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Director's Column

"A Room of One's Own", Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, argues for the place of women in the literary tradition. The title also makes for an apt underlying theme of this issue of *BiblioAsia*, which explores finding one's place and space in Singapore.

With 5.3 million people living in an area of 710 square kilometres, intriguing solutions in response to finding space can emerge from sheer necessity. This issue, we celebrate the built environment: the skyscrapers, mosques, synagogues, and of course, libraries, from which stories of dialogue, strife, ambition and tradition come through even as each community attempts to find a space of its own and leave a distinct mark on where it has been and hopes to thrive.

A sense of sanctuary comes to mind in the hubbub of an increasingly densely populated city. In Justin Zhuang's article, "From Garden City to Gardening City", he explores the preservation and the development of the green lungs of Sungei Buloh, Chek Jawa and, recently, the Rail Corridor, as breathing spaces of the city. Zhuang echoes the thoughts of Minister Othman Wok from the first tree planting projects: seeing the planting of seeds as not just the start of the garden city but also as planting the seeds of the nation.

Libraries are also traditionally viewed fondly as places of retreat. In Singapore, they are increasingly seen by the population as urban respites. Joanna Tan and Liyana Taha's article, "Icons of Learning: The Redesign of the Modern Library", spotlight libraries and their cutting-edge designs that have been making waves in the community and continuing to reinvent themselves as community sanctuaries where one is inspired to engage in contemplation, conversation and collaboration.

Continuing the theme of finding one's place, Dan Koh brings to life the intriguing little-known story of the Singapore Jewish Community in his article, "Oriental, *Utai*, Mexican: The Story of the Singapore Jewish Community". He examines the history of this small ethnic group and how they found a space and definition of their own in Singapore. He considers the impact of the Japanese Occupation, Israel's assistance with the Singapore Army and dispersal of the former Jewish Quarters on this under-studied group.

In "The Invention of a Tradition: Indo-Saracenic Domes on Mosques in Singapore", Ten Leu-Jiun, a Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow, reviews the Indo-Saracenic dome that tops almost all the mosques in Singapore and examines the impact of how the choices made by the local Asian community shaped this familiar sight into something of our own, a unique Singaporean translation.

Benjamin Towell, in "An Introduction to Design, Aesthetics and the Ethics of the Built Environment", underlines the importance of the designing the built environment for the human experience. The responsibility of urban design, Towell posits, is to provide an identity and sense of belonging for people who live within that space.

The two exhibitions featured in this issue address the theme of leaving a mark in the ever changing landscape of Singapore. "Sumbangsih MAS: An Exhibition on Muhammad Ariff Ahmad", organised by the National Library, traces the life and works of the illustrious and highly-regarded writer, Muhammad Ariff Ahmad. Finally, in "Yang Menulis" (They Who Write), an exhibition jointly presented by the National Library and the Malay Heritage Centre, early Malay manuscripts, which form part of the National Library's Rare Materials Collection, are featured.

We hope that you will be inspired by the diverse attempts by many over the course of generations to continue seeking a place of comfort and community — in essence, a room of one's own in a wider environment sometimes too large for one to master.

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To stand in a library building of distinctive and
innovative design is to be present in a crucible where
every idea holds promise and anything is possible.

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On The Cover

Golden Mile Complex, courtesy of DP
Architects Pte Ltd.

Errata

The image on page 40 (right) of the
previous issue of *BiblioAsia* Jan—Mar 2013
was wrongly captioned and credited.
It should be “Cover of Improvement Trust,
Singapore file on ‘New road to Bukit Brown
Chinese Cemetery (Kheam Hock Road)’”
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.
We apologise for the error.

FROM GARDEN CITY TO GARDENING CITY

Justin Zhuang writes and researches on Singapore's visual culture, heritage and spaces under the auspices of "In Plain Words" (<http://inplainwords.sg>)

What started five decades ago as a government-led project to build Singapore into a clean and green city, has today become a dialogue between the state and its citizens.

(BELOW) Chek Jawa are wetlands located off the Southeastern tip of Pulau Ubin. *Credit: Sengkang, Wikimedia Commons, accessed 12 March 2013.*



A *Straits Times* photo of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew launching Singapore's first-ever tree planting campaign in 1963 best depicts how the idea of building Singapore into a Garden City first took root. As Mr Lee bent over to dig a hole with a *changkol* to plant a Mempat tree in Farrer Circus, Singaporeans stood around and watched — none of them offering a helping hand.

Fast forward to 2012, and one finds a different landscape of Singapore's Garden City. In August, a group of residents in Limau estate petitioned the government to conserve a stretch of greenery near their homes instead of selling the land for development. This was not an isolated case. In that year alone, residents in Dairy Farm, Pasir Ris and Clementi also clamoured for green plots near their estates to be preserved, using what has since become a tried-and-tested method of engaging the government: banding together to write petitions and meeting their Members of Parliament to convey their thoughts and concerns.

In a span of five decades, the transformation of Singapore into a Garden City is no longer a project that only the government is concerned with. While the state dictated how Singapore was to

be greened in the past — from the choice of trees and shrubs, right down to where exactly to plant them — Singaporeans now want a say too, and in response, the government's approach has evolved, and led to more spaces for the grassroots to grow with this national initiative too.

THE SEEDS OF A GARDEN CITY

Although the tree-planting campaign was started in 1963, it was only five years later that a more fleshed-out concept to turn Singapore into a green environment was introduced. In 1968, the idea of the Garden City was first announced by the then-Minister for Health Chua Sian Chin, who said during the second reading of the Environmental Public Health Bill: "The improvement in the quality of our urban environment and the transformation of Singapore into a garden city — a clean and green city — is the declared objective of the Government."¹

In those early years, the government tried to soften the impact of concrete development as a result of Singapore's modernisation. It became the lead designer to turn Singapore into a Garden City, starting with an initial plan that was simple: to camouflage the concrete in a

blanket of green, using the most efficient and cost-effective methods to ensure life in this up-and-coming tropical city was both shady and cool². Trees were planted everywhere, along roads and at open spaces, and species such as the angsana and pong pong were favoured because they grew fast and to heights that matched the rapid pace of urbanisation.

Such thinking prevailed for over a decade until 1980 when the developing city-state felt it deserved and could afford more quality in its green environment. To break the monotony of green, colour was added into the Garden City by introducing flowering trees and shrubs, including species like the bougainvillea, hibiscus and ixora, as well as fruit trees such as the mango, jackfruit, guava, *jambu* and some citruses. As then-PM Lee outlined in his vision of the future then, "By the 1990s, Singapore can become a green, shady city filled with fruits and flowers, a city worthy of an industrious people whose quest for progress is matched by their appreciation for the beauty of nature."³

Singapore indeed blossomed in the 1990s, becoming recognised not only as an economic miracle, but also as a clean and green city. The government then set out on an even more ambitious goal.



In the 1991 Concept Plan formulated by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) for the long-term infrastructure planning of Singapore, it was proposed that the future city was one where nature and the urban environment would be seamless. Former URA CEO Liu Thai Ker explained: “It is a case not so much of bringing nature into urban development but bringing urban development into nature”⁴. Over the last two decades, this has become known as Singapore’s transformation from a Garden City into “A City in a Garden”, as illustrated with new features such as the Park Connectors Network that allows one to easily jog, skate and cycle across the different parks located around Singapore. The crown jewel of the new “City in a Garden” is Gardens by the Bay, opened in 2012. Not only is this green space in the heart of the city’s new financial centre, Marina Bay, it is also where nature from all around the world can be found in its two conservatories. The gardens underscored Singapore’s ambitions to be a global city, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at its official opening said: “(We) could have used this for far more valuable commercial or residential developments, right in the middle of the new Singapore city. But our planners in URA believed that a large and beautiful park was an important element of our new downtown in Marina Bay South, just like Central Park in New York or Hyde Park in London.”⁵

A GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

From the beginning, the government has tried to get citizens involved in the making of the Garden City. In the second tree-planting campaign in 1964, then-Minister of Social Affairs Othman Wok told the press how the project was more than just about planting the seeds of a green city, but that of a nation too. “Each tree planted in a public cooperative effort like this operation serves as a symbol of the unbreakable bonds that united the people and the Government in their common task of nation building,”⁶ he said.

Besides rallying people and corporations to participate in tree-planting efforts, the government tried to bring about wider community involvement in the 1970s by introducing tax reliefs for households that grew their own private gardens⁷. With an increasing number of Singaporeans living in public housing by the 1980s, the government also started planting fruit trees in the estate’s common areas so that residents would maintain the gardens together and in the process develop a community spirit amongst themselves⁸. This was the hope expressed by then-PM

Lee, when he introduced this new stage of development for Singapore’s ambitions to be a Garden City. However, the former PM Lee also anticipated potential problems. “We have the knowledge; we have the artistic touch. We can now afford the cost. The question is, can we do it in such a way as to avoid vandalism or theft, without severe security measures which will destroy the aesthetic impact?” he asked. Adding that better fruit trees would only be planted later when higher social standards were the norm, he said, “Gradually, both at home and in the schools, we can nurture a generation that will have the social discipline to respect and share the fruits of communal property.”⁹

As it turned out, Residents’ Committees who were placed in charge of the fruit trees struggled to upkeep them and were soon calling for the government to step in and maintain them instead. While some estates could not find enough manpower to harvest so many fruits¹⁰, others could not stop the theft of fruits, and fines of up to \$1,000 had to be introduced¹¹. But it was not that residents were uninterested in gardening. Many of them had been resettled from kampungs where they once lived close to nature. These residents continued to garden in their private apartments, even though high-rise housing was not the most optimal space for gardening. As residents tried to find alternative spaces in the public housing estate to garden, they found their efforts hampered. While residents could keep plants in the common corridors of their high-rise apartments, they should not cause obstruction or pose danger to others — subjective rules that led some residents to assume there was an outright ban¹². When some residents in the housing estate along Boon Tiong Road began planting in the common area of their estate, they were issued notices from public housing officials to remove their “unsightly plants”.¹³ Residents had to come to terms with the State’s notion of what constituted a garden.

AN ORGANIC GROWTH

In 1988, a civic organisation challenged this definition by showing how citizens could participate in the Garden City project besides being part of official state programmes when it convinced the government to conserve Sungei Buloh. The Malayan Nature Society’s Singapore Branch, which has since become the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS), came up with a conservation proposal for a nature site that was scheduled for development as an agro-technology park. In 1986, a member of the society, Richard Hale, had stumbled upon Sungei Buloh’s mangrove and prawn



ponds and discovered it was full of birdlife. When the banker learnt of the state’s plans to develop it, he led a group of NSS members to document the richness of the site and formulate a counter-proposal. Plans submitted to the government in 1987 suggested Sungei Buloh be kept as a 318-hectare nature reserve, providing a sanctuary for birds and birdwatchers. In time, it could also become a major tourist attraction and education centre for students. To aid the cause, Hale even personally escorted former-President Wee Kim Wee, then-Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and former-Minister of National Development S. Dhanabalan to Sungei Buloh. These efforts eventually convinced the government to conserve part of the area, and it was declared a nature park in 1988.

Sungei Buloh was the first post-colonial allocation of land for nature conservation¹⁴,



and the society's approach became a template adopted by later initiatives when engaging the state: doing research and creating professional reports, formulating concrete counter-proposals, as well as winning public opinion and convincing members of the government. The decision by the state to agree with the society's proposal has also been seen as what became an "inescapable collaborative manner of governing"¹⁵.

This was reflected in the case of Chek Jawa in 2001. This wetlands on the island of Pulau Ubin was already slated for reclamation since 1992, but a chance discovery in 2000 of its rich biodiversity led a group of volunteers to follow in the footsteps of the Nature Society and come up with a report on Chek Jawa's natural heritage and a petition to the government for the conservation of this natural habitat.

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As then-PM Lee outlined in his vision of the future "By the 1990s, Singapore can become a green, shady city filled with fruits and flowers, a city worthy of an industrious people whose quest for progress is matched by their appreciation for the beauty of nature."

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The government surprised many by agreeing to do so, promising to leave Chek Jawa untouched for the next 10 years. After the decision was made, then-Minister of National Development Mah Bow Tan said: "Has there been any change in our thinking? No. What has changed is the environment. Over the past 10 years, people's awareness of heritage and conservation issues has become more acute. The Government has also become more aware of the need to accommodate this... giving people a sense of belonging to Singapore."¹⁶

The intent was not radically different from what former-Minister Othman Wok said at the 1964 tree-planting campaign, that getting citizens involved in a project such as making Singapore into a Garden City was a way of nation-building. However, as suggested by Minister Mah, the government's approach had

(ABOVE) Students planting trees at Princess Housing Estate at Alexander Road in 1969. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



changed, and it was opening up more space for citizens to participate. This was confirmed in 2003 when the Garden City Fund was launched to encourage individuals and organisations to get involved. As then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said at its launch, “In the past, the Government played a lead role in realising the vision of a garden city... However, as Singapore matures as a society and our people develop a natural affinity for greenery, the Government’s role should increasingly be complemented by civic participation.”¹⁷

FROM GARDEN CITY TO GARDENING CITY

Concrete change in the government’s approach can be seen in projects such as Community in Bloom. Reminiscent of the earlier initiative to plant fruit trees in housing estates in the 1980s, the National Parks Board (NParks) started this project in 2005 so that people could start community gardens in public and private housing estates, educational institutions and organisations such as hospitals. The aim was to “foster a gardening culture among the people in Singapore”¹⁸, and unlike earlier efforts where residents were tasked to take care of trees planted by the state, community gardens could only be initiated by individuals in the community.

Together, the people would decide what to plant in the gardens and how so, and NParks would only act as a facilitator, offering gardening tips and also helping residents navigate the thorny issue of land ownership by seeking permission from relevant agencies. In the last seven years, some 480 community gardens have been set up across the island¹⁹. Community In Bloom provided the state a way of allowing citizens to participate in building the Garden City still within its purview. As a news report on the programme last year highlighted, this was a viable alternative against the issue of citizens gardening illegally on state land, saying there was “no need for keen gardeners here to break the law.”²⁰

A more prominent project that had Singaporeans take the lead in gardening

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 shaping it.**
 —

the city was the Butterfly Trail @ Orchard, a project started by NSS in 2010 to create a four-kilometre long green corridor that cuts through the heart of Singapore’s shopping district. NSS partnered NParks, Singapore Tourism Board and Orchard Road Business Association to create “butterfly hotspots”, propagating plants that provide food and shelter for butterflies along the stretch from the Botanic Gardens through Orchard Road to Fort Canning. This project came about after the President of Singapore had initially rejected NSS’s proposal to plant a species of vine in the Istana’s garden to attract butterflies to the Orchard Road area in 2008²¹. NSS was then introduced to volunteer Margaret Clarkson, who together with the Singapore Environment Council, had also been thinking about increasing the number of butterflies in Singapore. Inspired by Singapore’s garden city concept, Clarkson suggested creating an urban butterfly trail²², and at the end of 2012, three of the five sections that make up this walking trail have been completed, and it has attracted 62 of about Singapore’s 300 known butterfly species to the urban jungle thus far²³.

Perhaps no better project showcases the government’s changed approach to working with citizens in its pursuit

to become a “City in a Garden” than the on-going Rail Corridor development. It has often been cited by ministers and Members of Parliament on how both the government and citizens can work together on the issue of development. In September 2010, Malaysia and Singapore reached a historic land swap agreement. A stretch of land that Malaysia’s railway line had been running on for decades was returned to Singapore in exchange for parcels of land elsewhere in the city. The land, which runs across the north and south of Singapore, connecting its northern tip in Woodlands to the city’s Central Business District in Tanjong Pagar, had become akin to a nature park as it was left untouched by Singapore’s rapid urbanisation over the years. A few days after the land swap, NSS vice-president Leong Kwok Peng wrote in to the newspaper to suggest the land be converted into a nature corridor, and the society followed up with a detailed proposal to the government. This started a public discussion that received much attention in the media and online.

