

The Substation

A Home for the Arts

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Overview, Key Messages and Frequently Asked Questions

2 March 2021

Overview

The Substation's Board of Directors has decided to permanently close down the Substation. This difficult decision has been made in light of the impending relocation of the Substation in July 2021¹, NAC's decision to turn 45 Armenian Street into a centre for multiple arts groups², the financial situation of the Substation exacerbated by Covid-19, and the loss of venue hire at the Substation.

Key Messages

- The National Arts Council (NAC) has informed the Substation that it needs to vacate 45 Armenian Street for major renovations to take place from mid-2021.
- The newly renovated 45 Armenian Street will be repurposed as an arts centre for different arts groups. The NAC has indicated that the Substation may return, but only as a co-tenant with other arts groups.
- The Substation's heritage and identity as an independent arts centre is intrinsically tied to 45 Armenian Street, our home for the past 30 years.
- In addition, as with all arts institutions in Singapore, Covid-19 has impacted our operating model severely. Together with the loss of venue hire income from 45 Armenian Street and in the absence of a substantial inflow of private funding, the Substation's business model is not sustainable.

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Donations to The Substation Ltd in 2020 are eligible for a 250% tax exemption
Charity Reg No: 1138

The Substation is a recipient of the National Arts Council's Major Grant
1 April 2017 to 31 March 2020

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¹ *TODAY*. 4 Feb 2021. "After more than 30 years, the Substation will vacate Armenian premises in end-July 2021" by Navene Elangovan (<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/substation-vacate-premises-end-july-talks-ongoing-authorities-relocation>)

² *The Straits Times*. 9 Feb 2021. "The Substation to vacate space in Armenian St in July 2021" by Toh Wei Lin (<https://www.straitstimes.com/life/arts/the-substation-to-vacate-space-in-armenian-st-in-july>)

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: When will the Substation be closing?

A: The Substation will close down permanently in July 2021 or thereabouts. We are deeply aware of the Substation's profound significance to the local arts community. The Substation was home to experimental and cutting-edge artistic works over 30 years and has been a key arts institution in Singapore. The difficult decision to close the Substation was taken only after all possible options were explored.

Q: What will happen between now and July 2021?

A: The Substation will continue the celebrations of its 30th anniversary at 45 Armenian Street. Its announced programmes will continue as per normal and its venues have been hired until July 2021. SeptFest will run from 4-28 March. With *In The Margins* as its theme, SeptFest explores the stories of the marginalised, displaced and forgotten communities in Singapore. We look forward to your support until then.

Q: Why is the Substation closing after 30 years?

A: The Board came to this difficult decision for several reasons.

The Substation will have to vacate 45 Armenian Street in July 2021. NAC has informed the Substation that it will be one of several co-tenants and will not occupy the building in its full capacity.

With the loss of 45 Armenian Street, which has been synonymous with the Substation for the past 30 years, the Substation will lose a fundamental part of its identity and heritage.

The Board feels a deep responsibility to the local arts community to preserve the identity and heritage of the Substation as an independent arts centre.

Even if the Substation were to return as a co-tenant, the Substation will be unable to control or exercise autonomy over the building facilities integral to its operations such as the theatre and gallery, thereby impacting the Substation's ability to operate as an independent arts centre and incubator.

Additionally, the economic downturn triggered by Covid-19 has made fundraising for the arts especially difficult, and the Substation, like other arts organisations, has been severely impacted by the pandemic. NAC has offered grants to help the Substation tide over the next two years, but this will still entail a drastic reduction in staff strength and greatly decreased amount for programming. The Substation will not be in a position to fulfil its mission to support and provide a safe space for artists to do pioneering and experimental artistic work.

Q: When will the renovations take place and what are they for?

A: The building at 45 Armenian Street will undergo upgrading works from mid-2021. We understand from the NAC that they are expected to last around two years. NAC has said the renovations will introduce technological features and offer an improved design to support the creation and presentation of multi-disciplinary arts.³ These renovations were originally slated for 2020 but were postponed to allow the Substation to celebrate its 30th anniversary on-site.

