MELAKA
THE TRANSFORMATION OF A MALAY CAPITAL c.1400–1980
VOLUME ONE

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MELAKAN architecture is unique in the sense that six centuries of architectural mixing and blending have induced a distinctive ambience that occurs nowhere else in Malaysia. Its growth has been organic, a product of circumstance and slow time, reminiscent of wine with a good base which matures and intoxicates. This is typical of those cities of the world whose physical forms are the result of natural accretion and continual moulding and re-moulding, a product of generations rather than of individuals. This largely undirected growth is reflected in street patterns and general layout. The Melaka River meanders down from the north through village clusters and flat rice fields and enters the town along the backs of shophouses and by stone quays to meet the sea in the strategic estuary that once opened on to the resources of the world, when the whole of Southeast Asia was Melaka’s hinterland.

The street pattern that has developed is a cat’s-cradle of narrow streets and oddly shaped spaces that resemble the crackle design on a celadon bowl, the result of ineluctable forces at work rather than of conscious design. Streets formerly led to natural destinations as circumstances directed, and now where they meet they offer courteous surprise, as well as tacit agreement whither they should continue. This element of uncertainty makes greatly for the charm of the largely pedestrian core of the original town. Chinese influence on the pattern of life of the town has been considerable, particularly in the commercial and religious spheres, and this is reflected in the architectural overlay of the shophouse (and its residential development, the terrace house, which has re-emerged as the town house in modern architecture) interspersed with temples. Commerce and theology, it is apparent, here go hand in hand. The left or east bank of the River has always been the administrative centre of the town,
even in very early times. There are indications that the original Malay royal palaces were on the summit of St. Paul's Hill, the most prominent landmark of the inner town.

The Portuguese influence on Melakan architecture appears to have been totally erased. From Portuguese records it can be inferred that when the fortress of *A Famosa* was built much of the stone was obtained from quarries on St. Paul's Hill,¹ which leaves open the question as to whether stone buildings had been erected at an earlier date. It is certain, however, that there has not been much apparent development of a stone tradition from that point onwards.

The heart of Portuguese Melaka was a military complex with a five-storey keep (*A Famosa*), several churches, a residence for the commander, two hospitals, a prison, and a council-chamber, all surrounded by a massive wall nearly a mile long (see Fig. 8 in Chap. 46). One church, on the summit of the hill, was first built as a small chapel, dedicated to Nossa Senhora da Graça, in 1521, and entirely reconstructed of laterite between 1567 and 1590 (cf. Chap. 46). It was renamed St. Paul's Church by the Dutch in 1641. Other buildings erected by the Portuguese included a Jesuit College on St. Paul's Hill which was founded at the instigation of St. Francis Xavier, the Church and Monastery of S. Domingos, the latter established in 1556, a convent built on Bukit Cina in 1581, and a church dedicated to St. Lawrence. Unfortunately nothing of these works remains except the walls of St. Paul's Church (Plate I)—the tower having been lowered to the level of the roof in Dutch times—and, until recently, the bare traces of St. Lawrence Church beside the Melaka River (cp. Note 211 to Chapter 46).

During their period of occupation the Dutch approached the problems of urban planning with more long-range concern and on more bureaucratic lines than had the Portuguese. In 1666 they appointed an Equipage Master, who supervised the fitting out of ships and who also functioned virtually as a building surveyor.² He ensured that the sizes of bricks and tiles conformed to standard, legally fixed sizes; he was responsible for the inspection of foundations, party walls, and drain construction; and he collected stipulated fees for surveys and building inspections. Provision was made for building lines to be defined and for the industrial zoning of lime kilns and timber yards in order to reduce fire hazards.

The Dutch assault in 1641 either destroyed or damaged virtually all the Portuguese buildings in the town. However, the victors proceeded to repair the few that remained and to add new ones. The sole surviving feature of the Dutch fortifications, for instance, is a gate that was built in 1669 and known as the Land Gate (Plate II: cp. Irwin, p. 799 below). On it the town's coat of arms was emblazoned as a dominant plaster frieze incorporating a junk, an armed man, and the seal of the Dutch East India Company.