The government soon weighed in favourably on this, and even invited public feedback and suggestions. By July 2011, then-Minister of State for National Development Tan Chuan-Jin, who was leading this development project, had formed an informal workgroup with various people from the nature and heritage groups, as well as architects and academics to chart the future of the land²⁴ and even explored the stretch with them. The group was later formalised as the Rail Corridor Partnership, formed to “look into the programming and promotion of suitable community activities and events along the Rail Corridor”²⁵. Over the last year, workshops and exhibitions have been put up to explore the possibilities of developing the land, while there have also been runs and walks organised for the public to enjoy the stretch too.

As Leong noted, the Rail Corridor development “signals the Government’s readiness to collaborate and engage civil society groups at a deeper level”²⁶. Unlike Sungei Buloh and Chek Jawa, the Government consulted and engaged citizens from early on in the formulation of the future of the Rail Corridor, even including them as part of discussions in an informal workgroup that has become a formal partnership. As Minister Tan said in the Budget debates last year, this was an example of “co-creation”²⁷, where the government was empowering citizens to participate in the making of the “City in a Garden”.

In a sense, this has allowed citizens to become “gardeners” of this “City in a Garden”, where they are not passive consumers of a landscape defined by someone else, but active participants in shaping it. In this area, citizens have been able to make a significant impact on Singapore’s policy-making process.

It is also interesting to note that most calls by citizens have been for the preservation of existing nature as opposed to the building of gardens. It is perhaps a reflection that at its core, the government still sees nature as a means to soften the city landscape as opposed to an end in itself. It holds a strong belief in “constructing” a clean and green environment, as opposed to giving nature the space to grow. This is also seen in the city’s increasing lack of open green spaces. The only time they exist are when buildings are demolished, creating empty lands that exist until new construction begins on them.

Such a mindset is worrying because there may come a point in time where the only definition left of nature is that of a garden. For now, one must be stubbornly optimistic and say that Singapore as a “City in a Garden” is no longer a static and monolithic one, as it has been over the decades. The garden is now blossoming with diverse voices — from citizens, non-governmental organisations and even corporations — that reflect a rich landscape. Some may want to call it a “messier” kind of garden, but another way of looking at it is to simply appreciate the beauty of nature as it evolves organically. ●

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Oriental, *Utai*, Mexican, The Story of the Singapore Jewish Community

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Inscribed in the urban landscape of Singapore, through buildings such as David Elias Building and the Abdullah Shooker Welfare Home, is the story of an oft-overlooked group in Singapore's history: the Jewish community.

According to one story, the name Jurong was inspired by local Jewish magnate, Joe David, whose relative operated an open-air cinema in the area after World War II. Mr David was commonly identified as “Orang Jew” (Jewish man), a name that morphed into “Jew-Orang”, and then shortened to “Jurong”.¹ This urban legend may be patently untrue, but it remains a romantic and telling story.² The fable goes to show the small Jewish community’s outsized cultural, political, and mercantile contributions to Singapore since the early 19th century, and yet, how distinctly their ethnicity has always set them apart in Singaporeans’ minds.

A RICH HOMOGENEITY IN OPIUM

In 1830, the first census of Singapore recorded “[n]ine traders of the Jewish faith”, all male, living in a British colony of over 16,500 residents.³ In all likelihood, they were Baghdadi Jews, also known as Sephardis — arriving from Iraq via Calcutta. Part of the Baghdadi Trade Diaspora, these pioneers constituted a handful of the many Jewish merchants who, from the late 18th century, escaped Ottoman governor Daud Pasha’s persecution to trade in the British East India Company’s far-flung outposts.⁴

Buoyed by Singapore’s new status as the Straits Settlement capital, these Jewish founding fathers thrived from the legalised opium trade, which earned a majority of the funds that went towards Singapore’s operation.⁵ From their godowns at Boat Quay and Collyer Quay, they sent Indian opium onwards to Hong Kong and Shanghai.⁶

Community historian Eze Nathan’s *The History of Jews in Singapore* provides an important portal into their lives. Like his father, they initially spoke Arabic or Hindustani and wrote in Hebrew. Their style of dress was Arabic, they smoked the *hookah* (an Oriental tobacco pipe), and without formal accountancy training, wrote business accounts on their shirt cuffs.⁷

Even by then, Singapore was already a multi-ethnic entrepôt, hosting various Malays, Armenians, Parsees, Arabs, Chinese dialect groups, amongst others.⁸ To almost all these immigrants, Singapore was a mere commercial stopover. Jacob Tomlin, an English Christian missionary who encountered the Jewish people in 1830, found them “well acquainted with their own scriptures and...[referring] to the approaching restoration to their own land.”⁹

Their return home to India was to be delayed, for by 1840, the Sassoon family, a pillar of the opium trade, set up shop in Singapore.¹⁰ Perhaps due to their influence, 1841 was to be a landmark year for the

nascent Singapore Jewish community: a synagogue and cemetery were built for its 22 people, including the first four women.¹¹

Following a petition, the Governor allowed three trustees, going by the surnames of Cohen, Ezekiel, and Ezra, to lease a plot of land to use for worship. Located in a Synagogue Street shophouse, Singapore’s first synagogue was a decidedly humble affair. In 1858, the visiting Israeli poet Jacob Sappir¹² reported that the Orthodox synagogue “gathered cobwebs”, as a *minyán* (quorum of 10 Jewish men) assembled only on some Sabbaths.¹³

The trustees were also awarded a 99-year lease for the first Jewish cemetery. Located at today’s Dhoby Ghaut MRT, the Orchard Road Cemetery, or Old Cemetery, was moulded out of “a very swampy area as is was known on the very fringe of the jungle”.¹⁴ It was to remain there until 1983, when the government repossessed it.

With these two places, the community moved from “traders” to “settlers” of Singapore in the census and more importantly, in their self-identities. As pioneering “port Jews”¹⁵, they did not have to confront the choice that faced the second generation: “adapt to the British-dominated world and succeed financially, or maintain the life they had at home”, as Joan Bieder frames it in her authoritative *The Jews of Singapore*.¹⁶

One such person who straddled both worlds with panache was Abraham Solomon (1798–1884). Like David Sassoon in Bombay, Solomon became wealthy through opium, and served as Singapore’s Nasi, the unofficial Jewish community leader.

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Slowly, Singapore began to become theirs too, even as their thoughts turned to their ancestral villages. Like the early Chinese immigrant experience, which poet Boey Kim Cheng writes about, the Jewish community was to “discover how transit has a way of lasting, the way these Chinatowns / grew out of not knowing to return or to stay, and then became home.”

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He led a British lifestyle, living away from the commercial centre in a large villa, where he once entertained surveyor John Turnbull Thomson.¹⁷ Simultaneously, he was a strict Orthodox Jew, refusing to eat with a *goy* (gentile) as it was not *kosher* (observant of Jewish food laws).¹⁸

However naturalised Jewish persons like Solomon became in cosmopolitan Singapore, they stood irrevocably apart in the name of the law. “[T]he Singapore Jews became thoroughly anglicised”, anthropologist Tudor Parfitt notes, but “the majority of Jews were always regarded

as Orientals or Asiatics”.¹⁹ Nathan adds that from young, he was made aware of this label: “a tone of disparagement was easily detectable” in its use.²⁰ Even the official recognition of their places, but not persons²¹, Jewish people were banned from British institutions like the Tanglin Club, and more pertinently, the British Army, where their attempts to fight for their adopted country in the two World Wars were rejected.

Despite this seeming hypocrisy, the Jewish community had a pressing reason to stay: money. Historian C.M. Turnbull records that by 1846, the six Jewish merchant houses outnumbered Chinese-operated ones, and were second only to the British’s. As a guarantee against the unstable opium trade, Jewish merchants had by now diversified their booming business, importing and exporting goods like coffee and timber, and moving into the stock market.²²

Slowly, Singapore began to become theirs too, even as their thoughts turned to their ancestral villages. Like the early Chinese immigrant experience about which poet Boey Kim Cheng writes, the Jewish community was to “discover how transit has a way of lasting, the way these Chinatowns / grew out of not knowing to return or to stay, and then became home.”²³

OPEN THE FLOURISHING FLOODGATES

In 1869, the Suez Canal opened, letting in a diverse Jewish community to Singapore: rich, middle-class and poor, Sephardis and Ashkenazis, all of whom carved out their

own enclaves. This second generation of Singapore Jews ushered in the golden years: in 1872, the Jewish population was 172-strong and mostly Baghdadi — by 1942, it consisted of nearly 2,000 diverse Jewish people, the height of the Jewish population.²⁴

For some, fortunes in both senses redoubled. Sir Manasseh Meyer, a first-generation Sephardic Jew, arrived early enough to take full advantage of the 1875 law awarding “aliens” like him “equal rights with the British” in property, and later, the tin and rubber boom.²⁵ By 1900, he owned

three-quarters of Singapore, making him the “richest Jew in the Far East” and the natural inheritor of Solomon’s Nasi role.²⁶ He also established homes in the Sophia Road, Katong and Bencoolen Street areas.²⁷

For others, migration was simply not what it used to be. Hearing tales of their rich brethren, large numbers of impoverished Baghdadi Jews began making the shorter trip to Singapore. They moved into the *Mahallah*, where most of the Jewish community now lived, and where “the gap between the rich and the poor was complete and dramatic.” These new Sephardis were clerks, pedlars of the traditional Baghdadi *roti*, or wholesale traders — a far cry from being landlords and opium barons. Nathan recalls passing the *Mahallah* houses, the poorest on Short Street, where “rooms were often almost bare of furniture.”²⁸

The Suez Canal also opened up the doors to another distinct breed of Jewish people: the Ashkenazis, or ‘white Jews’. As with the Baghdadis, the Ashkenazis were fleeing anti-Semitism, this time from the pogroms in Poland and Russia.²⁹

As compared to the Baghdadis, these European Jews, who looked more German than Arabic, were even more rooted in their country of origin. They sent their children “home” for school, unlike the Baghdadis, who were enrolling their children in local colonial institutions.³⁰ And although they attended the same synagogue, they kept to themselves even after death — until 1939, Ashkenazis were buried in different sections of the Orchard Road Cemetery.³¹

This new stratification in Jewish society also occurred within groups. Amidst the Baghdadi Jews, a rift was developing between the rich, English-speaking elites, such as Meyer and Joseph Elias, and the poor, Arabic-speaking migrants of the second wave.³²

In 1873, Meyer began planning a new synagogue to cater for the burgeoning population. The Maghain Aboth, a simple one-storey building, was consecrated in 1878 on Waterloo Street — a second storey was later added. But the widening language and class divide followed him there. In the synagogue, there was a literal segregation among three groups: the wealthy sat on the left of the *bimah* (dais), shopkeepers and small merchants on the right, and the poor behind.³³

Arguments began to arise among the synagogue’s members about religious rituals and the order of service.³⁴ To escape the rancour, Meyer simply built his own synagogue — Chesed-El — and brought in a personal *Hazan* (minister) from Baghdad. The imposing Chesed-El, incorporating Roman and Greek architecture, was opened

in 1905, but its distant location on Oxley Rise made it inaccessible to the *Mahallah*’s poor.³⁵

In retrospect, these divisions in the once largely homogenous Jewish community were inevitable. Besides the sudden population increase, the opium trade had been completely taken over by the British in 1910, denying newcomers a direct road to riches. All the same, the Cohens and Ballas are examples of prominent families who rose from extreme poverty, while the early 20th century was especially easy-going for middle-class Jewish people, even through the Depression. “We were all royalist,” Nathan recounts. “We were unaware of racial tension — were we not all British?”³⁶

This simplistic self-conception was to be unsettled by the First World War, when the Jewish status as Asian “left a scar on society”. Already denied access to the upper echelons of the civil service, these “Asians” were still so keen on volunteering to fight for the British Army that in 1914, H.J. Judah, a Sephardic Jew, sailed to England to enlist. He was granted a rare commission, and was subsequently killed in action.³⁷

In response to the mass Jewish migration to Palestine in the 1920s, a nascent cultural connection to Zion began to replace the shaky British identity. This broader self-positioning was spurred by the 1921 and 1922 visits of Zionist leaders Israel Cohen and Albert Einstein, respectively.

Hosted and supported by Meyer, Cohen spoke about the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which supported a Jewish state in Palestine. He also established a Zionist Society in Singapore. The next year, another prominent visitor came appealing to Meyer for money. A week before he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics, Albert Einstein pulled into the island on the *Kitano Maru* to much fanfare.³⁸





In the audience was a 14-year-old boy named David Saul Marshall. Having been expelled from St Joseph's Institution for missing class on Yom Kippur (the holiest Jewish holiday), Einstein's speech, appealing for the establishment of Jerusalem's Hebrew University, must have struck a chord in the Sephardic Jew.³⁹

As the first-born eldest son, Marshall parlayed this broader Jewish identity and push for social equality into *ISRAELIGHT*⁴⁰, a magazine he edited.⁴¹ He wrote in his editorial, "Our community is drawn from every part of the world... We should be able to build on these cultures."⁴² It was a considered sentiment about the multi-ethnic nature of Singapore life that was to underpin his political philosophy⁴³ as Singapore's first Chief Minister.

SURVIVING AS UTAIS

As historians Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack argue, the Japanese Occupation was far from a unifying experience.⁴⁴ During the Syonan years, the Japanese perpetuated the British strategy of "Divide and Rule", meting out different treatments to each ethnic group. The Jewish community was marked out for humiliating punishment, but escaped the sufferings dealt to the Chinese.

Even after Hitler began to terrorise Europe in the 1930s, the local populace was lured into a sense of contentment by British propaganda. The Jewish community heard horrific stories from afar and boycotted German products. Nathan, Marshall and others in the community raised funds for German refugees to find work in Singapore

and Malaya. Yet, as Nathan writes, "in Singapore, it all seemed remote. We were observers at a safe distance. The war had scarcely touched us."⁴⁵

It was only after Pearl Harbour, and the bombings of Singapore in January 1942 that people started to collectively panic. In the *Mahallah*, a boy saw the milkman suddenly split in half by shrapnel.⁴⁶

Once again, the Jewish community offered to help the British fight, and once again, they were turned down because they were "Asian". Marshall himself joined the Straits Settlements Volunteer Corps "partly to prove Jews were not afraid to fight", and also because "he had been ashamed that during WWI, [some] Jewish men told the authorities that they would be happy to support the war financially, but the *Torah* forbade them to go into battle".⁴⁷

A mass exodus began in late January 1942. Jewish families who could afford tickets queued in long lines at shipping agents, desperate for any exit passes. They were not spared racial discrimination. Nathan's sister, Dorothy, recalls an official withdrawing the family's passes when the official spotted her dark-skinned brother. By the time Singapore fell to the Japanese, half of the Jewish population had fled — most never returned. An estimated 250 sought refuge in Bombay, while others made it to Calcutta, Australia, Palestine, England and the United States.⁴⁸

For the unlucky half who were too poor to leave, their time was marked by a bizarre ethnic prejudice. An order was issued in the only newspaper, *Syonan Shimbun*, that Jewish people were to report at Orchard Road Police Station, near the Old Cemetery. The next day, the estimated 700 Jewish people who turned up were issued a white armband with a red stripe in the middle. Written on it were their name, number, and the word "Utai", Japanese for "Jew". They had to wear it at all times. Sent home, they were instructed to resume "normal life".⁴⁹

The *Utai*s tried as best as they could to do so, in the face of a severe lack of food and perpetual fear of the Japanese. By a strange twist of history, the Japanese also admired the *Utai*s. As a nation, they remembered how in 1904, the Jewish-American financier Jacob Schiff had gifted Japan \$200 million in support of the Russo-Japanese War. Following that, the Japanese had even conceived of the Fugu Plan, offering Jewish people an "Israel in Asia" as a new homeland.⁵⁰

Nathan recalls:

[A Japanese official] stopped me in the street and examined my armband closely. "You what-ka?" he asked. I answered in as firm a voice

as I could muster, "I am a Jew." To my astonishment, he grasped my hand and shook it energetically, smiling broadly. "Ah Jew!" he exclaimed. "Werry [sic] good! In the world three great J's — one Japan, two Julius Caesar, three Jew!"⁵¹

True to their unpredictability, the Japanese suddenly interned more than 100 Jewish men on 5 April 1943. They were imprisoned at Changi camp, where they were largely left to continue their way of life. No one knew why they were captured, but after the war, a story circulated that a German ship had arrived in Singapore — its officers instructed the Japanese to "do something" with the Jewish people.⁵²

Ironically, the Japanese Occupation deepened the local Jewish identity, which was already moving away from Asian-Britishness. Meyer's Maghain Aboth Synagogue became a refuge for what remained of the Jewish community, who gathered there to pray regularly. Stockbroker and philanthropist Jacob Ballas recounts how he became more conscious of Judaism during those lean years. He even started donning the *tefillin* (Jewish phylactery).⁵³

By the time the war ended, less than 700 Jewish people remained. Even the wealthy found their homes destroyed, but the two synagogues had been largely left unscathed. Over the next few decades, the Jewish population was to steadily decline in numbers, but one last gasp of prominence was to come.⁵⁴

ONLY A SENSATION OF INDEPENDENCE

In 1955, David Marshall was elected Singapore's first Chief Minister. His victory represented, in the political sense, the rise of the Baghdadi Jewish community and its Zionist movement. In his capacity, Marshall was responsible for giving Singapore its first taste of internal self-government, setting the colony on the path to full independence.

