

# Classical Architecture

## Through the Window of the Singapore Shophouse

By Terrence Hong



*Typical Late Style shophouse in Telok Ayer Street*

Most Southeast Asian cities with colonial pasts contain a disparate collection of old buildings that reflect the city's historic heritage. Although we admire, photograph and sometimes try to conserve these vestiges of the past, how often do we stop to consider why property owners commissioned certain building types or chose particular architectural styles? In this article, let me share with you how we can see the British colonial empire in its socio-economic context through the window of Singapore's ubiquitous shophouses.

The shophouses of Circular Road (Boat Quay), Club Street, China Square and Far East Square demonstrate a range of styles over various periods. These periods can be classified broadly as Early Style (1840-1900), Transitional Style (1890-1910), Late or Chinese Baroque Style (1910-1930) and Art Deco Style (1930-1960).

As one knows from strolling around Singapore, shophouses are terraced houses consisting of ground floor shops open to a common public arcade or 'five-foot way', with residential accommodation in the rear and/or upstairs. Some Early Style shophouses, such as those in China Square

or in Telok Ayer Street, which are two-storeys high and have austere, unadorned façades, look like those in the port cities of southern China from which many Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia originated. Despite looking 'Chinese', however, shophouses derive from classical European-style buildings such as the canal houses of Amsterdam or the Georgian terrace houses of England, which in turn derive from the classical architecture of Greece and Rome.

The evolution of the simple, unadorned shophouse into the elaborate and sophisticated building that it became by the early 20th century was a direct reflection of Singapore's growth in wealth and its importance as a global mercantile centre. Landowners and merchants commissioned Euro-centric buildings to demonstrate 'respectability' and 'modernity' in the eyes of their colonial masters and western business partners. At first, British or British-trained architects who had been schooled in the strict grammar of classical architecture designed many local shophouses. By the 20th century, however, Chinese architects who had been apprentices and draughtsmen in the British architectural firms established their own practices, accepting commissions from wealthy *toukays* (sir or master). These draughtsmen-turned-architects created elaborate shophouses that combined Georgian windows and cornices, intricate Malay woodcarvings and Chinese ornamentation in delicate, detailed plaster relief. Fine examples of these buildings can be found in Balestier, Koon Seng or Bukit Pasoh Roads.

Taking a look back through history, one can say that the rapid spread of classical architecture began during the Industrial Revolution. As the middle classes moved upwards, the higher echelons of British society became increasingly insecure about their own positions. They found in classical architecture, with its long history and formalised vocabulary, a common standard for demonstrating social status that was especially appealing because of the concepts of hierarchy and social order it embodied.

The rise of the printing press further helped spread the reach of classical architecture, with classical design becoming



*Modest Early Style shophouses in Telok Ayer Street*

accessible to a literate middle class through building manuals and pattern books that contained detailed measurements and materials' lists. Anyone wanting to build a classical style home or public building anywhere in the world now had access to comprehensive information about designs, dimensions and materials. The sameness of style found in buildings throughout the British Empire can be attributed to the wide availability of these resource books on classical architecture.

By the 18th century, rising fortunes also enabled many households to send their sons abroad. With its splendid collection of antiquities and classical Roman ruins, Italy became a popular 'Grand Tour' destination for young British gentlemen seeking to further their education in the art, culture and politics of Europe. Before long, classical design became a feature of British homes, which until then, had been primarily of timber-frame construction in the Elizabethan or Tudor styles from which Singapore's 'black and white' houses descend. Classical ornamentation such as pilasters or Palladian windows on a home's façade, whether in a colonial outpost or Britain itself, increased not only the building's appearance of grandeur but also the social standing of its owner.

Aware that visual proportions affect the mind much as music affects the ear, classical architects used both proportion and symmetry to create visual harmony. It was a tenet of classical architecture, for instance, that all buildings on a street be built in a single plane set at right angles to the street or that the windows of a classically designed townhouse be the same size regardless of which storey they illuminated. These rules applied whether the buildings graced the streets of London or the colonial enclaves of Singapore, Malacca or Penang.

In a shophouse, well-balanced, symmetrical windows occupy a large portion of the front façade so as to provide maximum light to the street-facing rooms – while also providing opportunities for passers-by to glance into hallowed ground-floor spaces, whether it be a shop or private home. Most shophouses have three windows or openings (including the door) on the front façade, an architectural tradition that makes reference to the Christian



*Transitional Style shophouse in Club Street with Georgian fanlights above the louvre windows*

trinity while also appealing to the Chinese, who believe that the number three is auspicious. (This also explains why *dim sum* is usually served in threes!)

Some theorists who see architecture in a purely social context, regard the rusticated (rough stone) base on which classical buildings rest as the least refined part of the building, a metaphor for the 'great unwashed' of society. The second storey, with its pediment windows framed by columns or pilasters, is seen as representing the middle classes. The third or upper storey and roof, supported by columns that run through the entire façade, are interpreted as conformity and loyalty to the monarch. Elaborate ornamentation, such as pediments and the capitals of columns and pilasters, is found towards the top of the building – a metaphor for the aristocrats and nobility who stand near the apex of the social hierarchy. This theoretical perspective suggests there's more to classical design than first meets the eye.

Although the Singapore shophouse borrows heavily from European models, early *towkays* cleverly incorporated their own heritage, resulting in a distinct architectural style best described as 'Chinese Baroque'. Late Period shophouses thus achieved a new level of extravagant ornamentation in which the elegant designs and exacting proportions of Georgian architecture met exquisite Chinese ornamentation executed by master craftsmen from Shanghai, who combined the skills and aesthetics of both western and Asian traditions. These shophouses, which truly reflected *la belle époque* of colonial Singapore, encapsulated the *zeitgeist* of Singapore's 19th century mercantile classes, who fully understood that the house was an extension of the owner's aspirations, expressing his taste and refinement while also reflecting his social standing. Today these elaborate and detailed classical buildings contribute to a historical and aesthetic harmony that remains visible despite the expansion of Singapore's modern cityscape.



*Art-deco shophouses in Bukit Pasoh Road with typical scallop shell motif on façade and flagpoles mounted on a stylized zigurat reminiscent of the Empire State Building*



*Restored China Square shophouse with a local interpretation of the Palladian window and columns, which run the full length of the façade*

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*Photos courtesy of the author*