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TITLE: "IF WALLS COULD SPEAK" – A MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

During one's visit to evaluate the worthiness of any buildings for conservation purpose, the first question which crosses one's mind invariably is whether there would be adequate records of any sort still existing from which to work from. Most architects engaged in doing conservation work are constantly battling with this obstacle – the lack of documentation and records. It is a fact that maintaining records and documentation of events, activities and least of all building, is not a tradition in the Asean Context, unless it is something politically and socially significance. It is hardly surprising that many buildings being listed for preservation or conservation have very little supportive documents. Hence, the conservationist has to be a 'super-sleuth' of the architectural kind – well trained and experienced in methodology of construction of those times and having an eagle's eye for minute details.

2.0 MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

Within the context of Malaysia historical structures have to be categorized under the following headings: -

- a) Building Types;
- b) Architectural Periods;

These two headings can be further categorized under the following sub-categories: -

a) Building Types

- i) Government or Administrative-related buildings;
- ii) Non-Government or Administrative-related buildings;
  - a) traditional/institutional;
  - b) non-institutional;

b) Architectural Periods

- i) Pre-settlement period;
- ii) Post-settlement period.

(Note: It would be rather difficult to establish an actual date for these periods as difficult states within Malaysia were settled by different colonials at different times.)

## 2.1 GOVERNMENT OR ADMINISTRATIVE RELATED BUILDINGS

A) Buildings to be classified under grouping are the following, although it is not exhaustive: -

- District Office Building
- Government Houses
- Rest houses
- Post Offices
- Libraries
- Police Barracks/Stations
- Hospitals
- Churches
- Schools
- Resort Houses
- Fortifications

B) A brief description of Government or Administrative Related Buildings

These are structures built by the Colonial settlers, Portuguese, Dutch and British. The Portuguese being the earliest to have settled in Melaka in 1509 were followed by the Dutch when they defeated the Portuguese in 1641 and the British ousted the Dutch in 1807. The East India Company took Penang in 1786 and Singapore in 1819. The North Borneo Company took North Borneo in 1839 for the British crown, the Brook family settled and ruled Sarawak from 1841 and the earliest British advisor brought into the Malay States in early 1870s where they very quickly established themselves as the 'Administration'.

It is inevitable with succeeding Colonial settlers or conquerors; prominent edifices of the previous administration were destroyed or allowed to fall into disrepair and eventual ruin.

During the battle for Melaka, the Dutch destroyed the 'Feroza' (Castle) within the fortification, whilst the rest of the fortification and seven bastions were systemically dismantled by the Dutch and later by the British. The now famous 'Santiago' gateway of the A Formosa was saved on the intercession of Raffles, stands as the only evidence above ground of what is left of the Portuguese medieval city in the East.

These buildings were well documented and recorded. There were many plans not only of the city but also of the buildings, and impressions views recorded. Today, much about Melaka's records can still be found in the Portuguese and Dutch archives. Although many charts and maps of early Melaka were not very scientific, they were basis for any research or study about old Melaka. The British were the most prolific of all the Colonials. They built more structures and buildings; and most of these were well documented. They are held in the various archives and libraries both in Malaysia and Colonial offices in U.K. together with other records of many of these outstanding buildings.

However, the K.L. Municipal Council lost quite a substantial amount of its documents and records during the 'great flood' of 1971. Tracing these records and cross-referencing them requires some un-raveling. Therefore an understanding of the administrative structure, hierarchy and system of working of the British Colonial Department will assist in the search. Until now much of Badan Warisan Malaysia's research into buildings, their records and history are done with the assistance of Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard. An eminent scholar and former colonial public servant whose knowledge and understanding of the workings of the Colonial services, he has made the retrieval of records and documents relatively simple and fast. Knowing the source and how to contact the source also simplifies the task.

## 2.2 Non-Government or Administrative Related Buildings

### i) Traditional Institutional

#### a) Building classified under this category are the following:

- Palaces – Istanas
- Clan Houses
- Mosques – Masjids
- Guild Halls etc.

#### b) A brief Description of Traditional/Institutional Type Buildings

Here is where problems are encountered. Most of these buildings are not documented or records of their construction kept. We refer mainly to the vernacular types, be they of the early Malay settlers or Chinese traders.