Yet, after the height of Marshall's 1956 All-Party Constitutional Mission to Whitehall, his political career, mirroring the fate of the Baghdadi Jews, descended, ending in his loss in the 1963 General Election. By 1990, when the Baghdadi community had dwindled to a mere 180, Marshall mourned, "This remnant of a lost tribe is disappearing... We are a vanishing community."⁵⁵

Marshall could take comfort in a few victories, at least. When Singapore achieved independence, Judaism was recognised as one of Singapore's eight official religions. The *Mahallah* and its surrounds were gazetted in 2003 under

(TOP) Jewish wedding group photograph from 1954. Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

the Mount Sophia Conservation Area⁵⁶, and the Maghain Aboth as a national monument in 1998. And other Jewish children never again heard the taunt, “Jaudi Jew, brush my shoe, bring it back at half-past-two.” When Marshall was bullied with that racial epithet on the first day of school, he punched the boy in his face.⁵⁷

As a new nation, Singapore built on its Zionist links. By 1956, Francis Thomas, the Minister for Communications and Works, exhorted Singapore to “learn a lot from the spirit which has turned the small State of Israel from a desert into a garden.”⁵⁸ In 1969, full diplomatic relations were established between Singapore and Israel, even if they were kept in the “closet”.⁵⁹

In 2000, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew revealed that the Israel Defence Force had helped establish the Singapore



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More particularly, the dispersed Jewish community presents a difficulty to urban and heritage planners. How can one identify a singular cultural enclave like Chinatown, if the places where the group worked, lived, played, and prayed are geographically scattered and in spirit, dissipated?

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army. “To disguise their presence,” he wrote, “we called them ‘Mexicans.’ They looked swarthy enough”. The secret identities of the Israeli military mission, headed by then Colonel Yaakov (Jack) Elazari, was invented “in order not to arouse suspicions among the Malay Muslims”. In less than a year, Elazari, with the assistance of the Mossad, trained 200 commanders, and wrote the founding manuals for the Singapore army and intelligence body.⁶⁰

More recently, American, Australian and other European Jewish people have joined Singapore’s Israeli expatriates. In order to survive, the Baghdadi community found that they had to open themselves up, and through the Jewish Welfare Board, focus on cohesion between the different “blood groups” by catering to a “fuller Jewish life”. However, as with the Sephardis and Ashenazis, there remains “a social and cultural distance” between the old and new communities.⁶¹

This manifested itself most clearly in the 1991 establishment of the United

Hebrew Congregation (UHC). Formed by an expatriate group of mostly Westerners, UHC brands itself as an “egalitarian, inclusive, progressive Jewish community”, in contrast to the Orthodox Sephardic practices of the Maghain Aboth.⁶² The differences between the three communities — Baghdadis, Israelis, and Westerners — is somewhat bridged by the Geshar programme, which aims to “foster interaction and understanding” between them.⁶³

However, by 1957, when undergraduate Appu Raman began his study of the Jewish community in Singapore, signs of the diminishment of community feeling were already apparent. “The younger generation is drifting away from all good principles of the Jewish community”, one Mr N tells him. A contradictory sense of self-identification also manifests itself. Mr N continues, “In public life one should forget about his community and think in terms of the people of Singapore. I know it is difficult to be a Jew but all the same being born a Jew I am a Jew”.⁶⁴

THE COLLECTIVE HISTORY OF AMNESIA

“Being a Singaporean means forgetting all that stands in the way of one’s Singaporean commitment”, S. Rajaratnam famously defined in 1969.⁶⁵ Our founding Culture and Foreign Minister also reflected, “The contributions the Singapore Jews have made to the development of Singapore are out of proportion to their numbers, which goes to show... that what counts is quality not quantity.”⁶⁶

Despite or perhaps because of their minority, the Singapore Jewish community parallels other ethnicities’ self-development. They were compelled to forget their past in order to identify precariously as Singaporean — a construct that simultaneously celebrates and plays down different ways of life.

More particularly, the dispersed Jewish community presents a difficulty to urban and heritage planners. How can one identify a singular cultural enclave like Chinatown, if the places where the group worked,

lived, played and prayed are geographically scattered and in spirit, dissipated? One could argue that the preservation of many of the *Mahallah's* buildings suffices. Yet, a 2010 Preservation of Monuments Board walking tour only featured the Maghain Aboth, and conflated Armenian and Jewish history with a stop at the Church of St Gregory the Illuminator. Despite the two community's historical links, each deserves to be called by their name, which surely is not 'Other'.⁶⁷

Furthermore, Singapore's lack of preservation of burial sites renders many cultural enclaves soul-less. The Jewish community believes that "[e]ven the dead will be resurrected", as a member of the community told Raman. "That is why in Singapore we had to resist the Government's plan to take over the Orchard Road Cemetery... We cannot exhume our dead. Not a single bone of the dead shall be crushed; that is the law."⁶⁸

In fact, the Jewish community hit a low point when all graves in the Orchard Road and Thomson Cemeteries were exhumed and moved to the Choa Chu Kang Cemetery — a fate that seems ready to befall the historic Chinese cemetery of Bukit Brown.⁶⁹ As a result, some Jewish families took the chance to re-inter their ancestors back in Israel. Future generations of Singaporeans were thus denied the chance to learn about and be with their forebears.

As with Singapore, other cities in Asia display a complex "port Jewish" identity; academic Jonathan Goldstein has identified Manila and Harbin as prime examples.⁷⁰ It would be instructive to study how Jewish identity is preserved in those cities to learn how best to do justice to such small, proud, and unjustly "Other-ed" communities.

But the onus is on people, not power, to remember and more importantly, react. Retrace Jewish paths: the *Mahallah*, Waterloo Street, Oxley Rise, the Choa Chu Kang Jewish Cemetery, and even Jurong. Listen carefully. *Shalom*, their shophouses, synagogues, and tombstones will faintly but distinctly whisper. *Peace be unto you.* ●

ENDNOTES

- PAP Jurong Branch (1996), p. 30.
- Jurong is possibly named after the city of Jurong in Jiangsu, China, as there are already mentions of the "Soongie Jurong" (Jurong River) in 1837.
- Nathan (1986), p. 1, italics mine.
- Bieder (2007), pp. 17-21.
- Ibid.*, p. 19.
- Goldstein (2007), p. 3 and Nathan (1986), p. 8.
- Nathan (1986), p. 9.
- Raman (1957-1958), p. 35.
- qtd. in Bieder (2007?), p. 21.
- Chan (1984), p. 14.
- Bieder (2007), p. 23.
- aka Jacob Saphir (1822-1885).
- Bieder (2007), pp. 22-26 and Raman (1957-1958), p. 37.
- Nathan (1986), p. 2. Orchard Road's considerable distance from Synagogue Street made *livayah* difficult, which requires bodies to be carried on a bier to the cemetery. See Bieder (2007), pp. 23-24.
- Historian David Sorkin's concept: "port Jews" were lucky to find themselves in ports that valued international trade. Because of their commercial utility, they gained some social acceptance and legality. In terms of identity, port Jews had lax religious observance, yet actively identified as Jewish.
- p. 51.
- That night, Solomon showed Thomson his Torah, the holy Hebrew scriptures, discussed Jewish religious law, and confessed the torture he had suffered at home. See John Turnbull Thomson, *Glimpses into Life in Malayan Lands*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bieder (2007), pp. 24-26.
- qtd. in Bieder (2007), p. 51.
- p. 58.
- Theo Kamsma points out that Jews were either identified as Arabs or 'other Orientals'. "That has [historically] made Jews, as a separate category, almost unrecognisable." See *The Jewish Diasporascope in the Straits* (2010), pp. 92-94.
- qtd. in Chan (1984), p. 14.
- p. 26.
- Bieder (2007), pp. 29, 109.
- Nathan (1986), p. 14.
- Goldstein (2007), p. 3.
- Chan (1984), p. 15.
- Bieder (2007), pp. 26, 30, 45-6 and Chan (1984), p. 18.
- Nathan (1986), p. 57 and Chan (1984), p. 18.
- Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.
- Chan (1984), p. 18.
- Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
- Nathan (1986), pp. 25, 33.
- Ibid.*, p. 33.
- Bieder (2007), p. 46.
- p. 25.
- Nathan (1986), pp. 67-68.
- Bieder (2007), pp. 58-59.
- Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
- It would be interesting to analyse David Marshall's early writings for their influence on his politics, like *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam* (2011), though Nathan warns that "the standard was not higher than the average school magazine", p. 82.
- Bieder (2007), p. 88.
- Nathan (1986), p. 82.
- "I am both a Jew and an Asian," Marshall famously pronounced. He was especially popular among the Chinese for his anti-colonial, pro-labour, and principled democratic stance. See Pingtjin Thum (2011), "'Living Buddha': Chinese Perspectives on David Marshall and his Government, 1955-1956". Indonesia and the Malay World 39.114 (Jun.), pp. 245-267.
- pp. 301-333.
- Bieder (2007), pp. 91-92 and Nathan (1986), p. 88.
- Bieder (2007), p. 93.
- Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.
- Ibid.*, pp. 94-96, 109.
- Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.
- Ibid.*, p. 99.
- Nathan (1986), p. 109.
- Bieder (2007), pp. 101-103.

- Ibid.*, p. 99.
- Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.
- Ibid.*, p. 195, Yeo (1985), p. 304, Goldstein (2007), p. 4.
- Urban Redevelopment Authority (2010).
- Tan (2008), p. 22.
- qtd. in Goldstein (2007?), p. 5.
- Kamsma (2010), p. 104.
- qtd. in Barzilai (2004).
- Kamsma (2010), p. 105, Bieder (2007), p. 170.
- United Hebrew Congregation (2013)
- Kamsma (2010), p. 105, Singapore Jews (2010).
- Raman (1957-1958), pp. 88-89.
- qtd. in Lim (2013).
- qtd. in Bieder (2007?), p. 168.
- The 'Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other' racial nomenclature was introduced in 1965, largely borrowing from British census taking. The Jewish community, along with other minorities of minorities, are reductively classed as 'Other'.
- p. 80.
- Bieder (2007), pp. 171-173.
- Goldstein (2007)

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- PAP Jurong Branch (1996). *Jurong Journeys*. Singapore: Oracle Works. Call No.: RSING English 959.57 JUR -[HIS]
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The Invention of a Tradition: Indo-Saracenic Domes on Mosques in Singapore

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The typically onion-shaped Indo-Saracenic domes that crown the city's mosques are a late 1920s introduction to the Singapore's architectural landscape.

Domes are typical features of Singapore mosques today. However, this was not always the case. In fact, domes were introduced into Southeast Asian mosque architecture only in the 19th century.¹ This trend can be observed in Singapore and within the wider Malayan-Indonesian mosque landscape. This article will discuss the proliferation of domes on mosques in Singapore by considering how the Indo-Saracenic dome became an “invented tradition” as a typical mosque feature on the island beginning with the construction of the Sultan Mosque in the late 1920s.²

The present Sultan Mosque in Kampong Glam was not the first mosque on the site. Its stylistic contrast with the previous 19th-century mosque that it replaced reflects the changing trends in mosque architecture in Singapore. Instead of the typical four-square-plan mosque with a multi-tiered pyramidal roof that typified traditional mosque architecture in maritime Southeast Asia, the Sultan Mosque was commissioned in the Indo-Saracenic style characterised by domes and arches.

The most distinctive feature of the Indo-Saracenic style is its dome. This type of dome has a distinctive ogee profile and is sometimes referred to as an “onion dome.” Over time, the Indo-Saracenic dome was abstracted from the repertoire of Indo-Saracenic features and adapted to local mosques. The dome eventually turned into an identity symbol for mosques in Singapore.

The Indo-Saracenic style is closely associated with British imperialism. The British created the Indo-Saracenic style in 19th century India, by combining Western architectural ideas with what they thought were the most representative features of the Hindu and Islamic architecture of India. The word “Saracenic” was used in a broad sense to denote “Islamic,” while “Indo” morphed from the word “Hindu.”³ In Singapore, the decision to build a mosque in the Indo-Saracenic style in the 1920s raises questions about how this style was viewed by the local mosque trustees. Viewed through the theoretical lens of post-colonial criticism, the Sultan Mosque becomes another product of the imperial project. However, a consideration of the details surrounding the commission of the design reveals another perspective.

This article will consider the importance of “local agency” (choices made by local Asian community leaders in colonial Singapore) in both the transplantation of the style into Singapore and the abstraction of the dome as a potent symbol of mosques. The Board of Trustees and Building Committee of the Sultan Mosque commissioned Swan and Maclaren,

(ABOVE) The exuberant roof decoration of the Sultan Mosque, rising above the shophouses in Kampong Glam. STPB Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

arguably Singapore's pre-eminent architectural firm in the 1920s, and the design was carried out by the firm's Irish architect, Denis Santry. It was through this collaborative relationship between Asian Muslims and a Western architect that a new vocabulary of domes and decorative minarets was introduced into Singapore's mosque architecture.

THE INDO-SARACENIC STYLE

The choice of the Indo-Saracenic style for the Sultan Mosque may be viewed as a culmination of a number of factors beginning with the birth of the style in British India, notions of modernity and Islamic aesthetics, and, last but not least, British colonialism in Malaya.