In their homeland the Dutch tended to rely on earth banks rather than
stonework for their fortifications and on brick for domestic architecture, so that many of their buildings in Melaka give more than a hint of Amsterdam. As early as 1677 monopolies were being awarded to Dutchmen to manufacture clay bricks, roofing tiles of Mediterranean and Chinese patterns, as well as the large distinctive ‘Melaka tiles’ which have been popular right down to the present day.

The group of buildings now called the Stadthuys, situated at the foot of St. Paul’s Hill and facing a small river-side square, was built by the Dutch between 1660 and the end of the century (Plate III). A long wing of warehouses projecting to the east is the oldest part of the group, with the Stadthuys proper built later. They are simple structures, robust in form and fairly typical of Dutch municipal buildings, with their large high windows more suitable for less tropical climes, and their open monumental staircases entirely characteristic of Dutch provincial town halls. The original buildings were probably in fair faced brickwork, which almost certainly would have given rise to waterproofing problems and which consequently was likely to have been plastered over sooner or later. This has been a common device to cover bad brickwork in much colonial architecture, but in this particular case its inherent deficiencies have been mitigated by painting the whole exterior in a bright terracotta simulation of brickwork. This has resulted in a refreshing, startling, but surprisingly harmonious effect to which the small square in front of the Stadthuys, complete with its parish church, contributes a unifying component. This pleasing ambience could be further enhanced by reducing the width of the tarmac, thereby permitting a greater expanse of landscaped grass and shrubs.

Christchurch, built by the Dutch in about 1753 and standing to the north of the Stadthuys, is also painted terracotta, the two buildings harmonizing into an attractive architectural whole, although the present architectural form of the church (the porch and vestry were added in the middle of the nineteenth century) is reminiscent more of Mission style than of old Dutch practice. However, it is a good example of Dutch colonial architecture of the time. The building is simple in plan, rectangular without aisles or chancel, with a robust and dignified interior, 81 feet long by 42 feet wide and a flat timber ceiling carried by large single beams at a height of 40 feet. The brick walls are supported by a laterite plinth. Ventilation grilles punctuate the ceiling and there are large carved timber doors at its west end. The roof is of Dutch-pattern clay tiles. Mouldings along the walls are reminiscent of the former Town Hall (now the Palace) at Amsterdam and of the New Church in Haarlem.

St. Peter’s Church, on Jalan Pengkalan Rama in what was formerly the northern sector of the old Dutch town, was built in the eighteenth century, making it thus the oldest church in Malaysia still in use (Plate IV). Two rows of brick or stone columns carry a barrel vault above the central axis, on either side of which are brick outer walls. The church has an odd-
looking bell tower which, with its massive supports, even buttresses, and whimsical curved cornices, yet presents a truncated, unfinished appearance. The front gable of the church is curvilinear and the Classic ornamentation is unorthodox. The church proper has a modern Marseilles roof, the side walls have pointed Gothic openings, while the rest of the building has Romanesque and even Baroque characteristics, all pointing to a considerable amount of rebuilding. Its historical significance, however, is considerable, for it was the first permanent Roman Catholic Church to be built after the Dutch destruction or conversion to secular uses of earlier Portuguese foundations.

Other buildings of the Dutch period include the old house on Jalan Kota which now contains the Melaka Museum (Plate V). Not unexpectedly perhaps, it has been greatly altered, especially the porch, front wall, and staircase. The ground floor was probably the kitchen and store of the original house, the living quarters being on the upper floor, where window openings reach floor level, as in Malay houses. Turned timber balusters, Venetian louvres, Chinese pantile roofing and glazed grille-works, and sometimes Malay decorative eaves fascias very often give such buildings a hybrid cosmopolitan look that somehow is typically Melakan. The lofty Court House, situated to the east of the Stadthuys on Jalan Kota, is of fairfaced brickwork with cornices and pilasters of moulded brick. It is of a totally different character from the Stadthuys buildings and was probably constructed at a much later date. A structure on the summit of Bukit Senjuang marks the remains of an eighteenth-century fort. Its walls and arches are of brick, with laterite quoins, surrounds, and bonding courses.