In dealing with buildings of these type there is considerable time spent studying and recording whatever is still physically existing.

Actual records of ownership, function and purpose of building, cost of construction, any finer details of decorative elements, source of material supply, who built it or designed it, labour involved in the construction etc. do not exist. Therefore, only the basic structure bears testimony to the grandiose edifice and its historic and colourful past.

In depth study and research may necessitate sourcing the model in some other parts of the Malay Archipelago or China. Very often similarities in characteristic can be traced to an origin e.g. to Guild Halls in Kwantung province or mosques to Central Java. The oldest timber mosque in Malaysia, 'Masjid Damek' in East Java, whilst the Clan Houses of Penang traces their roots to those in Fukien province.

At source, many unrecorded question can be clarified. Often enough the method of construction still exists and building materials are still produced or stones quarried for making new similar type buildings. A recent publication 'Chinese Architect in the Straits Settlements & Western Malaya: Temples, Kongsis & Houses' by David G. Kohl is interesting as he discussed the possible roots and sources of many buildings found in the Straits Settlements.

Formal buildings do not vary from the traditional guidelines set out and were followed religiously by builders of yester-years. It is worthy to note that architecture, as a formal science did not exist then, therefore, there were no architects. There were artisans, craftsmen and masons who put these buildings together using the rules of building already setout traditionally. They complied with all governing rules on siting. Fung-shui, use of materials and skill of labour and craftsmen available. Special building materials would be imported from 'home source'. Construction details and method of putting parts together also follow traditional pattern and method.

ii) Non-Institutional

a) Buildings in this category are the following: -

- Shophouses;
- Kampong Houses;
- Urban Residential Houses;
- Gedung – Warehouses;
- Planters Houses;
- Coolie-lines, etc.

b) A brief description of Non-Institutional Type Buildings

This category is similar to the one described above. Where no formal records or documents are kept. Most of these structures

being fairly simple in constructional technique and their choice of building materials do not present much problems or difficulty to conservationists studying them. There are normally many living and still existing examples within the locality. Standardization in construction was the norm, dictated by the then available technology – very often simple. Be it buildings built in the urban area or the rural kampongs, this prevailing construction style – ‘post and beam’ with ‘king post trusses’ are the main choice. There is no need to source back to roots in other countries. Most often, decorative elements are lifted off the more traditional institutional buildings for use to reflect a cultural heritage or identity, or the use of craftsmen and artisans who are familiar with that particular decorative art form.

Traditional wood carvers would travel from village to village to sell their skill and therefore it is of no surprise to note similarity in work within a regional context. It is also through decorative elements and carvings that one may identify the original owners of the buildings. Decorative motifs that contain figures or birds, peony flowers are most likely to be Chinese. If they are Peranakans, the motifs will feature phoenix, peonies and rocks as essential themes. Plain geometric or flora carvings with no suggestion of living forms will reflect a Muslim owner. Accordingly they prompt the researcher towards the direction they ought to take.

### 3.0 How to overcome the shortcoming of lack of records and documentation

As mentioned at the Introduction, research into vernacular buildings need much more effort and time due to lack of documentation. Any conservation project therefore requires a longer start-up time. The following procedures become almost a prerequisite and necessity as a methodology to overcome the shortfall.

- A) Photographic and visual records of the existing building or structure;
- B) Measured drawings of the existing building or structure;
- C) Search Archives for: -
  - i) plans,
  - ii) letters,
  - iii) newspaper clipping, etc;
- D) Survey existing structure to evaluate:
  - i) existing condition and state of disrepair,
  - ii) existing finishes and type of finishes,

- iii) inventory of missing and still intact items within each space;
- E) On-site research to study:
- i) Structural system,
  - ii) Materials used for
    - a) Construction of structure:
      - substructure,
      - above ground,
    - b) Roof structure:
      - system,
      - technique,
      - covering
    - c) Finishes:
      - ceiling,
      - walls,
      - flooring;
  - iii) Contextualize the building:
    - History of area where building is situated, etc;
- F) Other sources of information:
- i) local schools,
  - ii) local historians,
  - iii) elder citizens,
  - iv) local photographers, etc;

### 3.1 Photographic & Visual Record of Existing

This is essential to record the current condition of what's still existing and standing. It also serves to record and provide pictorial evidence for close-up scrutiny. With modern invention and photography, the video camera can also serve as a rapid and instant record of the site situation – enabling instant review and study in a laboratory situation.

