

Heritage in Miniature

By David Whitworth



The miniature Black-and-White colonial house

A house is in effect a sort of designer cave and needs to be 'fit for purpose', which means creating a physically comfortable, functional environment for the inhabitants, whilst at the same time being in tune with its occupants' cultural and individual tastes, to make it feel home-like. With this in mind, the typical Singapore residential Straits shophouse and colonial Black-and-White would, at first glance, seem to be worlds apart. However, once one begins doing some basic research into their respective layouts and architectural features (during the early design stage of the modelling process), it becomes clear that the two house designs have much in common. A model allows you see the whole house at once, making the connections between its separate parts clear. This is sometimes difficult to do when one is standing in the real thing.

My daughters are to blame, of course. If they had responded to my attempts at non-gender-biased child-rearing, I would not now be hooked onto all things miniature. Introducing them to the joys of modelling with examples of trains and boats and planes hadn't worked and in desperation I turned to modelling a dollhouse. That



The miniature Straits shophouse

didn't light their fires either, but as an unintended consequence of building the first dollhouse, I was hooked, to the extent that at one stage I had six 1/12th scale model houses in our home. They had a room of their own, perhaps just a little over-the-top. Today, I am much better with only two dollhouses in our home here in Penang.

Probably the most obvious commonality is that both house types are ideally suited to tropical climates, having had features of the local Malay kampong house incorporated into their design. These features include high ceilings, vent openings high in internal as well as external walls, the absence of glass in windows in preference to slatted shutters, large over-hanging eaves to shade the walls from the sun, etc. All these are to be found in the architecture of both types of houses and provide a cool, comfortable living space.

Functionally, the use and placing of the various rooms is also much the same in both the house types and very much the same as in all human dwellings, irrespective of country and culture. The front, ground-floor rooms are set aside for entertaining visitors other than close friends and family members. These rooms are

dressed to impress the visitor and display the family's trophies: the best furniture, family photographs etc – a statement of status, if you like. This arrangement holds true for human dwellings as diverse as the Malay *kampong* (village) house, where visitors are entertained on a low veranda at the front entrance of the house, and the Lancashire terraced house with its formal front parlour for entertaining guests.

The upper-storey rooms and middle rooms are the domain of the family and near relatives, while the very back of the house has the kitchen and other service areas, which are the preserve of the servants and any other staff the family may employ. In fact, the Black-and-White house goes even further by having a separate building to accommodate the kitchen, usually connected to the main house by a covered walkway. All this is very different today, of course. Some new condominium units in Singapore are designed with the kitchen in the living room. Strangers and family alike are treated in the same way – with the expectation that all will join in the communal activity associated with the preparation of a meal. In my experience, this is very Singaporean.

Both the shophouse and the Black-and-White were built by and for individuals foreign to Singapore. The British as well as the Chinese inevitably felt more at home when surrounded with familiar things. This extended not only to artefacts such as furniture, cooking pots and food, but also to the architecture and decoration of the house. For the Chinese in Singapore, however, there was an extra constraint on a house's footprint, dictated by the frontage tax, resulting in shophouses being relatively narrow but deep, some as deep as 120 feet. This gave architects the opportunity to incorporate the distinctive air well, a feature reminiscent of the Chinese courtyard houses back home in China, while



Air well in the miniature shophouse

facilitating air-flow through the long, narrow building. The Chinese and Victorians also had a meeting of minds over their love of bright colours and ornamentation. The ornate, wrought-iron railings and pillars from Glasgow foundries as well as fancy glassware from Stourbridge still found in some renovated Straits shophouses, provide testament to this.

For the expat Brit, the Black-and-White house reflects the popularity of the mock Tudor designs of Edwardian England at the time when the first Black-and-Whites were built in Singapore. Other architectural features reflect the bungalow designs of the British Raj; many of the early Black-and-White house occupants had originally been posted to India. It was the marriage of the stilted Malay *kampong* house with English and Indian architectural features in combination that made the uniquely Singaporean colonial house.

Once the basic research is done, the models' components draughted, the cut plywood components assembled and white primer painted, the fun begins.

Turning the models' shells into a believable miniature of a living, breathing house is the real challenge and a source of endless joy. With field trips to research how a house became a home for the expat inhabitants and so many 'how to do' questions to find the answers to, the model is never truly finished. Of course, I must thank my two girls for leading me into the world of miniatures. There is no blame to attach.

David Whitworth is a retired engineer taking advantage of Malaysia's MM2H scheme to live in Penang. For more on creating a world in miniature, visit: www.david-dollhouse.blogspot.com/

All photos by the author



The upstairs family lounge in the miniature Black-and-White house