Generally speaking, neither Portuguese nor Dutch construction principles have exerted much influence on present-day local architectural styles, which, especially in domestic building, have been influenced more by local conditions than by traditional styles, especially when the tradition has not been indigenous.

The Melaka-style Malay house belongs to a category analogous to that of those small and intriguing one-claw crabs found on beaches in such quantities that one is fascinated, yet puzzled, regarding their origins. Houses of this type were partially described by the Chinese travellers Ma Huan and Fei Hsin in the fifteenth century, and there seems to have been relatively little change in their form from that period to the present. They are found not only in Melaka Town itself but also in the outlying suburbs and in districts to the north, east, and west such as Alur Gajah, Jasim, and Masjid Tanah. They are of a unique design, with a rectangular ibu rumah (living room) in the centre flanked by a similarly sized rumah dapur (kitchen) at the rear, and by a narrow serambi (verandah) at the front that invariably protrudes either to the right or to the left of the main building’s side lines and which is approached by open ornamental steps, usually odd in number, of timber or tiled brick (Plates VI and VII). The main roof is steeply pitched and usually accommodates a loft, venti-
Fig. 1. Sketch and plan of a representative Melaka-style Malay house.
lated by large tebar layar* louvres, which is often used as sleeping quarters by the young girls of the house, or else for storage. The kitchen area is covered by a similar but less dominant roof, these two main roofs meeting at an architecturally unsatisfactory internal gutter which discharges over a small side-door usually placed at this point. The front serambi has a low-pitched lean-to roof which develops into a double-pitched form where it projects beyond the side walls. This area can be either enclosed or left open as a verandah. Windows, where used, are in close-boarded or louvred panels with sills very close to the floor, which itself is raised from four to five feet off the ground on joists and beams carried on short columns resting on laterite or concrete heel-stones. All these components are assembled by means of a neat system of mortices, tenons, and wedged joints and members, all pre-fabricated in timber, atap, or split bamboo, though often with Chinese roofing tiles, or perhaps more commonly today galvanized iron, aluminium, or asbestos. The finished house is easily transportable either in parts or in toto by manual lift by the whole village.

The problem of the origin of this unique and distinctive style is still obscure. Some have attributed it to Bugis who settled in Melaka, but others have claimed to see traces of Minangkabau influence. In any case, whatever its origins, this type of house has developed a distinctive style that can be truly called Melakan.

The same goes for the Melaka masjid and surau,† the forms of which are as uniquely regional as that of the Melaka house, and which can be found throughout the Melaka region, but especially in the older sections of Melaka Town itself. It is a simple, open building on a square plan and surmounted usually by a two- or three-stepped pyramidal roof covered with Chinese or Marseilles tiles (Plate VIII). The corners and summits of the eaves often display Thai-like finials or Chinese or Buddhist pagoda details. Columns and minarets of late nineteenth and early twentieth century masjid usually incorporate Renaissance decorations, and sometimes there is a hint of a stūpa,‡ a pagoda, a Thai wat,§ or of buildings in Nepal.¶ One theory holds that the general form was based on that of the wantilan, or ‘fighting-cocks’ court’ that can be seen in Bali even today. It has been suggested that structures of this type were converted to mosques on the advent of Islam. However, there is no evidence that the fighting-cocks’ court was ever found outside Bali and perhaps Java. Moreover, it had no storeys, and was a profane building unlikely to have appealed to Muslims as a locale for prayer. In fact, the Melaka masjid appears to have

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*Tebar layar: the projection of the upper part of a house wall beyond the lower so as to provide an aperture for the disposal of rubbish.
†Strictly a masjid is a mosque of general assembly whereas a surau is a private mosque, which lacks a mimbar (pulpit). However, the terms are often used loosely, and even interchangeably.
‡A Buddhist relic mound.
§A Buddhist monastery.
numerous structural affinities with the mosque at Bantam, which was itself fairly representative of the main Javanese tradition of Islamic religious architecture. Dr. de Graaf has suggested that the general principles of this tradition may have been brought from western India at the time of the Islamization of Java in the fourteenth century, but this is a hypothesis which requires further investigation.