Q: Why is returning to 45 Armenian Street so important?

A: The Substation's identity and heritage are irretrievably tied to the building. The Substation was named after the building it occupies which was previously a power sub-station. The building dates back to 1926 and ceased operations as a power sub-station in the late 1970s. It was left vacant until Kuo Pao Kun submitted a proposal to the government in 1986 to convert it into an arts centre. His proposal was accepted and the Substation was opened on 16 September 1990. Since then, the Substation has occupied 45 Armenian Street and operated it as a major independent arts centre in Singapore and a home to experimental and cutting-edge artists and their works. The Substation has been identified with the building, while as an independent arts centre it has created a unique buzz that has been central to placemaking in Armenian Street for 30 years.

Q: Has the Substation considered alternative forms of operation?

A: Yes, it has. Indeed, this was publicly suggested by NAC.⁴ However, to change the Substation's operating model would be to change its mission. The Substation's mission is to be an arts centre that provides valuable safe spaces for emerging and experimental artists. These physical spaces showcase multidisciplinary works which have been at the core of the Substation's identity. To change its operating model would mean a drastic reduction of such spaces, the autonomy to determine their usage, and the inability to free young artists from commercial pressure as they develop their craft. In short, the Substation will cease to be the Substation if it alters its operating model.

³ See *The Straits Times*. 9 Feb 2021.

⁴ Paul Tan. 25 Feb 2021. "Creating Homes for the Arts" in *Plural Arts Mag* (<https://pluralartmag.com/2021/02/25/creating-homes-for-the-arts/>)

Q: Is 45 Armenian Street better utilised for multiple arts groups instead of a single arts centre?⁵

A: The Substation notes that there has been a numerical growth in arts groups and that space is at a premium. However, we would point out that as an arts centre, the Substation has always worked with emerging artists and arts groups. Similarly, its facilities have been hired out primarily for arts usage and to the members of the arts community. After the upgrading of 45 Armenian Street, if the NAC had seen it fit to return 45 Armenian Street to the Substation, 45 Armenian Street would have continued as a home for the arts community and a myriad of diverse artists and multiple arts groups, as it has been for the last 30 years. Instead, the NAC decided to take back control of 45 Armenian Street from the Substation. The NAC's decision appears to have been largely on utilitarian grounds⁶. In making this decision, it also decided against conserving the identity and the precious heritage, built over the last 30 years, of 45 Armenian Street. We believe that there must be other buildings or spaces in Singapore, without such a long intangible heritage and historical significance, that could have served as a multi-tenanted arts facility operated by the NAC. We understand that all policy decisions come with trade-offs. However, we also note that the arduous work of placemaking also comes with trade-offs, such as the need to prioritise identity and heritage over utilitarian or functionalist concerns.

Q: Has the Substation considered securing long-term funding from private donors?

A: Yes, it has. Over the past four years, the Substation's Board, through its networks, has been speaking to numerous private organisations and philanthropists to explore major donations and endowments. Unfortunately, these have not borne fruit in a sufficiently substantial way. The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn have made large donations even less likely.

Q: Why does the Substation have to close down so soon? Can't it go on for a while more?

A: The Board made the decision to close the Substation in a timely manner so that all our staff are adequately and fairly compensated for their dedication and service. The closure is also timely as the Substation has to vacate 45 Armenian Street in July 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Q: What about the Substation's records and documents?

A: After 30 years as a key institution on the Singapore arts landscape, the Substation has amassed a substantial amount of records and documents. They help chart and illustrate Singapore's evolving arts landscape. We believe these records and documents are very important to our nation's arts history and will serve as a crucial source of reference for artists and scholars alike. As such we have hired a vendor to archive these records and documents. Once this is completed, they will be located at a suitable organisation and made open to the public.

Q: How can I say good-bye?

A: The Substation plans to organise a soft launch of its archives later this year. This soft launch will be accompanied by a week of specially designed events. More information will be posted on the Substation's website (www.substation.org) in due course. You are invited to come down to share your memories with us.

Q: Will Staff receive redundancy payments?

A: Staff will be offered redundancy payments in line with government guidelines.