The Indo-Saracenic architectural style flourished in India from the last third of the 19th century to the early 20th century under British patronage.⁴ British imperialists in India regarded the Indo-Saracenic style as an appropriate expression for public buildings that would help legitimise British rule by presenting an image of continuity with the past.⁵ The style combined elements of Hindu and Indian-Islamic architecture with Western architecture. Indian-Islamic architecture was, in turn, derived from a synthesis of Central Asian and Persian features with indigenous Indian architectural features. For the British Raj, the Indo-Saracenic style was associated above all with the grandeur of the Mughal Empire, whose majestic palaces and mausoleums were much admired by the British.⁶



For all their apparent references to the traditional architecture of India, Indo-Saracenic buildings were in fact constructed with the most up-to-date European structural engineering, creating buildings that were at once modern and historical, Asian and Western.⁷ In British India, the Indo-Saracenic style found its way into all sorts of government buildings and public buildings, such as museums, railway stations and educational institutions. Thus, the Indo-Saracenic style was also associated



with progressive institutions and, by extension with modernity.⁸

The Indo-Saracenic style was introduced into Malaya by the British in the late 19th century, with the view that such a style was appropriate for a region with a Muslim majority. However well-intentioned, this Islamic aesthetic was misplaced because the Indo-Saracenic architectural style had no relevance or precedence in the Malayan architectural tradition.⁹ The cluster of public buildings erected by colonial architects for the British government that still stands around the Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur today is representative of the Indo-Saracenic style in early 20th-century Malaya. Soon, Indo-Saracenic elements began to proliferate in Malaya as the local architectural environment adapted the style to various types of buildings, ranging from local mosques to commercial buildings. An

example of a Singapore commercial building designed in the Indo-Saracenic style is the now demolished Alkaff Arcade, designed by David McLeod Craik and opened in 1909, on Collyer Quay.

While the Sultan Mosque was certainly not the first mosque in Singapore with Indo-Saracenic features, it was the first and perhaps only mosque in Singapore to be conceived in its entirety in this style. A mosque that predates the Sultan Mosque, the 1907 Abdul Gafoor Mosque, contains some architectural features that could be labeled Indo-Saracenic, such as its highly ornamental roof terrace of decorative minarets and a central octagonal turret capped by a dome. However, it falls short of being truly "Indo-Saracenic" because of the lack of a full-profile and monumental dome. This is further compromised by the presence of heavily-moulded frieze, capitals and plasters that evoke (Western) classical

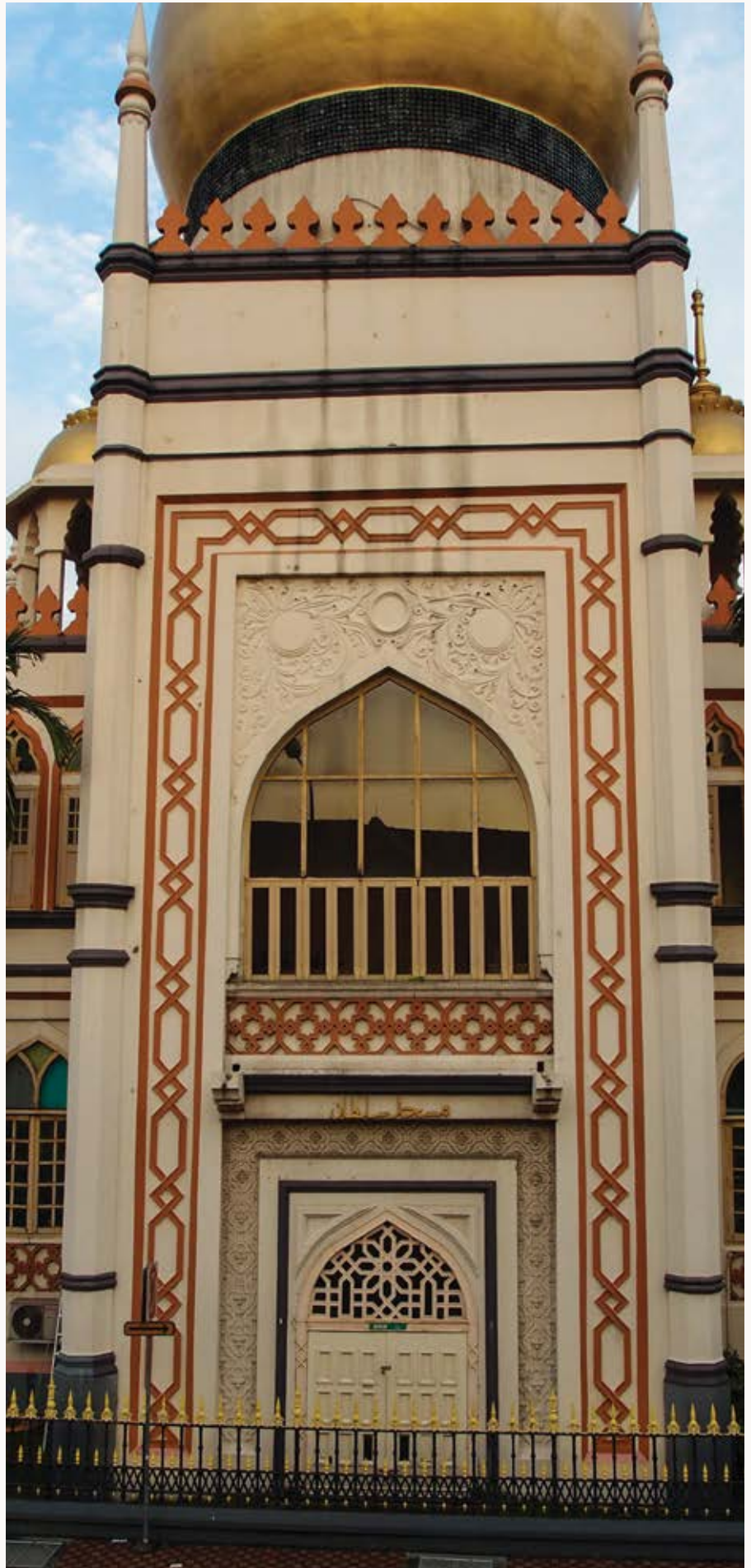
architecture. This is a fusion building, with an eclectic mix of decorative features taken from both Western and Indian-Islamic architecture. However, it might be seen as a first step towards the adoption of Indo-Saracenic architecture by the local Muslim community.

A NEW ARCHITECTURAL STYLE FOR MOSQUES

An undated photo in the Sultan Mosque's collection, probably taken in the early 20th century, shows a four-tier pyramidal hip roof superstructure supported by a white-washed square pillar, in a compound enclosed by white walls. This is the former Sultan Mosque, which was purported to have been completed by 1824 under the patronage of Sultan Hussein Shah.¹⁰ Sir Stamford Raffles promised the Sultan \$3,000 towards its construction.¹¹ The British had established a foothold in Singapore in 1819 through the East India Company, and Singapore was in its early stages of expansion as a British trading post. The building was of brick construction, but its architectural form still adhered to traditional Southeast Asian timber mosque architecture. The oldest existing mosque of this type in Malaya is the Kampung Laut Mosque in Kelantan, claimed by some to have been built in the 16th century.¹²

Although the original Sultan Mosque functioned as the royal mosque of the sultan in early Singapore, control of the mosque eventually passed from the sultan to local Muslim community leaders. In 1879, Sultan Alauddin Alam Shah, also known as Tengku Alam, the grandson of Sultan Hussein Shah, turned the administration of the mosque over to a five-member council.¹³ A Board of Trustees was appointed after 1914 to oversee the mosque. The 12-member trustee system ensured representation from various ethnic communities across the board by appointing two members from each major Muslim community in Singapore to its Board of Trustees, which were the Arab, Bugis, Javanese, Malay, Northern Indian and Tamil/Southern Indian communities.¹⁴ This was the system of governance in place when the construction of a new mosque was mooted in 1924, and Denis Santry was commissioned to design the new mosque.

Santry may have modeled his design after the Taj Mahal.¹⁵ This Mughal mausoleum was greatly admired by British proponents of the Indo-Saracenic style.¹⁶ The four minarets at the corners of the Taj Mahal complex have been replicated at the four corners of the roof of the Sultan Mosque. The shafts of the minarets follow the same gentle tapering outline and are similarly topped with *chhatris*.



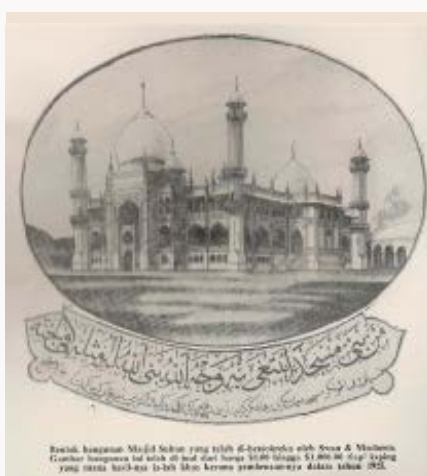
(ABOVE) The façade facing North Bridge Road decorated with the *pishtaq* motif. The doors open directly into the chamber containing the grave of Sultan Alauddin Alam Shah who passed away in 1891. Courtesy of Ten Leu-Jiun.



Chhatris are domed circular or polygonal pavilions that became highly ornamental features in Islamic architecture in India, and were in turn absorbed into the Indo-Saracenic decorative vernacular. Instead of a central and extremely monumental dome as seen on the Taj Mahal, two domes with a diameter of 40 feet each are positioned on opposite sides of the Sultan Mosque, one above the elevation facing North Bridge Road, and another over the main entrance to the mosque, facing the present Bussorah Mall. Flanking the monumental onion domes that rise above the corner minarets to 100 feet above ground level are four *chhatris*, just as four *chhatris* surround the Taj Mahal dome.

The façade facing North Bridge Road is decorated with the *pishtaq* motif. The doors open directly into the chamber containing the grave of Sultan Alauddin Alam Shah who passed away in 1891.

Ornamental crestings fringe the edge of the roofline similar to those found on the Friday Mosques in Kuala Lumpur, Delhi and Lahore. The first is in the Indo-Saracenic style, designed by Arthur Benison Hubback in 1909, and the latter two mosques are iconic structures from the Mughal period of Indian-Islamic architecture. Decorative pinnacles are topped with stylised lotus buds; they project at intervals from the edge of the roofline, and also spring from different heights off the decorous elements on the terrace of the roof. Like the Taj Mahal, the central portion of the façade facing North Bridge Road (the section directly beneath the dome) is executed with the *pishtaq* motif – an Iranian-derived portal design consisting of a monumental pointed arch set within a rectangular frame that is decorated with bands of ornamentation.



The mosque is elevated about 10 feet above the ground, with double staircases leading to the main entrance. There is one auxiliary entrance on each of the long sides of the mosque. The main entrance porch is designed in the form of a *chhajja*, a classical Indian rectangular pavilion with elaborate overhanging eaves. This feature was absorbed into Indian-Islamic architecture, and later, into the Indo-Saracenic style. The series of arches that run from the back of the prayer hall to the *qibla* wall, and perhaps all window frames and door frames within the building, as well as the mouldings on the *qibla* wall, are in the form of pointed-arches, multi-foil arches or cusped arches. These hallmark Indo-Saracenic shapes were assembled from both European and Indian arch traditions.

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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF LOCAL AGENTS

Unlike the Abdul Gafoor Mosque and the Friday Mosques noted previously, the Sultan Mosque is an enclosed mosque, and was reportedly one of the largest enclosed mosques in the world at the

time it was built.¹⁷ Its floor area measures approximately 106 by 180 feet. The sides and back portion of the prayer hall are split to incorporate a second floor gallery. The mosque has room for 5,000 worshippers and cost about \$250,000 to construct.¹⁸ The new Sultan Mosque was officially opened on 27 December 1929, the last Friday of the year, although it was completed only in 1932.¹⁹

The heart and soul behind the construction of the mosque was Mahmood bin Haji Dawood, a merchant and well-respected community leader of “Bombay origins”.²⁰ He supervised the project from the start until his untimely death in 1931 and is remembered as the “Builder” of the Sultan Mosque. Dawood first convened a meeting on 1 January 1924 to propose the construction of a new mosque to replace the dilapidated existing building. A four-member Building Committee was established to oversee the project on this occasion.²¹ Besides the uncertain identity of a “Mr Ismail,” the other three members were well-known merchants and community leaders. Syed Abdur Rahman bin Shaik Alkaff, J.P. was nominated chairman; Dawood was the honorary secretary and treasurer and Shaik Salim bin Taha Mattar was made a member of the Building Committee. All three community leaders signed their names as “owners” representing the Sultan Mosque on the building plans submitted to the Municipal Commission.²²

This was a mosque that the Singapore Muslim community could be proud of. When funds were not forthcoming in 1926, and appeals for funding to the Sultan of Johor and the colonial government proved unsuccessful, a meeting was called by the Building Committee. Thirty-seven Committee members were elected at the meeting to represent the Muslim community of Singapore with the expectation that they would solicit funds from their respective ethnic communities. The various communities included the Arab, Bombay, Bugis, French Muslim (probably referring to Muslims originating from the French colony Pondicherry), Javanese, Madras, Malay, Pathan, Punjabi and South Indian communities.²³

Construction of the new mosque began in 1928 after four years of initial fund raising and planning.²⁴ The Building Committee was most likely responsible for decision-making related to the new mosque, including the approval of Irish architect Denis Santry of Swan and MacLaren to design it. Santry was active in Singapore from 1919 to 1934, and his work included the Tanjong Pagar Railway Station and the Telok Ayer Methodist Church.²⁵ Several features in the physical design of the mosque point to a client-architect

(TOP) The main entrance to the prayer hall from Bussorah Street. The entrance foyer is in the form of an Indian *chhajja*. The windows are articulated by multi-foil arches (as seen above the *chhajja*) and pointed arches in different scales and proportions. MITA Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

(CENTRE) An image of the future Sultan Mosque created in 1925. Courtesy of the Sultan Mosque.

relationship that was consultative and collaborative.

Viewed from the exterior, the Sultan Mosque appears to be a unitary building, but it actually contains two separate domains: the prayer hall with its auxiliary verandahs, and a royal grave within an enclosed chamber behind the *qibla* wall, on the side facing North Bridge Road. This is the grave chamber of Sultan Alauddin Alam Shah who passed away in 1891. Incorporated into the new building, the grave is located beneath the western dome, and can be accessed directly from the exterior of the building through a set of double doors facing North Bridge Road.²⁶

When seen from North Bridge Road, the space behind the *pishtaq* motif appears to be connected with the rest of the building, but this grave chamber is in fact physically walled off from the other parts of the building. Thus, although structurally part of



the overall mosque building, it is segregated spatially and is symbolically distinct, a neat solution that accommodates the resting place of the Sultan without integrating his grave into a space of worship, which is a contentious subject within Islam. Such detail would have required giving specific instructions to the Christian Denis Santry, in order to work out a design that made such spatial distinctions within one building.

The second “tell-tale” detail of local intervention is a dark band accentuating the division between each dome and its drum support. Each band is made up of rows of glass discs, arranged around the “necks” of the two gigantic domes. Oral tradition has it that soya sauce bottles were offered to the mosque by poor people in Kampong Glam, and the Building Committee gave the bottles to the architect to see what he could do with them.²⁷ Whether it was Santry’s or the Committee’s idea to collect the bottles, this visible and unusual intervention into the design may have fostered a sense of community ownership of the dome design. It may also be regarded as evidence of the collaborative relationship between the

(ABOVE) Interior of the Sultan Mosque viewed from the second floor gallery, looking towards the *mihrab*. All images on this page are courtesy of Ten Leu-Jiun.

(TOP) The burial chamber of Sultan Alauddin Alam Shah at the Sultan Mosque is differentiated by a slight projection from the main building.

(CENTRE) The dark band encircling the dome is made of glass bottles contributed by the poor. A *chhatra* is positioned next to the dome in the company of decorative pinnacles with stylised lotus buds.



architect and his clients. It should be no surprise that the architect listened to suggestions by the members of the Building Committee. After all, it was they who approved the payment of the architect's fee.