The Chinese contribution to Melakan architectural styles, as has been mentioned before, is most strongly exemplified in commercial and religious buildings, namely the shophouse (with its residential development into the terrace house) and the temple. It resulted from the introduction of Chinese building forms, materials, decoration, workmen, systems of construction, tools, and craftsmanship, and is evidenced in the many temples, guild houses, and Chinese dwellings that abound in Melaka even today.

The Cheng Hoon Teng or 'The Abode of the Merciful Cloud' in Jalan Tokong, for instance, is reputed to be the oldest Chinese temple in the country and is entirely representative of Chinese overseas architecture in the seventeenth century (Plate X). It illustrates in physical and visual form all the orthodox elements of southern Chinese architecture, with its colour, intricacy, symbolism, and fineness of detail and materials. Another interesting building is the Hokkien Hui Kuan (Merchants Guild) in Jalan Gelanggang (formerly Jonker Street), which incorporates very fine carved details in wood and stone, with gilt, lacquer, and porcelain displayed with equal measures of commercial acumen and artistic sensitivity.

Chinese architectural traditions have always been involved with the pseudo-science of feng-shui or geomancy, which not infrequently also exhibits an underlying functional rationality in addition to its avowed purpose of adjusting cultural features of the landscape to the dynamic powers of the genius loci. A site at a T-junction, for instance, is frowned upon because it is the haunt of evil spirits. A house should face south. An architectural structure should harmonize with the landscape rather than dominate it. And so forth. A domestic building is normally rectangular and symmetrical about the north-south axis, with a large ancestral hall as the core and central feature, and with internal courtyards both providing internal light and ventilation and facilitating the collection of rain water, which is equated with good luck. However, the discharge of water from this area should be towards the front of the building (symbolizing wealth wisely spent) rather than towards the back (where it would imply wealth wasted and unnoticed). It is good feng-shui for a house to look out over the sea (or any other body of water, for that matter) rather than to face a hill. Applied decorations to buildings also usually have symbolic connotations: the dragon or phoenix denotes royalty; a bat, good luck; a lion, loyalty; and a deer, status.

There are many excellent examples of Chinese town or terrace houses on Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock (formerly Heeren Street) and Jalan Gelanggang, both formerly preferred residential areas. House lots fronting
Fig. 2. Sketch and plan of a typical Melaka shophouse.
Fig. 3. Sketch and plan of a large Melaka town house of the type that was built for well-to-do Chinese on Jalan Gelanggang and Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock.
the former street, in fact, stretch down to the sea on long and narrow allotments. This characteristic, which yields a maximum area from a narrow limited frontage, is also especially evident in the case of many of the old terrace houses in Jalan Tengkera and inland lots situated on roads bordering expanses of flat rice fields. Houses in Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, with their multiple courtyards and carved bats and deer, are the abodes of wealthy Baba families. Obviously good feng-shui has paid off. These houses are connected by common covered footways along the roadfronts beside open drains that quickly and effectively discharge the tropical rains. The footways are often tiled with skirtings and dadoes in hand-painted Delft or Wedgwood tiles, and each front door has a pintu pagar, an outer security swing-door in carved and fretted teak. A heavier inner door is shut and bolted at night. The front door is surmounted by the house motto, which usually takes the form of a short phrase such as Fountain of Plenty, Everlasting Peace, Southern Fortune, or Augmented Fortune. For the most part these maxims are concerned with material wealth, but occasionally they are of a more philosophical character. Other symbols of luck and status may be liberally attached to window leaves and wall spaces. The lower front of the building often has a short canopy of Chinese tiles carried on decorated granite corbels, and windows may be Venetian, Chinese, or Malay. Eaves fascias are usually in fretted Malay designs. Columns and pilasters may be Doric or Corinthian (the latter is especially popular, particularly when modified in accordance with the owner’s or builder’s eccentricity), and the whole front is typically loaded with porcelain figurines, dragons, phoenixes, flowers, and bats. The several courtyards in the interiors of these houses usually accommodate members of extended families who share a common kitchen at the rear. Houses such as these represent what may be called the Melakan Eclectic Style, in which Chinese, Malay, Renaissance, Mediterranean, English, Dutch, and now International accents all play a part. Echoes of and variations in this style occur in all parts of the Malaysian region where substantial Chinese populations have settled, but particularly in Pinang and Singapore.