Photographic and visual records of structure are useful for: -

- a) retaining permanent record of existing;
- b) establish existing condition and situation;
- c) essential for close scrutiny and study;
- d) fast method of retaining information fro site;
- e) important for comparison purposes at later stage of project;
- f) assist in preparing measured drawings and making drawings of details, etc;
- g) picks up any defects, faults or cracks in the structure.

### 3.2 Measured drawings (See appendix A)

As a pre-requisite to any conservation project, there must be a set of architectural drawings for the purpose of study to ascertain the original 'footprint' of the building if it is obvious or suspected that there may have been some extensions added. The layout plan very often clearly defined such additions.

The Elevations and Sections also help to ascertain and determine which walls were built first and the ones added on later.

Measured drawings become the first set of documented record of the building. Its usefulness are: -

- a) provides a complete documented plans of the structure;
- b) essential for any remedial or modification work, without which work cannot proceed;
- c) determines the size of the building and also the sizes of structure, e.g. column, sizes, thickness of walls, sizes of openings etc;

### 3.3 Search through Archives (See Appendix B)

This is needed if the building was built by the Colonial Authorities or if they are Administrative related. Very often there are kept records of remarkable detail. Not only are plans essential, but also letters, official files during construction; reports in the press of the opening etc. are essential to provide information about the building.

### 3.4 Survey to evaluate the existing (See Appendix C)

Prior to preliminary works commencing, a complete schedule, inventorying the existing finishes of all rooms evaluating their conditions, specifying the materials used, listing the missing items or any special features worth noting. Generally the space/room in question is segmented into the ceiling, walls, floor, cornices, windows, doors and skirting. This evaluation report assists the conservationists to clearer, accurately and meticulously propose conservation procedures for the building.

### 3.5 On-Site Research

This is most important as the surrounding area has many 'tell-tale' signs, which only a 'hands-on' situation will reveal. Many remedial stabilizing actions for building settlement are governed and subjected to surrounding and prevailing ground conditions. Only by on-site inspection will one be able to ascertain for example flow of surface water and whether the site is water logged or not.

Debris strewn around the site can provide vital clue to the possible finishes and treatment of the original structure. Samples of timber off-cuts or chipped-offs provide detail information to the actual specimen and type of timber and possible age of the wood.

Hidden masonry structure below ground provide detail and clue as to where and how the original layout was. Therefore careful probing will reveal the extent and scale of the original complex.

i) Structural System

Constructional methodology, material used can only be studied by site inspection, when no documents are available.

Traditional constructional techniques are quite different from modern construction method. Many structures employ 'load bearing wall' construction with strip footings. Understanding of load distribution along the walls and diversion from openings, the use of arched or flattened lintels are critical. Lack of understanding may lead to unnecessary and undesirable destruction of the building.

ii) Materials Used

Understanding and knowing the exact material used is essential in repairs. Using similar material is necessary to maintain continuity and compatibility of material. Selecting a replacement of almost similar age is desirable.

A detail survey of the roofing structure, covering – type of tiles, structural system etc. is essential. Maintaining correct material mix for the finishes is essential for compatibility.

iii) Contextualizing the Building

In adaptive reuse, knowledge of the original building and its context, history, location and importance within that region will assist in providing a sensible solution. Buildings were built for a purpose. Very often all is lost with time. Its glorious past remembered only its present silence and muted awe. When one is in the midst of a space where the main hall or living room once used to be, looking admirably at the debris, the desolation and decay, one cries out from one's heart for a revelation, hence – 'if walls could speak', for it to shout out and tell us about its glorious or inglorious past.

### 3.6 Other Source of Information

In order to collate and obtain as much information as possible about the building for conservation exercise, whatever available source ought to be tapped. Every local source, from the local headmaster, photographer to the elder citizens of that area can provide assistance. Ultimately, the most essential aspect of conservation is to kindle the enthusiasm of the local people about the local piece of history. Local participation and awareness will further the cause of conservation.

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion one can only say that in the Malaysian context, where proper documentation and records are not available, one has to proceed along the method outlined for any proper approach towards conservation. It is tedious and difficult and will continue to be so unless, of course, 'if walls could speak'.

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