THE DOME TAKES ROOT

The impact of the Indo-Saracenic style and its iconic dome was almost immediately felt on local mosques. The next mosques to lead the trend were the Alkaff Mosque built in 1932 and the new prayer hall of the Hajjah Fatimah Mosque designed in 1933.²⁸ Domes were variously placed on the minaret, above the porch-like structure at the façade, and on the gate posts of the Alkaff Mosque. This mosque with a distinctive curved gable was located on Jalan Abdul Manan, off Jalan Eunos. It was demolished around 1995, when a new mosque was erected nearby to replace it.²⁹

The Hajjah Fatimah Mosque was built around 1845.³⁰ When a decision was made to rebuild the prayer hall in 1933, Syed Abdul Rahman bin Taha Alsagoff, a descendent of Hajjah Fatimah, commissioned the local Chinese firm of Chung and Wong to design it in the Indo-Saracenic style. The prayer hall is dominated by a prominent dome supported by a drum lit by 12 stained glass windows. From the exterior, the pointed arches around the verandah are flanked by demi columns that rise above the edge of the roofline into full shafts topped by *chhatris*. The decision to use this style, and its design by a Chinese firm, indicate that the Indo-Saracenic design had become localised in Singapore. The Malabar Mosque on Victoria Street, opened in 1963, also used the decorative elements of monumental domes *chhatris*, and a domed minaret.

The roof of the former Haji Yusoff Mosque in Upper Serangoon represented a synthesis of the two roof traditions. An onion dome took the place of what would otherwise have been the uppermost pyramidal apex of a three-tier roof structure. This prominent dome rested atop a leveled-off two-tier roof. The Haji Yusoff Mosque was rebuilt in 1995.

Over time, a popular two-dome scheme emerged for the design of mosques in Singapore, featuring a main dome over the mosque building and a smaller dome over the minaret. Some examples are: "Singapore's last kampong mosque," the Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang built in 1970,³¹ the demolished Muhajirin Mosque in Toa Payoh built in 1977 and the 1980 Masjid An-Nur in Woodlands.

While better-endowed mosques were rebuilt with gleaming domes integrated into their designs, the humble kampong



22 (TOP) Alkaff Mosque, built in 1932, was one of the earliest Mosques in Singapore to incorporate domes into its design. All rights reserved, Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, 2009.

(CENTRE) The Hajjah Fatimah Mosque with its 1933 Indo-Saracenic prayer hall and the iconic minaret dating to around 1845. Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

(BOTTOM) An undated photograph of the Kampong Bedok Laut Mosque. Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

mosques followed suit, simply by capping a dome over an otherwise functional pitched zinc roof, such as the demolished Kampong Bedok Laut Mosque and the still standing Hussein Sulaiman Mosque on Pasir Panjang Road.

The dome, idealised in the onion-shape, has come to be regarded by many as an indispensable symbol of a mosque. According to Abdul Halim Nasir, writing about mosques in Malaysia, "Many people feel that a mosque is not really complete without the onion-shaped dome. This feeling has created restlessness and as a result mosques built during the pre-colonial and colonial period without the onion shaped domes have had the roofs radically modified so that an onion-shaped dome can be built."³² In an interview with *The Straits Times*, Dr Y. A. Talib, an Islamic Studies expert, said that domes were not compulsory on mosques, and were placed on mosques in different parts of the world out of the owners' preference.³³ The preponderance of domed mosques in the vernacular architectural environment in Singapore is thus an indication of a popular sentiment in favour of domed mosques.

The diffusion of the dome within the vernacular architectural environment in Singapore began in the early 20th century. This development highlights the active presence of local agents in creating meaning and significance that matched their ideals of what a mosque should look like. After all, domed mosques have long been common throughout the Islamic world, especially in the Middle East. For the trustees of the Sultan Mosque in the 1920s, the Indo-Saracenic style was a novel design that fused traditional Islamic stylistic elements originating outside of Southeast Asia with a technologically advanced structure of reinforced concrete designed in monumental proportions. The design and scale of the mosque were especially striking in an urban environment still dominated by two-storey shophouses.

Post-colonial critics and architectural purists who champion regionalism might lament the proliferation of domed mosques in place of a long-time native architectural form, namely, the multi-tiered roof mosque. Nevertheless, the "new" architecture received the endorsement of the local Muslim community. Moreover, the new style brought regional mosque architecture stylistically closer to the *ummah* (the global Muslim community) in terms of its formal expression.

This article highlights the multi-layered meanings that can be embodied by

architecture with hybrid features created in a colonial city. Swati Chattopadhyay has noted the "inordinate emphasis in architectural and planning scholarship on first acts and initial designs" that has helped to create narratives in which the colonisers are portrayed as "the only active agents on the scene, relegating the colonized population to the role of passive inhabitants or, at best, resisters of domination."³⁴

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- Metcalf, 1989, p. 77 & 84.
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- Ibid.*, p. 80.
- Ibid.*, pp. 77-90; Tillotson, 1989, pp. 46-56; Cannadine, 2002, pp. 148-9.
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- Current literature refers to the former mosque as the one built in 1823 or 1824. However, in 1926, a newspaper article reported that this mosque was the second building on the site. *The Singapore Free Press*, 1926, p. 11.
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The Sultan Mosque challenges such narratives and assumptions by showing that the British-Indian Indo-Saracenic style was embraced by local Muslim community leaders in Singapore for their own reasons and purposes. Their agency led to the incorporation of domes into the local idea of what a normal, modern mosque should look like, and thus created a new tradition in local architecture. ●

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Icons of Learning:

The Redesign of the Modern Library

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Many have considered the digital age and technological innovation as the death knell of libraries. Instead of going quietly into the night, libraries have adapted and evolved to meet the needs of their users. Libraries are more than just repositories of information, they are now places of innovation and inspiration.

A library, in its simplest form, is a repository of knowledge. Libraries contain records of our collective history — the things we know, said, achieved, failed at and hoped for. Libraries show us who we are and who we could be. A society that values libraries is a forward-looking society equipped to succeed in the global village.

Books make up the bulk of information resources available in libraries. Over time, library buildings have come to be regarded as repositories for a variety of print materials such as books, manuscripts, newspapers and periodicals. With advances in media technology, the notion of what makes a library has evolved. Besides books, the modern library now offers other information resources such as photographs, motion pictures, and video and sound recordings for public access.¹

In the current digital age, the library is undergoing what may be its most significant evolution yet. Computers and multimedia stations are now ubiquitous in library reading rooms as a result of the development of digital technology and the popularity of the Internet as a means of accessing information. Libraries have become hybrid spaces offering access to both print and digital resources.²

The needs and expectations of library users are also changing. Users are now able to access information remotely and at any time of day, and have come to expect the delivery of information resources in multiple formats, with round-the-clock online access. The way in which users consume information has also changed — information is shared, sampled and remixed to create new ideas and products. The result is new products incorporating repurposed content.³

WHITHER THE PHYSICAL LIBRARY?

With the growth of digital resources, some have questioned the need for physical libraries. As information resources become

increasingly available online, are physical libraries still necessary? The answer is a resounding yes. Studies show that, despite living in a world where information resources can be accessed remotely, people are still visiting library buildings.⁴ Today's library users are social creatures who continue to value physical libraries because the latter enable shared experiences, communication and interaction.

People continue to use libraries for traditional activities such as borrowing and returning library materials, and as sanctuaries for quiet reading and study. However, gone are the dusty, silent libraries of the past. Libraries are no longer just knowledge repositories; they are now hubs of community life where people connect through collaborative activities.

In a direct counterpoint to faceless interactions in cyberspace, the modern

—
**To stand in a library
 building of distinctive
 and innovative design
 is to be present in a
 crucible where every
 idea holds promise
 and anything is
 possible.**
 —

library has become a social space that brings people together in a productive learning environment to share, converse, collaborate and co-create. As library users move from content consumption to content creation, libraries have transformed from learning spaces into centres of knowledge production. The focus of library spaces has accordingly shifted from the display of information resources to enabling the activities of the users of those resources.

In short, *materials* have been replaced by *people* at the heart of the modern library.

To remain relevant and accommodate changing user needs and expectations, libraries worldwide are reconceptualising their roles and functions so as to continue to provide access to a range of information resources in a productive learning environment, and support knowledge sharing and collaboration by enabling users to connect both with libraries and with each other. As a result of this paradigm shift, the planning principles guiding library design are also changing as libraries reconfigure their internal spaces and architecture accordingly. In the digital age, the evolving definition of the modern library is driving the remodelling of library services and transforming the face of the library as we know it.

RETHINKING LIBRARY SPACES

While libraries continue their traditional roles as access points for information resources and loan transactions, library spaces are increasingly being reallocated and redesigned. Large physical collections at the centre of reading rooms are making way for groups of people and their activities. Virtual shelves are replacing physical ones as physical collections of print and multimedia resources go online as part of growing digital collections.⁵

To facilitate conversation and collaboration, libraries worldwide are introducing various types of spaces that support group-based activities. To accommodate students and adults who seek space for group discussions, for instance, libraries are introducing digitally connected workspaces with equipment designed for collaboration, laptop charging stations, and modular cluster furniture that users can customise to enhance group interaction. Such workspaces in a library environment that gather collaborators in proximity to



information resources can be a powerful catalyst for the synthesis of knowledge and the generation of ideas.

Media labs are another type of increasingly popular collaborative space. Media labs feature various forms of digital media software and tools that allow users to exercise their creativity and skills in recording, editing and re-mixing digital videos, animations, artworks and music. A good example is YOUmedia, an innovative learning space at the Chicago Public Library’s Harold Washington Library Center designed to inspire collaboration and creativity among young adults.⁶ The facility offers high school teens access to thousands of books, over 100 laptop and desktop computers, and a variety of media creation tools and software such as an in-house recording studio. Through workshops and the guidance of mentors, the teens develop their digital media skills and create digital artefacts such as photographs, songs, videos and blogs, thus building their critical thinking, creative and digital media skills.

In the drive to reconfigure library spaces, some libraries have created blended spaces by co-locating with partners offering complementary services. The Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department and Library Department, for instance, collaborated to create the Verde Library and Maryvale Community Center in Arizona,

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The focus of library spaces has accordingly shifted from the display of information resources to enabling the activities of the users of those resources. In short, materials have been replaced by people at the heart of the modern library.
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USA.⁷ Opened in 2006, this integrated facility combines a park, community centre and library with an auditorium for public performances and talks. The facility has invigorated the surrounding community: it has demonstrated the natural attraction of the library as a community hub, and the power of partnerships and cross-pollination in bringing people together to create strong communities. The response to the project has been positive: the community centre has the highest foot traffic in the Phoenix Parks Recreation System, and the library has the second highest for Phoenix Public Library branches.⁸

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INSPIRING LIBRARY BUILDINGS

People visit libraries for a variety of activities — to read, do research, discuss project work, attend exhibitions, participate in community meetings and workshops, work away from home, and enjoy multi-media entertainment, among others — but they also want these activities to take place in an inspiring, aesthetically pleasing environment.⁹ As with the internal spaces of libraries, the architecture of library buildings is being transformed. From the futuristic Joe and Rika Mansueto Library¹⁰ at the University of Chicago to the imposing Seattle Public Library, these inspiring buildings are proof that reports of the death of the physical library have been exaggerated.

An inspiring library building is more than the sum of its spaces. It is a symbol of the power of ideas and knowledge, and a declaration of national pride, achievement, history and power. The inspiring libraries of today are incubators of learning and creativity as well as expressions of the learning and creativity they foster. They are statements of who we are as a nation, an assertion of our belief in the value of knowledge as the foundation of a literate and learned society. To stand in a library building of distinctive and innovative design is to be present in a crucible where every idea holds promise and anything is possible.

The Stuttgart City Library in southern Germany is a fine example of an inspiring library building.¹¹ Opened in 2011, the impressive cuboid structure dominates Mailänder Platz, an area slated to become the future city centre. The building is a square five-storey room wrapped in a shell of books. At its heart, a fountain marks a meditative space illuminated by a central roof light.¹² Alluding to the library as a sanctuary akin to a place of worship, the design of the Stuttgart City Library draws its inspiration from that of the Pantheon, the ancient temple to the Roman gods. The building designer, Korean architect Eun Young Yi, based the design on her belief that “Stuttgart’s city library — as the intellectual and cultural centre of urban life — should occupy the position previously attributed to churches and palaces: a ‘foundation stone for a new society and a new spirit’.”¹³ Given the symbolism of its design and the grand presence of the structure, the building has been lauded as “a striking endorsement” of the physical library in the age of digitisation.¹⁴

The Seattle Public Library, designed by renowned architects Rem Koolhaas and Joshua Prince-Ramus, is another outstanding example of inspiring library architecture.¹⁵ The internal spaces of the building are divided into those centred on traditional uses, including an auditorium and meeting rooms; and a series of flexible open floors that can transform to meet future needs. Books are organised in a user-friendly spiral that encourages browsing and discovery, physically expressing the Dewey Decimal System in an arrangement that starts from 000 on the bottom curve to 999 at the top. To encourage creative interactions, the architects created the open-plan Mixing Chamber, a sweeping 19,500-sq-ft “trading floor” where librarians are “experts in a trading room of information” and sought after for their subject expertise and curatorial skills. The chamber features 132 computers, and offers a virtual reference

service via online chat. The building as a whole, says Koolhaas, “is at the same time old-fashioned in terms of resurrecting the public (realm), and contemporary in terms of addressing the key issue of whether the book is still relevant.”¹⁶

Taking the community focus in the design of library spaces and architecture to its logical extreme is the Halifax Central Library in Canada¹⁷ slated for completion in 2014. The building was deliberately planned and designed with extensive public consultation to create a library that would be a community icon, born of the community to serve the community.

The community was consulted on the building design through a series of public and focus group meetings. Residents wanted the new library to provide equal access to rich information resources for knowledge, learning and personal growth

by blending traditional library services with innovative, accessible spaces that could provide opportunities for civic and social interaction. Residents also wanted a library with distinctive and innovative architecture, a civic landmark and a source of pride and inspiration that could contribute to the economic revitalisation of the downtown area and spark cultural and learning activities. All the ideas and feedback gathered at the meetings went towards inspiring the building design.

LIBRARY DESIGN IN SINGAPORE

The development of the library system in Singapore has, until relatively recently, focused on meeting the needs of the population for reading materials and information resources. The establishment of the first full-time public library in



(TOP) The facade of Bishan Public Library. Patrick Bingham-Hall, courtesy of LOOK Architects.

(BOTTOM) The proposed children's area in Halifax Central Library, which is to be completed in 2014. Courtesy of Halifax Public Libraries ©2013.

Queenstown in 1970 was the first step towards creating a network of libraries throughout the island to make libraries accessible to all.¹⁸

Today, libraries play a critical role as the main public advocate of reading and literacy in Singapore. Libraries provide equal access to print and digital resources for all age groups and for all segments of society. Beyond this, libraries in Singapore are well-loved public spaces. When compared with international libraries in other cities with populations of over 1 million people, Singapore libraries ranked second in terms of visits per capita.¹⁹

Singapore's libraries have become social learning hubs. Libraries draw people together in a neutral social space where they interact through shared learning activities such as talks, book clubs and group discussions. By enabling such public interactions, libraries promote

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tolerance, civility and graciousness, and help to build social ties that moderate the behaviour of the community positively. In the current digital age, when people are becoming increasingly disconnected from their communities and socially isolated, libraries play a significant role in ensuring that we remain connected to each other not just remotely through the Internet, but also through close social ties.

Libraries are also becoming social spaces that encourage interaction between people and also between people and information. For instance, libraries are curating exhibitions to initiate interaction between library resources and patrons. Such exhibitions not only showcase the rich collections that libraries offer, but also open a doorway to local history and heritage. The National Library's recent *Campaign City* exhibition, for instance, highlighted diverse efforts in nation-building over the years, and also enabled re-interpretations of these campaigns via artworks by commissioned artists and youth.

Library design is thus important in enabling libraries to remain relevant to users. It impacts the ability of libraries

to reach out to people and to promote social and creative interaction. The re-conceptualisation of libraries and the reshaping of library spaces around user needs acknowledge that libraries are uniquely placed to support the development of a knowledgeable people.

