

## SALA CHALERM KRUNG THEATRE

Charoen Krung Road, Bangkok

1933-present day

By the late 1920s, cinema had established itself as the entertainment medium of choice among urban Thais, resulting in Bangkok being flush with all kinds of theatres competing for viewership. To honour the city's 150th anniversary in 1932, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) set aside 300,000 baht from the royal budget for the construction of a modern state-of-the-art theatre with the aim of elevating the theatre industry to world-class standards. The Sala Chalerm Krung theatre was completed in July 1933, one year late of the anniversary. Nonetheless, it set a new standard in movie-theatre design and technology.

In stark departure from the wooden, warehouse-like structures that characterized almost all the early movie theatres in the kingdom, the Sala Chalerm Krung was built of brick and concrete. Its interior was ornately decorated with brass fixtures and comfortable cushioned seats. The major innovation that set it aside from other theatres was the fact that it was air-conditioned, a rarity in an era when electrification was only available in certain quarters.

The Sala Chalerm Krung was a marriage of the most dynamic of the visual arts with the most luxurious of movie theatre design, mostly showcasing Thai cinema for all to enjoy. Even as Bangkok grew and its movie theatre industry evolved, the Sala Chalerm Krung maintained its lofty spot among elite movie theatres in the ever-competitive Bangkok market for decades.

By the early 21st century, however, revenue from film alone was not enough. The multiplex boom siphoned off all but the most dedicated fans and in 2005 the Sala Chalerm Krung Foundation was formed with the goal of finding ways to sustainably maintain the theatre for years to come. The theatre continues to operate to this day, serving as the country's primary venue for masked *khon* classical dance performances and still occasionally screens film.

Clearly visible in this photograph are the tangles of high-tension wires that are synonymous with urban Thailand and feature prominently in almost any street-based photograph.

