

*Straits Baroque shophouses in Mosque Street, c.1899*

Pastry-Cook Palladian, Coarsened Classical, Chinese Corinthian, *Tovkay* (boss) Italianate, the turn-of-the-century shophouse has been called many things, but to my mind the best description of this playful and inventive style of classically-influenced local architecture is Straits Baroque. While Pastry-Cook Palladian has a nice alliteration to it, Palladian these façades are most certainly not. Nor are they Italianate in the way that an architectural historian would use the term. Coarsened Classical, on the other hand, is too derogatory; they deserve better than that. My *Oxford Dictionary of Architecture* offers this account of Baroque architecture: "Theatrical and exuberant, it employed convex and concave flowing curves in plan, elevation and section ... complicated geometries and relationships between volumes of different shapes and sizes, emphatic overstatement, daring colour, exaggerated modelling and much architectural and symbolic rhetoric." This, it seems to me, perfectly encapsulates the spirit of architectural creativity that informs the turn-of-the-century shophouse, allowing for the fact that all of this had to be accomplished within the constraints



*Baba House, Neil Road, detail showing Chinese decorative elements*

imposed by a fairly limited canvas – a 20-foot shop front with two or three storeys piled on top.

The Baroque shophouse flourished between 1895 and 1905, and to me represents one of the high-water marks of shophouse architecture. Interestingly, the style emerged, developed and reached its maturity in a relatively short space of time. The first Baroque elements – rusticated piers, Corinthian capitals and fluted pilasters – begin to make their appearance around 1890 and five years later the fully-realised Baroque shophouse façade was in place. Before that, there had been little attempt to incorporate European features into the basic shophouse formula, jalousie windows and the occasional fanlight aside. Most shophouses in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were fairly prosaic affairs and when it came to the townhouses of affluent merchants and other notables, the ornamentation was almost wholly Chinese – the Baba House Museum of Neil Road provides the best surviving example of this style of architecture. Then suddenly, within the space of four or five years, the Baroque shophouse burst on the scene and quickly became the style of choice for the next ten years.

It has been suggested that the crossover was a fairly haphazard affair with local Asian builders more or



*Baroque masterpiece in South Bridge Road, Wee Teck Moh, 1908*

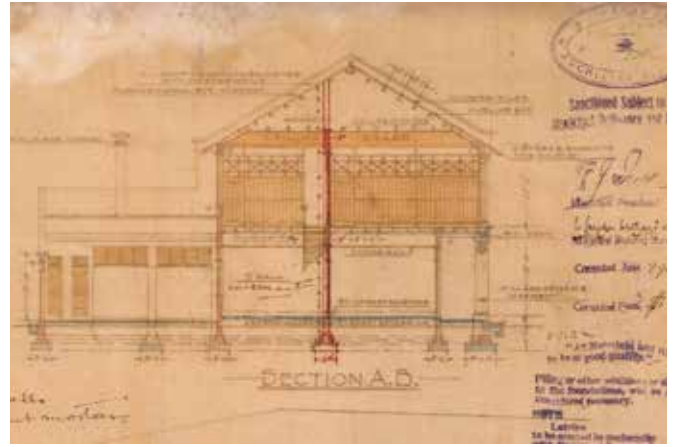


Old Parliament House, formerly the Supreme Court, 1870s

less randomly appropriating Classical features from the colonial architecture that they saw around them – government buildings, commercial premises and other European-style edifices clustered in and around the centre of town. For example, the late Lee Kip Lin, Singapore's premier architectural historian, writes of the "untutored ... application of classical features," in a manner that was "spontaneous, unsophisticated and hybrid," and no doubt there were many instances of cowboy contractors who then, as now, borrowed freely and inexpertly from the Classical repertoire, mixing ingredients together in a kind cheerful hotchpotch of contrasting Classical elements that was little more than a dog's breakfast, architecturally speaking. At the same time, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the process of adoption, especially in the initial stages, was a more measured and carefully considered undertaking and not in the least bit arbitrary or haphazard. When I say "evidence", I am referring to a huge collection of working drawings submitted to the municipality for planning permission between 1884, when records begin, and the advent of the war in the Pacific. These can be found at the National Archives in Coleman Street. Needless to say there are literally thousands of shophouse plans on record, which enables one to build up a fairly comprehensive picture of the evolution of the Singapore shophouse during this period.

Zeroing in on the typical Baroque shophouse from the turn of the last century, one quickly comes to appreciate the fact that this is no *ad hoc* assembly of disparate elements, but rather a carefully worked out composition which has its own rules and stylistic conventions – a sense of order that is no less rigorous than the precepts of Palladio, merely different. Often it is impossible to distinguish the work of one architect from another, so closely do they conform to a kind of common archetype or design template. Moreover, this is not simply a case of one man copying another, but rather it speaks of the development of the Baroque shophouse as a discrete architectural tradition in its own right with its own set of conventions and aesthetic principles. I don't imagine that the architects who were practising at this time ever sat down together and worked out what they could or could not do, nor that anyone published an architectural treatise on the shophouse façade to complement Vitruvius' *De Architectura* or Palladio's *Quattro Libri*. Nevertheless, a perusal of several hundred working drawings from around the turn of the last century leaves me in no doubt that there really is a clearly defined idiom that we can properly call Straits Baroque.

I use the term *Straits Baroque*, rather than Chinese Baroque as others have done, because not all of the architects working in this idiom were themselves Chinese. Nor, for that matter, were their clients who included Malays, Indians, Arabs, Eurasians, and even the occasional European. As



Working drawing with Municipal 'chop' from the National Archives collection

far as the architects themselves are concerned, the one thing that they all had in common was that at one time or another they received a proper schooling in the Classical tradition. Men like Yeo Hock Siang and Wee Teck Moh, Wan Mohamad Kassim and J B Westerhout, who were among the leading shophouse architects at the turn of the last century, started out either as apprentice draughtsmen in the Public Works Department, or found their first employment in one of the half dozen European architectural practices and engineering firms active in Singapore at that time. In either case, they would have received a formal training in the general principles of western architecture as part of their apprenticeship – presumably they would have studied pattern books and similar architectural treatises and in time acquired sufficient proficiency in the essential principles of architectural design and engineering to enable them to practise as architects in their own right. Moreover, by this point in their education they would probably have been quite well versed in the basic tenets of the Classical idiom.

This leads me to disagree with Lee Kip Lin's evaluation of the turn-of-the-century shophouse as representing a coarsened, that is to say *debased*, kind of Classical architecture. Rather, I see these architects as going about their business in much the same as way as the early Baroque masters of *cinquecento* Rome and Florence, who turned their backs on the Renaissance to come up with an entirely new set of architectural precepts and practices for the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The previous generation of architects had sought to emulate as closely as possible the architecture of ancient Rome, which they had carefully pieced together from the ruins that surrounded them and the writings of Vitruvius, the Roman author, architect and engineer, who was active in the first century BCE. The Italian architects of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, were bored by this received wisdom of the ancients and threw away their copy of Vitruvius in order to come up with something new, something daring, something vital. Michelangelo and those who came after him took the existing canon of Classical architecture and messed it about a bit. They rearranged the basic elements, played with the proportions and invented new ways of putting things together to create a vibrant, inventive, playful and intensely personal architectural lexicon of their own. In their own small way, the Singaporean architects at the turn of the last century were, I believe, trying to do the same.

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