Library design in Singapore has already taken some steps toward the transformative and the inspirational with the creation of the National Library building in 2005,²⁰ Bishan Public Library in 2006,²¹ and the recently launched Library@Chinatown in January 2013.²² The creative use of library space will go a step further with the opening of Library@Orchard in 2014.²³

In order to remain relevant, the re-imagining of future libraries in Singapore must accommodate the changing roles and functions of libraries. The mission of libraries to promote reading and literacy to create readers for life, learning communities and a knowledgeable nation will continue to be important, but Singapore's future libraries must evolve to continue to draw library users through inspiring and transformative spaces and services. ●



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An Introduction to Design, Aesthetics and Ethics of the Built Environment

The built environment is a space that reflects the dialogue among private, public and political spheres. Design impacts our lives everyday and good design can transform a mere place to one imbued with life and meaning.



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The built environment forms the backbone of any society; it is the backdrop of our lives, whether we realise it or not. As such the design of the built environment is paramount to our well-being, to our ability to connect, to interact, to evolve individually and collectively.

The built environment is a space in constant tension between public, private and political interests; as such any intervention within this forms an ethical judgement. Any decision made within the built environment will have an effect on one group over another: for example, building a road over culturally sensitive land favours the extraction of economic gains over cultural sensitivity to a group. This decision is more than a simple cost-benefit analysis; it also has a multitude of ethical considerations to it.

For anyone concerned with designing within the built environment, cultivating the ability to recognise, listen and respond to what people undergo and feel is vital. We relate to our environments emotionally, and we often fail to appreciate the complexity and variance of the human experience.

Good design within the built environment is mindful of the various tensions within spaces and acknowledges the importance for the population to feel connected to a place. Social, economic, cultural and political considerations will be present in all interventions within the built environment, thus one must have a good grounding in what design is and its importance in unlocking its potential for positive action.





DESIGN AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Buildings are primary objects within the physical environment, necessarily permanent and largely impassive.² Matters of location, design, visual impact, standards, place-making and so on are central to the experience and interpretation of the physical environment.³ Buildings become part of people's lives;⁴ all architecture must be built with durability, convenience and beauty⁵ in mind.

The goal of design is "mainly to conceive, realise and maintain a solid, lasting, comfortable, and possibly beautiful common world". Fundamental aesthetic and ethical principles are considered to be "of universal value... transcending time and space, climates and civilization".⁶ For example one can relate to: "The inexplicable features of old and or vernacular buildings,

otherwise so straightforwardly organised, are often precisely those that attract us to inhabit them. Offering opportunity rather than giving direction".⁷

The design of the built environment is often attributed as an action to make it "beautiful". A great emphasis is placed on the idea of beauty, which is incorrectly used interchangeably with "aesthetics". Beauty is the form of finality in an object; the beautiful pleases immediately.⁸ Therefore aesthetic ideas "are essentially different from rational ideas of determinate ends".⁹ Beautiful architecture and "positive" space creates atmospheres that kindle our emotions — "architecture is the alchemy of transforming real substances into human sensations".¹⁰ "When we speak of the 'draw' of a good fireplace, when we feel the pull of an empty room for us to enter and dwell there".¹¹

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The act of design is the way we plan and create the humanly shaped processes of public and private life, forming the interactions and transactions that constitute the social environmental and economic fabric of a city, town village or country.

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Beauty cannot be a pure judgement on taste, but must have an intellectual component. It is attached to an idea of perfection. A work of architecture may have judgements of both free and ideal beauty present — free in the sense of aesthetic formalism, and ideal in the sense of how gracefully it achieves its use ends.¹² Beauty lies in naturally grown things; that is not to suggest architecture built in an organic form, rather architecture that does not carry any signs or messages, a building that can manage perfectly well without the designer's or builder's personal rhetoric, designed.

Architecture is at its most beautiful when things come into their own, when they are coherent, when they are "real". Beauty thus is not an act of intense individualism, but an inherent property of the reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body,¹³ where "everything refers to everything else and it is impossible to remove a single thing without destroying the whole".¹⁴

Buildings can have a beautiful silence that I associate with attributes such as composure, self-evidence, durability, presence, and integrity, and with warmth and sensuousness as well; a building that is being itself, being a building, not representing anything, just being, that is the definition of beauty.¹⁵

The powerful ideology of beauty (inherent in the majority of theories and aims of design professionals acting within the built environment) leads us to the act of "Design". Design refers to the process that claims to improve the quality of the everyday, from objects that surround us (buildings, furniture, appliances, vehicles and gadgets) to advertising and marketing. Design within the built environment encompasses the idea of combining art, technology and society. Often-spaces have a utilitarian value and a symbolic value. The act of design is the way we plan and create the humanly shaped



processes of public and private life, forming the interactions and transactions that constitute the social-environmental and economic fabric of a city, town village or country. Design offers a way of thinking about the world that is significant to addressing many of the human-created problems in contemporary culture.

Today [design] incorporates spatial interests of social science, geography, cultural studies, economics, architecture, art history and other disciplines, and existential positions such as feminism, and sustainability.¹⁶

Design and “control” of the built environment is given a high weightage within the globalised world, where people and capital are increasingly mobile, thus ideals of liveability and quality of life are of a critical concern in attracting talents, motivating citizens and maintaining a “competitive advantage”. The ethical dimensions of design and the associated aesthetics must be considered at the macro level as well as the micro level (individual buildings). Analysing how one’s actions affect the wider world within the spheres of spatial equality,

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The town of Singapore and its architecture has always attracted attention. Even in the earliest days of the Settlement, visitors regularly commented on the fine buildings along the Esplanade, the neat and orderly streets and tree-lined thoroughfares, and the grand colonial-style residences of the European and Asian elites. From the outset, the progress of the town and its architectural landmarks were seen, quite rightly, as a reflection of the colony’s prosperity.

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environmental and social harmony is as important as ensuring our built environment is conducive for people to live well with each other and well within the environment.

The feelings of well-being embodied through the relationships between

groups of buildings, the open spaces and streets which link them are important. Therefore it is the “townscape”, rather than the design of individual buildings, that gives the built environment its unique significance, providing the bridge between public and private life.¹⁷

The external environment is a measure of convenience and accessibility, sanitary provisions, and comfort level. It reflects site planning standards... and deserves special attention.¹⁸

With this in mind the main purpose and need for design within the built environment can be identified with the life support of settlements such as the provision of shelter, access to food, clean water, fresh air and effective sewage treatment. Today, design aims to move beyond basic health support and into quality-of-life projects to improve the health of the city, which often proceeds as a reaction to industrialisation. The period of industrialisation gave rise to the thinking of places, people and resources and inputs to an economic machine. The ideals of mass production, mass consumption and mass construction came

with a great cost to the environment and the people living and working within these areas. As such public health acts were created and paved the way for Town Planning and the improvements to urban health. These ideals aim to improve the humane aspects of the environment. This includes the provisions of parks, cycle networks, safe environments, reduced car reliance, equity in access and mediating various environmental impacts that economic activities produce.

But what is “good” design, is it subjective and what is its value? “Good design is not a frill or a luxury, it’s a fundamental. Infrastructure will not function properly without good design”.¹⁹ Good design is design that meets the genuine needs, not of the faceless masses, but of real flesh-and-blood individuals; consequently, generic design cannot be the way of the future. A number of environments of the past few decades that have been rejected (such as the many modernist European mass housing schemes, and the recent ghost cities in China and Africa) should serve as a warning against the concept of non-contextual standard design aesthetics.

The discourse of design often focuses on the form, composition and principles of beauty, usability and technological developments. There is less of a discourse on the ethical and political implications of design, and thus the moral and ethical dimensions of design and the built environment are not often explored. Design finds its purpose in the values of the life of its people and thus must be grounded in human dignity and human rights. We should advocate human-centred design that highlights the moral and intellectual purpose of design, which is built upon the foundation of technical and artistic skill.

DESIGN IN THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC SPHERES

Design within the built environment is an explicit articulation of political, social and capital will. Every action within the built environment, every building, every idea, is an expression or physical representation of a value system, whether subconscious or conscious.

Space has been shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements, but it has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideology.²⁰

Every era has its own ethics and aesthetics. Aesthetics are a physical representation of

the values of a historical period. The early 20th-century design played a decisive role in giving form to modernity and the industrial or ‘rational’ ideology of the architectural machine. During the 1980s, the reaction to modernity or “post-modern” design was protagonist of a superficial and widespread “aestheticisation” of things in line with the rapidly developing consumer culture, and the built environment became an articulation of consumerism.²¹ Postmodernism identified that the built environment is not a coherent, logical or comprehensible “structure” designed by a rational process. Their thinking can be summarised as there is no discourse that can accommodate the complexities of man and the city, thus all totalising discourses must be rejected. A wholesale anarchy of forms and spaces with an ethical void established itself, a mirror of the increasingly materialist world to which it is the physical representation of.

Ethics and aesthetics cannot be separated, thus a good design must also be an ethical one. Aesthetics moves beyond questions relating to purely visual phenomena in order to include those derived from all facets of human experience. A good design is a considered approach to what the object represents, what it embodies, and who or what it is for. Why, for instance a building’s form takes the shape it does, not only raises the more conventional aesthetic questions but also questions what purpose or meaning the building serves beyond purely visual stimulation. Does the form for instance relate somehow to a social or economic ideal? And if so, is this ideal something that its inhabitants subscribe to or are even aware of? Therefore aesthetic and moral judgements act as a pair. Morals are a set of beliefs and practices about how to live a good life, the aesthetical judgement, thus contain’s the ethical dimension which is the conscious reflection on the adequacy of our moral beliefs.

Aesthetics and beauty are not synonymous. Beauty is simply the emphasis of the visual and external appearance of the element in isolation; aesthetics on the other hand links together identity, form and history, politics, culture, ideology and economics. To put it another way: “beauty may be one approach to achieving betterment, but it is not a sufficient one” (Spatial Agency). Therefore aesthetics takes the urban form and expands it to the broader set of social conditions to which the built environment contributes strongly. The theme of aesthetics must be considered seriously: it has become commonplace to view the “aesthetic” dimension as secondary



element, to be considered only when the rest has been resolved. This leads to the impression of a “contradiction between ethics (with its presumed rigour) and aesthetics (with its presumed frivolity)”.²²

People are directly influenced and emotionally moved by the design of items surrounding them, often without realising this immediately. Design, is not merely an adornment of cultural life, but is present in all the interactions and transactions that constitute the social and economic fabric of a country. This is evident if we consider the scope of design as it affects our lives. Design is the way we create all of the artefacts that serve us, striving to meet all our needs and desires, facilitating the exchange of information and ideas that is essential for civil and political life. Design is “the way we plan and create the complex wholes that provide a framework for human culture — the human systems and sub-systems that work either in congress or in conflict with nature to support human fulfilment”.²³

An example of an organisation that had a very strong value system and profound effect within Singapore is the Singapore Improvement Trust (1927-1959). The Trust emphasised the need to design for people and community rather than just numbers.



“To know the number of housing units, or living rooms, will give no direct clue to the amount of open space required, the number of shops to provide, or the amount of playing field space required. Living rooms or houses don’t play games or go shopping. In my view it is dangerous, and might be disastrous, to forget we are trying to plan for persons, rather than impersonal ‘units.’”²⁴

Good design ethics takes a stand against “the ruthless exploitation of people’s weaknesses for visual and haptic signals”,²⁵ which much of globalisation engages in. For example the glazed box as the sign of high quality living from London, to Abu Dhabi, New York and Singapore. The marketing of these globalised “icons” have created a myth that these provide a high-quality built environment versus a contemporary interpretation of the vernacular. The competition between cities and countries to “out-do” each other in the built form may create fashionable areas of interest, but these ultimately have shelf lives. These often do not have the daily joy that simple, humble, and thus resilient places can provide such as popular “hawker centres” and local markets.

Architecture reinforces its position as the part of the culture industry, which

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Places that foster a spatial representation of life are places such as hawker centres and local markets. These form a focal point in many Singaporeans’ lives; they are spaces where a great diversity of people congregate, and a local economy thrives. Hawker centres create a spatial attachment to a neighbourhood, or an area, not through their outward appearance, but through their purpose.

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commodifies the built environment into a respectable package according to the intrinsic contours of capital development. Architecture has ceased to engage in the discourse of architectural production as an integral part of all other social production. Architecture has forgone its role looking at the bigger picture; rather it has moved into the realms of the single object, the single entity, the project. Architecture has

forgotten, or simply fails to understand that space is constructed out of interrelations and interactions of people, at various levels and of various dispositions and thus must engage these tensions rather than ignore them. With the consideration of the wider issues, the motivations of design will be ultimately more resilient in the ever changing world. Thus cities will remain identifiable, useful and thus ultimately sustainable in the long term, rather than having to be re-branded and redesigned at frequent intervals.

PLACE-MAKING, PEOPLE AND IDENTITY

Architects and planners see design as the art of making places for people, and believe that design is critical in the realms of sustainable development, economic progress and social cohesion. Good design creates lively and distinctive places with character that are safe and accessible. Spaces are the embodiment of feelings, images and thoughts of those who live, work or are otherwise engaged in the area. Social space is dynamic space; its production continues over time and is not fixed to a single moment of completion, thus shifting the focus away from the static objects of display, and places it on

(ABOVE) A great example of a resilient development at an urban level is the Singapore Improvement Trust’s first mass housing project of Tiong Bahru. Today the area is still thriving and is testament to the importance of designing within a strong value system of a people-focused environment, rather than a machine for living in. *Courtesy of Benjamin Towell.*

the people and their lives. Good design addresses the physical aspects of space through addressing the relations within and of various social networks.

...You begin to realise that the important determinant of any culture is after all the spirit of place.²⁶

Similarity is important in establishing a recognisable or identifiable sense of place.²⁷ The aesthetics of places and place-making should be linked to the climatic vernacular and regional diversity through the spatial representation of the synergies of the life of the people²⁸, i.e. the place must reflect the climatic conditions of the area, as well as facilitate the daily interactions of the people. Places that foster a spatial representation of life are places such as hawker centres and local markets. These form a focal point in many Singaporeans' lives; they are spaces where a great diversity of people congregate, and a local economy thrives. Hawker centres create a spatial attachment to a neighbourhood, or an area, not through their outward appearance, but through their purpose.

At the urban level, Singapore followed good practice with island wide tree planting strategies to break up the increasing density of the built form. In a variety of key areas, the mix of the globalised "future" and traditional "cultural" past has been exceptionally juxtaposed, thus

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Architecture has forgotten, or simply fails to understand that space is constructed out of interrelations and interactions of people, at various levels and of various dispositions and thus must engage these tensions rather than ignore them.

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maintaining or, in the case of Boat Quay, enhancing an identity of place. Boat Quay, with its regenerated water front, traditional shophouses and the UOB plaza fronting the Central Business District, became recognisable as the embodiment of "Singapore". It was instantly recognisable and globally distinctive, representing the dichotomy that is Singapore.

There is a strong argument supporting design that values people and culture, and recognises the tensions within the processes of development that shape and make a resilient place. Resilience refers to the ability of the place to support itself and recover and quickly against



any difficult conditions—the place is able to adapt and change to stay relevant in the ever changing world—in a word—is able to thrive. The increasing globalisation of the world with the demand for symbolic capital by multinational corporations results in globalised spaces, which at its centre is represented by the dominant aesthetic of the glazed skyscraper²⁹ where the individual becomes a passenger, customer or number who is "possessed" by the "passive joys of identity-loss".³⁰ People are seen as statics, as equations to be solved through the very systems that the Singapore Improvement Trust took a stand against. Our identity is lost through the process of mass consumption; we can be anywhere in the world surrounded by familiar city scenery and products, in hotel rooms identical from one city to the next, restaurants, streets, shopping malls, parks and promenades that are replicated everywhere. Without mediation, the new global archetype can damage the fragile relationship between people and their individual and collective identities. Responsible design prevents feelings of estrangement from one's surroundings; it aims to enhance one's sense of place and identity through considered reference to the established vernacular. Responsible design is the combination of the primary needs of people (shelter), the projection of the local ideology (theory) and the cultural projection

of the population in the area. Thus, the architecture of Singapore must reflect the climate, culture and ideology which serve to enhance the general wellbeing of the population.

