, you may well be familiar with a 'Bauhaus'-style 1960s building nestling among the soaring skyscrapers that dominate the city. Hong Kongers are very fond of this distinctive landmark, which has stood almost unchanged for six decades amid the hustle and bustle of the city's commercial district; and with good reason, because this building is Hong Kong City Hall. Over the past 60 years, the City Hall has been transformed, from Hong Kong's first performing arts venue into the metropolis' key cultural centre. Over the years, it has nurtured many homegrown talents and hosted innumerable international artists, as part of its mission to foster innovation and creativity.

But I think the City Hall is more than just an architecturally interesting building that hosts events and draws in talents from around the world. It's the cultural heart of Hong Kong. Most people agree that the arts enrich societies and people; this being the case, then access to the arts is vital to the well-being of everyone, wherever they live. In Hong Kong's case, thanks to the City Hall, everyone who lives in or visits the city, whether they are arts professionals, 'culture vultures' or 'laymen', has access to this inviting performing arts venue.

Opened in 1962, the City Hall was the first multi-purpose cultural complex built for the community of

Top: Low Block, HKCH © Antiquities and Monuments Office, HKSARG

Above: Hong Kong City Hall (HKCH) in 1962



Top: The Hong Kong Museum of Art in the High Block in the 1980s

Above: The HKCH Public Library in the 1980s

Right: This signature staircase has always been the hotspot for newlyweds to take photos after exchanging their vows at the City Hall Marriage Registry



Hong Kong. The complex as we see it today comprises two buildings, a low block and a high block connected by a memorial garden in between, overlooking Victoria Harbour. Looking at Hong Kong's high-rise skyline, it's astonishing that the 12-storey high block was once the tallest building in the vicinity! It's easy to see why people love the building's looks – its clean lines, linear and geometric forms, floor-to-ceiling, large glass windows and monotone colours – are timeless, and a bold deviation from the 'Renaissance-style' celebrated by the nearby buildings, also constructed in the 1960s. The architectural design ensured that all facilities would have a view, except the fully enclosed Concert Hall and Theatre. Without ornate decoration, this typical Bauhaus-style building successfully brings the City Hall closer to the public.

Above: The great pianist Arthur Rubinstein performed at HKCH in July 1964

For many years, the City Hall has been a cultural centre rooted in the lives and memories of Hong Kong people and a cradle of local artistic talents. Starting off housing Hong Kong's first public concert hall, library and art museum, the City Hall delivered its cultural service on a limited scale. After six decades of strenuous efforts, this tiny seed planted has grown into a majestic tree. From there, 16 professional performance venues, 14 museums and 82 public libraries sprouted, providing diverse cultural services to enrich the life of the city.

INTERNATIONAL ARTS MANAGER

Renowned as perhaps the most prominent arts and cultural venues in the territory, the City Hall has provided a stage for thousands of top names and groups from around the world to make their debut in Hong Kong. To name but a few: cellists Janos Starker and Yo-Yo Ma; pianists Arthur Rubinstein, Malcolm Frager and Fou Ts'ong; singers Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and Patti Page; the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Stuttgart Ballet and The Royal Ballet; as well as homegrown artists and arts groups.

The acclaimed festivals the City Hall has hosted include the first Hong Kong Arts Festival (beginning in 1973), the first Festival of Asian Arts (1976), the first Hong Kong International Film Festival (1977) and the first International Arts Carnival (1982), all had their inaugural editions at this historic venue. Its significant role in promoting arts and cultural exchanges is indeed the pride of Hong Kong people.

In 2009, an innovative venue partnership scheme with objectives to enhance the artistic image and character of the venue and its partner, and encourage more community involvement in the arts was introduced. Two of the major performing arts groups of the city, Hong Kong Sinfonietta and Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, have become the venue partners since then. Hong Kong Sinfonietta is renowned for its performances and innovative programming, which have brought music



Right: The Chor Fung Ming Cantonese Opera Troupe was very popular in the 1980s and 90s



Right: The 4th Festival of Asian Arts. The Festival first started in 1976 at HKCH



closer to the community, having collaborated with an illustrious and eclectic array of artists such as Krzysztof Penderecki, Fazil Say, Jean Guihen Queyras and Sergei Nakariakov. Besides standard orchestral repertoire, the orchestra also performs year-round (at the City Hall) newly-commissioned works by celebrated composers, and collaborates intensively with artists from different disciplines to expand the horizons of classical music, creating acclaimed crossover projects such as *A Soldier's Story*, and venturing into the cinematic world with its groundbreaking 'Back On Stage' concert film series exclusively filmed at the City Hall. In 2018, the orchestra organised and livestreamed the first Hong Kong International Conducting Competition, showcasing the orchestra's devotion to arts and cultural development.

Top: The inaugural concert by London Philharmonic Orchestra on 4 March 1962

Above: The internationally-renowned Hong Kong Sinfonietta performs at HKCH

The other venue partner, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre (HKRep) is the longest-standing and largest professional theatre company in the city. Since its establishment in 1977, HKRep has been staging its productions at the City Hall. HKRep not only strives to promote cultural enrichment to the public and bring



Above: Bow Dance
by Hong Kong
Dance Company in
1989

**Right: HKCH's 50th
Anniversary
Programme, *On
Golden Pond* by
Hong Kong
Federation of Drama
Societies**



theatre arts to a wider audience, through performances of both original and translated plays; but also invests resources in nurturing local talents. But HKRep always wants to achieve more. By giving opportunities for their reruns, the creative personnel are able to refine the scripts, directions, interpretations and even the acting approaches. The concerted effort of the two venue partners has built synergy for both the groups and the City Hall. The two partners' commitment to promote arts and culture have undoubtedly contributed to the City Hall's reputation as a cultural landmark.

For the people of Hong Kong, the significance of the City Hall goes far beyond the boundaries of arts and culture. In colonial times, it hosted royalty and provided the venue for the Governor's inauguration. Today, while the shrine at the Memorial Garden houses records of wartime sufferings in the territory, the Marriage Registry, which was opened in the same year as the City Hall, bears witness to an important milestone for countless couples who have moved on to a new stage in their life. Over the past 60 years, the City Hall has stood by the people of Hong Kong through thick and thin. In early 2022, the City Hall was recommended



Above: *Hu Xueyan, my Dear* by Hong Kong Repertory Theatre
© HKRep (Keith Hiro/Cheung Wai Lok)

for declaration as a monument by the Antiquities Advisory Board. That means the 60-year-old complex will become Hong Kong's youngest, and first post-war, monument. The proposed declaration comes as a special birthday gift to City Hall, a beloved venue of different generations of the Hong Kong people who find their fond memories of being a member of the audience or even a performer on the stage; having their first taste of the art pieces in the art gallery; or spending their days in the sea of books in the library or just sitting on the staircases to read or enjoy the sea view through the big windows. The City Hall is surely one of the most important carriers of Hong Kong people's collective memories. The new status would offer permanent protection for the venue. In the years to come, it will continue to serve as a source of inspiration for artists and contribute to the continual and multi-faceted development of the arts in Hong Kong.

Like any musical instrument that needs to be maintained and fine-tuned for the best possible performance, a project to expand and renovate the City Hall is currently being planned to further its function as a prime performing arts venue in Hong Kong. Let us wait and see how this development plan enables the City Hall to continue to flourish and shine in the city.

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Below: Mock-up of art facade – 60 Years of Cultural Dynamics

