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The Classical Language of Architecture in British Malaya, 1867-1941

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Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning
University of Melbourne

Mereka sentiasa memelihara dan memuliakan bahasanya.

Bahasa itu ditambah dan diluaskan, dibaiki dan dihaluskan sehingga hari ini.

[All these people pay close attention to their own language,
whose vocabulary and richness of expression is thereby increased as time goes on.]

– Munshi Abdullah bin Kadir, *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849),
translated by A.H. Hill

with the beauty of temple
and space before temple,
arch upon perfect arch,
of pillars and corridors that led out
to strange court-yards and porches
where sun-light stamped
hyacinth-shadows
black on the pavement.

[...]

street after street alike.

– H.D., ‘Cities’ (1916)

Abstract

In both Malaysia and Singapore, thousands of historic buildings sport façades with architectural vocabulary drawn from Graeco-Roman Antiquity. Despite the ubiquity of classical ornament in Malayan architecture, to date there has been no comprehensive study of the classical style in Malaya. This thesis addresses this gap by undertaking the first survey of classical architecture in British Malaya.

This thesis charts how classicism was transmitted and translated in Malaya between 1867, when the Straits Settlements became a Crown Colony of the British Empire, and 1941, when the Japanese invasion of Malaya interrupted Britain's colonial influence. Through a stylistic analysis of selected buildings from the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States, and the Sultanate of Johor, this thesis traces the parallel development of imperial and vernacular modes of classicism over this period.

Drawing on the work of the architectural historian John Summerson and a range of post-colonial scholars, this thesis argues that the imperial language of classicism was creolised in the hands of Malaya's architects and builders, becoming a local vernacular. It argues against a prevailing reading of the Malayan vernacular as a 'coarsened' form of classicism. Instead, it argues that an imperial architectural language was translated into an eclectic, cosmopolitan, but ultimately coherent vernacular.

This thesis argues that Malayan classicism was heterogeneous in terms of both production and reception. For Malaya's colonial administrators, classicism was the language through which British governance, and power, was symbolically articulated. Classicism in its various guises, from Palladianism to the Edwardian Baroque, became a potent symbol of British authority in Malaya. This language was soon appropriated by local elites, however, becoming a symbol of both regal and religious patronage in the Johor Sultanate.

Classicism was also adopted by a range of other communities. From Catholic missionaries to Chinese merchants, the classical language provided a means by which Malaya's diverse faith and cultural communities could articulate both belonging and difference. While schools in Malaya taught in a Babel of languages, classicism became their architectural *lingua franca*.

Classicism also became a symbol of Malaya's mercantile wealth, adorning warehouses, godowns, and banking chambers.

Perhaps more than any typology, however, it is in the terraced shophouses of British Malaya that classicism was most fully realised as a local, if fundamentally eclectic, architectural language. The syncretic grafting of both Western and Eastern ornamental vocabulary onto a largely classical framework on the façades of these buildings came to characterise this Malayan typology.

The near universal adoption of classicism would only be challenged in the 1930s with the advent of Modernism. The 1930s saw the supremacy of the classical language increasingly challenged and questioned, even as imperial classicism reached its zenith with the construction of the Supreme Court in Singapore. The Japanese Occupation of Malaya, which interrupted over a century of British colonial influence in the region, put an end to classicism's dominance in Malaya. Today, these buildings endure as a significant part of both Malaysia and Singapore's architectural heritage, making the study of classicism integral to the region's architectural history.

Declaration

This is to certify that:

- i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy except where indicated;
- ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;
- iii) the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

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As with the architecture surveyed in this thesis, my work has been the product of various influences. First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Julie Willis for her endless patience, generous comments, and countless insights. I am also tremendously grateful to Professor Paul Walker and Professor Kate Darian-Smith for their considered feedback, which has been invaluable in refining my thinking around this subject. Many thanks are also due to Dr Amanda Achmadi and Associate Professor David Nichols for taking the time to read my work and providing many useful comments.

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List of Abbreviations

ANM	Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archives of Malaysia)
ANMJ	Arkib Negara Malaysia, Johor Branch
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France (National Library of France)
FC	Financial Commissioner, Johor
IWM	Imperial War Museum, London
JMBRAS	Journal of the Malay[sian] Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society
JSSAI	Journal of the Singapore Society of Architects Incorporated
KITLV	Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies)
MBPP	Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang (City Council of Penang Island)
NAS	National Archives of Singapore
NAUK	National Archives of the United Kingdom
NLB	National Library Board, Singapore
NMS	National Museum of Singapore
PWD	Public Works Department
RIBA	Royal Institute of British Architects
Sel. Sec.	Selangor Secretariat
SS	State Secretary, Johor
VOP	Visions of Penang Archive

A Note on Spelling and Transliteration

British Malaya was characterised by a remarkable degree of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Indeed, Malaya was often described by its British colonisers as ‘the Babel of the East.’ The names of people and places discussed in this thesis are therefore drawn from a myriad of languages, many of which were not historically written using the Latin alphabet.

Place names were transliterated in a number of different ways, sometimes by the same writer. Kuala Lumpur, for example, appears variously as ‘Qualla Lumpor’, ‘Kwala Lumpur’, and ‘Kwalla Lumpor’ in Colonial Office correspondence. I have chosen to maintain the original spellings in direct quotations, while adopting the most widely accepted modern standard transliterations for toponyms in the main text.

For Malay, this largely means the New Romanised System, Ejaan Rumi Baharu, adopted by the Dewan Bahasa in 1972. Thus Johor, not Johore and Melaka, not Malacca. Some official place names in Malaysia and Singapore still retain spellings that predate these reforms, however. For clarity, I have chosen to use these official renderings: thus Penang, not Pinang; Klang, not Kelang; and Telok Blangah, not Teluk Belanga.

For transliterating terms from Hokkien I use Peh-ōe-jī, while for Mandarin the Hanyu Pinyin system of Romanisation has been adopted. As there is no widely agreed upon standard for Romanising Tamil words in Southeast Asia, I have used the most commonly found spellings. People’s names present more of a challenge, and there is often even less consensus than with place names. I have therefore chosen to adopt the most widely used modern transliterations, thus Sultan Abu Bakar, not Sultan Abubakar; Alsagoff, not al-Saqqāf; and Wee Teck Moh not Huáng Démào.

A Note on Currency

Malaya was, for centuries, a centre of trade. Numerous currencies were used by Malaya's mercantile communities as well as its various colonial governments.

Up to the turn of the twentieth century, silver Spanish Dollars – first minted in Spain and later in Mexico – were the most widely used currency in both the Peninsular Malay States and the Straits Settlements.

While merchants in British India had called for a British trade currency from as early as the 1830s, it was only in the 1890s that the scarcity of silver dollars from Mexico led to concrete moves towards a British trade dollar, which circulated concurrently with other currencies.

In the early twentieth century, a new Straits Dollar was issued, backed by local reserves. In 1906, the value of the Straits Dollar was pegged at two shillings sterling, roughly mirroring its market value. The Straits Dollar was replaced by the Malayan Dollar in 1939.

While Spanish and subsequently Straits Dollars were used almost exclusively in both government correspondence and other sources of this period, the colonial press sometimes used the pound sign interchangeably with the dollar sign.

For more on the development of a Malayan currency, see: Chiang Hai Ding, 'The Origins of the Malaysian Currency System (1867-1906)', *JMBRAS* 39.1 (1966): 1-18.



Figure 1. Federated Malay States Survey Department, Kuala Lumpur. Map of British Malaya, including the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States, and Malay States not included in the Federation, 1920. BnF GE C-4850 (1-2).

Introduction

Dotted along the length of the Malay Peninsula and scattered across the adjacent islands of Penang and Singapore, tens of thousands of historical buildings are ornamented with architectural details drawn from Graeco-Roman antiquity. Lush acanthus leaves, neat rows of dentils, and plump volutes adorn innumerable shophouses, commercial institutions, government buildings, schools, mosques, and palaces throughout the former Malay States and Straits Settlements. Often, these classical details are incorporated alongside architectural motifs from other building traditions: Tuscan pilasters support friezes of Southern Chinese cut-porcelain work; Corinthian capitals buttress the cusped arches of Sufi saint shrines built by seafaring migrants from the Indian subcontinent; and intricate *pemeleh* bargeboards shelter the delicate scrolling plasterwork *rincaux* beneath them. Greek and Roman borrowings jostle with other architectural vocabulary in the hybrid syntax of Malaya's vernacular. So prevalent are these details that they form a consistent and prevalent part of Malaysia and Singapore's architectural landscape to this day, an inheritance from British Malaya shared by these two nations. This classical ornamental vocabulary was stock-in-trade for British Malaya's architects and builders. Their widespread adoption, in both colonial institutions and in local vernacular architecture, is the result of centuries of British influence and intervention in the region, and of local architects adopting and adapting these motifs in their own work.

How did architectural vocabulary drawn from Ancient Greece and Rome become so firmly entrenched elements in Malayan vernacular architecture? The architectural historian John Summerson uses the metaphor of language to define classicism, with a classical building understood in the broadest sense as 'one whose decorative elements derive directly or indirectly from the architectural vocabulary of the ancient world'.¹ This linguistic analogy provides a useful lens through which Malaya's classicism, in both its imperial and vernacular registers, can be studied. The development of a creolised architectural vernacular in Malaya can be traced through buildings constructed during Britain's colonial administration of the Peninsula and its neighbouring islands. As in other plural colonial societies, cultural exchange resulting from the meeting of different peoples led to 'the appearance of a creole style, an

¹ John Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 8.

architectural vernacular, born from the fusion of diverse cultures, forming a local language.’² As Rachel Leow notes in her study of Malaysia’s linguistic landscape, ‘creoles, hybrid, and contact languages testify to centuries of cultural, commercial, and intimate interactions.’³ Extending on John Summerson’s idea that classical architecture was a visual language, the so-called ‘Latin of architecture’,⁴ this thesis argues that, in the hands of British Malaya’s architects and builders, an imperial language of architecture was translated into a local vernacular creole language.

Drawing on and synthesising a number of significant but largely disparate bodies of scholarship, this thesis puts forward a new and more holistic reading of architectural classicism in British Malaya. The first body of existing scholarship upon which this thesis is based comprises historical studies of Malayan architecture. This thesis builds on decades of scholarship on Malayan architecture by contributing the first survey of the classical style in British Malaya. The writings of historical geographers, anthropologists, and postcolonial cultural theorists also inform this work, especially in terms of how this thesis theoretically frames ideas of colonial power relations and cultural flows in the contact zone. These works help situate Malayan classicism within its broader socio-cultural and historical milieu. Given the relative paucity of research into architecture in British Malaya, and Malayan classicism in particular, when compared to studies on British India, broader histories of architecture and urbanism in the British Empire also provide an important point of reference for this research, helping to ground work on Malayan architecture within its broader historical context. A small but growing number of works which deal with the impact of the classics, both as a body of works inherited from Ancient Greece and Rome and an intellectual tradition, on Britain’s imperial project has also influenced the reading of classicism put forward by this thesis. While there has been increasing scholarly attention paid to the ways in which the classics and

² Christophe Denise, ‘Une histoire évolutive de l’habitat Martiniquais’, *In Situ: Revue des patrimoines* 5 (2004): 1. See also: Dwight Carey, ‘Creole Architectural Translation: Processes of Exchange in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius’, *Art in Translation*, 10:1 (2018): 73-4; and Jay D. Edwards, ‘The Origins of Creole Architecture’, *Winterthur Portfolio* 29.2/3 (1994): 157. While Edwards uses the term in a more specific regional sense, he notes that in ‘vernacular architecture, Creole might refer to any architectural tradition genetically descended from a synthesised tropical colonial form’.

³ Rachel Leow, *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

⁴ Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, 8.

classicism shaped British imperialism, this literature has largely focused on India.⁵ Turning this critical lens towards British Malaya therefore opens a new geographical area of research within a burgeoning field of study.

Historical Background

Malayan architecture, both prior to and in the aftermath of British imperialism, is a product of geography and the multicultural communities which developed as a result of this geography. It was also shaped by the subsequent colonisation of the region by European powers. Spice, tin, and later rubber were all significant commodities which shaped the Malay world. So too did the colonial need for labour. Situated at the heart of the Malay Archipelago between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the Malayan Peninsula's population has been influenced by flows of migrants and culture from both regions for millennia.⁶ The Peninsula was the point where flows of people and culture intersected, receiving wave upon wave of migrants, and becoming subject to various European colonial powers. As Anthony Milner notes in *Kerajaan*, his seminal work on political culture in the pre-colonial Malay world, the region was not 'one all-encompassing empire or state' but rather 'many Malay polities'.⁷

From 1511, when the Portuguese conquered Melaka, the Malay Peninsula also began to be influenced by various waves of European colonisation – first Portuguese, then Dutch, and finally British. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 established the boundaries of British and Dutch spheres of influence within the Malay Archipelago.⁸ These spheres were not discrete, self-contained bubbles, however, and traders and pilgrims continued to move between the Dutch and British Empires retracing and recreating older patterns of movement. The

⁵ See, for example, Phiroze Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); C.A. Hagerman, *Britain's Imperial Muse: The Classics, Imperialism, and the Indian Empire, 1784–1914* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Rama Sundari Mantena, 'Imperial Ideology and the Uses of Rome in Discourses on Britain's Indian Empire', in *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*, edited by Mark Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2010), 54-73.

⁶ Veena Sikri, *India and Malaysia: Intertwined Strands* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), 3, 31, and elsewhere *passim*; Leow, *Taming Babel*, 4.

⁷ Anthony Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule*, second edition (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2016), 1.

⁸ Anthony Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East Asia 1770-1890* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998), 111.

development of railway lines across the Malay Peninsula created new pathways across the Malay states, integrating the various urban centres to rural hinterland, connecting people from Singapore in the south to Alor Setar in the north. People, commodities, ideas and architecture were thus transmitted along both old maritime trade routes and imperial railways, circulating through the Malay Archipelago, Indian Ocean, and South China Sea. As Rachel Leow notes in her study of Malaysia's linguistic landscape, Southeast Asia's 'very regional construction proceeds from heterogeneity' of geography, 'a fragmentary, archipelagic space made of promontories and islands, and surrounded by bodies of water that have seen thousands of years of movement – of travel, commerce, migration, imperial conquest, and religious exchange.'⁹

British involvement in the Malay States and the Strait of Melaka was not always direct. While the Straits Settlements – which comprised Melaka, Penang, Singapore, and the Dindings – became a Crown Colony in 1867, from the 1870s onwards, the Federated Malay States of the Peninsula experienced the 'informal imperialism' which characterised much of the British Empire. As noted by Anthony Webster in his history of British imperialism in Southeast Asia, the British often 'preferred informal empire to direct colonial rule because it avoided the costs and risks of direct rule.'¹⁰ Indeed, the historian Michael H. Fisher argues that the British Empire 'established itself and expanded largely through its incorporation of existing indigenous political structures.'¹¹

In Peninsular Malaya, this process began with the Treaty of Pangkor of 1874, which laid the groundwork for British control of the Peninsula via the Sultanates of Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan.¹² This agreement required the local rulers to accept a 'British officer to be called Resident... [to be] accredited to his Court' in an advisory capacity.¹³ British 'Residents', who were 'theoretically subject to the authority of their respective Sultans', in practice acted

⁹ Leow, *Taming Babel*, 4.

¹⁰ Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 7.

¹¹ Michael H. Fisher, 'Indirect Rule in the British Empire: The Foundations of the Indian Residency System (1764-1858)', *Modern Asian Studies* 18.3 (1984): 393-428. See also: David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 59.

¹² Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 190.

¹³ J.M. Gullick, *Rulers and Residents: Influence and Power in the Malay States 1870-1920* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2. See also: 'Pangkor Treaty – 20 January 1874', *A Collection of treaties and other documents affecting the States of Malaysia, 1761-1963*, Vol. 1, edited by John de Vere Allen, A. J. Stockwell, and Leigh R. Wright (Dobbs Ferry: Oceana Publications, 1981), 390-2.

as agents of British imperial power.¹⁴ This political arrangement was modelled on Indian princely states, whose political structures were incorporated into the Empire through the ‘advice’ given by British Residents to local rulers.¹⁵ While there was initially some friction between the indigenous rulers and the British, as, indeed, there had been in India, the Malay States were gradually transformed into British client states, with the British acting as patrons of the ceremonial but ultimately powerless Malay Rulers.¹⁶ By 1914, British influence extended across all the Sultanates of the Malayan Peninsula.¹⁷ As J.M. Gullick notes, this system ‘did maintain a dialogue’ between British colonial administrators and the Malay rulers, albeit one which was ‘distinctly lopsided’.¹⁸ While the Resident-General of the Malay States, Sir Frank Swettenham, would insist that the Malay States were ‘not British Territory’,¹⁹ the British Residential system compelled the native rulers to take British ‘advice’ on all aspects of government except for matters of custom and religion.²⁰

Even the Sultanate of Johor, which had resisted British political intervention through the latter half of the nineteenth century, would be compelled in 1914 to appoint a ‘General Adviser’ whose advice ‘the Sultan [was] obliged to accept his advice except on matters of Malay religion and custom’.²¹ While the level of British influence therefore varied across the Peninsula, Malaya was for the most part a colonial society in all but name.²² Moreover, the economy of the Federated Malay States was centred on resource extraction and the production of cash crops, with Malaya’s rich mineral and agricultural resources fed into

¹⁴ Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 190.

¹⁵ Fisher, ‘Indirect Rule in the British Empire’, 393-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* See also: C.W. Newbury, ‘Patrons, Clients, and Empire: The Subordination of Indigenous Hierarchies in Asia and Africa’, *Journal of World History* 11.2 (2000): 240; J.M. Gullick, *Rulers and Residents: Influence and Power in the Malay States 1870-1920* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.

¹⁸ Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 343.

¹⁹ Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya*, revised edition (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948), vi.

²⁰ Ernst Chew, ‘Swettenham and British Residential Rule in West Malaya’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 5.2 (1974): 178; Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, ‘British Colonial Rule, Japanese Occupation, and the Transformation of Malay Kingship 1930s-1957’, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 11.1 (2009): 106.

²¹ Keith Sinclair, ‘The British Advance in Johore, 1885-1914’, *JMBRAS* 40.1 (1967): 93, 109.

²² Although large parts of Malaya were thus never formally a colony of Great Britain, the impact of British administration and intervention in Malaya was both systemic and profound. The ‘Protected’ Malay States were effectively under indirect rule. Subsequent references to British colonisation in this thesis refer to this influence.

broad British trade networks by the port cities of the Straits Settlements. The period from 1874 to 1914 thus represents the height of Britain's imperial expansion in the Malay world.

British colonisation radically reshaped the demographics of the Peninsula. For much of the nineteenth century, colonial labour needs in Malaya were met by importing workers from other British colonies. British authorities in Malaya initially brought large numbers of convict labourers from the Indian subcontinent to work in their Malayan colonies as builders and railway workers, and later brought clerks from Ceylon to keep the colonial bureaucracy running.²³ Indian workers were largely responsible for the construction of Malaya's extensive railway network, which was built to facilitate the extraction of mineral resources – primarily tin.²⁴ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, this earlier indentured labour was superseded by the mass influx of Chinese labourers which accompanied the tin mining boom.²⁵ By the 1920s, Chinese immigration to Malaya was viewed as an 'inevitable' and 'natural movement of population' without which Malaya's development would be 'checked and arrested'.²⁶ While flows of people to the Malayan Peninsula from both the Indian sub-continent and southern China had occurred in prior centuries, the scale of immigration to Malaya from the eighteenth century onwards substantially outpaced these earlier movements and resulted in substantial demographic changes.²⁷

Malaya's large South Asian and Chinese populations were met by smaller, but often significant minority communities – including small but prominent Jewish and Armenian

²³ For an in-depth account of how penal labour from South Asia shaped Singapore and the Straits Settlements, see: Anoma Pieris, *Hidden Hands, Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore's Plural Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009). See also: Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 51-2, 209; John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Penguin, 2013), 91; and Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 75, 283, 297, and elsewhere *passim*.

²⁴ Indeed, by the 1940s, Malaya had the greatest length of railway line relative to population in the region. See: C.A. Fisher, 'The Railway Geography of British Malaya', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 64.3 (1948): 123.

²⁵ Khoo Salma Nasution, *The Chulia in Penang: Patronage and Place-Making Around the Kapitan Kling Mosque 1786-1957* (Penang: Areca Books, 2014), 5, 119.

²⁶ Letter from Governor's Deputy B.C.H. Wolff to Colonial Secretary L.C.M.S. Amery [drafted by Sir Hugh Clifford], in 'Chinese Labour in British Malaya', Colonial Office correspondence, 31 August 1927, NAUK CO 717/56/5, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.* See also: Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 100-3.

diaspora communities, adding to the existing cultural and linguistic diversity of the Malay Archipelago. This layered, intersecting history has implications for reading Malayan architecture, and necessitates a certain broad, comparative approach. While this thesis focuses on portions of the Malay world administered or influenced by British rule, it is important to note that the borders between this region and the rest of the Malay Archipelago, as well as the cultural spheres of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, were much more permeable than simple administrative divisions might suggest.

Architectural ideas would prove equally mobile, travelling with these flows of people from British India to Malaya, along the Straits of Melaka through to Siam, between Malaya and China, and between various colonies and concessions within the British Empire.²⁸ Older patterns of migration, which followed the yearly ebb and flow of the monsoon, were not wiped out by British rule, although they would gradually be eroded by the advent of steamships in the latter half of the nineteenth century.²⁹ British architects constructed imperial monuments using local and imported Asian labour. In the process, British architectural ideas were transmitted to local builders and architects, helping to lay the foundations of a new vernacular form of classicism. Architects, too, were responsible for the ‘transfer of knowledge from one place to another... not [just] from the centre to the periphery but along the periphery’s edge.’³⁰ If imperialism ‘describes the process by which Empire was fashioned, maintained and extended’,³¹ imperial monuments provide the most substantial and tangible reminders of how this process played out.

²⁸ For a discussion of the architectural exchange which occurred within the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, see: Ronald G. Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia: The Eclectic Architecture of Sojourners and Settlers* (Singapore: Tuttle, 2010). For an in-depth exploration of how the architecture of Penang’s Indian Muslim community was influenced by various ideas from both the Indian Ocean and British Empire, see: Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*. Finally, for a discussion of inter-colonial migrations within the British Empire, see: Julie Willis, ‘Architectural Movements: Journeys of an Inter-colonial Profession’, *Fabrications* 26.2 (2016): 158-79.

²⁹ The changing patterns of Indian Ocean trade are discussed at length in Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*, 9-13, 28-43, and elsewhere *passim*. Malaya was also integrated to the rest of the Malay Archipelago by trade in products such as gambier and tea. See: Gerrit Knaap and Heather Sutherland, *Monsoon Traders: Ships, Skippers and Commodities in Eighteenth-Century Makassar* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004), 190. The northern monsoon also helped traders from China circulate around the archipelago, including the Malay Peninsula. See: Leonard Blussé, ‘Junks to Java: Chinese Shipping to Nanyang in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century’, *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*, edited by Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Ching Chang (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 223.

³⁰ Willis, ‘Architectural Movements’, 165.

³¹ James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 12.

‘Our Tropical Possessions’: Malaya within the British Empire

Histories of architecture across the British Empire provide an important point of scholarly reference to better understand architecture in British Malaya in terms of both its particularities as well as its affinities with architecture in other colonies. This is significant because until recently, histories of Malayan architecture have tended to be written from the perspective of postcolonial nationhood, serving as exercises in nation-building as well as historical scholarship. This is an unsurprising impulse in relatively young postcolonial nations. As the French historian Marc Ferro argues, history is ‘the dominant element that distinguishes the collective consciousness of each society.’³²

The political split between Malaysia and Singapore in 1965 has resulted in Malayan architectural history being compartmentalised, with scholars from the two nations focusing their work within the confines of these twentieth-century borders, and tracing the relationship between the two nations and the former imperial metropole in London. Malaysia and Singapore are by no means unique in this regard. As Thomas R. Metcalf argues, colonial history has tended to ‘conceive of the British Empire as ... lines of telegraph wire through which information flows up and policy directives flow down – running from each colony to the metropole in London... the history of each colony is thus written in isolation from those of its neighbours’.³³ This view of imperial connections replicates the hierarchical world view the historian David Cannadine argues was central to how the British conceived of their empire.³⁴ According to Cannadine, the British ‘exported and projected vernacular sociological visions from the metropolis to the periphery, and they imported and analysed them from the empire back to Britain, thereby constructing comforting and familiar resemblance and equivalencies and affinities.’³⁵

While there has been considerable value in this focus on the relationship between colony and metropole, much is lost in failing to view the lateral relationship between Britain’s various colonies. This is particularly true of the Malayan Peninsula, which was, at least initially,

³² Marc Ferro, *The Use and Abuse of History* (London: Routledge, 2003), xii.

³³ Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, 6-7.

³⁴ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

administered as part of India, and whose residents had substantial links to other colonies such as Ceylon and Hong Kong. As Metcalf argues, ‘by the early nineteenth century, Singapore and Penang, with Malacca, grew into cosmopolitan urban centres integrated into larger maritime networks’.³⁶ British Malaya was situated at the crossroads of a number of such networks. The Malayan Peninsula and its neighbouring islands had long been at the intersection of the overlapping trade networks of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. British influence from the eighteenth century onwards saw this region integrated into ever wider networks of maritime trade. It is increasingly apparent that histories of Malaya, particularly cultural histories, need to consider the impact this position has had on Malaya: Malaya was simultaneously liminal and central, situated between India and China, and at the periphery of the British Empire.

Recent histories of Malaya as part of British India – and Indian Ocean trade and cultural flows – have helped enrich understandings of Malaya’s place within the region. As Metcalf and other scholars argue, India was more than just another colony in Britain’s imperial network, but in many senses a ‘sub-imperial centre’.³⁷ Indian models of governance and administration were exported from the subcontinent to the Malay States.³⁸ So too did Indian labourers.³⁹ It is thus crucial for histories of colonial Malaya to take into account Britain’s colonial experience in India if they are to make sense of Malaya’s colonisation. The work of two scholars has been particularly significant in situating British Malaya within this broader regional context. Marcus Langdon’s magisterial *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India 1805-1830* places a very local history of Penang into its wider colonial context as part of British India.⁴⁰ The first volume of Langdon’s in-depth documentary history deals extensively with Suffolk House (circa 1809),⁴¹ which was perhaps the most important classical building constructed

³⁶ Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, 62.

³⁷ Preeti Chopra, ‘South and Southeast Asia’, *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire*, edited by G.A. Bremner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 308.

³⁸ Chopra, ‘South and Southeast Asia’, 308.

³⁹ Sikri, *India and Malaysia*, 221.

⁴⁰ Marcus Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, 1805-1830. Volume One: Ships, Men and Mansions* (Penang: Areca Books, 2013); Marcus Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, 1805-1830. Volume Two: Fire, Spice and Edifice* (Penang: GTWHI, 2015).

⁴¹ As noted by Langdon, the date of Suffolk House’s construction has long been unclear. The estate on which the building sits is associated with Francis Light, who established the British settlement in Penang. The current building, however, likely dates to the tenure of William Edward Phillips, who became Governor of Penang in 1810. Langdon echoes the historian Victor Purcell, who argued in his book *Early Penang* (published in 1928) that the construction of the current house was made

by the British in the early years of their foray into Malaya. Suffolk House comes out of an Anglo-Indian architectural practice that was both overtly classicising but also tentatively adapting itself to the warmer climate, drawing on precedents that can be seen in both Calcutta and Madras.⁴² Early nineteenth-century visitors to the building recognised the Suffolk House as such, with the traveller James Wathen describing the building as ‘a very splendid mansion, built in a mixed style of English and Indian architecture’.⁴³

Indeed, the elegant and sober classical idiom of Suffolk House, with its pristine, white-washed Doric arcade running around the upper storey of the building, would have looked just as much at home in Madras as in Georgian London. As a prominent residence of senior colonial figures – and, by extension, symbol of colonial power – Suffolk House would shape how classical architecture was understood in Malaya, providing an important architectural prototype which would be emulated for decades after. Indeed, the building came to replace the older Government House as the seat of colonial rule in George Town.⁴⁴ Langdon argues that among the early buildings of Penang, the grandeur of Suffolk House ‘represent[ed] the high expectations that were held for the island as the fourth presidency of India’.⁴⁵ G.A. Bremner argues that not all ‘colonial’ architecture is necessarily ‘imperial’, and

a typical domestic dwelling, for instance, is very rarely, if ever, an imperial statement. For a building to carry the added designation ‘imperial’ (in an active, self-conscious sense) it must therefore embody and convey an idea of imperial rule. Projection of this kind in architecture was often intended to impress the colonizer as much as the colonized. Such buildings not only intimidated those over whom their rule extended but also acted as beacons to those who created them.⁴⁶

possible by the building of Suffolk Bridge in 1809. See Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India*, Vol. 1, 402.

⁴² Jon Sun Hock Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect 1887-1941* (Penang: Areca Books, 2015), 46-9.

⁴³ Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India*, Vol. 1, 408.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 414-36 *passim*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁴⁶ G.A. Bremner, ‘Stones of Empire’, *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 87.

Khoo Salma Nasution's *The Chulia in Penang: Patronage and Place-Making Around the Kapitan Kling Mosque 1786-1957* is another significant milestone in Malayan history which, like Langdon's work, makes a compelling case for reading Malayan history beyond the borders of the modern postcolonial nation state. As Khoo demonstrates in her study of the Kapitan Kling Mosque, which served George Town's Indian Muslim community, British architectural patronage in Malaya 'reflected broader trends in British Raj architecture'.⁴⁷ Moreover, the impact of patronage on the part of the East India Company during Penang's time as a Presidency of India continued to reverberate long after Penang, as part of the Straits Settlements, was separated from India administratively.⁴⁸ While this thesis focuses on the period after Malaya's administrative separation from British India, there is no denying the enduring influence of India – its culture, people, and British building practices which had developed on the subcontinent – on Malaya through the nineteenth century.

The 'Hidden Hands' of the Contact Zone

The work of Anoma Pieris provides another important – and markedly different – reading of the colonial cityscape as 'penal landscape'.⁴⁹ Pieris notes that the colonial landscape was 'designed to impress', with institutional buildings arranged in order to create 'a grand visual perspective' and communicate colonial codes of morality.⁵⁰ In its government buildings, the government of mid-nineteenth-century Singapore used the classical language of architecture to communicate the all-encompassing nature of modern government.⁵¹ But this classicism could also be used to conceal – as it did in Singapore's prison buildings, hiding convicts through the very products of their labour.⁵² Convict labour was instrumental in the erection of the jail at Bras Basah, which was the largest building complex in the settlement at the time.⁵³ This convict labour force was largely imported by British colonisers from their

⁴⁷ Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*, 289.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 495-6 and elsewhere *passim*.

⁴⁹ Pieris, *Hidden Hands, Divided Landscapes*, 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 50-1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 78-87.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87.

territories in South Asia.⁵⁴ This remains an all too frequently overlooked aspect of the urban and architectural history of British Malaya. Yet as Pieris argues, this convict labour is inextricable from the production of the colonial city in this context:

The original courthouse, government office, and recorder's office (1826-1827)... were located in a [Palladian] house leased from John Argyle Maxwell and designed by Coleman... Although a new courthouse was sanctioned in 1855 and eventually built in a neo-Palladian style with convict labour between 1864 and 1867, it was never used for its original purpose. Instead, it was converted to 'government offices', which housed 'virtually the entire government bureaucracy'... The classical proportions, arcaded *piano nobile*, and elevated Doric pilasters presented an imposing image of centralised governmental authority as a homogeneous and self-containing monolith servicing all aspects of modern and independent government. [These] government offices were firmly rooted in the rationalised humanist world of the new, post-mutiny governmental order. Yet this too was reinscribed through convict activity... [and] prisoners with specialised skills, such as writing and drafting, were given specific roles within this administrative system.⁵⁵

Malayan classicism was thus rooted as much in Asian manual labour as it was in Enlightenment thought. Penal labour was critical in the creation of the colonial city in the Straits Settlements, and thus shaped the meaning of that urban setting.⁵⁶ While architectural histories have tended to separate the work of British architects from later 'vernacular' builders, Pieris' book suggests that the line between the two was in fact rather more blurred than the canonical histories of architecture in Malaya and Singapore have tended to suggest. As Chang Jiat-Hwee notes in his pioneering study of tropical architecture, British architects were reliant on other, Asian 'social actors' to construct their Palladian villas.⁵⁷ Read in the Malayan context, where architectural classicism was the primary language of imperial architecture, classical architecture must then be understood as articulating a particular vision of British imperialism – one tied to notions of classical antiquity, imperial power, as well as

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-61.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁶ Chopra, 'South and Southeast Asia', 311.

⁵⁷ Chang Jiat-Hwee, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture: Colonial Networks, Nature and Technoscience* (London: Routledge, 2016), 30.

Enlightenment rationality. The adoption of classical vocabulary by vernacular builders over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can thus be read as a form of dialogue with the coloniser, and perhaps even a subtle subversion of the established relationship between the rulers and the ruled. There is the risk of overstating the agency of these builders – particularly in the case of indentured labourers who had little say in their transportation between British colonies.⁵⁸ Yet once they were transported from their places of birth to new colonies such as Malaya, these workers were forced to adapt to their new homes.⁵⁹ Moreover, this labour, coerced as it was, shaped the emerging urban fabric of Britain's Malayan colonies. In his study of architecture in eighteenth-century Mauritius, Dwight Carey observes that

Although enslaved builders never characterized their labour as a form of translation, they demonstrated their mastery of a range of styles, skills, and materials as they synthesized disparate vernacular traditions and combined them into a cosmopolitan architectural whole. Creole architectural translation can help us understand the implications of this process.⁶⁰

Preeti Chopra argues that in British colonies in South and Southeast Asia,

the production of buildings in many if not most circumstances was a collaborative effort. The bulk of the expertise, albeit often at lower levels, was drawn from colonized populations. Thus, in conception, construction, and use, the architecture of the British Empire should be seen as a 'contact zone', which is vital to any understanding of it as a means of interpreting British imperial culture.⁶¹

This idea of the 'contact zone', articulated by Marie Louise Pratt, refers to 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths'.⁶² While Pratt used a text written in Peru under Spanish colonial rule, this idea is also useful in

⁵⁸ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 90-91.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Carey, 'Creole Architectural Translation', 74.

⁶¹ Chopra, 'South and Southeast Asia', 279.

⁶² Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession* 91 (1991): 33-40.

discussing the intensely multicultural, but also deeply unequal, society of British Malaya. Pratt uses the term 'autoethnographic text' to describe the ways in which colonised peoples in these contact zones

undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them... [and] involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis of the conqueror. These are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene with metropolitan modes of understanding. Autoethnographic works are often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speaker's own community. Their reception is thus highly indeterminate.⁶³

This is where the primary utility of Pratt's articulation of the contact zone for this thesis lies. A similar process can be seen in the selective appropriation and adoption of elements of the classical language by Malaya's non-European architects and builders. In her essay, Pratt cautions against reading the arts of the contact zone according to the standards of the imperial metropole, noting

If one thinks of cultures, or literatures, as discrete, coherently structured edifices... any autoethnographic work [appears] anomalous or chaotic... If we do not think of culture in this way, then [the text] is simply heterogeneous. Such a text is heterogeneous on the reception end as well as the production end: it will read very differently to people in different positions in the contact zone.⁶⁴

It is in this heterogeneity of both production and reception, evident in the myriad ways in which classicism was received and translated within British Malaya, that Malayan classicism is most manifestly a product of the contact zone. Classicism would have meant different things to British colonial administrators than it would have to Malaya's diverse local and migrant populations. The diverse reception of classicism in Malaya is evidenced through the varied ways it was deployed by its cosmopolitan communities.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 36-7.

Pratt's idea is echoed by Pieris, who notes that the 'users' of buildings provide another lens through which colonial architecture can be read.⁶⁵ Drawing on the work of the linguist Lawrence Venuti, Carey notes that translation is a 'contact zone' which allows people to 'find meaning in a work that was previously unavailable to those unable to speak the source language... Translators bring cultures together through rendering the canonical decipherable and transforming it into a vernacular iteration of an established form.'⁶⁶ This process of translation can be seen in the vernacularisation of classicism in British Malaya, in which the architectural language of British colonisers was adopted and adapted to a myriad of uses by diverse peoples. If, as Chopra argues, imperial architecture was largely about 'articulating the relationship between ruler and ruled',⁶⁷ then Malaya's vernacularised classicism can be read as a means by which the colonised negotiated their relationship with their colonisers.

As Esra Akcan argues in *Architecture in Translation*:

Every translation, linguistic or visual, is a transformation... [while] literary translation aims at the maximum possible closeness to the original... architectural translation more often than not aims at distance, distortion, or transmutation. There can be missed opportunities of translation, but mistranslation is an oxymoron in architecture... [A]rchitectural translation is not burdened by fidelity.⁶⁸

Akcan notes, however, that 'the history of modern literary translation can hardly be written without taking into the hierarchical status of the source text.'⁶⁹ In reading Malayan classicism, architectural historians have tended to afford this same primacy to the source text of British colonial classicism, assuming its Malayan translations to be a distorted version of a language. This asymmetry of relations has been challenged in postcolonial studies of translation, 'which critically assessed the assumption that the non-West is only a copy of the West'.⁷⁰ Moreover, it was not only Asian architects, builders, and labourers who were translating classicism in

⁶⁵ Pieris, *Hidden Hands, Divided Landscapes*, 122.

⁶⁶ Carey, 'Creole Architectural Translation', 73.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁶⁸ Esra Akcan, *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey, and the Modern House* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

British Malaya. British architects, too, were responsible for translating the idioms and materiality of their own classical tradition to the resources and climate available to them in this tropical colonial environment. The history of Malayan classicism is thus a history of translation and creolisation.

This developing historical narrative revises the established reading of the relationship between imperialists and the subaltern. As Edward Said noted in his magnum opus, *Orientalism* is ‘fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient’s difference with its weakness.’⁷¹ For Said, Western understandings of the Orient were mediated by experts – that is, Orientalists – whose representations of the East shaped Western imperial thought and action.⁷² The relationship posited by Said between the coloniser and colonised is, on the whole, top-down and one-sided, moving from colonial rulers in the Western imperial metropole down to the colonies and colonised. The enduring impact of this Saidean conception of power relations is evident in much of the existing scholarship on architecture in colonial Malaya.⁷³ This has had an impact on scholarly readings of Malayan classicism, which have continued to frame the use of classical ornament in particular as a purely hierarchical transmission of culture from the coloniser to the colonised.

While this is most evident in writing on the use of Indo-Saracenic architecture in Malaya, where an explicitly ‘Oriental’ style of architecture was deployed by British architects for political reasons, it also influences writing on classical architecture in the region. Both Lee Kip Lin and Norman Edwards’ accounts of architecture in colonial Singapore, for example, trace a clear trajectory from the ‘learned’ work of British architects to the ‘untutored’ buildings of Asian vernacular builders.⁷⁴ In his monograph on the architecture of Singapore’s

⁷¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 204.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 49-73 *passim*, 107-110, 203-5.

⁷³ More recent histories of European imperialism in Asia have afforded colonised populations greater agency, and noted the varied and multiple responses to European powers. See, for example, Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

⁷⁴ See: Lee Kip Lin, *The Singapore House 1819-1942* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2015), 65, 125-6; and Norman Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life 1819-1939* (Singapore: Talisman, 2017), 166-77 *passim*.

Emerald Hill neighbourhood, Lee Kip Lin notes the consistent style which emerged over the course of the early twentieth century:

The common idiom is the use of the classical orders on the first and upper floor walls, either Roman Doric or Corinthian, not true to Palladian or any rules, but plagiarised freely. The absence of detailed drawings and the poor draughtsmanship evident in some of the building plans suggest strongly that craftsmen were responsible for the intricate detailing of the Orders. Despite the use of the European classical elements, the buildings have a pronounced Chinese character... The total effect and result of this mixture of European and Chinese elements has been somewhat misleadingly referred to as “Chinese Baroque” by one authority.⁷⁵

This idea of ‘plagiarism’ also appears in Gretchen Liu’s influential monograph, *Pastel Portraits*. Asian and Eurasian architects such as ‘R.T. Rajoo, Tan Seng Chong, Almeida, Kassim, and J.B. Westerhout’, many of whom had worked in Western firms as draughtsmen before branching out into their own practices, are described as ‘freely plagiarising Western architectural motifs’.⁷⁶ These architects, who were active in Singapore at the turn of the twentieth century, were certainly responsible for buildings with exuberant and at times exaggerated ornamentation. Yet the use of the term ‘plagiarism’ is racialised here given the near universal use of classical ornamental vocabulary in British Malaya by both British and Asian architects alike. Lee Kip Lin’s survey of Emerald Hill Road covers the work of many of the architects Liu names, including Eurasian architects such as Johannes Bartholomew Westerhout and George d’Almeida, the Malay architect Wan Mohamed Kassim, the Indian architect Rethinam Thamby Rajoo Pillay, and the Chinese architect Wee Teck Moh.⁷⁷ Despite their diverse origins, there is a remarkable consistency and stylistic unity to their architectural output on this one street. This consistency speaks to a level of intention belied by the term ‘plagiarism’.

⁷⁵ Lee Kip Lin, *Emerald Hill: The Story of a Street in Words and Pictures* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 1984), 7.

⁷⁶ Gretchen Liu, *Pastel Portraits: Singapore’s Architectural Heritage* (Singapore: Singapore Coordinating Committee, 1984), 52.

⁷⁷ Lee, *Emerald Hill*.

Moreover, as Swati Chattopadhyay notes in her study of architecture and urbanism in colonial Calcutta, emphasis on the distinctions between the architecture of the British colonisers and the colonised local communities erases the ‘tension of the blurred boundaries between the two’:

[R]acial divisions were neither complete nor static... The notion that these buildings were completely imported from England... is based on the neoclassical ‘look’ of the buildings, with no attempt to document and examine plans and sections... The blurring of boundaries lies in the heterogeneous use as well as the heterogeneous population who inhabited the buildings.⁷⁸

Chattopadhyay demonstrates that even the most imposingly classical buildings of India’s colonial government were not facsimiles of British buildings.⁷⁹ In their internal arrangements, these buildings were shaped by local building practices, the dictates of climate, and the pageantry of Empire.⁸⁰ Colonial classicism thus simultaneously reshaped Asian building practices in its own image while also being remade by them. This process was evident in Malaya’s earliest classical buildings, including Suffolk House, the first seat of British colonial government in Penang. An eighteenth-century British visitor to the building described Suffolk House as being in ‘the same style as Madras houses’.⁸¹ This was a result of both stylistic and climate adaptations brought over from British India, as well as a product of the predominantly Indian labour force brought to Malaya via colonial labour flows. The first classical structures erected by the British in Malaya were thus decidedly Anglo-Indian in character rather than ‘pure’ exemplars of British Palladianism.

As William J. Glover argues in his study of Lahore’s residential architecture, the emphasis placed by British commentators on the differences between British and Indian buildings ‘marked the contours of a widely shared anxiety about the implications of cultural hybridity’

⁷⁸ Swati Chattopadhyay, ‘Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of “White Town” in Colonial Calcutta’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59.2 (2000): 154.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 165-75.

⁸¹ See: Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India*, Vol. I, 351-5. See also: Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 10-16 and 46-7.

and the impact this hybridity had on the former's homes and institutional buildings.⁸² The distinction between the 'pure' classicism of British imperial monuments and the hybrid classicism of native builders is thus grounded at least in part by a colonial attempt to emphasise difference.

By moving away from notions of Vitruvian purity which have characterised much of the literature on classical architecture in British Malaya – notions which themselves are grounded in colonial epistemology – it becomes possible to write a history of the style in a manner that takes into account its complexities, contradictions, and underlying potential for syncretism and hybridity. This has largely been overlooked in existing scholarship on Malayan architecture, and this thesis thus addresses a gap in how Malaya's hybridised form of classicism reflects changing relationships of culture and power in British Malaya. The widespread adoption of classicism in Malaya by Asian architects and clients is particularly noteworthy as it differs markedly from the diffusion of colonial classicism in the Dutch East Indies, where it remained the exclusive province of the elite, and was soon abandoned by European architects with a modernising agenda.⁸³

Historical geographers offer further insights into the stratified nature of the colonial city. Brenda S.A. Yeoh's monograph *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore* provides an important analysis of the spatial and geographical aspects of the colonial city.⁸⁴ As Yeoh argues, the colonial city was not merely the product of imperial power stamped on a blank landscape, but a site of contestation which was read in multiple – and often differing – ways by the various communities that live in it.⁸⁵ For Yeoh, the colonial city is a reflection of the 'negotiation of power between the dominant and subordinated in society, each with their own versions of reality and practice.'⁸⁶ This negotiation of power was legible in the urban environment, seen in the racial segregation of the city, as well as in architectural typology; European colonialists lived in bungalows in their own residential enclaves, whereas 'densely

⁸² William J. Glover, *Making Lahore Modern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 158.

⁸³ Abidin Kusno, *The Appearances of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 131-3.

⁸⁴ Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

⁸⁵ Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, 9-10.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

populated mixed commercial and residential landuse districts [were] inhabited by the bulk of the Asian communities.⁸⁷

Municipal authority and regulations were also a reflection of colonial control. As Yeoh notes, public health and hygiene issues were racialised in a mixed society such as colonial Singapore.⁸⁸ Concerns about public health manifested spatially through the demolition of homes to create new back-lanes for waste disposal, a form of urban and architectural intervention that was enacted in predominantly Asian neighbourhoods.⁸⁹ If the colonial city was thus a site of contestation and negotiation, the use of western architectural vocabulary in Asian vernacular buildings is perhaps best understood as part of this process of negotiation, an attempt to assimilate traditional ways of living and building within the increasingly codified strictures of a colonial municipality. As Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz notes in her study of Penang's shophouse typology, the shophouse can be read as the product of Asian builders responding to the pressures of British building codes and municipal policies intended to improve public sanitation and prevent the sort of fire which razed much of early George Town.⁹⁰

Malayan architectural history remains a relatively young field. Recent architectural histories have moved away from the focus on periodisation and typology that dominated the key works of the 1980s and 1990s, but there remains a need for sustained, in-depth scholarly inquiry into architectural style. Given its ubiquity, prominence, and sustained use in British Malaya, this is particularly true for the classical idiom. From the East India Company's first direct involvement in the Malay Archipelago right until the abrupt disruption of its imperial influence by the Japanese Occupation, the classical language of architecture was used to convey imperial might, rule, and order. This is not to say that classical architecture remained unchanged for the duration of Britain's imperial involvement in Malaya. Imperial architecture was influenced by developments across the empire, and in the imperial metropole, responding to changing imperial policies and architectural fashions. Classical architecture was also transformed by local and diaspora builders.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 87, 101, 142.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 149, 153-9. See also: Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 132-42.

⁹⁰ Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz, 'Ordering of Housing and the Urbanisation Process: Shophouses in Colonial Penang', *JMBRAS* 71.2 (1998): 123-36.

Classical vocabulary, in its vernacularised form, became part of the architectural lingua franca, and was used in tens if not hundreds of thousands of buildings across the Malay Peninsula and the islands of the Straits Settlements. Initially an imperial imposition, by the early twentieth century, classical architectural vocabulary had become the most widely-used Malayan vernacular. A history of Malayan classicism is therefore overdue. This thesis addresses this gap by presenting the first thematic survey of classical architecture in Malaya. Taking cues from recent developments in the history of architectural classicism in British India, this thesis draws on broader social and cultural histories, as well as cultural theory, in order to present a new account of how an imperial style was creolised over the course of the nineteenth century, becoming the Malayan vernacular by the early twentieth century.

Reading Ornament

A substantial portion of this thesis is dedicated to the reading of classical ornamental vocabulary in colonial Malaya, and an attempt at uncovering its meaning and reception. The work of the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer informs the interpretation of architectural ornament put forward in this thesis. In ‘The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative’, drawn from his seminal text *Truth and Method*, Gadamer points out that architecture is uniquely ‘comprehensive’ among the arts:

As the art which creates space it both shapes it and leaves it free. It not only embraces all the decorative aspects of the shaping of space, including ornament, but is itself decorative in nature. The nature of decoration consists in performing that two-sided mediation; namely to draw the attention of the viewer itself, to satisfy his taste, and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies.⁹¹

⁹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative’, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, edited by Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), 129-30.

As Dana Arnold notes, Gadamer understood ornament as being ‘essential to the ontological role of the building to represent. Ornament is not then applied or extra but intrinsic to our reading of architecture.’⁹² Gadamer argues that:

Ornament or decoration is determined by its relation to what it decorates, by what carries it... Ornament is part of the presentation. But presentation is an ontological event; it is representation. An ornament, a decoration, a piece of sculpture set up in a chosen place are representative in the same sense that, say, the church in which they are to be found is itself representative.⁹³

As the architectural historian Paul Frankl notes, the ‘interpretation of architectural monuments as moulded theatres of human activity... is parallel to iconography, which names the figures and explains the events represented in painting and sculpture.’⁹⁴ Architectural ornament must thus be read as a cultural artefact.

For some buildings, the process of reading this ornamental language is relatively straightforward. The Supreme Court in Singapore, for example, clearly draws on the dome of Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London. Both the building and its ornamental programme are ‘representative’ in the way that Gadamer argues.⁹⁵ Built by a British architect for the colonial judiciary, it can safely be concluded that this was an intentional and explicit point of reference that both architect and the legal professionals who used the building would have understood. Indeed, the building’s dome itself is entirely ornamental.⁹⁶ Its design echoes that of Saint Paul’s Cathedral and Edward William Mountford’s Central Criminal Court, informally known as the Old Bailey, in London, and in the process further cements associations between British colonial rule and justice. Its power as a symbol of justice and British legal traditions

⁹² Dana Arnold, *Reading Architectural History* (London: Routledge, 2002), 84.

⁹³ Gadamer, ‘The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative’, 130.

⁹⁴ Paul Frankl, *Principles of Architectural History: The Four Phases of Architectural Style, 1420-1900* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 159.

⁹⁵ Gadamer, ‘The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative’, 136.

⁹⁶ The ornamental nature of the Singapore Supreme Court’s dome was a major point of criticism when the building first opened. This will be discussed in a later chapter. See: ‘Underneath the Dome’, *Straits Times*, 3 August 1939, 10. See also: ‘Supreme Court and Cathay Cinema’, *Straits Times*, 12 June 1939, 15.

derived from the meaning the building's users – including magistrates and lawyers – gleaned from its symbolic ornamental language.

The sculptural programme of this building reinforces this intended reading. These sculptures were created by the Italian sculptor Rodolfo Nolli at his workshop in Singapore.⁹⁷ They reinforce ideas of justice and the rule of law through classicising imagery, most notably in the allegorical figure of Justice in the building's tympanum. The iconographic power of this statue comes from its legibility to a wide audience, a legibility which has been built up through centuries of repetition.⁹⁸ This ornament was thus representative of the broader function of the building. Indeed, the allegorical representation of Justice was so familiar to its intended audience that contemporary commentators picked up on its subtle deviation from tradition, namely the lack of blindfold on the figure of Justice.⁹⁹ The Asian people tried in this building may not have been as familiar with the classicising allegory of its ornamental programme as its British judiciary, but they would have understood the building as a symbol of colonial power in its punitive capacity. The dome itself, which dramatically reshaped the Singapore skyline, was understood as an ornament to the colonial city.¹⁰⁰ As Cannadine argues, architecture became a means by which the British Empire was able to project 'a vision of imperial society as unified, venerable, time-honoured and hierarchical', and imposed 'vernacular sociological visions from the metropolis to the periphery'.¹⁰¹ In invoking the monuments of the imperial metropole, the Supreme Court thus communicated imperial

⁹⁷ Cavaliere Rodolfo Nolli (1888-1964) was an Italian sculptor known for his artificial stone sculptures. Nolli accompanied his uncle and cousin to Bangkok in 1913 to work on a series of sculptures for the new Throne Hall at the Grand Palace. He remained in Asia, teaching at Chulalongkorn University, before moving to Singapore in 1921. In 1925, he received the Order of the Crown of Italy from King Victor Emmanuel III. Nolli's sculptures adorn many of Singapore's important public buildings, including the Victoria Memorial Hall, the Supreme Court and the General Post Office, as well as buildings in Kuala Lumpur, Klang, and Kuching. His studio was at 47 Scotts Road, Singapore. He retired in 1956 having spent almost half his life – and the most prolific years of his career – in Singapore. See: Gretchen Liu, *In Granite and Chunam: Singapore's National Monuments* (Singapore: Landmark Books and the Preservation of Monuments Board, 1996), 72. See also: 'Sculptor Rodolfo Nolli dies in Italy', *Straits Times*, 19 February 1964, 10; and 'Ornamental & Stone Facings', *Malaya Tribune*, 2 August 1939, VII.

⁹⁸ Ruth Weisberg, 'The Art of Memory and the Allegorical Figure of Justice', *Yale Journal of the Law and Humanities* 24.1 (2012): 259-70.

⁹⁹ 'Musings beneath the Dome', *Straits Times*, 29 July 1939, 10.

¹⁰⁰ 'Underneath the Dome'. See also: 'Supreme Court and Cathay Cinema'.

¹⁰¹ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 48 and 122.

values through its ornamental role in the colonial urban landscape, reinforcing the role of the judiciary in colonial rule.

As Cannadine argues in *Ornamentalism*, the British Empire was conceived not only in terms of ‘race or colour’, but also in terms of ‘class and status’, and that this meant that Empire was performed in terms of ‘antiquity and anachronism... order and subordination... dominion and hierarchy, ostentation and ornamentalism.’¹⁰² While his discussion of architecture is largely confined to the Indo-Saracenic in India,¹⁰³ classicism was a substantial part of the regalia of Britain’s Imperial state. Classical monuments – and their ornamental vocabulary – were deployed by British colonisers to telegraph messages of Imperial power and authority to the governed populace. The parade of classical monuments which came to line the Padang of Malaya’s capitals would be the ornamentalist stage set against which the pomp and pageantry of Britain’s colonisation of Malaya would be performed.¹⁰⁴

Gadamer’s understanding of ornament is also useful in the study of Malayan classicism as it allows for, as an example, the Corinthian pilasters on a Chinese shophouse to be understood as integral to the building as opposed to merely applied ornament. The adoption of this colonial vocabulary was intended to signal certain things. This is not to say that Chinese vernacular builders were trying to evoke the ancient rituals and sacrifices of Greek Antiquity suggested by the etymologies of ornamental terms such as *guttae* and *femores*.¹⁰⁵ Rather, the use of classical ornament by local builders was signalling their modernity and cultural adaptation through their facility with the architectural vocabulary used by Malaya’s colonisers.

Just as loanwords from one language come to take on new meanings and associations in another, the classical vocabulary Malayan vernacular builders cribbed from British colonial

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 126. Cannadine underplays the role of racial hierarchies within the British Empire, but notes that British class structures were reproduced and reinforced through Imperial patronage and indirect rule. In Malaya, British administrators bolstered the traditional class structure of Malay society. See also: Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 194-6, 212-13, and elsewhere *passim*.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 48-51, 55-6, 128-42, and elsewhere *passim*.

¹⁰⁴ Lai, ‘Maidan to Padang’, 56-7.

¹⁰⁵ In *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture*, George Hersey argues that the great bulk of classical ornament derives from the ritual practices of Greek Antiquity, before becoming formalised as ornamental vocabulary in classical architecture. See: *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture: Speculations on Ornament from Vitruvius to Venturi* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1988).

examples came to take on new undertones and allusions when they were grafted onto a new Malayan syntax. The use of western ornament by local builders in the shophouses of George Town and Singapore thus signifies something about the cultural aspirations and affiliations of this diasporic group. The use of these 'British' ornaments, which were often combined with Chinese or other Asian ornamental vocabulary in these contexts, could thus be used to signal the layered cultural and political affiliations of a group like the Straits Chinese.

Shophouses, which by sheer numbers form the bulk of Malaya's urban fabric, are equally syncretic in their sources. Tan Yeow Wooi provides an example of this layered reading of architectural language in Malaya in his book on Penang shophouses: in so-called Straits Eclectic shophouses, the traditional Chinese *chitou* column head gradually merged with the capital of the classical Tuscan order, before both were replaced in fashionable homes by more elaborate console brackets.¹⁰⁶ This process of transformation reflects the vernacularisation of the classical, with classical elements becoming synonymous with traditional Chinese building elements in the context of British Malaya. Tan notes that in later manifestations of the Straits Eclectic style, Graeco-Roman egg-and-dart motifs were fully integrated with traditional Chinese motifs in decorative stuccowork.¹⁰⁷ The extensive use of ornate cast-iron columns, balustrades and brackets imported from Scotland and encaustic tiles from England provide another example of this incorporation of British materials and designs into Chinese homes.¹⁰⁸ These are clear examples of the creolisation of architecture, with ornamental language and materials from two distinct building traditions integrated through the hybrid syntax of the Malayan house into a new, but coherent and consistent, whole. This process of architectural hybridisation parallels and reflects the way in which the Anglophone Straits Chinese elite of Penang and Singapore increasingly aligned themselves with the British Empire, even as they retained elements of their Chinese culture and identity.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 10 and 14.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰⁸ Julia de Bierre, *Penang: Through Gilded Doors* (Penang: Areca Books, 2006), 88, 92-5; Gwynn Jenkins, *Contested Space Revisited: George Town, Penang, before and after UNESCO World Heritage Listing* (Penang: Areca Books, 2019), 63; Khoo Su Nin [Khoo Salma Nasution], *Streets of George Town Penang*, fourth edition (Penang: Areca Books, 2007), 107.

¹⁰⁹ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 299.

Malayan classicism must therefore be read in relation to both British architectural practice as well as the various building traditions of the region's diverse population. The appraisal of ornament, including sculpture, is vital in this examination of architectural style in British Malaya. This thesis explores why certain ornamental vocabulary was taken up by architects and builders, both British and Asian, in their works, and what this use of architectural language says about the cultural affiliations and aspirations of the various communities which made up British Malaya.



Figure 2. Ornate plasterwork on the façade of an early twentieth-century shophouse in George Town, Penang. Mark Lay.

In other instances, however, precedent can be harder to ascertain. Vernacular buildings, in particular, often draw on a variety of sources, both classical and regional. The Istana Rajah Bilah in Papan, Perak, for example, features classical decorative elements grafted onto an

architectural frame that is very much of the Malay Archipelago. Built for the first *Penghulu*, or Headman, of Papan, the house is set within a walled compound and entered via a gate crowned with an elegant scrolled pediment.¹¹⁰ The astylar ground floor, built in masonry, is enriched with simple mouldings along the frieze. But the overall floor-plan of the building, jack-roof, and wooden upper storey are all elements that firmly derive from regional building traditions. The architectural historian Imran bin Tajudeen argues that the so-called ‘Compound House’ typology seen in numerous Malayan bungalows descends directly from the indigenous *kampung* houses of the archipelago, and constitute a colonial translation of a traditional spatial programme.¹¹¹ As he notes, ‘the ubiquitous sitting room vestibule that projects from the [pedimented porte-cochère] house-front’ of so many Malayan bungalows is a clear reiteration of the *anjung* or *surong* which are ‘found in Malay, Minangkabau and Bugis house traditions.’¹¹² While these may be articulated with classical pediments and Corinthian columns in the grand Malayan homes of the early twentieth century, they are also clearly rooted in indigenous building traditions, and are thus a product of architectural creolisation.

The work of the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and the political scientist Benedict Anderson provide a theoretical framework for understanding the context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Malaya. The idea of cultural flows is particularly useful for understanding the process of architectural exchange and hybridisation which occurred in British Malaya. Appadurai argues that the ‘central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation.’¹¹³ While Appadurai is writing about the late twentieth century, the period surveyed in this thesis – from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century – was also a time of intense global connectivity and exchange. Appadurai’s synthesis of the Frankfurt School’s work on images, Benedict Anderson’s idea of ‘imagined communities’, and French philosophical writings on the imaginary provide a useful conceptual matrix for analysing the hybrid architecture that resulted from the British Empire’s administration of the diverse communities of colonial

¹¹⁰ Abdur-Razzaq Lubis and Khoo Salma Nasution, *Rajah Bilah and the Mandailings of Perak, 1875-1911* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2003), 174.

¹¹¹ Imran bin Tajudeen, ‘Clients, Architects, and the Persistence of Type: A Review of *The Penang House and the Straits Architect 1887-1941*’, *The Singapore Architect* 1(2015): 96ii.

¹¹² *Ibid.* See also: J.M. Gullick, *Malay Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Beginnings of Change* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), 181-88.

¹¹³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 32.

Malaya.¹¹⁴ Malaya was, as noted above, at the crossroad of various ‘flows’: of labour, people, culture, and ideas. The sources of these various flows manifested in architecture, particularly in the diverse ornamental vocabulary which was grafted onto the common syntax of Malaya’s vernacular architecture.

In the highly influential book *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson argues that the nation is an imagined political community, because ‘members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, yet in the minds of each lives the image of communion... [and] regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived of as a deep, horizontal comradeship.’¹¹⁵ Anderson’s work focuses on the postcolonial nation state. There are clear limits to how much this framework of an imagined community can be used to understand the significantly more stratified and tiered categories of belonging that categorised a colony like the Straits Settlements, or indeed ‘protected’ states such as the Federated Malay States. Yet there are still elements of Anderson’s work that prove germane to understanding the community of British Malaya, particularly in coming to terms with how individual communities imagined and presented themselves within the context of colonial Malaya.

Postcolonial scholars of architecture have taken up Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined communities and applied it to architecture and urban space. This was an area which Anderson himself overlooked in his work, as Abidin Kusno notes in his monograph *Behind the Postcolonial*.¹¹⁶ Yet as Kusno argues, ‘the urban structures of the city, as a major institutional form of the nation-state, [do] shape the national imagination.’¹¹⁷ This was as true of the colonial state as it is of the postcolonial nation. As the architectural historian Lai Chee-Kien notes in his study of the Padang as an urban typology in Malaya and Singapore, regulated open spaces of colonial recreation surrounded by architectural structures which housed the centres of colonial authority became a ‘spatial tradition’ which was replicated along the length

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edition (London: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

¹¹⁶ Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2000), 98.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

of the Malayan Peninsula and the islands of Penang and Singapore.¹¹⁸ The structure of the colonial polity in Malaya was translated into the urban environment, with British authority and recreation conspicuously centred and aggrandised through a careful, considered, and coherent arrangement of urban space and architectural grandeur in its various urban centres. Asian trade and residential life were segregated from these spaces. Imperial racial hierarchies were thus literally constructed into the urban fabric of British Malaya.

This thesis attempts to address the question of how the classical language of architecture was adopted, adapted, and appropriated in British Malaya, and how an architectural mode came to be creolised by vernacular builders. Through the hands of Asian architects and builders, both locals and migrants, the use of classical language came to signify a number of things at different points of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Many of these architects worked in partnership with British architects at various points in their career, and the constantly shifting professional allegiances of architectural professionals in this colonial milieu was underpinned by a shared architectural vocabulary which furnished British Malaya with a distinct and recognisable style.

The use of classical ornamental language could symbolise colonial authority, Asian allegiance to British rule, as well as wealth and taste. By the turn of the twentieth century, and well into the 1920s, classical architecture became the language of the cosmopolitan mercantile elites of Malaya, and was being transmitted along trade routes and railway lines into the smaller towns of Malaya's rural hinterland. Indeed, by the twentieth century, cartouches and Corinthian capitals could be found in the shophouses and public buildings of even smaller regional towns. This adoption of classicism was not wholesale, however, and the use of classical ornament alongside Chinese, Indian, or Malay architectural elements was a reflection of the often layered and multiple cultural, political, and social allegiances the diverse communities of British Malaya held. As Khoo notes of Penang's eclectic architecture,

¹¹⁸ Lai Chee-Kien, 'Maidan to Padang: Reinventions of Urban Fields in Malaysia and Singapore', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 21.2 (Spring 2010): 55-70.

The material culture and architecture of each historic community expressed claims of assimilation – through identification with the local society – and at the same time statements of difference – through reference to cultural origin.¹¹⁹

Classical architecture, transmitted and translated through the flows of labour and culture in this colonial contact zone, was thus used by the diverse communities of British Malaya for equally diverse reasons. The language of classicism was employed for both banks and bungalows, in churches, mosques, and synagogues, and for both public buildings and private homes. The ubiquity of classical architecture – or elements of classicism – in Malayan architecture which was evident by the early twentieth century was therefore not a simple case of colonial imposition. Rather, the classical language of architecture, and its ornamental vocabulary in particular, was an arena in which Malayans negotiated their shifting identities in a period of change.

Sources and Archives

This thesis locates architectural history within the broader context of socio-cultural history in order to present a new reading of classical architecture in British Malaya. This necessarily entails drawing on a variety of built and documentary sources. Buildings, approached in a number of ways, constitute the main primary source for this thesis. Extant buildings are an important source of historical information. Buildings serve as case studies, with information gleaned from their stylistic choices and devices, architectural programmes, and ornamental language. The buildings surveyed in this thesis range from the exceptional to the typical. Public buildings, houses of worship, large commercial buildings, and grand mansions sit at the other end of the spectrum. These represent the most ambitious architectural efforts in colonial Malaya, and often set trends which were subsequently imitated in residential architecture.

As will be demonstrated, this transmission did not just occur directly between the colonisers and the colonised. Local elites, most notably the Sultans of Johor, adopted and adapted

¹¹⁹ Khoo, *Streets of George Town*, 21.

classicism to their own ends, and their patronage provides insights into how classicism was deployed by Malayan rulers. Shophouses, which constitute the vast bulk of Malaya's built environment, provide examples of the wide-spread use of classical language in vernacular architecture. This ubiquitous building typology reflects how classicism was, between the late-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, transformed from an imperial language of power to the ornamental language of the masses.



Figure 3. Composite capitals decorated with Chinese mythological creatures, including pixiu and phoenixes, on a twentieth-century shophouse in Muar, Johor. Photograph by the author.

The buildings themselves are supplemented as a primary source by relevant building plans from the late nineteenth century onwards, drawn from various archives in Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom. A great many of these plans have been digitised in recent years, particularly those held by the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) and to a lesser extent those held in the municipal archives of the Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang (MBPP). Building plans help to corroborate the evidence provided by extant buildings, as well as providing details about buildings which have been demolished. A close reading of buildings, where they still stand, read in conjunction with the building plans collected from

these archives provide details about decorative schemes, architectural programme, as well as the circumstances surrounding their conception and execution.¹²⁰

There are limits to the use of building plans, however: not all the buildings depicted in plans lodged with municipal authorities were constructed, and buildings are not always constructed exactly to plan. This is particularly true of vernacular buildings, where ornamental details were the product of craftsmen rather than architects or draughtsmen.¹²¹ Ornamental features such as Chinese ceramic work, known in Mandarin as *qianci* (meaning ‘embedded ceramics’) or *jiannian* (meaning ‘cut and paste’).¹²² Stucco and plasterwork is another element of Malayan architecture where the artistic license of craft is on display (figs. 2 and 3), and may not necessarily be represented in the plan submissions made by architects to the various municipal authorities in Malaya and Singapore. Where possible, building plans must therefore be read in conjunction with the buildings themselves, or other documentary sources such as historic paintings, photographs and picture postcards.

While the great bulk of Singapore’s pre-war building plans survive in the National Archives of Singapore, this is not the case with many locations in Peninsular Malaysia. There are only a handful of surviving building plans in the Johor Branch of the Arkib Negara Malaysia, and almost no surviving building plans in the head office in Kuala Lumpur. It is therefore necessary to turn to other sources. Early paintings provide clues about the early built environment in British Malaya. The Penang State Museum and National Museum of Singapore hold important collections of early painted views of Malaya, as does the National Gallery of Singapore. Many of these were painted by colonialists such as Captain Robert Smith, who served as a military engineer and surveyor with the East India Company in Penang from 1814-1815, and John Turnbull Thomson, a British government surveyor in Singapore from 1841-1853. The paintings provide a wealth of information about the early townships of George Town and Singapore but must be read with caution.

¹²⁰ Andrew Leach, *What is Architectural History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 81.

¹²¹ Jon Sun Hock Lim, ‘The “Shophouse Rafflesia”: An Outline of Its Malaysian Pedigree and Subsequent Diffusion in Asia’, *JMBRAS* 66.1 (1993): 56.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 58. See also: Tan Yeow Wooi, *Penang Shophouses: A Handbook of Features and Materials* (Penang: Tan Yeow Wooi Culture & Heritage Research Studio, 2015), 80.

As noted by Roxana Waterson in her essay on early traveller's impressions of Singapore, while written accounts provided lurid details of both the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of the harbour city, 'this touch of honesty does not appear to find its way into the paintings, no doubt because artists were at pains to choose the more picturesque views that were likely to appeal to the European sensibility'.¹²³ The intentional sanitisation of these early picturesque views of Singapore and Malaya do not preclude them from being useful sources of historical information, however, as they tell the viewer much about how European colonisers and travellers viewed and imagined their colonies, and what they desired their colonies to be. Early paintings present us with an imperial vision of British Malaya, one which has been carefully composed to present the aesthetic and imperial ideals of these colonial painters.

Historic photographs and postcards provide another significant source of primary information, particularly for buildings that have been demolished. As with paintings, however, these visual sources must be treated with some caution. As Robert Bishop McLaughlin notes, the framing of historical images must always be considered, as 'the photographer's picture was not conceived but selected... [and the] subject was never truly discrete or self-contained'.¹²⁴ Picture postcards are a particularly plentiful – but also particularly fraught – source in this regard. The picture postcard was a product of the mid-nineteenth century, becoming extremely popular at the turn of the twentieth century.¹²⁵

The postcard's popularity thus coincides with the period of high imperialism surveyed in this thesis. Indeed, the postcard can also embody colonial power relations. Writing about historical images of Africa, Christraud M. Geary argues that '[w]e should be well aware of the fact that all these images were created in a power relationship predicated on the colonial situation: the photographer/colonialist could impose and enforce his will if he so desired'.¹²⁶

¹²³ Roxana Waterson, 'First Impressions: 19th Century Travellers' Perceptions of Singapore's Landscape, Cityscape and People', *Singapore through 19th Century Prints & Paintings* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet and National Museum of Singapore, 2010), 16.

¹²⁴ Robert Bishop McLaughlin, 'The Evaluation of Historical Photographs: Considerations for Visual Resource Curators and Librarians in Museums and Archives', *Art Documentation* 8.2 (1989): 57.

¹²⁵ See: Brent Elliott, 'A Brief Guide to the Use of Picture Postcards in Garden History', *Garden History* 31.2 (2003): 218-20; and Carol F. Sawyer and David R. Butler, 'The Use of Historical Picture Postcards as Photographic Sources for Environmental Change: Promises and Problems', *Geocarto International* 21.3 (2006): 73.

¹²⁶ Christraud M. Geary, 'Old Pictures, New Approaches: Researching Historical Photographs', *African Arts* 24.4 (October 1991): 39.

In his article on French postcard views of colonial Senegal, David Prochaska notes that the creators of postcards had ‘the power to name – [that] is the coloniser’s prerogative that is practiced on the colonised.’¹²⁷ Despite this power to name, Prochaska notes that the labelling of picture postcards is frequently erroneous.¹²⁸ As James R. Ryan argues in his monograph on the role of photography in visualising the British Empire, ‘imperialism found sustenance in various photographic practices’, a means by which colonisers ‘fabricated evidence of the splendour of colonial life.’¹²⁹ Picture postcards thus document imperial ideals as much as they captured colonial landscapes.

Images in picture postcards are also frequently distorted as a result of the production process, hand-tinting, or artistic license.¹³⁰ Historical photographs and postcards are therefore not neutral sources. Indeed, they were a way of consuming empire. Commercial trade in picture postcards boomed in tandem with imperial expansion.¹³¹ With these caveats, however, the use of historic photographs, and picture postcards especially, remains a useful source for architectural history, recording architectural details and even entire buildings that have since been lost. By using extant buildings, building plans, and historic photographic images, it is possible to use these varied visual sources to corroborate one another. The usefulness of early photographic images is evident in recent urban histories such as *The Towns of Malaya* by Neil Khor, Mariana Isa and Maganjeet Kaur. As the authors of this book note, the popularisation of photography ‘coincides with the time when most Malayan towns developed under the “trusteeship” of the United Kingdom.’¹³² Jason Toh’s *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs* provides a similar record of the colony’s urban development through photographic sources, and includes images of many buildings which have been demolished.¹³³ Photographs and picture postcards thus represent a compelling and significant, if skewed, source of documentary evidence for Malayan urban history – and a

¹²⁷ David Prochaska, ‘Fantasia of the Photothèque: French Postcard Views of Colonial Senegal’, *African Arts* 24.4 (1991): 44.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹²⁹ Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, 11, 13.

¹³⁰ Sawyer and Butler, ‘The Use of Historical Picture Postcards as Photographic Sources for Environmental Change’, 80.

¹³¹ Jason Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet and National Museum of Singapore, 2009), 23.

¹³² Neil Khor, Mariana Isa and Maganjeet Kaur, *The Towns of Malaya: An Illustrated Urban History of the Peninsula up to 1957* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2017), 10.

¹³³ Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs*.

rich record of Malayan architecture from the late nineteenth century onwards. The National Archives of both Malaysia and Singapore hold significant collections of postcards, and important private collections such as the Wade Collection have been digitised by the Visions of Penang Archives Online maintained by George Town World Heritage Incorporated.¹³⁴

There is, of course, a limit to how much can be read from visual sources. As noted by Leach, while it is ‘straightforward’ that ‘the content of architectural history is architecture, historically considered’, architectural historians must draw on a range of sources to set architecture in its historical context.¹³⁵ Work on the buildings must therefore be supported by other archival sources. Governmental records, such as the minutes and ordinances of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, held in the National Archives of Singapore and elsewhere, provide an important source of contextual information, particularly as relates to building policy in the colony. Correspondence from the colonial civil service is another of the main textual sources of information in this thesis. This correspondence provides a wealth of information about the thinking behind a number of significant buildings, as well as details of construction and cost. This correspondence has survived in the former Colonial Office records held by the National Archives of the United Kingdom, as well as in the Arkib Negara Malaysia and the National Archives of Singapore. Further written sources, particularly in the form of professional publications are held by the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. Of particular significance are the papers relating to the professional accreditation of many of the British architects surveyed in this thesis. These have in some instances been critical in confirming the authorship of buildings for which no plans survive.

As noted by the historian Geoff Wade, despite offering a vast trove of source material, newspapers remain an under-utilised source in Malaysian history.¹³⁶ Yet newspapers are a particularly useful source of information for histories of Malayan architecture. This is especially true of large public buildings of the early twentieth century, as well as the coverage

¹³⁴ National Archives of Malaysia and National Archives of Singapore, *Reminiscences of the Straits Settlements through Postcards* (Kuala Lumpur: National Archives of Malaysia and Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2005). See also: ‘The Wade Collection’, Visions of Penang Archives Online, URL: <http://www.visionsofpenang.com.my/wade-collection.php>.

¹³⁵ Leach, *What is Architectural History?*, 76-7.

¹³⁶ Geoff Wade, ‘New Ways of Knowing: The *Prince of Wales Island Gazette*—Penang’s First Newspaper’, *Penang and Its Networks of Knowledge*, edited by Peter Zabielskis, Yeoh Seng Guan, and Kat Fatland (Penang: Areca Books, 2017), 161.

of building ordinances and other municipal by-laws in Malaya. In addition to publishing articles chronicling the construction of major monuments, newspapers also include numerous advertisements relating to building tenders, contractors, and the importers and suppliers of specific building materials and finishes. In the case of the Supreme Court in Singapore, newspapers also provide a platform for a remarkable and extended series of architectural criticisms penned by various letter-writers. These offer an unusual insight into the way a major public building was received, though this must be read with the caveat that they come from a small, Anglophone colonial elite and do not necessarily reflect the views of the wider community. While Malaya and the Straits Settlements had a lively print culture, with numerous mastheads published in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, these newspapers did not generally report on buildings. Detailed descriptions of buildings in the Malay press, for example, appear to have been few and far between. The Malay-language newspapers consulted for this thesis did not contain any architectural criticism. Historic newspapers in English remain a useful source for Malayan architectural history, however, and this process has been greatly aided by the ongoing digitisation of newspapers by the National Library Board of Singapore through their NewspaperSG website. This has made dozens of newspapers, including the *Straits Times*, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, the *Malayan Saturday Post*, the *Malaya Tribune*, *Kabar Slalu* and *Warta Malaya* readily available to researchers of British Malaya.