Places and objects of the everyday are not only situated within the realms of architecture, but in the realm of the human, where the built environment is dissolved into a world of perceptual experience, becoming a continuum with human life.

There is a global body of research that discusses the importance of the urban aesthetic as a space for vitality of culture. "People make cities, but cities make citizens"³¹: As such the built environment is an incredibly important place. A successful urban realm fosters a civic identity that is formed through the feeling that public space is in the public's communal ownership and responsibility.

The public domain is the theatre of an urban culture. It is where citizenship is enacted; it is the glue that can bind an urban society.³²

Public space and visual connections with buildings themselves are not enough to create an identity. Impersonal neighbourhoods and precincts make anonymous people,³³ therefore great architecture places ethical, climatically suited interventions that will blend in and become a part of the fabric over time.

It is “the visual appearance of buildings, the relationships between them, the relationships with open spaces and all the other factors which combine to create the townscape”.³⁴

Design has become a tool for preparing cities to attract visitors and investors in the aim of improving the economic prospects and social conditions of cities. One should be careful that this does not manifest itself on a stage of branded designs, iconic single structures, that can stress relationships between people and their environments. A negotiated balance is needed between the built environment as an economic driver, and as a cultural space for the articulation of the multiple societal values.

People’s ties, relationships, and attachment to their particular territorial niches in the metropolis were significant because it is in these niches that they ‘come to have some sense of control’ where they are able to develop the sense of identity and comfortableness that a large downtown can make impossible.³⁵

DESIGNING FOR THE FUTURE

Design is the key to unlocking the potential of the new energy and ecological awareness, giving architects a greatly expanded role.³⁶

The challenge is naturally to construct more locally distinctive, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable environments that can house a growing population, while accommodating increasing aspirations with fewer and fewer resources available.

“The new model of development will not be born on a drawing board or around a conference table as a perfectly complete theorem, but will emerge from a dialogue and conflict among a multiplicity of ideas, visions and proposals. It will come into being thanks to a widespread atmosphere of innovation involving all social actors.”³⁷

Design can give form to a changing world, and offer opportunities for new types of behaviour. To “give form” means to operate within a more general cultural context, by amplifying and rendering visible the weak signs expressed by society (in terms of new types of demand and behaviour), proposing consistent criteria of quality in a perspective of sustainability, and designing overall scenarios which give form to the sustainable society.³⁸ Design can “offer opportunity for new types of behaviour and new lifestyles in keeping with a new notion of social quality”.³⁹ New behaviour means looking at our current way of living, and examining

how do we improve our relationship with each other and the environment without compromising our standard of living. How can our behaviour of consumption change, yet be a positive change both in terms of our enjoyment as well as that of our surroundings. The built environment forms the structure in which these changes can be made, from spatial organisation that makes the private automobile unnecessary, that allows a walk to school, to work, and to recreation. A built form that requires no use of energy other than from its own sources, and that requires little food imports as it can be produced within its boundaries. A built form that celebrates and encourages interactions, innovations and most of all is people centric. These are the areas in which design can play a significant role, indeed it must to explore the possibilities within the social dynamics of a sustainable society.

There is an urgent need for design to become more socially progressive and environmentally conscious in the face of intensifying neo-liberalism and neo-corporatism. This means moving beyond the scope of the project and transcending

professional boundaries. There is no one set of criteria according to which the design process is “supposed” to develop. However, thoughtful consideration of the moral and ethical responsibility of our actions, a greater awareness of social conditions and of the diversity of human experience are important in facilitating the production of a well-designed, well-negotiated, and equitable built environment.

Good design is not a fetish; good design creates the natural foci of social intercourse where people will recognise each other as members of a local community as a result of continuous yet joyous physical proximity. With this model there is a greater potential for physical social relationships to form as people meet in the context of their whole lives and not in part, such as mere colleagues in the same office or shoppers at the same shopping centre. The townscape will be varied and vibrant, accommodating a wide range of different uses and catering for different kinds of people. “It may be physically unprepossessing, even dirty, but it will be a place that people know and, perhaps most important, feel at home in”.⁴⁰ ●

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Beach Road area in the 1960s with Masjid Hajjah Fatimah, also known as the Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, which was built between 1845 and 1846. The mosque was named after Hajjah Fatimah, a wealthy businesswoman and is known for its unique minaret, which has a noticeable tilt. The mosque was gazetted as a national monument in 1973. *From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.*



Writing to Print:

The Shifting Roles of Malay Scribes in the 19th Century

Bernice Ang studied history at Oxford University, specialising in the history of modern China and overseas Chinese in Singapore. After a temporary posting at the Malay Heritage Centre, she now works at the Public Service Division. She contributed to the development of research for the Yang Menulis project.

Siti Hazariah Abu Bakar graduated from the National University of Singapore (NUS) with a degree in South Asian Studies in 2011, and is currently a curatorial assistant at the Malay Heritage Centre. Her research interests include the social history of the Malays in Sri Lanka, Tamil Hindu death rituals, Indian Mughal history and Tibetan Buddhism.

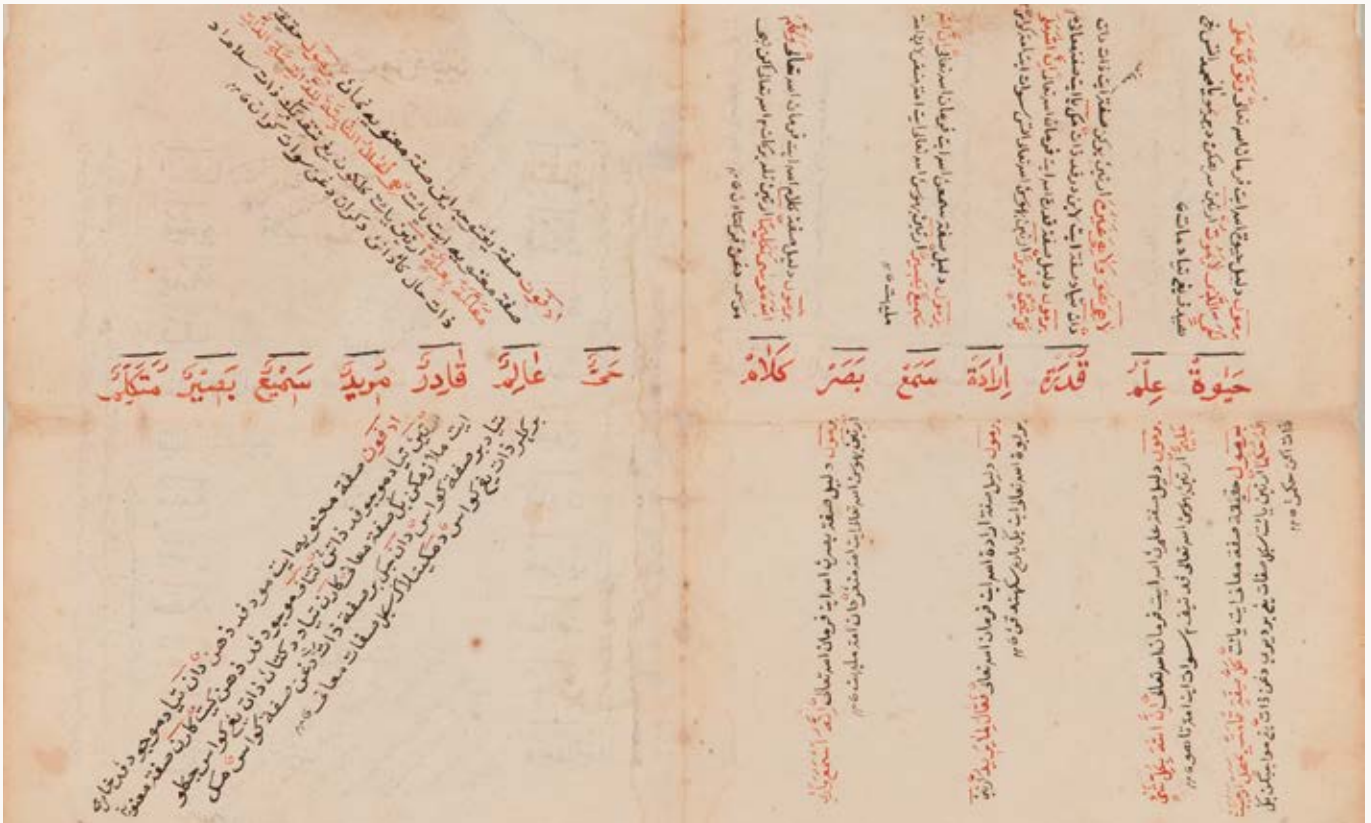
Noorashikin binte Zulkifli joined the Malay Heritage Centre in 2010 where she was trained in arts management and interactive media. Noora has been involved in museum work since 2004 and previously worked at the Singapore Art Museum and the NUS Museum.

Human beings communicate primarily through speech and then, writing. To write is to leave marks on paper or other surfaces that someone else can read at a later date to understand the message contained without requiring the writer's presence. Writing then refers to the systematic representation of language in visual form or, for those with visual difficulties, in tactile form.¹ Writing systems, however, can be renovated or replaced. In the case of the Malay language, the contemporary standard of writing in the Romanised alphabet or *Rumi* replaced an earlier system known as *Jawi*, which employs a form of modified Arabic script and was in use for at least 700 years. One of the oldest artefacts containing Jawi script is an engraved stone, *Batu Bersurat Terengganu*, discovered in 1899 and estimated to date from the 14th century. In contrast, Rumi writing has only been in mainstream use in Singapore and the Malay Peninsula for the past 60-odd years. Consequently, Malay manuscripts written in Jawi have been inadvertently rendered less accessible for the modern audience.

WRITING AND READING MALAY MANUSCRIPTS

In composing a sentence, a writer essentially pens combinations of signs drawn from a pre-defined set (an alphabet) that correspond to specific sounds of speech. These combinations are then deciphered by the reader according to rules commonly understood amongst speakers of the particular language. Reading itself is broadly defined as the act of extracting information from any encoded system and processing the extracted information to form meanings.² A reader's understanding of a text may shift as meanings are contingent upon the time and place in which the text is read, relative to the time and place in which the text is produced. Moreover, individual or collective interpretations can also be shaped by other socio-cultural factors such as familial upbringing or prevailing moral values.

The practice of copying and re-copying manuscripts can be viewed as a simultaneous act of reading and writing whereby the Malay scribe (*penyalin*) actively interprets and reinterprets the text as he copies. The larger role of the Malay scribe is to render the text copies accessible to his intended reader. Hence, he also assumes the mantle of author/



editor as amendments are made. A good scribe should possess an intellectual inventiveness capable of re-contextualising a text for better audience engagement. It is important to note that the scribe often strove to preserve the ideas and vocabulary of the original texts and that they were rarely altered whimsically. A good case study is the translation of the Indian *Mahabharata* into Malay, titled *Pandawa*, where tales from the former were translated and adapted into more secular versions in tandem with Islamic beliefs.³ With adaptation, it is commonplace to find several versions of the same text with variations on editorial and linguistic styles. The aforementioned variations make it possible to trace either genealogies or networks of copyists from a group of texts as well as provide some insight into the intellectual and cultural environment of the time as the scribes react and respond to each other's style and commentaries.

Only a fraction of the total Malay manuscripts survive today and their limited numbers impede a full understanding of the history and development of Malay writing. From the Malay perspective however, the physical manuscript is not as valued, even when a manuscript is kept for ceremonial or heirloom purposes, due in part to the hot and humid conditions of tropical Nusantara (the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago), which ensure limited shelf-lives of these manuscripts. Consequently,

knowledge transmission via text is not entirely dependent on the preservation of physical manuscripts. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Malay literary manuscripts functioned much like scoresheets for a predominantly oral culture of memorisation and recitation. Manuscripts would be passed around at reading assemblies or *majlis pembacaan* where the texts within would be recited aloud, ensuring a wider reach to both literate and illiterate audiences.⁴ In this way, the text is preserved firstly, in the individual reader-reciter's memory, and secondly, as part of social memory.

NEW MASTERS, NEW WORK VALUES

Initially, Malay scribes were employed in royal courts to compose epistles in fine calligraphy. Such employment or receipt of royal patronage accorded the scribes regular salaries and a special status in society. Although scribes could be employed by private individuals, religious centres and royal courts were the key producers of manuscripts. The insertion of foreign powers in this region as colonial masters from the 16th century onwards brought about complex changes to the socio-cultural fabric of the indigenous populations.

With the arrival of the English and Dutch powers, Malay scribes found a new employer in these colonial parties particularly towards the 19th century.

Aside from official correspondence, British scholar-administrators would employ scribes to copy manuscripts for the purpose of their own study of the Malays — a practice that was emulated by the Dutch. Soon, the two powers competed with each other to acquire Malay manuscripts, creating their commercial value as collectibles. Interestingly, a substantial number of Malay manuscripts, dating mostly to the 19th century, exist in collections held in Leiden, the Netherlands and other centres outside of the Nusantara.

THE MALAY SCRIBE'S INVISIBLE HAND

The Malay manuscript tradition underwent its greatest change at the height of colonisation in the 19th century as the Europeans paid more attention to the manuscripts as objects rather than their content. Consequently, more and more manuscripts included colophons (sections containing either biographical information such as the scribe's name, the date of the manuscript's completion and/or the name of commissioning party) where previously they were not attributed to specific authors or scribes. Instead, Malay manuscripts were regarded as a form of shared heritage belonging to the community-at-large.

Despite this anonymity, colophons were added to the manuscript either at the beginning, end or sometimes weaved into the main text (particularly with the

(ABOVE) The *Sifat Dua Puluh* is a tauhid treatise on the 20 attributes of Allah with explanations and discussions on Islamic theology and philosophy. Collection of the National Library Board.

syair form, a traditional Malay rhymed narrative that is sung aloud to a fixed melody). These here comment on when and how a manuscript was written, thus rendering the often laborious process of copying visible and providing some clues to the scribe's personality. This end colophon of the *Hikayat Abu Nawas* states its completion on a Saturday in the Islamic month of Zulhijjah (no year) within the Kallang River (*Sungai Kallang*) vicinity.

**FAITHFUL COPIES:
AN EXCEPTION TO THE RULE**

The introduction and subsequent adoption of Islam by Malay rulers from the 13th century onwards stimulated a new avenue of output for the scribes. Furthermore, a core injunction for all Muslims to read the Quran encouraged literacy for all instead of earlier precepts of literacy being reserved for the noble and priestly classes. Islamic texts were written/translated into the Malay language to provide guidance on the newfound faith of the Malays. Key Islamic tenets such as monotheism differed greatly from the preceding animistic or Hindu-Buddhist beliefs thus texts explaining and clarifying these newer ideas and principles were essential.

As religious *kitab* (meaning "book" in Arabic) were regarded as sacrosanct, this was one of the few instances in which a text's author and the subsequent scribes were clearly attributed so as to establish

the authenticity of a text. The importance of naming author and scribe(s) lie in determining the chain of transmission from a religious teacher to his students. Often, such texts were produced under the supervision of a teacher through oral transmission. In some cases, the text had to be retained in its entirety (such as the Quran as the Word of Allah) and original language, Arabic. However, notes could be added to the margins, between lines or any available space around the text, which are often indicative of the scribe's understanding of the subject matter.

**ON THE CUSP OF MECHANISED
MASS REPRODUCTION**

The introduction of mass printing technology in the 19th century threatened to undermine the need for scribes. However, the Malay scribes still had one more important role to play and the demand for their services continued unabated in the early period of Malay printing.

