

# On the Streets of Singapore

By Terrence Hong

Buildings create identity and make a landscape unique. Old buildings are perhaps Singapore's most visible claim to being a cultural melting pot of East and West. Building styles in the past may have been predominantly Eurocentric, but many of these buildings were designed and constructed by the forefathers of modern-day Singaporeans and hence Singapore's urban landscape represents the sweat, genius and industry of our forebears.

The Urban Renewal Authority (URA) has taken great pains to conserve and preserve Singapore's limited stock of colonial-era buildings. Buildings can be considered as living time capsules: they encapsulate the ideas, social values and trends of the time when they were constructed. Their façades can tell us much about the people who commissioned them, what images the owners wished to project of themselves and what was fashionable at that time. Yet so many of us walk by these majestic edifices without giving them much thought!

In order to fully appreciate the importance of these old buildings and their significance in an historic context, an understanding of basic architectural elements can be very useful. In this article I hope to communicate some of these concepts so the reader can better 'make sense' of a building and understand the underlying ideas, concepts and social context of the colonial-era architects who designed these buildings more than a century ago.

This is not an exhaustive survey but a selection of buildings and landscapes chosen as examples of colonial architecture.

## Swiss Chalet Houses

The Swiss chalet style of architecture originated in Germany in the early 19th century and was popular in certain areas of northern Europe and America for practical reasons. The style is characterised by gabled roofs with wide eaves (to allow snow to slide off without accumulating on



*Palladian windows of the old Parliament House*

the roof), and exposed construction beams including large brackets and decorative carvings and mouldings. By the 1930s, this style had come into vogue in Singapore and could be found in both bungalows and terraced houses.

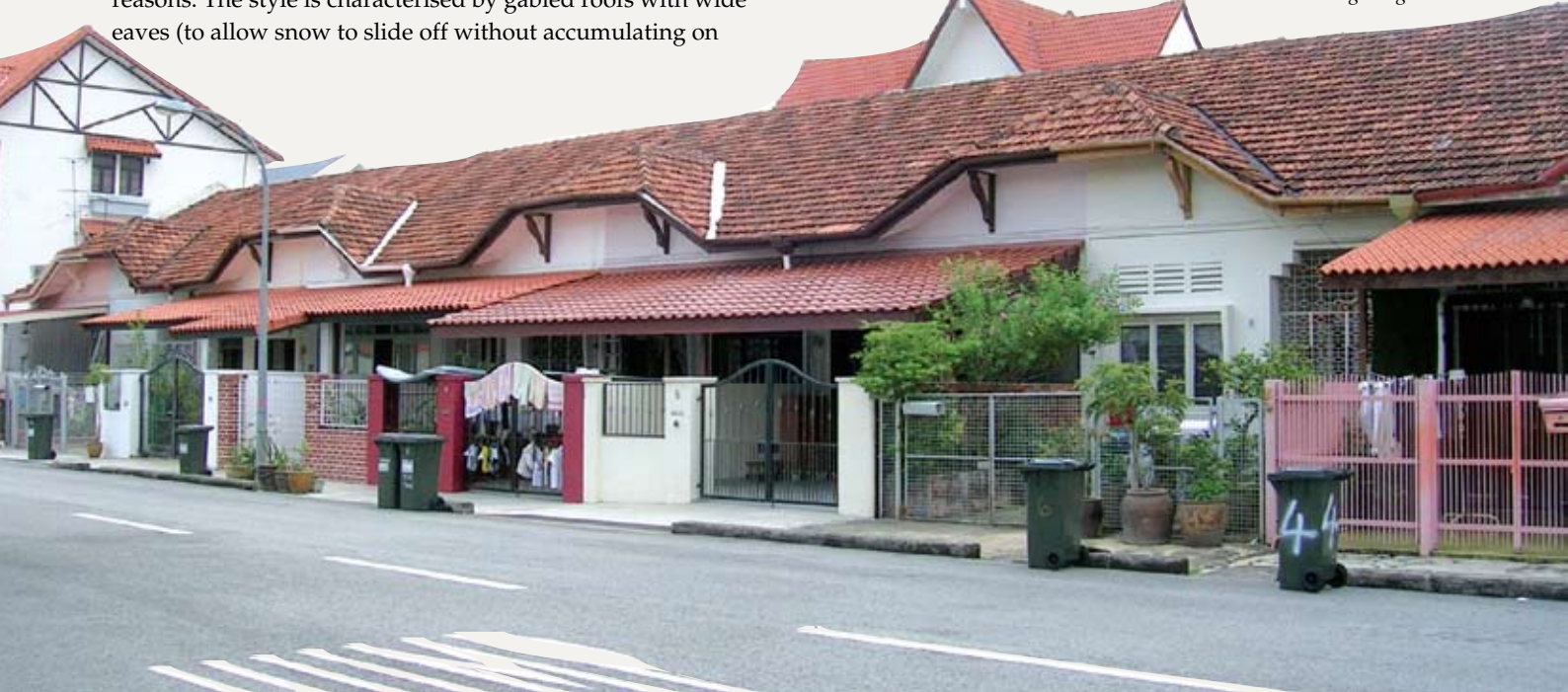
Although the chalet had no practical application in the tropics, its peculiar style caught the fancy of property developers. Good examples of chalet houses can be found in Thiam Siew Road, 258 Holland Road, Teng Tong Road (in Joo Chiat) and Joo Hiang Road (off Upper Serangoon Road).