Outline of Chapters

This thesis is, to the best of the author's knowledge, the first attempt to survey architectural classicism in British Malaya. A complete and comprehensive survey of every Malayan building constructed in the classical style is well beyond the scope of this work. Instead, a thematic approach has been adopted here, allowing insights into the various ways classicism was transmitted, translated, and transformed in British Malaya between 1867, when the Straits Settlements became a Crown Colony, to the Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941, when the Second World War interrupted direct British colonial influence in the region. Through a series of case studies focused on different types of buildings which employed the classical language, the variegated ways classicism was used for different purposes, and by different people, will be elucidated.

The first chapter of this thesis delves into the historiography of classicism in British Malaya, focusing on how architectural historians of the past four decades have understood British Imperial classicism and its vernacular counterpart. The idea of ‘coarsened classicism’, which has been a persistent trope in scholarship on Malayan vernacular architecture, will be problematised. Literature on the contact zone and architectural creoles will be used to put forward a new reading of Malaya’s vernacular classicism. Recent scholarship on classical architecture in British India will also be discussed as a point of contrast which provides potential new directions in the study of Malaya’s classical architecture, in both its imperial and vernacularised incarnations.

The use of classical architecture to convey colonial authority in British Malaya is the focus of the next chapter of this thesis, using the urban centres of the Peninsula and the Straits Settlements as case studies. With the conspicuous exception of Kuala Lumpur’s city centre, which was constructed in an exoticising Indo-Saracenic style between the 1890s and 1920s, Malaya’s urban centres were largely Neo-Palladian in style, with additions and expansions made in the Edwardian Baroque, Renaissance revival, and stripped ‘modern classical’ modes over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Developing from patterns of urban settlement in British India, the Padangs of colonial Malaya were both administrative centres and spaces of display, urban stage sets designed to convey the power and grandeur of the Empire. Yet they began as informal collections of administrators’ homes and offices. This chapter traces the development of Malaya’s imperial classicism through the turn of the twentieth century, chronicling the growth of an imperial register of architecture.

Education was an important tool in the education and formation of colonial subjects, and the third chapter of this thesis explores how classical architecture was used in schools across colonial Malaya. Education in colonial Malaya was diverse and pluralistic, encompassing Christian missionary schools, Islamic education, Chinese schools which taught the Qing Imperial curriculum, and schools run by the colonial state which served as feeders for the colonial civil service. Despite this great variety of curriculum and purpose, the classical language was widely deployed by all these groups for their educational buildings. Through a series of case studies drawn from across these various types of schools, this chapter will

provide a cross-section of the myriad ways in which classicism was deployed in educational contexts in British Malaya.

The architectural patronage of the Sultans of Johor through the reigns of Sultan Abu Bakar and Sultan Ibrahim is the focus of the fourth chapter of this thesis. Sultan Abu Bakar's adoption of the classical idiom coincided with the establishment of his dynastic line as rulers of the southernmost part of the Malayan Peninsula. The Istana Besar in Johor, built by a Chinese contractor and completed in 1866, draws heavily on the example set by the residencies of British colonial administrators in Singapore, positioning the modernising Sultan as an equal to British colonisers in the region. Sultan Abu Bakar's son continued his classicising patronage. The Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar, completed in 1900, designed by the Malay architect Tuan Haji Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak, is a case study in elegant Victorian classicism which became a model for future mosques in the state, including the Muar Mosque constructed in the 1920s and the Batu Pahat Mosque completed in 1930. This chapter demonstrates how the local elite adopted and adapted classicism to convey power, a modernising agenda, and their patronage of Islam.

The turn of the twentieth century saw the development and consolidation of a highly eclectic form of classicism in Malaya. By 1930, this style was so prevalent that it could be considered a Malayan vernacular. The development of this creolised classicism is the focus of the fifth chapter of this thesis. Drawing on key examples from both major urban centres and rural towns, this chapter demonstrates the widespread adoption of a florid, exuberant vernacular classicism across British Malaya. It will be argued shophouses, in particular, became a form of creolised classicism, in which classical vocabulary was layered onto a hybrid Asian vernacular syntax which drew on both Southern Chinese building traditions and climate adaptations from India and the Malay Archipelago. Influenced by the Edwardian Baroque of the turn of the twentieth century, this ornamental language was, by the 1930s, a widespread vernacular used across Malaya. Through the trade networks of empire – from steamships to railways – this form of creolised classicism was disseminated throughout British Malaya, fostering the development of a distinct Malayan style.

The next chapter of this thesis considers commercial classicism in Malaya. As Malaya's mercantile wealth grew in the early twentieth century, commercial buildings, including

godowns, banks, and trading houses became increasingly ostentatious in their designs. These buildings reflected the wealth and confidence of British Malaya in the early twentieth century, but also reflected broader trends in architecture across the empire, echoing the commercial centres of Liverpool and Shanghai, and symbolically linking port towns like Singapore and George Town into broader maritime trade networks within the British Empire. The China Building in Singapore, built for a conglomerate of Chinese banks, will be used as a case study in how classicism could be adapted and hybridised by Asian commercial institutions, reflecting the layered affiliations of the mercantile Straits Chinese community. The Indo-Saracenic Alkaff Arcade will be discussed briefly to highlight the otherwise universal adoption of classicism in commercial architecture.

The penultimate chapter of this thesis explores the declining currency of imperial classicism in late-1930s Malaya by tracing the critical reception of the New Supreme Court in Singapore designed by Frank Dorrington Ward. Lauded by officials as ‘the finest building in the Peninsula’, the building was, after its opening, met with an unprecedented critical backlash in the newspapers. While classicism was still very much the style of choice for large public buildings in the 1930s, this architectural mode was also increasingly viewed as wasteful, antiquated, and excessive in the colonies. Following the negative reception, the Public Works Department’s plans to rebuild Singapore’s civic centre in a similar grand ‘modern classical’ style were shelved. By contrast, Ward’s modernist Kallang Aerodrome was hailed as a symbol of modernity. Despite the very different responses to these buildings, both court and airport have considerable commonalities, sharing a palette of modern materials and building techniques, and laid out in a similar symmetrical fashion. Indeed, the main terminal of the Kallang Aerodrome can be read as a ‘stylistic’ use of Modernism, with a modern façade treatment draped onto a classical programme not unlike that of the Supreme Court. This chapter brings the thesis full circle, revisiting the Padang studied in the first chapter, and documenting its loss of symbolic potency.

Classicism’s decline in Malaya was as sudden and as total as its adoption. The Second World War would provide a complete break in terms of style in Malayan architectural practice. Malaya’s post-war architects, both local and foreign, would enthusiastically embrace Modernism. Indeed, when Malaya achieved Merdeka, or Independence, from Britain in 1957, Modernism was the official architectural language of the Federation. The style used for its

new Parliament House and National Mosque, among other virtuosic monuments to Merdeka. Yet the extent to which classicism was the default mode of architectural expression in Malaya for over a century has on-going ramifications. The bulk of Malaysia and Singapore's built heritage is classical in style. The concluding chapter of this thesis will touch upon this classical legacy in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore, and point to some directions for further research.

Chapter I. From Palladianism to Coarsened Classicism: The Historiography of Classical Architecture in British Malaya

In his 1963 book *The Classical Language of Architecture*, John Summerson describes classical architecture as ‘the Latin of Architecture... the common architectural language, inherited from Rome, of nearly the whole civilised [sic] world in the centuries between the Renaissance and our own time.’¹³⁷ As noted by the architectural historian Peter Collins, the use of this ‘linguistic analogy’ in architectural scholarship can be traced as far back as the seventeenth century, notably in the court architect Claude Perrault’s preface to the French edition of Vitruvius published in 1683.¹³⁸ In this preface, Perrault argues that architectural rules, like those of language, were a necessary pre-requisite to beauty:

the precepts of this excellent Author, whom Critics place among the first rank of the great spirits of antiquity, were absolutely necessary to lead those who wish to perfect themselves in this Art, by establishing... the true rules of beauty and perfection in Edifices... and it is certain that these rules are so absolutely necessary in all things, that if Nature refuses them to some areas, as she did with language... it is necessary that the institutions of man furnish them [with rules].¹³⁹

The analogy became a popular way of understanding architecture in the mid-nineteenth century, though it was not without its detractors.¹⁴⁰ Collins argues that the ‘principal virtue’ of the linguistic analogy is ‘that all spoken languages are based on what is usually called a vernacular... [and] is natural, spontaneous and uninhibited.’¹⁴¹

Extending this analogy provides a particularly useful way of coming to terms with the exuberant architectural hybridity which developed in Malaya, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This thesis will examine how the so-called ‘Latin of architecture’, employed extensively by British colonial authorities in their buildings, became

¹³⁷ Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, 8.

¹³⁸ Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, 174.

¹³⁹ Claude Perrault, ‘Preface’, *Les Dix Livres d’Architecture de Vitruve, corrigez et traduits nouvellement en François, avec des Notes et & des Figures* (Paris: Jean-Baptiste Coignard, 1683).

¹⁴⁰ Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, 175-6.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

creolised in Malaya and, in the process, was transformed into a localised architectural vernacular. In British Malaya, the classical vocabulary introduced by the British was grafted onto the 'grammar' of various traditional Asian architectural typologies. The resulting style has been given a multitude of names, variously labelled in the literature as 'Straits Eclectic',¹⁴² 'Chinese Baroque',¹⁴³ and 'Coarsened Classicism'.¹⁴⁴ As Khoo Joo Ee notes in her study of the Straits Chinese community, these terms were sometimes applied pejoratively to Malaya's exuberant vernacular architecture.¹⁴⁵ The architectural historian Imran bin Tajudeen argues that while many 'fanciful terms' have been coined in an attempt to describe the ornamental exuberance of Malayan shophouses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, '[at] the most fundamental level... there is a remarkable continuity of basic features that allows one to speak of shophouses and townhouses as a coherent type'.¹⁴⁶

Some scholars have viewed this vernacular classicism as the result of the 'ignorant' and 'incorrect' appropriation of the classical language 'by local men who were untutored in the Classical Orders'.¹⁴⁷ This view is grounded in a specific Vitruvian-Palladian tradition of classicism, however, and downplays the flexibility and inventiveness which existed within the classical tradition.¹⁴⁸ Yet as noted above, studies of so-called creole architectural languages demonstrate how vernacular traditions can be understood as an act of translation. In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin discuss the idea of a 'Creole continuum' in relation to the 'poly-

¹⁴² Khoo Joo Ee, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Pepin Press, 1996), 133. See also: Ken Yeang, *Tropical Urban Regionalism: Building in a South-East Asian City* (Singapore: Concept Media, 1987), 31; Jenkins, *Contested Space Revisited*, 57-66 *passim*; de Bierre, *Penang: Through Gilded Doors*, 68; Jürgen Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 244; and Ahmad Sanusi Hassan and Shaiful Rizal Che Yahaya, *Architecture and Heritage Buildings in George Town, Penang* (Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2012), 46.

¹⁴³ Khoo, *The Straits Chinese*, 133; Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, 244; Ahmad and Shaiful, *Architecture and Heritage Buildings in George Town, Penang*, 124; Gretchen Liu, *Singapore: A Pictorial History, 1819-2000* (Singapore: Archipelago Press), 202.

¹⁴⁴ Lee, *The Singapore House*, 61, 126; Liu, *Singapore: A Pictorial History*, 202.

¹⁴⁵ Khoo, *The Straits Chinese*, 133.

¹⁴⁶ Imran bin Tajudeen, 'Beyond Racialised Representation: Architectural Linguae Francae and Urban Histories in the *Kampung* Houses and Shophouses of Melaka and Singapore', *Colonial Frames, Nationalist Histories: Imperial Legacies, Architecture, and Modernity*, edited by Mrinalini Rajagopalan and Madhuri Desai (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 223.

¹⁴⁷ Lee, *The Singapore House*, 65, 125-6.

¹⁴⁸ Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, 11-13, 15, and elsewhere *passim*.

dialectal culture of the Caribbean’, arguing that ‘the view of language which poly-dialectal cultures generate dismantles many received views of the structure of language.’¹⁴⁹

British Malaya’s vernacular classicism can be read as one such creole language, ‘an architectural vernacular, born from the fusion of diverse cultures, forming a local language’.¹⁵⁰ The adoption and adaptation of architectural vocabulary drawn from Graeco-Roman antiquity can be seen as the means by which supposedly untutored local architects rendered the ‘canonical forms’ of British Imperial classicism ‘decipherable’ to local audiences and transformed the style ‘into a vernacular iteration of an established form.’¹⁵¹ This was a process of architectural translation, which as Akcan notes often revelled in ‘distance, distortion, or transmutation.’¹⁵² As Khoo notes, this architecture became a means by which diverse communities could simultaneously articulate both ‘claims of assimilation... and at the same time statements of difference’.¹⁵³

By treating Malayan vernacular classicism as a creole, it becomes possible to read the style as a consistent and coherent language in its own right. Rather than merely being an aberration or distortion of the classical tradition then, this eclectic vernacular can be read as a contact language which emerged from the intersection of British imperialism and the diverse flows of culture and migrants in the Malay Archipelago. By the 1930s, classical architecture in Malaya comprised of both an imperial register used in public buildings and offices of empire, and a lively local vernacular seen especially in residential buildings, but also in business premises and houses of worship.

A Historiography of Malayan Architecture

Malayan architectural history is a relatively young sub-field. As noted by the architectural historian Chang Jiat-Hwee, the earliest writing on Singapore’s colonial architecture dates

¹⁴⁹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2002), 44.

¹⁵⁰ Denise, ‘Une histoire évolutive de l’habitat Martiniquais’, 1.

¹⁵¹ Carey, ‘Creole Architectural Translation’, 73.

¹⁵² Akcan, *Architecture in Translation*, 8.

¹⁵³ Khoo, *Streets of George Town*, 21.

from the 1950s.¹⁵⁴ These accounts were written by T.H.H. Hancock, a Senior Architect who worked with the Public Works Department. Hancock's work focused on the buildings designed by George Doumgold Coleman (1795-1844), who is regularly cited as the first architect in Singapore and widely attributed with adapting the Palladian idiom to the local climate.¹⁵⁵ As Chang notes, Hancock's work has become a cornerstone of the literature, and his view of Coleman's role in developing a 'tropical Colonial style' has often been repeated in subsequent architectural histories.¹⁵⁶ Cyril Northcote Parkinson provides another brief but significant work on Malayan architectural history. His 1955 essay on 'The Homes of Malaya' examined the development of the bungalow typology in Malaya, and discussed the influence of Asian building practices and traditions on colonial bungalows.¹⁵⁷ This essay would go on to influence later studies on Malayan residential architecture.

Histories of residential buildings, with a strong typological focus, constitute some of the key works of Malayan architectural history. Three texts are particularly significant examples of this genre of typological study: Lee Kip Lin's *The Singapore House 1819-1942* (1988, republished in 2015),¹⁵⁸ Norman Edwards' *The Singapore House and Residential Life 1819-1939* (1991, republished in 2017),¹⁵⁹ and Jon Sun Hock Lim's *The Penang House and the Straits Architect 1887-1941* (2015)¹⁶⁰ are cornerstones of the literature. Lee's book, in particular, represents the first serious, in-depth study of residential architecture in colonial Singapore, and established the convention of studying this architecture from the initial stages of British colonisation until the Japanese Occupation as a discrete period of Malayan architectural history, a convention which this thesis has adopted. While all three books focus on residential buildings, they also include significant elements of social as well as architectural history, and represent some of the most in-depth writing on architectural style in colonial Malaya. As has been previously noted, however, these studies set their sights firmly within the postcolonial boundaries of the modern nation states of Malaysia and Singapore.

¹⁵⁴ Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 21.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ C. Northcote Parkinson, 'The Homes of Malaya', *The Malayan Historical Journal* 2.2 (1955). Cyril Northcote Parkinson taught at the University of Malaya. In addition to his writings on Malayan history, he was a prominent advocate for the creation of an archive for documents pertaining to Malayan history.

¹⁵⁸ Lee, *The Singapore House*.

¹⁵⁹ Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life*.

¹⁶⁰ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*. See also: Lim, 'The "Shophouse Rafflesia"'.

The three authors cast their eye well beyond residential buildings to include the public architecture which influenced trends in residential architecture through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Malaya and Singapore. These works are also significant because they survey the work of both British and the Asian architects, builders and draughtsmen who trained in British-run architectural firms before going on to establish their own practices. The work of Lee, Lim, and Edwards thus represent some of the most important works on Malayan architecture written since the 1980s. In addition to these works, surveys of Malayan or Malaysian architecture have been written by architects such as Ken Yeang and Chen Voon Fee in the 1990s.¹⁶¹ These works provide broad overviews of architecture in the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Melaka from antiquity to the late twentieth-century, but by necessity do not go into great detail about style. Lee's *Emerald Hill: The Story of a Street in Words and Pictures* (1984) provides another significant study of the development of residential architecture in Singapore, using a single neighbourhood as a case-study.¹⁶² Additionally, Gretchen Liu's monograph *In Granite and Chunam*, published by the Preservation of Monuments Board, provides insight into the construction of the buildings now gazetted as national monuments in Singapore.¹⁶³ These include a number of significant classical buildings. To date, however, there has been no extended study which deals specifically with architectural classicism in British Malaya – or indeed any specific historicist architectural style, a gap which this thesis finally addresses.

In the last decade, there has been a revival of interest in Malayan and Singaporean architectural history. This seems to have developed in tandem with an increasing awareness of built heritage in both Malaysia and Singapore – both in civil society and among local authorities keen to promote heritage-based tourism. The inscription of the historic cities of Melaka and George Town in Malaysia to the UNESCO World Heritage List has prompted a new wave of critical inquiry into local heritage.¹⁶⁴ Growing recognition of the social

¹⁶¹ Ken Yeang, *The Architecture of Malaysia* (Amsterdam: Pepin Press, 1992); Chen Voon Fee, editor, *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia. Volume 5: Architecture* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1998).

¹⁶² Lee, *Emerald Hill*.

¹⁶³ Liu, *In Granite and Chunam*.

¹⁶⁴ See, for example: Khoo Salma Nasution, 'George Town, Penang: Managing a Multicultural World Heritage Site', *Catching the Wind: Penang in a Rising Asia*, edited by Francis E. Hutchinson and Johan Saravanamuttu (Penang: Penang Institute and Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), 41; and *idem*, 'George Town: The Discreet Charm of Rejuvenated Heritage', *Australia Icomos Historic*

significance of buildings has also resulted in the production of social histories centred on buildings and place, most notably in Khoo Salma Nasution's *The Chulia in Penang* (2014), which uses the Kapitan Kling Mosque on Pitt Street (Jalan Masjid Kapitan Kling) to anchor its social history of Penang's South Indian Muslim community.¹⁶⁵ Despite this, intangible cultural heritage remains something of a poor cousin in Malaysia and Singapore, a vulnerable heritage asset increasingly facing the pressures of gentrification, mass-tourism and urban redevelopment. While heritage and the afterlife of colonial architecture is beyond the scope of this thesis, there has been a recent flowering of literature addressing the affinities and tensions between heritage and tourism in Southeast Asia, with Penang being a particularly popular case study.¹⁶⁶

Chang Jiat-Hwee's monograph *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture* (2016) presents a markedly different approach to the study of Malaya's architectural history, examining the development of colonial 'tropical' architecture in terms of colonial technology and responses to the climate.¹⁶⁷ Though not preoccupied with stylistic history, Chang provides important insights into the evolution of architecture in colonial Singapore. Chang's monograph explores how colonial ideas of comfort, for example, helped drive the 'tropicalisation' of classical colonial houses, and how changing British attitudes towards hygiene in the latter half of the nineteenth century impacted the design of houses in Singapore in the early twentieth century through planning reforms.¹⁶⁸ Drawing on David Cannadine's *Ornamentalism*, Chang also

Environment 26.3 Asian Cities: Cultural heritage and the interplay between nation building and internationalism (2014): 41, 48. See also: Judith Nagata, "'Elasticity" of heritage, from conservation to human rights: A saga of development and resistance in Penang, Malaysia', *Cultural Diversity, Heritage and Human Rights: Intersections in Theory and Practice*, edited by Michele Langfield, William Logan and Máiréad Nic Craith (London: Routledge, 2010), 101-2. Nagata argues that heritage in postcolonial, Southeast Asia has become an arena in which postcolonial identity – and the right for inclusion – is negotiated, and that heritage has also become a tool for resisting 'irresponsible development'. See also: Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, 'The Notion of Place in the Construction of History, Nostalgia and Heritage in Singapore', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 17.1 (1997): 52-65.

¹⁶⁵ Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*.

¹⁶⁶ See, for example: Gwynn Jenkins, 'Interpreters of Space, Place and Cultural Practice: Processes of Change through Tourism, Conservation, and Development in George Town, Penang, Malaysia', *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010), 147-172. See also: Victor T. King, ed., *UNESCO in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015); and Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King and Michael Parnwell, eds., *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008).

¹⁶⁷ Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* See chapters 1 and 4 especially.

argues that large classical public buildings of the early twentieth century such as the Singapore General Hospital can be read ‘as part of the colonial ornamentalism that sought to symbolise the colonial state’s commitment to the health and welfare of the local population’, with architecture central to these ornamentalist ‘pomp and pageantries [of empire], not only as a setting but as a display in and of itself.’¹⁶⁹ Chang also notes that however Palladian the villas of early colonial Singapore might have appeared, their British architects relied on ‘other [Asian] social actors such as clients, builders, craftsmen and advisors to realize (build) their design’, making colonial houses ‘contingent upon the heteronomous and heterogeneous conditions of early colonial architecture production.’¹⁷⁰

According to Cannadine, the British Empire based its power – and mystique – on ‘antiquity and anachronism... ostentation and ornamentalism.’¹⁷¹ The ornamental anachronism of architecture in the British Empire took different forms: while the Church of England draped its ritual in the pious perpendicularity of English Gothic architecture, and the Houses of Parliament in Westminster made a nationalist statement with Tudor detailing, many of the builders of empire cast their eyes further back – to Ancient Rome – for an appropriate imperial style. In British Malaya, the classical orders became the default style for public architecture from the East India Company’s first incursion into the Peninsula. The gravitas of the Roman orders would endure as symbols of imperial rule right until Britain’s retreat from the Japanese during the Second World War.¹⁷²

Histories of architecture in Malaya tend to rely heavily on what Andrew Leach terms the classic ‘style and period’ approach to architectural history, charting architectural style in a chronological manner.¹⁷³ This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the bulk of Malayan architectural history to date has been written by architects rather than social and cultural historians. As an approach to architectural history, the focus on style and period is well

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 121-2.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁷¹ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 126.

¹⁷² Other factors, such as the increased use of structural concrete in lieu of lime plaster, the rise of the modernist aesthetic, and increasingly frugal approaches to building following the Great Depression have all been attributed with contributing to the decline in the ornamental classicism which prevailed during the 1930s. The Second World War provides the most clear and significant disjunct in Malayan architectural practice during the Twentieth Century, however, and remains a useful boundary in histories of architecture in Malaya. See: Liu, *Pastel Portraits*, 23 and 106.

¹⁷³ Leach, *What is Architectural History?*, 41.

established, and is associated with the nineteenth-century German writers who helped establish architectural history as a discipline.¹⁷⁴ As Dana Arnold notes, architectural style ‘remains a principal concern of the histories of British architecture’, and while it does not ‘constitute the subject of architectural history... style is one of the many orders of narrative open to architectural historians.’¹⁷⁵ A number of histories of Malayan architecture trace a genealogical line from the first generation of professional British architects, who largely worked in a distinct Palladian idiom, to the later Asian or ‘vernacular’ architects who adopted elements of this classical style in their own works.¹⁷⁶ This discrete periodisation and clear-cut articulation of stylistic change is at best a broad indicator of architectural trends in Malaya, and at worst, misleading. As noted by Tan Yeow Wooi in his book on the shophouses of Penang,

styles did not completely align with clear-cut time periods. Styles overlapped at the beginning or end of each period. Earlier styles remained or new styles evolved, creating transitional stages of two or more different styles.¹⁷⁷

Popular stylistic terms such as ‘Southern Chinese Eclectic’, ‘Straits Eclectic’, and ‘Art Deco’ are not a clear indicator of period.¹⁷⁸ These labels must be approached with caution. As argued by Leach, ‘stylistic or periodic organisation of past buildings and monuments will introduce the problems of reconciling the individual example with a normative rule against which very few cases can be measured without compromising either the single building or the norm against which it is measured.’¹⁷⁹ Care must also be taken when using terms such as ‘Chinese Baroque’ to describe the architectural style popular across Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s, as this term in particular suggests a particularly ethnic affinity for an ornamental flourishing seen in the work of architects from various races. As noted above, Malaya’s eclectic vernacular classicism was a shared language, one used by architects from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* See also: James S. Ackerman, ‘Foreword’ in Paul Frankl, *Principles of Architectural History: The Four Phases of Architectural Style, 1420-1900* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), vii-xi.

¹⁷⁵ Arnold, *Reading Architectural History*, 83.

¹⁷⁶ See, for example, Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life*, 166-77 *passim*; Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 170-3.

¹⁷⁷ Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 6.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Leach, *What is Architectural History?*, 48.

¹⁸⁰ See: Lee, *Emerald Hill*.

An ethnic focus is not entirely unhelpful, however, when surveying the diversity of architecture in colonial Southeast Asia and can provide a useful starting point for discussing the shifting architectural fashions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Malaya. Works which focus on the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, such as Ronald G. Knapp's *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia* do have the advantage of allowing for a comparative, regional perspective, and reveal how certain architectural tastes and tendencies extended beyond Malaya through neighbouring kingdoms and colonies, from the Dutch East Indies to Siam and French Indochina.¹⁸¹ Malaya's eclectic architecture was the product of a densely cosmopolitan and multicultural world in which architectural ideas and influences moved freely along networks of colonial commerce, diasporic migration, and regional trade.

The British did not introduce the classical idiom to Malaya. Portions of the Malayan peninsula had previously been colonised by the Portuguese and, subsequently, the Dutch, who both employed architectural classicism in their churches, fortifications, and other buildings.¹⁸² The British did, however, introduce a particular brand of classicism – a late Georgian form of Palladianism, with a number of climate adaptations imported from Britain's Indian colonies – to the Malayan Peninsula and Singapore in the early nineteenth century, and this incarnation of classicism quickly took root in Malayan soil.¹⁸³ The subsequent introduction of Victorian eclecticism and the Edwardian Baroque idiom by British architects practicing in Malaya became another major set of stylistic touchpoints for local builders.¹⁸⁴ Local architects and builders who were apprenticed to British architects, or worked as draughtsmen in British architectural firms, began to branch out and form their own practices in the first decades of the twentieth century. In their work, they catered to the tastes of the various bourgeois Asian diaspora communities from across the Malay Archipelago, China, the Indian sub-continent, and elsewhere.¹⁸⁵

Underpinning these accounts of Malayan architecture is a sense of architectural lineage, but also hierarchy, one which privileges the professional training of British-born architects over

¹⁸¹ Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*.

¹⁸² Khor et al., *The Towns of Malaya*, 73-4.

¹⁸³ Lee, *The Singapore House*, 42. See also: Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 46-9.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 59-60, 124-5, 130.

¹⁸⁵ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 64-5, 172. Numerous examples of this phenomenon can also be found in Lee's *The Singapore House*; see, for example, pages: 198-99, 203, 208-9, 216-17, and elsewhere *passim*.

the practical training of local ‘vernacular’ architects. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s classic articulation of the construction of subjectivity through language, ‘the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference’.¹⁸⁶ This articulation of difference is not confined to the past, and has endured in postcolonial writing on Malayan architecture to the present; indeed, the distinction between colonial architect and local vernacular builder perpetuates a hierarchical conception of architects that is resolutely colonial. This distinction is all the more surprising as it overlooks the substantial impact amateur architects had on British architecture in the eighteenth century, particularly in promulgating the neo-Palladianism which Britain would subsequently export to its Asian colonies as an imperial style.¹⁸⁷

This preoccupation with charting a stylistic taxonomy is particularly evident in Lee’s seminal book on Singapore residential architecture, and colours his reading of the exuberant use of classical ornament found in early twentieth-century buildings – a style which Lee refers to as ‘coarsened classicism’.¹⁸⁸ For Lee, coarsened classicism was a local idiom which grew out of Victorian eclecticism and the Edwardian Baroque, and was characterised by the ‘ignorant [sic] application of the Orders and other classical elements’ in Singapore architecture.¹⁸⁹ Despite acknowledging that the so-called coarsened classical style was ‘hybrid’ in nature, designed by ‘local men who were untutored in the Classical Orders’, Lee’s rigid application of stylistic labels in his work means that he reads these syncretic buildings as ‘unsophisticated’ and ‘incorrect’ in their use of classical vocabulary.¹⁹⁰ By contrast, equally eclectic Edwardian Baroque works of European architects are described by Lee as ‘grandiloquent’.¹⁹¹ The idiosyncratic Eu Villa (1915) on Adis Road in Singapore, built by Swan & Maclaren for the wealthy businessman Eu Tong Sen, for example, is described by Lee as being ‘planned in the grand manner’.¹⁹² In a similar manner, Lee uses the term ‘mutant classicism’ to describe the

¹⁸⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 96.

¹⁸⁷ John Harris, *The Palladian Revival: Lord Burlington, His Villa and Garden at Chiswick* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 18. See: Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 36-40 *passim*.

¹⁸⁸ Lee, *The Singapore House*, 61, 125.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 61, 125.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125-6.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 123.

simplified vernacular classicism of the 1920s and 1930s, even though this style was in line with international trends in architecture of the time.¹⁹³

This contrast is also evident in Lee's discussion of the stylistic changes seen in the work of the British-led firm Swan & Maclaren through the 1920s. Lee argues that 'the controlled application of the Classical Orders in the grand manner of the Beaux-Arts style and the wall finishes mark the difference of the buildings from their Baroque predecessors'.¹⁹⁴ Rather than viewing this as a form of 'mutant' classicism, Lee cites this as an example of 'a new generation of expatriate architects who brought with them the latest stylistic trends prevalent in Britain'.¹⁹⁵ Lee's view of local architecture is thus jaundiced by a somewhat dogmatic and purist application of stylistic labels. In doing so, Lee unintentionally echoes nineteenth-century architectural historians, who used the term 'Baroque' in a derogatory fashion, particularly in contrast to the perceived stylistic purity of the Renaissance.¹⁹⁶ In a similar manner, Lee's work establishes a hierarchy between the stylistic purity of British architects and the 'ignorant' work of vernacular builders, underplaying the possibility that vernacular builders were consciously reacting to and modifying the work of their colonisers.

Other historians have taken a more measured view towards Malayan eclecticism. Northcote Parkinson, for example, dubbed the style 'Chinese Baroque Mannerism', describing it as 'a style which we might define as Roman Chinese with classical pilasters boldly added to shophouses not otherwise reminiscent of the Ancient World'.¹⁹⁷ Here, there is recognition, if only by association with the inventive Mannerist architects of the late Renaissance, that vernacular buildings were inventive rather than untutored. Norman Edwards goes even further, arguing that:

In one sense, the first architects – and arguably the best accomplished – were the native Malays and Chinese who, without formal training, had for generations been

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Leach, *What is Architectural History?*, 1-2. See also: Tod Marder, 'Renaissance and Baroque Architectural History in the United States', *Studies in the History of Art* 35: Symposium Papers XIX: The Architectural Historian in America (1990): 161-2.

¹⁹⁷ Cited in Lee, *The Singapore House*, 127.

building the type of timber *atap*-roofed hut that Raffles saw when he landed in 1819... For these people, there was no artificial separation of the act of designing and building.¹⁹⁸

Despite this acknowledgement that the distinction between ‘architect’ and ‘builder’ was a colonial construct, Edwards goes on to distinguish between the ‘Professionalism and Classicism’ of western firms such as Swan & Maclaren and the ‘Eclecticism’ of local practices.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, when discussing the output of local builders in the first decade of the twentieth century, Edwards argues that ‘the level of skill involved in the design and construction of... buildings [in Singapore] was often of a doubtful standard’.²⁰⁰ Edwards does, however, make concessions for certain local architectural practitioners. He argues that the Singaporean architect Wee Teck Moh – who was active from the 1880s till around 1910 – for example, was ‘able to achieve a relatively high standard of professional performance’ despite ‘the absence of adequate architectural tutorship’.²⁰¹ Edwards’ reading of Wee’s work still holds the architect to the standards set by British architects working in Singapore like R.A.J. Bidwell, however.²⁰² Edwards praises Wee for his ‘restraint, good proportion and careful detailing’ rather than his ‘artistic license’.²⁰³ Implicit in this account of classical buildings in Singapore is the idea that the best expressions of the classical idiom are those which most closely adhere to the Vitruvian-Palladian tradition imported to Malaya by British architects, and not the hybridised, vernacular expressions which developed in the region.

Like Lee Kip Lin before him, Jon Lim’s work on Penang’s residential architecture also assiduously applies stylistic labels to buildings, but his work places far greater emphasis on the biographies of both architects and clients.²⁰⁴ This approach offers insight into the reasons underpinning stylistic choices and developments in the works of individual architects or practices over time. In his discussion of the villa at Northam Road built by Joseph Charles Miller for Leong Yin Khean (1926), for example, Lim notes that the design of the mansion

¹⁹⁸ Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life*, 166.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 166-77.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ See: Leach, *What is Architectural History?*, 52-7, 61-6.

was influenced by the client's travels through Europe.²⁰⁵ Oral history provided further information about the specific inspiration for this syncretic building – a gentleman's club in London and Venetian *palazzo*.²⁰⁶ Far from being untutored, this building's eclecticism consciously drew on various sources as a way of signalling the sophistication of its well-travelled owner.²⁰⁷ The magpie-like pastiche of disparate classical ideas was not unlike the souvenirs of the Grand Tour collection by British gentlemen of the eighteenth century.

While Lim acknowledges that the classical style of early twentieth-century Penang grew increasingly 'florid', for Lim, this 'exuberant' architecture was a reflection of 'the opulent tastes of the local clientele'.²⁰⁸ He also attributes what he calls Penang's 'golden age' of architecture with the arrival of the British architects C.G. Boutcher and J.C. Miller to the island, claiming the architects 'injected a serious scholarship to the Penang house'.²⁰⁹ Despite his openness to the hybridity seen in Penang architecture, British academic classicism thus remains the standard against which Malayan classicism is measured. Histories of Malayan classicism thus continue to reproduce the 'articulation of forms of difference' that Bhabha argues was central to the construction of the colonial subject.²¹⁰ This is evident in the repeated distinction between colonial architect and vernacular builder which organises architectural practitioners in terms of both colonial racial and professional hierarchies. Bhabha argues that to understand

the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of truth... only then does it become possible to understand the... ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse – the 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity. What such a reading reveals are the boundaries of colonial discourse and it enables a transgression of these limits from the space of that otherness.²¹¹

²⁰⁵ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 152.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 152, 169 note 3.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 152-9.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²¹⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 96.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

A new reading of Malayan architectural history, which identifies the colonial ‘regime of truth’ in order to understand, reassess, and surpass the limits of colonial discourse is overdue. The conventional reading of Malayan eclecticism has been that vernacular architects and builders borrowed classical ornamental vocabulary in a magpie-like fashion, with little regard for the Vitruvian orders. This dim view of vernacular builders does not do justice to the inventiveness with which they borrowed from and transformed the classical idiom of the colonial authorities. Such processes of translation and transformation are evident in other parts of the British Empire. As Glover notes, British perceptions of ‘traditional’ Indian domestic architecture as ‘eschew[ing] progressive change’ both ‘denigrate[d] the agency of Indians in producing a distinctive urban modernity... [and] marked the contours of a widely shared anxiety about the implications of cultural hybridity’.²¹² Distinctions between a ‘pure’ imported classicism and ‘bastardised’ local eclecticism are thus epistemically grounded in colonial racial hierarchies and colonial administrators’ need to preserve the distinction between the governing self and colonised other.

Far from being naïve or illiterate, the eclectic works of local builders and architects in Malaya are better understood as a form of architectural creole. This hybrid quality was noticed by nineteenth-century visitors to Singapore such as John Cameron, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, who described the houses in the ‘native part of town’ as ‘a sort of compromise between English and Chinese.’²¹³ This view of Singapore’s Asian quarters was echoed in Isabella Bird’s account of her travels through Malaya, in which she wrote:

The native streets monopolise the picturesqueness of Singapore with their bizarre crowds, but more interesting still are the bazaars or continuous rows of open shops which create for themselves a perpetual twilight by hanging tatties or other screens outside the side walks, forming long shady alleys, in which crowds of buyers and sellers chaffer over their goods.²¹⁴

²¹² Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, 158.

²¹³ John Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1865), 60.

²¹⁴ Isabella Bird, *The Golden Chersonese* (Singapore: Monsoon Books, 2010), 118.

An Eclectic Empire

The view that Malayan eclecticism was particularly illiterate or haphazard fails to take into account parallel architectural developments within the British Empire from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. In the wake of the Palladian revival in seventeenth-century Britain, architects in the British Isles began experimenting with classical elements, producing increasingly inventive designs. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, architects such as Sir John Vanbrugh, Nicholas Hawksmoor, and Thomas Archer stretched the use of classical vocabulary in unusual and idiosyncratic ways.²¹⁵ While the turn of the nineteenth century ushered in a fashion for scholarly antiquarianism, the following decades would see a new eclecticism come into fashion. As noted by Roger Dixon and Stefan Muthesius in their survey of Victorian-era architecture, from the 1830s, British architects moved away from the severe Neoclassicism of the early nineteenth-century towards a ‘new Classicism, which had a less orthodox outlook and included features of the Italian Renaissance or the French Renaissance’.²¹⁶

Indeed, eclecticism was very much a part of the nineteenth-century architectural landscape. As Muthesius argues, this ‘wealth and diversity of buildings was something contemporaries were already aware of – in fact, overt display was positively desired by many. Victorians held in contempt what they saw as the sameness of the Neo-Classical architecture of the Georgian period.’²¹⁷ Even more scholarly architectural classicists such as Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson (1817-75) of Glasgow borrowed broadly from Greek, Egyptian and Indian precedents.²¹⁸ By the late nineteenth century then, a profligate eclecticism was very much a defining feature of the architectural landscape in Britain, and something of this tendency was exported to Britain’s colonies around the world.

Eclecticism can be taken as a widespread philosophical approach to architectural style in the latter half of the nineteenth century.²¹⁹ The buildings now labelled ‘Queen Anne Revival’

²¹⁵ David Watkin, *English Architecture: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 113-23.

²¹⁶ Roger Dixon and Stefan Muthesius, *Victorian Architecture*, revised edition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 18.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁸ Barry Bergdoll, *European Architecture 1750-1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 203.

²¹⁹ Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, 117.

were perhaps the best expression of this eclecticism in the British Isles, drawing as they did on vernacular architecture and historical precedent from the reign of Queen Anne as well as the Jacobean era.²²⁰ This eclectic approach has been labelled by some critics ‘artisan mannerism’ – a moniker which could just as well be applied to the buildings Lee calls ‘coarsened classical’.²²¹ Drawing on a range of Asian traditions, Malaya’s vernacular builders were also influenced by pattern books and fashions which travelled from Britain to Malaya.²²² This thesis builds on ideas recently put forward by scholars such as Lim, who argues that the vernacular architects active in the Straits in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries should be seen as experimental and inventive rather than untutored.²²³

A more focused reading of the work of prominent Asian architects working in British Malaya suggests that these architects were, in fact, perfectly capable of producing ‘literate’ classical architecture when the tastes of their clients required it. Tasked with building a mosque for the Anglophile Sultan of Johor, the Malay architect Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak produced a building (completed in 1900) which exemplified the elegant classicism that was in vogue in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century. Detailed as telescoping Baroque towers, the domed minarets of the Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque would not have looked out of place in Edwardian London, nor would the mosque’s generous porte-cochère.

The oeuvre of architects such as Chew Eng Eam in Penang and Wee Teck Moh in Singapore also defy simple categorisation as ‘Coarsened Classical’ since their work demonstrates an incredible versatility and stylistic range. In his design for offices and a godown for Lee Soon Poe on Weld Quay in George Town, Chew softened the severity of a rusticated façade with stucco wreaths and a parapet topped with urns.²²⁴ The row of shophouses Chew designed for the businessman and philanthropist Khoo Sian Ewe on Penang Road is perhaps more fussily ornamental, with its wreathed Ionic capitals and row of Palladian windows articulated to emphasise the central arched bays.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-3.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Liu, *Pastel Portraits*, 21

²²³ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*. See also: Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life*, 172-77; and Gwynn Jenkins, *Contested Space Revisited*, 56-66 *passim*.

²²⁴ Chew Eng Eam, ‘Proposed Offices & Godown in Weld Quay, Penang, on Lot 42 T.S. XXIII for Lee Soon Poe, Esq.’, 8 August 1929, Building Plan 2395/1929, MBPP Historic Building Plans Collection, VOP Code HBP 2395.

By contrast, Chew's design for the Majestic Theatre (1926), also commissioned by Khoo Sian Ewe and situated off Burmah Road, just around the corner from his shophouses, has a boldly modelled Baroque façade. Two deep, double-storey arcaded loggias set between full-height pilasters meet at the corner of Khoo Sian Ewe and Phee Choon Roads. Here, the building's façade reaches an appropriately theatrical climax: the main corner elevation, set at a forty-five-degree angle between two heavily rusticated, pedimented bays, is topped by a balustraded parapet that curves along the top into a shallow swan-neck pediment which is crowned with a central urn. The design suggests a confident, if highly mannered, facility with classical vocabulary. Where the detailing of this buildings is 'coarse', it is clearly intentional, and distinct from the delicate floral stucco seen in the shophouses Chew designed for the same client. A similar range is evident in Wee Teck Moh's prolific output – which included hundreds of shophouses as well as a number of distinguished bungalows. Wee Teck Moh's houses on Emerald Hill Road deploy an eclectic manner of exaggerated classical elements in tandem with traditional Teochew cut-porcelain work, while his design for the Golden Bell Mansion (completed 1910) on Pender Road in Mount Faber is an idiosyncratic take on the 'blood and bandages' style, so-named for its alternating courses of white plaster and redbrick,²²⁵ which was fashionable in the Edwardian era.

The house designed by the Eurasian architect Johannes Bartholomew Westerhout for Chee Swee Cheng in Melaka offers another example of the richly layered cosmopolitanism embodied by the eclectic classicism of Malaya's vernacular architects. Chee Swee Cheng was the scion of a prominent Straits Chinese family, and a significant figure in Malaya's banking sector.²²⁶ A descendent of Chee Soo Sum, who migrated to Melaka from Fujian Province in the eighteenth century, Chee Swee Cheng's family had risen to prominence and acquired considerable wealth by the late nineteenth century, their position aided by their close dealings

²²⁵ Loo, *Architecture and Urban Form in Kuala Lumpur*, 57.

²²⁶ Chee Swee Cheng was a descendent of Chee Soo Sum, who came to Melaka from China's Fujian Province in the late eighteenth century. He served as a director of the Ho Hong Bank, which started in Melaka and Muar before expanding to Batu Pahat. He went on to become Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, founded by the merger of Ho Hong Bank with the Chinese Commercial Bank and Oversea-Chinese Bank, a position he held till his death in 1938. See: Tan Ee-Leong, 'The Chinese Banks incorporated in Singapore and the Federation of Malaya', *JMBRAS* 26.1 (1953): 119-27.

with Malay royalty.²²⁷ In 1906, he commissioned a mansion on Heeren Street, Melaka's 'Millionaire's Row', to serve as an ancestral home.²²⁸ Westerhout's ancestors had also come to Melaka in the eighteenth century and become prominent figures in the local community.²²⁹ The flamboyant Dutch gable of the Chee House would seem to allude to Melaka's Dutch history. The two side bays are crowned with pedimented dormer windows which are flanked by scrolls. The overall effect of this principal elevation to Heeren Street evokes, appropriately, the *Herenhuizen* of the Dutch Golden Age. Yet the house cannot be read as a purely European building. The main doorway bears Chinese characters indicating that the building serves as an ancestral hall for the Chee family, and the central stairwell creates an atrium space not unlike those found in more conventionally 'Chinese' homes. On the mezzanine, at the heart of the home, a family altar with ancestral tablets reveals the syncretic nature of this space, which blends classical detailing with traditional East Asian patterns of spiritual domesticity. By using the classical language of architecture, the Chees were able to signal their cosmopolitan modernity, while still creating a space which facilitated traditional ancestral veneration.

If the classical idiom is, as Summerson put it, the 'Latin of Architecture',²³⁰ then the eclectic classicism of British Malaya is perhaps best understood as a descendent of this language. This architectural creole was enriched and enlivened by its free borrowing from both classical idiom and various Asian building traditions. This framing of Malayan classicism, and its vernacular manifestations in particular, goes some way towards restoring a measure of agency to the non-western builders and patrons of architecture in colonial Malaya, whose architectural choices provide tantalising evidence of shifting cultural affiliations and canny political manoeuvring within the context of a diverse and stratified cosmopolitan society. Classical architecture was not a single, monolithic entity in colonial Malaya, changing over time in both imperial and vernacular use. Moreover, the transmission of ideas did not go

²²⁷ Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*, 58-61.

²²⁸ Now called Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Heeren Street was the Anglicised form of its original Dutch name: Heerenstraat. Just as Amsterdam's Heerengracht reflected its association with the moneyed classes, Heeren Street was a fashionable and valuable address in colonial Melaka. See: Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*, 58.

²²⁹ The architect J.B. Westerhout was named for his ancestor, Johannes Bartholomew Westerhout, who came to Melaka from Utrecht in 1779, and who became Assistant Resident of Melaka in 1848. See: Myrna Braga-Blake and Ann Ebert-Oehlers, 'Where the Twain Met: Origins of Eurasian Families', *Singapore Eurasians: Memories, Hopes and Dreams* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2017), 40.

²³⁰ Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, 7.

solely in one direction. As Parkinson notes in his essay ‘The Homes of Malaya’, ‘the early European house in Malaya was basically of a Malay pattern, raised off the ground with a roof of Chinese tiles, to replace... [an] earlier roof of attap.’²³¹ Moreover, Parkinson argues the prevalence of white stucco finishes in early European houses in Malaya ‘represents an Indian usage.’²³² Yet over the course of the early twentieth century, what emerged in Malayan homes, in particular, was a hybrid form of residential vernacular. As Lee notes,

The common idiom [of early twentieth-century shophouses] is the use of the classical orders... either Roman Doric or Corinthian... The transition from the pure Chinese architecture [of nineteenth-century Singaporean Chinese homes] cannot be dated, but generally it is probable that after about 1900, European classical details were more lavishly applied on the façades of these houses.²³³

While these comments were written with reference to the residential enclave on Emerald Hill Road in Singapore, the same observations can be made about a sizeable portion, even the majority, of the shophouses constructed in Malaya from the 1910s through the 1930s. The work of Southeast Asian vernacular builders who borrowed from the western classical tradition in their architectural works is overdue for a reappraisal, as is the largely linear account of the exchange of architectural ideas between European and Asian builders that has dominated much of the scholarly literature on Malayan architecture since the 1980s.

Building the Golden Chersonese: The Classics and Imperialism

In recent years, there has been a new interest in the influence of the classics on British imperialism and, more specifically, imperial architecture. This scholarship has begun to expand its scope beyond the imperial metropole and the politics of empire within the United Kingdom, and is increasingly turning to questions of how this classical legacy influenced the

²³¹ Parkinson, ‘The Homes of Malaya’, 125.

²³² *Ibid.*, 123.

²³³ Lee, *Emerald Hill*, 6-7.

ways imperialism was imagined, formulated, and enacted.²³⁴ This is significant because, as C.A. Hagerman notes, ‘the classics and classical discourse were a key feature of empire and imperialism in the British idiom through the long 19th century’.²³⁵ The study of British India has benefited from the added nuance afforded by a critical reappraisal of classical thought and how it shaped British imperialism and British understandings of the empire. This holds true of imperial architecture in the classical style. Indeed, the classicist Phiroze Vasunia argues that ‘[t]o study the architecture of British India is to study the international dimensions of classicism as well as to grasp its implication in discourses of colonial rule’.²³⁶

To date, however, historians of colonial architecture in Malaya have focused on typology and have not taken up the framework offered by classical reception theory. Yet the classics had a profound impact on British architecture and thought during its imperial heyday, and this preoccupation was transmitted to Malaya. The lack of focus on the classics is all the more surprising given the ubiquity of the classical idiom in British Malaya. Indeed, as noted by Lee Kip Lin, ‘with few exceptions, all buildings [in Singapore] were in the classical style until the arrival of the Modern Movement in the 1930s’.²³⁷ This thesis thus aims to address a significant gap in the literature by situating classical architecture in British Malaya within the broader intellectual framework of classical thinking in the British Empire. This provides a new lens through which the colonial experience in Malaya can be better understood. As Vasunia argues

The broader visual culture of the colonial realm should not be overlooked, for colonial buildings – the homes, town halls, military barracks – existed within a broader environment in which painting, sculpture, and other kinds of plastic arts also showed a marked interest in the classical.²³⁸

²³⁴ See, for example: Mark Bradley, ed., *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie, eds., *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Barbara Goff, ed., *Classics and Colonialism* (London: Duckworth, 2005).

²³⁵ Hagerman, *Britain’s Imperial Muse*, 187.

²³⁶ Phiroze Vasunia, ‘Visions of Antiquity: Architecture and the Classical Style’, *The Classics and Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 10

²³⁷ Lee, *The Singapore House*, 45.

²³⁸ Vasunia, ‘Visions of Antiquity’, 159.

The use of classicism by Malaya's diverse communities reflects the diversity of this reception. Classical architecture, whether in India or British Malaya, did not exist within a vacuum. The impact of a classical education on Britain's political elite – who went on to become its colonial elite – through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is widely acknowledged, and this has implications for the study of the British Empire. As Hagerman argues:

The classics and classical discourse were an integral element of elite culture in Britain until at least the middle years of the 20th century... Classical discourse likewise contributed to the cultural and intellectual development of individual members of Britain's elites thanks to classical education and the pervasiveness of classical references in political discourse, poetry, literature, painting, sculpture, and architecture.²³⁹

The classics were thus the educational, intellectual, and cultural foundations of Britain's colonial elite. As Bradley argues in his introduction to *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*

the development of classical ideas, classical scholarship, and classical imagery in this period was often directly or indirectly influenced by empire and imperial authority, and the British Empire itself was informed, shaped, legitimized, and evaluated using classical models.²⁴⁰

The primacy of antiquity persisted through the nineteenth century, even if classical antiquity was sometimes read with ambivalence by British audiences. Certainly, for some Victorian thinkers, both Greek and Roman examples suggested that empires were doomed to decline.²⁴¹ Indeed, Rome was sometimes used as a cautionary tale and cultural touchstone for Victorian imperialists.²⁴² This ambiguity can also be seen in the aesthetic mania for ruins,

²³⁹ Hagerman, *Britain's Imperial Muse*, 1-2.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁴¹ Duncan Bell, 'From Ancient to Modern in Victorian Imperial Thought', *The Historical Journal* 49.3 (2006).

²⁴² Bradley, 'Introduction', 16. See also: Adam Rogers and Richard Hingley, 'Edward Gibbon and Francis Haverfield: The Traditions of Imperial Decline', *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 190, 193, 201-7 *passim*; Norman Vance, 'Anxieties of

which became popular as ornamental garden follies and as a subject for paintings, in the late eighteenth century.²⁴³ At the height of this ruin mania, British architects such as John Soane created ‘ruinscapes’, and paintings of his buildings as ruins were exhibited at the Royal Academy to celebrate their completion.²⁴⁴ The tangible architectural remnants of classical antiquity thus informed the aesthetics of new architecture in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as Britain began aggressively expanding its colonial territories.²⁴⁵ While the height of ruin mania had passed by the time the Straits Settlements were made a Crown Colony in 1867, classical antiquity was by no means a spent force as an inspiration for British architects. As Bradley notes:

Classical scholarship always occupied a prestigious position for negotiating the history and memory of the Western world... The system of cultural hierarchies, power structures, and moral codes of the ancient world evokes has always been well-suited to the evaluation of modern imperialism.²⁴⁶

The looming shadow of Rome on the British imagination by no means meant that Victorian and Edwardian commentators were unaware of the great differences between Britain’s modern empire and the ancient empire held by the Romans.²⁴⁷ The ambiguity and even ambivalence some Victorian and Edwardian writers demonstrated towards the Roman Empire does not diminish the influence of Rome on the British imperial imagination, however.²⁴⁸ Classical literature shaped the way British imperialists both imagined and projected imperial power. This was as true of the imperial metropole as it was of Britain’s far flung colonies. Britain borrowed from classical antiquity both intellectually and physically:

Empire and the Moral Tradition: Rome and Britain’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 18.2 (2011): 246-7.

²⁴³ David Watkin, ‘Built Ruins: The Hermitage as Retreat’, *Visions of Ruin: Architectural Fantasies and Designs for Garden Follies* (London: Sir John Soane’s Museum, 1999), 5-14.

²⁴⁴ Christopher Woodward, ‘Scenes from the Future’, *Visions of Ruin: Architectural Fantasies and Designs for Garden Follies* (London: Sir John Soane’s Museum, 1999), 49. See also: Sarah Tiffin, *Southeast Asia in Ruins: Art and Empire in the Early 19th Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

²⁴⁵ The picturesque passion for ruins also informed how British colonisers responded to the ruins they encountered in Southeast Asia, and in particular Java. See: Sarah Tiffin, ‘Java’s ruined *candis* and the British picturesque ideal’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72.3 (2009): 525.

²⁴⁶ Mark Bradley, ‘Introduction: Approaches to Classics and Imperialism’, *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

²⁴⁷ Emma Reisz, ‘Classics, Race, and Edwardian Anxieties about Empire’, in *ibid.*, 214-17.

²⁴⁸ Eric Adler, ‘Late Victorian and Edwardian Views of Rome and the Nature of “Defensive Imperialism”’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 15.2 (2008): 196-202.

the British Museum, for example, was constructed in a classical style in order to house antiquities plundered from Greece.²⁴⁹ British ownership of the physical legacy of the classical past was bolstered and reinforced by the creation of a Neoclassical ‘temple of the arts’ to house these objects.²⁵⁰ As noted by the geographers Mark Brayshaw and Mark Cleary, ‘landscapes are shaped as much by the ideologies and philosophies of the people who create them as by the practical work that brings them into physical existence.’²⁵¹ This classicising conception of empire – which at times overtly drew on architectural imagery – persisted into the twentieth century. Lord Curzon’s speech at the Imperial Press Conference at Oxford in 1909 paints a picture of empire as classical edifice:

I sometimes like to picture to myself this great Imperial fabric as a huge structure like some Tennysonian ‘Palace of Art’, of which the foundations are in this country, where they have been laid and must be maintained by British hands, but of which the Colonies are the pillars, and high above all floats the vastness of an Asiatic dome.²⁵²

These ideas were exported to India and, subsequently, Malaya as Britain’s imperial horizons expanded eastward. Overt references to classical antiquity were certainly evident in the buildings constructed by the British in Malaya and Singapore. As Thomas Metcalf argues in *An Imperial Vision*, ‘colonial buildings helped shape the discourse on empire of the later nineteenth century’.²⁵³ Classicism became the means by which Britain projected its political and administrative clout in Malaya, and the style thus became synonymous with power.

Classicism continued to be the lingua franca of public architecture in Malaya until the late 1930s, reaching a final peak with the construction of the Supreme Court in Singapore. Indeed, with the notable exception of Kuala Lumpur, where the Indo-Saracenic style was

²⁴⁹ Bradley, ‘Introduction’, 2-3.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵¹ Cited in Robin A. Butlin, *Geographies of Empire: European Empires and Colonies c. 1880-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

²⁵² Cited in Said, *Orientalism*, 213.

²⁵³ Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and the British Raj* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xv.

adopted from the 1890s through the 1910s,²⁵⁴ public architecture in British Malaya was, as a rule, classical architecture. This makes the current lack of focused inquiry into the symbolic and intellectual background of colonial classicism in Malaya a crucial gap within the scholarly literature. How was classicism employed as an imperial language, and how was this language received by the various colonised populations in Malaya? The ubiquity and persistence of the classical idiom, in both its imperial and vernacular forms, make these questions vital to understanding Malaya's architectural history.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 281. See also: Ashley Jackson, *Buildings of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 124-6; and Khor et al., *The Towns of Malaya*, 112.

Chapter II. Columns and Capitals:

Classical Centres of Colonial Power in Malaya's Capital Cities



Figure 4. The Porta de Santiago (left) and ruins of St Paul's in Melaka, circa 1935. KITLV 1403290.

Institutions of colonial power were the architectural medium through which classicism was first introduced to Malaya. The classical language of architecture was first introduced to the Malayan Peninsula by the European colonisers of Melaka: the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and the Dutch in the seventeenth.²⁵⁵ Churches, forts, and seats of government were the first examples of Western architectural classicism constructed on Malayan soil, with the classical language serving as an expression of European colonial power. A few traces of early Portuguese and Dutch colonial classicism survive to this day. These include the Porta de Santiago, the last surviving bastion of the fort known as A Famosa, which was constructed by the Portuguese in 1511, expanded through the sixteenth century, and modified by the Dutch in the latter half of the seventeenth century;²⁵⁶ the Church of St Paul, which was also constructed by the Portuguese and expanded by the Dutch;²⁵⁷ and the former Dutch

²⁵⁵ Khor et al., *The Towns of Malaya*, 73.

²⁵⁶ Chen, *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia, Volume 5: Architecture*, 62; Graham Irwin, 'Malacca Fort', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 3.2 (1962): 25-6, 39.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

Stadthuys nearby, completed in 1753.²⁵⁸ These extant examples are, for the most part, relatively austere in their classicism. In the tensely contested Strait of Melaka, the priority of these early colonisers appears to have been defence of their newly acquired territories, rather than architectural showmanship. Indeed, Graham Irwin notes that the fort of A Famosa

must have appeared, even to Albuquerque's contemporaries, as a decidedly old-fashioned structure, and there was indeed something distinctively feudal about its tall tower or 'place of last resort,' its rectangular plan and its plain high walls.²⁵⁹

With its decorative keystones and exaggerated Ionic pilasters framing an oversized coat of arms, the Porta de Santiago has a certain level of architectural pretension in what was otherwise a functional structure.²⁶⁰ Both St Paul's and the surviving Dutch structures in Melaka are relatively restrained buildings, however, with limited decoration beyond their Doric pilasters.

The most extensive classical building programme in Malaya would occur under British governance, beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century and only coming to a close in the late 1930s. By 1940, Malaya's capital cities, with the notable exception of Kuala Lumpur, would be characterised by a pattern of urban development articulated in the classical style. As with classicism elsewhere, changing architectural fashions saw the classical language evolve over time. By the time Francis Light established a British presence in Penang in 1786, Palladianism had become the dominant mode in British architecture.²⁶¹ The popularity of books such as *Vitruvius Britannicus* and new English-language translations of Andrea Palladio's *I Quattro Libri* coincided with elite patronage of the style, helping to ensure the style's prestige and dissemination across the British Isles.²⁶² As more and more country houses for Britain's elite were built in this style, the language became associated with power and prestige. The popularity of this Anglo-Palladian style also coincided with Britain's

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁵⁹ Irwin, 'Malacca Fort', 23.

²⁶⁰ For a description of A Famosa prior to its demolition, see: A.H. Hill, 'Munshi 'Abdullah's Account of the Malacca Fort', *JMBRAS* 23.1 (February 1950): 84-99.

²⁶¹ John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, eighth edition (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 295-7 and elsewhere *passim*.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 296-7, 338-42. See also: Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, 94, 136.

imperial expansion through India and subsequently Southeast Asia. The Palladian style would be exported across the British Empire, mutating as it reached new shores.²⁶³

In the early days of British colonial engagement in the region, Malaya was treated administratively as part of British India or conceptualised as 'Further India'.²⁶⁴ Architects who worked in British India adapted the classical style to the Indian climate and the needs of colonial rule. In the early nineteenth century, some of these architects then went on to practise in Malaya, bringing their Indian experience with them. Singapore's first British architect, the Irishman George Doumgold Coleman (1795-1844), would cement the status of Palladian classicism as the default mode of early British colonial architecture in Malaya.²⁶⁵ Leaving Britain in 1815 to work for the East India Company in Calcutta, Coleman would design a number of buildings in India before settling in Singapore via Java in 1822.²⁶⁶ British military engineers armed with Palladian-influenced handbooks would design many institutional buildings in Penang and Singapore over the course of the nineteenth century.²⁶⁷ British India would also provide the workforce required to realise these Palladian visions, in the form of indentured labourers.²⁶⁸ This made British Malaya, and its early government monuments, a potent example of Pratt's idea of the 'contact zone', where different groups were brought together in an asymmetric power relation.²⁶⁹

British Indian models of town planning were imported to the Malayan Peninsula and its neighbouring islands alongside the architects and indentured labourers who introduced Anglo-Indian Palladianism to the region. Nowhere is this more evident than in the arrangement of governmental buildings around the ceremonial and recreational space of urban fields, which came to be known in Malaya as the Padang. Evolving from the *maidan* of British Indian cities, the Padang became the symbolic heart of power in colonial Malayan cities.²⁷⁰ As noted by Lai Chee-Kien in his study of urban fields in Malaya, the *maidan* of

²⁶³ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 48-9.

²⁶⁴ For a comprehensive history of Penang's early history as a Presidency of India, see: Marcus Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, Vols. I and II*. See also: Lai, 'Maidan to Padang', 56.

²⁶⁵ T.H.H. Hancock, *Coleman's Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1986), 1.

²⁶⁶ Hancock, *Coleman's Singapore*, 12.

²⁶⁷ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 13-15.

²⁶⁸ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 90-1.

²⁶⁹ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 33-40 *passim*.

²⁷⁰ Lai, 'Maidan to Padang', 56-7.

British Indian cities became a ‘colonial third culture’ space in which colonial spatial practices were combined with the Islamic city planning of Mughal India which were subsequently re-articulated in Malaya.²⁷¹ This approach to planning fused with the Britain’s imperial ‘Grand Modell’ of urban planning, with its geometric layout of streets and rectangular plots, becoming the template for colonial urbanism in British Malaya.²⁷² If, as Cannadine argues, the British Empire projected its authority through ‘processions and ceremony’,²⁷³ the clusters of classical monuments constructed around these urban fields were the backdrop to the pageantry of colonial administration.

From George Town to Singapore, the arrangement of municipal and military structures around a central open space at the centre of colonial townships became the template for Malayan urbanism, particularly in the capital cities. With the sole exception of Kuala Lumpur’s administrative centre, where the Indo-Saracenic style was adopted between the 1890s and 1920 for reasons which will be explored below, these urban ensembles were all executed in variants of the classical style. Colonial urbanism in Malaya was thus overwhelmingly expressed through the language of classicism, and this would have a lasting impact on Malaya’s historic urban landscapes. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Britain thus established architectural classicism as the visual language of power as it began asserting its influence in Malaya.

This chapter will survey the development of imperial classicism in British Malaya, focusing on the ensembles of buildings at the heart of capital cities including Singapore, George Town, Ipoh, Taiping, and Seremban. Kuala Lumpur, as the notable orientalist exception to the classical rule, will also be discussed to explore in passing why the initial renaissance revival scheme for its governmental offices were passed over in favour of an Indo-Saracenic scheme. The development of these ensembles of British governmental buildings over time reflects the changing character of British imperial classicism in Malaya from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. While this imperial classicism may have undergone changes, from a light and airy Palladianism to the bombast of the Edwardian Baroque, the use of

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁷² Robert Home and Anthony D. King, ‘Urbanism and Master Planning’, *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire*, edited by G.A. Bremner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 57.

²⁷³ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 126.

classical vocabulary to house imperial institutions, and by extension convey imperial power, remained consistent throughout Britain's imperial intervention in Malaya. If Britain measured its Empire against Rome intellectually,²⁷⁴ it also projected its vision of Rome outwards. As Bradley argues, 'the classical... was both the 'other', pushed back into the distant past, *and* the evidence of un-broken tradition evoked to bestow legitimacy on the present.'²⁷⁵ The classical language thus became a signifier of imperial legitimacy.

British Classicism in Nineteenth-Century Penang and Singapore

Britain involvement with Malaya began in 1786, when Sultan Abdullah Mukarram Shah II of Kedah leased the island of Penang to the East India Company in exchange for military aid against Siam.²⁷⁶ The establishment of a British base on the island was seen as a necessary bulwark against increased Dutch control of the Strait of Melaka and, by extension, access to lucrative trade from China.²⁷⁷ The island was also briefly an important centre for the production of pepper and nutmeg.²⁷⁸ On 6 February 1819, British presence in the region would be further consolidated through the signing of a treaty between the East India Company's Thomas Stamford Raffles and the Temenggong of Johor, paving the way for the creation of a British entrepôt on the island of Singapore.²⁷⁹ Within a few years of these two respective treaties, East India Company engineers had laid out plans for towns arranged along a modern grid system, with the seats of government set around an open space at the heart of each city. This can be clearly seen in the *Plan of the Town of Singapore by Lieutenant Jackson* (fig. 5), drawn up in 1822 and published in 1828, which is the earliest British colonial plan for the city.²⁸⁰ While the town was not built precisely according to these plans, the overall spatial division of the city outlined in this plan can still be discerned in Singapore today, with

²⁷⁴ Bradley, 'Introduction', 11.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ Khor et al., 64.

²⁷⁷ Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya*, revised edition (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948), 33-4. See also: Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, Vol. 1*, 1 and *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, Vol. 2*, 397.

²⁷⁸ Swettenham, *British Malaya*, 33-4; Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, 1805-1830, Vol. 2*, 397-445 *passim*.

²⁷⁹ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 29.

²⁸⁰ Hancock, *Coleman's Singapore*, 16.

governmental buildings and the 'European Town' surrounding an 'Open Square' by the sea, separated from the 'Chinese Campong' by the Singapore River.

In the early nineteenth century, the civic centres of Malayan towns were deeply segregated spaces, both in terms of function and race. In these cities, the locus of British colonial power was geographically separated from the non-European quarters. This can be seen from the clear delineation of the 'European Town', from the 'Arab Campong', 'Chinese Campong', the 'Chuliah [South Indian] Campong', and the 'Bugis Campong' (fig. 5). As noted by Raymond Quek in his study of the evolution of Singapore's civic core,

Early town plans laid out the segregation of civic, domestic and commercial areas... In the 1820s, the European community [in Singapore] who could relate to neo-classical architecture or identify with its lineage were a numerical, but controlling, minority. Ethnically Asian or other religious buildings did not interfere with this harbour front civic square... [Later buildings] served as palimpsests upon which newer, larger and finer neo-classical efforts arose over earlier, more primitive and expedient outpost buildings, albeit with conscious or unconscious neo-classical styling.²⁸¹

This sense of segregation and colonial authority was further entrenched by the 1850s. As noted by Anoma Pieris in her history of penal labour in early colonial Singapore

At the very centre of the map was the convict jail with its new disciplinary regime, the largest complex of buildings to be located within the European town... Collectively, the prison, the churches and the government offices embellished by the esplanade communicated alternative and competing forms of morality to their native audiences.²⁸²

²⁸¹ Raymond Quek, 'Neo-classical architecture in the Straits Settlements: Singapore's civic square (1819-1936)', *The Routledge Handbook on the Reception of Classical Architecture*, edited by Nicholas Temple, Andrzej Piotrowski, and Juan Manuel Heredia (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 226.

²⁸² Pieris, *Hidden Hands, Divided Landscapes*, 50-1

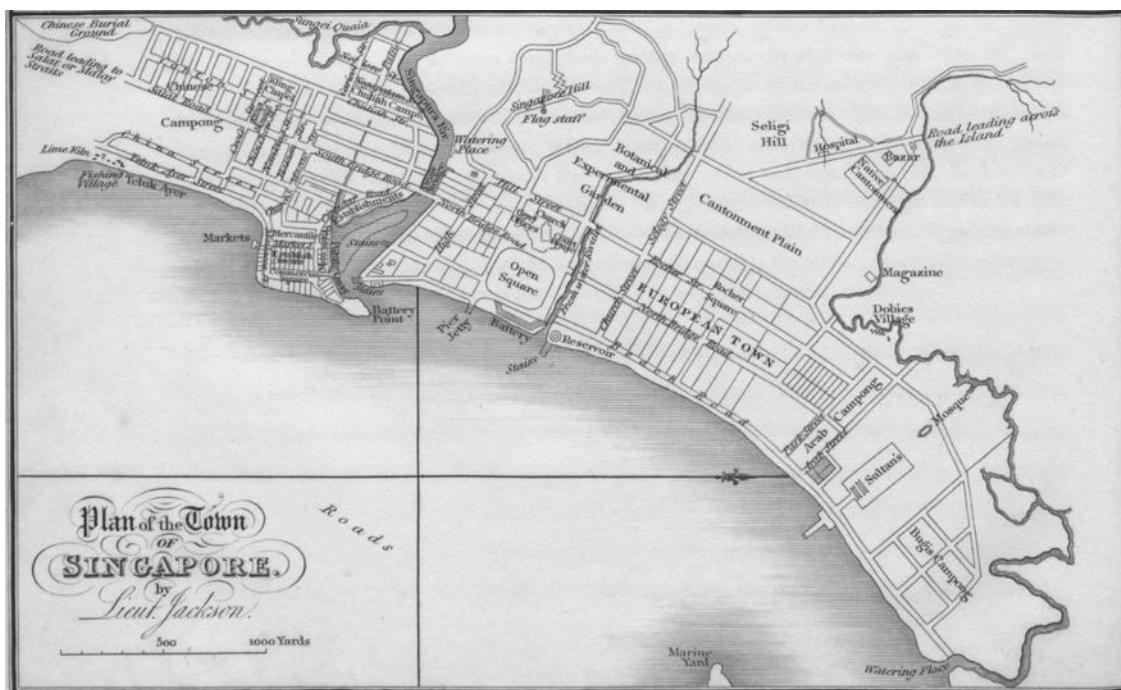


Figure 5. Philip Jackson. *Plan of the Town of Singapore*, 1822. N.A.S.

Like the early offices of government, Singapore's convict prison was designed by Coleman.²⁸³ This building's classicism is severe and astylar, with rusticated quoins and small window emphasising a sense of solidity.²⁸⁴ Convict labour became crucial to the construction of colonial buildings in both Penang and Singapore from the 1820s and 1830s, much of this labour coming from territories in British India and the Indian Ocean.²⁸⁵ British colonial classicism thus entrenched colonial hierarchies both symbolically, by visually articulating difference through the buildings of colonial institutions, and by virtue of the labour practices used to construct them. Classicism was used to symbolise British power, but it was also constructed through the enslavement of convicts from the Indian sub-continent.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, changing approaches to classicism would lend a sense of stylistic progression to Singapore's public buildings, with successive fashions evidenced in the series of public buildings flanking the Padang and stretching along the

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 86-7.

²⁸⁴ 'Convict Jail (Main Entrance)', from *Malaysia. Straits Settlements and Malayan Peninsular: Public Buildings and Scenery in Singapore, Malacca, Penang and the Malay States*, Colonial Office records, NAUK CO 1069/484.

²⁸⁵ Pieris, *Hidden Hands, Divided Landscapes*, 31; Hancock, *Coleman's Singapore*, 66-8; Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*, 165-8.

adjacent Singapore River. The Palladian mansion Coleman designed for David Skene Napier in 1826 was sold to the Scottish merchant John Argyle Maxwell, before being leased by the Government for use as a court house.²⁸⁶ The 'old Court House', as it became known, was gradually extended by process of accretion, with extensions by J.F.A. McNair in the 1870s, and further alterations made in 1901 and 1909.²⁸⁷ It was only in the 1930s that a purpose-built edifice would be constructed to house the Supreme Court. These alterations would radically transform the building, making it unrecognisable from the building seen in the earlier sketches and postcards, but always adding to it in the classical language.²⁸⁸

The Government Offices at Empress Place, designed by J.F.A. McNair in the 1850s but only completed in the 1860s, would be extended in a similar way.²⁸⁹ The overall symmetry of McNair's design would be lost in extensions undertaken in the 1880, 1908, and 1920, but these extensions would be more sympathetic to the architect's original intent than those undertaken on the old Court House.²⁹⁰ These extensions would draw on the same language, with the same rusticated base, giant order, and broad dentillated cornice used to clad what eventually became an irregular pile which turned its back to the Singapore River (fig. 9).²⁹¹

The 1860s also saw the construction of a Town Hall at Empress Place, creating much-needed space for civic governance. The building, was designed by the Municipal Engineer John Bennett and completed in 1862.²⁹² Corner pavilions with Serlian windows were linked by airy colonnaded loggias on the northern and southern elevations, while on the eastern and western elevations, aedicule windows topped with alternating triangular and segmental pediments are set between pilasters.²⁹³ Large finials top the balustrade parapets of the pavilions, while a hipped roof rises above the central portion of the building. Bennett's design was a refined study in the Renaissance revival, and in its mixture of porous loggias and richly moulded façades recalls Andrea Palladio's Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza. The Town Hall also

²⁸⁶ Hancock, *Coleman's Singapore*, 22.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-8.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ Liu, *In Granite and Chunam*, 12-19.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs*, 84-5.

²⁹² Liu, *In Granite and Chunam*, 45. See also: Jane Beamish and Jane Ferguson, *A History of Singapore Architecture: The Making of a City* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1985), 89.

²⁹³ Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs*, 93 and 95.

doubled as a venue for theatrical performances and housed a library, but would soon prove inadequate for both its governmental and social functions.

McNair's ever-growing Government Offices became the new home of the Town Hall, and by 1897 there were plans to erect a new hall.²⁹⁴ Funds were then raised by public subscription.²⁹⁵ An earlier plan, drawn up by Messrs. Sills & Francken, was abandoned 'because the cost per cubit [sic] foot originally given... proves now, after a great rise in local labour and material, to be absolutely prohibitive'.²⁹⁶ While an extension to the existing Town Hall was considered, subscribers to the Memorial Hall project were keen 'to erect something that would be a separate, an individual, and a lasting memorial to the Queen's reign', and Swan & Maclaren were tasked with drawing up new plans by June of 1899.²⁹⁷ Construction was undertaken in phases, with the first wing constructed adjacent to the Town Hall, and the second wing and tower constructed on the site of the Town Hall after its demolition.²⁹⁸ The final plans of the building as it was constructed were lodged with the Municipality by Swan & Maclaren in February of 1908.²⁹⁹

Where Bennett's Town Hall had been a restrained but fluent essay in Palladianism, the Victoria Memorial Hall was a grandiloquent example of the Edwardian Baroque style. Pairs of engaged columns decorated with block rustication sit atop ground level run through with banded rustication. Segmental pediments cap the windows between these columns, pierced by keystones. On the end pavilions, Palladian windows, considerably more decorated than the ones on the old Town Hall, are framed by paired Corinthian pilasters which support rounded pediments which are filled with swags executed in dainty plasterwork. The banded rustication which decorates the ground level rises up through the central clocktower, the columns of its cupola echoing the block rustication of the *piano nobile*. The tower culminates in a green copper dome topped with a crown. With the banded rustication of its tower and ornate aedicule windows, the Victoria Memorial Hall bears a resemblance to the London

²⁹⁴ 'Victoria Memorial Hall', *Straits Times*, 24 March 1902, 4.

²⁹⁵ 'The Memorial Hall', *Straits Times*, 6 June 1899, 3.

²⁹⁶ 'The Victorian Permanent Memorial', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 June 1899, 3.

²⁹⁷ 'The Memorial Hall', *Straits Times*, 6 June 1899, 2.

²⁹⁸ 'Victoria Memorial Hall', *Straits Times*, 5 February 1905, 5.

²⁹⁹ Swan & Maclaren, 'Victoria Memorial Hall Singapore', February 1908, Building Plan 6850/1908, NAS CBS 122.

Coliseum, designed by the theatre architect Frank Matcham and completed in 1904.³⁰⁰ The Victoria Memorial Hall demonstrates how much architectural fashions in Singapore could echo those in the imperial metropole.