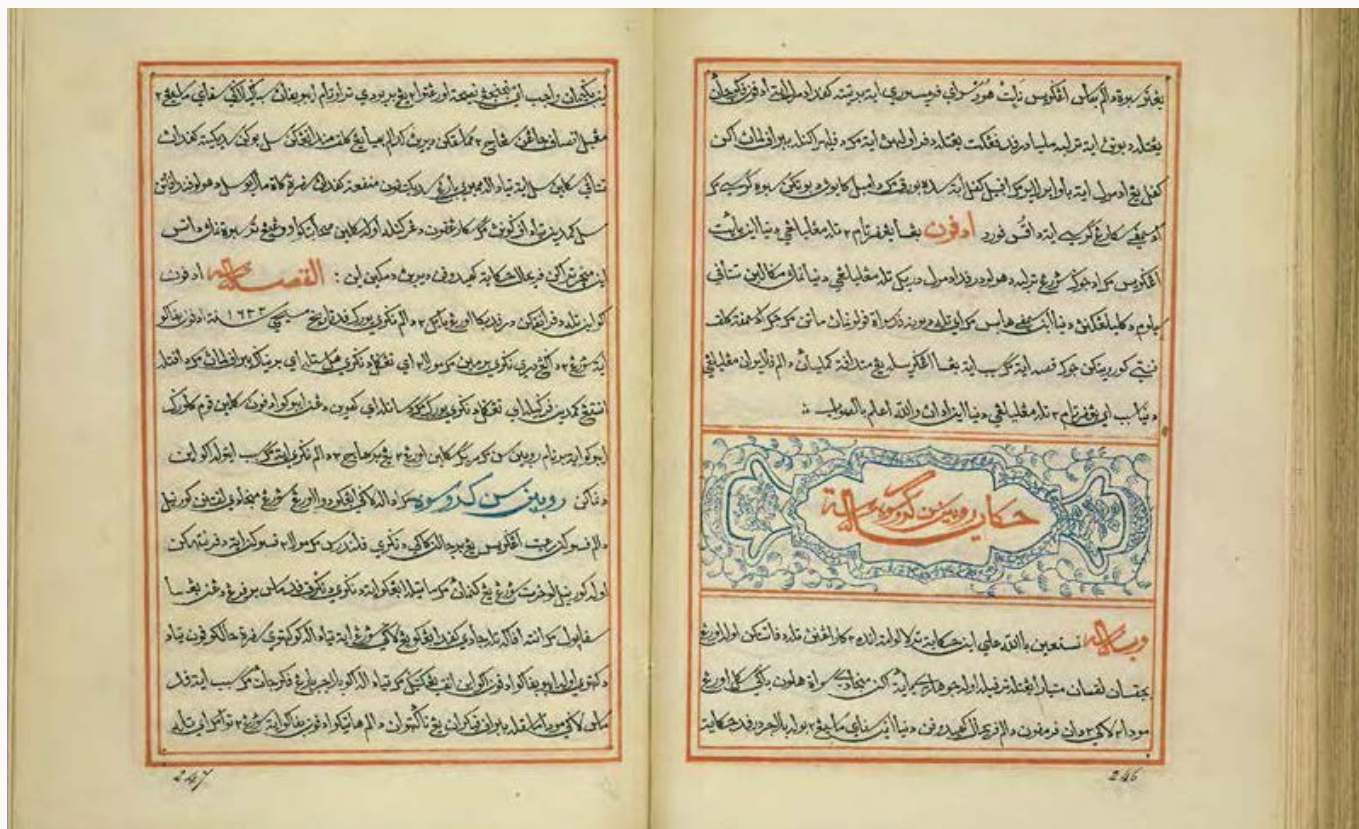
The Christian-based journal, *Bahawa hendaklah engkau menyembah Allah dan berbakti kepadanya sahaja*, is one of the publications in Singapore that involve Malay scribes as part of the printing process and highlights the important role of missionary presses in the emergence of Malay printing in Singapore. The most important was the Mission Press in the hands of Reverend Benjamin Keasberry

who pioneered the use of lithography to reproduce calligraphic styles so that his publications would appeal to a Malay audience familiar with hand-copied manuscripts. In contrast, earlier missionary publications were typographic prints that could not capture the flair and cursive form of handwritten Jawi, with scripts regarded as too uniform and stilted by Malay readers.

In contrast, lithography, called *cap batu* (stone-stamping) in Malay and favoured by indigenous printers, could convey the grace and fluidity of a scribe's handwriting. Like copying, scribes would draft a master page on paper that was then etched into a limestone tablet which acted as a printing plate to reproduce multiple copies of the original hand-composed design. As such, the same scribes with their skill sets could continue to be employed since "a book printed by lithography was essentially a manuscript reproduced".⁵

A MISSION TO PRINT

For the translation of Christian treatises and other English texts, the missionaries often worked closely with renowned scribe and writer, Munshi Abdullah, sometimes termed the "Father of Malay Printing" as he had imparted lithographic printing knowledge to Malay society.⁶ In addition to translations, the cooperation between Keasberry and Abdullah in the 1840s and 1850s resulted in multi-coloured lithograph



42 (ABOVE) *Chermin Mata*, a lithograph, is one of the earliest and more lavishly illustrated Malay periodicals. It was a quarterly journal compiled by Reverend Keasberry in collaboration with Munshi Abdullah. *Chermin mata bagi segala orang yang menuntut pengetahuan*, no. 4, 1859, Singapore: Bukit Zion. Joint copyright of The British Library Board and the National Library Board of Singapore.

editions of Malay texts written, copied and edited by the latter. These editions include Munshi Abdullah's autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah*, published in 1849. Keasberry used the proceeds of the press to run a boarding school for boys in River Valley Road. Here, students were taught English and Malay as well as the art of printing, sowing the seeds for the next generation of the Malay publishing industry.

Aside from the missionary presses, colonial regulations in the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia) on local printing and publishing indirectly stimulated the growth of Singapore's Malay publishing industry. The *Reglement on de Drukkerijen in Nederlands Indië* was issued on 10 November 1856 requiring all printers, publishers and sellers of printed material to apply for licences. In addition, copies had to be deposited free-of-charge with the government. Penalties for violation included confiscation of the publications, shutting down of printing presses, imprisonment and even prohibition from future work as printers or publishers.⁸ In contrast, the British administration in Singapore enacted less restrictive policies. As a result, many Javanese printers from the Dutch East Indies shifted their bases of operations to Singapore or more specifically, Kampong Gelam. This led to the establishment of the Malay printing and publishing industry in Singapore which subsequently became one of the major publishing centres in the Nusantara in the 19th and 20th centuries. ●

EXHIBITION DETAILS

"Yang Menulis" (They Who Write) is an exhibition collaboration between the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) and the National Library (NL) and features manuscripts drawn from NL's Rare Materials Collection. It was first on show at the Malay Heritage Centre from 2 November 2012 to 24 March 2013. It is currently on display (from 30 March to 12 May) at the National Library Building, at the Promenade, Level 7. "Yang Menulis" will also travel to Pasir Ris Public Library (14 May to 12 June), Jurong Regional Library (14 June to 11 July) and Woodlands Regional Library (13 July to 11 August).

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(ABOVE) A typeset page of *Bahawa hendaklah engkau...* is an example of a translated Christian treatise published for missionary work. *Bahawa hendaklah engkau menyembah Allah dan berbakti kepadanya sahaja*, 1832. Singapore: Mission Press. Collection of the National Heritage Board.



SUMBANGSIH MAS: AN EXHIBITION ON MUHAMMAD ARIFF AHMAD

“A prominent expert and activist of the Malay language, literature and culture who never stops writing and imparting his knowledge” — This succinctly sums up Haji Muhammad Ariff Ahmad, better known by his pen name MAS. Muhammad Ariff has many pseudonyms of which MAS is most recognisable to him. MAS stands for Muhammad Ariff Singapura (Muhammad Ariff of Singapore), an apt moniker as he has become the gold standard for his contributions to the Malay language, literature and culture. His other pen names include M. Arba, P.L. Rajaudang, M. Foerida, Mas Malaya, Mas Tanjung Malim, Mas Tomo, S.P.10 and Minamoria.

Muhammad Ariff Bin Ahmad was born in Kampong Tiong, Singapore on 6th December 1924 at 25 Outram Road. The second of four children, Ariff lived in different parts of Singapore, including Newton Road, Dunearn Road, Tiong Bahru and Henderson Road. In the day he sold cakes made by his mother, a housewife; and every evening his father would teach him to read the Quran.

At school, Muhammad Ariff loved reading and took part in many writing competitions. He also wrote for his school's Scouts magazine and dreamt of becoming a full-time writer. Despite being equally good at drawing, Muhammad Ariff chose to focus on writing.

After the Second World War, he studied at Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjung Malim, Perak, to fulfill his father's wish for him to become a teacher. Fortunately, his career as a teacher allowed him to continue writing. Muhammad Ariff has written numerous books including short stories, non-fiction, children's literature and school textbooks. He also contributes articles and essays to newspapers and magazines in Singapore and Malaysia. He has also written drama and documentary scripts for television and radio broadcasts.

THE PEOPLE'S CIKGU

Muhammad Ariff's life saw a dramatic change in November 1933. One afternoon, when playing rounders (baseball) in a field along Malcolm Road and Chancery Lane,

Juffri Supa'at is a Senior Librarian with the National Library. He curated the exhibition “Sumbangsih MAS” featuring works by literary pioneer, Muhammad Ariff Ahmad. Juffri compiled a selection of Muhammad Ariff Ahmad's poetry and also put together a comprehensive bibliography of his works.



he was “caught” by a teacher from Sekolah Melayu Tanglin Besar (Tanglin Besar Malay School), who was furious to see him not in school.

Muhammad Ariff was immediately enrolled into primary 1 where he studied until primary 4 in 1937. However, Muhammad Ariff had to remain in primary 5 for three years at Sekolah Melayu Tanglin Tinggi (Tanglin Tinggi Malay School) from 1937 to 1940 because he was not yet 16 years old — the minimum age required to become a Malay teacher.

Muhammad Ariff became a trainee teacher in 1940 after completing his studies in the Malay school and was subsequently posted to Sekolah Melayu Tanglin Tinggi in 1941 when World War II broke out.

In 1942, Muhammad Ariff was called up by the Japanese to learn and teach the Japanese language in a public school. From 1943 to 1944, he taught Japanese in a special Nippon-Go class for teachers and became a Japanese language instructor in a language centre in Pearls Hill School for teachers. It was here that he realised his potential as an educator. His path towards formalising his teacher training came when the British returned to Singapore. Between 1946 to 1949, Muhammad Ariff attended formal Malay teacher training at Sultan Idris Teacher Training College (SITC) in Perak, Malaysia.

It was in SITC that he became acquainted with many writers and activists all over Malaya. Many of them were later

involved in Malaysian politics and curators of post-war literary developments.

Muhammad Ariff retired as a senior lecturer at the Institute of Education. After that he was appointed as the editor of the Malay edition of *Grow* magazine (*Majalah Mekar*) published by the Ministry of Education. Muhammad Ariff produced many school textbooks during his stints in SITC and IE and was behind the scheme of work for the teaching of Malay Language, Literature and Science in Malay language for Singapore schools.

He was also member of the Romanized Malay Spelling committee that developed the Singapore Malay language. In 1966 he organised the First Malay National Language Congress in Singapore.

Muhammad Ariff’s contributions as a teacher were not confined to the realm of education. As highlighted by Mr Guntor Sadali, former editor of *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu*, “Cikgu Ariff is a reference point of the community and he is ever ready with the answers when there are issues about the Malay Language.” Muhammad Ariff reached out to the community through his regular columns and broadcasted through the mainstream media.

ARTS FOR THE PEOPLE

Muhammad Ariff is also one of the founding members of the Angkatan Sasterawan ’50 (ASAS ’50) a literary organisation that champions the rights of the community through the writings of its members.

ASAS ’50 was established with the belief that “united we stand, divided we fall”. He commemorated the founding of ASAS’50 — 6 August 1950 — through his poem “Long-lived Unity”.

Muhammad Ariff’s first foray into creative writing was in the field of radio drama. During the Japanese Occupation, he produced drama scripts for radio broadcast. The drama series *Oleh-Oleh Pembelaan Seorang Ibu* and *Inikah Balasanmu*, based on his scripts, were broadcasted in 1943.

At the same time, he decided to record and report the cruelty of Japanese soldiers. However, his short stories such as *Pokok Jarak (Barbados Nut)* and *Pondok Buruk (Old Hut)* were rejected and not published because their anti-Japanese sentiments were exposed to strongly. Pak Sako (Dr Ishak Haji Muhammad), the writer for *Semangat Asia*, advised him to stop if he wished to stay alive.

Muhammad Ariff, together with other writer friends, was conscious of the potential of arts as an instrument to build a society that was facing an uncertain future after the Japanese Occupation. Literature became a platform to seek independence from colonisation and redress for social injustices. It also reflected the hope and ambition to achieve the common goal of attaining “full independence” through their literary works and through the concept of Arts for the masses.

In 1947, Muhammad Ariff completed his first novel *Menyahut Seruan Ibunda (Answering the Call of Motherland)*. It was

accepted for publication by Cikgu Harun Aminurrashid. However, it was published as a series in the magazine *Mutiara*.

Muhammad Ariff believes that writing is his responsibility, one that allows his fellow countrymen to view life positively and lead a meaningful existence. For instance, his novelette *Sarah Pengarang Kechil*, published in 1957, exemplified his concerns on the importance of education in order for the next generation to achieve success. The novelette was adopted as a textbook for Malay literature. The novel *Mail Mau Kawin* (*Mail Wants to Wed*), published in 1976, considers the issues of the Malay community at that time. The importance of lifelong learning was subtly touched on as one of the ways to overcome the vicious cycle of poverty. Another example is the poem “Is it true?”, which gave rise to controversy when it was published in *Berita Harian* in 1974.

“Is It True” encouraged readers to reflect and compare Truth and Falsehood. It is a simple poem but has a very deep meaning. The poem was able to provoke readers to think about life via the beauty of poetry.

His works span almost 65 years of his life and comprise various themes that express his journey and struggles in the fields of literature, language and culture. At the same time, his poems serve as a documentation of our social memories.

CITIZEN MUHAMMAD ARIFF

Muhammad Ariff’s influence can also be seen in the fields of language and culture. He was appointed as the chairman of the Malay Literature Prize committee that formed to promote literature in Singapore. Initiated by ASAS’50, it was supported by 18 other non-governmental organisations. Today the award is known as the Malay Literary Award under the purview of the Malay Language Council of Singapore.

The Malay Language Council of Singapore is also responsible for organising the Malay Language Month campaign. Muhammad Ariff has been involved with the initiative since 1965 when it was known as National Language Month. In 1988, he penned the lyrics to *Bahasa Menjunjung Budaya*, which has remained as the Malay Language Month’s theme song till today.

Muhammad Ariff’s influence and high regard by the Malay Muslim community is illustrated by the numerous organisations he is a part of, such as the Association of Muslim Professionals and Malay Heritage Centre Foundation. The various awards and accolades bestowed upon him are testaments to a life dedicated to serving the community. Even though he is now in



his late eighties, Muhammad Ariff is still sharing his knowledge, thoughts and ideas via a weekly newspaper column in *Berita Harian*. He is indeed an iconic national treasure that can never be replaced.

Muhammad Ariff’s many contributions to the community are a manifestation of his philosophy in life: “The life of a tree bears fruit; Let the life of humans be fruitful”. Despite all he has achieved, he still continues to share his knowledge, expertise and service as inscribed in the words of Kiayi (religious leader) in his poem “What will I become?”:

What should I become?
The Kiayi says: Be as complete as a human can be
to the Creator, to others — have piety,
have compassion
so that you will get Allah’s blessings,
even the people will respect you
this will benefit you in life, even in the hereafter, you will not lose anything... ●

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