## Palladian Architecture

Palladian architecture is a style of architecture derived from the designs of the Venetian architect Andrea Palladio (1508–1580). Palladio's work was based on the values of the formal classical temple architecture of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Palladianism became popular in Britain from the mid 17th to 19th centuries and is commonly referred to as Georgian architecture.

The Palladian window is the most famous trademark of Palladio's work. It consists of a window with an arched central light flanked by two lower straight-headed lights. This enduring feature of Palladio's style can be found in numerous buildings in Singapore such as the old Parliament House, Raffles Hotel, Stamford House and the shophouses of Seah, Purvis and Eng Hoon streets.

*Swiss Chalet terrace houses with exposed carved wooden brackets on Teng Tong Road*



## Black and White Houses

Tudor architecture was the final development of English medieval architecture and is characterised by distinctive, decorative half-timbering and steeply pitched rooflines. The 20th century witnessed the rise in Britain of 'Tudor Revival' architecture (also called Mock Tudor). This later spread to Britain's colonies, including Singapore, where colonial engineers adapted the style to suit the local climate, pioneering what became known as the 'Black and White House'. Good examples are found at 2 Pierce Road (India House), along Tanglin Road near Tanglin Mall and Monk's Hill Terrace (near Newton Food Centre).



*Photo of the Padang with Supreme Court (left) and City Hall (right)  
Source: picas.nhb.gov.sg*

## Domes

The dome is a common feature in European ecclesiastical architecture and was used frequently in Roman architecture. (The most famous dome is probably that of the Pantheon in Rome.) Domes reached a zenith of popularity during the early 18th century Baroque period. A famous example is the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in London, completed in 1708. Its architect, Sir Christopher Wren, is said to have been inspired by St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City. The dome of Singapore's old Supreme Court appears to be a miniature version of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral – perhaps a deliberate decision to provide the local British population with a touch of the home country when the courthouse was completed in 1937. The National Museum of Singapore is the only other building here capped by a dome. It is said that the construction of this dome in 1884 was so daunting for the original builder, Chan Ah Quan, that the project drove him to madness!

## Gothic Architecture

Gothic architecture flourished during the late medieval period. Some characteristic features include the pointed arch, the ribbed vault and the flying buttress. Gothic architecture is most familiar as the architecture of many great European cathedrals, abbeys and parish churches. Britain experienced a Gothic revival in the mid 18th century, which led to the construction of the new Houses of Parliament in London in that same style. In Singapore, St Andrew's Cathedral, the Church of the Nativity in Hougang and St Joseph's Church in Victoria Street are fine examples of Gothic architecture. In designing the steeple of St Andrew's Cathedral in 1856, the architect, Lt-Col. Ronald Macpherson, took inspiration from Salisbury Cathedral in Britain.