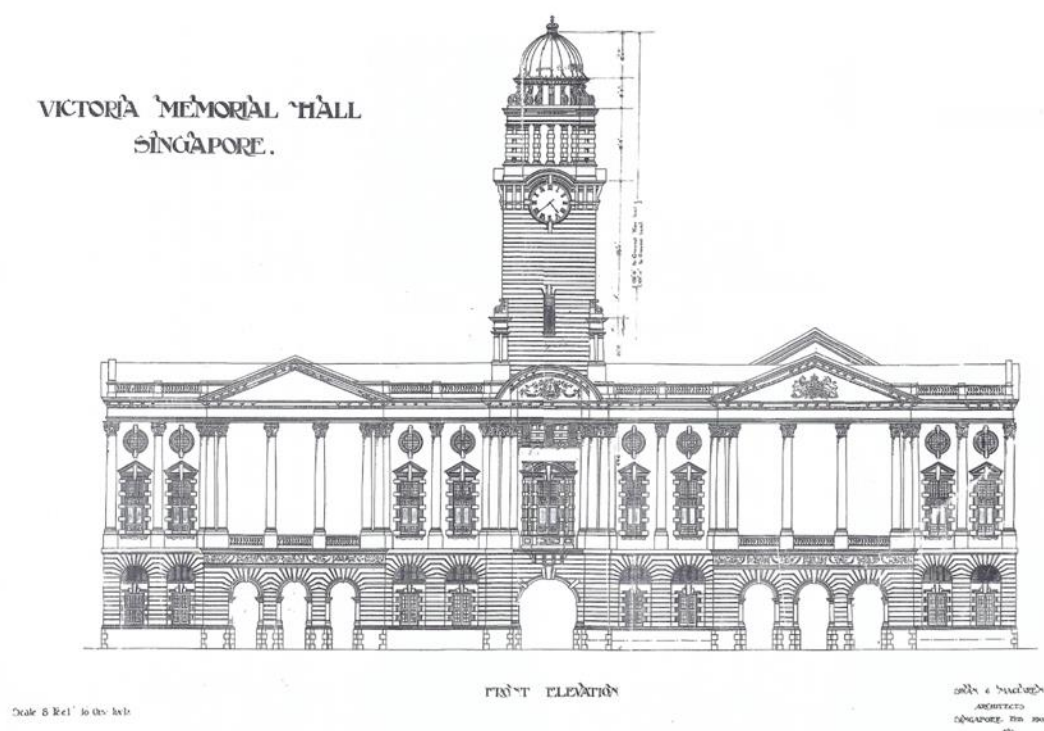


Figure 6. Swan & Maclaren. Front elevation of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Singapore, 1908. NAS CBS 122, Building Plan 6850.

The Edwardian Baroque would continue to be influential in the design of government buildings into the 1920s. After a lull in public building during and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Singapore's administrative centre would become the focus of ambitious redevelopment plans in a grand Neoclassical manner in the 1930s. This final planned phase of rebuilding the colonial heart of Singapore around Empress Place, a scheme which was never completed, will be discussed in detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

³⁰⁰ Kenneth Powell, 'Building Study: A play of spaces', *The Architect's Journal* 219.14 (2004): 24-33.

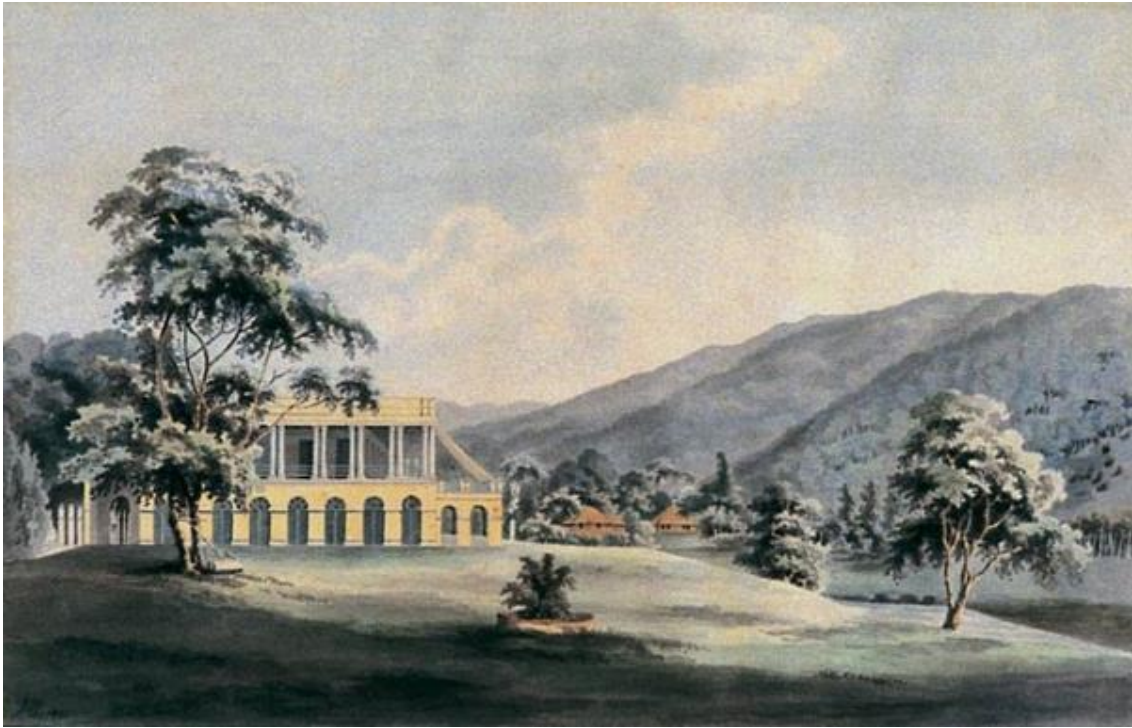


Figure 7. James George. *Watercolour of Suffolk House in Penang, 1811. Penang State Museum.*

A similar sense of stylistic progression can be seen in the governmental buildings constructed in Penang from the turn of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Built by engineers from the East India Company, the first seats of British authority in Penang and Singapore were classical structures coming out of an Anglo-Indian tradition that had been established in cities such as Calcutta and Madras.³⁰¹ In Penang, the tents which housed British East India Company men in the 1780s were quickly replaced by simple houses.³⁰² Francis Light's house became Penang's first Government House, and was described by one visitor as being 'charming and... [in] the same style as Madras houses', though a visitor to the house in the 1790s noted that it was by then already 'full of White Ants, and the Timbers are so much decayed... which renders it really unsafe to remain in the House much longer.'³⁰³

One of the few surviving early watercolours suggests a simple, astylar building with an arcaded verandah; this first Government House is extant, albeit substantially altered, on the grounds of the Light Street Convent.³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 10-16 and 46-7; Hancock, *Coleman's Singapore*, 8-14.

³⁰² Langdon, *Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, Vol. I*, 351-5.

³⁰³ Cited in *ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 356-7.

Light's house would soon be superseded as the seat of government in Penang. Marcus Langdon, a historian of Penang's early colonial history, argues that Suffolk House 'represents the high expectations that were held for the island as the fourth presidency of India.'³⁰⁵ Whether the house was built by Francis Light or Governor William Edward Phillips remains unclear, but the building appears in paintings from 1811, and had become the seat of Government by 1818.³⁰⁶ An elegant house in the regency style, the building features an airy colonnade of paired Doric columns set above an arcaded verandah on the ground floor, topped by a classical flat roof. Lim suggests that Government House in Calcutta may have provided the inspiration for Suffolk House.³⁰⁷ With its deep wraparound verandahs and lack of pedimented portico, Suffolk House perhaps owes a greater debt to Government House in Madras, however, which was expanded to a design by John Goldingham at the turn of the nineteenth century.³⁰⁸

While the Governors of the Prince of Wales Island, as Penang was then known, may have worked from Suffolk House, many colonial institutions including the Court, would remain adjacent to Fort Cornwallis and the Padang. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would see this area consolidated as the centre of British rule in Penang through a series of buildings including a new Town Hall in 1880, which was subsequently expanded through the construction of a pedimented portico in 1906, and the Municipal Offices in 1903.³⁰⁹ The addition of this portico would give an otherwise simple Victorian building a Palladian quality that brought it in line with earlier government buildings on the island, albeit with a greater degree of ornamental plasterwork. The Supreme Court was also constructed in 1903 to a design by J.H. Calcott, with revisions by Aston Webb and Ingress Bell (fig. 8).³¹⁰ The latter were also responsible for the Supreme Court in Hong Kong, which was constructed between 1898 and 1912.³¹¹ As Bremner notes, this sober Renaissance revival style was 'the closest Britain came to forging a true and consistent imperial style, one that Herbert Baker would

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 394.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 394-7, 414.

³⁰⁷ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 48.

³⁰⁸ Jan Morris, *Stones of Empire: The Buildings of the Raj* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 69.

³⁰⁹ Jenkins, *Contested Space Revisited*, 65.

³¹⁰ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 31-3.

³¹¹ Bremner, 'Stones of Empire', 99.

later suggest was a manifest expression of “law, order, and government”.³¹² The turn of the twentieth century also saw the construction of a large U-shaped complex of government offices in the Edwardian Baroque style, with frontages along Beach Street, Downing Street, and King Edward Place, although only the Beach Street wing of this building survived Japanese bombing during the Second World War.

These buildings demonstrate a burgeoning ornamental sensibility of Victorian classicism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Municipal Offices, in particular, reflect the Baroque tendencies of the Edwardian era, with a rhythmic façade composition created by a mixture of protruding freestanding columns, engaged columns, and clustered pilasters culminating in a varied multi-gabled roofline and an ornate pedimented parapet with ball finials. The result is lively and highly plastic, particularly in comparison to the severe and un-Vitruvian Doric order of the 1820s courthouse situated along Light Street. This sequence of buildings, centred around the Padang and Fort Cornwallis, shows how the classical language of architecture was consistently the visual language of colonial rule in Penang. This language found itself articulated in different ways over time, however, ever influenced by changing architectural fashions within the British Empire.



Figure 8. C.J. Kleingrothe. *The High Court in Penang*, circa 1910. KITLV 80027.

³¹² *Ibid.*

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]nms

Figure 9. J.T. Thomson. The Esplanade from Scandal Point, 1851. NMS HP-0054.



Figure 10. Government offices and the Victoria Memorial Hall at Empress Place in Singapore, circa 1920. KITLV 1404909.

Capital Ideas: Building Indo-Saracenic Kuala Lumpur

By the turn of the twentieth century, the administrative centres of Malaya's major cities were filled with classical buildings. As noted above, the earliest of these buildings were predominantly executed in an elegant Palladian style, a style which prevailed in Malaya's town centres through much of the nineteenth century. The one notable exception to this rule, however, was Kuala Lumpur. Even today, the historic core of the city, situated at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers for which the city is named,³¹³ is characterised by a fanciful sequence of Orientalist buildings, a picturesque urban composition of cusped arches and onion domes. Constructed between the 1890s and the 1920s, this urban ensemble, unique within Malaya, was the product of historical circumstances and personalities unique to Selangor in the late nineteenth century.

Kuala Lumpur is a relatively young city. While Malay settlement in the Klang Valley goes back centuries, the state remained relatively undeveloped and sparsely populated for much of the nineteenth century, particularly in its interior. Visiting the state in 1879, the traveller Isabella Bird wrote 'Selangor is a most wretched place'.³¹⁴ The establishment of a substantial town at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers dates to the 1850s, when new mining techniques made it possible to exploit the rich tin deposits of this hinterland.³¹⁵ Mandailings, who had migrated to the Peninsula *en masse* in the wake of the Padri War, and Chinese miners under the patronage of the Bugis Raja Abdullah of Klang and his brother Raja Jumaat of Lukut, settled in the eponymous muddy confluence.³¹⁶ As noted by John G. Butcher in his history of British colonial engagement in Malaya, encouraging tin mining was 'the main object of British policy towards the Chinese in the years after the [Treaty of] Pangkor'.³¹⁷ The early decades of this young settlement were marred by the Klang War of the 1860s and 1870s, a civil war for control of Selangor, leading to British intervention in support of the Viceroy

³¹³ The name Kuala Lumpur literally translates as 'muddy confluence' or 'muddy estuary', referring to the place where the Klang and Gombak rivers meet. For more on the naming of the city, see: Abdur- Razzaq Lubis, *Sutan Puasa: Founder of Kuala Lumpur* (Penang: Areca Books, 2018), 1-7.

³¹⁴ Bird, *The Golden Chersonese*, 226.

³¹⁵ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 2. See also: Lubis, *Sutan Puasa*, 233-52 *passim*

³¹⁶ Lubis, *Sutan Puasa*, 57, 122-26, and 190-5; Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 2, 5, and 8-13.

³¹⁷ John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya 1880-1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 9.

of Selangor Tunku Kudin.³¹⁸ 1874 saw that appointment of J.G. Davidson as the British Resident of Selangor, with Frank Swettenham serving as Assistant Resident.³¹⁹ The same year, a proclamation from Sultan Abdul Samad of Selangor stated:

Now, We wish to open our country Salangore [sic] (for trade) and its dependencies, and our intention is to secure peace and prosperity to all our subjects... Now, We, Sultan Abdussamad [sic], inform all European Gentlemen, Chinese Headmen, and others, that We shall be exceedingly glad if any one will come to do any useful business for themselves in our country, such as to open tin or gold Mines, or for purposes of cultivation, or to cut Timber, or to look for Gutta Percha and on any other profitable business.³²⁰



Figure 11. *A street in Kuala Lumpur, circa 1880. KITLV 3990.*

³¹⁸ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 8-16; Lubis, *Sutan Puasa*, 381-5. See also: Bird, *The Golden Chersonese*, 198-99.

³¹⁹ Lubis, *Sutan Puasa*, 403.

³²⁰ Proclamation by the Sultan of Selangore [sic], 18 November 1874. Cited in Swettenham, *British Malaya*, 341.



Figure 12. Resident's House in Kuala Lumpur, circa 1880. KITLV 91806.

The war-ravaged town would quickly be reconstructed, and from there grow rapidly as a result of a tin mining boom. Kuala Lumpur would become even more important to British imperial interests in the Peninsula when the administrative centre of the Federated Malay State of Selangor was moved from the royal seat of Klang to Kuala Lumpur in 1880.³²¹ The settlement still largely comprised of timber buildings at this stage, and 'fire, flood and filth' posed a substantial risk to the new capital of Selangor.³²² Even the British Residency was a relatively simple structure in the Anglo-Indian style, with an airy wooden upper storey sitting atop Tuscan pillars on the ground floor. According to John Henry Matthews Robson, who founded the *Malay Mail* newspaper in 1896, the newly-built Residency and 'a railway house at Seven Dials' were 'the only brick-built European residences' in 1889.³²³ Yet the city was rapidly growing. In this context, British authorities in Selangor quickly found the Selangor

³²¹ J.M. Gullick, 'The Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad', *JMBRAS* 65.1 (1992): 28.

³²² J.M. Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur 1856-1939* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2017), 38.

³²³ John Henry Matthews Robson, *Records and Recollections (1889-1934)* (Kuala Lumpur: Kyle, Palmer & Co, 1934), 3.

Public Works and Survey Department wanting in its ability to fulfil the needs of the new state capital. In Colonial Office correspondence from Sir Frederick Weld, Governor of the Straits Settlements to the Earl of Kimberley, Weld wrote that he

was not satisfied that Mr Daly was exerting himself or doing his present work... Daly is the Resident's son-in-law, and it is therefore the more inexcusable that such a state of affairs should have existed without the latter officer having brought it to my knowledge... it is highly desirable that the increased staff should have a competent Head of Department, which I cannot consider Mr Daly to be.³²⁴

The attached report by Captain Henry McCallum also noted

I have already said enough to show that designing and drawing could not have occupied much of Mr Daly's time, and enough to make unnecessary further remarks on the points brought forward in Appendix 11, the various objects of enquiry being generally distinguished by their absence.³²⁵

McCallum's inspection of the newly-built Treasurer's Quarters found

the specifications faulty in many particulars, and many things had been left out which a sharp contractor would have soon taken advantage of. Thus, for example, no internal doors were specified to be provided and the Contractor therefore need not have put them in. The work was not well done, the timber was quite green and therefore shrinking and warping, the carpentry being very unfinished and badly done, particularly in respect to joints. French doors provided for had not been put in; the standards had not been set upright; the flooring of the bathrooms was particularly bad and their plaster skirting was composed of mud instead of Portland Cement.³²⁶

³²⁴ Letter from Sir Frederick Weld to the Earl of Kimberley in 'Selangor – State of the Public Works & Survey Department', Colonial Office Correspondence, 3 May 1882, NAUK CO 273/114, no 10025.

³²⁵ Captain H.E. McCallum, 'Report upon the State, organisation, and operations of the Public Works and Survey Department, Sēlāngor' in *ibid.*

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

W.E. Maxwell was appointed Resident of Selangor in 1889, and set about reforming the Selangor public service.³²⁷ In 1892, Charles Edwin Spooner was transferred from Ceylon to fill the newly created role of State Engineer,³²⁸ with a salary of \$5,400 per annum in addition to his pension from the Government of Ceylon.³²⁹ Spooner's appointment would have a dramatic impact on Malayan architecture, drastically altering Kuala Lumpur's architectural trajectory, and setting the city apart from every other capital in both the Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements.

By 1893, various government departments in Kuala Lumpur had grown, and were in desperate need of new offices. A sum of \$152,000 to go towards the construction of new government buildings was voted for in the Selangor budget, with the buildings slated to be the largest such construction project in the Peninsula.³³⁰ The initial plans for these offices were drawn up by R.A.J. Bidwell in a Renaissance revival style. These designs survive in Public Works Department correspondence in the Arkib Negara (fig. 13). In Bidwell's scheme, a central arch punctuates a double-storey arcaded loggia. This central wing is flanked by twin pavilions, which feature Palladian windows and diminutive mansard roofs.³³¹ The miniature mansards of the building recall the roof of Government House in Singapore, built by Major John Frederick Adolphus McNair in 1867.³³² This initial design for the Selangor government offices was somewhat ungainly and poorly proportioned, and Spooner was apparently not pleased with Bidwell's efforts. Recounting the design process behind the government offices in a speech at its opening, Spooner remarked:

Mr Norman ... drew out a ground plan and Mr Bidwell an elevation in Classic Renaissance of a building. Though I did not like the design, I adopted the arrangement of the offices and the general lines. I then decided on the Mahometan style, and in due course sent it in with an estimate for \$152,000... Mr Bidwell then

³²⁷ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 131-2.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ Letter from Governor Sir Cecil C. Smith, 12 November 1892 to The Most Honourable The Marquess of Ripon, K.G. in 'C.E. Spooner', Colonial Office Correspondence, NAUK CO 273/183, no. 23693.

³³⁰ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 132.

³³¹ State Engineer, 'Selangor Government – Proposed Public Buildings, Sketch Elevation', in 'New Government Offices & post Office – Draft Plans etc – forwards', Selangor PWD Correspondence, 1 July 1893, PWD 3871/1893, ANM 1957/0042944.

³³² See: Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 12.

set about the details and was most happy in rendering my ideas on paper and adding his own, and in generally carrying out the detail drawings in Mr Norman's office and under his critical eye... During construction, many alterations and additions were made. Mr A.B. Hubback rendered me valuable assistance in these, as well as with the designing of the fixtures.³³³

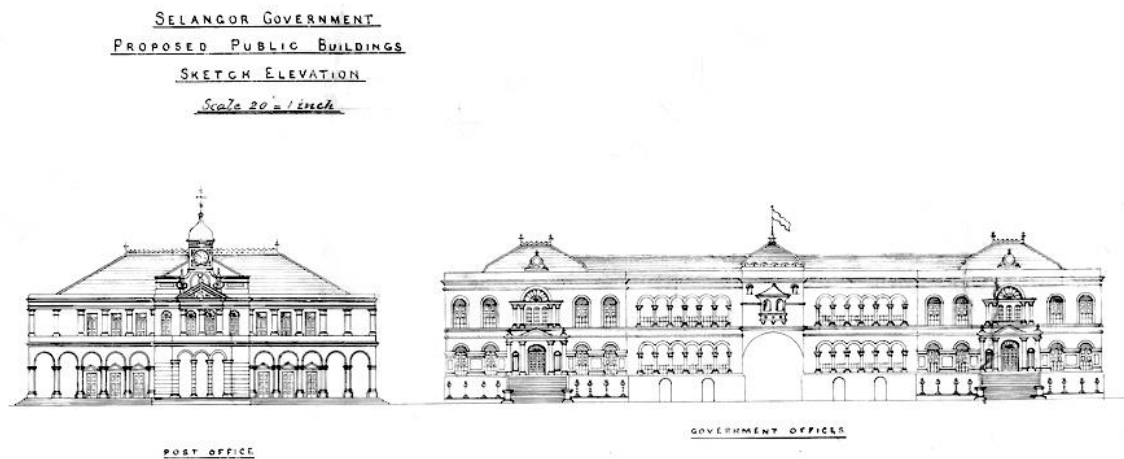


Figure 13. C. E. Spooner and R.A.J. Bidwell. *Selangor Government – Proposed Public Buildings*, 1893. ANM 1957/0042944.

Spooner's decision to adopt the 'Mahometan style' for these government offices would radically distinguish Kuala Lumpur's civic centre from the other townships of British Malaya and have long-lasting impacts on Malayan architecture. As Gullick argues, this choice of style was likely informed by Spooner's time in the PWD in Ceylon, as he was undoubtedly familiar with the Indo-Saracenic style which had predominated much British building in India in the latter half of the nineteenth century.³³⁴ Gullick notes the similarities between the Selangor government offices and Muir College in Allahabad, built by Emerson in the 1870s, and that Spooner may have seen drawings of the college which were published in technical journals.³³⁵ This is particularly evident in the upward arches of its spiral staircases, which are capped with onion domes, in a design that recalls the fifteenth-century Palazzo Contarini del Bovolo in Venice. The resulting building, with its central 135-foot clocktower topped with a copper

³³³ 'Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad (1897)', *Selections from the Selangor Journal*, edited by John Gullick (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), 190.

³³⁴ J.M. Gullick, 'Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad', *JMBRAS* 65.1 (1992): 31-2.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

dome, was an instant landmark.³³⁶ The completion of the building was a powerful symbol which, according to the editor of the state's gazette, the *Selangor Journal*, 'made it difficult to believe that even so near to us as in Singapore there are some who still regard Kuala Lumpur as "a place in the jungle"'.³³⁷

Why was the Indo-Saracenic style chosen for this new Malayan capital? As Gullick notes, Spooner did not give further explanation for his choice to choose the 'Mahometan style' in favour of the established Renaissance revival models so widely used across British Malaya.³³⁸ Spooner's sentiments in some ways anticipate those of F.O. Oertel, the superintending engineer at Allahabad, who argued a decade later that

those who advocate a Colonial Renaissance style [for New Delhi]... forget the true significance of the move to Delhi and of our position in the country... [not] in India as colonists intent on making a home there as nearly like the one we have left behind... [but] to exercise Imperial sway... with the consent of the people and for their benefit.³³⁹

The choice of an overtly Islamic style of architecture in Kuala Lumpur can be read as an attempt on the part of British authorities to ingratiate themselves with the Sultan of Selangor, and to portray the British as patrons of the Sultan. As noted by both Thomas Metcalf and Preeti Chopra, from the mid-nineteenth century, the British had used Indo-Saracenic architecture to 'project themselves as legitimate successors to the Mughals'.³⁴⁰ As Chopra notes, however, 'the Indo-Saracenic of Madras did not have the same meaning as the Indo-Saracenic of Bombay'.³⁴¹ What then did the Indo-Saracenic style mean in Kuala Lumpur?

Unlike in British India, where Mughal architecture provided a stylistic template for British imperial architecture, Selangor had no native tradition of masonry building to draw upon. As

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

³³⁷ 'Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad (1897)', 191.

³³⁸ Gullick, 'Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad', 31.

³³⁹ Cited in Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision*, 215-16.

³⁴⁰ Preeti Chopra, *A Joint Enterprise: Indian Elites and the Making of British Bombay* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 32.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

noted above, local buildings were primarily constructed from timber. British India, and the Indo-Saracenic, therefore provided the template for an Islamic architecture in Selangor. Indeed, the *Selangor Journal* noted at the building's opening that the new government offices had been designed 'of a character quite new in this country'.³⁴² British architectural patronage in the Indo-Saracenic style did not proceed in a straightforward manner, however.

In 1888, a wood and attap 'istana on a plan chosen by His Highness' was constructed at Bukit Nanas in Kuala Lumpur, and the Sultan was invited to approve a site for a larger, more architecturally ambitious palace in 1892.³⁴³ The 'main feature' of this scheme was to be 'the erection of some five or six separate buildings, within a fort or walled enclosure.'³⁴⁴ The style of this proposed palace is not stated in the *Selangor Journal*, and no plans for it survive. Whether the Indo-Saracenic style helped ingratiate British authorities with Sultan Abdul Samad remains unclear as this latter palace would never be realised. The style did, however, apparently resonate with Sultan Abdul Samad's son and successor, Sultan Sulaiman. Following his accession to the throne of Selangor in 1898, a new site at the royal seat of Klang was chosen for Sulaiman's palace, and a domed palace modelled on the Selangor government offices was constructed there at the turn of the twentieth century.³⁴⁵

The Indo-Saracenic style had become the architectural language of Selangor's new capital, and over the next two decades the status of this architectural language would be cemented through the construction of a series of new buildings by Arthur Benison Hubback, including the Municipal Offices and Town Hall (1901), the Post Office (1902), Railway Offices (1902), and the city's grand new Railway Station (1908).³⁴⁶

The son of a former Mayor of Liverpool,³⁴⁷ Arthur Benison Hubback joined the Public Works Department in Selangor in 1895.³⁴⁸ He had previously been articled to the Liverpool

³⁴² 'Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad (1897)', 183.

³⁴³ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 146-7.

³⁴⁴ 'An Istana at Kuala Lumpur?', 13 January 1893, *Selections from the Selangor Journal*, edited by John Gullick, 178.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 146-8.

³⁴⁶ Ashley Jackson, *Buildings of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 124-5. See also: Arthur Benison Hubback, 'Nomination Paper for Admission as Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects', file number 1426, 28 July 1909. London: Royal Institute of British Architects.

³⁴⁷ 'General Hubback', *Malaya Tribune*, 13 October 1917, 4.

³⁴⁸ Arthur Benison Hubback, 'Nomination Paper'.

City Architect Thomas Shelmerdine in 1887, and by June 1890 was made Assistant at City Architect and Surveyor's Office in Liverpool. In July 1901, Hubback was appointed as Architectural Assistant to the Director of Public Works of the Federated Malay States.³⁴⁹ He became a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1909, his nomination papers supported by Sir Aston Webb (1849-1930) on the basis of his extensive work in Malaya. A prominent architect of imperial monuments in both England and Hong Kong, Webb noted that he was 'only acquainted with the candidate's work through photographs and drawings owing to their being situated in the Malay States but they seem... to justify his application.'³⁵⁰

While the Indo-Saracenic style came to define the city that would go on to become the capital of the Federated Malay States, it did not spread in any meaningful manner beyond Kuala Lumpur. Even Hubback, who was eminently proficient in the style, would not use it for major commissions outside of Kuala Lumpur. The isolated examples of the style in Singapore and Penang are limited to mosques and a few idiosyncratic buildings such as the Alkaff Arcade, built by David McLeod Craik for a wealthy Arab trading family. This suggests that the style was too closely associated with Islam to be used for government buildings in the Straits Settlements, which no longer came under the jurisdiction of Malay Sultans. Even as Kuala Lumpur was being remade in the image of British India, classicism remained the prevalent mode of imperial architecture in the rest of British Malaya. The exceptional flowering of Spooner's so-called 'Mahometan' style in Kuala Lumpur is thus the exception that proves the rule; outside of Selangor, classicism remained firmly entrenched as the language of British rule in Malaya, as evidenced by other state capitals in the Federated Malay States. Instead, the Edwardian Baroque would become the dominant mode of architectural expression in Malaya over the course of the 1910s and 1920s.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.* See also: Arthur Benison Hubback, 'Letter from Mr. A.B Hubback, Architectural Assistant, re his status in the Dept:', in Selangor PWD Correspondence, 2 February 1907, PWD 3132/1907, ANM 1957/0589468.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Variations on a Theme: The Spread of British Imperial Classicism



Figure 14. Gerald Edward Livock. Aerial photograph of the royal seat of Klang, Selangor, circa 1925. IWM Q82205.

By the 1910s, British Imperial classicism would extend to Malaya's regional centres as economic development opened up new areas to rural development and the apparatus of colonial administration reached further into the hinterland. Models of urban planning and approaches to colonial classicism developed in Penang and Singapore over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would, by the turn of the twentieth century, be deployed across the length of the Malayan Peninsula's west coast. Being the primary economic and political centres of British Malaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and George Town were naturally the focus of major colonial building projects. But by the turn of the twentieth century, however, other regional centres were in the process of being laid out or expanded, their growth aided by the spreading reach of Malaya's railway networks and an increasingly intensive programme of economic

development. Both tin mining and agriculture provided the impetus for strengthening the networks of governance and trade within British Malaya.³⁵¹

As Britain's influence over the Malayan Peninsula extended, so too did its town planning principles. Early town planning in Malaya, which came under the purview of the various Sanitary Boards, was intrinsically tied to sanitation. As noted by Chang in *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, while sanitary reforms to planning emerged in the United Kingdom by the mid-nineteenth century, 'these reforms had little impact upon and made minimal headway in the colonies during the same period, at least in relation to the housing of the colonized population.'³⁵² At least initially, new ideas around sanitation manifested themselves in the tropics through the 'emergence of highly sanitized and regulated military and medical enclaves.'³⁵³ At the turn of the twentieth century, this would change, and principles of hygiene would shape the colonial urban landscape. Lynn Hollen Lees argues that 'British colonial administrators offered good government as their justification for ruling Malaya', and that this governance was achieved by 'disciplining urban populations' through 'sanitary regimes in combination with harsh policing'.³⁵⁴ By 1913, legislation gave these municipal authorities 'sweeping powers over public spaces, private buildings and public behaviour.'³⁵⁵ The practice of planning was thus increasingly rationalised and standardised over the course of the twentieth century. As Malayan towns were developed, they became increasingly uniform in appearance as a result of planning principles and building by-laws. This homogeneity was heightened by the near-universal adoption of classicism in both administrative buildings and in the new streetscapes shaped by these planning laws.

Classicism became the public face of British administration across Malaya. Public Works Department architects such as A.B. Hubback would go on to design a number of other government buildings across Malaya, though none of these would be carried out in the Indo-Saracenic style adopted in Kuala Lumpur, suggesting that Spooner's tastes and influence did

³⁵¹ See: Amarjit Kaur, 'The Impact of Railroads on the Malayan Economy, 1874-1941', *Journal of Asian Studies* XXXIX.4 (1980): 693-710; and Thomas R. Leinbach, 'Transportation and the Development of Malaya', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 65.2 (1975): 270-82.

³⁵² Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 129.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ Lynn Hollen Lees, 'Discipline and delegation: colonial governance in Malayan towns, 1880-1930', *Urban History* 38.1 (2011): 48-9.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

not extend beyond the Selangor PWD. Hubback's classical contributions to Malayan public architecture include the District Office in Klang (1910), which closely resembles his design for the Malay Residential College at Kuala Kangsar (1909), the Seremban government offices (1912), and the Town Hall and Post Office in Ipoh (1917).³⁵⁶ These imposing buildings, generally set beside parade greens and large boulevards, would be anchor grids of shophouse terraces which extended from the various urban centres, all for the most part articulated in some variant of the classical style. The hierarchical and highly structured urban forms of these colonial centres were part of what Cannadine describes as the ornamentalist approach to imperialism, in which the British Empire's hierarchical structures were made 'visible, immanent, and actual.'³⁵⁷

Architectural motifs would be repeated across colonial administrative buildings in different states. In both the town halls Hubback designed for Ipoh and Seremban, for example, the bays of rusticated arcades project to emphasise entrances, with doubled columns supporting prominently moulded pediments above. Given Hubback's connection to the city, this particular architectural gesture may have been inspired by the principal elevation of the Dock Offices in Liverpool, designed by Briggs, Wolstenholme, Hobbs and Thornley in 1900.³⁵⁸ Despite their differences in size and in the specific arrangement of offices, both the Ipoh and Seremban Town Halls, constructed five years and almost 300 kilometres apart, share a common architectural language, uniting the two Malayan mining centres architecturally. Their affinities with the Port of Liverpool Building tie them in to broader architectural trends within the British Empire. Drawing on the work of Foucault, Chang calls this use of monumental architecture to telegraph governmental power 'ornamental governmentality', referring to the use of such architecture as 'part of the performance of spectacle.'³⁵⁹ This performance of the spectacle of imperial governance would be played out with ritualistic repetition across the Malayan Peninsula.

³⁵⁶ Hubback, 'Nomination Paper'.

³⁵⁷ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 122.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.* While Hubback was already working in Malaya by the time the Port of Liverpool Building was under construction, he would almost certainly have been familiar with the building through trade publications such as *The Builder*. See: Peter de Figueiredo, 'Symbols of Empire: The Buildings of the Liverpool Waterfront', *Architectural History* 46 (2003): 232-7.

³⁵⁹ Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 97.

By the early twentieth century, a particular brand of classicism, one inflected by the Edwardian interest in Baroque revivalism, had emerged as the imperial style of British Malaya. This style, which was consolidated in tandem with the crystallisation of town planning laws in Malaya, spoke to its urban audiences of regulation, rationality, and control. The idiosyncratic use of the Indo-Saracenic style in Kuala Lumpur notwithstanding, the uniformity of this classical language across Malaya's governmental buildings hints at the British push towards Federation within Malaya, telegraphing to its urban audiences a continuity of governance that spanned the disparate Sultanates of the Peninsula. While the earlier Palladian villas built by East India Company men in Malaya were rooted in a certain English aristocratic tradition, appropriated by the mercantile trading elites, the classicism of twentieth century administration was that of an imperial juggernaut, an increasingly monolithic entity that brought vast swathes of territory through by-laws rather than battleships. This monumental imperial style would become increasingly grandiose, culminating in the unfinished rebuilding of Singapore's administrative district in the 1920s and 1930s. As Bradley argues, appeals to the classical were the intellectual means by which Britain 'bestow[ed] legitimacy' on its imperial project.³⁶⁰

In Malaya, the grandeur of Graeco-Roman Antiquity was borrowed in order to convey the values of a modern British Imperial administration in both the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States. The constant repetition of this architectural language, reproduced across the administrative buildings of British Malaya, meant that this architecture became a signifier of power. As Gadamer argues:

Ornament or decoration is determined by its relation to what it decorates, by what carries it... Ornament is part of the presentation. But presentation is an ontological event; it is representation. An ornament, a decoration, a piece of sculpture set up in a chosen place are representative in the same sense that, say, the church in which they are to be found is itself representative.³⁶¹

³⁶⁰ Bradley, 'Introduction', 11.

³⁶¹ Gadamer, 'The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative', 130.

Classical ornament, and indeed classical buildings in general, thus became representative of governance and imperial power. In much the same way that British architects borrowed the associations of Roman imperial grandeur to telegraph British imperial governance, local elites in Malaya would borrow and co-opt the language of British power in order to assert their own authority and institutions.

Chapter III. A Classical Education: Schools in British Malaya

Schooling in British Malaya was as diverse as its colonial populace. Indeed, education in Malaya was fragmented along lines of race, religion, language and class. Missionaries, both Anglican and Catholic, pioneered education as a means of proselytization as well as education.³⁶² The first schools established in the Straits Settlements used English as the medium of instruction, most notably the Penang Free School (1816), the Anglo-Chinese College in Melaka (1818), and the Raffles Institution in Singapore (1823).³⁶³ An early attempt at using Malay as the medium of instruction was made by the Protestant missionary Reverend Benjamin Keasberry, through the small school he established in Singapore in 1840.³⁶⁴ This school would educate members of the Johor elite, who were sent to board in Singapore.³⁶⁵

Colonial authorities in the Federated Malay States would begin establishing vernacular schools later in the nineteenth century, with the first set up in Klang in 1875.³⁶⁶ By 1902, Selangor had 40 Malay schools, while neighbouring Perak would have 171 Malay schools by the end of the decade.³⁶⁷ As the historian Khoo Kay Kim notes, these were the two Malay States where 'British efforts in promoting Malay education' were 'most noticeable'.³⁶⁸ Even then, colonial education policy for the Malay community sought to reinforce the established social order of Malay society by educating the sons of its rulers while largely excluding rural Malaya.³⁶⁹ The rapid expansion of this school system by colonial authorities parallels the

³⁶² David W. Scott, *Mission as Globalization: Methodists in Southeast Asia at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 135, 181, and elsewhere *passim*. See also: Soon-Tzu Speechley and Yeo Kang Shua, 'They will not suffer a church more beautiful than their own': The Chinese as patrons of ecclesiastical architecture in early twentieth-century Singapore', paper presented at EAAC 2017 International Conference on East Asian Architectural Culture, 13-17 October, School of Architecture, Tianjin University, Tianjin, China.

³⁶³ Neil Khor Jin Keong, 'Peranakan Chinese Literature in Penang and the Region: With an Emphasis on Anglophone Penang Peranakan Writing', *JMBRAS* 82.2 (2009): 137

³⁶⁴ Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 73. Keasberry would also be instrumental in disseminating Malay texts through his printing press. See: Lim Peng Han, 'Elementary Malay vernacular schools and school libraries in Singapore under British colonial rule, 1819-1941', *School Libraries Worldwide* 14.1 (2008): 75.

³⁶⁵ Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 102.

³⁶⁶ J.M. Gullick, 'The Fall and Rise of Klang, 1867-1900', *JMBRAS* 79.1 (2006): 15.

³⁶⁷ Khoo Kay Kim, 'Malay Society, 1874-1920s', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 5.2 (1974): 184.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ Keith Watson, 'Rulers and ruled: Racial perceptions, curriculum and schooling in colonial Malaya and Singapore', *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in the British Colonial Experience*, ed.

establishment and consolidation of the Malayan Civil Service.³⁷⁰ As the British became more involved in the administration of Malaya, Malay-language schools became an instrument of imperial intervention.

By contrast, the colonial authorities initially adopted a largely *laissez-faire* approach to the teaching of non-Malays. While English-language government schools recruited some non-Malay students destined for careers in the Malayan Civil Service,³⁷¹ the educational needs of the Chinese and Indian communities were otherwise left in their own hands, resulting in a proliferation of vernacular schools which used Chinese and Tamil as the medium of instruction.³⁷² The result was an incredible diversity of educational practices in both the Federated and Unfederated Malay States and the Straits Settlements. As noted by Keith Watson in his survey of race and education in colonial Malaya and Singapore, ‘at no time before the Second World War, except in a few government-aided schools, were there any attempts to use the education system as a means of bringing together the different races in a sense of national harmony.’³⁷³ Instead, education in British Malay appears to be the product of what the colonial civil servant and historian of Southeast Asia J.S. Furnivall’s termed a ‘plural society’, ‘a unit of disparate parts which owes its existence to external factors, and lacks a common social will’.³⁷⁴

Even within ethnic groups, educational practices varied. According to Philip Loh Fook Seng in his survey of colonial education policy in British Malaya, Malay education was effectively ‘dualistic’.³⁷⁵ The sons of the Malay nobility groomed to rule at the elite Malay College at Kuala Kangsar, an institution modelled on British public schools.³⁷⁶ Other Malays, as well as the children of Muslims from across the Malay Archipelago and Indian Ocean, received a

J.A. Mangan (London: Routledge, 1993), 152-3. See also: Charles Hirschman, ‘Educational patterns in colonial Malaya’, *Comparative Education Review* 16.3 (October 1972): 489.

³⁷⁰ Yeo Kim Wah, ‘The Grooming of an Elite: Malay Administrators in the Federated Malay States, 1903-1941’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 11.2 (1980): 288.

³⁷¹ Watson, ‘Rulers and ruled’, 162.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 153. See also: Hirschman, ‘Educational patterns in colonial Malaya’, 488.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁷⁴ Cited in Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malay 1874-1940* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1.

³⁷⁵ Loh, *Seeds of Separatism*, 11.

³⁷⁶ Yeo, ‘The Grooming of an Elite’

religious education at Quranic schools.³⁷⁷ Many of the schools established by the Chinese community focused on rote learning of the classics, perpetuating a version of traditional Chinese schooling models.³⁷⁸ As the Qing government officially prohibited Chinese emigration until 1894, there was no policy governing Chinese education overseas, and there were few attempts by the British colonial government in Malaya to control Chinese schools until after the First World War.³⁷⁹ The result was a Chinese education sector which was largely unregulated until the mid-1920s, when concerns about the influence of increasingly heated politics in mainland China prompted Malaya's colonial authority to increase the role of school inspectors and tighten rules governing the expansion of all schools.³⁸⁰ Government-supported English-medium schools in urban areas trained a diverse, but predominantly Chinese and South Asian, student body, while missionary schools, mostly founded by various Catholic orders, educated and converted large swathes of the populace, but were barred from proselytising to the indigenous Muslim population as a result of treaties between the Malay rulers and the British.³⁸¹ This may have helped cement the preference for the more 'universal' classical style over the Gothic, which had clear associations with Christianity. A sub-set of missionary schools, building upon the evangelical work of Protestant missionaries in China, were established in the early nineteenth century, but were limited in number.³⁸² As Watson notes, this 'allowed four parallel school systems to develop, largely along ethnic lines',³⁸³ though as noted above, there was variety even within these four major streams.

Despite the great variety of school systems in colonial Malaya, and with the exception of a few Catholic schools constructed in the Gothic Revival style, classical architecture came to be the architectural mode of choice for the vast majority of educational institutions with any architectural pretensions. The flexibility of the classical language meant that it could be adapted to a diverse range of educational institutions. This chapter will examine the way the classical language of architecture was adapted to the wide range of educational institutions in British Malaya by surveying a variety of schools. An exhaustive survey of schools constructed

³⁷⁷ Watson, 'Rulers and ruled', 153-4.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 153. See also: Lee Ting Hui, *Chinese Schools in British Malaya: Policies and Politics* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 2006), 2.

³⁷⁹ Lee, *Chinese Schools in British Malaya*, 12-13, 46-52, 72-84, and elsewhere *passim*.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 68-84.

³⁸¹ Watson, 'Rulers and ruled', 150.

³⁸² Lee, *Chinese Schools in British Malaya*, 3-5.

³⁸³ Watson, 'Rulers and ruled', 150.

in the classical style is beyond the scope of this work. Rather, this chapter will provide a cross-section of Malaya's plural school system by examining a variety of case studies: St Joseph's Institution in Singapore, a Catholic school re-designed by a French Jesuit missionary; the Malay Free School at Sultan Street, Singapore, funded by the bequest left by a wealthy Arab trading family; the Tao Nan Chinese School at Armenian Street in Singapore, a Chinese school with a modernising curriculum funded by an influential group of Hokkien merchants; the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar designed by Arthur Bennison Hubback, the architect of Indo-Saracenic Kuala Lumpur; and the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur, which began as a private school but came under government control in the 1920s, and was subsequently transformed into a flagship colonial educational institution.

Saint Joseph's Institution, Singapore

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]

Figure 15. Photograph of St Joseph's Institution, circa 1940. Singapore Art Museum.

St Joseph's Institution in Singapore was established by Father Jean-Marie Beurel, who put forward the idea of a school 'placed under the direction of the "Christian Brothers"... specially brought up for the purpose... of this eminently Christian and Civilizing call' in the late 1840s.³⁸⁴ Beurel used his own money, some \$4,000, to purchase land at the corner of

³⁸⁴ 'To All Friends of Christian Civilization' [Letter from Fr. Beurel], *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 22 June 1848, 3.

Victoria Street and Bras Basah Road.³⁸⁵ The first incarnation of this school opened on the grounds of the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd in 1852, and the foundation stones for its first dedicated building were laid nearby at Bras Basah Road in 1855.³⁸⁶ By the mid-1860s, the school was already becoming a well-respected educational institution, with the Governor of the Straits Settlements commenting at a scholarship ceremony:

the Christian Brothers' School both here [in Singapore] and at Penang but more especially the former, have made a most satisfactory display and shewn themselves formidable rivals of the older Establishment [i.e. the Raffles Institution.]³⁸⁷

Singapore was of particular significance to Catholic missionaries in the East. The island, with its large Chinese population, was seen as a potential launching pad for further missionary activities in China.³⁸⁸ With proscriptions against the conversion of Malay-Muslims constituting an important part of the social contract between the British and Malay authorities, the populous Chinese community in British Malaya became a particular focus for Christian missionary activities. This is made explicit in the circular letter of the Paris Foreign Missions Society:

Chinese Christianity in Singapore continues to grow in numbers and influence under the leadership of Messieurs Vignol and Gazeau; it has doubled in ten years and attained the figure of 2,000 faithful. When the Sacred Heart has its [new] church, already planned two years ago, the movement can only increase ; we hope it will be [completed] soon. The Chinese element is the future of the Mission: the figure of 113 adult baptisms, achieved this year, demonstrates that this population – so seemingly busy and indifferent – is not deaf to the voice of the missionary.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁵ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old times in Singapore, from the Foundation of the Settlement Under the Honourable the East India Company, on Feb. 6th, 1819, to the Transfer to the Colonial Office as Part of the Colonial Possessions of the Crown on April 1st, 1867, Volume 1* (Singapore: Fraser & Neave Ltd, 1902), 265.

³⁸⁶ Hedwig Alfred, *Living the Mission: The SJI Story, 1852-2002* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2002), 9-11.

³⁸⁷ Quoted in *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 8 February 1866, 2.

³⁸⁸ Speechley and Yeo, "They will not suffer a church more beautiful than their own".

³⁸⁹ Société des Missions-Étrangères, *Lettre Commune No. 35 [Compte-rendu des travaux]* (Paris: Séminaire des Missions-Étrangères, 1900), 182.

With their potential to provide both a religious education and aid in proselytization, schools were an important part of the Christian missionary programme in Asia. Indeed, Father Beurel commented that ‘a church without a school is like a king without progeny.’³⁹⁰ Education thus became part and parcel of the Catholic Church’s evangelical mission in British Malaya.

The school continued to expand, and at the turn of the twentieth century, Father Charles-Benedict Nain drew up plans for a new domed building flanked by two wings of classrooms along the important thoroughfare of Bras Basah Road.³⁹¹ This building would have considerably greater architectural pretensions than the simple buildings the school had previously occupied. With its central dome and curved wings enclosing a forecourt, Nain’s design faintly recalls on a more intimate scale the dramatic Baroque planning of Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s design for Saint Peter’s Square in Rome, though Bernini’s colonnade is translated into a double-storeyed arcade to shelter students from the glare and rain of the tropics. The school was an architectural statement to match the steeples of the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd across the road and the nearby Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, consolidating the area as a Catholic stronghold within Singapore. The chapel at St Joseph’s Institution was decorated with stained glass sourced from Belgium. These windows were designed by the atelier of Jules Dobbelaere in Bruges.³⁹² Dobbelaere was a prolific maker of stained glass, and his work was exported to Catholic institutions around the world, including Singapore and Java.³⁹³ The use of this stained glass helped tie the school materially to networks of trade and culture within the Catholic Church.

Born in France in 1870, Nain came to Singapore in 1894 and was involved in the design of a number of Catholic institutions in Malaya, including the Chapel at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Singapore and St Paul’s Institution in Seremban.³⁹⁴ He is described as being ‘an architect by training’ in a history of the Convent, though secondary sources fail to give

³⁹⁰ Alfred, *Living the Mission*, 11.

³⁹¹ Ch[arles-Benedict] Nain, ‘Proposed New Front Elevation for St Joseph’s Institution, Singapore’, N.D. [1901], un-numbered building plan, NAS CBS 1142.

³⁹² Yeo Kang Shua and Swati Chandgadkar, ‘Windows into History’, *BiblioAsia* 12.04 (2017). URL: <http://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/2017/01/03/windows-into-history/>.

³⁹³ *Ibid.* See also: Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai, and Jacqueline Yip, *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994), 60.

³⁹⁴ ‘Death of Father Nain’, *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 July 1916, 10. See also: Elaine Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus: 150 Years in Singapore* (Penang: The Lady Superior, 2004), 52.

evidence of where he was trained.³⁹⁵ While it is not clear where Nain was trained, the quality of Nain's draughtsmanship makes it clear he had some form of technical education in architecture. It seems likely that Nain studied at an architectural atelier in France, giving him the necessary skills required to design the sophisticated buildings he created for the Catholic Church in Singapore. Set between the spires of the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd and the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, the dome of St Joseph's Institution also echoed that of the Singapore Museum sited across the school's field at the foot of Fort Canning. The building's classicism thus served to highlight both the traditions of the Catholic church and, perhaps, also to convey colonial ideas of learning exemplified by the museum, which was constructed in the 1880s.

The building was well received upon completion. After visiting Singapore, the architect's brother Abbé B. Nain wrote:

Saint Joseph's Institution is one of the most beautiful buildings in Singapore. The façade is a hemicycle with a beautiful colonnade measuring three hundred feet. An imposing cupola dominates the whole. This remarkable edifice, admired even by foreigners, was built according to the plans and under the direction of Father Nain, the current priest of the cathedral.³⁹⁶

The dome of St Joseph's Institution added to the concentration of Catholic monuments clustered around the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, alongside the nearby Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, and the Portuguese Mission Church. The effect of these monuments, in a mix of classical and gothic styles gave the area the nickname of 'Holy City'.³⁹⁷ St Joseph's was thus not only an imposing educational monument, but part of an ensemble of buildings through which the Catholic Church was able to present an image of benevolence and patronage within the heart of Singapore.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ Abbé B. Nain, *En Extrême-Orient : Impressions et Souvenirs* (Lille: Société Saint-Augustin, Desclée, De Brouwer & Cie, 1913), 74.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

The Tao Nan Chinese School, Singapore

By the late nineteenth century, the population of Singapore was predominantly Chinese, with the Hokkien community – hailing from southern Fujian Province – the most populous dialect group.³⁹⁸ Chinese merchants consolidated their influence in Singapore through philanthropic works, establishing schools and temples.³⁹⁹ As with the patronage of temples, the establishment and management of schools was a ‘framework’ through which the creolised Straits-born Chinese could find common ground with the new migrants who were arriving *en masse* in Malaya in the nineteenth century.⁴⁰⁰ By serving as middlemen between the British authorities and more recent Chinese migrants, the Straits-born Chinese community were able to amass considerable wealth and political influence.⁴⁰¹ The community was increasingly ‘Anglophile in their outlook’, viewing themselves as the ‘King’s Chinese’.⁴⁰² As Philip Holden notes in his study of Straits Chinese literature,

The Straits Chinese were cultural hybrids, ethnic Chinese who frequently served as middlemen between colonial power and the broader population of the colonised. As recent studies have argued, the identity of the Straits Chinese was situational, changing over time.⁴⁰³

This hybrid character, the performance of which was adjusted according to context, is evident in the architectural patronage of the Straits Chinese community too. In the schools they constructed over the course of the early twentieth century, the Chinese community

³⁹⁸ Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 163-4. See also: *Census of the Straits Settlements, 1881*, cited in Maurice Freedman, ‘Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Singapore’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3.1 (1960): 24 and 26.

³⁹⁹ Temples, along with clan and kinship organisations were central to the organisation of Chinese society in British Malaya. See: Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others* 162-70.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 163, 178.

⁴⁰¹ Kwa Chong Guan, ‘The Political Dilemmas and Transformations of the Straits-born Chinese Community in the era of Decolonisation’, *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan and Kua Bak Lim (Singapore: World Scientific, 2019), 693. See also: Philip Holden, ‘Literature in English in Singapore before 1965’, *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, edited by Angelia Poon, Philip Holden, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 8.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*

⁴⁰³ Holden, ‘Literature in English in Singapore before 1965’, 8.

would adopt the Edwardian Baroque style with gusto, reflecting their identification with the colonial government in the Straits Settlements.

Spearheaded by the philanthropist Tan Boo Liat, the Tao Nan School was established by a group of influential Hokkien merchants on 8 November 1906.⁴⁰⁴ The school was initially run from Siam House, the former home of Tan Boo Liat's grandfather – the politician and businessman Tan Kim Ching – on North Bridge Road, until a large donation from the sugar tycoon Oei Tiong Ham made the construction of purpose-built premises at Armenian Street possible.⁴⁰⁵ The construction of this school was thus an act of patronage on the part of a number of significant figures in Straits Chinese society. Significantly, this school would be designed by a Straits-born Chinese man.

The school has been erroneously attributed to the Municipal Engineer's Office in the secondary literature, most likely due to the Office's stamp on the building plans. The building was in fact designed by Tan Seng Chong (c. 1874-1927),⁴⁰⁶ with plans signed by the firm of 'Chong & Co' lodged with the Municipal Engineer's Office on 18 August 1910.⁴⁰⁷ After working as an apprentice for the Singapore Municipality for 13 years, Tan Seng Chong became the first Chinese person in Singapore to commence private architectural practice as a sole proprietor.⁴⁰⁸

Each of the school's three storeys comprises nine bays, with the three bays on either end canted. The central bay supports a triangular pediment, with the date of construction

⁴⁰⁴ Lim Guan Hock, 'Development of Chinese Education in Singapore (1819-1979)', *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan and Kua Bak Lim (Singapore: World Scientific, 2019), 427. See also: Ong Chu Meng, Lim Hoon Yong, and Ng Lai Yang (Eds.), *Tan Lark Sye: Advocate and Founder of Nanyang University* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 78-9.

⁴⁰⁵ Ong et al., *Tan Lark Sye* 78-9.

⁴⁰⁶ 'Acknowledgment', *Malaya Tribune*, 25 August 1927, 8,

⁴⁰⁷ [Tan Seng] Chong & Co., 'Proposed Chinese [sic] School to be Erected at Armenian Street for Mr Toh Lum', 18 August 1910, Building Plan 10204/1910, NAS CBS 127. The 'Mr Toh Lum' named in the building plans does not exist, and appears to be the product of a miscommunication between English and Chinese speakers. 'Toh Lum' is a non-standard transliteration of the school's name in Hokkien. The Chinese characters on the building plan read 道南學堂, which is pronounced Tō-lâm Hāk-tông in Hokkien or Dàonán xuétáng in Mandarin. The school, which has moved out of its Armenian Street premises to a new campus, is now officially known as Tao Nan School.

⁴⁰⁸ Lai Chee Kien, 'Pioneer Architect: Tan Seng Chong', Bukit Brown: All Things Bukit Brown website, URL: <http://bukitbrown.com/main/?cat=116&paged=8>.

surrounded by ornate floral plasterwork. On all three storeys, broad fluted Corinthian pilasters topped with dentillated cornices flank segmental arches set on smaller Corinthian pilasters, which frame vasiform balustrades made of green ceramic. The balustrade parapet that crowns the building also features deep green ceramic balusters. Inside, a central lightwell helps provide illumination to the classrooms set on either side of the grand staircase which connects the school's three storeys. Two single-storey bays on either side of the building, intended to house kitchens and servants' quarters, were not constructed. Plans of the building as it was built were lodged by Swan & Maclaren to the Municipal Engineer's Office in February of 1912.⁴⁰⁹

The exuberantly ornamental form of classicism adopted by Chong & Co. for the Tao Nan School echoes the same florid style adopted by members of Singapore's Chinese mercantile community in their shophouses and warehouses. Indeed, Tan Seng Chong's firm designed a great number of ornate residential and mercantile buildings for Chinese clients.⁴¹⁰ These buildings demonstrate Tan Seng Chong's ability to reconcile the traditional Chinese shophouse typology with the classical language, integrating ornamental vocabulary from both these traditions.

This eclectic mode of classicism was enthusiastically embraced by the mercantile Straits Chinese community, reflecting their wealth. The adoption of classicism may also have been a means by which the Straits Chinese patrons of the school signalled their layered cultural affiliations. Enjoying the privileges of citizenship in the Crown Colony, Straits-born Chinese, some of whom were educated in English while speaking Chinese dialects at home, came to occupy a position as middlemen between the British authorities and later Chinese sojourners and migrants.⁴¹¹ The Tao Nan School's confident eclectic classicism could therefore be seen as a means by which the more established Hokkien merchants of Singapore demonstrated their place within the colony, even as they promoted a modern education in their mother

⁴⁰⁹ Swan & Maclaren, 'Plan of a Proposed Chinese School as Erected at Armenian Street for Mr Toh Lum', 7 February 1912, Building Plan 405/1912, NAS CBS 128.

⁴¹⁰ See, for example Tan Seng Chong & Co., 'Plan of Additions & Alterations to House MC. No. 36 Upper Circular Road for Rice Store for Mr. Goh Yang Cheng', 16 December 1914, Building Plan 2140/1914; and 'Plan of a Shophouse Proposed to be Erected at Tanjong Pagar Road for Mr Lim Peng Siang', 8 October 1913, Building Plan 1389/1913, NAS CBS 130.

⁴¹¹ Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 163.

tongue. The use of a Singapore-born Chinese architect to design the school further highlights the way in which this language was adopted and adapted by the Straits Chinese community. This style would be adopted for other Chinese schools across Singapore. The Anglo-Chinese Mission's girls' school at Neil Road, designed by David McLeod Craik in 1911, is one such school.⁴¹² With its central broken pediment and domed lantern, rusticated columns, and porthole windows, the school's principal elevation used the Edwardian Baroque language to create an educational landmark along a major thoroughfare in Singapore's Chinatown. This Baroque language would continue to be used for Chinese schools a decade later. The most notable of these, the Chinese High School in Bukit Timah, was designed by Swan & Maclaren in 1924.⁴¹³ The building featured an extensive colonnade and an imposing 110-foot clocktower.⁴¹⁴ With its echoes of the Victoria Memorial Hall, designed by the same firm, the building demonstrates the extent to which the classical language had been internalised by Straits Chinese community as an appropriate architectural language for their own institutions. The adoption of this Edwardian Baroque idiom across a number of Chinese schools in British Malaya demonstrates the level to which the Straits Chinese community identified itself with its citizenship within the Empire. The clocktower of this school, in particular, served to telegraph the communities belonging in colonial Singapore.

As noted by Kwa Chong Guan, the Straits Chinese experienced a 'golden era' which 'coincided with the high noon of the British Empire at the start of the twentieth century.'⁴¹⁵ The adoption of the Edwardian Baroque for Chinese educational institutions reflects the community's acceptance of British rule in Malaya. For the Straits Chinese, whose wealth and political influence derived from their proximity with colonial power, the adoption and appropriation of this colonial language of power was an expression of their position within Malayan society. This Neo-Baroque idiom would also be adopted for a number of Chinese clan associations, such as the Yap Kongsi (1920s) in Penang,⁴¹⁶ and the Eng Choon Hoey Kuan (1930) in Kuala Lumpur, reflecting its acceptance among the Chinese.

⁴¹² David McLeod Craik, 'New Chinese Girls School for the Anglo Chinese Mission Niel [sic] Road', 2 December 1911, Building Plan 339/1911, NAS CBS 128.

⁴¹³ 'Chinese High School', *Straits Times*, 7 August 1924, 9.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁵ Kwa, 'The Political Dilemmas and Transformations of the Straits-born Chinese Community in the era of Decolonisation', 693.

⁴¹⁶ Khoo, *Streets of George Town*, 32.

PROPOSED CHINESE SCHOOL
TO BE ERECTED
AT
ARMENIAN STREET

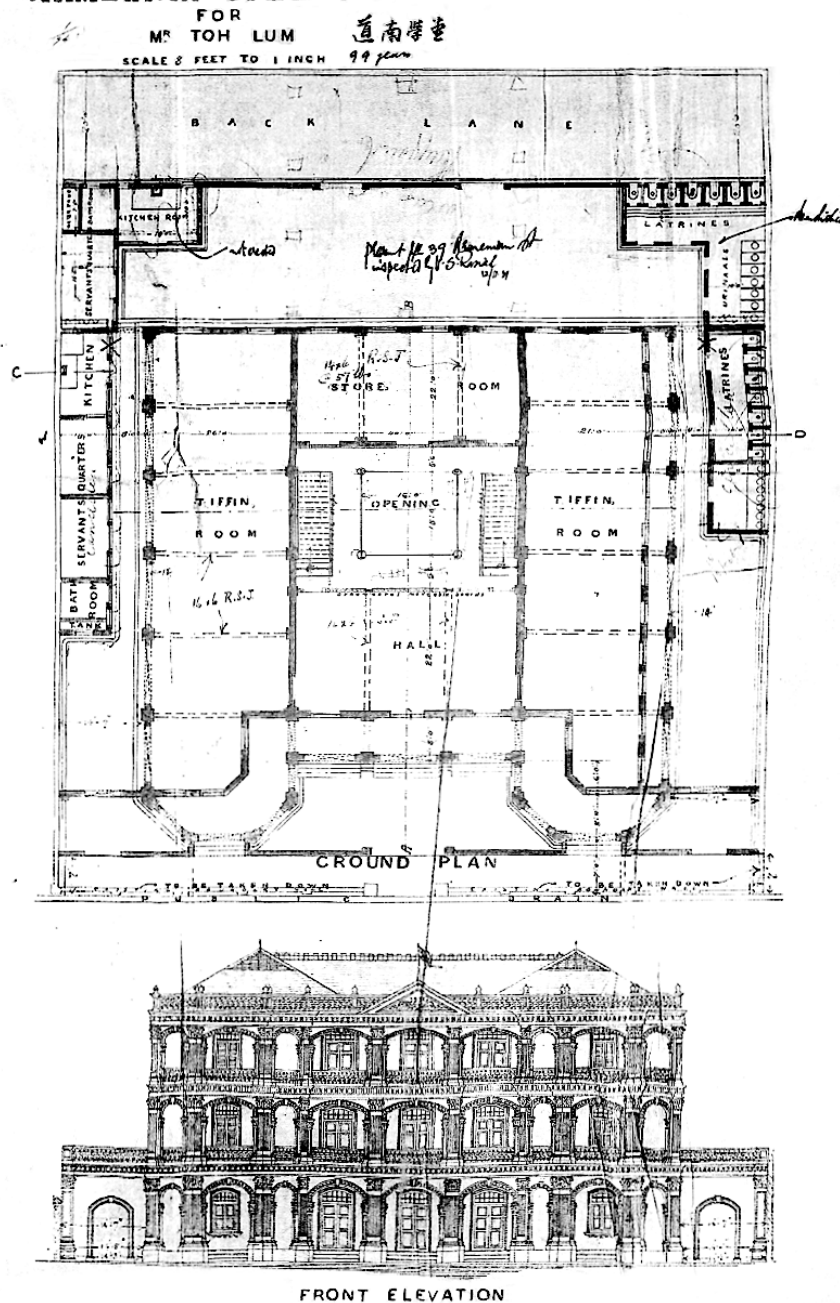


Figure 16. Chong & Co. Plan and elevation for the Tao Nan Chinese School at Armenian Street, 1910.
NAS CBS 127, Building Plan 10204.

The Malay College, Kuala Kangsar

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]

Figure 17. Photograph of the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, circa 1910. NMS 1997-03269.

Among the buildings which the Public Works Department architect Arthur Bennison Hubback cited to support his application for the status of Fellow of the RIBA was the ‘Malay Residential School, Kuala Kangsar’.⁴¹⁷ The Malay Residential School, later renamed the Malay College, would become a prestigious institution sometimes referred to in British Malaya as the ‘Eton of the East’ or ‘the ‘Malay Eton.’⁴¹⁸ The idea of a school to educate the Malay elite was first floated in 1903 by the then-Resident of Perak John Pickersill.⁴¹⁹ Despite initial resistance to the idea from the High Commissioners of the Federated Malay States, by 1905 the Inspector of Schools Richard James Wilkinson would succeed in pushing for

the establishment at a suitable locality in the FMS a special residential school for the education of Malays of good family and for the training of Malay boys for admission to certain branches of the Government Service.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁷ Arthur Benison Hubback, ‘Nomination Paper’.

⁴¹⁸ Yeo, ‘The Grooming of an Elite’, 293; Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 241.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.* 292.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

After a three-year trial, the school's operations would become permanent, though Wilkinson's vision of admissions based on merit would be superseded by an institution that predominantly served the scions of the upper class.⁴²¹ Under the aegis of Ernest Woodford Birch, who succeeded Pickersill as Resident of Perak in 1904, the Malay College would be reimagined along the lines of Britain's elite boarding schools, its student body drawn largely from the aristocracy.⁴²² In this manner, the approach adopted by British authorities to the education of the Malay elite resembled the one taken in the Indian princely states, where

princes were subject to contradictory expectations: to be educated along the lines of the English public school system yet retain a connection to Indian culture; to be receptive to technological and bureaucratic innovation and yet resist the demands for political change.⁴²³

The provision of local elites with the 'trappings of English public school education' was a feature of those states in India through which the British Empire exercised indirect rule, moulding a new generation of leaders who would go on to govern states administered by British civil servants.⁴²⁴ As Cannadine argues in *Ornamentalism*, the education of Indian princes was one of the means by which the British Empire 'replicat[ed] and reinforc[ed] the layered, time-hallowed social order of the metropolis.'⁴²⁵ This model of indirect governance, pioneered in India, would be applied to the Malay States through the Resident System. As in India, elite education would be a means by which indigenous class structures could be integrated into the class hierarchies of the British Empire.

While the Malay College may have been modelled on British public schools in terms of its ethos and approach to education, architecturally, the school's architect eschewed Gothic Revivalism. The choice of the classical over the Gothic may have been an attempt to avoid

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁴²² *Ibid.*

⁴²³ Fiona Groenhout, 'The History of the Indian Princely States: Bringing the Puppets Back onto Centre Stage', *History Compass* 4/4 (2006): 638.

⁴²⁴ Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, 'Rajputna under British Paramountcy: The Failure of Indirect Rule', *Journal of Modern History* 38.2 (1966): 140-41.

⁴²⁵ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 58.

any conflation with Christian institutions. The Treaty of Pangkor in 1874, had established the relationship between British administrators and Malay rulers, decreeing that

the Sultan receive and provide a suitable residence for a British Officer to be called Resident, who shall be accredited to his Court, and whose advice must be asked and acted upon on all questions other than those touching Malay Religion and Custom.⁴²⁶

British policy thus officially supported the traditional role of the Malay *ancien régime* as the ceremonial heads of the Islamic faith in the Malay States.⁴²⁷ Yet the school was also distinctly not an Islamic school, differing from the traditional *pondok* or madrassahs of the Malay world, making an overtly Islamic style inappropriate. Instead, Hubback adopted what may be described as a tropicalised approach to classicism in his design for the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar. This had been the architecture of Malaya's earliest schools, and was increasingly the language of modern institutional architecture, from medical to military.⁴²⁸

The Malay College's principal building has a C-shaped plan, surrounded by a giant Ionic order which spans the school's two storeys and wraps around the building. Doubled Ionic columns support the triangular pediments which cap the two wings of the building, while the central entrance is crowned with a segmental pediment. Cornices and mouldings are picked out in white plaster, contrasting with the redbrick tympana and the brick pilasters set behind the colonnade.

Hubback would adopt a similar overall plan for the Anderson Boys' School in Ipoh, though without the level of formality deployed for the princely school in the royal seat. In the Ipoh school, squat Doric columns set on pedestals, projecting eaves, rooflets, and porthole windows all serve to temper the formality of the building, giving it something of an Arts and Crafts character. The similar, yet distinct, approaches to classicism in the two schools, built at roughly the same time, perhaps reflect the hierarchy of colonial Perak. The school built to educate members of the Malay royalty was afforded the dignity of a giant Ionic order,

⁴²⁶ 'Pangkor Treaty – 20 January 1874'.

⁴²⁷ For a discussion of the politics around the religious role of the Malay rulers, see: Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 137-63 *passim*.

⁴²⁸ Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 51-120 *passim*.

whereas the school designed along a similar plan for the mining boomtown of Ipoh was articulated in a relatively informal manner. These two buildings, designed by the same PWD architect for two very different institutions in Perak, demonstrate how Malaya's British administrators were able to deploy classicism in different registers to reinforce the stratified class structures of Malayan society.

The adoption of classicism as an appropriate style for the Malay Muslim rulers of the Malay States began in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The use of an imperial mode of classicism in the school built by the British administration for the Malay ruling class can be read as reflecting the dynamics of indirect colonial rule. The local elites of British India were also educated at British public schools or institutions modelled thereon to reinforce class hierarchies.⁴²⁹ The Malay School at Kuala Kangsar can be seen as serving a similar function, 'replicating and reinforcing' the hierarchical nature of British society in its distant tropical protectorates. The same language of power which was used to convey British governance in Malaya was also adopted for the education of Malaya's native rulers, drafting them into the power structures of colonial administration by association through a shared architectural idiom. The school was thus an expression of Britain's colonial patronage. By the time the Malay School at Kuala Kangsar was constructed, classicism was considered an appropriate style by some Malay monarchs for their own architectural patronage, a phenomenon that will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁴²⁹ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 58

The Malay Free School at Jalan Sultan, Singapore

In 1906, the prominent Singapore-based Arab trader Syed Mohamed bin Ahmed Alsagoff bequeathed money for a Malay school in his will. A member of Singapore's Hadhrami Arab community, Syed Mohamed Alsagoff has been described by the historian Anthony Reid as 'the most influential of Singapore's Muslims in the 1880s and 1890s'.⁴³⁰ Hailing from the Hadhramaut region in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, the Hadhrami became enmeshed in the Indian Ocean trade from the late Middle Ages, spreading from Zanzibar to the Malay Archipelago.⁴³¹ For a time, Hadhrami traders also served as 'intermediaries between China and the ports of the archipelago' until the Ming Dynasty banned private foreign trade in its ports.⁴³² Syed Mohamed Alsagoff acted as a de facto acting consul to the Ottoman Empire.⁴³³ It was in this role that Syed Mohamed Alsagoff acted as an intermediary between the Acehnese, who were fighting a war of resistance against their Dutch colonisers, and the Ottoman Caliph.⁴³⁴ Aceh – like Singapore – had an influential Hadhrami community, and there was considerable movement of Hadhrami traders between Singapore and the Dutch East Indies. The Hadhramaut Arab Habib Abdur-Rahman az-Zahir, an official in the Aceh court who played a significant role in the war against the Dutch, had previously lived in Singapore and served as an advisor to Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor.⁴³⁵ Syed Mohamed Alsagoff was among the many Hadhrami Arabs in Singapore who raised money towards the Acehnese resistance against the Dutch during the Aceh War.⁴³⁶ He also had a concession in Kukup, a fishing village in the southwestern part of Johor.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁰ Anthony Reid, 'Aceh and the Turkish Connection', *Aceh: History, Politics and Culture*, edited by Arndt Graf, Susanne Schröter, and Edwin Wieringa (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010), 33-4.

⁴³¹ Yusof A. Talib, 'Les Hadramis et le Monde malais', *Archipel* 7 (1974): 42. See also: Ahmad Athoillah, 'Pembentukan identitas sosial komunitas Hadhrami di Batavia abad XVIII-XX', *Lembaran Sejarah* 14.2 (2018): 150-70.

⁴³² Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*, 30.

⁴³³ Reid, 'Aceh and the Turkish Connection', 34.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴³⁵ See: Ulrike Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut: Reforming the Homeland* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 195-7; Anthony Reid, 'Indonesian Diplomacy. A documentary study of Atjehnese foreign policy in the reign of Sultan Mahmud, 1870-4', *JMBRAS* 42.2 (December, 1969): 77; and Reid, 'Aceh and the Turkish Connection', 31-2.

⁴³⁶ Talib, 'Les Hadramis et le Monde malais', 45, note 18.

⁴³⁷ George Stauth, 'Slave Trade, Multiculturalism and Islam in Colonial Singapore: A Sociological Note on Christian Snouck Hurgronje's 1891 Article on Slave Trade in Singapore', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 20.1 (1992): 76, note 17.

In 1908, plans for a 'Proposed Malay Free School to be erected at Jalan Sultan being the property of Messrs. Alsagoff & Co.' were lodged with the municipal authorities in Singapore.⁴³⁸ The school was intended to replace an earlier school which Syed Mohamed Alsagoff had begun in his own home in the late nineteenth century to cater to the needs of Singapore's Arab community.⁴³⁹ The school had just four students in the beginning, but soon outgrew the home, and had to move to a site of its own.⁴⁴⁰

The building site, bounded by Jalan Sultan to the east, Aliwal Street to the west, North Bridge Road to the north, and an unnamed lane to the south, was at the very heart of Singapore's historic Malay quarter. Tomlinson & Lermitt's plan for the Malay Free School was T-shaped, with a central portico of rusticated Tuscan columns surmounted by a half-timbered gable on its principal elevation to Jalan Sultan, flanked on either side by wings of three bays whose windows are capped with prominent keystones and enriched with Gibbs surrounds. The ends of the building are articulated with rusticated quoins. Behind the gable, a small cupola rises to crown the entire composition. These plans also included the design for a rusticated boundary wall; a schoolmaster's quarters with a pitched roof, elevated on short masonry stilts in the Anglo-Malay manner; and a simple lavatory block. The school's architectural language is of the Edwardian free style, combining Baroque classical vocabulary with the more picturesque aspect of its vernacular roof form. It is unclear, however, if construction on Tomlinson & Lermitt's design for the Malay School ever commenced. In 1910, a modified plan for the school was lodged with municipal authorities by Tomlinson & Lermitt, with the position of the buildings revised.⁴⁴¹ In December 1910, another plan for the school, with substantial revisions, was approved by the Municipal Engineer.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁸ Tomlinson & Lermitt, 'Proposed Malay Free School to be erected at Jalan Sultan being the property of Messrs. Alsagoff & Co.', 1908, Building Plan 9197/1908, NAS CBS 1128.

⁴³⁹ 'The Alsagoff School', *Straits Times*, 4 March 1913, 9. See also: 'Muslim Affairs. The Alsagoff Arab School', *Malaya Tribune*, 6 February 1931, 11.

⁴⁴⁰ 'The Alsagoff School', *Straits Times*, 4 March 1913, 9.

⁴⁴¹ Tomlinson & Lermitt, 'Malay Free School' 1910, Building Plan 10375/1910, NAS CBS 1127.

⁴⁴² M.E. Alsagoff, Architect, 'Proposed Malay Free School to be erected at Jalan Sultan being the property of Messrs. Alsagoff & Co.'. 24 December 1910, Building Plan 10.375/1910, NAS CBS 127.

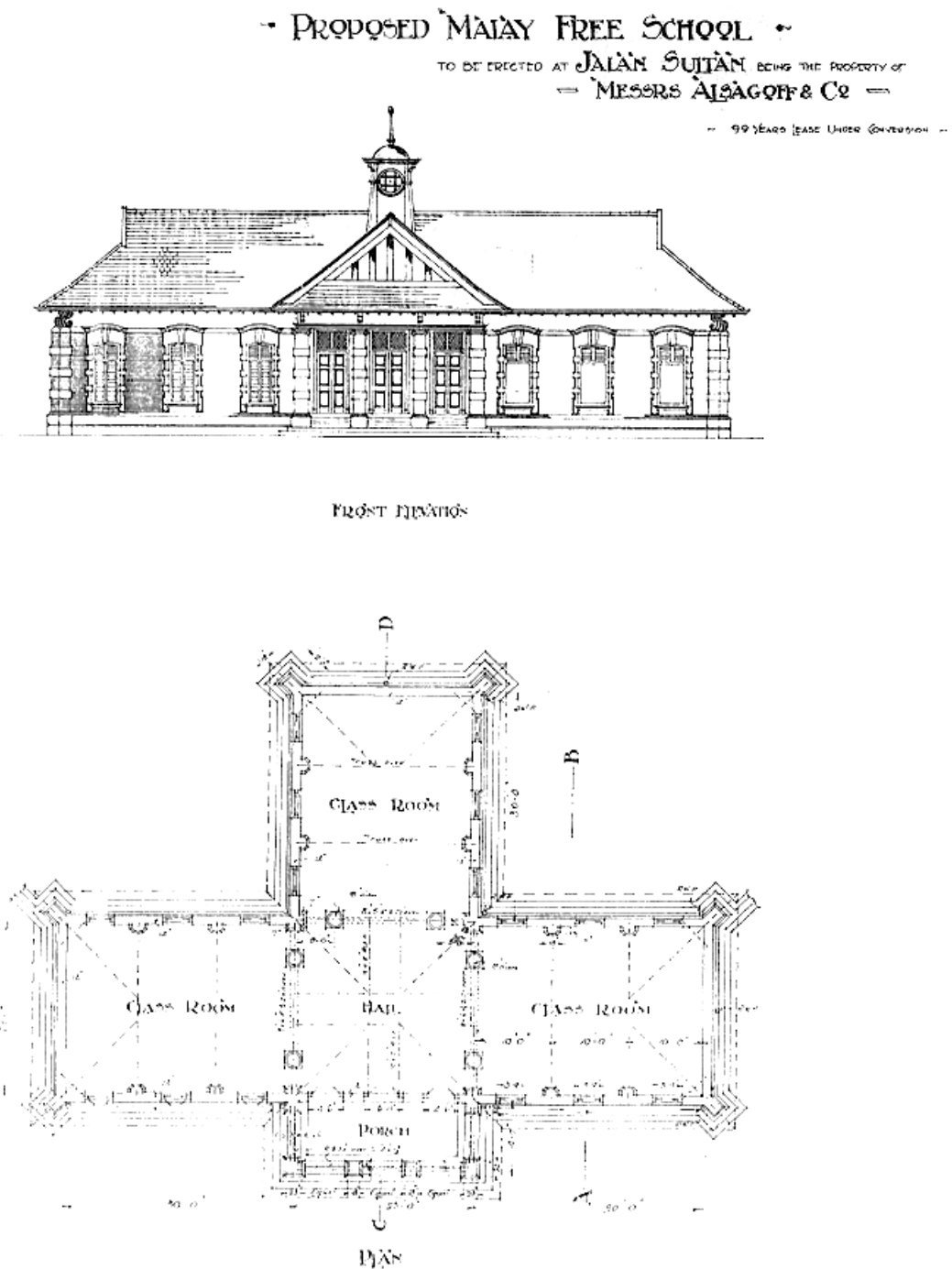


Figure 18. Tomlinson & Lermitt. Plan for the Malay Free School at Sultan Street, 1908. NAS CBS 1128, Building Plan 9197.