With the advent of the British and the rise in affluence consequent on the expansion of the rubber and tin industries, the typically Melakan bungalow came into being (Plate XI). This was based essentially on the form of the Malay house, often with a Chinese tile roof, but incorporating English construction methods and plumbing, together with an eclectic range of details and decoration. Although many of these bungalows exist today, others are being demolished and re-developed as housing estates, mainly as a result of the desirability of their large sites and choice locations. Most of these bungalows were designed by architects in the Melaka Eclectic Style, and furnished with heavy and impressive gates, with verandahs, large rooms, servants’ quarters, and garages. They also incorporated louvres, grille-works, elements of rustication, and other
Renaissance displays mixed with Malay and Chinese accents that already constituted part of the local architectural tradition.

Many of the early Public Works Department buildings in Malaya, including Melaka, were designed by army engineers, some, like Major J. F. A. MacNair who became the first head of the Straits Settlements PWD in 1867, from the Madras Artillery. Their contributions included public buildings, quarters for government servants, and even some private houses.

These army engineers introduced a pragmatic approach to building, happily tinged with an appreciation of local architecture and often modulated by a formalism acquired from English architectural pattern books, which then formed an essential part of a colonial designer’s kit. However, these early PWD buildings often evinced considerable charm derived from a blend of functionalism, quaintness, and aptness. The typical early PWD quarters for government servants, for instance, exhibited these qualities, although the buildings themselves were of different types, ranging from bungalows and huge mansions, set amidst broad acres and intended for senior European executives, to compressed ‘lines’ or quarters for lowly labourers or coolies. In keeping with army and, later, Malayan Civil Service traditions, there was a hierarchy of sizes, spaces, and designs for the various grades of occupants. Surprisingly, however, all these structures exhibited a high degree of uniformity resulting from the common architectural approach. For a long period there was even a common colour scheme, so that ‘PWD Brown’ had become accepted as a specific tint in the commercial colour charts.

The design of the PWD bungalow in Melaka was based, as we have said, on that of the Malay house. Elevated on stilts, with a steeply pitched roof (for good rain run off), with high ceilings and louvred windows, and broad verandahs screened by ‘chicks’ and furnished with weatherboarding and timber grilles, it was a simple yet functional house adapted to the exigencies of the sun, rain, and wind of the tropics.

During the present century British architects have, in fact, made numerous contributions to the development of an architecture adapted to the tropics. The Public Works Department, for instance, was active in the building of hospitals, schools, personnel quarters, police stations, and other government structures, and it is encouraging to observe that experiments have been carried out with new building forms using traditional materials from the Melaka locality, including stone, timber, and atap. If this spirit of inquiry and experimentation prevails, there is every hope that Melakan architecture, which has developed from interesting and varied beginnings, will continue to devise new and distinctive modes of construction, and possibly contrive techniques and forms applicable well beyond its own locale.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


6. There is a lithograph of this mosque as it appeared c.1840 in C. W. M. van de Velde, *Gezichten uit Neêrlands Indië, naar de natuur getekend en beschreven* (Amsterdam, 1845).