*Church of the Nativity in Hougang  
Source: www.veritas.org.sg*

## Greek Temples

Classical architecture refers to the set of building styles and techniques that began in ancient Greece and continued through the Hellenistic period and the Roman Empire. In architectural history, classical architecture also includes later styles derived from Greek sources. With this understanding, one can see that many European buildings (and subsequent colonial ones) are built following the basic design tenets of a classical Greek temple such as the Parthenon. An excellent example of such a building in Singapore is the Good Shepherd Cathedral in Bras Basah Road. The church's design is reminiscent of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, which was designed by James Gibbs in 1721. Gibbs' design



*Westbourne House at 25 Gilstead Road was built in 1927  
for Dr Yin Suat Chuan, father of Leslie Charteris, author of the series of  
books entitled The Saint*

spawned thousands of examples in the United States and the British colonies. Like Gibbs' church in London, the Good Shepherd Cathedral is essentially a rectangular structure with a pediment in the Classical style supported by a row of huge Corinthian columns – not too different from the façade of the Parthenon. Further modifications and more elaborate renditions of the basic Parthenon plan can be seen in City Hall, the Fullerton Hotel, on the façade of the old Supreme Court building or at 25 Gilstead Road.

## Dutch Architecture

A Dutch gable is a roof with a decorative parapet wall that projects above the adjacent roof to create an ornamental and symmetrical pediment projection in the façade. This roof can be curved or stepped or both. The Dutch gable was a notable feature of the Renaissance architecture that spread to northern Europe from the Netherlands, arriving in Britain during the latter part of the 16th century. One can find hints of this style in Dhoby Ghaut (next to MacDonald House), 130 Watten Estate and in the former warehouses of Clarke Quay, surrounding the fountain court.

## Mansard Roof

A mansard roof refers to a hip roof characterised by two slopes on each of its four sides with the lower slope being much steeper, almost a vertical wall, while the upper slope, usually not visible from the ground, is pitched at the minimum needed to allow water to run off. French architect François Mansart (1598–1666) is known as the father of the mansard roof. At a time when French houses were taxed by the number of floors below the roof, Mansart's roof had the added benefit of exempting the upper floor from taxation. Sections of the Louvre, including the central portico of the Richelieu Wing, are capped with mansard roofs. A revival

of the mansard roof occurred when Paris was greatly rebuilt in the 1850s, and the roof's popularity spread to America, Europe and even Singapore soon thereafter. The Istana is the only colonial building in existence in Singapore today with a mansard roof, although the new Parliament House exhibits a modern rendition of the mansard roof. Conversely, the new Parliament House can also be seen as a modern rendition of the old Police Court (built on Hong Lim Green and demolished in 1975), which also had a mansard roof. (The police post at Hong Lim Green is all that remains of the old police complex).

I hope this article will help you understand the origins and significance of our colonial-era buildings as you stroll through Singapore's conservation areas. Why not be a local tourist and explore Singapore from an architectural and social perspective? These buildings reflect Singapore's importance in the world and connect our island with developments in global history. No need for expensive hotels or plane tickets – and so much to be learned close to home from the language of architects and their buildings!

For further research, try the following resources:  
*In Granite and Chunam* by Gretchen Liu  
*Black and White* by Julian Davison  
[www.lookingatbuildings.org](http://www.lookingatbuildings.org) / [picas.nhb.gov.sg](http://picas.nhb.gov.sg)

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**Terrence Hong** has been a volunteer at the ACM since 2003. He has conducted walking tours on colonial architecture in the vicinity of Empress Place, Chinatown and Sembawang and enjoys photography building up extensive photo records of Singapore's colonial houses.

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*Photos courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted*



*The Istana is the official residence of the President of Singapore where he receives and entertains state guests*