The architect responsible for the new plans was one M.E. Alsagoff, who listed his address as 12 Battery Road, a location where many local architecture practices traded. While there is little biographical information about this architect, it is likely he was part of the extended Alsagoff clan. The revised plans for the Alsagoff Malay school are likely to have come about as a result of extra funding. According to a letter to the *Straits Times* published on 12 October 1923, Syed Omar Alsagoff supplemented the original building fund of \$7,000 bequeathed by Syed Mohamed b. Ahmed Alsagoff with his own money.⁴⁴³

Alsagoff's design departs substantially in its principal elevation from the initial plans drawn up by Tomlinson & Lermitt, replacing the half-timbered gable with an unusual stylised Dutch gable. This design element, relatively rare in Singapore, is particularly unusual for a school building. It was possibly intended as an allusion to Syed Mohamed Alsagoff's connection with the Acehnese community in the Dutch East Indies. If this is the case, the design is somewhat ironic, adopting an overtly Dutch motif to commemorate a man who supported rebellion against Dutch colonisers in Aceh.⁴⁴⁴ The design may also reflect the tastes of Syed Omar Alsagoff, who supplemented the school's building fund, enabling the construction of an additional storey.

The revised plan doubled the number of classrooms from three to six, with the central space of the original design given over to a pair of staircases in the revised two-storey design. Alsagoff's design also encloses the three classrooms within a verandah, and adds a set of stairs to the rear of the building, directly opposite the Dutch-gabled portico. It is also worth noting that while the term 'Malay School' remained in the architect's submission to the Municipal Council, the wording on the gable was changed to say 'Arab School', perhaps indicating a desire to assert the Alsagoff clan's own ethnic and cultural identity even as they provided an education for the broader Muslim community in Singapore.

On 4 March 1913, the *Straits Times* reported the opening of the Alsagoff School by the Governor, noting that the 'munificence of the [Alsagoff] family' had provided the school with a 'handsome new brick school house in Jalan Sultan.'⁴⁴⁵ In addition to religious

⁴⁴³ 'The Alsagoff Arab School', *Straits Times*, 12 October 1923, 10.

⁴⁴⁴ Talib, 'Les Hadramis et le Monde malais', 45, note 18.

⁴⁴⁵ 'The Alsagoff School', *Straits Times*, 4 March 1913, 9.

education, the school provided instruction in both Arabic and English languages to Muslim boys. Funded by the *waqf*, or Muslim charitable trust endowed by the late Syed Mohamed b. Ahmed Alsagoff, the Alsagoff School provided free education.⁴⁴⁶

As noted by the historian Khoo Salma Nasution, '[t]he creation of philanthropic *anqaf* for educational purposes has a venerable history... Over the years, the colonial authorities [in Malaya] had eyed underutilized *waqf* assets as a means to deliver public goods and services', and encouraged the Muslim community to endow such trusts to cater to their community's educational needs.⁴⁴⁷ The Alsagoff School was thus just one of a number of religiously-endowed schools operating in the Straits Settlements.⁴⁴⁸ The Alsagoff School demonstrates how readily classicism could be adapted by and for the diverse communities of British Malaya. Funded by prominent members of the Hadhrami Arab diaspora to serve the educational needs of an even more cosmopolitan Muslim trading community in Singapore, the school's Dutch gables may also have hinted at its patron's connection with the Dutch East Indies.

European-run schools were initially 'treated with suspicion by the Malays' until the 1920s, preferring their own independent institutions which offered religious instruction alongside a reading-focused curriculum.⁴⁴⁹ The Malay Free School demonstrates how, while European schools may have been viewed with suspicion, European classicism was by no means the preserve of Catholic missionaries or the colonial state. Indeed, the classical language was sufficiently flexible to allow a community like the Malay-speaking Arab Muslims of Singapore to co-opt the style for their own institutions. The Malay Free School was thus designed by a Muslim architect for a Muslim client and, ultimately, Muslim students. The Dutch inflection of the school's classicism hints at the donor's affiliations, and reflects a degree of distance from British education, even in its adoption of the classical language of architecture.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁶ 'Religious and Secular Education', *Malaya Tribune*, 17 July 1931, 5.

⁴⁴⁷ *Anqaf* is the plural form of *waqf*. In the Straits Settlements, the colonial government sometimes went as far as obtaining a court order to direct *waqf* funding towards the creation of schools. See: Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*, 218.

⁴⁴⁸ Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*, 217-21. See also: 'Religious and Secular Education', *Malaya Tribune*, 17 July 1931, 5.

⁴⁴⁹ Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 250.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. Akcan, *Architecture in Translation*, 15.

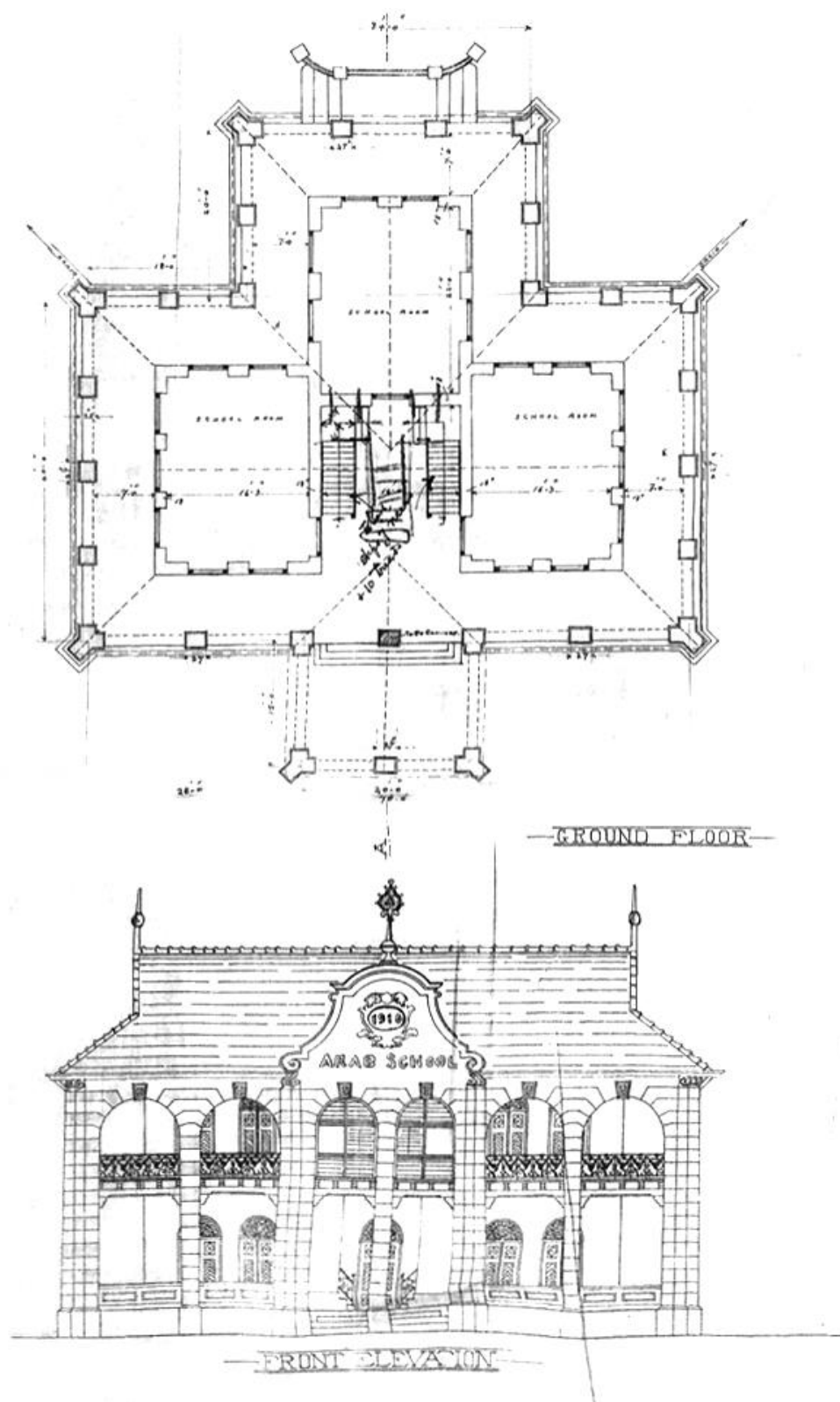


Figure 19. M.E. Alsagoff. Revised plan and elevation for the Malay Free School at Jalan Sultan, 1910. NAS CBS 127, Building Plan 10.375.

The Victoria Institution, Kuala Lumpur



Figure 20. Photograph of the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur, circa 1940. *New Straits Times*.

The Victoria Institution opened in 1894, a new school built to address the educational needs of a city which was gradually being transformed from a war-torn mining town into the capital of the Federated Malay States. The Victoria Institution was the city's fourth educational institution. Kuala Lumpur's first school, a Chinese school, was established in 1884.⁴⁵¹ This was followed by a 'Government English School' around 1890, and the so-called 'Raja School' for the Malay elite in 1892.⁴⁵² These educational arrangements were evidently seen as insufficient by a large segment of Kuala Lumpur's population, and community leaders ranging from the Kapitan China Yap Kwan Seng, State Councillor Loke Yew, and Ceylonese community leader Tambusamy Pillai pushed for the establishment of a new school, finding a sympathetic ear in the new Selangor Resident, William Hood Treacher.⁴⁵³ Some \$3,188 in leftover funds from Queen Victoria's Jubilee – likely the source of the school's name – were supplemented by \$5,000 from the Selangor government, \$1,100 each from the Sultan of

⁴⁵¹ J.M. Gullick, 'Kuala Lumpur, 1880-1895', *JMBRAS* 28.4 (1955): 101.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 102. The name 'Raja School' may derive from its location on the street which would later be named Jalan Raja, rather than through an association with royalty.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 103.

Selangor and three other Asian donors.⁴⁵⁴ The total subscriptions were more than enough to cover the costs of new school buildings, and in 1894, the school opened on the banks of the Klang River with 104 Chinese, 60 Indian, 24 Eurasian and 10 Malay students.⁴⁵⁵ The school thus differed from Kuala Lumpur's other educational institutions of the 1890s, its student body a cross section of the city's diverse population.

As the population of Kuala Lumpur continued to grow, the Victoria Institution's school buildings were quickly rendered inadequate. New buildings were completed in 1903 to house some 500 boys.⁴⁵⁶ This arrangement proved satisfactory for only a few years, and by April 1907, the Chairman of the school wrote to the Secretary to the Resident of Selangor to propose a further extension to the school, noting:

The Trustees have decided that the accommodation now provided is insufficient for the number of boys attending the school and that if – as seems probable – the numbers continue to increase in the same proportion, that it will shortly be necessary to provide classrooms for a total of about 700 boys... Owing to the opening of two [new] schools since the year 1903 the number of boys in the Victoria Institution remained more or less stationary (viz:- 450-500) until the present year. It is computed that there are now considerably over 1000 boys attending the English Schools in Kuala Lumpur and it is evident that thus [sic] number is increasing daily.⁴⁵⁷

More drastic measures to address the capacity of the Victoria Institution's buildings were taken in the 1920s. In June 1925, the Selangor government began preparing a bill to take over the Victoria Institution ahead of its expansion.⁴⁵⁸ A new site was found for the school on Petaling Hill, and the prestigious firm of Swan & Maclaren were tasked with drawing up plans for the new school. Selangor government correspondence reveals extensive internal discussions over the size of the new school buildings, whether the new campus should

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁶ 'Extension of Buildings, Victoria Institution', Selangor Secretariat Correspondence, 8 April 1907, Sel. Sec. 1975/1907, ANM 1957/0135324.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁸ 'Victoria Institution: plans for new buildings (semi-permanent)', Selangor Secretariat Correspondence, 23 December 1924, Sel. Sec. 4845/1924, ANM 1957/0233825W.

accommodate an elementary school in addition to a secondary school, whether the buildings should be built as permanent or semi-permanent structures with a fifty-year life-span, and the associated cost of construction.⁴⁵⁹

While no plans for the Victoria Institution buildings survive in the Arkib Negara Malaysia or in the archives of Swan & Maclaren,⁴⁶⁰ extensive Selangor government correspondence provides details of how the building plans evolved. J. Watson, the Chief Inspector of English Schools in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, and R.P. Gunn, the Inspector of Schools in Selangor, provided extensive notes on how Swan & Maclaren's original design should be revised.⁴⁶¹ These included calls to provide greater space between the wings and the main building, that rooms be 'at least 13½ feet high', that 'verandahs everywhere should be not less than 8 feet in width', and that floors were not to be made of wood.⁴⁶² The Inspectors specified a chemistry laboratory and chemistry lecture room, a physics laboratory and lecture room, a geography room and an art room, as well as a bicycle shed and sports pavilion.⁴⁶³ Additionally, Watson and Gunn noted that:

The width of the class-rooms should be at least 22½ feet. Some of the class-rooms will have to hold 40 pupils and with single desks a room 30 feet by 20 feet could accommodate 40 with the utmost difficulty only and by leaving the master practically no floor-space. We are informed \$17,000 would meet the cost of widening the building shown on the plan so as to make the rooms 22½ feet wide.⁴⁶⁴

The Selangor government was evidently keen to avoid the mistakes of the turn of the twentieth century, when growing educational demands rendered the Victoria Institution's earlier school buildings obsolete within a matter of a few years.

⁴⁵⁹ Sydney Smith, 'Memorandum on the preparation of plans for the new Victoria Institution by Messrs Swan and Maclaren, Architects, Singapore', 18 November 1925, in *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ Christopher Flannery (Director, Swan & Maclaren), email correspondence with the author, 13-20 February 2017.

⁴⁶¹ J. Watson and R.P. Gunn, 'Notes on Sketch Plan of New Victoria Institution Building', 9 February 1925, in 'Victoria Institution: plans for new buildings (semi-permanent)', Selangor Secretariat Correspondence, Sel. Sec. 4845/1924, ANM 1957/0233825W.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Not all suggestions were taken quite so seriously. Writing to Swan & Maclaren on 9 April 1925, R.O. Winstedt, the Director of Education in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States conveyed the Victoria Institution's Headmaster's notes that the stage in the main hall was 'too shallow', and that the ceilings of the woodworking room should be sufficiently high for the painting of stage scenery, but added:

In my opinion these suggestions are swayed too much by his fondness for school theatricals. I am opposed to school boys being treated as if they were professional actors, as it appears likely to give them an undue sense of their histrionic abilities and to divert them from their school work.⁴⁶⁵

While student theatricals were not taken seriously by the Director of Education, the Cambridge Examinations were, and the size of the school's Assembly Hall was adjusted a number of times to strike a balance between budget considerations and accommodating the spatial needs of the examinations, as well as the ceremonial uses of the hall.⁴⁶⁶

The resulting buildings were spacious and elegant, with deep colonnaded verandahs providing the high-ceilinged classrooms with ample shelter from Kuala Lumpur's tropical heat and rain. Set on a gentle rise above the school's sports field, the building's principal elevation enjoyed a lofty position which made the school an instant landmark. The building's floor plan takes the form of the letter E, with the three wings set at right angles from the main building. The main building and wings are capped with hipped roofs, while the corners take the form of recessed pavilions with flat roofs. The rhythm established by the colonnaded verandahs of the main building and the three wings is interrupted by the rusticated walls of these corner pavilions. A simple X-shaped motif is used extensively for the balustrades of the verandahs and parapets, as well as for the top-lights of the building's numerous doors and windows. The new Victoria Institutions buildings made extensive use of reinforced concrete, although '[o]wing to an erroneous impression under which the contractor has been working the 9" panel walls have been built in accordance with local practice namely lime mortar instead of cement mortar as specified.'⁴⁶⁷ The building thus marks an interesting, if

⁴⁶⁵ Letter from R.O. Winstedt to Swan & Maclaren, 9 April 1925, in *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ See sheets 9, 10, 11, and 12 in *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁷ Letter from Swan & Maclaren to the State Engineer, Selangor, 22 December 1927, in *ibid.*

unintentional, point of transition between the traditional use of lime mortar in favour of modern concrete.

The most architecturally prominent feature of the Victoria Institution's new building at Petaling Hill was its central tower, situated just behind the main entrance portico. A clear quotation of the Christopher Wren-designed Tom Tower at the University of Oxford's Christ Church college, at the Victoria Institution Wren's Gothic design was classicised by H.C. Atkin Berry, the architect of the building. The tower was nearly a victim of the Selangor government's attempts at economising. Writing on 13 October 1925, the Selangor State Engineer noted that the 'tower does not seem to be absolutely necessary, but would add to the appearance of the buildings.'⁴⁶⁸ This sentiment was supported by Sydney Smith, Acting State Engineer of the Selangor Public Works Department, who wrote:

It is recommended that the Tower be allowed to remain as a very necessary architectural feature and would moreover be of considerable utility in the storage of water to increase the pressure of the supply; it is further recommended that a suitable clock and school bell be supplied and fixed in the Tower.⁴⁶⁹

With its newfound purpose as a space for the water tank and a school bell, the tower was retained as a point of architectural interest for the otherwise restrained school buildings. With its direct allusion to the oldest seat of higher learning in the United Kingdom, the Victoria Institution was a clear statement of a new era in Malayan education; the Petaling Hill campus was not like Kuala Lumpur's earlier and relatively ad-hoc school buildings, which strained to accommodate their students within a few short years. Despite the cost-cutting measures implemented by the Selangor government, the new school conveyed a sense of antiquity and permanence, the Gothic language of venerable Oxford colleges classicised in line with other colonial educational institutions. The building is an imperial monument, conveying its purpose with a simulacrum of a venerable English educational institution adapted for the needs of Kuala Lumpur's tropical climate.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

The Victoria Institution's architectural pretensions were not lost on local commentators. The new building was well received by the local press, which celebrated the school as a new institutional landmark for Kuala Lumpur. The *Straits Times*' report of 'Kuala Lumpur's new school' was effusive:

Built upon a hill, its white walls assert a dominance appropriate to an establishment dedicated to knowledge. It may be seen for miles from various points in Kuala Lumpur, an arresting landmark. The tower, over one hundred feet in height, reminds one vaguely of Christ Church, Oxford, but its curves and cornices are more addicted to modernist principles and the resemblance is only partial, for the Victoria tower has an individuality quite unique. Its presence saves the entire building from being just a building and makes of it a distinctive piece of architecture, to which, in the future, scholars past and present will be able to point with justifiable pride. Architecturally, the school is pre-eminently Western and, although its general design postulates no one particular style, it recalls the classic symmetry and grace of the Renaissance.⁴⁷⁰

This elegant, stripped-back style of classicism would become increasingly popular in the design of important colonial schools in Malaya over the course of the 1920s and 1930s. Examples of this include the Penang Free School's new campus on Green Lane, which was opened in 1928, and the Victoria School at Tyrwhitt Road in Singapore, designed by Government Architect Frank Dorrington Ward and opened in 1933. Both of these schools feature broad Doric colonnades with X-shaped balustrades, and reflect an increasingly stylised, streamlined approach to the classical language and its ornamental vocabulary.

This stripped classicism was not reserved for schools alone, however, and the Victoria Institution's architectural language was part of a broader streamlining of institutional classicism in British Malaya. This style was particularly evident in military barracks and other martial institutions. Indeed, the Victoria Institution's architectural language bears remarkable similarities to the buildings constructed for the Far East Command Centre Headquarters in Singapore, completed in 1926, which subsequently housed the Singapore Command Staff

⁴⁷⁰ 'Kuala Lumpur's New School', *Straits Times*, 10 December 1928, 9.

College.⁴⁷¹ Chang Jiat-Hwee argues that ‘the military barracks was the earliest British colonial building type to be formally “tropicalised”... [and] the 1920s and 1930s could be considered as the culmination of more than a century of heterogeneous engineering.’⁴⁷² Rapidly changing ideas of sanitation and ventilation were crucial in shaping the design of such institutional buildings, but there was also an emerging stylistic uniformity which made these buildings legible as institutions. In both the Changi and Gilman Barracks in Singapore, the simple trabeated forms of the verandahs are further streamlined, their visual interest deriving from the use of unusual trapezoidal arches. Schools of the same era appear to have been somewhat more conservative in their architectural detailing, with restrained historicist detailing remaining prevalent throughout the 1920s. As Chang argues, such colonial military institutions were a ‘space of exception’, ‘a biopolitical and sanitary haven’ set apart from and visually intelligible from the broader colonial milieu.⁴⁷³ The same was arguably the case for a school like the Victoria Institution: set apart from and indeed above the city around it, its gleaming white corridors and lofty clocktower proclaimed the new school as a very different kind of educational institution from the previous generation of schools in Kuala Lumpur, a monument to a modern, colonial education intended to mould the next generation of civil servants.

It is possible that Swan & Maclaren, a Singapore-based firm, was responsible for importing this new institutional language from the metropolitan centre of Singapore to the capital of the Federated Malay States in Kuala Lumpur. Certainly, the Victoria Institution’s understated classicism represented a break with the city’s other established schools, providing a stark contrast with the redbrick Flemish gables of St John’s Institution and the Gothic arches of the Bukit Nanas Convent School.

With the exception of its singular clocktower, the striking similarity of the Victoria Institution’s new buildings to the barracks and military offices of 1920s Singapore suggest that a new understanding of how institutional buildings should look had developed on the

⁴⁷¹ Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), ‘11 Canning Walk’, Architectural Heritage Awards 2011, Category B. URL: <https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Get-Involved/Conserve-Built-Heritage/Architectural-Heritage-Season/-/media/0659CBAA95674019AD931F194BD52118.ashx> [accessed 13 January 2020].

⁴⁷² Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 52-3.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

island, and was being exported to other parts of Malaya through firms like Swan & Maclaren, who were active in other Malayan towns. This pared-down classicism was increasingly prevalent in institutional buildings, from the medical to the military, reflecting an increasingly pragmatic approach to imperial classicism, one which focused on ventilation, light, and thrift even as the basic elements of the classical language remained, albeit in an abridged form.

Like many Malayan institutional buildings of the 1920s and 1930s, the Victoria Institution was finished with a brilliant coat of white paint. The school's whitewashed walls were not without detractors, however, and when works on the building were completed, the Headmaster wrote to the Acting Inspector of Schools to

enquire whether the walls of the New Victoria Institution cannot be made some other colour than white. The glare from this colour on a sunny day is painful and I am sure the Health Department would condemn it as being most injurious to the eyesight of the children, if the matter were referred to them. Further, walls of a snowy white colour show the slightest mark and offer an irresistible temptation to the average boy to use his pencil on them.⁴⁷⁴

These requests were dismissed, however, and the preference for whitewashed walls within the Selangor government prevailed.⁴⁷⁵

The Victoria Institution demonstrates how classicism was changing in the 1920s, with institutional buildings increasingly adopting a more stripped version of the classical language. School buildings such as the Victoria Institution were not without architectural pretensions, however, and the school's clocktower was used to communicate an imperial vision of education through its modernised version of one of Oxford's 'dreaming spires.' As argued by Bill Schwartz in his essay on 'nativisation' and British identity abroad,

⁴⁷⁴ See: 'Re-colour washing of the new Victoria Institution Buildings', correspondence from the Acting Inspector of Schools to the Selangor Resident, Selangor Secretariat Correspondence, 28 December 1928, Sel. Sec. 2467/1928, ANM 1957/0255651.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Britishness... worked as a symbolic field-force through which the power of the metropolis operated... [and] the repertoire of Britishness was indeed generated through a range of social institutions—the churches and the missions, family arrangements, literacy and literature, sport—which had no competitors of equal authority. Power lay, precisely, in those engines for the dissemination of Britishness.⁴⁷⁶

The Victoria Institution was one such ‘engine for the dissemination of Britishness’, one which used the potent symbolism of Oxford, a revered institution at the heart of British education, as a symbol for the modern, British education the school could provide in Kuala Lumpur. The school, which provided the Selangor civil service with the local administrators needed to keep its colonial government in motion, was inextricably tied with the business of imperialism in Malaya.

Conclusion

By the early twentieth century, Malaya had a diverse and plural education system, reflecting the intensely cosmopolitan character of Malayan society. Schools were run by missionaries, the colonial state, and by various faith and cultural communities.⁴⁷⁷ While both British administrators and European missionaries used English as the medium of instruction, schooling was also provided by individual communities in Malay as well as in various Chinese and Indian languages. Muslim religious schools also taught Arabic alongside Malay. Malaya’s multicultural faith and cultural communities often preferred to school children in their own institutions, rather than in the schools run by the colonial state.⁴⁷⁸ Despite the considerable variety of school systems within British Malaya, the classical language of architecture was adopted almost universally for the construction of educational institutions.

⁴⁷⁶ Bill Schwartz, “‘Shivering in the Noonday Sun:’ The British World and the Dynamics of “Nativisation”,’ *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Cultures*, edited by Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw, and Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 22-3

⁴⁷⁷ Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 250.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

This classical language was not, however, a singular tongue, but a broad spectrum of dialects which could be used to convey vastly differing sets of religious and cultural affiliations. Graeco-Roman columns and capitals sheltered students educated by Catholic missionaries as well as those studying the Quran in British Malaya, and a pedimented portico could signal the entrance to a *surau* or a science laboratory. These varied translations of the classical idiom demonstrate how ideas of modern governance telegraphed by colonial public buildings were internalised and adapted to the needs of Malaya's disparate communities.

These use of classicism in these schools can be read as what Pratt terms 'autoethnographic texts', 'addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speaker's own community.'⁴⁷⁹ The wholehearted adoption of the Edwardian Baroque by the Straits Chinese community, for example, telegraphed their identification with their citizenship in the Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements. A school like the Tao Nan School in Singapore fully embraced the architectural bombast of the Edwardian Baroque, even as it taught students in Hokkien. The school thus signalled the layered affiliations of the Straits Chinese: both British subjects and inheritors of Chinese civilisation. By contrast, the Dutch-inflected classicism of the Malay Free School suggests a more complex relationship with Singapore's colonial rulers. For the patrons of this school, the Dutch gables hinted at the donors' links to the Dutch East Indies, and signalled a degree of distance to the British colonial authorities in Singapore. The school evidences the 'distance, distortion, or transmutation' that Akcan argued were sometimes the goal of architectural translation.⁴⁸⁰ Malaya's various communities could thus signal either their proximity to or distance from British rule in Malaya.

A different form of translation is also evident in the design of the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur. Here, 'distortion' and 'transmutation' become a means by which ideas and associations from the imperial metropole were translated to 'distant' Malaya. In classicising the design of a famous Gothic college building in Oxford, Swan & Maclaren were able to simultaneously borrow on ancient associations while simultaneously projecting an image of a modern colonial education. Classicism, widely used in Malaya as a signifier of British imperial power, could also be a symbol of British educational patronage. This was equally

⁴⁷⁹ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 35.

⁴⁸⁰ Akcan, *Architecture in Translation*, 15.

true of the Malay School at Kuala Kangsar, where a polite form of Palladianism was used to communicate British patronage of the Malay elite.

In the schools of the Malay States and the Straits Settlements, the classical language came to embody the heterogeneity of production and reception that Pratt argues exemplifies the contact zone. Classical architecture was 'heterogeneous on the reception end as well as the production end... read very differently to people in different positions in the contact zone.'⁴⁸¹

In the hands of French priests as well as Arab, Malay, Chinese, and British architects, the classical orders could be used to signal very different things to different segments of the community. The ornamental vocabulary of these schools was, as Gadamer argued, representative. Through the classical language of architecture, the builders of these schools were able to both 'draw the attention of the viewer... satisfy [their] taste[s], and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies.'⁴⁸²

The shaded colonnades and crisp stucco pediments of these school buildings were thus richly polysemous. Elements of the same architectural vocabulary could communicate a range of ideas to different sectors of Malaya's diverse populace, while still fitting in with the broader urban and architectural patterns of British Malaya.

⁴⁸¹ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 36-7.

⁴⁸² Gadamer, 'The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative', 129-30.

Chapter IV. Classical Monuments for the Modern Sultan: Royal Patronage of Classical Architecture in the Johor Sultanate

On New Year's Day in 1866, Abu Bakar (1833-1895), the Temenggong Seri Maharajah of Johor, inaugurated his new palace on the southernmost tip of the Malayan Peninsula. To mark the occasion, the town of Tanjong Puteri was renamed Johor Bahru – literally New Johor – to reflect its elevated status as the seat of royal power. Located on a slope facing Singapore from across the Tebrau Strait, the Istana Besar was an architectural statement piece commissioned by the ambitious ruler of a rapidly rising dynastic line. Abu Bakar's domain was a successor state to the older Johor Empire, a maritime power which spanned from its historical centre in Riau through to Singapore and the southern parts of the Malay Peninsula.⁴⁸³ Incursions into the region by European colonial powers at the turn of the nineteenth century saw the empire fragment between spheres of influence: the British-controlled peninsula and the insular Dutch East Indies.⁴⁸⁴ Descended from the Temenggong line, third in the order of precedence in the old Johor Empire,⁴⁸⁵ Abu Bakar would elevate his line to the status of Maharajah and eventually Sultan over the course of his reign.

While the Sultan of the old Johor Empire maintained his seat in the Riau Islands, the Temenggongs of Johor administered the portions of the Sultanate which spanned the island of Singapore and the southern reaches of the Malayan peninsula. The treaty of 10 March 1855, witnessed by Governor Butterworth of Prince of Wales' Island and Resident Councillor Thomas Church of Singapore saw Sultan Ali Iskandar of Johor (1824-1877)

cede in full sovereignty and absolute property to His Highness Tumongong Daing Ibrahim Sri Maharajah bin Tumongong Abdul Rahman Sri Maharajah [1810-1862], his heirs and successors forever, the whole territory of Johore within the Malayan

⁴⁸³ Carl A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784-1885*, second edition (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 21.

⁴⁸⁴ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 18-22.

⁴⁸⁵ Milner, *Kerajaan*, 55.

Peninsula and its dependencies, with the exception of the Kassang territory hereinafter mentioned.⁴⁸⁶

Temenggong Ibrahim was thus able to use his dealings with the British to consolidate his territorial claims over large portions of the Malay Peninsula, securing greater power for his descendants.⁴⁸⁷ By permitting Chinese planters to move from Singapore to the Peninsula, Temenggong Ibrahim was able to begin opening up hinterland areas through the cultivation of cash crops such as pepper and gambier.⁴⁸⁸ *Getah percah*, or wild rubber, was another major source of income for Temenggong Ibrahim's demesne.⁴⁸⁹ This created the revenue base for a new state formed from remnants of the fragmenting Johor Empire. Temenggong Ibrahim's son, Abu Bakar, would spearhead the modernisation of Johor, consolidating his family's control of Johor's Malayan territories and gradually elevating his titular status, first to Maharajah and eventually to Sultan.

Under the leadership of Abu Bakar, Johor's government underwent a radical process of modernisation. The traditional Malay court was reinvented as a modern bureaucracy, though aristocrats continued to hold key roles, supported by a new Malay bureaucracy, many of whom were educated at Reverend Benjamin Keasberry's school in Singapore.⁴⁹⁰ In terms of economic development, Abu Bakar continued his father Temenggong Ibrahim's legacy. He continued the practice of issuing *Surat Sungai*, or river grants, to settlers, a great many of these being Chinese merchants who had settled in Singapore.⁴⁹¹ This practice opened up even more of Johor's rural hinterland along its rivers to farming, with a particular focus on the cultivation of lucrative pepper and gambier crops.⁴⁹² This was a marked change from the historical emphasis on maritime trade seen in the old Johor Empire, with the new kingdom of Johor becoming a settler society with an economy rooted in agricultural development.⁴⁹³

⁴⁸⁶ 'Johore Treaty of 10 March 1855', *A Collection of treaties and other documents affecting the States of Malaysia, 1761-1963*, Vol. 1, edited by John de Vere Allen, A. J. Stockwell, and Leigh R. Wright (Dobbs Ferry: Oceana Publications, 1981), 46.

⁴⁸⁷ Milner, *Kerajaan*, 55 and 86; Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 18.

⁴⁸⁸ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 19.

⁴⁸⁹ Milner, *Kerajaan*, 30.

⁴⁹⁰ Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 102 and 107-8.

⁴⁹¹ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 138.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 101, 128. See also: Carl A. Trocki, 'The Origins of the Kangchu System 1740-1860', *JMBRAS* 49.2 (1976): 132-55.

⁴⁹³ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 98.

Abu Bakar was a shrewd ruler, and navigated a sometimes fraught relationship with the British in Singapore. During his reign, Abu Bakar's status was elevated from Temenggong Seri Maharaja – a court official – to simply Maharaja, and eventually Sultan of Johor.⁴⁹⁴ As Carl A. Trocki observes in his study of the role of the Temenggong dynastic line in the development of Johor and Singapore, Johor became 'the first of the new model [of autonomous] Malay states.'⁴⁹⁵ The political model which developed in Johor in the latter half of the nineteenth century would become a template for the Malay polities of British Malaya, combining aspects of traditional Malay monarchy with a modern civil service emulating contemporary British practice. While the government of Johor was gradually modernised along European lines, the power of Johor's rulers remained absolute; as noted by Gullick, 'the bureaucratic apparatus masked a personal autocracy'.⁴⁹⁶ Abu Bakar's government was 'not a very complex organisation', comprised of a small number of Malay nobles.⁴⁹⁷ Indeed, Johor's governance would remain remarkably resistant to British influence until financial issues which mounted in the 1910s forced Abu Bakar's son, Sultan Ibrahim, to make concessions to British advisors as other Malay rulers had in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁹⁸

Politically, Abu Bakar built on the legacy of his father, Temenggong Ibrahim, who had secured a title to the territory of Johor through the Treaty of 1855. During his reign, Abu Bakar would work to secure further treaties to guarantee his claims to Johor and autonomy from the influence of Governor Frederick Wells, who sought to increase British influence in the Peninsula through the appointment of British Residents.⁴⁹⁹ As noted by Trocki, despite this, there were still 'many ambiguities regarding Abu Bakar's status and role' in the early parts of his reign. Abu Bakar's contemporaries included other descendants of the old royal house of Johor in Muar, Lingga, as well as descendants of Sultan Abdul Jalil in Pahang and Terengganu.⁵⁰⁰ Abu Bakar maintained cordial relations with the branch of the royal house in

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 153-4; A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, 'Sultan Abu Bakar's Foreign Guests and Travels Abroad, 1860s-1895: Fact and Fiction in Early Malay Historical Accounts', *JMBRAS* 84.1 (June 2011): 1.

⁴⁹⁵ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 131.

⁴⁹⁶ Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 113.

⁴⁹⁷ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 166.

⁴⁹⁸ Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 115-117.

⁴⁹⁹ Philip Loh Fook Seng, *The Malay States 1877-1895: Political Change and Social Policy* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1969), 69-70.

⁵⁰⁰ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 131.

Riau, as attested to in the Malay-language chronicle of Johor called the *Tuhfat al-Nafis*,⁵⁰¹ He also had designs on Pahang and Negri Sembilan, though this desired territorial expansion would not come to fruition.⁵⁰²

Abu Bakar worked to consolidate his personal authority and establish a dynastic line.⁵⁰³ In 1865, he decided to shift his court away from British-controlled Singapore and set about building a new seat of power at the southernmost tip of the peninsula.⁵⁰⁴ This strategic position was designed to afford Abu Bakar control of ships coming through the narrow Strait of Johor; this assertion of Johor's sovereignty over the strait was contentious move which caused a dispute with British-controlled Singapore.⁵⁰⁵ It was during these tensions that Abu Bakar decided to build his Istana Besar, or Grand Palace, at the southernmost tip of the Peninsula, its back turned to Singapore from across the narrow Tebrau Strait.

Abu Bakar's son, Sultan Ibrahim (1873-1959), would continue to resist British interference in Johor through the first decade of the twentieth century. Financial pressures made Sultan Ibrahim 'vulnerable to British pressure', and with a mounting state debt of almost \$12 million in 1910, the British in Singapore saw an opportunity to increase their influence over the southern part of the Malay Peninsula.⁵⁰⁶ Sir John Anderson, the British High Commissioner had previously observed that 'a crisis in the affairs of Johore before long... [would be] the opportunity of claiming and establishing an effective control' of the state.⁵⁰⁷ In 1910, Douglas Graham Campbell was appointed 'General Adviser' in the Johor Civil Service, and by 1914 'the various Courts in the State, which had hitherto been controlled and conducted by Malay Magistrates, untrained in English law, were put under the supervision of English officials.'⁵⁰⁸ Johor's civil service, which had been in the process of modernising reforms under the reign of Abu Bakar, was subsequently brought closer to the administrative practices of the

⁵⁰¹ Al-marhum Raja Ali Al-Haji Riau, *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, transliterated from Jawi by Zainal Abidin Wahid (Singapore: Malaysia Publications, 1965) 379.

⁵⁰² Loh, *The Malay States 1877-1895*, 68-70, 85; Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 132-3.

⁵⁰³ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 155.

⁵⁰⁴ Patricia Lim Pui Huen, *Wong Ab Fook: Immigrant, Builder and Entrepreneur* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2002), 61.

⁵⁰⁵ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 140-3.

⁵⁰⁶ Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 114.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 114-15.

⁵⁰⁸ *Annual Report Johore* 1914, para. 56. Cited in Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 116.

Federated Malay States. The autonomy of Johor's government diminished as British influence over the affairs of state grew. As noted by Gullick, however,

The substantial changes in the government of Johor which followed [the acceptance of a British Adviser and amendments to the 1885 treaty] did not amount to an assimilation of the system to that of the FMS. By 1914 there was a firmly established Malay government of Johor, which could not be swept away and replaced by a largely European regime on the FMS model⁵⁰⁹

Johor thus retained a certain exceptional character within the broader context of British Malaya, influenced by the British but also removed from the level of direct control experienced by other states within the Federation. Moreover, its civil service had a distinctly Malay character and staffing in comparison with the European administrations of Selangor, Penang, or Singapore.

This chapter will examine the architectural patronage of the Johor Sultanate under Sultans Abu Bakar and Sultan Ibrahim. In particular, this chapter will examine the Istana Besar and the Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque in Johor Bahru, the Muar Mosque. A series of buildings constructed for members of the Johor elite in Singapore during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim will also be discussed, as they provide further insight into the tastes of the Johor royal family, and the quality of the work of the architects, draughtsmen and engineers they employed. In doing so, this chapter chronicles the reception of classical architecture by a Malay ruler, and its appropriation and adaptation as a Malay court style.

There are certain documentary challenges in studying the history of Johor. Sources prior to British intervention in Johor are limited. As such, this chapter relies on government correspondence available in the Johor branch of the Arkib Negara Malaysia, the bulk of which dates from the 1910s to 1930s. There are also almost no surviving building plans in the Johor archives. In the absence of available building plans, this chapter will supplement Johor government correspondence with historic newspapers, travellers' accounts of Johor, as well as old photographs and postcards, in order to reconstruct the history of a number of

⁵⁰⁹ Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 116-17.

buildings constructed under the patronage of the Johor royal house. Building plans by the Johor court architect and engineer from the turn of the twentieth century which survive in the National Archives of Singapore will also be used to develop a fuller picture of Johor's royal patronage of architecture in this period.

The Istana Besar at Johor Bahru



Figure 21. Postcard view of the Istana Besar, circa 1920. Private collection. The Banqueting Hall, constructed during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim, is visible on the left-hand side of the photograph.

The new palace Abu Bakar commissioned in Johor Bahru was an important statement of his elevated status. Abu Bakar had shifted his court away from its historic centre in Telok Blangah in the west of Singapore to the town of Tanjong Puteri at the southern end of the Malay Peninsula. This shift was in part an attempt to exert greater control over trade between Singapore and Johor.⁵¹⁰

Construction of the Istana Besar commenced in 1864, and the building was completed in 1866. The overall plan of the palace is T-shaped. The central portion houses the Throne Room, with a portico projecting to the northeast, flanked on either side by long wings. The

⁵¹⁰ Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 139-42.

formality of the central Tuscan portico contrasts with the side wings, where a broad roof overhangs the colonnades, giving them a somewhat vernacular character. The overall symmetry of the Istana would be lost half a century later when the Edwardian Baroque-style Banqueting Hall commissioned by Abu Bakar's son, Sultan Ibrahim, was completed in 1919, replacing the old east wing of the palace. From its principal elevation on the building's northern elevation, the Istana Besar's classical colonnades and sweeping stairs echoed the architecture of power in British-controlled Singapore. Internally, however, the building's layout conformed to traditional patterns of use, with Malay-style shutters instead of western-style doors and deep verandahs for ventilation. Constructed by a Malay engineer and a Chinese contractor, the building reflects the diverse community of nineteenth-century Johor. The Istana Besar in Johor Bahru also helped establish the classical idiom as the royal style of the Johor monarchy, a style which would be continued by his son and successor Sultan Ibrahim.

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]

Figure 22. Postcard view of the southern elevation of the Istana Besar, circa 1900. NMS 1998-00336.

Florence Caddy, an Englishwoman who stayed at the Istana Besar while travelling with the Duke of Sutherland in 1880, described the Istana's luxurious appearance under the reign of Sultan Abu Bakar at length:

The Sultan's house near the sea appears a comfortable country-seat... The Istana, as it is always called, the Malay word for palace, is European, that is Anglo-Indian in build; in style Renaissance. It was built entirely by Chinese workmen under a European architect. It is internally handsome and well furnished; the halls and rooms very large and lofty, and the marble staircase broad and fine... As we met each other in the large verandah-like room, common to all of us, between our private apartments, between our private apartments, we said, 'We shall enjoy this place thoroughly;' and we all secretly wished our stay might be longer than the two days we had at first almost unwillingly spared.⁵¹¹

The name of the European architect Caddy mentions is now lost; there is no surviving documentary evidence which gives the name of the architect who designed the Istana Besar. The building draws clearly on Anglo-Indian Palladian precedents, however, and shows great affinity with the work of Singapore's early British military engineers such as George Doumgold Coleman, who designed many of Singapore's earliest buildings, and Major John Frederick Adolphus McNair, who would be responsible for the design of the new Governor's residence in Singapore a few years after the Istana Besar in Johor Bahru was completed.

While it is unclear who the European architect behind the design of the Istana Besar might have been, the contractor who worked on the Istana Besar was Wong Ah Fook, a Chinese migrant from the village of Yanjingcun in Guangdong. Initially establishing himself as a carpenter, Wong eventually began work as a builder.⁵¹² Through the patronage of the prominent Cantonese businessman Hoo Ah Kay, also known as 'Whampoa', Wong was brought into contact with Abu Bakar's circle.⁵¹³ Wong would soon become a favoured

⁵¹¹ Florence Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya in the Duke of Sutherland's Yacht 'Sans Peur'* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1889; Singapore: Oxford University Press 1992), 232-5.

⁵¹² Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, 34-35.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 35-39.

contractor, working on both the Istana Besar in Johor Bahru and the Istana Tyersall, built as the Sultan of Johor's new residence in Singapore.⁵¹⁴ Wong would go on to become an important figure in Johor's Chinese community, establishing Malaya's first Chinese bank, the Kwong Yik Bank, and a Cantonese clan association called the Kwong Siew Wui Koon.⁵¹⁵ Wong was thus a leading figure in Singapore and Johor's Chinese community.

The Sultan of Johor would grant Wong Ah Fook considerable land concessions, resulting in the creation of a settlement known as Kampung Wong Ah Fook.⁵¹⁶ Wong would also go on to build various buildings for the Johor royals in Johor Bahru, as well as major buildings such as the jail.⁵¹⁷ The use of Chinese labourers to construct the palaces of Malay rulers was not confined to Johor; the construction of Istana Bandar in Jugra, built for Sultan Sir Alaeddin Sulaiman Shah of Selangor in the late nineteenth century and completed in 1905, also relied on Chinese craftsmen and builders.⁵¹⁸ Chinese labour thus lay behind the construction of a European-style palace for a Malay ruler, reflecting the complex interrelationships between various ethnic groups in British Malaya.

Reached by two flights of stairs which project northward into the lush surrounding gardens, the elevated portico of the Istana Besar presents a simple Tuscan façade which, unlike many colonial residences of the time, lacked a central pediment. Doubled Tuscan pilasters on either end of the hexastyle portico support a simple entablature topped by a pierced balustrade, which conceals an attic level. On either side of the portico, the main wing is punctuated by arched windows and doors, with a simple label mould serving as an entablature for the ground floor and large cornices on the upper storey. From the side, this northern wing consists of five bays, with simple arched openings on the ground level and arched windows on the first storey set between Tuscan pilasters. Historic photographs of the Istana Besar show a rooflet, since lost, which wraps around the building below the pierced balustrade,

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-65. See also: Patricia Lim Pui Huen, 'Past and Present Juxtaposed: The Chinese of Nineteenth-Century Johor', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 13.1 (1998): 130.

⁵¹⁵ Lim, 'Past and Present Juxtaposed', 130.

⁵¹⁶ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, 89-93.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66-72.

⁵¹⁸ Jabatan Warisan Negara, 'Kerja-kerja membaikpulih Istana Bandar, Jugra, Kuala Langat, Selangor Darul Ehsan, 24 May 2016,' URL:

<http://www.heritage.gov.my/index.php/ms/konservasi/konservasi-bangunan/istana/istana-jugra-jalan-bandar-kuala-langat-selangor>.

shading the windows of the main wing. The effect is both elegant and solid, with limited ornamental detailing beyond the Malay-style fascia boards beneath the tiled roof. The restrained classicism recalls some of Palladio's more austere designs, such as the Villa Saraceno in Agugliaro, filtered through the lens of British colonial Palladianism and its concessions to the warmer climate.

As in many British Palladian buildings, the Istana Besar's main building is flanked by two symmetrical wings, though these were executed in an altogether simpler style. Widely-set Tuscan pilasters set a loose rhythm for the deep verandahs on both side wings of the Istana Besar, with the simple galleries dwarfed by the broad pitched roof above them. With their prominent long roofs and shuttered galleries, these wings appear to owe more to traditional Malay architecture than to the work of Andrea Palladio.⁵¹⁹ Historic postcards of this garden front of the Istana Besar show the upper storey gallery entirely covered in wooden shutters, while the ground storey arcade was concealed by bamboo chick-blinds.⁵²⁰ The southern elevation of the Istana Besar, facing Singapore, presents a less formal aspect, with the building's frontage to the Strait apparently designed to make the most of the sea breezes. Without a projecting portico, the central building presents a wide, relatively flat elevation towards Singapore, with Tuscan pilasters supporting a broad half-hipped roof fringed with Malay-style fascia boards, providing deep eaves for this sea-facing front. The rear elevation of the Istana Besar presents more syncretic image than the austere classicism of the building's northern front, blending both Malay and Anglo-Indian architectural elements to create a distinctly modern palace.

There appears to have been an element of competition between Abu Bakar and the British in Singapore. A year after the Istana Besar of Johor was completed, British authorities in Singapore constructed their own Istana off Orchard Road to replace the single-storey building designed by George Doumgold Coleman for Raffles which had served as the Government House of Singapore till its demolition in 1859. In 1867, British authorities began construction of a new Government House on Mount Sophia.⁵²¹ The construction of the Istana Besar in Johor Bahru thus seems to reflect Abu Bakar's ambiguous relationship

⁵¹⁹ Chen, *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia, Vol. 5: Architecture*, 24-5, 38-9.

⁵²⁰ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, 90.

⁵²¹ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 13.

with the British Singapore; stylistically, the palace draws on the architecture of colonial power of British Malaya, employing the light, Anglo-Indian Palladian classicism favoured by British administrators through the first half of the nineteenth century, yet conspicuously turning its back on Singapore – and the British centre of power in Malaya – to face Abu Bakar's territory to the north.

The Istana Besar became the symbolic seat of Johor's well-travelled ruler. During his reign, Abu Bakar made no less than half a dozen trips to Europe, and also visited the Middle East, India, Ceylon, Java, Hong Kong, Japan and China.⁵²² He was the first Malay ruler to visit England and used the visit of 1866 – the same year the Istana Besar was inaugurated – to cement ties with Queen Victoria, the Prince of Wales, and secure his position as the ruler of the new state of Johor.⁵²³ Perhaps learning from his experiences in Europe, Abu Bakar began entertaining foreign dignitaries and other Malay royals at the Istana Besar in a grand, even extravagant manner. Visitors to the Istana during the 1880s included Prince Heinrich of Prussia, the King of Hawai'i, the Duke of Sutherland, Prince of Saxe-Weimar, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, and Bendahara Wan Ahmad of Pahang.⁵²⁴ This cosmopolitanism was echoed in the rich interior furnishings for Abu Bakar's new Istana. Imported chandeliers and rugs, as well as expensive ceramics from China and Japan, spoke eloquently of Sultan Abu Bakar's wealth, and provided ample evidence of his travels. According to Caddy, the saloon and ballroom were

hung with rich damask draperies and portraits of the royal family, and lined with tall Japanese vases, brought home by the Sultan from Japan, with other handsome Chinese and Japanese ornaments; the other furniture, sofas, ottomans &c., are all European... The floral decorations all over the house are worthy of the tropics, besides the ferns, so bright and green, the various crotons and begonias so rich and dark and velvety, and all so tropically luxuriant as scarcely to be imagined by a Londoner.⁵²⁵

⁵²² Tang Abdullah, 'Sultan Abu Bakar's Foreign Guests and Travels Abroad, 1860s-1895', 1.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 1 and 5.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵²⁵ Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya in the Duke of Sutherland's Yacht 'Sans Peur'*, 234.

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]

Figure 23. Postcard view depicting of one of the lavish interiors at the Istana Besar, circa 1900. NMS 1998-00335.

The Istana Besar became a centre of courtly life in Johor, the place where foreign guests to Johor were received. Upon his death in 1895, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* described Sultan Abu Bakar's palace 'the show-place of the town and the scene of the many hospitalities displayed by its generous-hearted owner'.⁵²⁶ Indeed, Abu Bakar's palace symbolised and facilitated his reinvention of Malay monarchy along modern lines. Abu Bakar's appropriation of the same classical language which was used by Singapore's British governors allowed him to telegraph the modernising agenda of his own government to his subjects. The Istana Besar became the focal point of a ritualised form of courtly life endorsed by the British colonial government and reinforced through the appropriation of classical imagery.⁵²⁷ Abu Bakar refashioned Johor's court along the modern but ritualised, ornamentalist lines of the British Empire, with the Istana Besar serving as the symbolic heart of his reformed Sultanate.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁶ 'The Death of the Sultan of Johore', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 6 June 1895, 3.

⁵²⁷ Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 212-13.

⁵²⁸ Cf. Cannadine, *Ornamentation*, 126-8; Milner, *The invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 210, 212-13.

The Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque



Figure 24. Gerald Edward Livock. *Aerial photograph of the Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque, Johor Bahru, taken 21 May 1924. IWM Q 82193.*

One of Sultan Abu Bakar's final acts as ruler of Johor was the promulgation of the *Undang-Undang Negeri Johor*, or Constitution of the State of Johor, in 14 April 1895, less than two months before his death.⁵²⁹ The constitution would see Johor transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy.⁵³⁰ This constitution enshrined Islam as the religion of state.⁵³¹ The position of Islam in the state of Johor would be exemplified by a mosque commissioned by Sultan Abu Bakar and completed during the reign of his son, Sultan Ibrahim. Commanding an elevated position on a hill overlooking the Tebrau Strait, the four domed minarets of the Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar would immediately become a landmark that could be seen from Singapore.

⁵²⁹ A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, 'Abu Bakar and Modern Johor: The Question of Modernisation and Westernisation in Malay Tradition', *Sejarah: Journal of the Department of History [Universiti Malaya]* 16.16 (2017): 71. See also: Ermy Azziaty Rozali, Mohd. Hafiz Othman, and Napisah Karimah Ismail, 'Pengaruh Kerajaan Uthmaniyyah dalam Pentadbiran Islam di Negeri Johor pada Abad ke-19 oleh Sultan Abu Bakar (1862-1895) dan Sultan Ibrahim (1895-1959)', *Bitara* 3.3 (2020): 74.

⁵³⁰ Tang Abdullah, 'Abu Bakar and Modern Johor', 71.

⁵³¹ A. Ghafar Ahmad, 'The Architectural Styles of Mosques in Malaysia: From Vernacular to Modern Structure', *Proceedings of the Symposium on Mosque Architecture: The Historic and Urban Developments of Mosque Architecture*, Vol, 2, 147-63 (Riyadh: King Saud University, 1999).

A new mosque had been urgently needed. In the late 1880s, Johor Bahru's mosque was bursting at the seams. At the end of Ramadan in 1889, the *Straits Times* reported:

To-day therefore is "Hari Rayah," and... a large congregation assembled at the Mosque for prayers, but owing to the smallness of the edifice many were unable to gain admission and had to seek some other place for worship. H.H. the Sultan and many members of his family were present.⁵³²

Construction commenced in 1892.⁵³³ The mosque was officially opened by Sultan Ibrahim on 19 April 1900, during the festival of Eid al-Adha, known locally as Hari Raya Haji.⁵³⁴ While archival material relating to the building is scarce, the building's design has been widely attributed to the court architect Tuan Haji Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak and the Johor government engineer Dato' Yahya bin Awalidin.⁵³⁵ The building demonstrates how Johor's rapidly modernising civil service, including its fledgling Public Works Department, were able to produce inventive and effective designs in the classical language to suit the needs of a growing Malay polity, one which remained steadfastly Islamic in its religious practices, even as it westernised its bureaucratic ones.

While historic building plans for the mosque do not survive in the Johor branch of the National Archives of Malaysia, a number of extant plans in the National Archives of Singapore provide further insight into the work of the court's architect and engineer, who collaborated on a number of prestigious building projects for the Johor elite in both Singapore and the Peninsula. These plans further demonstrate Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak's fluency with the classical idiom, and his ability to adapt classical vocabulary to the spatial needs of the Malay elite for both residential and religious use.⁵³⁶ Elements such as the

⁵³² 'Johore News', *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 7 June 1889, 5.

⁵³³ Ermy et al., 'Pengaruh Kerajaan Uthmaniyyah dalam Pentadbiran Islam di Negeri Johor', 73.

⁵³⁴ 'Johore. Opening of the New Mosque "Musjid Abubakar"', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 19 April 1900, 243.

⁵³⁵ Arkib Negara Malaysia, *Hari Ini Dalam Sejarah*, Vol. 5 (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Percetakan Negara, 1987), 103.

⁵³⁶ Hadji Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak and Dato' Yahya bin Awalidin, 'Plan of a Dwelling House to be erected in Telok Blanga, the property of Ungku Alec bin Ungku Chu', 1904, Building Plan 7309/1904, NAS CBS 123.

balustraded parapets, rusticated quoins and richly moulded window-surrounds are evident in both the residential and religious buildings designed by this designer-engineer team. There is limited biographical information on either the Tuan Haji Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak or Dato' Yahya bin Awalidin, though the death of the latter on 8 March 1918 is recorded in Johor government correspondence.⁵³⁷

The mosque is a rectangular structure topped with a broad hipped roof. Its façade consists of aedicule windows topped with segmental pediments, set between paired Doric pilasters. Above a cornice enriched with triglyphs and dentils, a balustraded parapet capped with urns runs around the length of the building. Steps leading into the mosque rise from under the porticos set beneath the three-storey minarets which project from the centre of each of the building's four elevations. These four minarets, which take the form of Baroque towers, are the most distinctive aspect of the Abu Bakar Mosque. In their profile and general composition, the minarets of the Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque resemble the tower of St Magnus-the-Martyr in London, designed by Christopher Wren. The four towers also recall, more faintly, the four corner towers of St John the Evangelist in Smith Square, Westminster, designed by Thomas Archer. The then-Tunku Ibrahim had accompanied his father Sultan Abu Bakar on the latter's trip to London in 1895, the last of Abu Bakar's the Sultan's many visits to the British capital.⁵³⁸ It is therefore possible that both Abu Bakar and Ibrahim were familiar with these buildings. The approach to London along the Thames would have entailed passing St Magnus-the-Martyr, as a retrospective passage in the *Times* written in 1927 makes clear:

Before the erection of Adelaide House [in 1925], to approach the City from Southwark was to enjoy as fine a sight as any in London. In the foreground were the ships in the Pool, with the Dutch schyuts off Billingsgate, while the morning light glinted upon the glorious tower of Wren's church of St Magnus-the-Martyr, the Customs House and the golden flames of the Monument.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ See: 'Informs the Death of Dato Yahya bin Awalidin [sic] on 8-3-18', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 10 March 1918, FC 238/18, ANMJ 1973/0003291J.

⁵³⁸ For a thorough account of Sultan Abu Bakar's extensive travels and the cosmopolitan image he cultivated, see: Tang Abdullah, 'Sultan Abu Bakar's Foreign Guests and Travels Abroad, 1860s-1895'.

⁵³⁹ 'The Wards of the City—I.', *The Times*, 8 November 1927, 38.

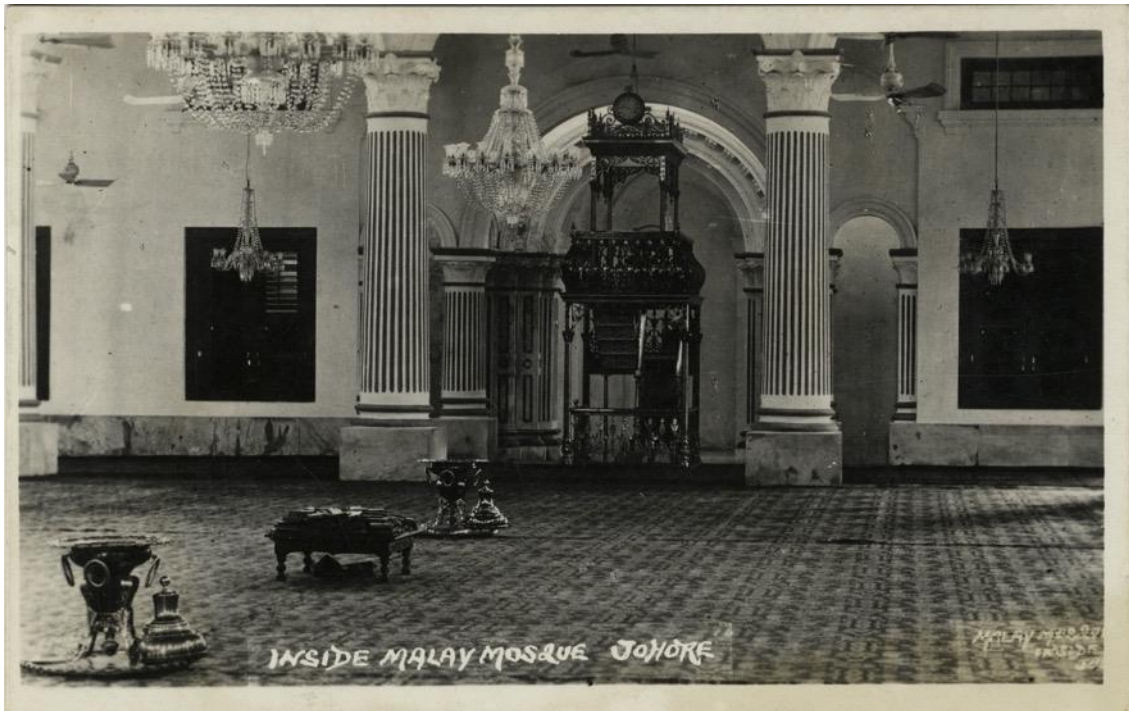


Figure 25. G.R. Lambert & Co. 'Inside Malay Mosque, Johore', circa 1900. KITLV 1402707.

It is not fanciful to imagine that the Johor royals became acquainted with this view on their journey to London. Moreover, Abu Bakar stayed at the Bailey's Hotel in South Kensington but was received by the Prince of Wales at Marlborough House in Westminster on both his trips.⁵⁴⁰ It is therefore possible that they saw Thomas Archer's Baroque church of St John the Evangelist in Westminster, and that upon his return to Johor, the newly crowned Sultan Ibrahim commissioned the court architect Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak to design a mosque inspired by these two buildings. In visiting the imperial metropole of Malaya's colonial power, the Sultans of Johor drew inspiration for the architectural language with which they communicated their own regal and religious authority.

The mosque's interiors are as lavish as the building's Baroque exterior. A historic photograph taken at the turn of the twentieth century by the Singapore photography studio G.R. Lambert & Co. shows that the interiors were richly appointed with thick carpets and ornate chandeliers. Architectural details, including astragal and torus mouldings, abaci, and the

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

fluting of columns are picked out in a darker contrasting colour from the overall interior paint scheme.

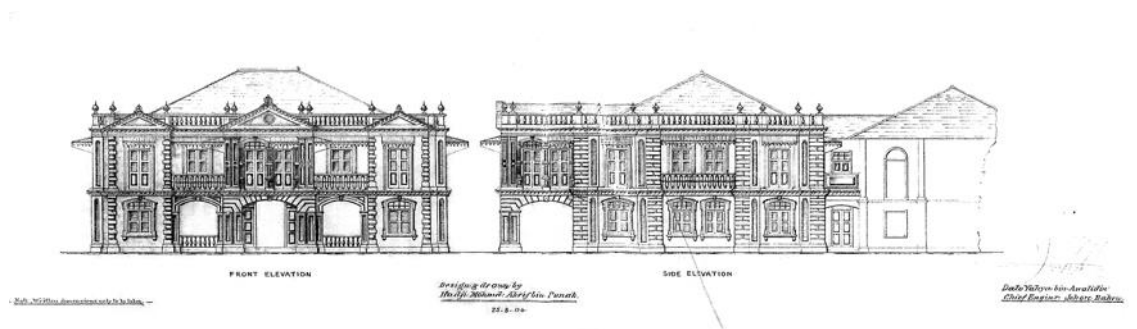


Figure 26. Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak and Dato' Yahya bin Awalidin. House for Ungku Ale bin Ungku Chu at Telok Blangah in Singapore, 1904. NAS CBS 123, Building Plan 7309.

Many of the ornamental devices seen in the Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque, such as rusticated quoins and broad mouldings surrounding the fenestration, are evident in other buildings designed by Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak and constructed by Dato' Yahya bin Awalidin. These elements can be seen in the house designed by the court architect and engineer for Ungku Ale bin Ungku Chu, a Johor Royal, at Telok Blangah in Singapore. This demonstrates the extent to which, at the turn of the twentieth century, classicism – and particularly a certain strain of the Edwardian Baroque – had become something of a house style for the Johor court, both in Johor Bahru, and in its historic centre of power in western Singapore.⁵⁴¹ This style would be emulated by other members of the Malay nobility, including the Sultan of Siak, a ruler from the Riau Islands in the Dutch East Indies, who commissioned the Singaporean Malay architect Wan Mohamed Kassim to rebuild his mansion at Chancery Lane in an ornamented version of the Anglo-Indian Palladian style in 1907.⁵⁴² Through this style, known as the 'Grand Manner', the Malay nobility would reflect back British symbols of

⁵⁴¹ The adoption of the so-called 'Grand Manner', a revival of the Baroque style exemplified by Christopher Wren and the planning principles of the late eighteenth century, was fashionable in Edwardian Britain. Proponents of this style argued, not entirely unsuccessfully, for its adoption in New Delhi, and with greater success in colonies like Singapore. See: A.S. Gray, 'II. Public Buildings and Street Architecture', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 121.5200 (1973): 216. See also: Gavin Stamp, 'British Architecture in India 1857-1947', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 129.5298 (1981): 357-79; and *idem*, 'New Delhi: A New Imperial Capital for British India', *The Court Historian* 17.2 (2012): 198.

⁵⁴² W.M. Kassim, 'Plan Shewing the Re-Building of a Dwelling House M. No. 6 Chancery Lane the property of H.H. the Sultan of Siak (Freehold-Land)', 2 January 1907, Building Plan 8613/1907, NAS CBS 125.

colonial authority in Singapore by adopting and adapting this grandiloquent variant of the classical language of architecture for their own regal institutions.⁵⁴³

Enjoying a lofty position on a hill overlooking the Tebrau Strait, the Abu Bakar Mosque immediately became the defining landmark of Johor Bahru. *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*, an early encyclopaedic reference on British Malaya, dubbed the mosque and Istana ‘the chief places of interest’ in the city, with the former described as ‘one of the most imposing and beautiful buildings devoted to the Mahomedan religion in the Far East’.⁵⁴⁴ Through the construction of this mosque named after his father, Sultan Ibrahim continued the tradition of architectural patronage established by his father, and cemented Johor Bahru’s position as the capital of a new Malay kingdom. As with the Istana Besar, the mosque drew on contemporary architectural fashions to project a modernising image. A similar architectural language would also be deployed by the Johor royal family for its mausoleums nearby, further cementing the association between the family and a Baroque strand of the classical language of architecture.

⁵⁴³ Hadji Mohamed Ahrif bin Punak and Dato’ Yahya bin Awalidin, ‘Plan of a Dwelling House to be erected in Telok Blanga the property of Ungku Alee bin Ungku Chu’, 26 August 1904, Building Plan 7309/1904, NAS CBS 123.

⁵⁴⁴ Arnold Wright and H.A. Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Lloyd’s Greater Britain Publishing Company, Ltd., 1908), 891.

Sultan Ibrahim's Banqueting Hall



Figure 27. Southern elevation of the Banqueting Hall at the Istana Besar. Photograph by the author.

Work on the Istana Besar did not end with Sultan Abu Bakar's death in 1895. During the reign of his son, Sultan Ibrahim, the Istana Besar was repaired, repainted, and renovated. The most notable change to the Istana Besar, however, was the addition of a grand banqueting hall in the Edwardian Baroque style. Like his father before him, Sultan Ibrahim was a well-travelled and cosmopolitan ruler who spent a considerable amount of time in Europe, and who developed a taste for the social life he encountered there.⁵⁴⁵ By the early twentieth century, the Palladian palace Sultan Ibrahim had inherited from his father would have appeared somewhat dated, and plans were made to upgrade the building. Some \$35,000 was provided for the construction of the Banqueting Hall in the Johor government estimates of 1916, but it was decided to postpone the construction due to the First World War.⁵⁴⁶ The delay also appears to have given Sultan Ibrahim time to reconsider his plans for extending the Istana Besar. The Sultan ultimately decided on a grander building for his new hall. This was outlined in correspondence from F.J. Weld, Acting General Adviser in the Johor civil service, to the Secretary to the High Commissioner for the Malay States in Singapore.

⁵⁴⁵ *A Souvenir Commemorating the Diamond Jubilee of His Highness the Sultan of Johore* (Singapore: Department of Information, Johore and the Straits Times Press Ltd., 1955), 14 and 24-28.

⁵⁴⁶ 'Banqueting Hall. Istana Besar. \$35,000 – to be revoted in 1917 & \$ 16,000 – extra provided for', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 28 July 1916, FC 542/1916, ANMJ 1973/0001764J.

With reference to Item 58 on page 63 of the Johore Estimates, 1916, Banqueting Hall, Istana Besar, \$35,000, I have the honour to report that His Highness the Sultan desires that a better building than originally contemplated should be erected at a cost of \$51,000. Owing to the War, however, High Highness proposes that the building should be postponed until 1917. I agree to both these proposals.⁵⁴⁷

In January 1917, the Johor Government was preparing to commence construction of the new Banqueting Hall. The tender for works was initially awarded to the Singapore contractor Poh Poo Yong. In 1917, Poh wrote to the Johor government to request a revision to the tender, noting that

With reference to my tender for the supply of materials and erection of the above Hall, I beg to state that my tender was based on estimated prices of August last year, and owing to the war the prices of European goods have since been increased.⁵⁴⁸

Poh raised the cost of his tender from \$51,000 to \$67,000 and, as a result, the Johor Government subsequently awarded the tender to Wee Kam Siong, also of Singapore, whose quoted price was raised from \$51,000 to \$58,000 to account for the elevated commodity brought on by the First World War.⁵⁴⁹

The apparent savings from hiring Wee would soon prove to be illusory, however, as disputes with the contractors over more than \$13,000 worth of misappropriated materials emerged in 1918.⁵⁵⁰ The Chief Engineer of the Johor PWD raised concerns that of some 2,600 casks of cement shipped from Singapore that had been supplied to the contractor, an estimated '1710

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁸ Letter from Poh Poo Yong to the Chief Engineer, PWD Johore, 23 February 1917, in 'Informs that Poh Poo Yong is ready to start work on the new Banqueting Hall Istana Besar. Enquires if the work may be put in hand', Johor State Secretary's Correspondence, 21 January 1917, SS 89/1917, ANM 1974/0001095J.

⁵⁴⁹ 'Banqueting Hall, Istana Besar: Recommends that the work be given to Wee Kam Siong at \$58,000', Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 21 January 1917, FC 199/1917, ANM 1973/0002392J.

⁵⁵⁰ 'Recommends that the money (\$40,000) for re-building a portion of Istana Besar be utilized to complete the Banqueting Hall', Johor State Secretary's Correspondence, 7 July 1918, SS 1284/1918, ANMJ 1974/0003470J.

casks [had been] misappropriated' and that, in addition to this, a large quantity of bricks had gone missing.⁵⁵¹ Johor Government correspondence in August of 1918 detailed the spiralling costs of replacing misappropriated materials in addition to sourcing the materials and labour for the Banqueting Hall's ornate decorative work and French tile roof:

the estimated cost of replacing the missing cement & bricks alone is \$25,581/=. I value the materials actually on the site at \$16,143/2. In addition to this a considerable amount of cast iron work (decorative) has to be supplied and will cost \$10/2 per square foot. French tiles for roofing must also be supplied and are now very costly. The internal & external plastering which will have to be done by special workmen is a very large item. Marble slabs must also be provided for the floor and some iron plates for columns. The materials on site are all taken into account by tenderers. Their tenders are in addition to this & they expect to have all the materials now on the site handed over to them for the work. The cost will eventually be \$105,048.65 i.e. amount already expended \$45,048.65 + Tender to complete 60,000.00 = 105,048.65. In addition to the 890 casks of cement, 290,000 special bricks, granite, sand, timber and labour dismantling the old building, removing old foundations etc. must be taken into account. This amounts to \$15,200/=. The tender is undoubtedly high but considering the decorative work, on which only specially skilled men can be employed, I am unable to recommend any but a reliable contractor. I might add that had the original contractor completed the work he would have lost money on it at present prices.⁵⁵²

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the Banqueting Hall would not be completed until four years later. Once again, the lack of available building plans makes it difficult to confirm the authorship of the Banqueting Hall at the Istana Besar. Public Works Department correspondence does, however, reveal that the building was completed in 1922 by the State Engineer of the Johor PWD, Fred Glendinning. This correspondence also suggests that there were initially plans for further extensions, but that these were not executed:

⁵⁵¹ See minutes dated 7 August 1918 in *ibid.*

⁵⁵² See minutes dated 13 August 1918 in *ibid.*

I have the honour to report that His Highness the Sultan has asked me to complete the Banqueting Hall which was left open at one end in anticipation of further extensions.⁵⁵³

While Sultan Ibrahim's vision may not have been achieved in full, his Banqueting Hall was still an imposing addition to the Istana Besar.

Sultan Ibrahim's Banqueting Hall broke away from the Palladian style of the existing building, imparting the palace complex with a distinctly Baroque character. The rhythm of its façade is established by a series of engaged Corinthian columns. Though set in pairs, each column is articulated with its own entablature, decorated with exaggerated dentils. The entire order is united by a single cornice, however, which runs along the length of the hall. This cornice is topped with a solid parapet, with one plinth for each pair of columns. The capitals of the hall's Corinthian columns are highly stylised and angular in appearance. The keystone of the arches on the ground level merge with protruding panels bearing the Johor coat of arms, which form the base of the clerestory windows above, giving the façade a lively, highly plastic character. Two bays project to form porticos along both the southern and northern elevations of the Banqueting Hall, while the end the hall curves to form an exedra.

A variant of the Edwardian Baroque style would be subsequently adopted for government buildings constructed during Sultan Ibrahim's reign, gradually reshaping the centre of power in Johor Bahru. Completed in 1929, the new courts designed by Stark & McNeill, for example, were commended in the *Journal of the Singapore Society of Architects Incorporated* as being 'treated in a simple classic style in sympathy with the function of the structure'.⁵⁵⁴ With a façade stretching for 350 feet along the Tebrau Strait,⁵⁵⁵ the new law courts helped create an eastern bookend to Johor's palace precinct, which was framed on its western end by the four domed minarets of the Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque. Even for this most modern of classical buildings, however, the Johorean tradition of using Chinese contractors from Singapore

⁵⁵³ 'Banqueting Hall, Istana Besar', Johor General Adviser's Correspondence, 17 May 1922, GA 329/1922, ANMJ 973/0027229J.

⁵⁵⁴ W.E. Watson, 'The New Law Courts Johore Bahru', *JSSAI* 1.3 (1929): 10.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

continued into the late 1920s, and the courthouse was constructed by Mr. Woo Mun Chew of Singapore.⁵⁵⁶

Through his lavish Banqueting Hall, Sultan Ibrahim continued his father's tradition of hospitality and entertaining, ensuring the Istana Besar would remain an important centre for the social and political life of the Johor court. In expanding his father's Palladian palace with an Edwardian Baroque wing, Ibrahim also demonstrated that he was a fashionable ruler, abreast of architectural trends in the way his father was. The Banqueting Hall at the Istana Besar thus reaffirmed the importance of both the palace and its regal resident, deploying the same language that colonial administrators across the narrow Tebrau Strait were using in their own buildings. Sultan Ibrahim's architectural patronage in Johor Bahru saw the classical language of architecture consolidated as the architecture of state in Johor. Changing fashions in architecture from across the British Empire were adopted by the Johor Sultanate to communicate its status and confidence as a modern state. As Milner notes, the adoption of British ideas afford the Johor Sultans 'new ceremonial opportunities... as a means of exploiting British colonialism and strengthening' the power structures of their dynasty.⁵⁵⁷



Figure 28. Stark & McNeill. Perspective drawing of the new courts at Johor Bahru, 1929. JSSAI.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁵⁷ Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 213.

The Muar Mosque

Situated on the estuary of the Muar River, the town of Muar was an important regional centre for trade. Muar was not initially part of the Abu Bakar's new Kingdom of Johor, and was controlled by a member of a different branch of the old Johor Empire's royal family. Following the death of Sultan Ali in 1877, the territory was ceded to Maharajah Abu Bakar on the advice of the Acting Governor-General of the Straits Settlements, a position consolidated through an election in 1885.⁵⁵⁸ Abu Bakar renamed the town Bandar Maharani, meaning Queen's Town, in honour of his wife in 1887, though this name never received wide use outside of official publications.⁵⁵⁹ The town was laid out by Dato' Bentara Luar Salleh bin Perang, a prominent bureaucrat and surveyor who also planned the town of Batu Pahat according to contemporary British planning principles.⁵⁶⁰ The construction of the Muar railway between 1888 and 1890 opened up trade between the port of Muar and its rural hinterland, allowing for the export of betel nut, copra and fruit from the villages to other states, and for the import of rice and other products to the hinterland via Bandar Maharani.⁵⁶¹ Muar was the first town in Johor with its own railway service.⁵⁶² The signing of a railway convention between the British and the Sultan of Johor in 1904 finally made it possible to connect the Federated Malay States with Singapore via Johor.⁵⁶³ By 1928, the construction of the highway between Melaka and Singapore via Muar and Batu Pahat also helped link the city to the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements.⁵⁶⁴ Migration from other parts of the Malay Archipelago, and in particular of Javanese, Bugis and Banjarese labourers to Muar also helped make the royal town a thriving regional centre.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁵⁸ Khor et al., *The Towns of Malaya*, 58.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 62. For an account of Mohamed Salleh bin Perang's life, see: Amin Sweeney, *Reputations to Live On: An Early Malay Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

⁵⁶¹ Ismail bin Abdullah, 'Sejarah Pengangkutan di Johor', *Johor: Dahulu dan Sekarang*, edited by Abdullah Zakaria bin Ghazali and Zainal Abidin Borhan (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Muzium Malaysia, 1994), 122.

⁵⁶² Khor et al., *The Towns of Malaya*, 58.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁶⁵ Rahila Omar, Khazin Mohd. Tamrin, Nordin Hussin, and Nelmawarni, 'Sejarah kedatangan masyarakat Bugis ke Tanah Melayu: kajian kes di Johor', *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics and Strategic Studies* 36 (2009): p. 51 note 44. See also: Abdul Malek Munip, *Bandar Maharani dan Daerah Muar, 1884-1920: Peribumi dan Pemodenan* (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Muzium Malaysia, 1984).



Figure 29. G.R. Lambert & Co. Muar Mosque, circa 1900. KITLV 7525.

The Muar Mosque was originally housed in a wooden building constructed in the late nineteenth century. Historic photographs show a rectangular structure raised on stilts, surmounted by a broad, tiled hipped roof which overhangs a verandah on all four sides. The building's limited ornamentation consisted of Malay-style foliated fascia boards beneath the eaves and slender turned-wood balustrades along the length of the verandah. The doorways of the building were topped with triangular fanlights. Built along traditional lines, the mosque was located at the end of Jalan Petrie, or Princess Street, on the southern bank of the Muar River, close to the river's mouth. The mosque marked the end of Bandar Maharani's main thoroughfare, commanding a prominent and significant symbolic position in the port town. By the 1920s, however, the building was becoming insufficient for the needs of its growing congregation. On 31 October 1923, the Secretary of Religious Affairs in the Johor Civil Service wrote to the Financial Commissioner to request a special provision of \$1,000 for an extension to the Muar Mosque, which he stated was 'urgently needed as on Fridays there is not sufficient accommodation for such a large number of worshippers, many of them being obliged to worship outside the mosque.'⁵⁶⁶ This funding was approved on 1 November

⁵⁶⁶ 'Special provision of \$1,000- for extension to Muar Mosque', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 27 October 1923, FC 1138/1923, ANMJ 1973/0010291J. See also: Johor State Secretary's Correspondence, 27 October 1923, SS 2539/1923, ANMJ 1973/0010291J.

1923.⁵⁶⁷ It is unclear whether this was built, but the extension was apparently a stopgap measure, and by 1924, some five parcels of land were earmarked for acquisition by the government for an estimated cost of \$16,500 in order to construct the new mosque.⁵⁶⁸ In 1924, a provision was made in the Johor Estimates for \$175,000 to go towards the construction of the Muar Mosque.

The design of the Muar Mosque has been attributed by scholars to the draughtsman Sulaiman bin Haji Ilyas, with construction supervised by Major Muhammad Said bin Haji Sulaiman, an attribution corroborated by a plaque on the wall of the mosque and the mosque's own website.⁵⁶⁹ In the absence of building plans, this authorship is supported circumstantially by other documentary evidence. A 'Sulaiman bin Hadji Alias' appears in *The Singapore and Straits Directory* of 1915 as Johor's Chief Draughtsman,⁵⁷⁰ and a 'Sulaiman b. H. Alias' was attending Johor State Banquets well into the 1930s.⁵⁷¹ Major Muhammad Said Bin Haji Sulaiman was an influential figure in the Johor government and a prolific writer, serving as Private Secretary to Sultan Ibrahim and between 1910 and 1952.⁵⁷² As seen above, the use of a local designer and engineer for an important state mosque would certainly be in keeping with the precedent established by an earlier generation of Johor court architects and engineers.

It is also clear from archival material, however, that the original design was substantially modified by Stark & McNeill, who were engaged by the Johor Government as architects for the Muar Mosque, in order to make the minaret structurally viable. Stark & McNeill had been employed by the Johor Government for other major government commissions in this period,

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁸ 'Acquisition of land for the site of the Muar Mosque', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 12 September 1924, FC 1378/1924, ANMJ 1973/0011767J.

⁵⁶⁹ See the entry for the Masjid Jamek Muar in Abdul Halim Nasir, *Masjid-Masjid di Semenanjung Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing, 1985). See also: Harlina Md. Sharif, 'Contesting perception: the genesis of Islamic architecture idioms in the Sultanates mosques of British Malaya 1874-1957', Proceeding of the 3rd International Conference on Masjid, Zakat and Waqf (IMAF 2016), 1 December 2016, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. See also: 'Sejarah Masjid: Sejarah Pembinaan Masjid Jamek Sultan Ibrahim Muar', Masjid Jamek Muar Official Website, URL: <http://www.masjidjamekmuar.org/?Masjid+Sultan+Ibrahim%2C+Muar:Sejarah+Masjid>.

⁵⁷⁰ *The Singapore and Straits Directory* (Singapore: Fraser & Neave, 1915), 470.

⁵⁷¹ 'The Johore State Banquet', *Malaya Tribune*, 19 September 1935, 16.

⁵⁷² See: A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, 'Hikayat Johor dan Kepentingannya sebagai Sumber Sejarah Johor Moden: 1833-1895', *Jurnal Perspektif* 5.2 (1985): 29-43. See also: Rahimah Hamdan and Shaiful Bahri Md. Radzi, 'A Hero of Two Ages: Mohd. Said Sulaiman as the First Malay Autobiography Editor', *Asian Social Science* 10.7 (2014): 191-9.

including the new Law Courts in Johor Bahru.⁵⁷³ The final design of the mosque as it stands is therefore likely to be a combination of Sulaiman bin Haji Ilyas' design and the revisions made by Stark & McNeill over the course of its construction.

Messrs. Gammon & Co. provided the government with a tender of \$185,000 for the construction of the entire building.⁵⁷⁴ Stark & McNeill, who were acting as architects for the Johor Government for the Muar Mosque 'strongly advised a different form of foundation', and the State Engineer approved of the use of a 'continuous raft foundation', bringing the total cost of the building including architects' fees and land acquisition to \$300,000.⁵⁷⁵ Despite the high cost of the building, the Acting General Adviser observed that 'Muar is a very prosperous and thickly populated district and I do not consider that \$300,000 is an unduly large sum to be devoted to this purpose.'⁵⁷⁶

The foundation stone of the new mosque was laid on 15 February 1925 by the Crown Prince Ismail, the Tunku Mahkota of Johor.⁵⁷⁷ Construction continued apace until 1926, when tests by the architects revealed that the loads from the main tower were 'far in excess of half a ton per square foot', exceeding the pressure provided for in the foundations originally designed for the building.⁵⁷⁸ This would have sweeping implications for the design of the building, and in particular its minaret.

Situated along the southern bank of the Muar river near its estuary, the Muar Mosque is largely rectangular in shape, with a round domed tower projecting from its western elevation, and the taller, squared-based minaret projecting from the eastern side of the mosque. To the east of the minaret, there is a smaller square block, with semicircular porticos on both its northern and southern elevations, which contains a circular pool for ritual ablutions, which

⁵⁷³ W.E. Watson, 'The New Law Courts Johore Bahru', *JSSAI*, 1.3 (1929): 10-13. See also: 'Johore Jottings', *Malaya Tribune*, 5 April 1929, 11.

⁵⁷⁴ Letter from the Acting General Adviser, Johore to the Secretary to the High Commissioner for the Malay States, Singapore, 8 November 1924, in 'Muar Mosque: Seeks H.E.'s sanction for extra provision', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 8 November 1924, FC 1293/1924, ANMJ 1973/0011685J.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁷ 'New Mosque for Muar', *Malayan Saturday Post*, 7 March 1925, 9.

⁵⁷⁸ 'Subsidence of the mosque building at Muar', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 8 December 1927, FC 1490/1928, ANMJ 1973/0044091J.

is ringed with Doric columns that support an oculus above. Both the northern and southern elevations of the mosque's main hall, the northeastern and southeastern corners are also graced with projecting bays with curved porticos. The latter recall the main entrance of James Gibbs' Church of St Mary-le-Strand, which was completed in 1723.⁵⁷⁹

Indeed, the design of the mosque has a strong eighteenth-century character, with an unusual minaret that recalls the Commissioner's Churches designed by architects such as Thomas Hardwick and Robert Smirke. Hardwick's church of St Mary in Marylebone (completed 1817) and Christ Church on Cosway Street (completed 1824) were, in the words of Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, 'an elaboration of the tradition established by Gibbs's St Martin in the Fields'.⁵⁸⁰ In both Christ Church and the Muar Mosque, the tower consists of a thin, cylindrical volume piercing through an airy, square colonnade. Smirke's church of St Mary in Bryanston Square and the church of St Philip in Salford may have also served as an inspiration for the mosque, as both churches adopt a similar classical vocabulary of semi-circular porticos, elegantly spaced pilasters, and slender telescoping towers.⁵⁸¹ These designs, born of eighteenth-century antiquarianism, have their ultimate source in Classical Antiquity. Funerary towers and mausolea from the Roman Empire, particularly the distinctive forms of Oriental and African mausolea, provided a precedent for the superposition of temple forms, both rounded and square, above polygonal bases.⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁹ James Gibbs, *Gibbs' Book of Architecture: An Eighteenth-Century Classic* (Minneapolis: Dover, 2008), 16-19.

⁵⁸⁰ Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. London 3: North West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 51 and 600.

⁵⁸¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. South Lancashire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 28.

⁵⁸² Henri Rolland, *Le mausolée de Glanum. XXI^e supplément à Gallia* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1969), 72.



Figure 30. The Muar Mosque as it appeared in 2018. Photograph by the author.

The minaret is the most idiosyncratic element of the Muar mosque's design. The unusual tower comprises four storeys. The ground storey features a central arched portal flanked by niches set between Doric pilasters. Above this, the first storey comprises widely-set Ionic columns on plinths, topped by a balustraded parapet decorated with urns. Set in the middle of this belvedere-like storey is a round room punctuated with tall and narrow arched openings. This rounded part of the tower rises up another two storeys as a cupola, articulated with Doric pilasters and rectangular windows on the third storey and Ionic pilasters and arched windows on the top-most storey. The minaret is capped with a mushroom-shaped dome. The rounded portion of the tower is considerably more slender than the broad square base from which it rises. The proportions are unusual, and the reasons behind and authorship of this unique design are elucidated in Johor Government correspondence concerning issues with the mosque's construction.

During construction, the Muar Mosque was affected by subsidence.⁵⁸³ This eventually forced the demolition and re-design of the minaret. This caused a dispute between the mosque's architects, Messrs. Stark & McNeill, and the contractors, Messrs. J.C. Gammon Ltd. While the original building plans for the Muar Mosque do not appear to have survived, the government correspondence regarding the reworking of the mosque's 'tower' provides insight into the way the design evolved. This correspondence also makes it possible to confirm that the minaret at least was re-designed by Messrs. Stark & McNeill in conjunction with the engineers, as stated in a letter to the State Engineer of the Johor Public Works Department:

Messrs. Gammon have asked our permission to demolish the Tower, and we have informed them that this should be done forthwith. They are preparing a scheme for approval, providing new foundations and reconstructing the Tower in a much lighter design.⁵⁸⁴

Further correspondence between Stark & McNeill and the State Engineer on 23 October 1928 confirm that the original minaret's fate was sealed:

There was no other remedy left but to demolish the Tower and rebuild it of lighter construction and on new foundations.... We enclose herewith a print shwoing [sic] the new design of the Tower.⁵⁸⁵

This would explain the porous first storey and spindly upper storeys of the minaret. While the original building plans for the Muar Mosque are now lost, it seems likely that the minaret was originally closer in design to those of the Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque, which was also built during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim, and that the unusual proportions of the Muar Mosque came about as a practical response to serious structural issues, rather than wilful mannerism on the part of the building's designers. This idea is supported by the design of yet another

⁵⁸³ 'Subsidence of the mosque building at Muar', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 8 December 1927, FC 1490/1928, ANMJ 1973/0044091J.

⁵⁸⁴ Correspondence from Messrs Stark & McNeill to the State Engineer, Johore PWD, 9 September 1928, reproduced in *ibid.*

⁵⁸⁵ Correspondence from Messrs Stark & McNeill to the State Engineer, Johore PWD, 23 October 1928, reproduced *ibid.*

Johorean mosque in Batu Pahat, which was completed in 1935 under the patronage of Sultan Ibrahim.⁵⁸⁶ While the mosque is eclectic in its style, featuring cusped arches and chevron cornices, the profile of its clocktower minaret echoes those of the Abu Bakar Mosque in Johor Bahru. This series of mosques demonstrates how Sultan Ibrahim, through his patronage of mosques in Johor's key urban centres, was establishing a royal architectural style, continuing his father's classicising legacy. The profile of the Batu Pahat Mosque also lends weight to the idea that the extremely idiosyncratic minaret of the Muar Mosque was entirely the result of the structural issues faced during construction, rather than the whims of its architect.

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]

Figure 31. Lim Tan Tong. Photograph of the Batu Pahat Mosque, 1953. Straits Times.

⁵⁸⁶ 'New Mosque in Johore Opened', *Straits Times*, 25 November 1935, 12.

After the considerable delays caused by the subsidence of the minaret, the Muar Mosque finally opened on 28 February 1930. The opening of the mosque was presided over by the Tunku Ismail, the Regent of Johor and Commissioner of Muar.⁵⁸⁷

Despite the considerable problems caused by subsidence, no expense was spared on the finishing of the Muar Mosque. In 1927, tenders were received for marble dados, *chengai* (*Balanocarpus heimii*) hardwood doors, and provisions were made for \$35,000 to be spent on electrical lighting for the mosque.⁵⁸⁸ The interior of the mosque was also appointed with a lavish cast-iron Minbar, its slender Corinthian columns supporting an elaborate canopy decorated with Arabesques as well as angled stars-in-crescents drawn from the Johor flag. The star-in-crescent motif also appears between the canted volutes of every capital within the main prayer hall. The interior of the main prayer hall, with its widely spaced Ionic columns and clerestory of Diocletian windows, has the sober, elegant classicism of eighteenth-century English churches, with the bulk of ornamentation centred on the Minbar as a focal point.

The troubled construction of the Muar Mosque demonstrates the complex relationship between the Malay rulers of Johor and the region's British administrators and architects. Throughout his reign, Sultan Ibrahim appears to have been eager to draw on the talents of Malay architects and draughtsmen, resisting the use of British architects for his mosques in much the same way as he attempted to resist British interference in his government. Malay architects and draughtsmen were the driving force behind both the Abu Bakar Mosque and the Muar Mosque. In both instances, they produced complex and sophisticated classical designs in response to their briefs. When British professionals were engaged to assist in the latter, the relationship was not a top-down transfer of knowledge and expertise between imperial engineers and the local population. Rather, British engineers were brought in to assist with the technical aspects of the job, not for their proficiency in the classical language. The two mosques thus demonstrate how much classicism had become assimilated as a local architectural language by the time Sultan Ibrahim ascended to the throne in Johor.

⁵⁸⁷ 'The Muar Mosque Opening Ceremony', *Malayan Saturday Post*, 22 March 1930, 28.

⁵⁸⁸ 'Tenders for marble dado chengai doors and pulpit for the Muar Mosque. Supplement of \$7530', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, 20 June 1927, FC 1314/1927, ANMJ 1973/0016086J.

Conclusion

Under the powerful influence of Sultan Abu Bakar, Johor reinvented itself as a modern Malayan Kingdom. Traditional power structures of the former Johor Empire were reformed into a new type of government, adopting a British-style civil service to advance its agenda. In his final months, Abu Bakar would also see Johor transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy through the promulgation of the *Undang-Undang Negeri Johor*. Abu Bakar's architectural patronage can be read as part of his modernisation programme, with the Sultan reimagining his kingdom as a modern state. To do this, Abu Bakar adopted the classicism employed by the governors in Singapore, who had become the colonial owners of an island traditionally governed by the Johor Empire. Through the use of Wong Ah Fook, the same influential Chinese contractor who built many of Singapore's major classical buildings of the mid-nineteenth century, Abu Bakar was able to equal the colonial government in Singapore architecturally and project a new image of Malay royal authority in line with his ambitions.

This architectural patronage was continued by his son, Sultan Ibrahim, who supported the construction of major mosques from the turn of the twentieth century through to the 1920s. The classicism which the Johor Sultans adopted for their palaces and their places of worship was always fashionable, keeping pace with the changing architectural tastes of the British Empire. From the late Victorian ornamentalism of the Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar, with its four Baroque minarets proudly overlooking the Tebrau Strait, to the idiosyncratic but elegant classicism of the Muar Mosque, Sultan Ibrahim's mosques were powerful statements of what a modern Islamic ruler's patronage could achieve architecturally.

The adoption of classicism – first in the form of Anglo-Indian neo-Palladianism, and later the Edwardian Baroque – by the Johor Sultans belies their complex relationship with British Imperial influence. Western symbols of power were adopted by the Johor Sultans as part of their modernising agenda. Yet the Johor Sultans did not always welcome British influence with open arms, and it was only financial difficulties on the part of the Johor Crown which allowed that British influence to gradually hold sway over the Johor civil service. Regal classicism in Johor cannot therefore be read as an attempt at projecting Britishness so much as it was an attempt at projecting modernity, with the architecture of imperial governance in

nearby Singapore being taken as the appropriate setting for a modern Malayan ruler. Cannadine argues that ‘the British Empire as a hierarchical enterprise... was never just one-sided, because many colonials.... believed in it.’⁵⁸⁹ Architecture was one of the means by which the British Empire projected its hierarchical vision of authority.⁵⁹⁰ As Milner argues, Abu Bakar is presented in royal chronicles such as the *Hikayat Johor* not as a passive receiver of British influence, but rather as a shrewd monarch who obtained ‘actual advantages from the European relationship.’⁵⁹¹ For the Johor Sultans, the British Empire offered a model by which they could refashion their own courtly life, borrowing on colonial authority to reinforce the power of their own dynastic rule.⁵⁹²

This vision of hierarchical authority would prove eminently suitable for the modernising agenda of the Johor Sultans. In adopting the classical architectural language of British colonial authority, Johor’s ruling dynasty were able to appropriate and subvert its meaning. Classicism became part of the ornamentalist framework through which the Johor monarchy could project its own hierarchical structures. Bhabha argues that the ‘menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.’⁵⁹³ By co-opting the architectural language used by the colonial governors of Singapore, Johor’s Sultans were able to reclaim and project their own political authority.

While the Johor Sultans were the first to adopt the classical language in their architectural commissions, they were not the only Malay royals to do so. In Selangor, Sultan Alaeddin’s idiosyncratic palace at Jugra adopted an orientalised form of classicism, with ornamental details provided by the Chinese craftsmen who worked on the building in the early twentieth century.⁵⁹⁴ A similar eclecticism is evident in the Istana Sepachendera in Alor Setar, Kedah,

⁵⁸⁹ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 134.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁹¹ Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 212.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁹³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 126.

⁵⁹⁴ Shireen Jahn Kassim and Zumahiran Kamaruddin, ‘Urban Syncretism: Conscious and Unconscious Architectural Formation of National Identity’, *Modernity, Nation and Urban-Architectural Form: The Dynamics and Dialectics of National Identity vs Regionalism in a Tropical City* edited by Shireen Jahn Kassim, Norwina Mohd Nawawi, and Mansor Ibrahim (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 217-20.

in northern Malaya.⁵⁹⁵ When the royal family of Negeri Sembilan constructed a new palace near the more traditional Istana Seri Menanti (1908) in the early 1930s, it was executed in a modern classical style.⁵⁹⁶ In this regard, the Johor royal family may be regarded as trendsetters among the Malay royals, adopting the classical style as part of their modernisation programme for the state, and in doing so creating a new language for the Malay *istana*.

The modern Malay Sultan would increasingly live in classical grandeur, though some would continue to patronise traditional architecture well into the twentieth century, as in the case of the Istana Kenangan at Kuala Kangsar, commissioned by the Sultan of Perak in 1926.⁵⁹⁷ Malay rulers of the early twentieth century thus had a number of architectural languages at their disposal with which they could variously project an image of modernity or of their patronage of customary building practices. Shireen Jahn Kassim and Zumahiran Kamaruddin argue that a building like the Istana Bandar in Jugra, Selangor demonstrates how Malay rulers adopted a ‘conscious’ syncretism in their architectural patronage as a means by which they could ‘balance and unite’ the disparate cultures of the cosmopolitan polities they ruled in British Malaya.⁵⁹⁸

Chinese labour was central to the construction of many of these monuments, reflecting patterns in Johor’s, and indeed Malaya’s, economic development in this period more broadly. Under the patronage of the Temenggongs and later Sultans of Johor, Chinese migrants had helped open up large swathes of modern Johor to agriculture. In the process, they enriched both themselves and the state. Chinese contractors like Wong Ah Fook, who enjoyed a close relationship with Johor’s elite, also saw architectural projects authored by Malay and British designers realised through Chinese labour. As argued by Chopra, the royal monuments of Johor are thus enduring evidence of the ‘contact zone’, in which the labour of the colonised

⁵⁹⁵ Tengku Anis Qariah bt Raja Abdul Kadir, Puteri Shireen Jahn Kassim, Nurul Syala Abdul Latif, and Harlina Md. Shariff, ‘Identifying the Parameters of the Malay Classical Architecture’, *Planning Malaysia: Journal of the Malaysian Institute of Planners* 18.2 (2020): 62-3 and 65-6.

⁵⁹⁶ Khor et al., *The Towns of Malaya*, 52-3. See also: Nurdyana Zainal Abidin, Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan, and Fawazul Khair Ibrahim, ‘Architectural Influences of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan’, *Planning Malaysia: Journal of the Malaysian Institute of Planners* 15.1 (2017): 151-62.

⁵⁹⁷ Daeng Haliza Daeng Jamal, Zuliskandar Ramli, and Mastor Surat, ‘Istana Kenangan: Meneroka Integrasi Warisan Budaya Melayu dan Konservasi Menerusi Pendekatan Suaiguna Semula’, *Jurnal Arkeologi Malaysia* 30.2 (2017): 3-4.

⁵⁹⁸ Jahn Kassim and Kamaruddin, ‘Urban Syncretism’, 217-20.

was integral to the construction of the colonial project.⁵⁹⁹ Expertise that Wong gained working on projects for the colonial government in Singapore was transferred to the works he undertook for Sultan Abu Bakar, to very different ends. Chinese labour drawn from the colony of Singapore were applied to the construction of monuments to Malay authority across the Tebrau Strait in Johor.

Through their architectural patronage, Johor's cosmopolitan leaders put forward a new vision of what modern Malay kingship and its institutions could look like. While this vision was articulated through the new language of classicism, it did not detract from traditional Malay ideas of authority, or of Islam. As argued by A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, Abu Bakar remained staunchly religious, and promoted religious education through his reforms.⁶⁰⁰ Modernisation was not always the same as westernisation, and traditional court structures and religious rites endured even as the civil service was reformed.⁶⁰¹ The grand mosques constructed by his son, Sultan Ibrahim, show a continued commitment to upholding and promoting Islam, even if the religion had now acquired a classical garb. The Johor Sultanate's adoption of classicism thus demonstrates that the classical language was not solely associated with colonial power, and could just as easily be co-opted by Malay rulers who resisted British rule. The adoption of both classicism and British town planning principles in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century by the Johorean elite demonstrates how architectural ideas were adopted and translated, with western classicism adapted for both regal and religious functions within an Islamic Sultanate.

⁵⁹⁹ Chopra, 'South and Southeast Asia', 279. See also: Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 33-40 *passim*.

⁶⁰⁰ A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, 'Modernisation or Westernisation of Johor under Abu Bakar: A Historical Analysis', *Intellectual Discourse* 16.2 (2008): 224-8.

⁶⁰¹ Tang Abdullah, 'Abu Bakar and Modern Johor', 65-71 and elsewhere *passim*.

Chapter V. Coarsened or Cosmopolitan?

Re-reading Malaya's Vernacular Classicism

While government buildings, royal palaces and trading houses were undoubtedly the grandest manifestations of classical architecture in British Malaya, it was in residential buildings that the classical language of architecture was most ubiquitously used, and where this idiom was most clearly hybridised. This is particularly true of the terrace house typology. These buildings were often referred to as 'shophouses' in both building plans from the period and secondary literature, even in purely residential buildings where no commercial use was ever intended.⁶⁰² By sheer numbers, these shophouses constituted the bulk of the urban built environment in colonial Malaya, and continue to make up the lion's share of the listed built heritage in cities such as George Town, Melaka, and Singapore.⁶⁰³ This building typology developed out of a mixture of influences from Southern China, the Malay Archipelago, and the Indian subcontinent, with traditional building forms reshaped by the rules and regulations imposed upon Asian builders by British colonial municipal authorities.⁶⁰⁴ This form of building was inherently hybrid in nature. The so-called shophouse typology was taken up by both Asian and European architects alike and, by the twentieth century, this widespread, hybrid vernacular had also become the greatest vehicle for classical ornament in Malayan architecture. As noted by Lee Kip Lin in his monograph on Singapore's residential architecture, 'with few exceptions, all buildings were in the classical style until the arrival of the Modern Movement in the 1930s.'⁶⁰⁵ This was equally true of residential architecture in cities and towns across the length of the Malay Peninsula and Straits Settlement, from the largest cities to the small linear settlements along rural trunk roads.

In his monograph on Singapore's Emerald Hill neighbourhood, Lee notes that by the early twentieth century, a consistent style was emerging among vernacular residences:

⁶⁰² Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*, 81. See also: Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 1.

⁶⁰³ Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) states that shophouses 'form the bulk of [Singapore's] gazetted conservation buildings' while Tan estimates that there are around 7,000 historic shophouses in George Town alone. See: Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), 'The Shophouse', URL: <https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Get-Involved/Conserve-Built-Heritage/Explore-Our-Built-Heritage/The-Shophouse>; and Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 4-6. See also: Tjoa-Bonatz, 'Ordering of Housing and the Urbanisation Process', 125.

⁶⁰⁴ Lim, 'The "Shophouse Rafflesia"', 47-66.

⁶⁰⁵ Lee, *The Singapore House*, 45.

The common idiom is the use of the classical orders on the first and upper floor walls, either Roman Doric or Corinthian, not true to Palladian or any rules, but plagiarised freely. The absence of detailed drawings and the poor draughtsmanship evident in some of the building plans suggest strongly that craftsmen were responsible for the intricate detailing of the Orders. Despite the use of the European classical elements, the buildings have a pronounced Chinese character... The total effect and result of this mixture of European and Chinese elements has been somewhat misleadingly referred to as “Chinese Baroque” by one authority.⁶⁰⁶

While classical ornamental vocabulary may have been most widely disseminated through the shophouse typology, later scholarly readings of such buildings have not generally looked favourably upon their use of western ornament. Lee’s book popularised the use of the term ‘coarsened classicism’ to describe this eclectic style, and the term ‘mutant classicism’ was also used to describe the streamlining tendencies of the late 1920s and 1930s.⁶⁰⁷ For Lee, coarsened classicism was a local idiom which grew out of Victorian eclecticism and the Edwardian Baroque, but was characterised by the ‘ignorant [sic] application of the Orders and other classical elements’ in Singapore architecture.⁶⁰⁸ Despite acknowledging that the so-called coarsened classical style was ‘hybrid’ in nature, Lee argues that this style was the product of ‘local men who were untutored in the Classical Orders’, resulting in ‘unsophisticated’ and ‘incorrect’ uses of classical vocabulary.⁶⁰⁹ Lee describes this vernacular use of classical ornament as being ‘plagiarised freely’ from western sources.⁶¹⁰ This idea of ‘plagiarism’ is also echoed in Gretchen Liu’s influential monograph *Pastel Portraits*, which describes local architects and builders as ‘freely plagiarising Western architectural motifs’.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁶ Lee, *Emerald Hill*, 7.

⁶⁰⁷ Lee, *The Singapore House*, 61, 125, 135, and 138.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 125-6.

⁶¹⁰ Lee, *Emerald Hill*, 7.

⁶¹¹ Liu, *Pastel Portraits*, 21.

Ideas and ornamental motifs were certainly borrowed, revisited, and translated across British Malaya. James Stark's design for Heah Swee Lee's mansion Northam Lodge in Penang would go on to influence a number of houses for Penang's fashionable elite in the 1910s and 1920s.⁶¹² This included Gan Ngoh Bee's mansion on Northam Road, designed by David Nathaniel, which mirrored and extended the design of Northam Lodge, and the mansion designed by Chew Eng Eam for Choong Lye Hock on Macalister Road, which added an extra storey and a domed tower to the design.⁶¹³ An element of competition between the elite is evident here, with motifs borrowed, extended, and exaggerated.

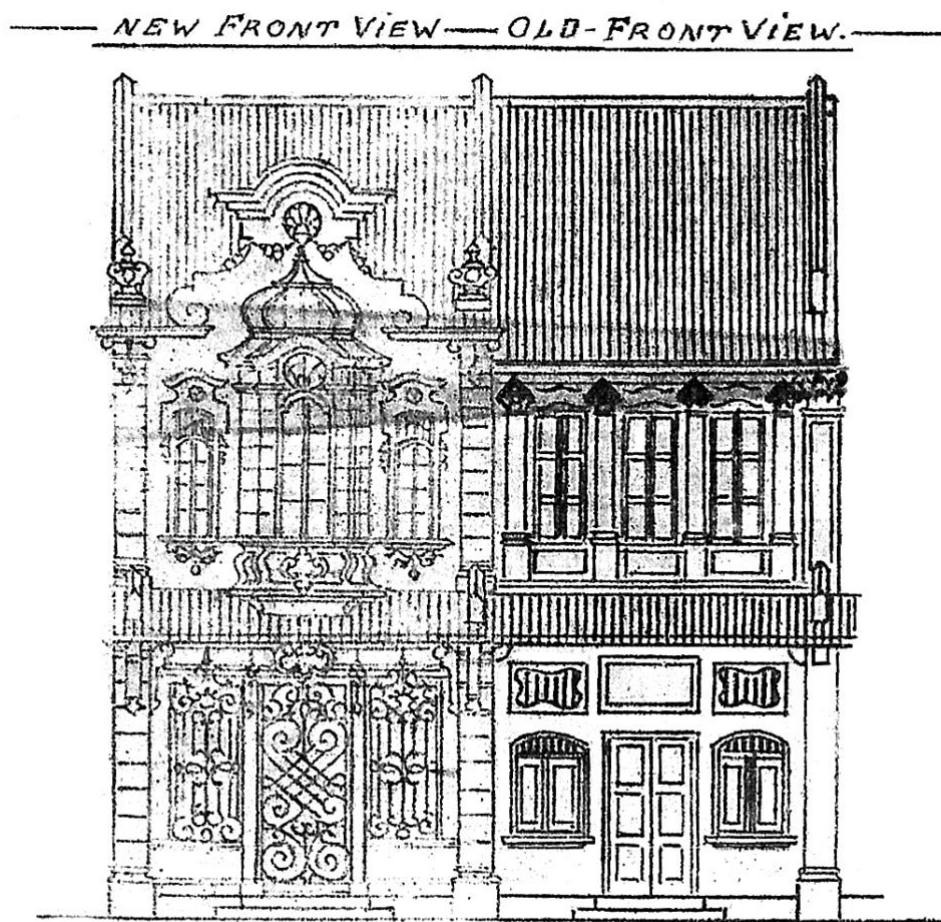


Figure 32. Paul Bernatz, *Remodelled house for Lo Gek Seng, 1911*. NAS CBS 128, *Building Plan* 365.

⁶¹² Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 60-2.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

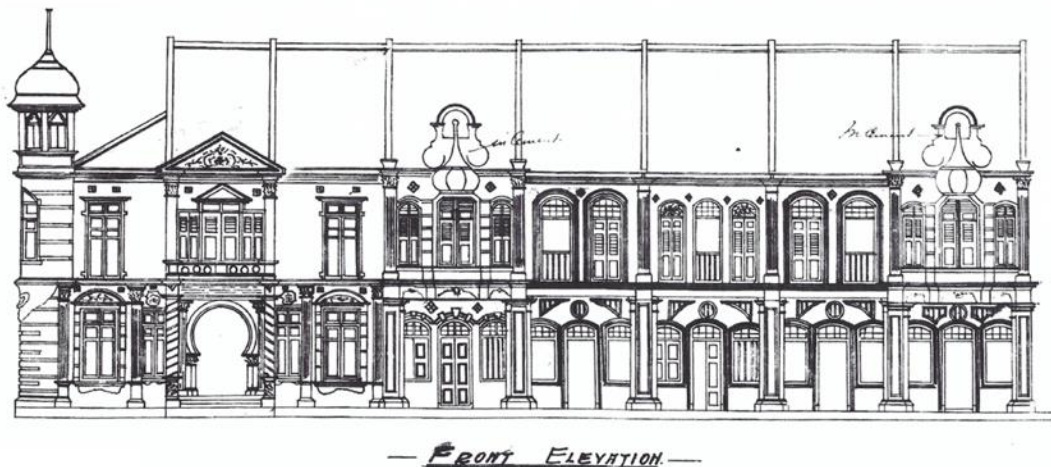


Figure 33. R.T. Rajoo. *Six houses for Thayammal*, 1915. NAS CBS 1113, Building Plan 2239.

This borrowing and extending of ideas was widespread, but there are few examples of that could be accurately described as plagiarism. More common was the adaptation, translation, and extension of ideas. This can be seen in the six houses on Morris Road in Singapore designed by Rethinam Thamby Rajoo Pillay, better known as R.T. Rajoo, for a Tamil client named Thayammal 1915.⁶¹⁴ The Dutch gables of this building, and unusual oriel window topped with an onion dome, are clearly influenced by the remodelling of a house on Waterloo Street for Lo Gek Seng by Paul Bernatz in 1911.⁶¹⁵ In this renovation, Bernatz transformed a conventional shophouse into a distinctive Baroque building. While Rajoo's composition of gables and oriel windows is clearly indebted to and influenced by Bernatz's design, Rajoo extends Bernatz's ideas and adds an element of syncretism through the use of horseshoe arches and a domed corner turret. The exoticising quality of Rajoo's design, with its Indo-Saracenic motifs, was perhaps a nod to the client's origins.

This reading of local eclecticism as a form of plagiarism is filtered through an understanding of classicism that is ultimately grounded in the Vitruvian-Palladian tradition, which emphasises the role of proportion and the scholarly application of the classical orders based

⁶¹⁴ R.T. Rajoo, 'Plan of 6 Dwelling Houses to be Built at Morris Road for Thayammal', 23 February 1915, Building Plan 2239/1915, NAS CBS 1113.

⁶¹⁵ Paul Bernatz, 'Plan Showing Alterations & Repairs on House No. 54 Waterloo Street of Lo Gek Seng Esquire', 16 January 1911, Building Plan 365/1912, NAS CBS 128.

on precedents set in Classical Antiquity. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the strong Palladian bent of work produced by Malaya's earlier colonial engineers. The transmission of classicism to British Malaya came at a particular moment in British architecture, when Palladianism was *de rigueur*, and antiquarian classicism was on the rise, spurred by the rise of archaeology.⁶¹⁶ This first generation of classical builders in British Malaya produced the monuments against which all subsequent classicism would be measured. The whitewashed sobriety of these early colonial monuments embodied a classical ideal which emphasised geometric regularity and grammatical purity.⁶¹⁷ By contrast, the eclecticism which came to be Malaya's vernacular around the turn of the twentieth century delighted in exuberant excess, playfully distorting the architectural rules which had been established by Malaya's early colonial engineers.

Undoubtedly, many of Malaya's builders would have incorporated motifs from Western pattern books freely, unconstrained by an intimate knowledge of the rules established by writers such as Vitruvius and Palladio. A similar process is evident in other parts of the British Empire, for example in the pattern book *Joshi's Modern Designs*, published in Amritsar in the 1930s.⁶¹⁸ The sometimes wilful bending of the norms of classical grammar would have been unsettling for Western viewers accustomed to the norms of academic classicism. The shophouse designed by Tomlinson & Tian Fook for Loke Yew, for example, appears to revel in the breaking of rules, setting a rusticated Corinthian order above a simple Tuscan one, and capping the composition with a fluted Doric order.⁶¹⁹ The result emphasises the first storey in a manner not dissimilar to the *piano nobile* of a Renaissance palazzo, though in a manner that contradicts Renaissance grammar. Given that this building was produced by the partnership between a British and a Chinese architect, the building's distortions of Vitruvian-Palladian grammar cannot simply be ascribed to 'ignorance' on the part of Asian builders. The consistent distortions of classical idiom in the shophouse typology raise the question as

⁶¹⁶ In Summerson's view, Palladio's approach to classicism was arguably more influential in Britain (and by extension its colonies) than it was in Italy. See: Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, 45. See also: Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, 295-323.

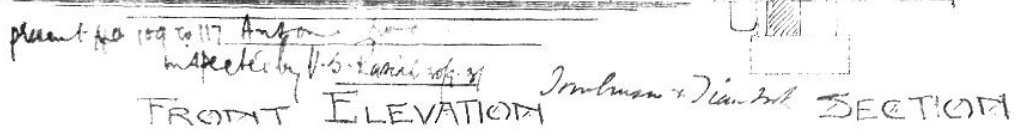
⁶¹⁷ See: Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, 91-4.

⁶¹⁸ Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, 141-6.

⁶¹⁹ Tomlinson & Tian Fook, 'Plan Shewing Alteration of Front Pillars in Five Foot Verandah Re: Passed Plan No. 4746 for Loke Yew Esq', 26 July 1902, Building Plan 5322/1902, NAS CBS 119.

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Such criticisms are not unique to discussions of Malayan eclecticism. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, the Scottish architectural historian James Fergusson decried the ‘bastard style’ which had emerged in cities like Lucknow and Hyderabad, which he viewed as ‘corrupt and bad to the last degree’.⁶²⁰ Fergusson cites the Begum Kotie in Lucknow as an example of a building which, ‘like all the other specimens of Oriental Italian [i.e. Classical] Architecture, it offends painfully... from the misapplication of the details of the Classical Orders.’⁶²¹ The result, according to Fergusson, was a ‘bastard style’.⁶²²

The distortion of the classical language was unsettling to nineteenth-century commentators as it upset the colonial order. As argued by Vasunia, a ‘hybrid building prevented the observer from placing it within a single racial or ethnic context’.⁶²³ This hybridity was problematic in a colonial context. By appropriating and subverting the order and Orders of this imperial architectural language, the architects of these creolised classical buildings also subverted colonial racial hierarchies, blurring the line between the coloniser and colonised. Critiques of creolised classicism assume fidelity to principles of Vitruvian grammar were the aim of the builders. Yet as Akcan observes, ‘architectural translation more often than not aims at distance, distortion, or transmutation’.⁶²⁴ Moreover, as Chattopadhyay argues, such critiques of ‘inauthentic’ classicism in Asian homes fail to acknowledge the extent to which the homes and institutional buildings of British colonial administrators were themselves shaped by native building practices, typologies and spatial arrangements.⁶²⁵

Criticism of architectural eclecticism also appears in British architectural histories of the early twentieth century. Writing in 1938, the English architectural historian Osbert Lancaster looked back on the free-for-all stylistic eclecticism of the nineteenth century unfavourably, arguing that:

⁶²⁰ Cited in Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India*, 186-7.

⁶²¹ James Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture: Being a Sequel to the Handbook of Architecture* (London: John Murray, 1862), 420.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 422.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁴ Akcan, *Architecture in Translation*, 15.

⁶²⁵ Chattopadhyay, ‘Blurring Boundaries’, 177. See also: Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, 158.

in the eighteenth century every well-educated man considered himself entitled to express an opinion about the moulding of a cornice or the disposition of a pilaster, and in nine cases out of ten was possessed of sufficient knowledge to lend it weight. But in the early nineteenth century this happy state of affairs came to an end and architecture was removed from the sphere of everyday life and placed under the jealous guardianship of experts and aesthetes.⁶²⁶

Long-standing critiques of Malaya's eclectic classicism, which draw on the Vitruvian-Palladian tradition, thus fit into a broader idea that the subtle rules of classicism had been lost in the jumble of styles revived through the nineteenth-century's historicist fervour.

A contrasting view of this eclecticism is offered by Seow Eu-Jin, who argues that while

[m]uch was left to the imagination and the competence of the craftsmen carrying out the work. However, a remarkable degree of uniformity and refinement in design and detail were achieved in these buildings, and this must be attributed to the common trend in design that had already developed and accepted the Singapore Eclectic theme as the norm.⁶²⁷

Indeed, this norm was prevalent far beyond the island of Singapore, becoming a consistent and ubiquitous architectural style across British Malaya by the 1920s and 1930s.

The long-standing reading of these buildings as a form of 'plagiarism' of Western architectural vocabulary by Asian builders and architects is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Firstly, it fails to sufficiently take into account the tendency towards eclecticism and ornament which developed in Britain in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a tendency which continued into the twentieth century through the so-called 'Free Style' and, increasingly, the Baroque revival.⁶²⁸ This eclecticism found local expression across the British Empire. In Melbourne, for example, the gold rush of the nineteenth century fostered the

⁶²⁶ Osbert Lancaster, *Pillar to Post: The Pocket Lamp of Architecture* (London: John Murray, 1938), xii.

⁶²⁷ Seow Eu-Jin, 'Architectural Development in Singapore', Doctoral Thesis, University of Melbourne 1973, 202.

⁶²⁸ Dixon and Muthesius, *Victorian Architecture*, 176-81.

development of an ‘exuberant’ decorative style ‘built for newly-rich clients whose aesthetic taste.’⁶²⁹ As King and Willis argue,

The buildings that emerged at this time are notable for their eclectic use of style and the free arrangements of tectonic elements, strongly influenced by Mannerism. Long derided by earlier architectural historians such as Max Freeland and Colin Caldwell, it is only relatively recently that such buildings have been celebrated for their virtuosity and skill in composition.⁶³⁰

Much the same could be said of the buildings constructed for the *nouveaux riches* mining magnates of Malayan cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, or of the merchants and traders of Penang and Singapore. Prestigious European-led architectural firms also bent the rules of classicism in early twentieth-century Malaya for their wealthy clients. This can be seen, for example, in Northam Lodge, designed by the Scottish engineer James Stark for the wealthy Perak sugar and rubber planter Heah Swee Lee in 1911.⁶³¹ The building’s asymmetrical façade features exaggerated squat Corinthian pilasters on the upper storey and an idiosyncratic variation of the Doric order framing the main entrance. Swan & Maclaren, whose institutional and commercial buildings were generally rigorously academic in their classicism, produced deeply idiosyncratic homes for wealthy Chinese merchants such as Teo Hoo Lye in 1913 and Eu Tong Sen in 1915.⁶³² Eclecticism, then, was often a fashionable aesthetic choice, even for those who could commission architects well-versed in Vitruvian rules, rather than simply the product of ‘ignorant’ builders. Many architects would code switch between the academic and vernacular registers of classicism.

⁶²⁹ Stuart King and Julie Willis ‘Mining Boom Styles’, in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 33, Gold*, edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad, 334-345. (Melbourne: SAHANZ, 2016).

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶³¹ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 83.

⁶³² Lee, *The Singapore House*, 198-9 and 208-9

A Diverse Profession

Perhaps more significantly, the reading of ‘coarsened classicism’ as architecturally illiterate understates the consistent and sophisticated ways in which a number of Malayan architects used Western vocabulary in their buildings. Moreover, a good number of architects across Malaya shifted between eclecticism to scholarly classicism depending on their clients’ needs. Across the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, architects from a range of cultural origins developed a common architectural language whose ornamental vocabulary was rooted in the western classical tradition but incorporated a variety of oriental influences, a shared ornamental language which transcended specific racial and cultural traditions. Extant building plans in the archives attest to rapidly shifting professional partnerships, with architects many European and Asian architects forming practices one year, disbanding the next, and going on to form new partnerships, helping to transmit and transform this shared language.

The idea that these Asian architects were not ‘trained’ architects is somewhat ahistorical. Before the nineteenth century, the term ‘architect’ was used in Britain to refer to a small number of amateur gentlemen and a larger number of highly skilled masons and builders.⁶³³ This changed over the course of the nineteenth century, as the practice of architecture became increasingly professionalised, architectural training became more standardised, and the push for professional licensing through the RIBA gained ground.⁶³⁴ The use of the professional title ‘architect’ did not begin to be regulated in Malaya until the mid-1920s, however. Even after the passage of the Architects Ordinance in 1926, the term ‘architect’ still accommodated people with a greater variety of training than the term does today. Moreover, a substantial number of practitioners were grandfathered through the Architects Ordinance, allowing them to continue their practice without necessarily meeting the new prerequisites of the title.

As late as 1931, when the Singapore Society of Architects became the Institute of Architects, Malaya, it was noted in the local press that ‘the Institute have not been able to make a practical

⁶³³ Andrew Saint, *The Image of the Architect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 57-68 *passim*.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*

move towards architectural education yet', though there was clearly a desire on the part of the Institute's European board to narrow the definition of the profession.⁶³⁵ This move was articulated by the Institute in racialised terms, with Oscar Wilson, the secretary of the Institute of Architects, Malaya, stating to the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* that training of architects was crucial

[s]o that... no longer will it be possible for tambies, after acquiring a smattering of the profession in local offices, to prepare so-called 'plans' for badly constructed shop-houses in the town, as has been the case in the past!⁶³⁶

As noted by Lim, the push to regulate the architectural profession was caused by the rapid increase in building plan submissions which occurred in the mid-1920s.⁶³⁷ The period saw burgeoning numbers of Asian 'improvers' and draughtsmen working in both Public Works Departments and the private sector. Many were recruited from other British colonies such as Ceylon as well as young graduates from schools such as the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur.⁶³⁸ Concerns over the ability of Asian draughtsmen fuelled the move towards regulating the use of the professional title of 'architect' in Malaya, but this would only have a meaningful impact in the decade or so before the Second World War.

Yet the oeuvre of some of these 'vernacular' Asian architects demonstrates their ability to adjust their use of Western architectural vocabulary according to the needs of the project and

⁶³⁵ 'Architectural Education in Malaya', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 6 May 1931, 10.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.* 'Thambi', a Tamil word meaning 'younger brother', was a colloquial form of address within Malaya's Tamil community. Its use here, however, is clearly derogatory and racialised.

⁶³⁷ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 36.

⁶³⁸ While biographical details are scant, the names of draughtsmen employed in cities like Kuala Lumpur and Johor suggest the profession had a strong South Asian character in these cities, though Chinese draughtsmen predominated in Singapore. See, for example, the appointment of S. Kanapathy Pillay and M. Ramalingam in Selangor PWD Correspondence, 11 February 1901, PWD 1081/1901, ANM 1957/0096831; the appointment of S. Chelliah in Selangor PWD Correspondence, 12 February 1901, PWD 1082/1901, ANM 1957/0096832; the employment of A.I. Duray, a 'native of Ceylon' and brother of Selangor PWD overseer A.I. Duray in Selangor PWD Correspondence, 18 January 1902, PWD 529/1902, ANM 1957/0100457; and the retirement of one S. Somasundram in Selangor PWD Correspondence, 11 December 1907, PWD 1864/1907, ANM 1957/0590025. For Johor, see: 'Appointment of S. Kathiravelu, as an assistant architectural draftsman on a salary of \$900 per annum from 6-6-18' Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence 408/1918, ANMJ 1973/0003459; 'Appointment of Mr K.G. Pillay as Asst. Architectural Draftsman, P.W.D. on \$60 on 3 months' probation vice Mr. Kathiravelu resigned', Johor Financial Commissioner's Correspondence, FC 833/1918, ANMJ 1973/0003878,

dictate of their clients' tastes;⁶³⁹ where their work is mannered, it is intentionally so, rather than as a result of being unschooled in the use of classical elements. Indeed, it is worth noting that the so-called 'coarsened' form of classicism was practiced and produced by architects of both European and Asian origin practicing in Malaya, and that these buildings were constructed using the same labour force. Moreover, despite the eclectic nature of the style, its consistency across the length of British Malaya, from the Siamese border down to Singapore, supports the reading of this style as a form of creole vernacular with its own rules and syntax; classical elements were assimilated into Asian building traditions in a consistent manner, reflecting a consistent style rather than a haphazard and untutored attempt at reproducing 'pure' Western architecture. Finally, while the homes of the wealthy were generally more ostentatious in their ornamental programme, the rise of speculative building in Malaya over the first three decades of the twentieth century meant that eclectic classicism was not the preserve of the rich; as hundreds of terraces were built by wealthy landlords for the rental market, this creolised form of classicism came to house a substantial part of Malaya's urban population.

Finally, many Asian architects worked closely with European architects, and European architectural firms relied on a small army of Asian draughtsmen. Professional partnerships were constantly being formed, disbanded, and reformed, with Asian, European, and Eurasian architects creating a series of constantly shifting professional alliances in the early twentieth century. Thus the Colchester-born architect Alfred William Lermitt initially practiced with the Ceylonese Tamil surveyor Arumugam Annamalai Pillai in 1885.⁶⁴⁰ The two parted ways shortly after, with Lermitt forming another short-lived practice with the engineer Archibald A. Swan from New Zealand around 1888,⁶⁴¹ then partnering with the Eurasian architect Johannes Bartholomew Westerhout to form the practice Lermitt & Westerhout in 1898, before they were joined by former Municipal Engineer Samuel Tomlinson, a Yorkshireman,⁶⁴² to establish the firm of Tomlinson & Lermitt in 1906.⁶⁴³ Tomlinson himself

⁶³⁹ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 171-3.

⁶⁴⁰ Seow, 'Architectural Development in Singapore', 254. See also: Wright & Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*, 628; and Victor S. Savage and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Singapore Street Names: A Study of Toponymics* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2013), 265.

⁶⁴¹ Lee, *The Singapore House*, 190.

⁶⁴² Wright & Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*, 627.

⁶⁴³ Seow, 'Architectural Development in Singapore', 254-8.

had previously worked with the Chinese civil engineer Chye Tian Fook 1904, in a relatively large practice which styled itself Tomlinson & Tian Fook.⁶⁴⁴ This practice employed both British architects and engineers as well as Chinese draughtsmen.⁶⁴⁵

To draw to clear a line between the work of Asian and European architects is thus to ignore the rich tradition of collaboration between these architects, and downplay the exchange of ideas and expertise which must have been happening in Malayan architectural practices at the turn of the twentieth century. As ‘social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other’, the architectural practices of British Malaya embodied the idea of the ‘contact zone’ as articulated by Pratt and Chopra.⁶⁴⁶ The asymmetry of power relations within colonial Malayan society did not preclude an exchange of ideas between coloniser and colonised which allowed Malaya’s highly decorative dialect of the classical language of architecture to develop. The varied use of shared architectural vocabulary arose from the heterogeneity of Malaya’s population, and fostered a classicism that was heterogeneous in terms of both production and reception as a result.⁶⁴⁷ As a product of the contact zone, with its diversity and asymmetric power relations, Malayan classicism could thus be ‘read very differently to people in different positions in the contact zone.’⁶⁴⁸

This chapter will explore the development of a highly syncretic form of classicism in the residential architecture of Malaya, drawing on selected examples from both major urban centres and rural towns. As both the most prevalent housing typology and the main vehicle for the development of Malaya’s eclectic vernacular classicism, shophouses will make up the bulk of case studies in this chapter. It is in the shophouse typology that the development of Malaya’s creolised vernacular, in which classical vocabulary was layered onto a hybrid Asian vernacular syntax which drew Chinese, Indian, and Malay traditions, is most evident (figs. 35 and 36). Other residential typologies, particularly the bungalow and the Malay kampong house, will also be discussed in passing to demonstrate how the ornamental classicism which developed in Malaya was not confined to the terraced housing. Influenced by late Victorian

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁶⁴⁵ *The Directory & Chronicle for China, Japan, Straits Settlements, Indo-China, Philippines &c, for the Year 1904* (Hongkong: The Daily Press Offices, 1904), 638.

⁶⁴⁶ Pratt, ‘Arts of the Contact Zone’, 34. See also: Chopra, ‘South and Southeast Asia’, 279.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-7.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

historicism the Edwardian Baroque of the turn of the twentieth century, a hybridised classical ornamental language was, by the 1930s, the most widely used architectural style across British Malaya. Eclectic classicism was thus a vernacular architectural language, in the sense that it was the architectural language of the people. Through case studies drawn from the Peninsula and the Straits Settlements, it will be argued that the trade networks of empire – from steamships to railways – helped disseminate this form of creole classicism throughout British Malaya, fostering the development of this distinctive vernacular that was stylistically coherent, relatively consistent, and inventive.

Due to the nature of surviving archival sources, the bulk of building plans in this chapter pertain to buildings in Singapore. While the National Archives of Singapore hold a largely intact collection of historic building plans from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, the same cannot be said for the rest of what is now Malaysia. A good number of building plans from Penang survive in the archives of the Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang, but archival holdings in other parts of the Peninsula were drastically impacted by the Second World War and loss of documents in the post-Merdeka period. There are effectively no extant plans for historic buildings in Kuala Lumpur or Ipoh, and only a handful of building plans are held in the Arkib Negara's Johor branch. This means it is considerably more difficult to identify the architects responsible for residential buildings outside of Singapore and Penang with any real certainty. As noted by J.M. Gullick in *A History of Kuala Lumpur 1856-1939*, 'random clues enable the historian to hazard – there is no certainty – a general picture of the design of buildings at this time.'⁶⁴⁹ Indeed, Gullick notes that contemporary newspapers stated 'with few exceptions the individuals who make a profession of drawing plans in [Kuala Lumpur] are not qualified architects.'⁶⁵⁰ There are therefore limits to what historians of Malayan architecture can ascertain about the nation's rich trove of vernacular classicism.

There are still, however, thousands of extant buildings from this period across Malaysia, and circumstantial evidence, whether drawn from newspapers, documentary sources, or the pediments and foundation stones of the buildings themselves, provide clues about the authorship and ownership of these historic buildings. Furthermore, many buildings bear their

⁶⁴⁹ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 150.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

date of construction on their pediments, allowing for a sense of chronology if not authorship to be gleaned from the surviving built fabric. This chapter will therefore draw on a mixture of building plans, archival sources, newspapers, and, where possible, the extant buildings themselves to trace the history of the development of Malaya's creolised vernacular classicism.

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]

Figure 35. View of Chinatown and Telok Ayer Bay, Singapore, before 1879. NMS 1995-00565.



Figure 36. A.E. Kaulfuss. A street in Penang, circa 1895. KITLV 51554.

An Emerging Vernacular: Shophouses before the Twentieth Century

The earliest extant shophouses in Melaka and Penang are relatively modest structures.⁶⁵¹ The few remnant eighteenth-century shophouses in Melaka are simple in their construction and limited in ornamentation. This perhaps reflects the relatively transient nature of the Chinese trading communities in the coastal entrepôts of Malaya, who were initially largely sojourners rather than settlers.⁶⁵² In his study of Chinese houses in Southeast Asia, Ronald G. Knapp notes that while ‘Chinese dwellings throughout the country [China] share a range of common elements even as it is clear that there are striking regional, even sub-regional, architectural styles.’⁶⁵³ Chinese migrants to Malaya, predominantly drawn from Fujian and Guangdong Provinces, as well as the Chaozhou region, brought their local building traditions with them to Southeast Asia.⁶⁵⁴ The architectural historian Lee Ho Yin argues that the commercial terrace houses of southern China ‘became the prototype for the early Singapore shophouse’, but notes that these houses in China lack characteristic Southeast Asian features like the covered five-footway.⁶⁵⁵ Lim, by contrast, argues that while the shophouse typology is widely attributed to southern China, it was the colonial administrator Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles who was in fact the ‘architect’ of this ‘prototype’, through the various town planning ordinances instituted in Singapore over the first half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁵⁶ According to Lim, Chinese building traditions ‘became a Malaysian [sic] prototype’ through British colonial ordinances, which legislated for the use of brick, uniform street alignments, and the verandahs later known as ‘five-footways’, as part of a ‘grand vision’ for tropical colonies such as Singapore.⁶⁵⁷ The resulting form has been described by Lee Ho Yin as an ‘Anglo-Chinese urban vernacular’.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵¹ Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 8.

⁶⁵² Wang Gangwu, ‘Sojourning: The Chinese Experience of Southeast Asia’, *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, edited by Anthony Reid (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996), 1-14. See also: Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*, 12-21 *passim*.

⁶⁵³ Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*, 16.

⁶⁵⁴ Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*, 20. See also: Yeo Kang Shua, *The Teochew Diaspora and Their Temple in Singapore: An Architectural and Social History of Wak Hai Cheng Bio*, *ASD Research Working Paper Series* (Singapore: SUTD, 2019).

⁶⁵⁵ Lee Ho Yin, ‘The Singapore Shophouse: An Anglo-Chinese Urban Vernacular’, *Asia’s Old Dwellings: Tradition, Resilience, and Change*, edited by Ronald G. Knapp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 122.

⁶⁵⁶ Lim, ‘The “Shophouse Rafflesia”’, 47-51 and elsewhere *passim*.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁸ Lee Ho Yin, ‘The Singapore Shophouse’.

The shophouse typology spread through trade networks along the Peninsula, across the Strait of Melaka to Medan, and to the enclaves of Chinese trading communities in neighbouring Siamese provinces such as Phuket.⁶⁵⁹ Traditional Chinese spatial hierarchies remained prevalent through the 1930s.⁶⁶⁰ By the mid-nineteenth century, planning laws had thus reshaped the vernacular building traditions brought by migrants, resulting in a remarkable consistency of built form that is readily apparent in the early postcards and watercolours. Building by-laws ensured that terraced shophouses were no higher than three storeys, with brick party-walls, tiled roofs, and masonry foundations to reduce the risk of fire, which had plagued both Singapore and George Town in the early days of British settlement.⁶⁶¹ Shophouses could be built relatively quickly and made the most of newly subdivided lots. The length of these lots made traditional Chinese features such as airwells particularly essential for light and ventilation. This meeting of traditional Chinese coastal typologies and British imperial town planning legislation thus produced a hybrid typology that was well suited to the rapidly-growing cities of nineteenth-century Malaya.

Visitors to nineteenth-century Malaya were quick to observe this hybrid character in the local architecture. John Cameron, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society who visited Singapore in the 1860s, observed that the shophouses in the ‘native part of town’ were neither particularly Western nor Chinese: ‘The style is a sort of compromise between English and Chinese.’⁶⁶² This hybridity was not interpreted as a lack of skill by Victorian observers, however, nor as being reflective of a ‘coarsened’ style. Describing local houses, Cameron goes on to observe:

There are numerous columns and arches inside as well as outside, and the Chinese builders make very neat cornices to the doorways and the ceilings. The rooms are

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 64; Knapp, *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*, 25.

⁶⁶⁰ Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 10-14.

⁶⁶¹ Lee, ‘The Singapore Shophouse’, 122. In response to a fire in George Town in 1814, a Committee of Assessors insisted that new policy should require ‘none but Pucka buildings, with tiled or Terraced Roofs, should be permitted to be constructed Eastward of Pitt Street... and that all Houses at present within the limits above prescribed, constructed and roofed with Artaps [sic] should be within a period of five (5) Years pulled down and if rebuilt within, or after that period, be constructed in the manner now recommended. Cited in Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*, 61. See also: A. Ghafar Ahmad, ‘Tropical Architecture and Preservation in Malaysia’, *SPAFA Journal* 12.1 (1991): 45.

⁶⁶² John Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1865), 60.

never papered, but the entire plasterwork—ceilings, walls, and pillars—is kept beautifully white with *chenam*.⁶⁶³

As in colonial India, many of these houses were built ‘to supply a speculative [property] market in which the functions of buildings changed frequently’.⁶⁶⁴ As Chattopadhyay argues, the ‘classical garb’ of such buildings did not make them copies of English houses.⁶⁶⁵ The influence of Asian typologies on the plans and layouts of these houses allowed these buildings to accommodate the lifestyles of Malaya’s cosmopolitan trading communities, with internal layouts providing a degree of flexibility not found in more rigidly delineated English homes.⁶⁶⁶ In the cosmopolitan towns and cities of British Malaya, homes were built by people of one race and rented out to people of another. Flexible interior arrangements were unified by classicising façades.

The earliest surviving plans for such houses in the National Archives of Singapore date from the 1880s. With their western orders and Chinese roofs and gable ends, these buildings demonstrate the ‘sort of compromise between English and Chinese’ that Cameron observed. By the turn of the twentieth century, the developing hybrid style of the mid-nineteenth century had stabilised and become relatively consistent in form and ornamentation. As Seow Eu-Jin notes in his doctoral thesis, ‘the building plans of the 1900-1908 period... reveal a great similarity of plan-types and decorations.’⁶⁶⁷ The earliest shophouses often featured simple square pillars on their ground level, with an astylar upper storey and arched windows, unglazed and closed by means of wooden shutters, topped with simple decorative fanlights. Houses of this early typology can be found from Kedah down to Singapore, though few have survived intact in the major cities as a result of development pressures. Over time, the treatment of the façades of these buildings would become more elaborate, even as their overall layout remained fairly consistent.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 76. Not all travellers were impressed by the rows of shophouses which lined the streets of Singapore. Writing in 1878, William T. Hornaday claimed that ‘Architecturally considered, Singapore has little to boast of except solidity and uniformity. With but few exceptions the buildings are all Chinese, and perfectly innocent of style.’ See: William T. Hornaday, ‘1878: How Odd Everything Looked’, *Travellers’ Tales of Old Singapore*, edited by Michael Wise (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2018), 127.

⁶⁶⁴ Chattopadhyay, ‘Blurring Boundaries’, 154.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-9.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁷ Seow, ‘Architectural Development in Singapore’, 240.

Plans for these shophouses ‘were drawn in Indian ink on vellum tracing cloth with generally a poor standard of draughtsmanship and most of them did not indicate the name of the architect, but only that of the owner.’⁶⁶⁸ Before architecture was formally professionalised in Malaya in the 1920s, draughtsmen with various degrees of training were responsible for the vast majority of building plans, and the distinction between the figure of the draughtsman and of the architect was somewhat blurred. Lee Ho Yin notes that

Until 1884, the erection of a building was a relatively simple process of buying a piece of land and engaging a contractor to carry out the construction. It was not long before it was realised that some form of statutory control was needed in order to regulate and enforce proper building standards... It would take another half century before trained architects appeared in appreciable numbers in Singapore. In the meantime, government surveyors and military engineer generally designed public buildings, while architectural practitioners who were actually civil engineers, surveyors, self-educated ‘gentlemen architects’, or draughtsmen often designed private buildings.⁶⁶⁹

As noted above, this distinction between trained and untrained architects, with ‘training’ denoting education in the United Kingdom, is ahistorical given that regulation of the title ‘architect’ would not come into force until the 1920s.⁶⁷⁰ Prior to this, building practitioners with various educational backgrounds and forms of training freely called themselves architects. While the 1926 Ordinance saw professional affiliation with the ‘RIBA or Society of Architects of London and any holder of a diploma in Architecture granted within England or from the British possession [sic]’ become one criteria for being allowed to the use title of ‘architect’, the law also made provisions for ‘any person who had received a proper and recognised training or articleship in the architectural profession’ or ‘any person in Singapore and George Town who was already registered to submit building plans to the Municipal Commission on 1st December 1924 for approval under the Building By-Law 154.’⁶⁷¹ The

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁶⁶⁹ Lee, ‘The Singapore Shophouse’, 126.

⁶⁷⁰ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 39–40.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

Ordinance thus effectively grandfathered existing architectural practitioners as licensed architects, regardless of their educational background. Malaya's architectural profession was thus diverse both in terms of its ethnic and cultural make-up, as well as the training of its practitioners. As shall be seen below, numerous Asian draughtsmen working in European architectural firms or in government 'drawing offices' would go on to start architectural practices of their own, practicing independently as architects, and producing prolific quantities of classicising buildings.⁶⁷²

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, 39-40.

Nascent Eclecticism

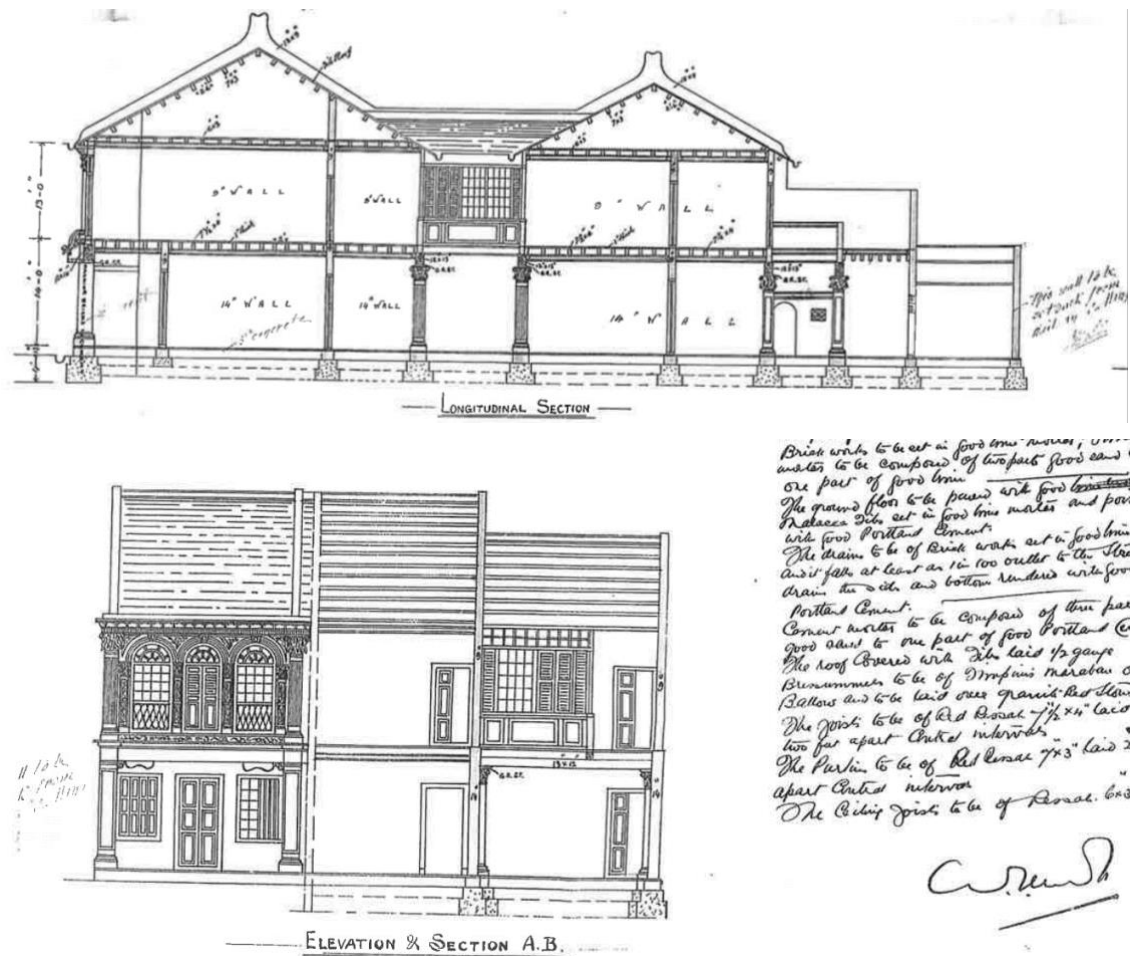


Figure 37. W.T. Moh. Elevation and section for three shophouses at Emerald Hill Road, Singapore, 1889. NAS CBS 121, Building Plan 6439.

Through their work, the diverse cohort of architectural practitioners in British Malaya consolidated an exuberant but coherent form of creolised classicism. The work of these professionals is instructive, demonstrating their fluency in the classical language of architecture, and also their ability to incorporate ornamental vocabulary drawn from this classical language into an architectural creole language which drew on Chinese and Malay traditions. By the turn of the twentieth century, a number of Asian architects were active in Singapore, their names gracing hundreds of building plans lodged with the municipal authorities. Among the most significant and prolific Asian architects active in Singapore in this period was Wee Teck Moh. The signature 'W.T. Moh' graces thousands of building plans

in the National Archives of Singapore, with works ranging from temples to toilet blocks.⁶⁷³ His prolific output makes Wee's work difficult to generalise. The vast bulk of Wee's architectural output, however, consisted of residential buildings, of which shophouse terraces are the most prevalent typology. Wee's output through the turn of the twentieth century illustrates how syncretic classicism developed in Singapore's residential architecture during this period. His distinctive cursive handwriting makes Wee's draughtsmanship easy to identify, even where his rounded signature is missing.

Wee's 1889 design for 'three dwelling shop houses' for Messrs. Chew Keng Cheng and others are typical of the ornate façade decorations beginning to emerge in late Victorian and early Edwardian-era Singapore.⁶⁷⁴ On the ground level, the building's entrance, flanked symmetrically by rectangular windows topped by ornamental 'butterfly' windows, conforms to Chinese tradition. The squared Tuscan columns of the ground floor are superposed with elaborate Composite pilasters on the first storey, which three arched windows with their own subsidiary Composite pilasters. These Composite pilasters sit on a band of ornamental plasterwork in the Chinese style. A broad dentillated cornice sits directly above the main pilasters of the upper storey without a frieze. The sections reveal that the buildings have two roof ridges in the Chinese style, separated by an airwell. Internally, the building's airwell is given a degree of monumentality through the use of the Composite order on the ground floor, while upstairs the use of wooden louvres affords both privacy and ventilation. The building is typical of shophouses of its period in blending elements of both Chinese and European architecture. Wee would design hundreds of other buildings like this one, with minor variations in their ornamental detailing, size, and layout.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷³ While Wee Teck Moh signed his plans 'W.T. Moh', Wee was his surname.

⁶⁷⁴ W.T. Moh, 'Plan of Three Dwelling Shop Houses Proposed to be Built at Emerald Hill Road the Property of Messrs. Chew Keng Cheng & Others', 24 July 1903, Building Plan 6439/1903, NAS. CBS 121. See also: Lee, *Emerald Hill*, 82.

⁶⁷⁵ Numerous examples of Wee Teck Moh's work can be found in the National Archives of Singapore. For example, see the following: Building Plan 189/1894, NAS CBS 333; Building Plan 2/1897, NAS CBS 335; Building Plan 142/1897, NAS CBS 336; Building Plan 3418/1899, NAS CBS 339; Building Plan 4143/1900, NAS CBS 117; Building Plans 4707/1901, 4708/1901, 4770/1901, and 4783/1901, NAS CBS 118; and Building Plan 9343/1908, NAS CBS 126, among others.

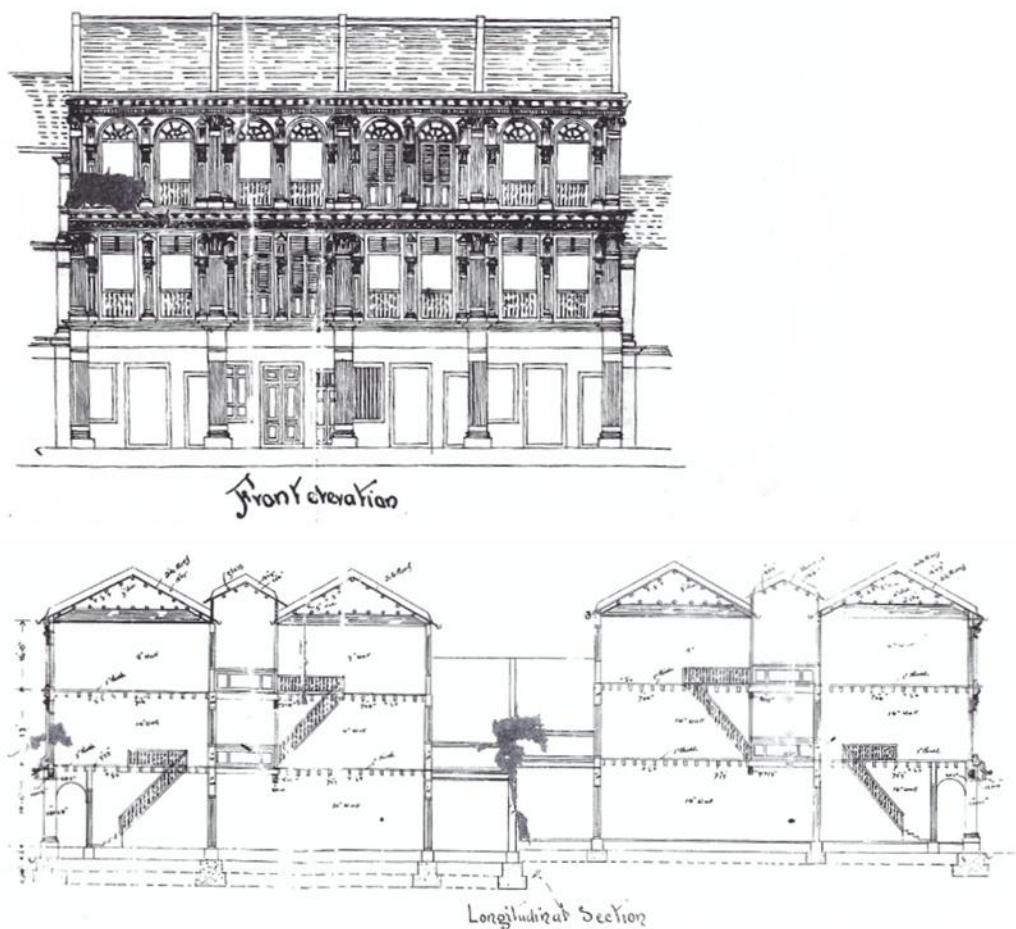


Figure 38. W.T. Moh. Elevation and section for eight shophouses at the corner of Sago and Smith Streets, Singapore, 1900. NAS CBS 117, Building Plan 4143.

Similarly rich designs can be seen in the work of contemporary architects like Yeo Hock Siang. Yeo seems to have favoured a slightly more academic application of the orders, as seen in his 1899 design for two shophouses at Malabar Street for Mr Seaw Kew Mee that feature a relatively academic superposition of the Corinthian order above the Ionic order,⁶⁷⁶ and in his addition to shophouses at No. 35 Pagoda Street for Loh Lum, Esq, in which he added a third storey to an existing double-storey shophouse and redid the façade to feature Tuscan, Ionic, and Corinthian pilasters set on top of each other.⁶⁷⁷ This traditional

⁶⁷⁶ Yeo Hock Siang, 'Plan of Two Shophouses to be Erected in Malabar Street the Property of Mr Seaw Kew Mee', 20 September 1899, Building Plan 3353/1899, NAS CBS 339.

⁶⁷⁷ 'Plan of an Addition to house M. No. 35 Pagoda Street the Property of Loh Lum Esq.', September 1899, Building Plan 3328/1899, NAS CBS 339.

superposition of orders suggests an understanding of their conventional use rather than mere 'plagiarism' of motifs. Like W.T. Moh, however, Yeo reduced the entablature in this shophouse to an exaggerated dentillated cornice, omitting the frieze on the uppermost storeys in his shophouses; this seems to have been a common design in buildings of the period, and can be seen ubiquitously across the shophouses of the Malayan Peninsula.

The design of the shophouse at Palembang Road for Hadjee Wahap designed by Almeida & Kassim in 1896, by contrast, features a much looser application of the classical style, with a panelled Tuscan order on the ground floor topped by a pair of fluted Ionic pilasters on the upper storey with exaggeratedly small volutes.⁶⁷⁸ The ground floor entablature features large egg-and-dart moulding, while the upper storey has a dentillated cornice. The parapet features vasiform balustrades, and is capped with unusual urns and a small segmental pediment decorated with a crescent moon and stars framed by foliage, a symbol of the owner's Muslim faith. More overtly Chinese in their decorative programme are the two shop houses designed by Almeida & Kassim at Neil Road for Choa Kim Keat.⁶⁷⁹ The building features a rooflet over the five-footway with Chinese glazed tiles, Chinese-style plasterwork on the ground-floor frieze, and cusped lozenge-shaped panels in the Chinese style below the windows of the upper storey, which is framed by Doric pilasters. Rather than having a clear house style, it is evident that Almeida & Kassim were able to tailor the ornamental details of the shophouses they designed towards the tastes and cultural identities of their clients. Throughout, however, the shophouse typology remains consistent in its spatial arrangement, as does the use of western classical detailing to varying extents.

⁶⁷⁸ Almeida & Kassim, 'Plan Shewing Alteration and Addition to House Mu[nicipa]l No. 5-3 Palembang Rd: for Hadjee Wahap', 7 February 1896, Building Plan 19/1896, NAS CBS 334.

⁶⁷⁹ Almeida & Kassim, 'Plan of 2 Shop Houses to be Built at Neil Rd. for Choa Kim Keat, Esq.', 21 July 1896, Building Plan 130/1896, NAS CBS 335.



Figure 39. Almeida & Kassim. Houses for Hadjee Wahap (left) and Choa Kim Keat (right), 1896. NAS CBS 334, Building Plan 19 and NAS CBS 335, Building Plan 130.

In these shophouses, ornament clearly serves an ontological function. As Gadamer argues, ‘an ornament... set up in a chosen place are representative in the same sense that, say, the church in which they are to be found is itself representative.’⁶⁸⁰ The simultaneous and syncretic use of both classical ornament and symbols of specific Asian cultural origins reflects the ways in which Malaya’s various migrant communities sought what Khoo describes as ‘claims of assimilation... at the same time [as] statements of difference’.⁶⁸¹ Bhabha argues that colonising powers entrenched their hierarchies through otherness and the ‘articulation of difference’.⁶⁸² Yet this was by no means a one-way process: colonial populations also articulated their difference from the colonising power through the selective adoption, appropriation, and translation of colonial symbols. Elements of traditional Chinese or Islamic architecture were incorporated into the largely classical framework of these

⁶⁸⁰ Gadamer, ‘The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative’, 130.

⁶⁸¹ Khoo, *Streets of George Town*, 21.

⁶⁸² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 96.

shophouse façades in order to articulate difference from the British and belonging within specific communities.

Not all shophouses were as richly ornamental as these examples, however, and the classical order was also applied to cheaply built terraces across Singapore. In his design for five shophouses at Telok Blanga Road for Inche Samad, the Datoh Barat of Johor, Wee uses Tuscan pilasters constructed in brick and lime mortar to enliven an otherwise austere wooden façade.⁶⁸³ These shophouses, constructed for a member of Singapore's Malay nobility, would likely have been rented out cheaply to fishermen and traders active around the old Malay court at Telok Blangah in Singapore's west.

Wee also appears to have designed a number of traditional Malay houses for members of the Malay community living in the swampy terrain around Outram. In his plans for 'huts' for Inche Jalleah, Inche Bahman, and Inche Dollah, Wee sheds all classical detailing for the rustic simplicity of traditional Malay stilt-houses.⁶⁸⁴ The three houses bear similarly simple principal elevations, but differ in profile. All three houses appear to be of the Melaka house typology, which was prevalent in the southern half of the Malay Peninsula. Each of the houses comprises of two linked gable-roofed volumes with steeply pitched roofs. In each instance, the front portion of the home is surmounted by a higher pitched roof, while the roof of the rear section is lower. In the case of the house for Inche Jalleah, the rear section of the house is a discrete, separate section, while in the other two houses the two roofs are joined. In contrast to the ornate style of many of Wee's shophouses, Wee's 'Malay huts' appear austere and unornamented. It is likely that any ornamental detailing in these homes would have been left in the hands of Malay woodcarvers. What is clear from these drawings, however, is that Wee had a grasp of the traditional Malay *rumah limas* typology. While these house do not, in any sense, belong to the classical tradition, their spatial arrangement would have an impact

⁶⁸³ W.T. Moh, 'Plan of Five Shop Houses Proposed to be Erected at Teluk Blanga Road, 3 ¾ Miles St:[one] the Property of Inche Samad, Datoh Barat of Johor, Singapore', June 1893, Building Plan 60/1893, NAS CBS 332.

⁶⁸⁴ W.T. Moh, 'Plan of a Malay's Hut [sic] to be Erected on the Swamp next to M.C. No. 19-1 off Outram Road for Inche Jalleah', 8 October 1902, Building Plan 5594/1902, NAS CBS 120; *idem*, 'Plan... for Inche Bahman', Building Plan 5595/1902, NAS CBS 120; and *idem*, 'Plan... for Inche Dollah', Building Plan 5596/1902, NAS CBS 120. 'Inche' is a non-standard rendering of the Malay honorific 'Encik', which is equivalent to Mister.

on the Malayan bungalow typology, which would graft classical elements onto the Malay 'compound' house.

An example of the influence of the Malay compound house typology on the homes of non-Malays in British Malaya can be seen in Wee's Plan of a Compound House proposed to be built at Reserve Road off Balestier Road for Kam Peng Huat. As in traditional Malay houses, this building is raised off the ground, though in this instance a squat Tuscan order is used in place of wooden stilts. The ground floor void between these sturdy, square pillars is enclosed with a vasiform balustrade. The upper level of this home, reached by stairs on either side of the projecting portico, consists of a simple wooden house with ornamental fascia boards reminiscent of those found in traditional Malay houses. In both plan and elevation, the house is symmetrical. From the portico, visitors enter a hall that spans the width of the house. This leads to a corridor flanked by two bedrooms on either side. From the back verandah, which like the front hall extends across the width of the house, steps lead to a rear annexe, which would have likely housed the kitchen. This spatial progression emulates the transition from the communal, to the private, to the functional found in traditional Malay homes. In traditional Malay homes, the communal spaces of the *serambi* and *anjung*, or balcony and verandah, lead on to the private quarters of the *rumah ibu*, or main house. To the rear, the *rumah dapur* or kitchen is kept separate from the main building. In Wee's house for Kam Peng Huat, a Malay typology has been adapted by a Chinese architect for a Chinese client, with this traditional building style sitting – quite literally – on a classical base.

Traditional Malay houses would also influence the work of British architects such as David McLeod Craik, whose work synthesised the *kampung* house typology with the decorative language of the Arts and Crafts movement.⁶⁸⁵ The Scottish architect spent 36 years in Malaya, working in Singapore from 1902 before settling in Penang.⁶⁸⁶ Over the course of his long career, the architect was responsible for a number of major buildings in Singapore, spanning a range of styles, from the Gothic Revival St Joseph's Cathedral to the Indo-Saracenic of the Alkaff Arcade.⁶⁸⁷ His understanding of the Malay *kampung* house typology is evident in his

⁶⁸⁵ See: Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 124-45.

⁶⁸⁶ 'Architect's 36 Years in Malaya', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 August 1938, 5.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.* See also: D. McLeod Craik, 'Arcade & Offices for Messrs Alkoff [sic] & Co.', 13 March 1908, Building Plan 9186/1908, NAS CBS 126.

plan for ‘a country bungalow’ for one W.F. Morgan in Singapore,⁶⁸⁸ as well as in his design for a house on Cluny Road for a D. Parsons.⁶⁸⁹ In both houses, the bedrooms are bookended by verandahs, while covered walkways that leads to rear blocks containing the kitchen and bathrooms. These buildings show Craik was aware of, and drew on, Malay housing typologies. These typologies would go on to influence the bungalows he designed in Penang in the 1920s and 1930s, though these would have greater stylistic pretensions.⁶⁹⁰ Craik also designed more conventional shophouses, as seen in his design for the rebuilding of two shophouses for Syed Ahmat, and for the renovation of two three-storey shophouses for Chan Seng Lin.⁶⁹¹ Craik’s shophouses feature the same bending of the classical language of architecture as the ones designed by Asian architects, suggesting that local architectural fashions rather than ignorance were responsible for the playful distortions of the classical style that were so widespread in early twentieth century Malaya. A comparable Baroque eclecticism, which at times wilfully disregarded the rules of Palladian classicism, is evident in the work of Ernest Hogan in Penang.⁶⁹² These British architects were undertaking their own act of translation, adapting the classical idiom in which they were educated to the demands of both climate and clientele.

If Chinese architects such as W.T. Moh were sufficiently capable of drawing plans for non-Chinese buildings, the reverse also held true for non-Chinese architects working on the supposedly ‘Chinese’ shophouse typology. Non-Chinese architects were responsible for the plans of hundreds, if not thousands of shophouses. An example of this can be seen in plans for two shophouses by the Indian architect T. Dorasamy for a Chinese client named Teck Leong at Bukit Pasoh in 1888; simple Tuscan pilasters adorn an otherwise simple façade

⁶⁸⁸ D. McLeod Craik, ‘Plan of Country Bungalow to be built at Clematis Estate (Freehold Property) off 3 ¾ Mile Stone Bukit Timah Road for W.F. Morgan Esq.’, 21 January 1908, Building Plan 9120/1908, NAS CBS 126.

⁶⁸⁹ D. McLeod Craik, ‘Plan of Proposed House King’s Road Cluny for D. Parsons Esq.’, 3 August 1909, Building Plan 9792/1909, NAS CBS 127.

⁶⁹⁰ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 124-45.

⁶⁹¹ D. McLeod Craik, ‘Proposed Rebuilding of Nos. 11 & 12 Omar Road (Lease 99 Years) for Syed Ahmat’, 13 January 1908, Building Plan 9110/1908, NAS CBS 126; and *idem*, ‘Rebuilding & Alterations to Nos. 68 & 69 Duxton Road for Chan Seng Lin’, 19 May 1908, Building Plan 9284/1908, NAS CBS 126.

⁶⁹² See, for example: Ernest Hogan, ‘Plan of Additions & Alterations to Premises No. 18 Leith Street, Property of Thye Kee Yoon, Esq., Penang’, 20 November 1907, Building Plan 10.170/1907, MBPP Historic Building Plans Collection, VOP Code HB10.170; and *idem*, ‘Plan of Proposed Offices for S.S. Moheden at Ah Kwi Street, Penang’, MBPP Historic Building Plans Collection, VOP Code HB10.180.

which conforms to the traditional shophouse typology.⁶⁹³ The building also features traditional Chinese gable ends. Dorasamy would later go on to work as a draughtsman at the prominent European firm of Swan & Maclaren, the premier architectural firm in Singapore.⁶⁹⁴ In a similar vein, the additions and alterations designed by the firm of Almeida & Kassim, a partnership between a Eurasian and a Muslim architect, for the prominent Chinese trader Seah Peck Seah included the expansion of a shophouse and addition of an ornamental 'Chinese' roof on the front elevation.⁶⁹⁵ While this ornamental rooflet, the main roof ridges, central airwell, and symmetrical fenestration on the principal elevation all conform to Chinese tradition, the façade is largely classical, framed once again by the ubiquitous Tuscan pilasters of the period, and with the balustrade of the second storey terrace articulated as a panelled frieze. In both the Dorasamy and Almeida & Kassim shophouses, the overall arrangement of the interior spaces conforms to the traditional shophouse typology, as does the use of brick party walls rendered in lime plaster, with timber interior construction.

In Lee Ho Yin's view,

[t]he lack of formal architectural training among the Chinese architectural practitioners was revealing in the shophouses they designed in that, while they emulated European Classicism, they lacked the more subtle aesthetic aspects of Classical style in terms of proportions and ornamentation. Moreover, the designers' attempts to achieve a semblance of European classicism was often diluted by the desire of Chinese developers and builders to embellish the building façades with traditional Chinese-style ornamentation, such as stucco decorative details depicting traditional auspicious objects and symbols as well as mythical creatures... Such combinations of European, Chinese, and Malay aesthetic traditions in shophouse

⁶⁹³ T. Dorasamy, 'Plan for 2 Shops to be Built at Bukit Paso [sic] the Property of Mr Teck Leong', 20 June 1888, Building Plan 125/1888, NAS CBS 330.

⁶⁹⁴ *The Directory & Chronicle for China, Japan, Corea, Indo-China, Straits Settlements, Malay States, Siam, Netherlands India, Borneo, the Philippines, &c, for the Year 1898* (Hongkong: The Daily Press Offices, 1898), 120.

⁶⁹⁵ Almeida & Kassim, 'Plan Shewing Additions and Alterations to House M. No. 42 High Street for Seah Peck Seah, Esq.', 7 July 1900, Building Plan 3980/1900, NAS CBS 117.

design gave rise to a hybrid style that characterised the design of shophouses of this period.⁶⁹⁶

This multiculturalism is also evident in the architecture of Kuala Lumpur, where the classicising arcades of the city's shophouses set in stark contrast to the self-consciously exoticising tendencies of its governmental architecture. The production of these buildings was not the work of British architects alone. Indeed, as the city was transformed from a small mining town to the capital of Selangor and, subsequently, the Federal capital of the Federated Malay States, the production of imperial architecture became increasingly reliant on the labour of Britain's imperial subjects. The Selangor Public Works Department and, later, the Federal Drawing Office, employed a small army of draughtsmen and improvers to produce plans for the city's imperial monuments and commercial buildings. Many of these draughtsmen were locals trained at the Victoria Institution. Teenage graduates of the Victoria Institution such as S. Kanapathy Pillay, M. Ramalingam, Reginald Skelchy, S. Chelliah, Alfred Spykerman and S. Kandappu were employed as volunteers or apprentice draughtsmen immediately after passing their Standard VI or Standard VII examinations, and generally came with training in algebra, 'geometrical drawing' and 'Euclid'.⁶⁹⁷

The names of these local graduates suggest Tamil, Malayalam, and Eurasian ancestry. Other draughtsmen came from further afield. One A.I. Duray applied for the post of Improver and was subsequently taken on as a volunteer after graduating from the Batticotta English Highschool in Jaffna, Ceylon, in order to join his brother A.S. Duray, who was employed in the same department as Establishment Overseer in Ulu Selangor.⁶⁹⁸ The Selangor, and later Federated Malay States, Public Works Department thus drew on the human resources of empire, both local and from abroad, in order to construct a new imperial capital.

⁶⁹⁶ Lee, 'The Singapore Shophouse', 127.

⁶⁹⁷ See, for example: 'Recommendations in filling up the vacancies of Apprentices P.W.D. Drawing Office', Selangor PWD Correspondence, 11 February 1901, PWD 1081/01, ANM 1957/0096831; 'Recommendations in filling up the vacancies of Improvers, P.W.D. Drawing Office', Selangor PWD Correspondence, 12 February 1901, PWD 1082/01, ANM 1957/0096832; and 'Authority to employ S. Kandappu as a Volunteer Tracer in the Head Quarters Drawing Office', Selangor PWD Correspondence, 2 December 1903, PWD 6769/03, ANM 1957/0112754.

⁶⁹⁸ 'Correspondence requesting the authority to employ A.S. Duray as volunteer until such time as a vacancy offers as an Improver', Selangor PWD Correspondence, 18 January 1902, PWD 529/02, ANM 1957/0100457.



Figure 40. The Chow Kit Store in Kuala Lumpur, designed by Abdul Kader Moosdeen, as it appeared in 2018. Photograph by the author.

The architect Abdul Kader Moosdeen, responsible for a number of significant buildings in Kuala Lumpur, is another example of how imperial networks converged in the city at the turn of the twentieth century, fostering a cosmopolitan architectural language.⁶⁹⁹ Moosdeen was born in Hong Kong in 1869.⁷⁰⁰ He applied for work with the Selangor Public Works Department in Kuala Lumpur in 1892,⁷⁰¹ resigned from the post of draughtsman and surveyor in Ulu Selangor in November 1896,⁷⁰² and subsequently worked in a similar role in

⁶⁹⁹ Moosdeen's name is also rendered as 'A.K. Moosden' in both contemporary sources as well as in the secondary literature.

⁷⁰⁰ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 143.

⁷⁰¹ 'A.K. Moosdeen – Applies for the post of draftsman & surveyor, PWD, Kuala Lumpur', Selangor PWD Correspondence, 1 March 1892, PWD 1453/1892, ANM 1 957/0030437W.

⁷⁰² 'Resignation of A.K. Moosdeen, draftsman & surveyor, Ulu Selangor, on \$900 per annum', Selangor PWD Correspondence, 30 November 1896, PWD 6144/96, ANM 1957/0066448.

Kuala Kubu in 1898.⁷⁰³ He came to Malaya having worked with the architect H.F. Hayllar in Hong Kong, and subsequently H.M. Dockyards and the Siam Electric Co.⁷⁰⁴

Apparently a talented draughtsman, the Selangor State Engineer lamented that ‘Moosden [sic] can hardly be replaced’ in the minutes attached to Moosdeen’s resignation,⁷⁰⁵ and a Certificate of Service issued by the Selangor Government described him as ‘a rapid and clean draftsman’ who was ‘well above the average.’⁷⁰⁶ F. Minjoot, who came with a recommendation from the Resident of Singapore, was hired in February 1897 to fill the vacancy left by Moosdeen’s departure.⁷⁰⁷ Moosdeen then appears to have gone into private practice, working on a number of residential and commercial commissions for the wealthy Chinese magnate Loke Yew.⁷⁰⁸ In his design for the Chow Kit Department Store, Moosdeen produced a lively and eclectic façade which drew on a mixture of Asian and Renaissance motifs. At ground level, the deep arcaded verandah is articulated with rusticated arches enriched with pedimented keystones. These broad arches are set between octagonal piers reminiscent of those seen in Chinese temples, which draw the eye up towards a lively multi-gabled parapet drawn clearly from the models of the northern European Renaissance. On the corner elevation, a bay window with pedimented lights creates visual interest and a focal point for this commercial landmark. Moosdeen was clearly comfortable with classical vocabulary, and employed it in this department store in a dynamic and interesting manner. By contrast, Moosdeen’s design for Loke Hall, built in 1903 on Barrack Road, is an essay in sedate Palladian symmetry.⁷⁰⁹ Perhaps due to his origins in Hong Kong, Moosdeen seems to have found favour with Kuala Lumpur’s Cantonese community, and he was eventually commissioned to design the Loke Yew Maternity Ward of the Chinese Hospital at Pudu Road.⁷¹⁰ As noted by Gullick, the ongoing architectural collaboration between Loke Yew and Moosdeen is ‘an interesting example of the spread of architectural ideas across ethnic

⁷⁰³ *The Directory & Chronicle for the Year 1898*, 455.

⁷⁰⁴ ‘A.K. Moosdeen – Applies for the post of draftsman & surveyor, PWD, Kuala Lumpur’.

⁷⁰⁵ ‘Resignation of A.K. Moosdeen’.

⁷⁰⁶ ‘Certificate of Service of Mr A.K. Moosden’, Selangor PWD Correspondence, 16 February 1897, PWD 1026/1897, ANM 1957/0068913W.

⁷⁰⁷ ‘Appointment of F. Minjoot to succeed A.K. Moosden – recommends’, Selangor PWD Correspondence, 20 February 1897, Sel. Sec. 540/97, ANM 1957/0074029,

⁷⁰⁸ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 142-3 and plates 21-22.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid*, plate 21. The restored house is now the home of Pertubuhan Akitik Malaysia.

⁷¹⁰ ‘New Maternity Ward’, *Straits Times*, 20 November 1928, 3.

boundaries.⁷¹¹ His professional connections with Hong Kong make him an interesting example of the movement of architects between colonies.⁷¹² Despite the adoption of the Indo-Saracenic style for Kuala Lumpur's governmental architecture under the direction of Spooner and Hubback, the city's Asian elite adopted classicism with the same enthusiasm as their counterparts elsewhere in Malaya for their shophouses and mansions.

A Consolidated Style

Residential architecture became increasingly florid in its ornamentation over the course of the Edwardian era. While the First World War briefly slowed building works in British Malaya, as the economy turned towards wartime effort, this ornamental tendency resumed following the end of the war. By the 1920s, a Neo-Rococo aesthetic was becoming prevalent in residential architecture at both the grand scale of mansions and in the mass building of terraced shophouse built by speculative landlords for the rental market in Malaya's rapidly growing cities. The mansions built for Malaya's wealthy mercantile class set the tone for residential architecture, which was emulated by even relatively modest suburban villas, terraced houses and even wooden bungalows.

While building plans sometimes indicated the level of ornamentation to be executed on the building, in many instances, the ornamental plasterwork which characterises so much of Malayan residential architecture in the 1920s was left to the imagination and skill of craftsmen, particularly plasterers. Highly elaborate plaster mouldings elevated otherwise plain shophouse façades, lending a monumental character to even relatively small buildings. This can be seen in the shophouses designed by the Eurasian architect Dominic Boudewyn for Mohamed Bin Haji Omar at the corner of Jalan Tambah and Jalan Besar in 1926.⁷¹³ Boudewyn designed one set of five terraced shophouses and one set of two terraced

⁷¹¹ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 143.

⁷¹² For a discussion of this hitherto underdeveloped aspect of the study of architecture in the British Empire, see: Willis, 'Architectural Movements', 158-79.

⁷¹³ Dominic Boudewyn, 'Plan of Proposed Five Shop-Houses to be Built at Jalan Besar for Md. Bin Haji Omar', 29 October 1926, Building Plan 512/1926, NAS CBS 105; and *idem*, 'Plan of Proposed Two Shop-Houses to be Erected at Jalan Besar for Md. Bin Haji Omar', 29 October 1926, Building Plan 515/1926, NAS CBS 105. Jalan Tambah is now called Veerasamy Road.

shophouses, with matching corner elevations to make the most of a prominent location at the entrance to Jalan Tambah from Jalan Besar. These buildings are situated at the edge of Singapore's Little India district, on the road connecting this historic neighbourhood to the city's new suburban expansion. As early as 1922, Mohamed Bin Haji Omar had been acquiring large parcels of land in the newly expanding suburb of Geylang in the east of Singapore.⁷¹⁴ In 1925 he began purchasing land in Jalan Besar, acquiring an area of leasehold land measuring some 1,289 square feet for \$1,850,⁷¹⁵ and a further 6,642 square feet of leasehold land for \$24,575.40.⁷¹⁶

Boudewyn was his architect of choice for these parcels of land. The resulting buildings are amongst the most elaborate shophouses in the whole of Singapore. Historic photographs show that the ornate Baroque plasterwork still evident in the buildings today were original. However, the building plans reveal that the design of these mouldings were not indicated on the drawings by the architect. The richly moulded swags, cartouches and strings of egg-and-dart moulding were thus likely the product of the builders' imaginations, or worked out on-site in dialogue with the architects, though it is also possible that the builders worked from a pattern book. These shophouses also feature liberal use of glazed tiles, which were imported in large quantities to British Malaya from the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Asia.⁷¹⁷ The rich ornamentation of shophouses such as these thus reflects the influence of both Asian artisans and imperial trade networks, a display of cosmopolitanism. Boudewyn appears to have had a good working relationship with his client, who commissioned other shophouses at nearby Syed Alwi Road as well as an unbuilt row of shophouses at Cuppage Road near the city's fashionable Orchard Road district.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁴ 'Sale of Property', *Straits Times*, 15 September 1922, 10.

⁷¹⁵ 'Property Sales', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 18 July 1925, 3.

⁷¹⁶ 'Property Sale', *Malaya Tribune*, 24 September 1926, 8.

⁷¹⁷ See: Wang Cheng Yong, Ruzaiika Omar Basaree, and Rafeah Legino, 'Cultural and Intrinsic Value of Ornamental Tiles on the Facade of Traditional Straits Chinese Shophouses in Malaysia', *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Research of Arts, Design and Humanities (ISRADH 2014)*, edited by Oskar Hasdinor Hassan, Shahrman Zainal Abidin, Rusmadiyah Anwar, and Muhamad Fairus Kamaruzaman, 413-28 (Singapore: Springer, 2015).

⁷¹⁸ Dominic Boudewyn 'Plan of Proposed Shop-Houses to be Erected at Junction of Jalan Besar & Syed Alwi Road for Md. Bin Haji Omar, 24 October 1926, Building Plan 510/1926, NAS CBS 105; and *idem*, 'Plan of Proposed Twelve Dwelling Houses to be Erected at Cuppage Road for Mr Mohamed Bin Haji Omar', 9 February 1926, Building Plan 62/1926, NAS CBS 1054.

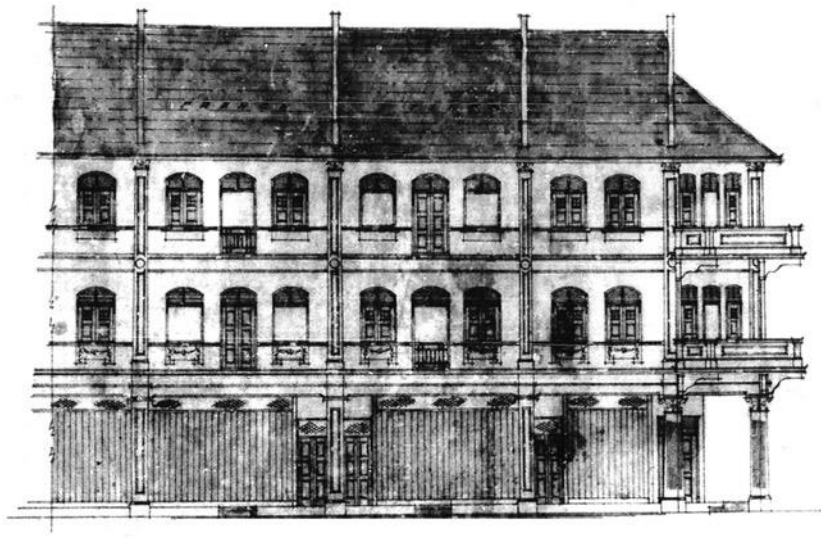


Figure 41. Dominic Boudenryn. *Shophouses at Jalan Besar for Md. Bin Haji Omar, 1926.*
NAS CBS 105, Building Plan 512.



Figure 42. *Shophouses at the corner of Jalan Besar and Veerasamy Road (formerly Jalan Tambah), Singapore by Dominic Boudenryn as they appeared in 2019. Photograph by the author.*



Figure 43. Ornamental plaster durians sit atop a Doric capital in an early twentieth-century bungalow on Macalister Road, Penang. Mark Lay.

Ornamental plasterwork is arguably where the hybrid nature of Malayan classicism in the 1920s is most evident. Plasterers incorporated local motifs, such as durians, alongside both classical and Chinese motifs, and even symbols of the British Empire. In the shophouses designed by Kwan Yow Luen for Madame Sim Cheng Neo at the corner of Balestier Road and Jalan Kemaman in 1928, traditional Chinese motifs jostle with conventional Graeco-Roman mouldings to animate a lively façade.⁷¹⁹ Unfortunately, the elevation drawings for this highly idiosyncratic shophouse have not survived, with only the footprint drawings and plans of the buildings still extant in the archive. An unusual pediment, which appears to draw on both Dutch and Chinese gables, gives the building's corner elevation a landmark quality. The subtle arch of the windows, with their upturned edges, are capped with dentillated mouldings and set between pilasters that are decorated with imported glazed tiles and capped by idiosyncratic Composite pilasters. Panels between the windows feature traditional Chinese

⁷¹⁹ Kwan Yow Luen, 'Proposed Shophouses 4 Shophouses at Balestier Road and 4 Barrack Houses for Madam Sim Cheng Neo', 27 September 1928, Building Plan 415/1928, NAS CBS 1047.

floral decorations and images of peacocks, finely moulded in plaster. In place of traditional Chinese door gods, plaster mouldings featuring Sikh guards protect the building's entrance, reflecting the manner in which Straits-born Chinese were reconciling their Chinese traditions with their increasing affiliation and identification with the British Empire. The result is a highly syncretic building which openly reflects the cosmopolitan nature and influences of Singapore in the early twentieth century.

In another prominent corner shophouse on Joo Chiat Road, also likely designed by Kwan Yow Luen who designed a number of buildings in the neighbourhood, a largely Baroque façade is enriched with Chinese ornamental details such as calabash gourds in the recessed panel mouldings, and a high-relief dragon in the pediment. Again, Chinese cultural signifiers sit alongside conventional classical Composite capitals and strings of egg-and-dart mouldings. These richly decorated shophouses have a consistency of style that suggests intention rather than ignorance; they are the product of a community attempting to express their layered cultural affiliations in a thriving cosmopolitan entrepôt. Kwan seems to have excelled at corner sites, as can be seen in the shophouses he designed around Geylang for Leong Ah Kee and others.⁷²⁰ This intensely Baroque ornamental tendency was not the preserve of Kwan alone, however, and a similar richness of ornament can be found in the shophouses commissioned by the same client, Madam Sim Cheng Neo, designed by the firm Westerhout & Oman.⁷²¹ The richness of these buildings can thus be attributed to the tastes of the client.

Chinese building crafts, such as ornamental cut-and-paste porcelain work, were also widely integrated into shophouse architecture at the turn of the twentieth century. Known as *jiannian* or *qianci*, this decorative technique originated in the Teochew region of Southern China, and was also widely used in Fujian Province, where the great bulk of Malaya's Chinese migrants originated. Shards of coloured porcelain were cut and shaped before being applied to lime

⁷²⁰ Kwan Yow Luen, 'Proposed Four Houses at Geylang Road for Mr Leong Ah Kee & Others', 24 July 1928, Building Plan 304/1928, NAS CBS 1046; and *idem* 'Proposed Dwelling House to be Built at Reserve Road off Geylang Road for Mr. Leong Ah Kee', 21 December 1928, Building Plan 375/1928, NAS CBS 1047.

⁷²¹ Westerhout & Oman, 'Proposed 12 Houses at Balestier Road for Madam Sim Cheng Neo', 1926, Building Plan 448/1926, NAS CBS 1057. See also: Sim Kwong Ho Shophouses, National Heritage Board Roots.sg Website, URL: <https://roots.sg/Content/Places/landmarks/balestier-heritage-trail-historical-landmarks-of-balestier/Sim%20Kwong%20Ho%20Shophouses>.

plaster to create animal and vegetal designs, as well as auspicious symbols. Artisans from these regions were brought in to work on temples, but soon came to ply their trade in residential buildings as well. Other Chinese decorative techniques, included painted *bas-relief*, would also be popular in the shophouses of British Malaya. The friezes of shophouses across Malaya, particularly in the trading ports of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore, were decorated in this manner, with Chinese ornament set between western pilasters. These ornamental details demonstrate an attempt on the part of Malaya's vernacular builders to reconcile the ornamental language of British colonisers with their own building traditions. The resulting architecture is both creolised and cosmopolitan, deviating from Vitruvian traditions and western pattern books through the incorporation of Asian ornamental vocabulary.



Figure 44. A frieze decorated with Chinese-style painted bas-relief depicting fish, an auspicious symbol in Chinese culture, sits above Georgian-style fanlights on a shophouse in Penang, Mark Lay.



Figure 45. Shophouses inscribed with Chinese characters and the date 1919 in Johor, Negeri Sembilan. Photograph by the author.

In cities like Singapore and George Town, the rise of this vernacular creole classicism coincided with a period of rapid suburban expansion after the First World War. Neighbourhoods like Katong and Joo Chiat in the former,⁷²² and areas like Northam Road and Pulau Tikus the latter,⁷²³ came to be characterised by a highly decorated form of suburban architecture. In Kuala Lumpur, the area around the Market Square saw the construction of new commercial buildings throughout the Edwardian era, as the Sanitary Board moved to improve the condition of local building quality and the Selangor Government upgraded infrastructure and built a new railway station.⁷²⁴ Malaya's west coast was undergoing a process of rapid urbanisation, and this syncretic Baroque language was the means by which this urbanisation was expressed. The florid ornamentation and *horror vacui* of the Straits Eclectic style was not limited to Malaya's major cities, however, and can be found in rural centres and even small towns along the inland trunk roads and railway lines of the Peninsula's west coast.

⁷²² Lee, *The Singapore House*, 107 and 222; Gretchen Liu, *Singapore: A Pictorial History*, 223.

⁷²³ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 82-5, 96-105, 136-41, and elsewhere *passim*.

⁷²⁴ Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur*, 142-3 and 152-58.

Plans for two shophouses at the corner of Jalan Putrie and Jalan Sulaiman in Muar, in the northern part of Johor, survive in the Arkib Negara's Johor branch. Muar, also known as Bandar Maharani, which means 'Queen' Town', is one of the royal seats of Johor. Located on the estuary of the Muar River, it was connected by this river to coastal trade. The expansion of the railways in Muar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries connected the city to other cities along the west coast of the Peninsula, allowing its inland cultivation of crops like palm, copra, gambier, black pepper, and rattan to wider Malayan trade networks.⁷²⁵ By the 1920s, Muar was a thriving regional centre of Johor, and the two shophouses in these plans, situated on a prominent intersection along the city's principal commercial artery, reflect this confidence.

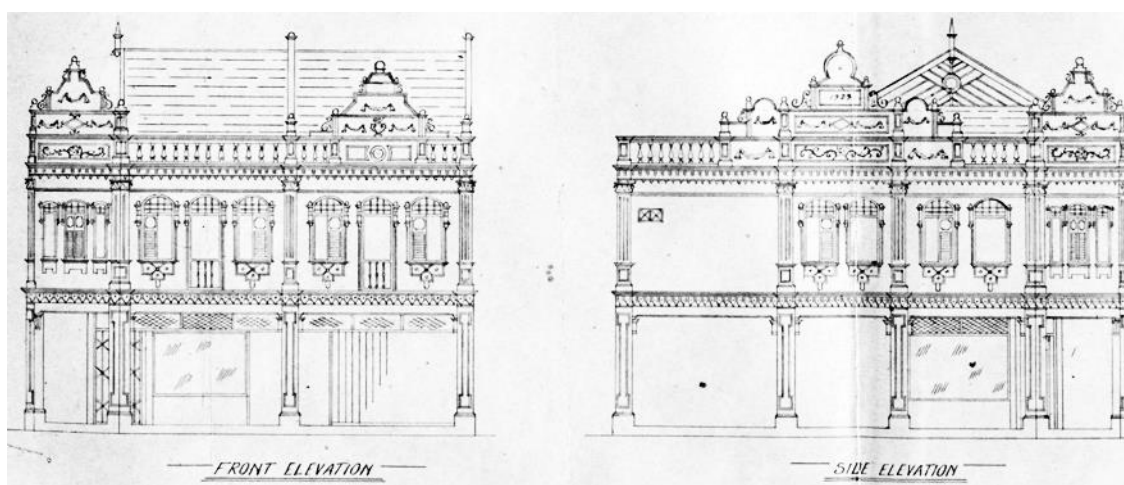


Figure 46. H. Ahmad. *Shophouses at the corner of Jalan Putrie and Jalan Sulaiman, 1929*. ANMJ PL255, Building Plan 3572/1929.

Dating from 1929 and signed 'H. Ahmad', the pair of brick and concrete shophouses designed for two Chinese clients exhibit many of the characteristics found in the exuberant eclectic shophouses of the late 1920s across the rest of Malaya.⁷²⁶ A balustraded parapet unites the three elevations of the buildings along Jalan Sulaiman, Jalan Putrie, and at the canted corner between the two streets. On each of these elevations, panels stacked atop the

⁷²⁵ Ismail bin Abdullah, 'Sejarah Pengangkutan di Johor', 120-1.

⁷²⁶ H. Ahmad, 'Plan Shewing Proposed 2 Shophouses at Corner of Jalan Putrie and Jalan Sulaiman, Bandar Maharani', 1929, ANMJ PL255, Building Plan 3573/1929. Jalan Putrie is a variant spelling of Jalan Petrie, which is now more commonly Romanised as Jalan Peteri.

parapet, culminating in rounded or trapezoidal gables which are decorated with string courses and swags. The façade is richly decorated with Corinthian pilasters, dentillated cornices, and idiosyncratic geometric window surrounds. No biographical data for this 'H. Ahmad' was found in the Johor archives, but the architect is likely to be the same one mentioned in a *Malaya Tribune* advert published on 25 July 1914, which lists a 'Mr. H. Ahmad' as a 'specialist... engineer and architect' in connection to 'reinforced concrete work, which is taking the place of brick in present day construction.'⁷²⁷ The 'Matters Muslim' column in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* published on 17 November 1926 records that Ahmad, 'Civil Engineer and Architect of Singapore and Muar, who had been away in India to see his family, has returned. He has his office now in Muar'.⁷²⁸

It seems likely that H. Ahmad was of South Indian Muslim extraction. While these two shophouses have been substantially modified, with much of their façade decoration lost and an additional storey added, two pairs of shophouses with gables of a strikingly similar design survive a few doors down on Jalan Petrie and immediately next door on Jalan Sulaiman, with the dates 1927 and 1930 inscribed on their respective pediments. It seems likely that they were designed by the same architect for the same owners, who may have owned all of the land on this block, though the lack of further surviving plans in the archives makes this impossible to confirm.

The same highly ornamental vernacular classicism can be seen in towns like Kuala Pilah in Negeri Sembilan, which was a major node in travel between the east and west coasts of the Peninsula. The town's extant shophouses reflect the wealth of its trading community in the 1910s and 1920s. The ornate corner shophouse at the junction of Jalan Yam Tuan and Jalan Dato' Ulu Muar is an exceptionally rich example of Malayan vernacular classicism. While no documentary evidence of the ownership or construction of this shophouse has been found, the extant building fabric reveals clues about the building's ownership. In terms of style, the building's decorative programme draws on both western classical and traditional Chinese ornamental vocabulary. Its construction showcases a virtuosic mixture of Western and Asian

⁷²⁷ *Malaya Tribune*, 25 July 1914, 9.

⁷²⁸ 'Matters Muslim', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 17 November 1926, 313.

building techniques, uniting various traditional crafts including woodcarving, plaster moulding, and fresco work into a frenetic but unified composition.

The Chinese inscriptions on plaster scrolls on the building's pediments suggest Chinese ownership, as do the richly modelled plaster mouldings which depict auspicious symbols including bamboo, plum blossoms, vases filled with flowers, fish, prawns, as well as phoenixes and other mythological creatures including *qilin*. Bats and vases decorate the gable ends, again drawing on traditional Chinese symbolism. This high-relief plasterwork fills almost all the available space on the façade, covering pilasters, panels, becoming entirely three-dimensional as it rises over the parapet. On the ground level, the five-footway articulated with rusticated piers spanned by shallow arches with keystones decorated with Chinese sages. The frieze is decorated with Southern Chinese *jiannian* or 'cut-and-paste' work, in which porcelain shards of various colours are set in plaster to create lively panels of flora and fauna.⁷²⁹ Beneath the arches of this verandah, the floor and façades are covered entirely with glazed tiles of the sort imported to Malaya in large quantities from England, Europe, and Japan in the early twentieth century.⁷³⁰

In less ornate shophouses, these would be used to form a dado, but here the glazed tiles extend to the top of the ground floor beneath the verandah, with the dado line marked out through the use of differently patterned tiles. Through variations in the patterns on the tiles used on this level, the illusion of dados and pilasters is created around arched windows which flank the central doorway. This composition, with two windows framing a door, is typical of the shophouse typology, though the use of arched windows in place of traditional rectangular windows reflects an element of western influence. A set of elaborately carved *pintu pagar*, or half-height 'fence doors', sit in front of the heavy wooden doors.⁷³¹ The windows feature richly carved wooden panels with botanical subjects executed in a Chinese style, topped with a richly carved wooden fanlight featuring Chinese figures surrounded by foliage. These wooden features are all enriched with gilding, reflecting the wealth and status of the owners.

⁷²⁹ This decorative technique, which derives from traditional Teochew architectural practice, was imported from Southern China to Malaya in the early nineteenth century. See: Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 8, 30, 40, and 80

⁷³⁰ Cement, encaustic, and majolica tiles all became exceedingly popular in Malayan shophouses of the early twentieth century. See: Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 14, 48, and 68-9.

⁷³¹ Tan, *Penang Shophouses*, 53-4.

While this shophouse is by far the most elaborate extant example of Malayan vernacular classicism in Kuala Pilah, the remaining shophouses of the town's historic core reflect varying degrees of architectural eclecticism. Kuala Pilah's wealthy Chinese community were no strangers to eclecticism, and the Lister Memorial Arch, built in 1906 in memory of the late British Resident of Negeri Sembilan by members of the town's Chinese community, reflects this syncretism.⁷³² The building, which is the centrepiece of an ornamental garden along the main trunk road through Kuala Pilah, marries the classical triumphal arch with the Chinese *pailou*, with an idiosyncratic composite order topped by a Chinese-style roof. Inscriptions in English, Chinese, and Malay are inscribed on panels set above each of the three arches. The building has an unusual entablature featuring various a combination of egg-and-dart moulding, string courses, a stylised Chinese floral border, and dentils of differing sizes.



Figure 47. The Lister Memorial Arch in Kuala Pilah. Photograph by the author.

⁷³² 'The Lister Memorial', *Straits Times*, 24 April 1906, 3.



Figure 48. An ornate corner shophouse in Kuala Pilah, featuring a combination of Chinese and western ornamental features executed in plaster and cut porcelain work. Photograph by the author.

These examples all demonstrate the extent to which a florid brand of eclecticism had spread across British Malaya, becoming an almost universal style by the 1930s. In his discussion of the so-called 'Singapore Eclectic' style, Seow argues that

As nature abhors a vacuum, so the shophouse abhors an unadorned front... The uninhibited development of Singapore Eclectic may be conveniently described as Singapore Baroque or Rococo, the luxuriance of the work being the deciding factor.⁷³³

The diffusion of this style, however, spread well beyond the island of Singapore, and is better understood as a Malayan style.

The richly syncretic architectural language of these shophouses can be understood as the product of the contact zone, with the architects and patrons of these buildings creating what Pratt described as 'autoethnographic text[s]'. As Pratt notes, such works 'are often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speaker's own community. Their reception is thus highly indeterminate... If one thinks of cultures, or literatures, as discrete, coherently structured edifices... any autoethnographic work [appears] anomalous or chaotic'.⁷³⁴ The apparently anomalous or chaotic character of Malaya's creolised classicism, which borrowed elements from both Graeco-Roman Antiquity as well as East and Southeast Asian building traditions, has perhaps understandably led to its subsequent reception as 'plagiarised' or even 'ignorant' when compared to the Vitruvian-Palladian ideal.⁷³⁵ Yet as has been demonstrated above, Malaya's architects and their patrons drew freely and consciously from both Western and Eastern architectural vocabulary, and used this syncretism to express both fashionable modernity and cultural affiliations in the buildings they commissioned.

If, as Bhabha argues, colonising powers entrenched otherness through the 'articulation of difference',⁷³⁶ it should also be acknowledged that the colonial 'other' also articulated their

⁷³³ Seow, 'Architectural Development in Singapore', 198-200.

⁷³⁴ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 35-7.

⁷³⁵ Cf. Lee, *Emerald Hill*, 7; Lee, *The Singapore House*, 125-6; and Liu, *Pastel Portraits*, 21.

⁷³⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 96.

difference. This can be seen in the ornamental vocabulary through which Malaysians of various races articulated the ‘difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity’ through their places of residence.⁷³⁷ While the mercantile elites of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States readily absorbed the architectural vocabulary and grammar of their British colonisers, they did not reproduce facsimiles of this architectural language in their own homes. Instead, the classical language of architecture was hybridised, with ornamental vocabulary incorporated into the classical language, providing loanwords drawn from their respective building traditions. The layered affiliations of these communities were expressed through this creolised vernacular language.

This diversity of ornament is reflected across Malaya, giving shophouses a decorative diversity even within their typological regularity. A remarkably consistent programme of internal spaces became the canvas for a variety of ornamental flourishes. Within the loose grammar established by the classical orders on the façades of these innumerable shophouses, Malayan builders adopted a rich vocabulary drawn from diverse traditions. In doing so, the builders and owners of these shophouses asserted their cultural ownership of the style. Builders drew from their cultural lexicons to decorate the houses which sprang up across Malaya over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was done in an inventive and even playful manner, with builders absorbing the influences from Graeco-Roman Antiquity, Ancient China, as well as life in contemporary Malaya when designing and constructing these highly ornate façades.

New Accents, New Languages: From Art Deco to Modernism

By the latter half of the 1920s, the design of shophouse façades began to diverge along two distinct paths. The first saw the continuation of the Rococo tendency in the ornamentation of façades which flowered as an offshoot of the Edwardian. The latter, under the influence of Art Deco, saw a more streamlined approach to shophouse design, sometimes shedding ornament almost completely. Where classical ornament remained, these ornaments were increasingly stylised, geometrical, and severe. This can be seen in the work of European-led

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*

firms such as Swan & Maclaren, as well as in the work of local architects. By the 1930s, architects were developing an increasingly modern approach to the shophouse typology, incorporating Art Deco influences, and stripping or even dispensing with classical ornament completely.

The 1920s did not signal the end of the ornamental exuberance of the Edwardian Baroque, however, and firms like Swan & Maclaren designed some of Malaya's grandest and most ostentatious houses in this decade. In 1915, the firm produced one of Malaya's most imposing houses, Eu Villa, for the mining magnate and trader Eu Tong Sen. Eu Villa was a fanciful Baroque composition which commanded an elevated position that made it visible through much of Singapore.⁷³⁸ The building was constructed from brick made locally in Pulau Batam, marble columns and iron handrails enriched the interior, while the building's prominent dome was constructed in reinforced concrete.⁷³⁹ A similar sense of Baroque grandeur is evident in a house designed by Swan & Maclaren in Selangor over a decade later. The Big House in Kuala Lumpur, a palatial domed mansion constructed for the Chinese tin miner Chan Wing in 1928, was so grand that it was chosen to house the Sultan of Selangor after the Second World War.⁷⁴⁰ Like Eu Villa, the domes of the Big House were constructed from reinforced concrete. These structures, designed by the same firm provided Malaya with so many major institutional buildings, demonstrate how the classical language used to convey colonial governance could also be co-opted by Asian elites to signal their wealth and influence.

Some architects would adopt a more stylised version of classicism in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This can be seen in the home Major Percy Hubert Keys of the firm Keys & Dowdeswell designed for himself in the Watten Estate in Singapore.⁷⁴¹ Keys came to Singapore on an unusually specific contract to design the new General Post Office.⁷⁴² His unique design sensibilities, which favoured a boxy, geometric approach to the classical

⁷³⁸ Swan & Maclaren, 'Proposed New House Mount Sophia Singapore for Eu Tong Sen, Esq.', 4 November 1913, Building Plan 1431/1913, NAS CBS 1121.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁰ 'Mansion for a Sultan', *Singapore Free Press*, 13 December 1951, 5.

⁷⁴¹ Major Percy Hubert Keys, 'Proposed Bungalow at Watten Estate for Major P.H. Keys', 13 April 1928, Building Plan 371A/1928, NAS CBS 1051.

⁷⁴² Quek, 'Neo-classical Architecture in the Straits Settlements', 239.

language, is evident in his design for his own home. In this asymmetrical composition, a giant Doric order stretches around the house, framing two exaggerated Dutch gables which pierce the eaves. Along one elevation, the Doric pilasters are stretched to form a continuous band of moulding along the length of the bay. The main entrance is marked by a cantilevered porch supported by simplified brackets set on smaller Doric pilasters. Ornamentation is limited to an escutcheon framed by fasces on one gable, and a lozenge on the other. These are ornamental motifs which appear on Keys' other buildings. Indeed, Keys' home, one of six designed in this style, shows Keys' distinctively stylised, geometric approach to classical ornament – which he employed in the Fullerton Building and Capitol Theatre – applied on a domestic scale. The house also has strong affinities with the work of Herbert Baker in South Africa, where historicist details from Dutch Baroque architecture were stylised in a modernising way.⁷⁴³

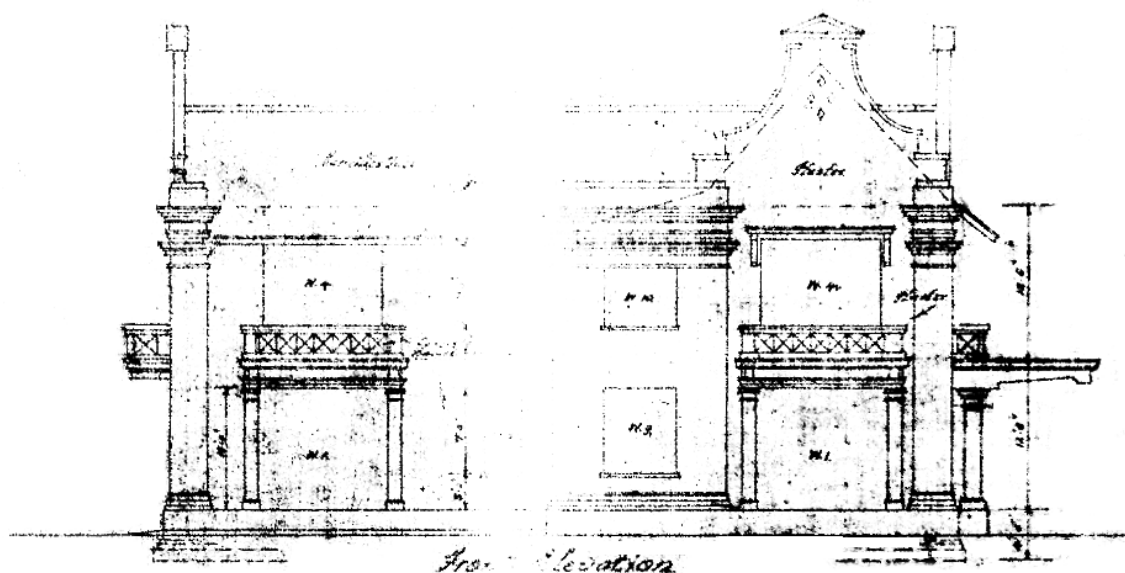


Figure 49. Major Percy Hubert Keys. Bungalow at Watten Estate, Singapore, 1928. NAS CBS 1051, Building Plan 371A.

⁷⁴³ Mark Crinson, 'Imperial Modernism', *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire*, edited by G.A. Bremner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 199.

By the mid-1930s, what classical detail remaining in the designs of shophouses was of a vestigial nature. Art Deco had become the preferred idiom for shophouses, and if classical details remained, they were highly stylised. A new austerity came into vogue, and façades densely festooned with classical gestures and floral motifs were replaced with smooth surfaces. If ornamented, shophouses were enriched with Art Deco fins, emphasising the verticality of the pediment or wall spans between windows. Increasingly, however, a new, simplicity characterised the shophouse façades of the late 1930s. The few classical elements which remained on the façades of shophouses built in this period were highly stylised, mannered, or reduced. This can be seen in the shophouses designed at Geylang Road designed by Ho Kwong Yew for Mrs Lee Kong Chian.⁷⁴⁴ Two pairs of simple pilasters are set in an otherwise plain façade, elongated and articulated without base or entablature. The parapet of this pair of shophouses forms an almost completely straight line, save for two small pairs of volutes at the centre of each shophouse, creating an exaggeratedly small scrolled pediment. Here, the classical details have been reduced to a vestigial gesture in an otherwise astylar façade.

The use of lime plaster to create richly ornamented façades gave way to the use of granolithic cement, known locally as ‘Shanghai plaster’, which gives the appearance of stone. This material was used to create monumental classical buildings such as the Municipal Building and the Supreme Court, but was also used to lend an air of monumentality to more modernist residential buildings.⁷⁴⁵ The popularity of Shanghai plaster would coincide with the decline in the highly exuberant, Rococo plasterwork which had been favoured in British Malaya throughout the first decades of the twentieth century.

⁷⁴⁴ Ho Kwong Yew, ‘Proposed Two Shophouses to be Erected at Geylang Road for Mrs Lee Kong Chian’, 22 January 1937, Building Plan 24/1937, NAS CBS 79.

⁷⁴⁵ Yeo Kang Shua, ‘Innovative Cement Derivative Products in the Supreme Court Building’, *The Making of National Gallery Singapore*, edited by Pauline Ang (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 30.

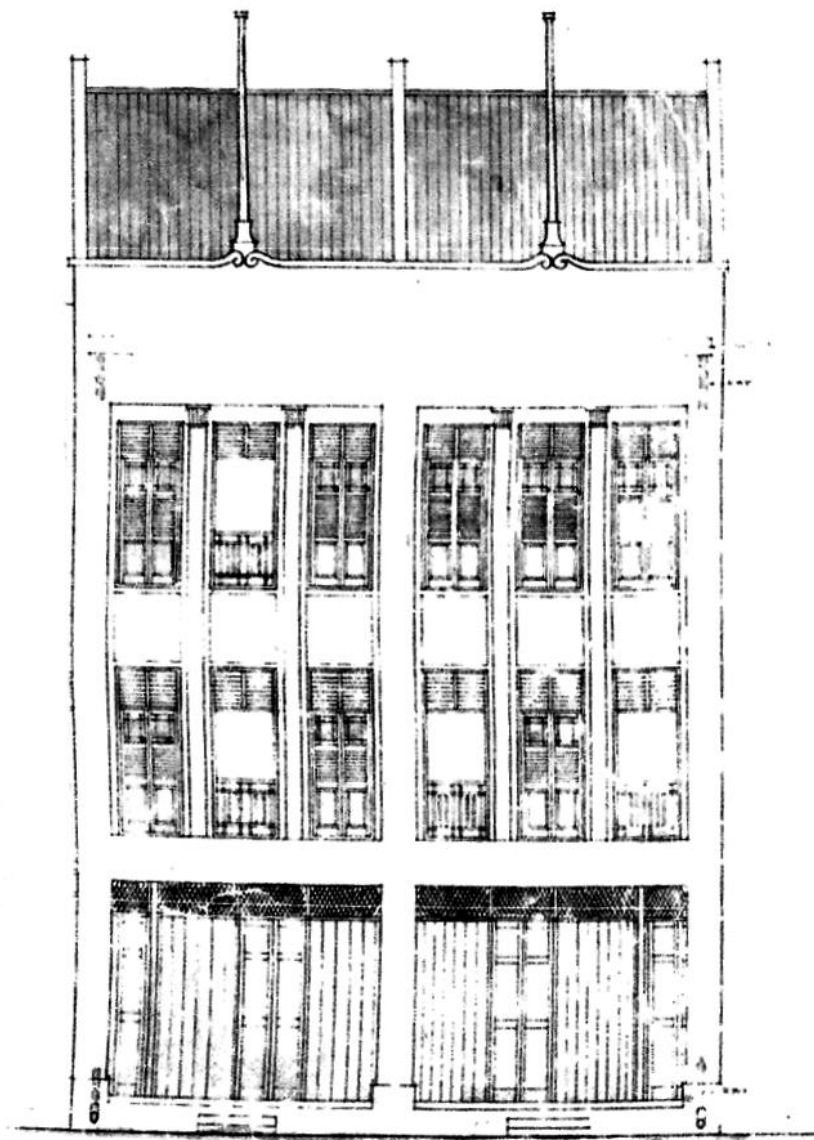


Figure 50. Ho Kwong Yew. *Two shophouses at Geylang Road for Mrs Lee Kong Chian, 1937.*

Indeed, the declining popularity of the classical idiom for vernacular shophouses in the late 1930s did not simply lead to a decline in the number of new buildings constructed using this ornamental language, but the active destruction of older classically inspired façades. Older classical façades were stripped of their rich ornamental detail, and given streamlined Art Deco makeovers. An example of this can be seen in the redesigned façade created by Ho Kwong Yew for Chan Heng at South Bridge Road.⁷⁴⁶ The building plans reveal the outline

⁷⁴⁶ Ho Kwong Yew, 'Plan Shewing Amendment to Top Pediment of Front Elevation to M.C. No. South Bridge Road for Chan Heng Esq', 25 November 1937, Building Plan 561/1937, NAS CBS 81.

of an elaborate curved Dutch-pediment being removed entirely, with the front of the shophouse refaced with an austere granolithic plaster façade, unadorned save for the simple mouldings around the ground floor frieze, which would presumably have been used for a shop sign. Classical ornament, which had reached new heights of exuberance and ornateness in Singapore shophouses of just a decade earlier, was now unfashionable and undesirable. The ornamental vocabulary inherited by local builders and architects from Graeco-Roman antiquity via British colonial architects had lost currency as part of British Malaya's architectural vernacular. The remaking of these façades would continue after the Second World War, with simple modernist façades grafted onto once-classical arcades.

Ho Kwong Yew was the first of a new generation of foreign-educated local architects who would bring modernist ideas to Malaya.⁷⁴⁷ This is evident in the avant-garde shophouses Ho designed in the 1930s. This is particularly evident in the shophouses he designed for Ho Yee Onn at the corner of Circular Road and Lorong Telok, just behind the Singapore River,⁷⁴⁸ described by Lim as the 'most important' example of Ho's work.⁷⁴⁹ With its arcaded trapezoidal openings and thin concrete *brise-soleils*, the building marked a sharp stylistic departure from the florid ornamental classicism of the previous decade. Yet despite the constraints of its narrow corner site, the building conforms to the shophouse typology, with residences set above the ground floor shops, and clever ventilation features built into the façade of the building. Internally, the division of rooms is not dissimilar to earlier, more ornamentally rich shophouses, demonstrating how spatially conservative the shophouse typology was. Other examples of Ho's modernising approach to shophouse design include the houses he designed on Telok Ayer Street for Oh Sian Goan, as well as a number of shophouses in Joo Chiat for Ean Lian & Co.⁷⁵⁰ In all of these, the classical language has been stripped back completely, replaced with a bold, stark Modernism, but the traditional shophouse typology continues to inform the internal arrangement of spaces.

⁷⁴⁷ Johannes Widodo, 'Modernism in Singapore', *Docomomo Journal* (2003): 58-9.

⁷⁴⁸ Ho Kwong Yew, 'Proposed Shop House at corner of Circular Road & Lorong Telok S'pore for Ho Yee Onn Esq', 28 November 1938, Building Plan 682/1938, NAS CBS 78.

⁷⁴⁹ Lim, "The "Shophouse Rafflesia"", 62.

⁷⁵⁰ See, for example: Ho Kwong Yew, 'Proposed Renovation to M.C. No. 52 Telok Ayer Street Singapore for Oh Sian Goan Esq', 20 November 1938, Building Plan 676/1938, NAS CBS 79; 'Proposed 4 Shophouses at Lot No. 276 Joo Chiat Road Singapore for Ean Lian & Co. Ltd', 28 December 1938, Building Plan 728/1938, NAS CBS 79; and 'Proposed Nine Dwelling Houses at Reserve Road Off Joo Chiat Road S'pore for Ean Lian & Co. Ltd', 20 December 1938, Building Plan 728/1938, NAS CBS 79.

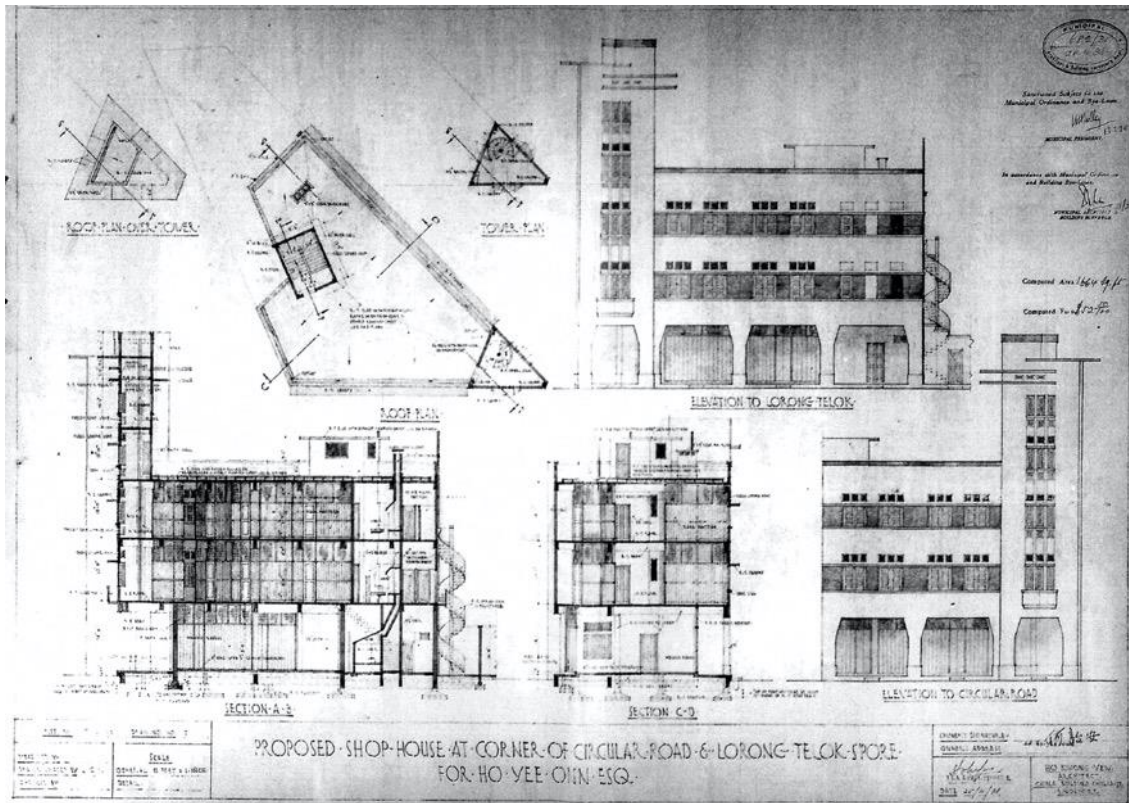


Figure 51. Ho Kwong Yew. *Shophouse at Lorong Telok, Singapore for Ho Yee Onn, 1938.* NAS CBS 78, Building Plan 682.

Conclusion

While the vernacular builders and local architects of British Malaya did indeed produce an eccentric, mannered form of classicism which bent traditional Vitruvian and Palladian rules, the long-standing reading of this local vernacular as ‘coarsened’, ‘ignorant, or ‘plagiarised’ does a disservice to their inventiveness. This reading relies on the assumption that fidelity to the Vitruvian ideal was the intent of these architects. Yet the consistent bending of the rules of classicism by innumerable architects across British Malaya suggests that they were committed to an act of translation; as Akcan argues, ‘architectural translation more often than not aims at distance, distortion, or transmutation.’⁷⁵¹

⁷⁵¹ Akcan, *Architecture in Translation*, 8.

The distinction between ‘trained’ and ‘untrained’ architects which has informed much of the existing literature on Malayan architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relies to a large extent on an ahistorical understanding of the use of the term ‘architect’. By the 1920s, a floridly ornamental form of classicism had become Malaya’s common architectural tongue, a language shared by architects and builders of all ethnicities across the Peninsula and its neighbouring islands. The impact of the late 1920s global economic crash would take some time to be felt in Malaya, but by the 1930s a combination of architectural fashion and economic austerity led to the dissipation of the intensely ornamental tendencies of the later 1920s. The classicism which continued to be practiced in the 1930s was of an increasingly sober, stripped character

The exuberant eclectic style favoured by Malaya’s diverse trading communities in the early twentieth has been criticised by some scholars for its supposed misuse of the classical idiom and its vocabulary in the name of superficial ornamentalism. Yet the brash mercantile ornamentalism of British Malaya in the 1920s and 30s in some ways paralleled the commercial architecture of London in the same period, reflecting the economic conditions of the time. Writing about the frantic building and rebuilding of the major commercial thoroughfare of Oxford Street in London in 1931, Virginia Woolf observed:

But any day of the week one may see Oxford Street vanishing at the tap of a workman’s pick as he stands perilously balanced on a dusty pinnacle knocking down walls and façades as lightly as if they were made of yellow cardboard and sugar icing. And again the moralists point the finger of scorn. For such thinness, such papery stone and powdery brick reflect, they say, the levity, the ostentation, the haste and irresponsibility of our age. Yet perhaps... the charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is built to pass... [The] old builders and their patrons... their pride required the illusion of permanence. Ours, on the contrary, seems to delight in proving that we can make stone and brick as transitory as our own desires.⁷⁵²

This idea of transient grandeur was also the condition of the sojourning mercantile communities of British Malaya, many of whom made vast fortunes in a short amount of time

⁷⁵² Virginia Woolf, ‘Oxford Street Tide’, *The London Scene* (London: Daunt Books, 2013), 23-4.

and constructed monumental confections to serve as their residences in equally short amounts of time. The inventive, frosting-like plasterwork which adorned so many of Malaya's innumerable rows of shophouses was an expression of economic confidence, just as the inventive distortions of classical detailing in the Edwardian Baroque had been in the imperial metropole. The diversity of ornament deployed in British Malaya's residential architecture reflected the diverse peoples who made the region home in this period.

As the classicist Phiroze Vasunia argues, '[t]o study the architecture of British India is to study the international dimensions of classicism as well as to grasp its implication in discourses of colonial rule'.⁷⁵³ The same holds true for British Malaya. In this intensely heterogeneous colonial society, architecture became a 'contact zone' where the culture of Malaya's British colonisers and a Babel of migrant mercantile communities met and negotiated cultural identity. The resulting buildings were 'heterogeneous on the reception end as well as the production end... read very differently to people in different positions in the contact zone'.⁷⁵⁴ As with the adoption of classicism by the Johor Sultans, the classical language became associated with both modernity and wealth. If classicism had once been the exclusive language of Malaya's British colonisers, their grip on the language had loosened by the 1930s.

The adoption of this architectural language did not, however, compel Malaya's mercantile communities to discard their own cultures. As noted by Khoo, this architecture could be used to simultaneously make 'claims of assimilation... and at the same time statements of difference'.⁷⁵⁵ Ornamental language drawn from various cultures were grafted onto the façades of these buildings alongside Graeco-Roman vocabulary, signalling the cultural origins of the building's owners. Ornament thus served an ontological function in Malayan classicism. As Gadamer argued, ornament served a representational purpose, signalling meaning, 'draw[ing] the attention of the viewer to itself, to satisfy his [sic] taste, and then redirect[ing] it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies'.⁷⁵⁶ If, a 'building should certainly be the solution of an artistic problem' and

⁷⁵³ Vasunia, 'Visions of Antiquity', 10

⁷⁵⁴ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 36-7.

⁷⁵⁵ Khoo, *Streets of George Town*, 21.

⁷⁵⁶ Gadamer, 'The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative', 129-30.

also ‘seek to fit into this unity by providing ornament, a background of mood, or framework’, classicism became the framework by which Malayan builders both ornamented the urban landscapes of the Peninsula, creating a varied but unified language.

Living arrangements preferred by various cultures continued to inform the spatial hierarchies of both *kampung* houses and shophouses alike, even where they were self-consciously classicising in their external decoration.⁷⁵⁷ The classical language of architecture was readily adopted and appropriated by the mercantile elites of colonial Malaya, who incorporated this architectural language alongside elements drawn from their own building traditions. Yet these patrons of architecture were also ever open to new architectural fashions. The advent of Art Deco, and later Modernism, in the 1920s and 1930s would soon be felt in British Malaya, and a younger generation of architects would strike out in new ways. The classical language of architecture, which had become ubiquitous by the 1920s, would see its popularity wane sharply in the late 1930s, contending with other styles for supremacy on the eve of the Second World War.

⁷⁵⁷ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 64-5.

Chapter VI. Vestal Versions: British Malaya's Temples of Commerce



Figure 52. *The Chartered Bank Building at Raffles Place, the commercial heart of Singapore, circa 1930. KITLV 104795.*

Over the course of the nineteenth century, British Malaya became an important commercial centre within the British Empire. Strategically located at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the Straits Settlements were an entrepôt and centre for transshipment, a crucial node in the trade networks linking the British Empire's Asian territories and East Asia. After the British East India Company lost its monopoly on India trade in 1813,⁷⁵⁸ and subsequently its hold on China trade in 1833, this strategic location became even more attractive to merchants.⁷⁵⁹ Transshipment and import-export businesses flourished. The development of the Peninsula's hinterland led to consistent growth in both imports and exports in the Straits Settlements from the 1860s through to the twentieth century.⁷⁶⁰ The tropical climate and mineral wealth of the Federated Malay States made them productive protectorates, providing a lucrative source of spices, coffee, rubber, palm and

⁷⁵⁸ Anthony Webster, 'The Political Economy of Trade Liberalization: The East India Company Charter Act of 1813', *The Economic History Review* 43.3 (August 1990): p. 404.

⁷⁵⁹ Douglas Wong, *HSBC: Its Malaysian Story* (Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet, 2004), 30.

⁷⁶⁰ Swettenham, *British Malaya*, 331.

coconut products including palm oil and copra, and tin from the mines of Perak and Selangor. The production and trade of these commodities necessitated the expansion of railways across the length of the Peninsula, bringing these lucrative goods to the ports of George Town and Singapore, from whence they were integrated into wider Imperial trade networks. Malaya's material wealth was summed up in the account written by the former Resident General of the Malay States Sir Frank Swettenham at the beginning of the twentieth century:

With the advancing prosperity of the country, the rapid development of new and old mining fields, and the construction of roads and railways, many populous towns sprang up... Tin-mining has enabled the administration to open up and develop rapidly a country which, thirty years ago, was practically covered by virgin forest... Rice and cocoanuts are probably the two forms of cultivation best suited to Malays. The Chinese are successful sugar-growers, and years ago the Government introduced into Pêrak the cultivation of the pepper vine, and that is an established industry... The cinchona failed, but very fine qualities of Arabian coffee and tea were grown... All kinds of india-rubber succeed admirably.⁷⁶¹

All this material and mercantile wealth saw a flowering of ancillary buildings to support the colonial enterprise in Malaya. Godowns,⁷⁶² warehouses, and the offices of trading houses blossomed along the coastlines of the Straits Settlements. As the wealth of the mercantile community grew, banks and trading companies increasingly asserted their presence as landmarks in these colonial towns and cities. As with residential architecture, the infrastructure of commerce in British Malaya found its architectural expression articulated in the classical style. Grand colonnades lined the likes of Weld Quay in George Town as well as Boat Quay and Clarke Quay in Singapore, with goods making their way from the arcaded verandahs of warehouses and godowns directly onto lighters and *tongkang* before being loaded onto larger vessels. Shipping companies and banks adorned their buildings with imposing pilasters and ornate cupolas, creating imperial echoes of classical temples along the rising skylines of Malaya's seaports and the mining boomtowns of the interior.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 261-2.

⁷⁶² The word 'godown', alternatively rendered 'go-down', is an Anglicised version of the Malay word *gudang*, meaning 'warehouse'.

As noted by Peter Drake in his study of British trade and banking in Malaya, the dawn of the twentieth century saw new confidence, and with that confidence an influx of cash, in Malaya.⁷⁶³ A stabilised currency and growing profits from booming rubber plantations encouraged further investment into the Malayan economy.⁷⁶⁴ This economic boom, which saw the construction of increasingly imposing buildings to house Malaya's various banking and mercantile institutions, coincided with the consolidation of the Edwardian Baroque as Britain's imperial architectural language. Bremner argues that this grandiloquent revival of the Baroque style, heavily influenced by the work of Wren and his contemporaries, was 'the closest that Britain ever came to formulating an expressly "imperial" style of architecture.'⁷⁶⁵ If the classical language of architecture was used to convey imperial power, it was also used to express imperial wealth. Set immediately behind the godowns of Weld Quay in Penang and Boat Quay in Singapore, the grand banking chambers of Beach Street and Chulia Street became some of the grandest landmarks of the two cities respectively. As the industrial powerhouses of Liverpool and Glasgow competed for the title of 'second city' of empire,⁷⁶⁶ Singapore's skyline rose to compete with these secondary cities. Indeed, Singapore came to be known as the 'Liverpool of the East', a nomenclature which asserted and reaffirmed its place in the Empire.⁷⁶⁷ Singapore was thus connected both by lines of trade and in the imperial imagination. This skyline, created by the flow of commodities and capital between Malaya and the rest of the British Empire, also reflects the flow of architectural ideas and language across this vast maritime network. As Bremner notes,

the traces of empire in the architecture of the metropolis demonstrate are that at no time can the two worlds of 'home' and 'abroad', 'centre' and 'periphery', 'metropole' and 'colony' be seen or understood as entirely distinct. Indeed, an indissoluble connection is implied by their very association.⁷⁶⁸

⁷⁶³ Peter Drake, *Merchants, Bankers, Governors: British Enterprise in Singapore and Malaya 1786-1920* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2018), 91.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶⁵ G.A. Bremner, 'The Metropolis', *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire*, edited by G.A. Bremner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 150.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷⁶⁷ Donna Brunero, 'Visiting the "Liverpool of the East": Singapore's Place in Tours of Empire', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50.4 (2019): 564.

⁷⁶⁸ Bremner, 'The Metropolis', 157.



Figure 53. Postcard view of godowns along Weld Quay, Penang, circa 1900. KITLV 50224.

These relationships between the various nodes of Britain's Empire can be traced through a shared architectural language, which traversed its imperial maritime networks along with architectural practitioners who were as mobile as the commodities traded through these networks. The result was a commercial mode of classicism which developed across these centres of trade.

Not all financial or mercantile buildings were designed in this style, and some of these rare exceptions to the rule will be discussed to explore how classical influences were either hybridised or rejected by other communities within Malaya. The China Building on Singapore's Chulia Street provides an interesting case study in how two Chinese banks asserted their cultural affiliations through a syncretic approach to classicism in order to distinguish themselves from European banking institutions. The elaborate Indo-Saracenic façade of the Alkaff Arcade, built for a Singapore-based Hadhrami Arab family who made their wealth through trade with the Dutch East Indies, provides another contrast to the otherwise resolutely classical waterfront of Singapore's Collyer Quay. By and large, however, the Edwardian Baroque and later, a variant of Beaux-Arts Neoclassicism, would dominate the design of Malaya's commercial and financial institutions from the late 1910s to the Second World War.

This chapter will survey commercial classicism in British Malaya from the nineteenth century to the 1930s. The grand banks and mercantile buildings of Singapore's commercial district will be the especial focus of this chapter, as these exemplify the development of the classical language as the architectural expression of finance and trade in the colony. As will be demonstrated below, these buildings are also tangible evidence of the vast networks, both commercial and professional, which knitted together Britain's vast maritime Empire. Banks in regional centres elsewhere in Malaya, namely Ipoh and George Town, will also be considered. Warehouses, godowns, and other mercantile infrastructure will also be discussed in passing to paint a more complete picture of how classicism was used to construct the commercial centres of British Malaya. These two genres of buildings reflect different registers of classicism, one consciously transnational and imperial in character, the other the product of local syncretism. These varied uses of classicism by different demographics within the Malaya's commercial centres demonstrates how classicism was a visual language borne of the contact zone, which, as such, could be 'addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speaker's own community.'⁷⁶⁹ British banks and trading houses articulated a vision of empire through their buildings, which Asian communities variously adapted or rejected according to their position within this colonial society.

Early Warehouses and Godowns

Among the first mercantile buildings to be built in Malaya were warehouses and godowns. While practical concerns dictated much of the early mercantile infrastructure in British Malaya, even some godowns in early colonial Singapore had a degree of architectural pretension. This can be seen in the godowns of two prominent early Chinese merchants in Singapore. Yeo Ki Swee's godown, designed by George Doumgold Coleman in the 1840s, and Tan Kim Seng's godown, constructed in the 1860s, both helped establish the classical character of Singapore's Boat Quay in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁷⁰ The former featured a Doric order one-and-a-half storeys high along its side elevation, set on giant plinths which

⁷⁶⁹ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 35.

⁷⁷⁰ Hancock, *Coleman's Singapore*, 13.

framed the arches of the five-footway on the ground floor, while the façade of the latter was articulated with a giant Tuscan order spanning its two storeys.⁷⁷¹ The use of giant orders in both buildings gave the two warehouses a monumental quality that had not hitherto been seen on earlier godowns and warehouses, which had largely been functional, makeshift structures in the early days of the colony. Palladian Classicism was used to elevate the architecture of these godowns, and with them, the status of the merchants who owned them. As the nineteenth century progressed, the seafronts of Malaya's major port cities came to be fringed with classical orders across hundreds of warehouses and godowns. The classical orders stretched over the commercial waterfronts of Malaya's port cities, giving the sea fronts of these trading ports a grand appearance. As with warehouses and other such functional structures in the United Kingdom, the overall interior arrangement of these buildings did not change substantially over the course of the nineteenth century; unlike in the United Kingdom, the godowns and warehouses of Malaya did not experience the same kaleidoscopic variety of applied styles that the High Victorian era in Britain saw.⁷⁷²

This stylistic uniformity may well have fairly prosaic causes. The earliest godowns of any architectural merit were, as noted above, designed by the same Palladian architects who produced British Malaya's earliest classical buildings. In subsequent decades, the architectural language of the godown would be informed by and merge with the ornamental language of shophouses, which were often packed cheek-by-jowl with godowns in Malaya's working ports. The end result is a consistency of urban form, with warehouses and godowns transitioning seamlessly into rows of shophouses, and those giving way to purely residential buildings, all articulated in a similar manner.

European Banks and Trading Houses

By the late nineteenth century, both British and European banks and trading companies were commissioning increasingly grandiose structures for the commercial centres of cities like

⁷⁷¹ Marjorie Doggett, *Characters of Light: A Guide to the Buildings of Singapore* (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1957), 68.

⁷⁷² Dixon and Muthesius, *Victorian Architecture*, 120

George Town and Singapore. Institutions such as the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, the Chartered Bank, the Mercantile Bank of India serviced the banking needs of Malaya's mercantile community, tying Malaya into broader financial networks within the British Empire.⁷⁷³ British banks were not the only financial institutions to establish themselves in British Malaya, however, and the Banque de l'Indochine, and the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij had a prominent Malayan presence, particularly in the Straits Settlements.⁷⁷⁴ These institutions vied with one another to establish themselves along the principal commercial thoroughfares of Malayan cities, their increasingly stolid buildings serving as an advertisement for the security of these institutions. Despite the great variety of players within British Malaya's burgeoning financial sector at the turn of the twentieth century, a certain consistency is evident in the stylistic development in the design of these buildings.

This stylistic consistency of these buildings can be attributed in no small measure to the dominance of one firm: Swan & Maclaren. *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*, a significant colonial guide to Malaya, observed that the house style of Malaya's most prestigious architectural firm was writ large in the commercial monuments of the colony:

Singapore abounds in monuments of the skill of Messrs. Swann & Maclaren, the well-known architects and civil engineers, who have been established in the colony since 1885. They are the designers of some of the finest ornamental buildings both in Singapore and the Federated Malay States. Among the former are the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank buildings, the Chartered Bank buildings, Raffles, Adelphi, and Europe Hotels, the pavilion of the Singapore Cricket Club, the Electric Power Station, and the business premises of Messrs. Syme & Co., Messrs. Fraser & Neave, Ltd., the Eastern Extension Australasian and China Telegraph Company, the P. & O. Steam Navigation Company, the Oriental Electric and Telephone Company, and Messrs. Whiteaway, Laidlaw & Co.⁷⁷⁵

The buildings designed for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in both the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, many by Swan & Maclaren, provide a barometer for

⁷⁷³ See Chapter 5 in Drake, *Merchants, Bankers, Governors*.

⁷⁷⁴ Wong, *HSBC: Its Malaysian Story*, 66-7.

⁷⁷⁵ Wright and Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*, 627.

changing architectural tastes, and the evolving character of commercial classicism in British Malaya from the 1890s to the 1940s. Britain took control of Hong Kong through the 1842 Treaty of Nanking following the Anglo-Chinese War.⁷⁷⁶ The Hongkong Bank was established in 1865 to meet the needs of the rapidly burgeoning European trading community in this new colony.⁷⁷⁷ In 1892, Swan & Maclaren designed a building for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in Singapore, a châteauxque French Renaissance Revival structure with prominent mansard roofs.⁷⁷⁸ The building's elevation towards Battery Road was a lively composition of stacked gables, block-rusticated engaged columns, and steeply pitched roofs. An essay in high Victorian historicism, the French character of the building is heightened by the combination of classical ornamental elements in its façade juxtaposed with the Gothic arches employed in its interior spaces.

The building was well-received by the local press, with the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* reporting at its opening that

The Hongkong and Shanghai Bank deserves the thanks of the town for... having erected buildings which cannot fail to satisfy the educated taste and to create an emulative spirit... [The buildings] ... constitute at once an architectural embellishment to the town and a monument to the public spirit of the well-known bank... The buildings are designed in a style much in vogue at home now, the prevailing characteristics of which, at least in the main features, are Gothic, freely treated, with classic details so adapted as to meet business requirements.⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁶ R. Derek Wood, 'The Treaty of Nanking: Form and the Foreign Office, 1842–43', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24.2 (1996): p. 181.

⁷⁷⁷ Wong, *HSBC: Its Malaysian Story*, 26.

⁷⁷⁸ Swan & Maclaren, 'Hongkong & Shanghai Banking Corporation: New Bank Singapore', 29 September 1892, Building Plan 91/1892, NAS CBS 332. The firm would also go on to design the new premises for the Chartered Bank the following year, featuring a gigantic Corinthian order. See: Swan & Maclaren, 'Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China: New Bank Singapore', 22 December 1893, Building Plan 158/1893, NAS CBS 332.

⁷⁷⁹ 'The Hongkong and Shanghai Bank', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 6 November 1894, 15.

Perhaps more accurately, the *Straits Times* described the ground floor as ‘Renaissance’ and the gables as ‘Queen Anne’.⁷⁸⁰ The resulting offices were an elegant addition to the streetscape of Victorian-era Singapore. Such was the growth of Singapore’s financial sector that the building would be replaced by much bigger premises less than thirty years later, with a modern classical design furnished by the same firm.⁷⁸¹

By contrast, the George Town premises of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, completed just a few years later in 1906, shows a shift towards the Edwardian Baroque. Its design is more clearly indebted to Mountford’s Old Bailey than Mansart’s Château de Blois. This building was designed by Wilson & Neubronner, as reported in a local newspaper:

The building faces on Beach and Downing Streets and is surmounted by a large dome on the corner, the top of which is a hundred and twenty feet from the ground. There is, as you may imagine, a capital view of Penang and the harbour to be obtained from the roof of this, the highest building in town while from the sea the huge dome makes quite an imposing landmark and greatly adds to the appearance of the town... Messrs. Wilson and Neubronner, the architects, are to be congratulated on their work, which is a credit alike to their firm and Penang.⁷⁸²

While not a Swan & Maclaren building, the firm responsible for the Penang bank was formed in 1902 by a former Swan & Maclaren engineer, Alan Wilson, and the Melakan Eurasian architect Henry Alfred Neubronner.⁷⁸³ The building, destroyed by Japanese bombing during the Second World War, was solid but refined, with extensive and varied rustication in its columns, arcades, and window surrounds. Its domed corner tower was a prominent landmark until the war. Its post-war replacement would be constructed in an Art Deco-inflected form of stripped classicism, subtly asymmetrical in a manner reminiscent of Adelaide House in London.⁷⁸⁴ Commercial competition would see various banks and trading

⁷⁸⁰ ‘New Offices of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank’, *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 10 October 1893, 2.

⁷⁸¹ ‘Singapore Development’, *Straits Times*, 23 January 1924, 12.

⁷⁸² ‘The Hongkong Bank Building at Penang’, *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, 5 October 1906, 3.

⁷⁸³ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 20-1.

⁷⁸⁴ ‘Five-Storey Bank for Penang’, *Straits Times*, 20 April 1949, 8.

houses vie to construct the grandest premises in the business districts of Malaya's cities, and architects based both in Singapore and abroad would furnish these institutions with increasingly grandiose designs.



Figure 54. *Collyer Quay, Singapore, circa 1930. KITLV 1404932.*

The Maritime Gateways of Empire

By 1920, the florid eclecticism of the late Victorian era had given way to the more sculptural, Baroque-inflected classicism which had flourished through the Edwardian era. This can be seen in Swan & Maclaren's design for a new Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Building at Battery Road, which replaced the Renaissance revival structure constructed in the 1890s.⁷⁸⁵ With its giant order resting on a heavily rusticated base, the building recalls the work of architects such as Sir Reginald Blomfield in London, while its prominent cupola overlooking the harbour recalls the work of Liverpoolian architects such as Walter Aubrey Thomas. Indeed, Swan & Maclaren's contributions to the Singapore skyline in the 1920s saw the city

⁷⁸⁵ Swan & Maclaren, 'Proposed New Premises at Singapore for the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank', 24 October 1921, Building Plan 523/1921, NAS CBS 116.

increasingly resembling a tropical version of Liverpool. As noted by John Griffith in his history of Antipodean port cities, the ports of Australia and New Zealand served as entrepôts for their rural hinterlands, and came to resemble the ‘provincial’ centres of industrial Britain such as Leeds and Liverpool while also incorporating influences from further afield.⁷⁸⁶ The ports of Singapore and George Town operated in a similar capacity, as a staging point for the rich mineral and vegetal resources of the Malayan hinterland and a centre for transshipment. As shall be seen, the architecture of these ports was also subject to influences from across the British Empire and beyond. These visual affinities were the product of both trade and professional networks.

Peter de Figueiredo, in his study of Liverpool’s waterfront, has noted that the grand buildings erected in Britain’s leading port were part of a ‘long cherished vision to enhance the city’s maritime gateway’, projecting both a vision of empire and serving as an advertisement for individual trading companies.⁷⁸⁷ This strategy was also adopted by the architects of Singapore and Penang’s waterfront buildings. Singapore’s role as a major port within the maritime British Empire was asserted not only through its public buildings such as the Post Office and the new Municipal Offices, but also through the construction of increasingly grand premises for its numerous banks, shipping companies, and trading houses. By 1930, the waterfront at Collyer Quay in Singapore would echo those of both Liverpool and the Shanghai Bund, with a fainter echo of these imperial maritime gateways also evident along Weld Quay in Penang.

Architects from other ports across the British Empire would contribute to Singapore’s waterfront. One of the imposing new landmarks which came to define the Singapore waterfront in the 1920s was the Ocean Building. The building was constructed for the Liverpool-based shipping company Alfred Holt & Co., who ran the Blue Funnel Line.⁷⁸⁸ Construction of the building commenced in 1919, and the Ocean Building formally opened on 24 March 1923.⁷⁸⁹ The Ocean Building was designed by the British engineer Somers Howe

⁷⁸⁶ John Griffiths, ‘On the Margins of Empire: Antipodean Port Cities and Imperial Culture, c. 1880-1939’, *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c. 1700-2000*, edited by Brad Beavan, Karl Bell, and Robert James (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 91-2.

⁷⁸⁷ De Figueiredo, ‘Symbols of Empire’, 229

⁷⁸⁸ ‘Ocean Building’, *Straits Times*, 18 December 1922, 9.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Ellis.⁷⁹⁰ Ellis was educated at Kings' College London, and initially worked for a number of railway companies before entering into private practice.⁷⁹¹ Most of his work in private practice was for Alfred Holt & Co., for whom he designed offices in both Liverpool and Singapore, as well as port facilities in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and the Dutch East Indies.⁷⁹² Built from reinforced concrete and faced in synthetic stone, the Ocean Building was regarded as both modern and luxurious. Contemporary newspapers commented on the building's spacious arcaded footway, which spanned six feet rather than the conventional five.⁷⁹³ The five-storey building was topped with a prominent corner tower that brought the total height of the building to 160 feet, making it the tallest building in Singapore upon completion.⁷⁹⁴ The design of this tower, articulated in the form of a temple in the round and resembling the ancient Temple of Vesta, would prove influential. Designed by a Liverpool-based engineer for a Liverpool-based company, the Ocean Building's architectural language was imported from Britain's 'second city' to the burgeoning port of Singapore, and also visually communicated the ties between these two nodes in Britain's maritime Empire.

The Ocean Building in Singapore would soon be joined by other major buildings along Collyer Quay. One such landmark was the Union of Canton Building, which was completed in 1924.⁷⁹⁵ Established in 1835, the Hong Kong-based Union Insurance Society of Canton was one of the oldest insurance agencies in the British Empire.⁷⁹⁶ Designed by Denis Santry of Swan & Maclaren, the building featured a deeply rusticated granite arcade, with upper stories faced in synthetic stone.⁷⁹⁷ The building culminated in a monumental cupola, which concealed the building's water storage.⁷⁹⁸ As with many Malayan commercial buildings of the 1920s, the design of the building features a stylised, highly geometric variant of the Baroque style, most noticeable in the angular, festooned Ionic capitals and the stepped top of the attic storey. Ornamentation is concentrated in a few areas, with sculpted medallions bearing sailing

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹¹ 'Obituary [Somers Howe Ellis].', *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers* 4.3 (1955): 391-2.

⁷⁹² *Ibid.*

⁷⁹³ 'Ocean Building', *Straits Times*, 18 December 1922, 9.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁵ Swan & Maclaren, 'Proposed New Premises at Singapore, S.S. for the Union Insurance Society of Canton, Ltd.', N.D. [1920], NAS 18(1), NA 309.

⁷⁹⁶ Union Insurance Society of Canton Limited, *A Brief Historical Record of the Insurance Society of Canton, Ltd.* (Hong Kong: Union Insurance Society of Canton Limited, 1952), 3.

⁷⁹⁷ 'Singapore Development', *Straits Times*, 23 January 1924, 12.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

ships decorating the bays at each end of the building, and large cartouche decorating the keystone of the central rusticated arch. Construction of the Union of Canton Building commenced in May of 1922, and as it neared completion the *Straits Times* reported that the building was

the largest of several modern and graceful structures which have arisen in the business area, and Collyer Quay will soon present an impressive contrast between the old and the new—between many-storied, finely designed, ferro-concrete buildings, representing the last word in building construction, and the low and unpleasing godowns of the old colonial days... The design of the frontage is English Renaissance style.⁷⁹⁹

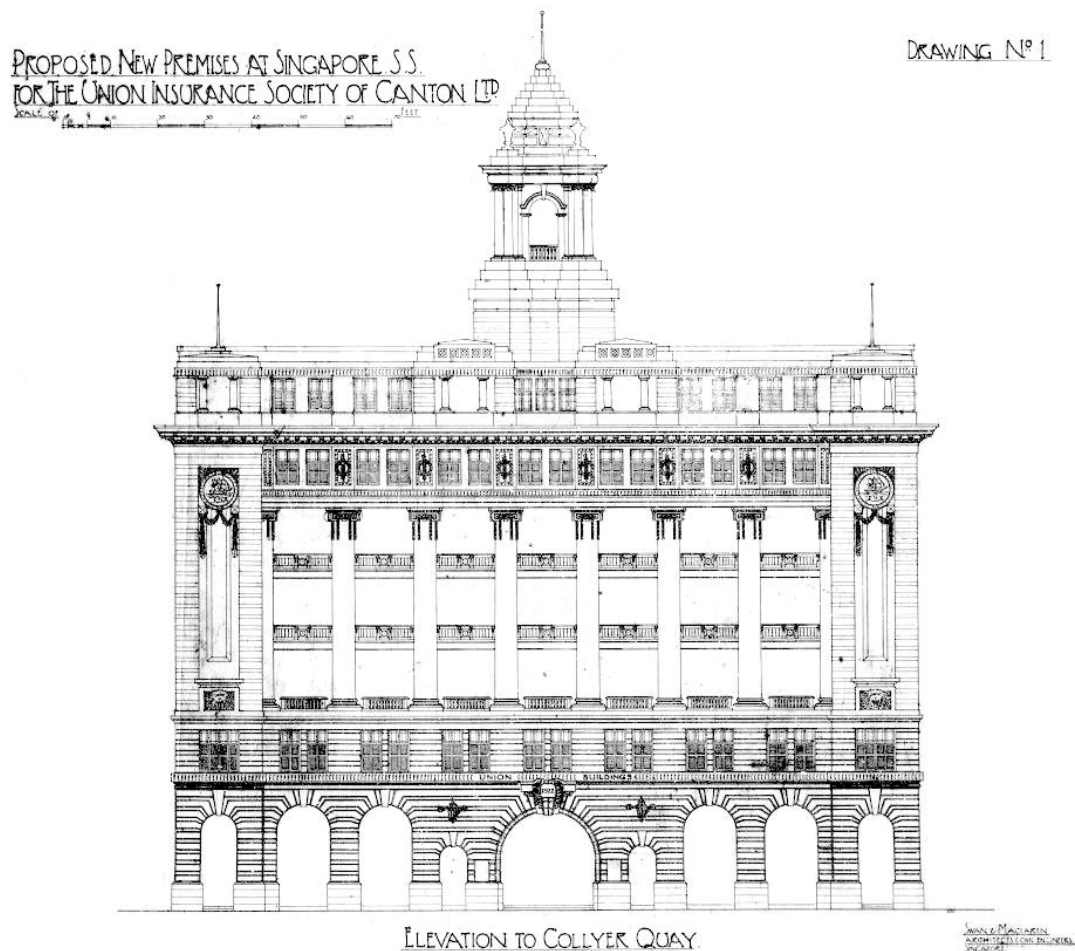


Figure 55. Denis Santry of Swan & Maclaren. Union Insurance Society of Canton Building, 1920. NAS NA 309, Building Plan 18(1).

⁷⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Completed around the same time as the Union of Canton Building, the new premises of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in Singapore were also designed by Denis Santry and, according to the *Straits Times*, ‘intended to “harmonise” [with the former]’.⁸⁰⁰ Various trading and financial institutions thus drew on the prestige firm of Swan & Maclaren for their buildings in the 1920s, and the firm produced monumental buildings which were designed to act as an ensemble, aggrandising the Singapore waterfront through various complimentary designs. These buildings were not simply competing with their immediate neighbours, but also with the commercial landmarks of other trading ports within the British Empire, such as Liverpool, and of treaty ports such as Shanghai and Tianjin.

Architects in the 1920s had recourse to a number of styles, from the Edwardian Baroque favoured in Britain to the French Beaux Arts style and the American Commercial Palazzo.⁸⁰¹ While a broad ‘house style’ is evident in many of these financial and mercantile institutions, in some instances the hand of the individual architect is discernible. This is the case with the Banque de l’Indochine Building in Singapore designed by David McLeod Craik of Swan & Maclaren.⁸⁰² Craik listed this building as his most recent work in his nomination papers for Fellowship with the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1913.⁸⁰³ The architect would go on to design a strikingly similar building in Penang a decade later: the George Town Dispensary. While there are differences between the two buildings, the overall effect is similar as a result of the architect’s distinctive use of the same ornamental vocabulary. Craik makes free use of Edwardian Baroque motifs, including porthole windows, banded rustication, and ornamental cartouches, and terracotta finials. Both buildings emphasise their location on a street corner through the use of a canted façade. Many of these elements are also evident in Craik’s residential designs, including the bungalows he designed for staff of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in Penang, and lend a certain informality to his classical designs.⁸⁰⁴

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰¹ Griffith, ‘On the Margins of Empire’, 97.

⁸⁰² David McLeod Craik for Swan & Maclaren, ‘Proposed New Premises for the Banque de l’Indo-Chine’, 26 October 1912, Building Plan 796/1912, NAS NA 309. See also: Maxime Pilon and Danièle Weiler, *The French in Singapore: An Illustrated History (1819-Today)* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2012), 99.

⁸⁰³ David McLeod Craik, ‘Nomination Paper for Admission as Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects’, file number 1531, 23 July 1913, London: Royal Institute of British Architects.

⁸⁰⁴ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 126-9.

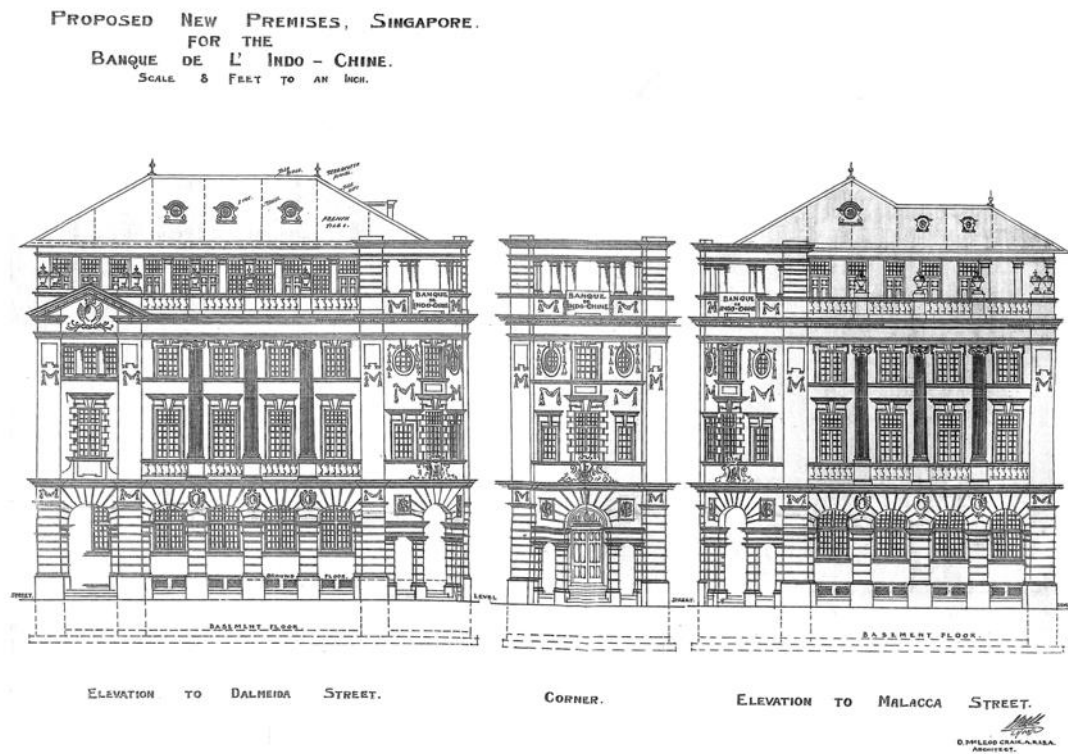


Figure 57. David McLeod Craik. Elevation for the Banque de l'Indochine, Singapore, 1912. NAS NA 309, Building Plan 796.



Figure 56. The George Town Dispensary designed by David McLeod Craik as it appeared in 2008. Mark Lay.

The idiosyncratic, Baroque classicism of Craik's George Town Dispensary finds a strong contrast in the Chartered Bank Building further up the road. Designed by Charles Geoffrey Boutcher, the design hints at Boutcher's increasing tendency towards a more Streamline Moderne-inflected approach to classicism.⁸⁰⁵ The use of so-called Shanghai plaster, a relatively new synthetic stone product, to emulate granite also reflects a broader trend in institutional architecture.⁸⁰⁶ The material would also be used for major government buildings in Singapore, as will be seen in the next chapter.⁸⁰⁷ Used alongside or in lieu of granite, Shanghai plaster would give Singapore's waterfront a solid, monumental quality in contrast to the delicate, intricate plasterwork which had been favoured by architects just a decade earlier. Boutcher's residential designs would also adopt this mode, streamlining classical ornamental details into geometric gestures and using rustication to emphasise horizontal or vertical lines.⁸⁰⁸ While still largely classical in their overall composition, these buildings show the influence of the abstracting tendencies of Moderne design.

The grandiose classicism of the 1920s was by no means confined to Malaya's port cities. The design of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in Ipoh, the capital of Perak in northern Malaya, bears a striking similarity to that of the Ocean Building, and draws on similar architectural vocabulary to express the wealth of the tin-mining boomtown. While the plans for this building do not survive, the design of the building is attributable to Swan & Maclaren. A *Straits Times* article of 20 May 1930 reported that

Mr. B.C.G. Burnett, L.R.I.B.A., has arrived at Ipoh from Tientsin to open business for Messrs. Swan and Maclaren, architects and civil engineers of Singapore. Tenders are now being called for the erection, under the supervision of Messrs. Swan and Maclaren, of the new building for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank at the corner of Belfield and Hale Streets, Ipoh.⁸⁰⁹

The Ipoh branch of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank was thus the product of professional networks within the British Empire. Beni Carr Glyn Burnett was born in Mongolia to

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 106-23 *passim*.

⁸⁰⁶ Yeo, 'Innovative Cement Derivative Products', 30-31.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁸ Lim, *The Penang House and the Straits Architect*, 106-23 *passim*.

⁸⁰⁹ *Straits Times*, 20 May 1930, 12.

Scottish missionary parents in 1889.⁸¹⁰ He was articled to the architectural firm of Smedley & Denham in Shanghai at the age of 15 in 1904, and worked for the Shanghai-based firm of Atkinson & Dallas between 1915 and 1928, designing the Tianjin branch of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank among other financial institutions.⁸¹¹ The buildings produced by Burnett while he worked at Atkinson & Dallas in Tianjin are scholarly essays in Beaux-Arts Neoclassicism, mostly produced for prestigious financial institutions.⁸¹²

Burnett brought the considerable experience he gained in Shanghai and Tianjin with him to Malaya, and his scholarly approach to classicism is evident in his work in Ipoh. In the Ipoh Bank, a giant Corinthian order is superposed over a double-height rusticated arcade and topped with an attic storey. As with the Ocean Building in Singapore, the façade of Burnett's bank in Ipoh curves around the corner of Belfield and Hale Streets. Where the building turns the corner, the street wall is recessed, so that the Corinthian pilasters that wrap around the building's upper storeys become free-standing columns. This curved corner is further emphasised by a round tower with a design that echoes the ancient Temple of Vesta in Rome. The resulting building communicates both solidity and permanence. With his experience in both Shanghai and Tianjin, Burnett would undoubtedly have been intimately familiar with the imposing architecture of the two treaty ports, and his scholarly Neoclassicism in the Ipoh bank reflects this. The building demonstrates how tightly interwoven the British Empire's trade and professional networks were in the 1920s, and how well Malaya was integrated into this network: the construction of the Ipoh branch of a Hongkong-based bank was supervised by a Shanghai-trained and Tianjin-based architect on behalf of a Singapore-based architectural practice.⁸¹³

Completed a year after the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, the Mercantile Bank in Ipoh was another monumental addition to the city's financial quarter. The Chartered Mercantile Bank

⁸¹⁰ Burnett would eventually move to Australia in 1934, working in Sydney and Canberra before finally settling in Darwin. See: David Bridgman, 'Burnett, Beni', *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, edited by Philip Goad and Julie Willis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 125-6; and Eve Gibson, 'Burnett, Beni Carr Glyn (1889-1955)', *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Revised Edition*, edited by David Carment, Christine Edward, Barbara James, Robyn Maynard, Alan Powell, and Helen J. Wilson (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008), 78.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁸¹² Yuan Fang, 'Influences of British Architecture in China. Shanghai and Tientsin 1843-1943' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1995), 11, 124-5, and 190-212 *passim*.

⁸¹³ See: Willis, 'Architectural Movements', 164-5.

of India, London and China had established a presence in Singapore in the 1850s, and expanded across Malaya over the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁸¹⁴ Its principal business engagements included prominent rubber plantation companies such as Guthrie, Boustead, and Paterson & Simons.⁸¹⁵ The Bank's architecture reflected the wealth which accompanied Malaya's rubber boom in the early twentieth century. Designed by the Danish architect Berthel Michael Iversen of Keys & Dowdeswell, the Mercantile Bank's Ipoh branch reflects the European architect's modernising impulses, evident beneath the limited and highly stylised ornamentation that defined the firms buildings of the 1920s.⁸¹⁶ The building's corners are articulated as astylar pavilions, which frame long, deeply recessed loggias. The lack of columns on the upper storeys emphasises the horizontality of the building's composition, apparently influenced by the Streamline Moderne style. The building's uppermost windows and balcony are sheltered by chunky cantilevered cornices. A row of squat, angular urns, which closely resemble those on the parapet of the Keys & Dowdeswell-designed Capitol Theatre in Singapore, top the balustrade of the first floor balcony.⁸¹⁷ Along with the festooned cartouches which rest atop the bracketed cornices that shelter the uppermost windows on the corner pavilions, these urns are the only ornamental flourish in an otherwise stripped building. The design of the Ipoh Mercantile Bank is almost reluctantly classical, with limited ornamental vocabulary applied to an otherwise modernist composition, contrasting strongly with the more scholarly Neoclassicism of the Ipoh branches of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank and Chartered Bank nearby. The resulting commercial streetscape speaks of both the wealth and confidence in British Malaya's economy in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁸¹⁴ Drake, *Merchants, Bankers, Governors*, 100.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸¹⁶ Ruth Iversen Rollitt, *Iversen: Architect of Ipoh and Modern Malaya* (Penang: Areca Books, 2015), 35.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The China Building, Boat Quay



Figure 58. Keys & Dowdeswell. *Perspective drawing of the China Building, 1929.* JSSAI.

While the classical style was effectively the de facto style for Malayan banks, this style was articulated in various ways over time. As noted above, the ornamental tendencies of the late Victorian era were quickly superseded by the Edwardian Baroque, which consolidated itself into an imperial style. In this manner, financial institutions mirrored the architecture of government, evoking ideas of solidity, reliability, and permanence. The China Building, designed by Keys & Dowdeswell for the Chinese Commercial Bank and Oversea Chinese Bank in 1929,⁸¹⁸ provides an unusually eclectic example of the classical style being adapted by European architects for Asian clients. Situated on Chulia Street, near the European banks at Raffles Place but closer still to the godowns and warehouses of Boat Quay, the 78-foot tall China Building instantly became a landmark along the bustling Singapore River.

The first Chinese banks in Singapore were established at the beginning of the twentieth century; these included the Chinese Commercial Bank, founded in 1912, the Ho Hong Bank

⁸¹⁸ P.H. Keys & F. Dowdeswell, 'Proposed Premises for Chinese Commercial Bank & Overseas Chinese Bank', 23 May 1929, Building Plan 341/1929, NAS CBS 1037.

in 1917, and the Oversea Chinese Bank in 1919.⁸¹⁹ These banks were founded by prominent members of the Straits Settlements' Hokkien community, and their management committees were deeply intertwined.⁸²⁰ The establishment of these banks coincided with the commodities boom of the 1910s, which saw high demand for rubber and tin, particularly after the First World War.⁸²¹ The Great Depression prompted the consolidation of various smaller banking houses, resulting in the merger of the Oversea Chinese Bank, the Chinese Commercial Bank, and the Ho Hong Bank to form the Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation.⁸²² Given that building plans for the China Building indicate that it was commissioned by two of the three banks which would go on to form the Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation, it is possible that the building was designed in anticipation of their eventual merger in 1932.

The China Building comprised five storeys and a basement, with a mezzanine over the main hall on the lofty ground level of the building. The uppermost storey of the building is set back behind an exaggerated cornice, and topped with a distinctive Chinese roof. Aside from this roof, however, the building's ornamental language clearly draws on the more grandiloquent strands of the Beaux-Arts tradition. The main entrance is emphasised by a chunky double-storey projecting aedicule which is set between two pairs of twinned Composite pilasters. Both the main entrance and two side portals are decorated with bundles of fasces which hang from the cornices. The three central bays are framed by pateræ. Oversized pateræ on the attic level bear stylised swags. The overall effect of the façade below the main cornice is lively. Above this, the topmost storey, with its delicately upturned Chinese eaves, appeared to float. The bold, stylised classical elements are typical of Keys & Dowdeswell's work of this period, as can be seen in the extant Capitol Theatre which the firm designed the previous year.⁸²³

The adoption of an overtly 'Chinese' style for the China Building reflects a shifting attitude towards architecture within the Chinese diaspora. After the deposition of the millennia-old dynastic system, the young Republic of China was searching for a modern identity. Part of

⁸¹⁹ Dick Wilson, *Solid as a Rock: The First Forty Years of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation* (Singapore: Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, 1972), 9.

⁸²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, 22-5.

⁸²³ See: Iversen Rollitt, *Iversen: Architect of Ipoh and Modern Malaya*, 26.

this included the quest for a ‘national style’ of architecture, and the blending of distinctly Chinese elements, particularly in roof structures, with modern western construction techniques and internal programmes was one of the answers which architects in the first half of the twentieth century found for the question of a modern Chinese architectural identity.⁸²⁴ This style, dubbed ‘traditional Chinese eclectic’ or ‘Chinese renaissance’ by some architectural historians, would prove popular with Singapore’s Chinese community, particularly for institutional buildings such as clan associations and, after the Second World War, the main buildings of Nanyang University.⁸²⁵

Keys & Dowdeswell’s design for the China Building was well received within both professional journals and the wider press. The *Journal of the Singapore Society of Architects Incorporated* noted prior to its construction:

The present buildings will shortly be replaced with a spacious modern bank building designed in a similar style to many large American Banking Institutions, but in the present case modified, to suit the position of the building and the nationality of the owners, by a judicious blending of Eastern and Chinese detail with the Modern Classical style usually adopted by Messrs. Keys & Dowdeswell F. & A.R.I.B.A., who are the architects... The front throughout will be of Granolithic plaster with a fine-axed finish and the massive and highly ornamental enrichments will be precast with a carved finish. The new building should form a notable addition to the architectural features of the business portion of the City, and will serve to brighten what at present is a digny [sic] and commonplace business thoroughfare.⁸²⁶

The striking combination of modern materials, a modern classical design, and the overtly Sinicising character of the building’s prominent roof are powerful architectural statements. The solidity of the building, constructed in the aftermath of the Wall Street crash of the late

⁸²⁴ Jeffrey W. Cody, *Building in China: Henry K. Murphy’s ‘Adaptive Architecture,’ 1914-1935* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), 34-8.

⁸²⁵ Yeo Kang Shua and Chen Yu, ‘Building a Modern Chinese Identity in Singapore: From Orientalism to Chinese “Traditional Eclectic Style” Renaissance’, paper presented at EAAC 2009 International Conference on East Asian Architectural Culture, April, Tainan, Taiwan. See also: Julian Davison, ‘Chinese Renaissance Architecture’, *BiblioAsia* 14.1 (April 2018). URL: <http://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/2018/04/17/chinese-renaissance-architecture/>.

⁸²⁶ W.E. Watson, ‘The New China Building’, *JSSAI* 1.2 (1929): 10-13.

1920s, could perhaps be read as an attempt to reassure the bank's clients that their assets were secure. The syncretic fusion of both Western classical and Chinese elements also speaks to the cultural identity of the Straits Chinese community who established the bank. Dr Lim Boon Keng, chairman of the Oversea Chinese Bank, was born in Singapore and educated at the universities of Edinburgh and Cambridge; Lim Peng Siang, who founded the Chinese Commercial Bank and the Ho Hong Bank, was born in Amoy but later naturalised as a British subject in 1902.⁸²⁷ Through its combination of both Western classical grammar and Chinese ornamental vocabulary, Keys & Dowdeswell's China Building thus reflects the layered affiliations of its founders, and a much looser approach to classicism than the one Swan & Maclaren adopted for their commercial work.

This syncretic style would come to be seen from the 1920s onward as an appropriate way of constructing Chinese institutional buildings in Singapore, so much so that Denis Santry of Swan & Maclaren would adopt a similar approach to the design of the Chinese Methodist Church at Telok Ayer.⁸²⁸ This hybridised architectural language, which drew on both Western Classicism and traditional Chinese architecture, can be seen as an attempt on the part of Straits-born Chinese to reconcile their plural cultural and political affiliations. The hybrid architectural language of these buildings can be read as a product of the contact zone, one in which the imperial language of classicism was 'merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding.'⁸²⁹ In the case of the China Building, this intervention was both stylistic and spatial, with the overtly Sinicising roof of the building erupting from an otherwise Beaux Arts-styled volume and, also, the classical uniformity of the shophouses surrounding it.

⁸²⁷ Wilson, *Solid as a Rock*, 29-33.

⁸²⁸ Speechley and Yeo, 'They Will Not Suffer a Church More Beautiful Than Their Own'.

⁸²⁹ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 35.

The Alkaff Arcade, Collyer Quay

Other communities would also adopt syncretic elements for their commercial architecture. The Alkaff Arcade, designed for Alkaff & Co. by David McLeod Craik,⁸³⁰ would use an unusual Indo-Saracenic style to distinguish itself from its neighbours along the Singapore waterfront. Indeed, the Arcade would be the only non-classical building in this area until the widespread adoption of Modernism in commercial architecture after the Second World War. The Alkaff family, a prominent Hadhrami Arab trading family, came to Singapore via the Dutch East Indies in the 1850s.⁸³¹ Trading in spices through connections to Java and India, by 1908 the Alkaffs were some of the biggest land owners in Singapore.⁸³² They were also among the biggest taxpayers in Singapore at the time.⁸³³ The Alkaffs had already built a shopping arcade facing Raffles Place in the 1880s.⁸³⁴ The building was largely in keeping with the commercial architecture of Singapore's business district, with Dutch gables that hinted at the family's connections to the Dutch East Indies. By the early twentieth century, this connection had made the Alkaffs one of Singapore's wealthiest families, and the new Alkaff Arcade building was constructed along Collyer Quay to 'provide a new artery for pedestrians' that connected the waterfront to Raffles Place and the old shopping arcade.⁸³⁵

The conscious adoption of the Indo-Saracenic style for the new Alkaff Arcade contrasted strongly with the classicism of the rest of Collyer Quay, and earlier buildings commissioned by the Alkaff family. This stylistic contrast was noted by the *Straits Times* in its journalistic coverage of the building's grand opening:

⁸³⁰ David McLeod Craik, 'Arcade and Offices for Messers Alkoff [sic] and Co.', 13 March 1908, Building Plan 9186/1908, NAS CBS 126.

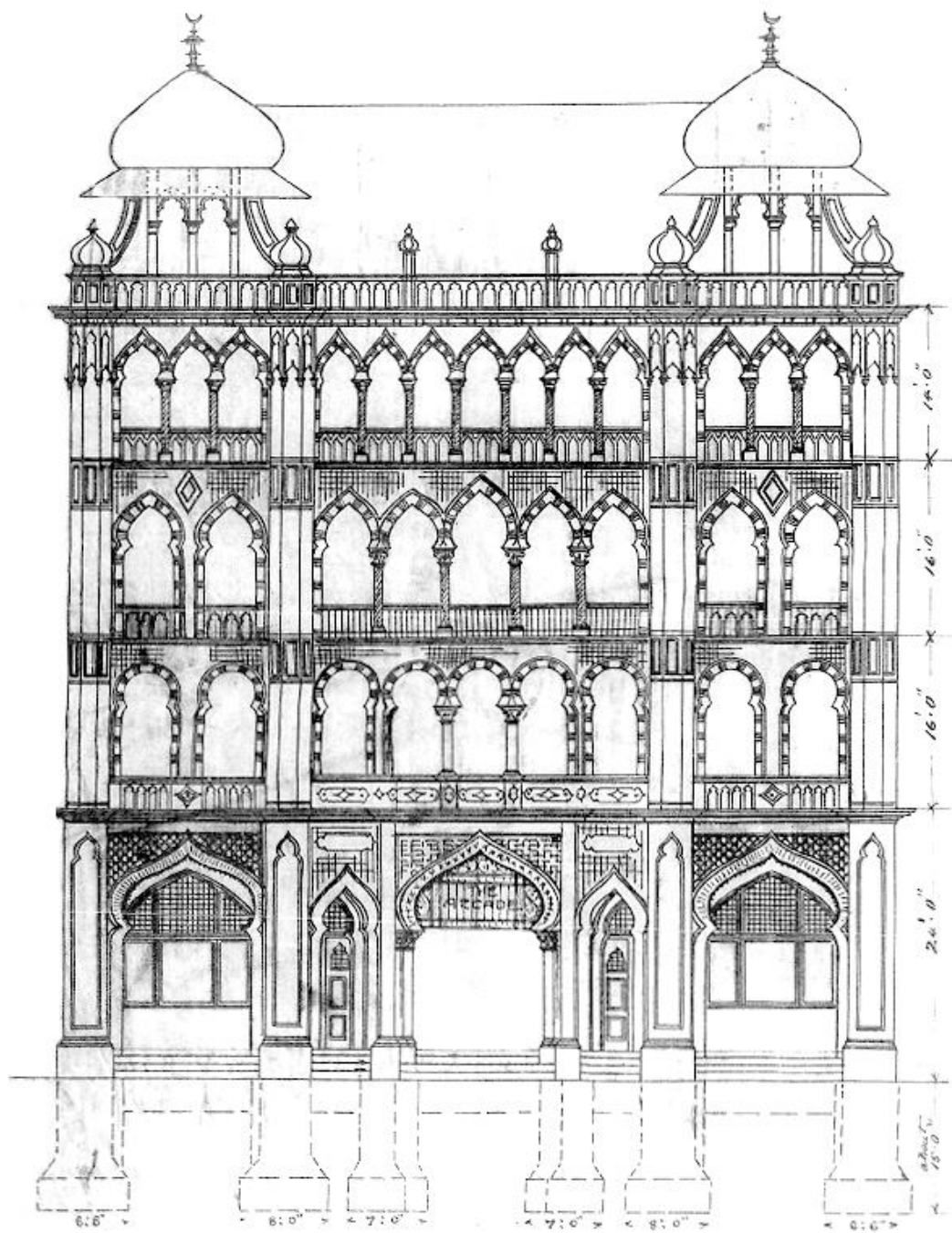
⁸³¹ Stephanie Po-yin Chung, 'Transcending Borders: The Story of the Arab Community in Singapore, 1820s-1980s', *Merchant Communities in Asia, 1600-1980*, edited by Lin Yu-ju and Madeleine Zelin (London: Routledge, 2015), 111-12.

⁸³² *Ibid.* See also: Savage and Yeoh, *Singapore Street Names*, 15-16; and Imam Subchi, 'The History of Hadrami Arabic Community Development in Southeast Asia', *Epistémé* 14.2 (2019): 241.

⁸³³ Chung, 'Transcending Borders', 112.

⁸³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸³⁵ 'Alkaff Arcade', *Straits Times*, 27 November 1909, 7.



ELEVATION OF COLLYER QUAY

Figure 59. David McLeod Craik. Alkaff Arcade, 1908. NAS CBS 126, Building Plan 9186.

Of the numerous large buildings, public and otherwise, which have lately been erected in Singapore, the Alkaff Arcade is possibly the most unique... [The Arcade] is in itself a credit to the business enterprise of Messrs. Alkaff and Co., the owners of the property, and to the skill of Mr. McLeod Craik, the architect who was responsible for designing the building... The façade on Collyer Quay is a strikingly handsome combination of ornamental pillars with a free use of coloured tiles in intervening spaces, and the whole effect is heightened by the presence of an oriental type of dome at each corner of this face.⁸³⁶

A subsequent article also noted that the Alkaff Arcade 'broke the monotony of design in Singapore and combined utility with beauty in a very gratifying degree'.⁸³⁷ The use of the consciously exoticising Indo-Saracenic perhaps speaks to a desire on the part of a later generation of Alkaffs to express their cultural origins where earlier members of the family sought to blend in with the existing trading houses of Raffles Place.

As with the China Building, the Alkaff Arcade's overtly exoticising quality can be read as 'intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding'.⁸³⁸ The Indo-Saracenic style of the Alkaff Arcade distinguished it from the otherwise classical promenade of Collyer Quay, jarring with the other buildings which were intended to 'harmonise' with one another.⁸³⁹ Where the other landmarks of Collyer Quay tied Singapore's waterfront into broader patterns of urban development in the British Empire's other maritime centres, the Alkaff Arcade hints at ties to different networks of trade, leading ultimately to Hadhramaut. The strident exoticism of the building, set between the Neoclassical pomp of its neighbours, can be read as an architectural advertisement of the Alkaff family's spice trading links to the Dutch East Indies, India, and Yemen. The building's early tenants included the Standard Oil Company of New York and the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company.⁸⁴⁰ With the notable exception of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank branch in Sungei Petani, Kedah, the Indo-Saracenic style would not be adopted for other prominent commercial or financial

⁸³⁶ 'Alkaff Arcade', *Straits Times*, 27 November 1909, 7.

⁸³⁷ 'The Alkaff Arcade', *Straits Times*, 29 November 1909, 7.

⁸³⁸ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 35.

⁸³⁹ 'Singapore Development', *Straits Times*, 23 January 1924, 12.

⁸⁴⁰ 'Alkaff Arcade', *Straits Times*, 27 November 1909, 7.

buildings in Malaya, even in Kuala Lumpur, where the style was used as the architectural language of government.

Both the China Building and the Alkaff Arcade are thus the exceptions which prove the rule. Classicism, in either the Edwardian Baroque or the Beaux Arts mode, remained the dominant architectural language for commercial and financial buildings in Malaya until the advent of the Second World War. Indeed, the stylistic consistency of these financial buildings, and the infrastructure of trade in the form of godowns and warehouses, from the southernmost financial hub of Malaya in Singapore up to the mining towns of the north, demonstrate how universally accepted classicism was as the architectural language of trade and commerce. The architectural language of these buildings, much like the maritime trade which they facilitated, was an international endeavour.

Conclusion

Malaya's commercial buildings, from its grandest banking halls to its simplest godowns, grew out of its place within the British Empire. Developing in response to and in service of imperial trade, these buildings were tangible manifestations of the growing flows of cash and commodities in and out of the Malayan Peninsula via the entrepôts on the neighbouring islands of Singapore and Penang. In their use of the classical language, these commercial buildings also reflect the movement of architects as well as ideas across the same maritime networks through which tin, rubber, and spices flowed from Malaya to the rest of the British Empire. Classicism was thus used to convey cultural and commercial connections. The architects of Malaya's major commercial buildings drew on a shared imperial language, echoing architectural developments in other ports across the British Empire and its concessions in East Asia. In doing so, the ports of British Malaya were integrated, both visually and symbolically, to the Empire's vast maritime trade networks. As with governmental buildings, which communicated British colonial authority in the Straits, the financial buildings of British Malaya were a reflection of both local industry and the wealth generated by the Empire's maritime trade.

While classicism was thus adopted as an imperial language by the banks and trading houses of the British Empire, it also found local manifestations in Asian-owned institutions. Through syncretism, classicism could also be used to communicate other cultural affiliations, and Malaya's diverse mercantile communities variously adopted, adapted, or rejected classicism to articulate their difference within colonial society. The China Building, constructed for a group of Straits Chinese banks, demonstrates one way in which a community like the Straits Chinese could appropriate this architectural language by way of hybridisation and creolisation. The resulting architectural language, like the contact languages spoken by the Straits Chinese, reflect an assimilation of Western vocabulary alongside Asian ornamental language. The complete rejection of classicism, though rare in Malaya's port cities, could also be used to articulate difference. This can be seen in the ornately orientalisising façade of the Alkaff Arcade, which hinted at the Hadhrami Arab origins of the Alkaff family, and its ties to the spice trade in India and the Dutch East Indies. By and large, however, by the 1930s, the ports of British Malaya were ornamented with grand, classicising seafronts, which sought to position these ports in terms of architectural stature in relation to the rest of the British Empire. If the British Empire imagined itself as 'an Empire of trade in the Eastern seas',⁸⁴¹ then the architecture of its banks and trading companies in its Asian colonies such as the Straits Settlements was an articulation of this imperial vision. This vision of Empire was constructed through an imperial language, the classical language of architecture.

⁸⁴¹ Ronald Hyam, 'British Imperial Expansion in the Late Eighteenth Century', *The Historical Journal* 10.1 (1967): 119.

Chapter VII. Decline and Fall? The Supreme Court, Empress Place, and the Kallang Aerodrome

As the skeletal steel frame of Frank Dorrington Ward's Supreme Court was rising over the Singapore River, another building by the same architect was also being erected to the city's east. The Kallang Aerodrome, Singapore's first civil airport, welcomed its maiden landing in 1937. With its expanses of glass and futuristic design – which some commentators likened to an aeroplane – the building seemed to herald a new age in Malayan architecture. While the ancient goddess Justitia presided over the tympanum of the Supreme Court, the dome-less glass drum of the Kallang Aerodrome's viewing tower represented an altogether new type of temple, one consecrated to modernity and technology. The parallel construction of these two buildings (which are, at first glance, diametrically opposed in terms of style) also demonstrates how attempts to establish a clear stylistic chronology of Malayan architecture are ultimately limited in their utility. Moreover, the lines between the classical and the modern in 1930s Malaya were less clear-cut than initial appearances might suggest. As shall be seen in this chapter, the two buildings shared more than an architect, and in their own distinct ways, the two buildings reflected a fusion of classical principles and modern technology. Upon completion, however, Ward's two major works of the 1930s would receive starkly different receptions in the local press, reflecting the rapidly shifting attitudes towards imperial classicism in Malaya in the years leading up to the Second World War.

Lauded by officials at its opening as the 'finest building in the Peninsula',⁸⁴² the Supreme Court drew on imperial precedents to provide an imposing symbol of British judicial authority. With its austere yet grand classicism, the building linked Singapore with architectural developments in other parts of the British Empire during the 1930s, from Bombay to Brisbane to Bloemfontein. With its clear allusions to both St Paul's Cathedral and the Old Bailey in London, the building was a direct symbol of British power in Malaya. Upon completion, however, the building was subject to an unprecedented attack by critics in the press, decried by a number of writers in the local newspapers for its stark, utilitarian façade and apparently superfluous dome. The critical backlash to the building would radically

⁸⁴² 'The Finest Building in the Peninsula', *Straits Times*, 2 August 1939, 2.

reshape the practice of public architecture in Singapore. The colonial government's plans to enclose the Padang, the symbolic heart of British authority in the Straits Settlements, with a grand ensemble of new administrative buildings in the classical style, would be questioned and ultimately shelved.

Contrary to initial appearances, however, Ward's courthouse and airport are not diametric opposites. With its central viewing tower flanked by symmetrical wings, the Kallang Aerodrome's composition is very much influenced by classical principles; indeed, its principal elevation can be read as a streamlined version of the Supreme Court. Nor is the Supreme Court purely a product of Graeco-Roman imagining. While the design of the Supreme Court self-consciously evokes antiquity with its Corinthian columns and grand pedimented portico, the building also made considerable use of modern technologies, including an extensive steel frame, synthetic stone, rubber tiles, and a sophisticated ventilation system. Many of these innovative materials and technologies were also used in the Kallang Aerodrome, which for all its apparent modernity still featured classical ornamental detailing, albeit in a restrained, stylised form. Ward's Supreme Court and Aerodrome thus reflect the ambiguous, blurred relationship between classicism and modernity in the 1930s, and reveal both points of confluence and disjuncture between the two seemingly disparate styles. The two buildings show how the imperial classicism of the British Empire was evolving to the tastes and needs of a new era.

This chapter will chronicle the increasing ambivalence to imperial classicism for public architecture in British Malaya in the late 1930s, using the work of the Public Works Department architect Frank Dorrington Ward in Singapore as a case study. Specifically, the Supreme Court of Singapore (constructed 1936-39), Ward's unrealised plans for redesigning the Singapore civic district around the Padang (drawn up in 1934, with a revised version exhibited in 1939), and his modernist design for the Kallang Aerodrome (constructed 1931-37) will be used to illustrate Malaya's crisis of classicism, which unfolded in tandem with the rising popularity of the modernist idiom in architecture. Ward's work during the 1930s, which spanned the stylistic gamut from severe Neoclassicism to bold Modernism, exemplifies the complexities and contradictions of public architecture in this period. Building plans and contemporary newspaper coverage will be used to trace the varied responses to this ensemble of buildings.

Monuments in Translation

Ward's grand building was designed to replace the former Supreme Court, which had been housed in the residence designed by the Irish architect George Doumgold Coleman for the Scottish merchant John Argyle Maxwell.⁸⁴³ Constructed between 1826 and 1827, the building never served as a residence, becoming a courthouse and eventually the Supreme Court in 1875.⁸⁴⁴ Coleman's building was soon deemed inadequate for this role, however, and was expanded by various architects including John Frederick Adolphus McNair through a series of accretions in 1875, 1901, and 1909. The extensive renovation of 1901 is evidenced in reports put to the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements. In 1899, the Legislative Council received 'correspondence regarding the unsatisfactory accommodation in the Supreme Court Buildings',⁸⁴⁵ which was followed in 1900 by a 'despatch regarding additional Accommodation for the Supreme Court, Singapore'.⁸⁴⁶ Despite these expansions and renovations, by the 1930s, Coleman's now unrecognisable building was no longer seen as sufficient for housing the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements.

The new Supreme Court was part of a larger programme to rebuild much of Singapore's civic core. Writing in 1921, Makepeace, Brooke and Braddell noted that

Singapore has, in the hundredth year of its existence, neither a Town Hall nor proper Municipal Offices... The Municipal Offices were in the old Town Hall till 1893, when they were moved to Finlayson Green, to the building now occupied by the Borneo Company. There they remained till 1900, when the present magnificent site was purchased for \$300,000; but the magnificent offices to correspond remain still to be built.⁸⁴⁷

⁸⁴³ Liu, *In Granite and Chunam*, 3.

⁸⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁸⁴⁵ 'Correspondence regarding the unsatisfactory accommodation in the Supreme Court Buildings', *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements*, 1899, C525, NAS NL 1114.

⁸⁴⁶ 'Despatch regarding additional Accommodation for the Supreme Court, Singapore', *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements*, 1900, C106, NAS NL1114.

⁸⁴⁷ Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke, and Roland St. J. Braddell (Eds.), *One Hundred Years of Singapore, Volume One* (Singapore: Oxford University Press 1991), 334-5.

This situation was finally addressed by the colonial government in the late 1920s. In 1927, plans for the new Municipal Building were drawn up by the Municipal Architect Alexander Gordon,⁸⁴⁸ and the building was completed in 1929.⁸⁴⁹ By 1930, plans were being drawn up for a government complex, including the new Supreme Court, to be built at Empress Place.⁸⁵⁰ The possible demolition of the Edwardian Baroque Victoria Memorial Hall was floated as a possibility, though critics of the plan suggested that tearing down such a recent and expensive building would be a waste of Municipal resources.⁸⁵¹ In 1931, a Commission was appointed by the Governor to 'inquire and report as to the steps to be taken for the design of a civic centre for Singapore.'⁸⁵² The committee included representatives from various bodies, including the Honourable Mr. W.A. Fell from the Singapore Chamber of Commerce.⁸⁵³ A Public Works Department official quoted by the *Straits Times* noted that the 'trouble' with plans for the civic centre were that 'some wanted the existing buildings in Empress Place rebuilt in one place and others in another.'⁸⁵⁴

On 14 April 1934, the Government acquired the site of the Europe Hotel, immediately adjacent to the new Municipal Buildings through a Gazette Extraordinary, in a move characterised by the *Straits Times* as being 'surrounded by extraordinary secrecy'.⁸⁵⁵ The architectural firm Swan & Maclaren were in the process of demolishing the old Hotel Europe in order to construct a new block of flats, and the government's move to acquire the site caused some consternation, with at least one critic suggesting that it was an unnecessary governmental expense.⁸⁵⁶ Newspaper reports from 1934 suggest that the government was not yet clear about whether the site would be used to build the Supreme Court. In April, the *Straits Times* quoted a PWD worker as saying the site was 'where the government wish to

⁸⁴⁸ Alexander Gordon FRIBA (b. 1893, d. 1931) was born in Aberdeen and educated at the Robert Gordon Technical College and the University of Aberdeen. He worked as the Borough Surveyor of Aberdeen before moving to Singapore to join the Municipal Architect's Department in 1923. He died suddenly, while sailing back to Singapore from Colombo. See: 'Municipality's Loss', *Malaya Tribune*, 30 April 1931, 8. See also: 'Loss to Singapore Municipality', *Straits Times*, 30 April 1931, 12.

⁸⁴⁹ 'Formal Opening of the New Municipal Offices', *Malayan Saturday Post*, 27 July 1929, 24.

⁸⁵⁰ 'Singapore's £8,500,000 Plan For New Civic Centre', *Straits Times*, 11 August 1935, 12.

⁸⁵¹ 'The Memorial Hall's Fate', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 7 November 1930, 10.

⁸⁵² 'Singapore's £8,500,000 Plan For New Civic Centre'.

⁸⁵³ Singapore Chamber of Commerce, *The Singapore Chamber of Commerce Report for the Year 1930* (Singapore: Printers, Limited, 1931), 12.

⁸⁵⁴ 'Singapore's £8,500,000 Plan For New Civic Centre'.

⁸⁵⁵ 'Government to Acquire Europe Hotel Site', *Straits Times*, 15 April 1934, 12.

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid.* See also: 'Europe Hotel Site', *Malaya Tribune*, 7 July 1934, 15.

build the new Supreme Court',⁸⁵⁷ but in September, they suggested that the site may be slated for another building, as the government had already drawn up plans for the Supreme Court prior to acquiring the site.⁸⁵⁸

This timeline in these newspaper reports is questionable, however, as plans dating from April 1934 in the former Colonial Office collection at the National Archives of the United Kingdom show, Ward was already drawing up plans for both the Supreme Court at the Hotel Europe site and new Government Offices next door at Empress Place by that date.⁸⁵⁹ The colonial government was therefore seriously exploring the option of acquiring the site for future expansion. Moreover, a perspective drawing printed in the *Straits Times* on 11 August 1935 suggests that the design process had progressed considerably by that stage, and mentioned rumours that 'six different plans' had been drawn up for the new civic centre, including the Supreme Court.⁸⁶⁰ Ward prepared a series of at least eight preliminary designs for the Supreme Court, all of which featured a central dome but ranged in stylistic treatment from Beaux-Arts to Neoclassical.⁸⁶¹ The drawing reproduced in the article of 11 August 1935 suggests that the design which was finally built was already the preferred scheme by that date, and plans had moved on significantly from the drawings produced just a year earlier.

As noted by the architectural historian Chang Jiat-Hwee, the Supreme Court was being built as part of a large-scale programme of improvement for Singapore's infrastructure which was simultaneously 'injecting symbolic capital into the built environment of colonial Singapore as a reflection of its rising wealth and increasing importance as a trading centre.'⁸⁶² Ward's courthouse would achieve this by continuing the rhythm set by the colonnade of the Municipal Building Gordon had designed a decade earlier:

Domed, and in its interior, fashioned on the style of London's Central Criminal Court, the Old Bailey, the new building will have four courts, a big library and dozens

⁸⁵⁷ 'Government to Acquire Europe Hotel Site'.

⁸⁵⁸ 'Europe Hotel Site: May Not Be Used for Supreme Court', *Straits Times*, 19 September 1934, 13.

⁸⁵⁹ Frank Dorrington Ward, 'Supreme Court: New Building', April 1934, Colonial Office Correspondence [Straits Settlements], NAUK CO 273/599/1.

⁸⁶⁰ 'Singapore's £8,500,000 Plan For New Civic Centre'.

⁸⁶¹ Liu, *In Granite and Chunam*, 76-7.

⁸⁶² Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 119.

of offices... The exterior architecture will be in sympathy with the adjacent Municipal Building except that it will be taller. A feature of the façade will be the Ionic colonnades, of the style seen on the Municipal Building [sic], leading to a Corinthian colonnade at the main entrance.⁸⁶³

While the interior spaces may have been inspired by the Old Bailey, the exterior of the Supreme Court in Singapore was modelled on another London landmark. The final design featured a principal dome based on that of St Paul's Cathedral in London, with a smaller subsidiary dome to the rear over the Supreme Court's library.⁸⁶⁴

The use of St Paul's as architectural inspiration was not unprecedented in the British Empire. Influential British buildings were paraphrased, translated, and reproduced in various forms across the globe as symbols of the Empire. This practice was not limited to Britain's colonies. When Edwin Lutyens was called upon to design a permanent structure for the British School at Rome on the site of the British Pavilion at the Rome International Exhibition of 1911, he reproduced part of St Paul's Cathedral in London. The reference to Sir Christopher's Wren's design was, according to Lutyens, a condition imposed by the Board of Trade who commissioned the building.⁸⁶⁵ Lutyens's façade was not, however, a direct facsimile of Wren's design, but a paraphrase of Wren's classical idiom. Indeed, in a letter to the English architect Herbert Baker, Lutyens wrote

The building was a copy, i.e. an adaptation from the upper floor of St Paul's... They all think it like St Paul's but it isn't a bit, and that's where the fun, for me, came in.... I think it takes more architectural technique to do this and make every other part fit in with the design of an undoubted master like Wren. The cornice, columns, etc. were altered – the portico and pediment etc... To the lay mind a copy is good enough.

⁸⁶³ In fact, the Municipal Building features a giant Corinthian order, which is echoed by the portico of the Supreme Court. See: 'Uniteers Get New Supreme Court Contract', *Straits Times*, 19 January 1937, 12.

⁸⁶⁴ Frank Dorrington Ward, 'New Supreme Court', 1935, Public Works Department Collection, NAS.

⁸⁶⁵ David Crellin, "'When in Rome'": Lutyens's architectural translations of Wren and Sanmicheli', *Lutyens Abroad: The Work of Sir Edwin Lutyens outside the British Isles*, edited by Andrew Hopkins and Gavin Stamp (London: The British School at Rome, 2002), 57.

Not to an architect, except some tradesman – it means a very great deal of thought, insight and knowledge.⁸⁶⁶

A sophisticated understanding of the classical orders was thus a point of pride for Lutyens. Lutyens based his design for the British School at Rome on the upper storey of the cathedral's west front, but chose to adapt the Corinthian order from the cathedral's interior rather than exterior to better suit the proportions afforded by his site in Rome.⁸⁶⁷ The architect also made adjustments to the design of the cornice, added bays to the front elevation, simplified ornamental details, and borrowed the design of the doorways from the cathedral's lower portico to provide a suitably grand entrance for the school.⁸⁶⁸ The result was an erudite translation of an iconic British monument that responded to the classical legacy of ancient Rome and the school's Roman site, while also presenting a recognisably British iteration of classicism. As a proud and imposing symbol of the nation abroad, the British School at Rome was an imperial statement piece, even if it was not situated in a British colony.

Wren's cathedral was a building vested with deep symbolic meaning and was regarded as an appropriate architectural representation of Britain abroad. This was as true in Singapore as it was in Rome. St Paul's Cathedral provided one of the major influences for the design of the Supreme Court in Singapore. Just as Lutyens did not build an exact copy of Wren's design in Rome, the Supreme Court's architect, Frank Dorrington Ward, paraphrased Wren's design. Where Lutyens drew on the cathedral's portico, Ward drew on its dome, presenting Wren's design in an abridged form. The rhythm of Wren's dome is established by a repeated series of four Corinthian columns set in antis between niched walls. In the Singapore Supreme Court, the dome has two columns set in antis between the niched walls. The court's lantern is also less ornamentally rich than that of the cathedral, presenting an abridged version of the English landmark. Despite these differences, the references to Wren's cathedral would have been clearly legible to contemporary audiences. The building's dome was a symbol of Empire, a concise statement equating Britain with justice. This was made explicit by Governor Sir Shenton Thomas at the building's opening on 3 August 1939:

⁸⁶⁶ Cited in Crellin, "“When in Rome”: Lutyens's architectural translations", 57.

⁸⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

In these days of difficulty and trial, it is well to bear in mind that the British Empire is founded on the principles of truth and justice and is the greatest instrument for civilisation the world has ever seen. And, as this great building symbolical of these ideals has risen slowly and steadily during the years of storm and stress, and now stands serene and ready, so too in these years the British Empire has gathered itself together and stands united, resolute, and strong to defend its faith.⁸⁶⁹

A more direct classical allusion was made by Chief Justice Sir Percy McElwaine, who described Ward's Supreme Court as 'one of the noblest Temples of Justice in His Majesty's Dominions.'⁸⁷⁰ Richly draped in classical imagery, the Supreme Court in Singapore was a grandiose statement in the classicising mode of high imperialism. Yet it was also a thoroughly modern building, at least in terms of its construction and materiality.

Stylistically, the building was in keeping with the bulk of British public architecture of the 1920s and 1930s. As David Watkin notes in his history of English architecture, 'traditionalism was the norm in architecture until the 1940s'.⁸⁷¹ Architects such as Herbert Baker, Edwin Cooper, Albert Richardson, Reginald Blomfield, and Edwin Lutyens were all strong proponents of the severe, muscular classicism which typified public architecture after the exuberance and excess of the Edwardian Baroque had subsided. While architectural Modernism was introduced to Britain in the 1920s, the modern movement would only gain widespread traction after the Second World War.⁸⁷² The Supreme Court in Singapore was part of a wider tendency in imperial classicism, and can be read alongside similarly sober modern classical buildings of the 1920s in both the imperial metropole and abroad.

In London, buildings such as Herbert Baker's South Africa House (completed 1933), Edwin Lutyens' Britannic House (1927), and Ralph Knott's County Hall (completed 1922, with further additions made in 1936), exemplify this tendency towards a more abstract form of classicism in large-scale buildings. This trend was evident in Britain's colonies too; the

⁸⁶⁹ Quoted in 'New Supreme Court Symbol of Empire—H.E. The Governor', *Malaya Tribune*, 4 August 1939, 15. See also: 'Dignified Pageantry at Opening of New Supreme Court', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 4 August 1939, 9.

⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷¹ Watkin, *English Architecture*, 190.

⁸⁷² *Ibid.*, 192-5.

Brisbane City Hall (opened 1930) designed by Hall and Prentice, and Herbert Baker's work in South Africa reflect this shift towards a less ornamental form of classicism. A more idiosyncratic, locally-inflected version of this can also be read in Lutyens' work in Delhi – particularly in his design for the Viceroy's House (completed 1929), which incorporated Indian architectural motifs to create an elegant, even austere form of hybrid classicism. The use of a steel frame for an otherwise conservative design also recalls Thomas Cecil Howitt's domed Nottingham Council House, constructed between 1927 and 1929. The Supreme Court of Singapore was thus in many ways a typical colonial classical building of the 1930s, reflecting the tendency of public works department architects across the British Empire to drape the institutional buildings they designed during this decade in a simplified toga.

Imperial Monuments, Colonial Labour

According to Gretchen Liu, the design of the Supreme Court in Singapore was an 'amalgamation of British architectural themes.'⁸⁷³ Yet this very 'British' building was the product of Asian manual labour as much as it was British design, a concrete embodiment of the relationship between coloniser and colonised. As argued by Preeti Chopra 'the production of buildings' in the colonial context was a 'collaborative effort' and thus a contact zone.⁸⁷⁴ By the early twentieth century, Chinese labour was viewed as essential to the functioning of the Malayan economy.⁸⁷⁵ This included the construction industry, in which migrants from southern China played a crucial role. While government records do not offer detailed accounts of the labourers who built the Supreme Court, visual sources provide a number of insights into the workforce who would shape Malaya's last major colonial monument.

Photographs drawn from the newspaper coverage of the Supreme Court's construction reveal that Chinese coolies, including a number of women labourers, were responsible for

⁸⁷³ Liu, *In Granite and Chunam*, 76-7.

⁸⁷⁴ Chopra, 'South and Southeast Asia', 279.

⁸⁷⁵ 'Chinese Labour in British Malaya', 18.

the building works undertaken there.⁸⁷⁶ From their distinctive headdresses, the women in these photographs are identifiable as so-called ‘Samsui women’, the name given to the Cantonese migrant labourers from around Samsui Village in Canton Province who came to Malaya in large numbers in the early twentieth century.⁸⁷⁷ These women were generally employed on contracts that spanned anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, depending on the scope of the works required.⁸⁷⁸ The images in the *Straits Times* show Samsui women working with hammers in hand.⁸⁷⁹ One image depicts a group of Samsui women seated on the floor of the Supreme Court, a caption noting that these women ‘eat their lunch in corners where judges, members of the bar, litigants and witnesses will walk.’⁸⁸⁰ Another image depicts ‘Chinese women coolies’ in conical hats carrying buckets on bamboo poles, ‘methodically jog-trot[ting] along the superstructure of the new Supreme Court building against a cloud-flecked sky.’⁸⁸¹

These women builders were not ‘hidden hands’ in the strictest sense,⁸⁸² with evidence of their labour published in the local papers. They were, however, silenced hands, as the women depicted in these images were not given a voice on those same pages. Instead, their images in the colonial press were romanticised and exoticised, the presence of their labour juxtaposed against the building’s future use. How these women might have received the grand classicism of the building they toiled on is not recorded for posterity, in stark contrast to the extensive commentary from Singapore’s Anglophone community which would consume many column inches upon the building’s completion. It must be assumed, however, that their reading of the space would have been different from those of the British lawyers and judiciary for whom the building was constructed. The Supreme Court was a product of the contact zone, and thus ‘heterogeneous on the reception end as well as the production end... read very differently to people in different positions in the contact zone.’⁸⁸³ As Vasunia

⁸⁷⁶ ‘Singapore’s New Supreme Court’, *Straits Times*, 31 July 1938, 32; ‘Opening Expected in August’, *Straits Times*, 19 March 1939, 32.

⁸⁷⁷ See: Kelvin E.Y. Low, *Remembering the Samsui Women: Migration and Social Memory in Singapore and China* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015), 60-1.

⁸⁷⁸ Kelvin E.Y. Low, ‘Chinese Migration and Entangled Histories: Broadening the Contours of Migratory Historiography’, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 27.1 (2014): 78.

⁸⁷⁹ ‘Opening Expected in August’.

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸¹ ‘Singapore’s New Supreme Court’.

⁸⁸² Pieris, *Hidden Hands, Divided Landscapes*, 95.

⁸⁸³ Pratt, ‘Arts of the Contact Zone’, 36-7.

notes in his study of classicism in India, the ‘feelings, responses, and hard labour of those who actually made the buildings under British rule’ have not been sufficiently analysed.⁸⁸⁴

Photographs from the personal collection of Rodolfo Nolli, who was responsible for the sculptural programme of the Supreme Court, also show that Chinese labourers were responsible for sculpting of the building’s monumental column capitals.⁸⁸⁵ In one photograph, Chinese labourers sit in an up-turned Ionic capital, while in another, Nolli himself sits with European co-workers in a similar position.⁸⁸⁶ While the construction of the Supreme Court did not rely on penal labour in the same way the buildings of nineteenth-century Singapore works had,⁸⁸⁷ the construction of this imperial monument was still reliant on a migrant workforce whose names, unlike those of the British architect and European sculptor, are unknown to us. Chinese coolies would be commemorated in a single bas-relief panel designed by George Thomas Squires on the building’s porte-cochère.⁸⁸⁸ This panel appears alongside depictions of Indian rubber tappers and Malay fishermen.⁸⁸⁹ This decorative programme reflects colonial hierarchies as well as racial divisions. These stylised Asian figures are consigned to the ground-floor frieze, while European gods in a more naturalistic style sculpted by Nolli occupy the central tympanum above. The Asian women who walked across the building’s steel frame to construct it are not immortalised in its sculptural iconography. The Supreme Court was thus the ornamentalist monument *par excellence*, one in which imperial hierarchies were rendered ‘visible, immanent, and actual.’⁸⁹⁰

⁸⁸⁴ Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India*, 190.

⁸⁸⁵ See: Liu, *In Granite and Chunam*, 73.

⁸⁸⁶ ‘Group Photograph of Italian Sculptor Rodolfo Nolli with His Co-Workers at His Stoneyard in Singapore’, 1930. Lina Brunner Collection, NAS accession no. 144690.

⁸⁸⁷ See: Pieris, *Hidden Hands, Divided Landscapes*, 78-87.

⁸⁸⁸ Jean Wee and Foo Min Li, ‘History and Architecture’, in *Connections: History and Architecture, City Hall and Supreme Court* (Singapore: Preservation of Sites and Monuments Division, National Heritage Board, 2016), 32.

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹⁰ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 122.

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]

*Figure 60. Photograph of the sculptor Rodolfo Nolli and his workers in Singapore, 1930.
Lina Brunner Collection, NAS 144669.*

Modernity in Antiquity: The Materiality of the Supreme Court

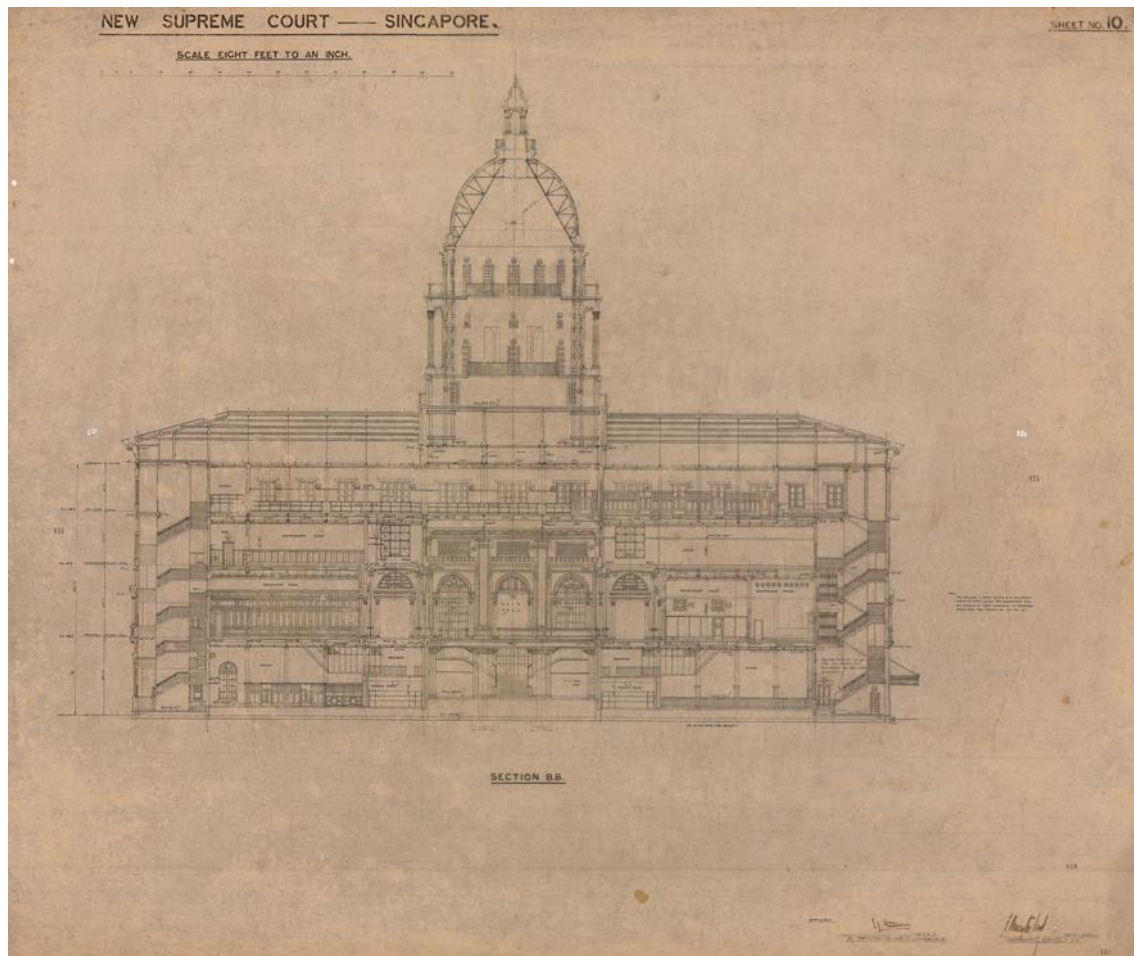


Figure 61. Frank Dorrington Ward. Section drawing for the New Supreme Court, Singapore, 1935. NAS PWD Collection.

Despite its resolutely classical appearance, the Singapore Supreme Court realised through modern construction methods and innovative building materials.⁸⁹¹ Newspaper articles and advertisements taken out by the building's suppliers and contractors around the time of its completion in 1939 provide an important source for understanding the materiality of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court consists of a steel frame clad with artificial stone. Some 2232 tonnes of structural steel fabricated by Redpath Brown & Co. were used in the construction of the building.⁸⁹² This included the steel used for the main dome, which

⁸⁹¹ Yeo, 'Innovative Cement Derivative Products', 30.

⁸⁹² '2232 Tons of Structural Steel Supplied and Fabricated by Redpath Brown & Co., Ltd.', *Malaya Tribune*, 2 August 1939, 1.

comprised a steel lattice and ribs which rested upon a steel platform.⁸⁹³ According to an article in the *Straits Times* on 2 July 1937, delivery of this steel – which was manufactured in Britain – was delayed ‘owing to Britain’s colossal rearmament programme and the world scarcity of the metal.’⁸⁹⁴

A thoroughly modern material, steel was not seen as antithetical to classicism in the early twentieth century. As noted by the art historian John Wilton-Ely, the work of firms such as McKim, Mead & White in the United States ‘was seen as confirming the vital modernity of classicism and the compatibility of its aesthetic principles with steel-framed structures.’⁸⁹⁵ Indeed, from the late eighteenth century, classicists had been experimenting with modern materials and construction techniques – marrying the technological developments of the industrial revolution with the design principles of classical antiquity. A notable example of this phenomenon is the church of Sainte-Geneviève (built 1757-1789) in Paris by Jacques-Germain Soufflot (1713-1780), which used a complex experimental system of iron rods to reinforce the building’s vaulted masonry structure.⁸⁹⁶

Other modern materials included Pilkington’s plate glass and mirrors, imported by the prominent plantation and import firm Guthrie & Co.,⁸⁹⁷ and ‘Eldorado’ cork panelling manufactured by the Cork Insulation Company Ltd. in England, which was used in courtrooms.⁸⁹⁸ This was installed by Solo Air-Engineering Co., Ltd., who were also responsible for the innovative ventilation system of the Supreme Court, and was intended to address the ‘notoriously poor acoustics of the old Supreme Court.’⁸⁹⁹ Singapore-made Cressonite rubber tiles, designed to imitate marble, were used for the flooring of all the main corridors and various rooms within the court.⁹⁰⁰ The use of rubber as a building material

⁸⁹³ ‘Supporting the Domes’, *Malaya Tribune*, 2 August 1939, 3.

⁸⁹⁴ ‘First Girders for Supreme Court’, *Straits Times*, 2 July 1937, 12.

⁸⁹⁵ John Wilton-Ely, ‘“A Vindication of Classical Principles”: Sir Albert Richardson (1880-1964)’, *The Persistence of the Classical: Essays on Architecture Presented to David Watkin*, edited by Frank Salmon (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2008), 166.

⁸⁹⁶ Barry Bergdoll, *European Architecture 1750-1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27.

⁸⁹⁷ ‘Pilkington’s Plate Glass and Plate Glass Mirrors’, *Malaya Tribune*, 2 August 1939, 3.

⁸⁹⁸ ‘Opening expected in August’. See also: Yeo, ‘Innovative Cement Derivative Products’, 30.

⁸⁹⁹ ‘Acoustics in New Court’, *Straits Times*, 2 August 1939, 3.

⁹⁰⁰ ‘Singapore-Made Rubber Tiles’, *Straits Times*, 2 August 1939, 7; and ‘Cressonite Rubber Tiles Manufactured by the Singapore Rubber Works Ltd.’, *Straits Times*, 2 August 1939, 6. See also: Yeo, ‘Innovative Cement Derivative Products’, 30.

reflected British attempts to stimulate Malaya's rubber industry by finding new uses for the material and increasing exports.⁹⁰¹ Imperial trade interests thus went hand-in-hand with the architecture of Empire in the Singapore Supreme Court and, as shall be seen below, at the Kallang Aerodrome. The rubber industry was also the theme of one of the bas-reliefs on the porte-cochère of the Supreme Court, along with images of Chinese coolies laying bricks under the supervision of European engineers, and scenes of fishermen in traditional boats.⁹⁰² This cornerstone of the Malayan economy thus informed both the choice of building materials and the decorative programme of the Supreme Court.

Synthetic stone and other cement-based products were another area where the Supreme Court made extensive use of modern materials. Also known as 'artificial granite', 'granolithic plaster', or by its popular name 'Shanghai plaster', this artificial stone treatment was composed of a mixture of 'cement-based binder, crushed stone aggregate, sand, and water.'⁹⁰³ The use of the term 'Shanghai plaster' in Southeast Asia is believed to have come about as a result of the predominantly Chinese craftsmen who came to the region, bringing with them experience in artificial stonework from the foreign concessions of Shanghai.⁹⁰⁴ The Supreme Court reflects improvements to this technology, seen in earlier buildings such as the General Post Office, as well as in the commercial buildings of Collyer Quay across the Singapore River. In the Supreme Court, mother-of-pearl chips were used in place of granite chips for interior finishes, resulting in finer, more lustrous surfaces.⁹⁰⁵ In addition to high-quality terrazzo, the Supreme Court also feature the use of an innovative proprietary material called 'Spuncrete', which was developed by the local company United Engineers Ltd.⁹⁰⁶ The timeless solidity of the Supreme Court, which from a distance appears to be made of granite, was thus a product of technological innovation. Despite its classical design, it was, in terms of materiality, every bit as modern as the fledgling skyscrapers of 1930s Singapore.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the Singapore Supreme Court's architecture was invisible. The building used a technologically advanced ventilation system to cool its court

⁹⁰¹ See: 'London Applauds Rubber Committee Wisdom', *Straits Times*, 2 August 1939, 7.

⁹⁰² Wee and Foo, 'History and Architecture', 32-3.

⁹⁰³ Yeo, 'Innovative Cement Derivative Products', 30.

⁹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 31. See also: Wee and Foo, 'History and Architecture', 31.

⁹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

rooms. The so-called ‘Solo-Air’ system, integrated with the building’s wooden furniture, allowed for mechanical ventilation of the building.⁹⁰⁷ This cutting-edge technology was an innovative solution to the problem of keeping ceremonially garbed magistrates cool in the intense tropical heat. This was explained in detail by an article in the *Straits Times* on 2 August 1939:

No chief justice in the Empire will be as well supplied with cool air as the Chief Justice, Straits Settlements, when he takes his seat at the Chief Justice’s bench in the new court. Under the Solo-Air system, two adjustable nozzles, or impingers, will spray air at him from the surface of the bench; there will be two air jets at his feet and one jet, directed downwards, above his head. The Solo-Air system has been installed in the four courts and attendant offices and a separate system has been installed in the library. Jets of air are placed at foot level along the barristers’ benches, while in the jury box, each juror has an independent nozzle which he can adjust himself.

Despite its classical design, the Supreme Court thus afforded the building’s users a level of individual comfort hitherto unimaginable as a result of technological advances. This new technology was, as the *Straits Times* explained, a local invention:

Invented by Mr. E.H. Hindmarsh, of Singapore, the system is marketed and installed by the Solo-Air Engineering Co., Ltd... When Solo-Air is installed at the time a building is erected, as in the case of the Supreme Court, the ducts are concealed in such places as table pillars and are completely invisible.

The system provides a cooling current of renewed air, filtered from dust, at atmospheric temperature. Its cost of installation is only slightly above that of installing a set of fans. No-body catches cold or pneumonia from Solo-Air.⁹⁰⁸

⁹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹⁰⁸ ‘Air for Judge, Jury, Barristers’, *Straits Times*, 2 August 1939, 4. See also: ‘System of Ventilation’, *Malaya Tribune*, 2 August 1939, 5.

This ventilation system was integrated into the teak furnishings of the Supreme Court, rendering these conveniences largely invisible – a modern convenience hidden by classical trimmings.⁹⁰⁹ Despite these considerable technological advancements, the Supreme Court's opening was not celebrated by all quarters. Indeed, the innovative aspects of the building would be largely ignored by critics, who singled out aspects of its classical design for condemnation.

Trial by Media: Critical Backlash to the Supreme Court in the Press

Upon completion, the building was afforded lavish praise by the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Thomas Shenton.

It is with special pleasure that I record the eminent services rendered by Mr F. Dorrington Ward... who designed this building and has superintended its construction. To my great regret, Mr Dorrington Ward is shortly leaving Malaya on retirement; and this, his last and greatest work, will stand as a memorial to his profession and as an inspiration to those who come after him.

This quiet, cool, and dignified building would be a credit to cities much larger than Singapore, and to the Public Works Department and all those who have had any share in its construction we offer our most hearty congratulations. It is through their competent and careful thought and engineering skill that we have a Supreme Court which conveys the purpose and tradition of the Law and embellishes our city. They may well be proud of their achievement.⁹¹⁰

In making colonial hierarchies visible, the building thus reflected the ornamentalist tendencies which Cannadine argued 'underpinned the spectacle of empire.'⁹¹¹ For one

⁹⁰⁹ 'Over Fifty Tons of Teak for New Supreme Court Furniture', *Sunday Tribune*, 2 July 1939, 13.

⁹¹⁰ Quoted in 'Dignified Pageantry at Opening of New Supreme Court'.

⁹¹¹ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 122.

journalist covering the Supreme Court's opening for the *Straits Times*, the building was 'the finest building in the Peninsula [sic]'.⁹¹²

The sanguine views of Sir Shenton and this journalist were not shared by other commentators. If the reception of the building by its Asian builders is lost to historical record, its reception within the English-speaking readership of the *Straits Times* was not. The Supreme Court was subject to an unprecedented level of critical backlash in the colonial press, from both named and unnamed letter writers. Richard Sidney, Secretary of the Asia Rotary Club International, and a prominent public figure in Singapore, provided extensive criticism of the Supreme Court in a series of letters to the editor of the *Straits Times*. The first of these letters was published on 15 May 1939, a little over a month after the building's opening, and expresses disappointment with the exterior proportions of the building:

Sir,—For a long time the new Supreme Court building has been giving the writer great pleasure... The dome has tremendously improved the Singapore sky-line, and also—I suspect—given our defence chiefs more of a headache, for from the air (especially when coming in from Java) the new dome is a striking landmark...

On closer inspection, however, there is palpable disappointment. The dome when seen from near the cricket club—surely its most fitting view point—is seen to be too top-heavy and far too big for its base... as it is, there is a feeling that there is too little *in front* [emphasis original] of the dome, that everything has been sacrificed for the sky-line effect and that nothing is left for the effect when the whole building is seen from near. (Much the same criticism applies to our General Post Office, the façade of which when seen from the harbour is much more satisfying than any near and detailed view of the Post Office).⁹¹³

The punning reference to the dome being 'striking landmark' hints at growing concerns about the war. Indeed, Sidney's letter ran in an edition of the *Straits Times* which also carried stories on the Axis powers and the potential for war,⁹¹⁴ Japan stationing workers on the

⁹¹² 'The Finest Building in the Peninsula'.

⁹¹³ 'The Dome. On the Singapore Sky-Line, *Straits Times*, 15 May 1939, 10.

⁹¹⁴ 'Towards Peace or War?', *Straits Times*, 15 May 1939, 11.

Spratley Islands following their annexation,⁹¹⁵ and a piece attempting to quell rumours of a run on gunny-bags ‘caused by residents who wish to convert them into sandbag shelters as an air raid precaution.’⁹¹⁶ For some commentators, the Supreme Court’s dome was thus an irresponsibly showy building – and potential target – constructed as the clouds of war gathered on the horizon.

On 8 June 1939, the *Straits Times* published another letter under the title ‘New Supreme Court. A Singapore Citizen Broods on the Esplanade—Colonnades and the Dome’.⁹¹⁷ This provided an extensive criticism of the classical style of the Supreme Court:

Sir,—There will, of course, be a large public to whom the latest effort of Government Architecture will prove in every way satisfactory. There always is, for a great deal of money has been spent. That will appeal to those who believe that the indiscriminating use of public funds for public buildings is an index of prosperity and culture...

Others may wonder what is the object of the colonnades on either side of the central position. One can imagine some inquisitive person, who has perhaps wandered in Greece or Sicily or Italy, questioning the advisability of flanking Corinthian with Ionic and inquiring from some wise guide whether the strange excrescences at either extremity are intended merely to fill up space or to indicate the Doric, so that the grateful taxpayer may know that Governmental Architecture is able and willing to avail itself of all the resources of the classic, all at the same time.

But why colonnades? What is their function apart from sheer beauty? To hold up a verandah, from which the elect may watch in comparative comfort the pageants which no longer take place on the Padang? And if we must have verandahs, why uphold them by useless and enormously expensive columns when they can exist just as easily without them?

⁹¹⁵ ‘300 Japanese Going to Spratley Islands’, *Straits Times*, 15 May 1939, 11.

⁹¹⁶ ‘Gunny Bags for A.R.P.?’ *Straits Times*, 15 May 1939, 13.

⁹¹⁷ ‘New Supreme Court. A Singapore Citizen Broods on the Esplanade—Colonnades and the Dome’, *Straits Times*, 8 June 1939, 15.

As to whether these verandahs should be in existence at all, I ask anyone who has sufficient interest in the matter to take the excellent photograph which was published recently in *The Sunday Times*, take also a brush and a pot of process-white and block out the verandahs and colonnades and watch a certain amount of character, which is at present entirely lacking, invest the façade.

To most architects a cornice is a much-longed-for opportunity for the display of boldness. What shall we say of this cornice, except that a building should have a cornice and that it has a cornice?

After criticising the Supreme Court's main portico, which 'extends the invitation to slink into some underground dive', the letter-writer's attention turned to the dome:

I have been trying to recall any other building in the world where the dome is perched in the very outer edge of the structure, instead of in the centre. I cannot think of a single one in Europe. Such things may exist in America, but is there any reason why they should be copied here? Or can it be that someone with modernistic tendencies has fallen victim to the charm of the smoke-stacks of the aircraft carriers which occasionally anchor in the outer roads?

The letter finishes with a quotation from Alexander Pope's 'Essay on Criticism', which the letter-writer uses to take another critical jab at the dome:

*Fired at first sight with what the Muse Imparts,
In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts,
... But more advanced, behold with strange surprise,
New distant scenes of endless science rise!*

(This last, I suggest, in particular reference to the criss-cross girders in the barrel of the dome).⁹¹⁸

⁹¹⁸ 'New Supreme Court. A Singapore Citizen Broods on the Esplanade'.

The classical vocabulary of the new Supreme Court, from the various orders to the prominent dome, thus became an object of ridicule.

The criticism of the dome's placement was rebutted in a letter to the Editor of the *Straits Times* signed by W.G.H. While the letter-writer defended the placement of the dome, however, his view of the building was not laudatory either:

The dome itself looks very impressive and has a dignified strength, but it is totally at variance with the rest of the building. The main frontal building gives the impression of a nineteenth-century English factory building, which has had the colonnades and balconies added in an attempt to make it impressive.

I do not pretend to be an architectural expert, nor to understand the conglomeration of styles that are incorporated in the new Supreme Court, but I would say that the skyline of Singapore's waterfront has not been improved by this latest effort of the Government Architect. And what a pity... when we think how much it cost, and what an artist could have done with such a wonderful opportunity!⁹¹⁹

W.G.H. received a response from a writer who signed only as X on 13 June 1939, which continued the attack on the Supreme Court:

Sir,—The explanation put forward by G.W.H. [sic] for not having the dome in the centre of the new Supreme Court building is, if I may say so, an over-powering reason for not having a dome at all, but is no excuse for putting one in the wrong place.

However impressive it may look from the outside, the existence of the criss-cross girders within entirely stultifies the idea of a dome. One has only to go into the cathedral in Florence or the mosque of Santa Sophia [sic] to realize that the function of a dome is, and how contrary to all reason it is, having built a dome, to obstruct a clear view of its interior... In my humble opinion, whatever impressiveness this dome may possess is largely vitiated by the presence of a series of unnecessary niches,

⁹¹⁹ 'Supreme Court and Cathay Cinema'.

unless, of course, it is believed that a niche in itself is an ornament: and further, unless it is intended to fill these niches with statues of local celebrities, the mere mention of which is sufficient to wreath our tropical countenances in smiles.

As for the Cathay Cinema, with all its faults it is less intolerable than the New Supreme Court. It may be suggestive of an enormous tall-boy with all the drawers pulled out, but there is no pretence about it. It looks what it is, a frank attempt to express the uglier side of industrialism... We should bear in mind that it is, at any rate, an effort to get away from nineteenth-century baroque, to conceal which no trees could ever grow high or thick enough.⁹²⁰

This view was echoed a few days later in a letter signed 'P.B.E.' and published in the *Straits Times* on 16 July 1939.⁹²¹ Like X, P.B.E. found the Cathay Cinema's Modernism commendable where the Supreme Court's classicism was not. Less than a month later, on 3 August 1939, the *Straits Times* published yet another letter from Richard Sidney. In his letter, Sidney continued his criticisms of the Supreme Court, moving this time from the building's exterior to its interior:

Sir,—Say what you will—it is a noble building, and one which Singapore citizens ("privileged" and "unprivileged" alike) are justly proud. The dome is a landmark, and has given a new dignity to the skyline, and if we have played for safety and stuck to a classical and renaissance style of architecture—in spite of all the new possibilities before architects today—it is perhaps better so: we might have done even worse had we tried too many tricks.

Inside too, as plenty of Singapore citizens now know, the new building has dignity and grace... But stay—did we not see a dome surmounting the building when we were outside? Have we lost it? We expected to find its interior when we came to the noble entrance, and then we forgot all about it as we explored the building, and now that we are reminded of the dome we begin to wonder where on earth it has got

⁹²⁰ 'The Dome and Cathay: One Critic Replies to Another', *Straits Times*, 13 June 1939, 12.

⁹²¹ 'Singapore in Transition', *Straits Times*, 16 June 1939, 10.

hidden. As a matter of fact, if you can find your way to the Bankruptcy Court, or to some of those other offices housed in the new Supreme Court, you may perceive a winding stair, and this will lead to the dome itself.

What a disappointment this will prove! For here the dome is obviously useless so far as the *interior* [emphasis original] of the building is concerned: it is a waste of space, and no inspiration to those who would look up from the ground floor and have the thrill that is theirs in such buildings as St. Peter's at Rome or St. Paul's in London.

After all, what is the reason for a dome nowadays? Surely that it may be an inspiring spectacle from outside, and that when we look up into the dome (when we are inside the building) we may have a similar thrill of inspiration? None of this is possible at the Supreme Court. The dome is a purely outside affair. It might have been built in a separate piece and then just stuck on the building as a piece of decoration.⁹²²

Sidney's letter goes on to explain the history of the dome from antiquity, before criticising the dome as a waste of public money:

Enough authority has been quoted, I think, to show that we have spent public money to no purpose except so far as the outside appearance of our dome is concerned.

What a pity! What an admirable effect might have been had we even obeyed the rules of the architecture whose form we were striving to carry out. Granted the difficulties. But why have a dome at all if we are only to use it for outside purposes?⁹²³

What is remarkable about these criticisms of the Supreme Court is that they were so extensive and so public. No other building in British Malaya had ever received this level of critical scrutiny in the press, or been the focus of such sustained debate.

These letters present the first published critique of classicism's legitimacy as the architectural language of Empire in the Straits Settlements. They thus mark a juncture in the history of

⁹²² 'Underneath the Dome'.

⁹²³ *Ibid.*

Malayan classicism. As Phiroze Vasunia argues in his study of classical reception in British India, '[t]o study the architecture of British India is to study the international dimensions of classicism as well as to grasp its implication in discourse of colonial rule.'⁹²⁴ Initially administered as part of British India, British Malaya inherited this architectural legacy. As has been demonstrated in the preceding chapters, the classical language of architecture had been established both as the visual language of colonial government in Malaya, but also as the de facto common language. The open critiques of the Supreme Court's neoclassical style were thus a critique of what colonial rule itself should look like. While stylistic debates over the appropriateness of classicism in place of an autochthonous tradition had gripped discussion of British Indian architecture from the nineteenth century,⁹²⁵ the discourse which emerged in the *Straits Times* following the Supreme Court's completion focused on the superfluosity of ornament.

In New Delhi, imperial architects such as Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker sought to establish a new 'imperial' style, one which synthesised the grammar of Graeco-Roman classicism with Indian ornamental vocabulary.⁹²⁶ By contrast, the Singapore Supreme Court's detractors' concerns seem more prosaic, questioning whether 'the grateful taxpayer' should foot the bill for the colonial government 'to avail itself of all the resources of the classic, all at the same time.'⁹²⁷ For the first time since British intervention in the late eighteenth century, the validity of the classical language of architecture in Malaya was being openly debated. It seems clear that the government was aware of these criticisms. Indeed, the critical backlash to the Supreme Court in the press would prove fatal to Ward's vision for the Singapore civic district rebuilt as a classical agora or an echo of the Roman Forum.

⁹²⁴ Vasunia, *The Classical and Colonial India*, 158.

⁹²⁵ Vasunia, 'Visions of Antiquity', 166-91 *passim*.

⁹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 172-3.

⁹²⁷ 'New Supreme Court. A Singapore Citizen Broods on the Esplanade'.

Grand Designs: Ward's Unrealised Civic District

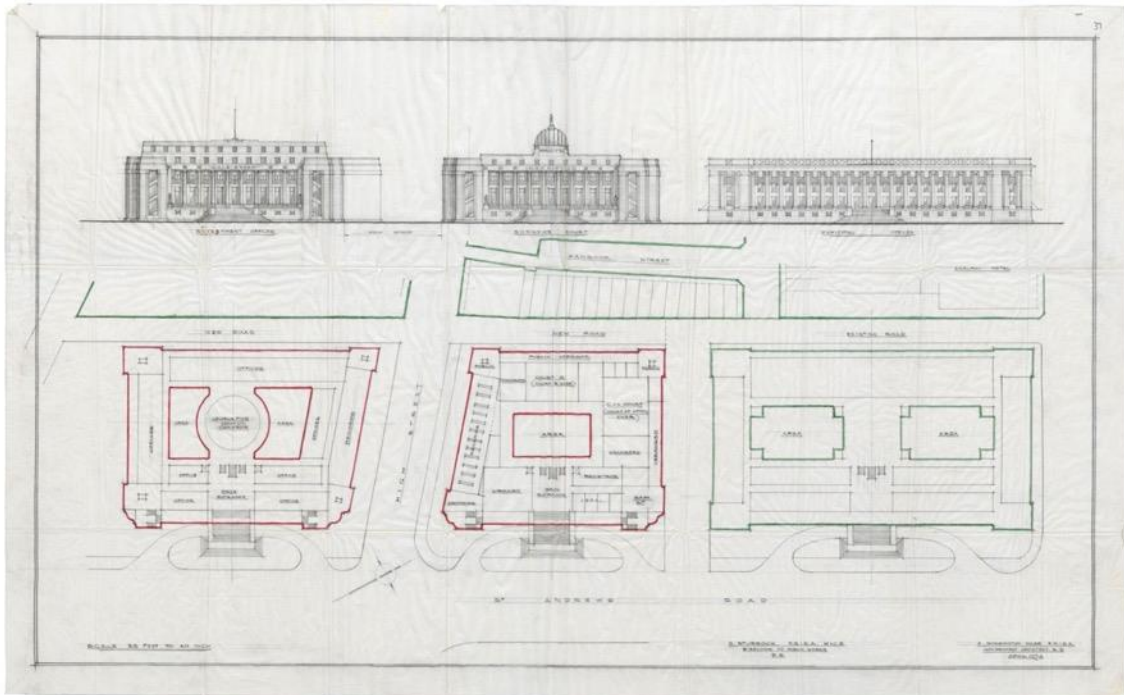


Figure 62. G. Sturrock and Frank Dorrington Ward. *Plan for New Supreme Court and Government Offices*, 1934. NAUK CO 273/599/1.

On 27 August 1939, the *Straits Times* reported on the model presented by Frank Dorrington Ward and E.H. Hindmarsh for the rebuilding of Empress Place. This model elaborated and expanded upon the designs Ward had first drawn up in 1934.⁹²⁸ The 1939 proposal included the creation of a new Treasury Building next to the Supreme Court to mirror the Municipal Building, and called for the demolition of the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall to make way for a garden, with the statue of Raffles on a pedestal, which would serve as the forecourt for a new Legislative Council Building along the banks of the Singapore River. The buildings would give the Singapore waterfront a continuous stretch of grand official classical buildings stretching from the Municipal Offices through to Empress place, and on to the General Post Office across the mouth of the Singapore River. The effect would have been of one great colonnade, executed in Shanghai plaster to simulate stone, stretching for almost a kilometre between St Andrew's Road and Fullerton Road.

⁹²⁸ Frank Dorrington Ward, 'Supreme Court: New Building'.

These plans represent the culmination of an imperial building programme which had lasted for almost a century and a half. As Lai Chee Kien notes, ‘the construction of Neoclassical administrative and commercial buildings around the Padang [had] formed a further bulwark signifying colonial legitimacy and difference from local or immigrant peoples.’⁹²⁹ Over the course of the nineteenth century, the classical language of architecture had been used to signify British colonial authority in Malaya, with these monuments set around the ceremonial and processional space of the open field.⁹³⁰ Ward’s plans for Singapore’s civic district sought to regularise the classical symmetry of the precinct by erasing the earlier manifestations of colonial classicism which gave Empress Place its layered appearance, removing the earlier Palladian and Edwardian Baroque monuments which had been constructed along the Singapore River. In doing so, Ward’s plans reflect a modernising vision of Empire, which adopted a more stripped, severe variant of the classical language to project imperial authority.

Contemporary newspaper coverage makes it clear, however, that the tide of public opinion had turned against the grandiloquent imperial classicism of the Supreme Court and Municipal Building. Indeed, it appears that authorities were keen to avoid the embarrassment which had followed the opening of the new Supreme Court, and to pre-empt the sort of critical backlash which had followed the opening of the Supreme Court. The in an article on Ward’s proposal for the civic centre published in the *Straits Times* on 27 August 1939, it was stated that:

The model represents Mr. Dorrington Ward’s personal opinions and is in no way officially-sponsored... It was decided upon as a result of criticism of the new Supreme Court building, so that the public would have an opportunity of considering the building as part of a complete civic centre. The model also makes it possible for suggestions and improvements to be made before work is started.⁹³¹

⁹²⁹ Lai, ‘Maidan to Padang’, 58.

⁹³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹³¹ ‘Empress Place of the Future’, *Straits Times*, 27 August 1939, 17.

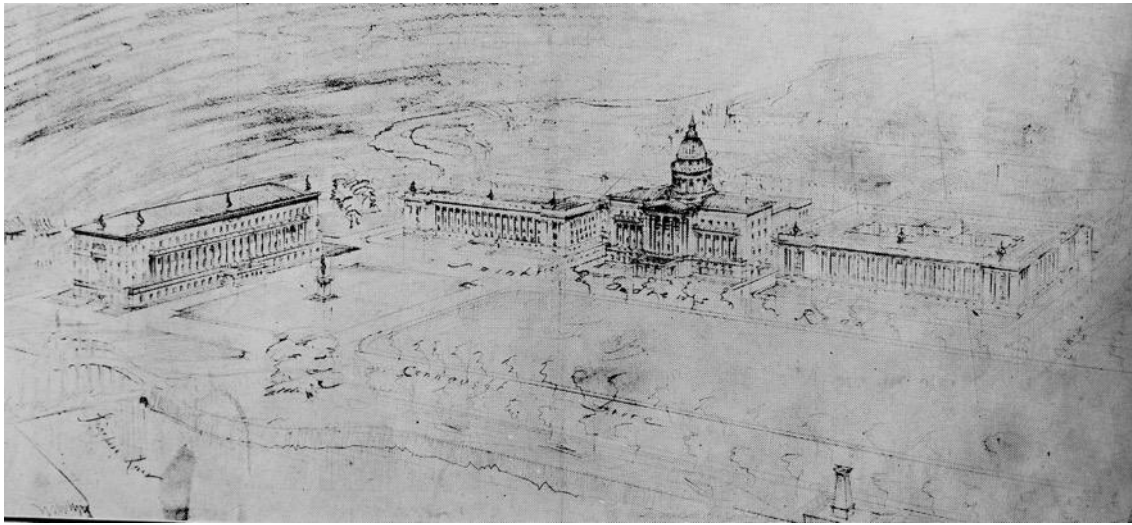


Figure 63. Frank Dorrington Ward. *Sketch for the proposed rebuilding of Empress Place, 1937.* *Malayan Architect.*

This invitation for public input on the design of a government building is without parallel in the history of Malayan public architecture. Ward's Supreme Court thus marks the end of classicism as the dominant mode for British public buildings in Malaya, a final monument to the grand designs of the British Empire in Southeast Asia. While there is no surviving documentary evidence of the public responses the government might have received following this exhibition, given its poor reception in the local press, it seems unlikely that Ward's plans would have gone unchallenged. The Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941 and Fall of Singapore in 1942 would ensure that this imperial vision for the metropolitan centre of British Malaya would never be realised. The Supreme Court thus marks the definitive end of an era for imperial architecture in Malaya, the last major classical building built for the British in the region.

As noted by Robert Home and Anthony D. King, 'the grand, often unrealized designs associated with British colonial expansion sought to showcase the "imperial project" and the controlling ambition of empire.'⁹³² In Singapore, the construction of a unified ensemble of Neoclassical buildings to frame the Padang was a gradual one.⁹³³ As Lai notes, the

⁹³² Robert Home and Anthony D. King, 'Urbanism and Master Planning', in *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire*, edited by G.A. Bremner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 51.

⁹³³ Lai, 'Maidan to Padang', 58.

composition of this ensemble ‘deliberately evoked colonial power’.⁹³⁴ In its scale and uniformity of vision, Ward’s plans for the Padang and Empress Place would have seen Singapore’s seat of power reimagined along the lines of a city like New Delhi; a comprehensive statement of British colonial rule. Yet as the public discourse surrounding the Supreme Court in Singapore and planned rebuilding of Empress Place shows, the articulation of this imperial project, and how it was presented, was increasingly contested by the late 1930s. As noted by the historian Rama Sundari Mantena,

Rome seemed to rear its head repeatedly but was never really enthusiastically adopted as the model for an empire. The example of imperial Rome served as a template for early colonial attempts at understanding/imagining a legitimate form of ruling foreign peoples and cultures.⁹³⁵

This style, adopted by Malaya’s early colonisers and applied with near-universal consistency across the Peninsula and its neighbouring islands, had been reflexively used as the architecture of government everywhere except for Kuala Lumpur between the turn of the nineteenth century until the eve of the Second World War. The prevailing attitude towards classicism in Malaya until the early twentieth century appears to echo Lutyens’ sentiments in a letter of 1914:

The style is to be one adaptable to all climates yet is to represent the ideal of British Empire. Of course classic is the only architectural language that can achieve this and I am sure it is better, saner, wiser and more gentlemanlike than the most sentimental of an English building, bad Indian or bad anything else [sic].⁹³⁶

By the late 1930s, however, this assumption that the classical language was the ‘only architectural language’ that could represent the ‘ideal of British Empire’ could no longer be taken for granted. The style no longer existed in splendid isolation as the only one available to Malaya’s public works architects. The construction of the Supreme Court coincided with

⁹³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹³⁵ Rama Sundari Mantena, ‘Imperial Ideology’, *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*, edited by Mark Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 70.

⁹³⁶ See: Vasunia, ‘Architecture and the Classical Style’, 173, note 45.

the advent of both Art Deco and the Modern Movement in Southeast Asia.⁹³⁷ As the critical backlash to the Supreme Court demonstrates, the legitimacy of classicism as the architectural language of colonial government in Malaya could no longer be taken for granted in the 1930s. Ward's imperial visions would remain unrealised, with the Padang and Empress place instead reflecting a century and a half of evolving inflections of the classical language.

The Kallang Aerodrome

**SINGAPORE CIVIL AERODROME
TERMINAL BUILDING**

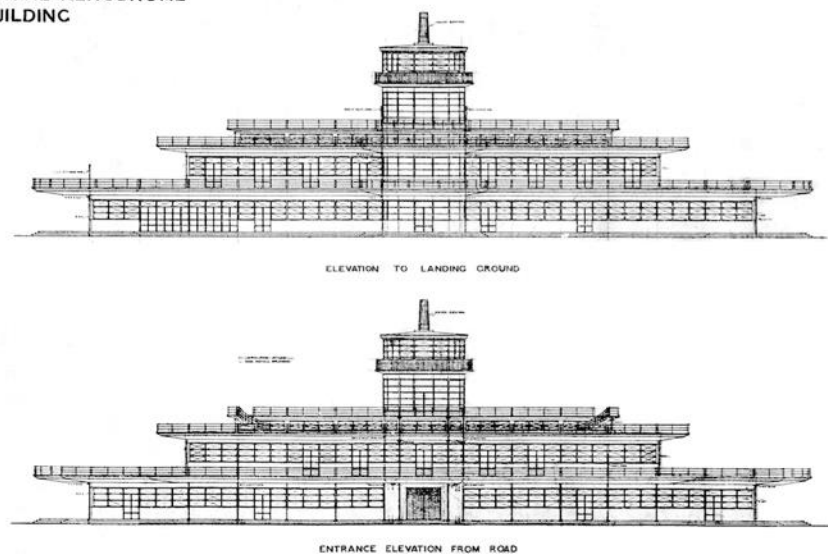


Figure 64. Frank Dorrington Ward. Elevation drawings for the Kallang Aerodrome. NAS NA 186.

Built at the same time as the Supreme Court, another major PWD project hinted at the direction of things to come for imperial architecture in Malaya. Sitting on reclaimed land at the edge of the Kallang Basin, across the water from the city centre, the Kallang Aerodrome was, like the Supreme Court, an instant landmark in Singapore's urban landscape. Unlike its architectural contemporary, however, the Kallang Aerodrome, the first civil airport in Singapore, received a rather different reception in the press. Construction of the airfield had commenced in 1931 with extensive land reclamation works undertaken in the mangrove

⁹³⁷ Lai, 'Maidan to Padang', 58.

swamp of the Kallang Basin.⁹³⁸ Plans for the terminal building would come later in 1937.⁹³⁹ This strategic location allowed for the landing and accommodation of ‘seaplanes, flying boats, and land planes in the one area.’⁹⁴⁰ According to the press, the aerodrome’s two hangars were ‘designed to harmonise... as, owing to the central position of the aerodrome in relation to the city, all buildings are required to display a measure of architectural merit.’⁹⁴¹

The result was a modern architectural ensemble whose masterplan was guided by a classical symmetry. The scheme was described as reflecting ‘modernity allied with utility’.⁹⁴² The Kallang Aerodrome received a host of famous visitors. These included the celebrity aviator Amelia Earhart, whose book *Last Flight* was serialised in Australian newspapers. Earhart wrote effusively about the Kallang Aerodrome, which was a stop during her much-publicised flight from Bangkok to Singapore and Java, calling it ‘an aviation miracle of the East... the peer of any in the world.’⁹⁴³ She was described in Malayan papers as the ‘first aviatrix’ to land at Kallang airport.⁹⁴⁴ Both the *Malaya Tribune* and the *Morning Tribune* reported Earhart’s comment, made to the press upon landing, that the building was ‘a magnificent airport’.⁹⁴⁵

As Alastair Gordon notes in his cultural history of airports, the earliest airports in Europe were treated as ‘national gateways’, and relied on historical allusion.⁹⁴⁶ When the Beddington Aerodrome was expanded as the Croydon Aerodrome in 1928, its main terminal was designed in a modern classical style.⁹⁴⁷ The terminal’s entrance was articulated as a rusticated triumphal arch, while its air control tower took the form of an astylar square tower. While historicism was widely adopted in a number of early airports around the world, the newness of airports as a building type and inherent modernity of air travel also provided a beacon to Modernists.⁹⁴⁸ Perhaps the most influential proponent of airports as symbols of modernity

⁹³⁸ ‘New Airport is on Site of Former Swamp’, *Straits Times*, 12 June 1937, 10.

⁹³⁹ Frank Dorrington Ward, ‘Singapore Civil Aerodrome Terminal Building’, Public Works Department Collection, NAS NA 186.

⁹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴² ‘Terminal Building Fittings’, *Straits Times*, 12 June 1937, 10.

⁹⁴³ ‘Singapore Airport an Aviation Miracle of the East’, *Courier Mail*, 11 April 1938, 4.

⁹⁴⁴ ‘Amelia Earhart First Aviatrix to Land at Airport’, *Malaya Tribune*, 21 June 1937, 12.

⁹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* See also: ‘American Aviatrix Arrives’, *Morning Tribune*, 21 June 1937, 2.

⁹⁴⁶ Alastair Gordon, *Naked Airport* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 47.

⁹⁴⁷ Hugh Pearman, *Airports: A Century of Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2004), 50.

⁹⁴⁸ Gordon, *Naked Airport*, 47–69 *passim*.

was the Swiss-born architect and architectural writer Le Corbusier, who saw airports as ‘the symbol of the new age.’⁹⁴⁹ By the 1930s, Modernism was prevailing as the preferred style for airports, though as the architecture critic Hugh Pearman notes, colonial airports such as Al Basra in Iraq (built 1937) were seen by British architects as an opportunity to indulge in imperial historicism.⁹⁵⁰ The Kallang Aerodrome thus exemplifies the modernising impulse seen in airport design of the 1930s – as much a product of its time as the Neoclassical Supreme Court. Indeed, Singapore’s first civil aerodrome shares certain affinities with the rear elevation of the terminal and control tower at Elmdon Airport, Birmingham designed by Nigel Norman and constructed between 1938-9. Both feature bold, central circular volumes with extensive glazing designed to maximise views.

[Image redacted for copyright reasons.]

Figure 65. Elmdon Airport in Birmingham, England, 1939. Historic England Archive ce47/03137.

As a ‘national gateway’, the Kallang Aerodrome offered spaces of both welcome and control. The Kallang Aerodrome was reportedly the ‘first in the world with quarantine and disinfecting facilities for the aeroplane itself... [and serve as] the first port of entry for all

⁹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁵⁰ Pearman, *Airports: A Century of Architecture*, 69.

airplanes from “infected” countries, especially those with yellow fever’.⁹⁵¹ Modern notions of public health and sanitation to some extent decided what sort of welcome Singapore’s aerial visitors received. For those arriving from locales subject to less scrutiny, the airport also offered large halls and a restaurant, as well as balconies and terraces from which to view the aeroplanes landing and departing from Singapore.

As he did in the Supreme Court, Ward used a range of modern materials in his design of the Kallang Aerodrome’s terminal building, from reinforced concrete to rubber tiles.⁹⁵² These rubber tiles would have been manufactured locally.⁹⁵³ As noted above, the extensive use of rubber floor tiles for the building’s interiors was promoted in public buildings to address the declining price of this major Malayan commodity in the 1930s. Indeed, as noted by W.G. Huff, ‘the Singapore rubber market made a major contribution to the growth of the Malayan rubber industry’.⁹⁵⁴ Like the Supreme Court, the construction of the Kallang Aerodrome was thus an imperial project, not only in that it projected a vision of empire, but also in its use in stimulating economy and industry in colonial Malaya. On the balconies and terraces, cement tiles were used in place of rubber tiles. Steel-framed glass panel screens were used for internal partitions, while polished aluminium strips were used as an ornamental detail in places.⁹⁵⁵ While both Supreme Court and Aerodrome shared a similar palette of materials, in the former, synthetic stone and rubber were used to create economical simulacra of historic materials such as ashlar and marble, whereas in the latter, these modern materials were showcased for their very modernity.

While the Kallang Aerodrome was in this sense avant-garde in style and materiality, the building still drew on classical precedents in both its overall symmetry of plan and in its detailing. Upon closer inspection, the modernist tendencies of the building’s design were tempered with historical influences, including classical cornices and even ornamental details such as obelisks on the airport grounds, albeit filtered through the abstracting tendencies of the Streamline Moderne style. Rusticated doorway surrounds, enriched with bold Art Deco

⁹⁵¹ ‘New Airport is on Site of Former Swamp’.

⁹⁵² Ward, ‘Singapore Civil Aerodrome Terminal Building’.

⁹⁵³ ‘Singapore-Made Rubber Tiles’.

⁹⁵⁴ W.G. Huff, ‘The Development of the Rubber Market in Pre-World War II Singapore’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 24.2 (1993): 285.

⁹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

geometric ornament, are another classical feature used to enrich the design of the public spaces within the Kallang Aerodrome. These ornamental flourishes draw on the same classical vocabulary used in the Supreme Court, though in the airport they are inflected with an accent derived from the then-fashionable Art Deco.⁹⁵⁶

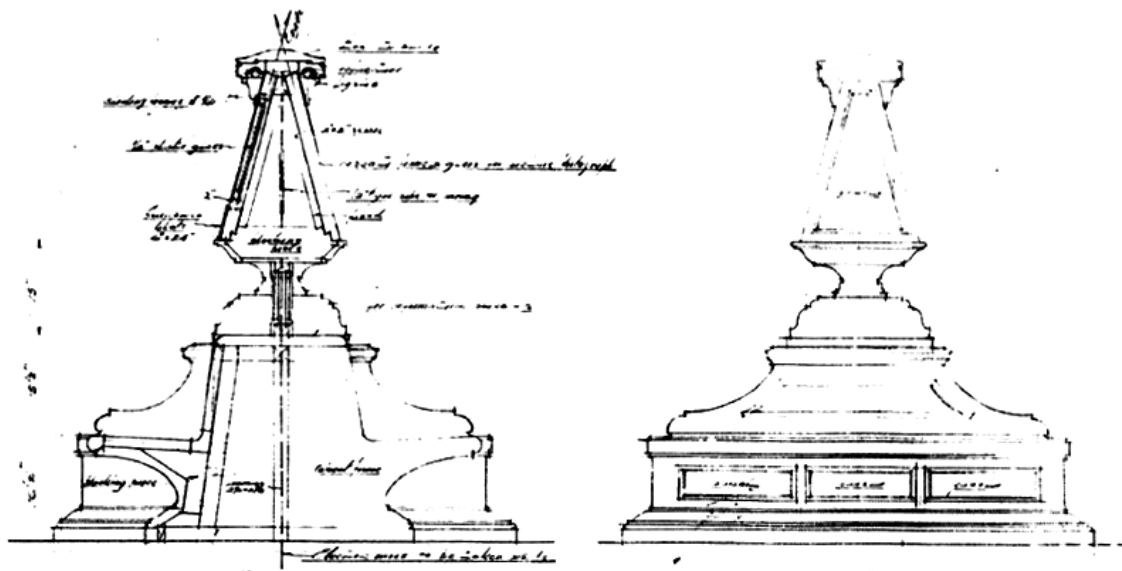


Figure 66. Frank Dorrington Ward. Detail drawings for obelisks at the Kallang Aerodrome, 1937. NAS NA186.

Despite the modern, astylar articulation of the terminal building's exteriors, its ornamental vocabulary and grammar, limited as it was, was ultimately still indebted to the classical language of architecture. The terminal building was undoubtedly 'Modern', but its modernity was not antithetical to classicism. Nor was Ward's terminal building an example of a Loosian Modernism, an architecture which had eschewed historicist detailing and 'overcome ornament'.⁹⁵⁷ The Kallang Aerodrome was still laid out along classical principles, and it did not shy from restrained historicist ornament.

⁹⁵⁶ While the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, Streamline Moderne is used here to refer to a specific approach to design, one which generally emphasised horizontality through abstraction and exaggeration. Art Deco is used more broadly, encompassing both the more streamlined variants of the style as well as the stylised historicist ornament which was fashionable in British Malaya and elsewhere.

⁹⁵⁷ Loos, 'Ornament and Crime (1908)', 189. See also: Joseph Masheck, 'Critique of Ornament', in *Ornament and Crime*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2019), 267-322.

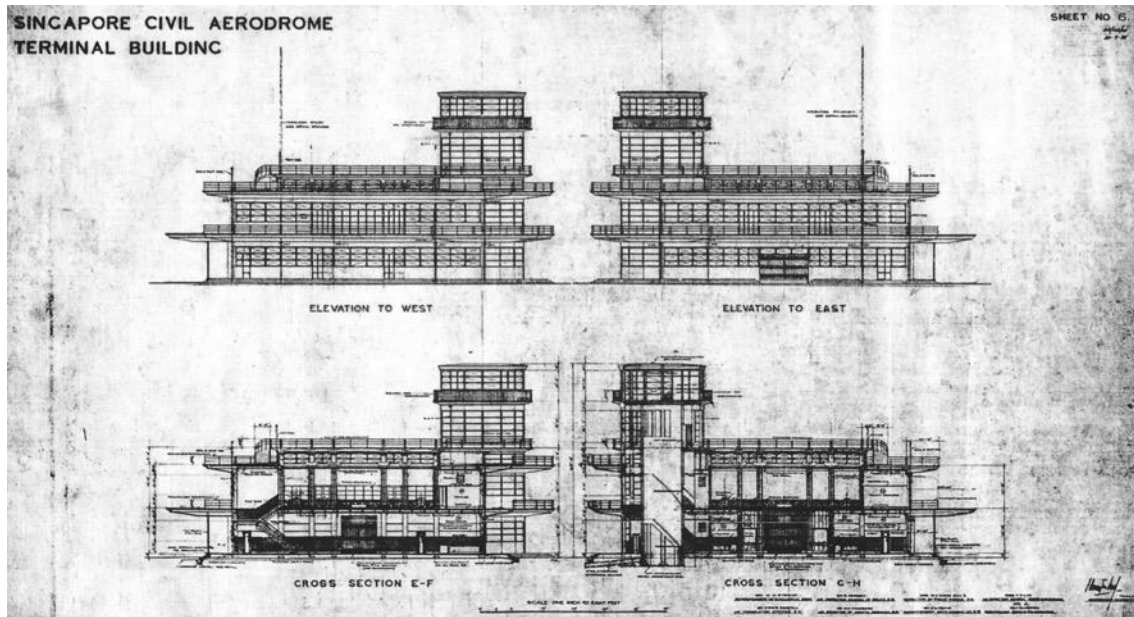


Figure 68. Frank Dorrington Ward. Elevation and section drawings for the Kallang Aerodrome. NAS NA 186.

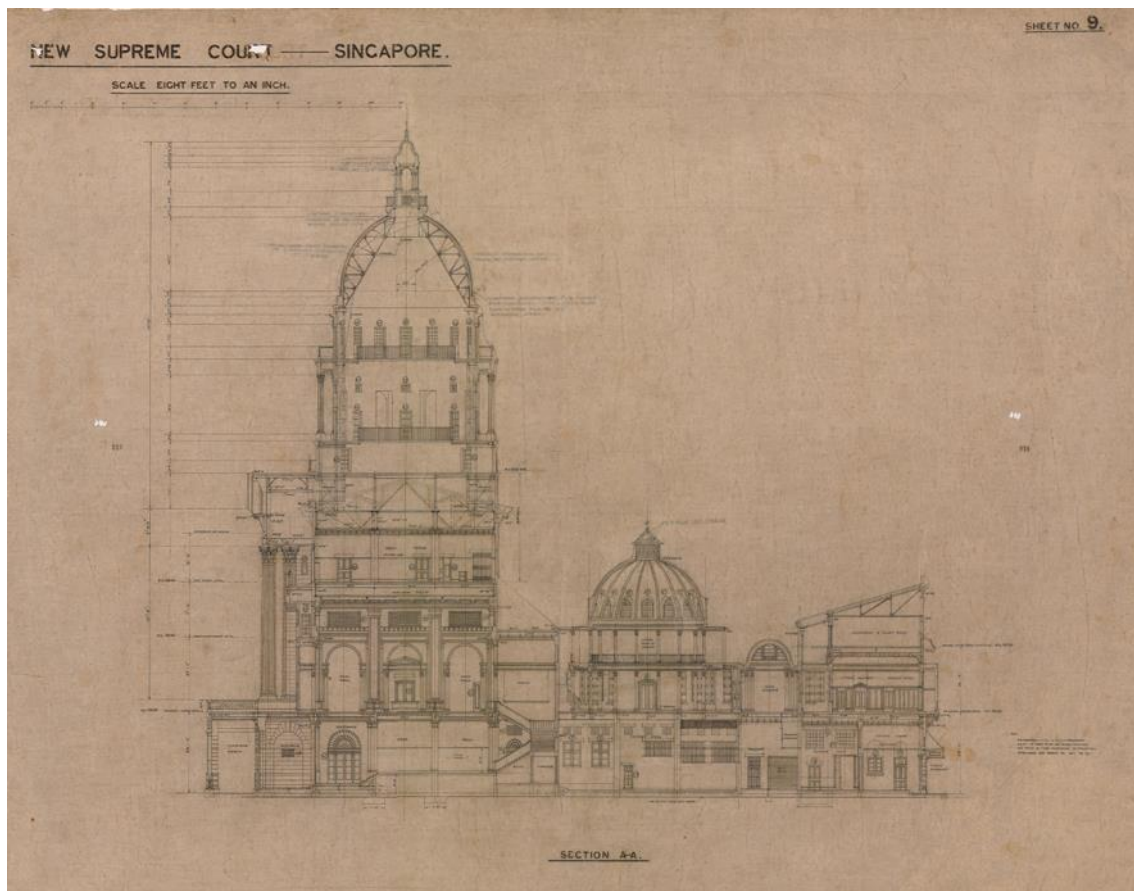


Figure 67. Frank Dorrington Ward. Section drawing for the New Supreme Court, Singapore, 1935. NAS PWD Collection.

The residual classicism of the Kallang Aerodrome becomes more readily apparent when it is compared in terms of elevation and section with the Supreme Court. Both buildings maintain a classical symmetry along their principal elevations, and feature prominent central towers. While in the Supreme Court, the lack of substantial setback between portico and dome was severely criticised in the press, in the Kallang Aerodrome, this design feature is taken even further. The central volume of the control tower projects outward from the façade, reminiscent of an exedra set in the garden front of a Palladian country manor. Rather than facing the geometric parterres of a Baroque garden, however, the Kallang Aerodrome's 'garden front' looked out onto the new geometries of the reclaimed airfield, with the watery expanse of Kallang Basin beyond. Unlike the purely ornamental dome of the Supreme Court, the Kallang Aerodrome's tower served as a control room, and thus avoided the criticisms levelled against the court.

Conclusion

Malaya in the 1930s was a colonial society in transition. The colonial administration of Malaya was put under significant budgetary pressures caused by the economic downturn following the Wall Street Crash and, as the decade progressed, the tightening of imperial purse strings in anticipation of the coming war. These financial pressures were translated into greater public scrutiny of public building works and consequently an increasing economy of materials. This did not prevent public buildings of the 1930s from achieving a level of unsurpassed monumental grandeur, however, as evidenced by the high imperial classicism of the Supreme Court in Singapore. Rather, imperial architects increasingly relied on modern technologies to simulate more costly materials, particularly through the use of synthetic stone. This was the classicism of thrift.

While classicism had been the default idiom of British imperial architecture in Malaya since the late eighteenth century, there was, by the 1930s, a growing ambivalence towards

classicism in public architecture.⁹⁵⁸ The criticism of the Supreme Court in the Malayan press was an unprecedented example of this; while critics had balked at public expenditure on government buildings in the past, they had always done so on the basis of cost rather than style. The backlash against the Supreme Court thus marked a turning point in Malayan architecture. With the advent of the Modern Movement in Southeast Asia, it could no longer be taken for granted that the monuments of Empire would be articulated through the classical language of Graeco-Roman Antiquity.

Yet the tensions between classicism and modernity in the 1930s are not so clear-cut or binary. The Supreme Court was, in many ways, a thoroughly ‘modern’ building, despite its rigorously academic use of the classical orders. Its materiality and use of technology for ventilation were very much at the cutting edge. Indeed, the Supreme Court shared a great deal of its materiality with the Kallang Aerodrome, which was widely lauded for its modernity at the time of its opening. Moreover, even the design of more overtly modern buildings like the Kallang Aerodrome were still guided by classical principles, and still drew on classical precedent in detailing and finishes. While Singapore’s first civil airport might, at first glance, appear resolutely modern, the building can equally be read as a classical building, articulated in an astylar manner, its ornamental vocabulary limited and stylised to a few strategic flourishes. That the two buildings shared the same architect demonstrates that Neoclassicism and Modernism were not two antithetical styles in colonial Malaya, but rather existed along a spectrum, and fed into one another.

The crucial difference between the two buildings was perhaps more symbolic than stylistic. The Kallang Aerodrome heralded a new age of travel and technology and was thus more readily read by the public as a monument to modernity and progress. By contrast, the Supreme Court was not just traditional in style but housed an ancient institution, and one which was intimately linked with British colonial rule. That this monument to the rule of law was constructed by a largely Chinese workforce was not missed by contemporary commentators in the press, who contrasted images of the Chinese workwomen who toiled on the floors of the Supreme Court with the ‘judges, members of the bar, litigants and

⁹⁵⁸ For a discussion of the shift away from classicism in the public architecture of 1940s Britain, see: Gavin Stamp, ‘Classicism without Columns’, *The Persistence of the Classical: Essays on Architecture presented to David Watkin*, edited by Frank Salmon (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2008), 183-201.

witnesses' who would eventually walk upon those same surfaces.⁹⁵⁹ These colonial hierarchies, which structured social order in the Straits Settlements, were also reproduced in the decorative scheme of the Supreme Court, with coolies, fishermen and labourers decorating the lower levels of the porte-cochère, while in the tympanum above the Roman goddess Justitia provided over an allegorical scene free from the presence of Asian figures. The highest symbolic spaces of the building were reserved for the colonisers, not the colonised. The building was thus a representative ornamental device in the manner Gadamer argued,⁹⁶⁰ symbolising colonial justice and rule overall, its meaning reinforced by its ornamental programme of sculptural decoration. Indeed, the building was arguably the greatest exemplar of what Cannadine termed ornamentalism, a crystallisation of imperial hierarchies made 'visible, immanent, and actual.'⁹⁶¹

The Fall of Singapore was the final nail in the coffin for Ward's vision of a grander, classical civic district being realised in Singapore. Given the extensive criticism the Supreme Court received in the press upon opening, it seems unlikely that Ward's scheme would have proceeded without opposition. By the late 1930s, imperial classicism sat uneasily in Singapore for reasons of both economy and taste. The Supreme Court was thus the final flowering of a style which could arguably be traced back to Francis Light's Suffolk House in Penang, constructed more than a century earlier, an architectural language which used Graeco-Roman vocabulary to communicate British authority in Malaya. When British authority was briefly reasserted in Malaya in the post-war era, its architecture would be resolutely modernist, exemplified by buildings such as B.M. Iversen's Federal House in Kuala Lumpur.⁹⁶²

⁹⁵⁹ 'Singapore's New Supreme Court'.

⁹⁶⁰ Gadamer, 'The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative', 130.

⁹⁶¹ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 122.

⁹⁶² Iversen Rollitt, *Iversen: Architect of Ipoh and Modern Malaya*, 144-62 *passim*.

Chapter VIII. Translations and Transitions

On 8 December 1941, the Imperial Japanese Army began its invasion of Malaya.⁹⁶³ By 15 February 1942, following a week of battles between British and Japanese forces on the island of Singapore, Lieutenant General Arthur E. Percival, the General Officer Commanding Malaya, had surrendered to Japan.⁹⁶⁴ The Fall of Singapore marked the end of over a century and a half of British colonial influence in Malaya. When the British returned to Malaya following the end of the Second World War, it was under very different circumstances.⁹⁶⁵ The post-war British administration would be challenged by a growing push for independence and armed resistance from Communist fighters.⁹⁶⁶ These sweeping political changes were also reflected in architecture. Construction, which had experienced a boom in the 1920s and 1930s, ground to a halt during the four long years of the Japanese occupation. Malaya's post-war growth saw it become the second most urbanised country in Southeast Asia by 1957.⁹⁶⁷ This urbanisation would not, however, be articulated in the classical language. By the time the British returned to Malaya and the process of post-war reconstruction commenced in earnest, the classical language of architecture had lost its currency as both visual language of empire and the vernacular idiom of the nation's housing. For reasons of both economy and fashion, Modernism became ascendant in Malaya. Merdeka, or Independence, in 1957, would be expressed in this new architectural language.⁹⁶⁸

The Second World War claimed the lives of some of Malaya's most innovative architects, including the Singaporean architect Ho Kwong Yew.⁹⁶⁹ A number of western architects,

⁹⁶³ Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya and Singapore, 1941-45: A Social and Economic History*, second edition (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018), 34.

⁹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 40-3.

⁹⁶⁵ T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 358.

⁹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 142-68,

⁹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 214. This urbanisation was largely centred around Singapore, however, with Kuala Lumpur still eclipsed in size by the former capital of the Straits Settlements. See: King, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, xxiii.

⁹⁶⁸ See: Lai Chee Kien, *Building Merdeka: Independence Architecture in Kuala Lumpur, 1957-1966* (Kuala Lumpur: Galeri Petronas, 2007).

⁹⁶⁹ Ho Kwong Yew's sons Ho Kok Yin, Ho Kok Kit, and Ho Kok Hoe would all go on to be architects at Swan & Maclaren in the 1950s, with the latter designing Malaya's new National Museum in Kuala Lumpur in 1960. See: 'Architect meets Architect', *Straits Times*, 5 January 1954, 12; and 'New million-dollar museum to be built', *Singapore Free Press*, 11 May 1960, 5.

including Frank Dorrington Ward, left Malaya before the war and never returned. Those who did would go on to practice architecture in new ways. Western architects such as Berthel Michael Iversen – who had once had a hand in designing bombastic classical buildings under Keys & Dowdeswell – returned to the Malaya with new ideas from continental Europe, and went on to propagate Modernism, unfettered by the classical tastes of their former employers.⁹⁷⁰ A new generation of local architects took post-war Malayan architecture further from the classical language of architecture, ending a century and a half of stylistic development.⁹⁷¹ In retrospect, the exuberant eclecticism of the late 1920s and early 1930s would be the last flowering of classicism, both in its high Imperial mode and in its richly exuberant creolised vernacular iterations.

Summary of Findings

This thesis has surveyed the development of this classical language over the course of Britain's colonial rule in Malaya. Over the course of Britain's colonial intervention in Malaya, this architectural language became an omnipresent part of the region's architecture. Classicism went from being an imperial language, the visual language of British colonial administration, to a common tongue that was shared by the diverse communities which made up Malaya's colonial milieu.

This process of translation started with Britain's first colonial forays into Malaya. Beginning with the Palladian structures erected by the British East India Company at the turn of the nineteenth century, classicism took root as the language of Empire in Malaya. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these imperial associations would be reinforced through accretions of the classical style across the Malayan Peninsula and the neighbouring islands of Penang and Singapore. From Georgian Neoclassicism through to the Edwardian Baroque, the classical language was used, with few exceptions, as the language of Imperial power in British Malaya. While the exoticising Indo-Saracenic style of Kuala Lumpur's administrative buildings broke with this tradition at the turn of the twentieth

⁹⁷⁰ Iversen Rollitt, *Iversen: Architect of Ipoh and Modern Malaya*, 22-35, 144-62 *passim*.

⁹⁷¹ See: Widodo, 'Modernism in Singapore', 54-60.

century, classicism remained firmly established elsewhere as the language of colonial administration elsewhere in Malaya. These monuments grew ever grander and more ambitious as the decades of colonial governance rolled on. This culminated in the construction of Frank Dorrington Ward's Supreme Court in Singapore, which was, in its scale and ambition, the high point in British colonial classicism in the Straits Settlements. The urban centres of Malaya's colonial administration became the backdrop for the pageantry of empire, both a projection and locus of imperial power.⁹⁷² This was the architectural language of 'ornamental governmentality', as Chang calls it, as concerned with the 'performance of spectacle' as it was with the housing of imperial administrators.⁹⁷³ The classical language of architecture was the language through which imperial ideals were communicated to the Malayan masses.

Through allusions to Graeco-Roman Antiquity, British architects were able to borrow and project their visions of modern imperial grandeur. As Bradley argues, the British Empire was 'informed, shaped, legitimized, and evaluated using classical models', with the classical tradition used 'to bestow legitimacy on the present.'⁹⁷⁴ Through the repetition of classical motifs, the classical became what Gadamer termed 'representative', an artwork which communicates meaning.⁹⁷⁵ Thus, the columns and capitals of the classical orders became synonymous with ideas of modern governance, administration, and also power in British Malaya.

This imperial classicism was not static or singular, however, responding to fashions in both the Imperial metropole as well as in other mercantile and industrial centres of the British Empire. Early colonial engineers were in effect responsible for the translation of British monuments, adapting the classical ideals of Palladianism to the tropical climate and a colonised labour force. Moreover, Singapore and Penang's earliest classical monuments were a 'collaborative effort' between British architects and the 'hidden hands' of a colonial labour force drawn from other parts of the Empire, particularly South Asia.⁹⁷⁶ These asymmetric

⁹⁷² Cf. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 46, 122, and elsewhere *passim*.

⁹⁷³ Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 97.

⁹⁷⁴ Bradley, 'Introduction', 10-11.

⁹⁷⁵ Gadamer, 'The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative', 130.

⁹⁷⁶ Pieris, *Hidden Hands, Divided Landscapes*, 122. See also: Chopra, 'South and Southeast Asia', 279.

power relations forged the transfer of architectural knowledge which allowed colonial labourers to adopt classicism in their own buildings.

The subsequent movement of architects – from Liverpool, Hong Kong, Ceylon, and Tianjin – and labourers, predominantly from the South of China but also South Asia, meant that new ideas and influences were constantly being introduced to Malaya's architectural milieu.⁹⁷⁷ Malaya's Public Works Departments drew in architectural professionals from around the world, with an intensely cosmopolitan workforce serving as architects, draughtsmen, and improvers in drawing offices from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. The collaboration between British and Asian architects fostered the transfer of knowledge, and led to professional partnerships. Men who trained as draughtsmen in government service often struck out into private practice, where they would necessarily have applied the ideas and techniques they had learned while in government service. Builders from Southern China brought their own construction techniques, building typologies, and ornamental vocabulary, which was synthesised with both the classical idiom and Malay architectural traditions. This intense cross-pollination of ideas led to the development of shared idioms which transcended both public and private practice, and the boundaries of race and religion.

Classicism was not confined to the buildings erected to signify British authority and administration in Malaya. By the mid-nineteenth century, this imperial language would be adopted, appropriated, and translated by both local and migrant communities within Malaya. This appropriation can be seen in the architectural patronage of the Sultans of Johor, who adopted the classical language of neighbouring Singapore to signal their modernity and royal authority. If 'ornamental governmentality' was one of the means by which colonial administrators conveyed power in Singapore,⁹⁷⁸ it was also employed by the Johor royal family to convey their own rule. In the hands of the Johor Sultans and their architects, the classicism of the Straits Settlements was translated into a medium by which modern Malay rule could be conveyed. Through this language, the rulers of Johor projected an image of their own regal authority, and the modernising processes put in place by their dynasty over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Malay architects and engineers who worked for

⁹⁷⁷ Cf. Willis, 'Architectural Movements', 158-79.

⁹⁷⁸ Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*, 97.

the Johor court proved adept at adapting this classical language to the spatial requirements of local royalty and religion. If, as Gadamer argues, ornament serves a representative purpose,⁹⁷⁹ then the ornamental classicism adopted by the Johor elite represented a multitude of things: classicism became a symbol of the Johor royal family's modernity, magnificence, faith, and *noblesse oblige*. The reception and repurposing of this architecture by the Malay elite in the nineteenth-century would pave the way for a more widespread adoption of this architectural language by Malaya's diverse communities.

Classicism also became the language of educational institutions in British Malaya. The language was first used by the Christian missionaries who established some of the earliest schools in the region, and subsequently by the British administrations in the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements. The use of classicism in these institutions communicated their intended use as part of the 'civilising mission' of colonialism. By the twentieth century, however, the use of this language was adopted by the diverse communities who made British Malaya home. The style was adopted by both Chinese and Muslim communities in their own schools, though articulated in different ways, reflecting the different relationships with colonial power in British Malaya. For the Straits Chinese, in particular, the adoption of the Edwardian Baroque signalled the layered affiliations of the community, and their sense of citizenship within the British Empire. Classicism remained tied to the imperial project even through the 1920s, however, and the stripped classicism of a flagship school like the Victoria Institution demonstrates how colonial education was part and parcel of the imperial project. Yet classicism could also be used to express the patronage of Muslim elites, from Arab traders to members of the Malay aristocracy. Classicism's ability to be all things to all people gave it an appeal to Malaya's diverse population in a manner other styles such as the Gothic Revival, with its clear associations with Christianity, were unable to rival. The Treaty of Pangkor, which recognised the role of Malay Muslim rulers in the Peninsula, may have also cemented the preference for classicism over the more overtly Christian Gothic Revival style.

Classical vocabulary was thus adopted by the multicultural community of architects and builders who plied their trade in Straits Settlements and the Malayan Peninsula. The tens of thousands of extant shophouses which line streets in both the major cities and quiet back

⁹⁷⁹ Gadamer, 'The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative', 130-1.

roads of modern-day Malaysia and Singapore attest to the prevalence of the classical style in Malaya. It is in these buildings that the classical language was most extensively translated and creolised, incorporated into the grammar of traditional Asian typologies, and synthesised with ornamental traditions drawn from other cultures. The classical language found, in the hands of Malayan architects, a rich localised expression with a distinctly regional inflection.

Malayan classicism was therefore fundamentally cosmopolitan in character. In the hands of these architects, builders, and patrons, the classical language was translated in Malaya through a rich and complex series of collaborative efforts between various cultures and communities. Architects, builders, and their patrons collaborated across racial and cultural divides to produce a shared language with varied inflections. Of course, these relationships were by no means equal; the creation of Malayan classicism, in both its imperial and vernacular modes, was a product of the colonial contact zone and its asymmetric power relations.⁹⁸⁰ The diversity of colonial Malaya also ensured a heterogeneous reception. While documentary sources that afford insights into the minds of Malaya's architects and builders are exceedingly rare, the buildings in some ways speak for themselves. The adoption of Palladian Classicism and later the Edwardian Baroque by the Sultans of Johor demonstrate how the styles used to communicate colonial governance in neighbouring Singapore could be refashioned as a symbol of modern Malay rule. Unlike the Gothic Revival, with its clear Christian origins, the classical language was thus seen as sufficiently universal to be appropriate for Malay Muslim rulers and their regal and religious monuments.

While there is limited textual evidence to elucidate how the vast majority of Malaysians felt about the classical language of architecture, the myriad ways in which classicism was adopted and adapted by Malaya's diverse communities reveals a great deal about its reception. As noted by Khoo, eclecticism allowed Malaya's diverse communities to make simultaneous 'claims of assimilation' and 'statements of difference'.⁹⁸¹ It is this selective adoption and rejection of classical elements, and the use of these elements in conjunction with architectural motifs, typologies, and building techniques drawn from other traditions, which defines Malaya's vernacular classicism. The syncretic, pluralistic use of ornament reflects the

⁹⁸⁰ Cf. Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 33-40 *passim*.

⁹⁸¹ Khoo, *Streets of George Town*, 21.

heterogeneous, pluralistic colonial society which became the crucible for this creolised architectural language. While classicism was, at least in its early days in Malaya, the architectural language of British colonisation, it is clear that by the turn of the twentieth century, its reception had changed. While an element of prestige likely underpinned its adoption by various ethnic communities within Malaya, the classical language of architecture also appears to have been viewed as something of a blank canvas upon which other forms of cultural expression could be painted. If not entirely neutral, classicism was evidently palatable to a broad spectrum of Malayan society, who adopted and adapted the language according to their various needs. As Akcan argues, ‘architectural translation more often than not aims at distance, distortion, or transmutation... [A]rchitectural translation is not burdened by fidelity’.⁹⁸² This was evidently true of Malaya’s vernacular classicism, in which ideas from other architectural traditions reshaped a new classicism which became the common architectural language of the Peninsula and its neighbouring islands.

Our Classical Inheritance? Imperial Classicism as Post-Colonial Heritage in Malaysia and Singapore

As the political scientist Benedict Anderson notes in *Imagined Communities*, his seminal work on nationalism, many postcolonial states ‘inherited... [the] political museumising’ of their colonial predecessors, who strategically used the past to legitimise their new regimes.⁹⁸³ In the context of postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore, this political museumising has seen Malaya’s colonial-era architecture reframed as the discrete architectural heritage of the two respective nations. Just as in the colonial era, however, reception of Malaya’s classical architecture has been diverse and varied.

By the 1950s, Singaporean officials were already compiling lists of ‘Ancient Monuments’ as part of the preparation for the 1958 Master Plan.⁹⁸⁴ While most of the buildings on these

⁹⁸² Akcan, *Architecture in Translation*, 8.

⁹⁸³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 181-3.

⁹⁸⁴ See: Kevin Blackburn and Tan Peng Hong Alvin, ‘The Emergence of Heritage Conservation in Singapore and the Preservation of Monuments Board (1958–76)’, *Southeast Asian Studies* 4.2 (2015): 341-64.

early lists were Chinese temples and mosques, the list also including colonial institutions such as the Raffles Institution and the Outram Gaol.⁹⁸⁵ Modern heritage legislation would come some two decades later. Speaking in Parliament on 4 November 1970, the Minister for Law and National Development E.W. Barker noted:

Singapore now stands in the 151st year of its foundation. We have achieved much since the days when the island was largely jungle and swamp land... [O]ur rapid industrial and economic advancement and other factors have contributed towards a surge of progress in the last decade, the like of which Singapore has not seen in its previous history. In this forward-looking state of mind and in our enthusiasm for urban renewal, we may wake up one day to find our historic monuments either bulldozed or crumbling to dust through neglect. As new Singapore is being built, we must not let the worthwhile part of older Singapore disappear, and the time has therefore come for us to take stock of what we have of the past and seek to preserve objects and buildings that will remind us of our heritage, even though it be short in span of time.⁹⁸⁶

This desire to ‘not let a worthwhile part of older Singapore disappear’ became the impetus for the *Preservation of Monuments Bill* in that same year. Heritage policy in Singapore continued to focus on antiquity, however, and it would take longer for later colonial classicism to be absorbed into the canon of state heritage. The Supreme Court and City Hall, for example, would only be gazetted as National Monuments on 14 February 1992.⁹⁸⁷

Since the 1980s, Singapore has leveraged its colonial built heritage into its nation-building narratives.⁹⁸⁸ In 2019, the bicentennial of Sir ‘Thomas Stamford Raffles’ arrival in Singapore was the focus of both national commemorations and public reflection.⁹⁸⁹ Since Independence

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁹⁸⁶ Quoted in Parliament of Singapore, “Preservation of Monuments Bill”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports Vol 30, Cols. 337–342, 4 November 1970.

⁹⁸⁷ Woo and Foo, ‘History and Architecture’, 11.

⁹⁸⁸ Hamzah Muzaini, ‘Heritage Landscapes and Nation-Building in Singapore’, *Changing Landscapes of Singapore: Old Tensions, New Discoveries*, edited by Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, Chih Yuan Woon, and Kamalini Ramdas (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 27.

⁹⁸⁹ See, for example: Jianli Huang, ‘Stamford Raffles and the ‘Founding’ of Singapore: The Politics of Commemoration and Dilemmas of History’, *JMBRAS* 91.2 (2018): 103–22; and Kwa Chong Guan,

in 1965, the regalia of the British Empire in Singapore, including the statue of Raffles, has been reframed time and again as part of the foundational myths of the modern state.⁹⁹⁰ Yet as the cultural and historical geographer Hamzah Muzaini notes, ‘reliance on its colonial past... [has] resulted in questions over whether Singapore’s history may even be exclusively seen as its own.’⁹⁹¹ The use of this colonial heritage as a focus of tourism in both Malaysia and Singapore has seen economic pragmatism weighed against political and historical ambivalence in the interpretation of this shared inheritance.⁹⁹²

In contrast to Singapore, Malaysia’s relationship with its colonial heritage is far more ambivalent. In the 1990s, this ambivalence saw Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad spearhead the construction of Putrajaya, a new purpose-built administrative capital which he claimed unlike Kuala Lumpur would have ‘no link to colonial powers’.⁹⁹³ Yet this official rejection of Britain’s colonial legacy was accompanied by an inadvertent echo of both colonial aesthetics and the planning logic of the British Empire.⁹⁹⁴ The overtly Islamicising style adopted in Putrajaya echoes the Edwardian exoticism of Indo-Saracenic Kuala Lumpur.⁹⁹⁵ As Ross King argues, it is possible to trace a clear ‘line of descent’ leading from Victorian England to Putrajaya via Kuala Lumpur and the British Raj.⁹⁹⁶ In attempting to foster a new national identity and assert the Islamic aspect of Malayness, Mahathir’s capital adopted colonial ideas of what, precisely, Islamic architecture should look like. In doing so, it turned away from the claims over classicism Malay Muslim rulers had made from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards.

Classicism remains as polysemous as post-colonial ‘heritage’ as it was as the language of

‘Editorial Foreword: The Singapore Bicentennial as Public History’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50.4 (2019): 469-75.

⁹⁹⁰ Kwa, ‘Editorial Foreword’, 470-1.

⁹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹⁹² See: Joan C. Henderson, ‘Tourism and British colonial heritage in Malaysia and Singapore’, *Tourism and Postcolonialism: Contested Discourses, Identities and Representations*, edited by C. Michael Hall and Hazel Tucker (London: Routledge, 2004), 113-25.

⁹⁹³ Quoted in Yat Ming Loo, *Architecture and Urban Space in Kuala Lumpur: Race and Chinese Spaces in a Postcolonial City* (London: Routledge, 2016), 87.

⁹⁹⁴ See: Ross King, *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 181-88 *passim*; and Sarah Moser, ‘Rejecting and Reproducing Colonial Urbanism in Putrajaya, Malaysia’, in *Cross-Cultural Exchange and the Colonial Imaginary: Global Encounters via Southeast Asia*, edited by H. Hazel Hahn (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019), 201-3.

⁹⁹⁵ King, *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya*, 11-12 and elsewhere *passim*.

⁹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

power in colonial Malaya. Indeed, it is this ‘elasticity’ which has allowed this colonial inheritance to be appropriated by a variety of civil society groups in the post-Merdeka era.⁹⁹⁷

Directions for Further Research

The diverse origins of Malaya’s architects and builders offer directions for further research. A comparative study of classicism in Malaya and in its immediate neighbours remains to be done. Further research into this regional context, and how classicism was taken up in the Dutch East Indies and Siam would help situate Malayan classicism within its broad region. Greater research into the movement of people to and from Malaya, and the links between Malaya and various trading communities across Asia and the Middle East, would help provide a more nuanced understanding of how Malayan classicism developed.

A more thorough study of professional networks within the British Empire also remains to be written.⁹⁹⁸ As has been demonstrated, the architects working in Malaya’s major firms came not only from Britain, but from across the Empire. Architects brought with them experience from cities like Liverpool, Hong Kong, and Tianjin, and in doing so shaped the ways in which the classical language was articulated in British Malaya. A study of these architects and their professional networks, their training and partnerships, would offer new insights into the movement of architectural ideas and influences. Situating Malayan classicism within these broader contexts, both regional and imperial, would allow for a better understanding of the how this creolised classicism sits within a broader spectrum of classical architectures.

Further fieldwork, delving deeper into regional centres and rural areas of Malaysia to document extant buildings is another avenue for further research of vital importance. This would allow a more nuanced picture of Malayan classicism to develop. Malaysia is rapidly developing, and with this development comes pressures to demolish and rebuild. Much of the nation’s historic built fabric is also vulnerable to disaster. The fire which destroyed thirty-one shophouses in Sungai Lembing in August 2019 is a reminder of how fragile this built

⁹⁹⁷ See: Nagata, “‘Elasticity’ of heritage, from conservation to human rights’, 101-2 and 112-13. See also: Yeoh and Kong, ‘The Notion of Place in the Construction of History, Nostalgia and Heritage in Singapore’, 52-65.

⁹⁹⁸ Willis, ‘Architectural Movements’, 173-4.

heritage is, and how urgently documentation of Malaysia's historic buildings is needed.⁹⁹⁹ Malaysia's rural hinterland still possesses a wealth of historic buildings. What inventive and syncretic approaches to classicism remain undocumented in the villages of rural Malaysia? How did the classicism of remote areas relate to the architectural developments of the urban centres in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur? While this thesis necessarily limited itself to a small sampling of Malayan architecture, there remains much to be surveyed in the villages and townships of the East coast.

In terms of theoretical approach, this thesis also provides a potential model for a re-evaluating of other creolised architectural traditions, particularly in former colonial societies. The linguistic analogy, and incumbent ideas of grammar, vocabulary, creolisation, and translation, remains a fruitful means by which the transmission of architectural ideas can be studied. Using ideas drawn from linguistics, and in particular the study of creole languages, has allowed this thesis to put forward a new reading of classicism in Malaya, one which questions the prevailing understanding of how this architectural language was transmitted, received, and translated over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In reframing the definition of classicism, this postcolonial approach to classical architecture affords opportunities to engage with eclecticism in a new way, unconstrained by the more rigid Vitruvian-Palladian reading of classicism inherited from nineteenth-century writers such as James Fergusson. Rather than reading Malaya's vernacular classicism as a 'bastard style' which 'offends... from the misapplication of the details of the Classical Orders',¹⁰⁰⁰ this thesis calls for a re-reading of these hybrid styles as languages in their own right. Over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Malaysians actively and consciously creolised the classical language of their British colonisers. The consistency evident in the work of Malaya's architects and builders, along with their ability to code switch in order to signal cultural affiliation, assimilation, or otherness, demonstrates their fluency in this dialect of the classical language. Indeed, through translation, they made this classical language their own.

⁹⁹⁹ 'Sungai Lembing villagers to rebuild after disastrous fire', *New Straits Times*, 1 September 2019. See also: Veena Babulal, 'Sungai Lembing fire a wake-up call', *New Straits Times*, 24 September 2019.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture*, 420 and 422.



Figure 69. Façade details of a former theatre dated 1916 in Kuala Pilah. Photograph by the author.

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