

Notes on the architecture of the Sarawak Museum

John Ting, 19 August 2011

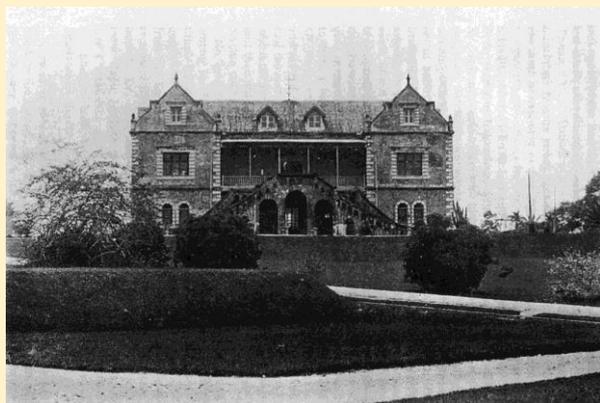


Figure 1: The Sarawak Museum, in about 1900.
(Source: *A Naturalist in Borneo*.)

The Sarawak Gazette reported that the Sarawak Museum was built in the 'Queen Anne' style when it was completed in 1891, though its architectural origins are now commonly thought to be that of a French town hall in Normandy, as for example, in Alice Yen Ho's book, *Old Kuching*.¹ She might have gotten this from Elizabeth Pollard's 1972 book, which cites 'someone' as suggesting that Charles Brooke got the idea for the museum's architecture from a French provincial newspaper.² On the same page, Pollard also mentions that the Gazette described it as being designed in a Queen Anne style, (possibly due to the steps in the gables of the end wings) although Ho fails to report or cite this more reliable source. Despite the reconfirmation of the Gazette entry by Lucas Chin, the director of the museum in 1980, Ho's premise is more popular with tourists and bloggers, perhaps showing the pervasiveness of her book.³

However, having established its architectural style, what inspired its use is still

questionable. While Pollard does not reference her source of the design being seen in a French newspaper, the Queen Anne style was primarily a British style, not French. Ho similarly states that the design was due to the Rajah's 'interest in French culture,' and that his French valet was involved in the building's design.⁴

This is curious since all Kuching's public buildings from the late 1870's onwards were designed and implemented by the European officers of the Sarawak Public Works Department (SPWD,) and the valet is not known to have worked there in addition to attending to the Rajah. Although Sarawak had very few European officers in its government, Charles was very careful to appoint SPWD and outstation officers that had practical surveying and construction skills, unless they were employed for other purposes (for example, a valet role.)⁵ If the valet had those skills, I am sure that the Rajah would not have wasted them on his personal service, and placed him with the SPWD to bolster their numbers and capabilities – given this, I believe that it is unlikely that Charles' valet had much influence over the design of the Museum. While Charles Brooke chose only to sail with French passenger ships, his government had an eclectic taste in architectural styles, most of them being British or colonial, rather than French. The question is then: how did it come about that the Museum was designed in a Queen Anne style, and where did the Rajah learn about it?

A clue to this question is given by another curator of the museum, Edward Banks. In a

¹ Ho, *Old Kuching*, 64

² Pollard, *Kuching 1839-1970*, 67

³ Chin, *Cultural Heritage of Sarawak*

⁴ Ho, *Old Kuching*, 64

⁵ This is a recurring theme in Charles' letters to prospective officers, for example, in Brooke, *Rajah's Letters 1890-1892*, 223-4.

short piece in the Sarawak Museum Journal, he discusses the spoken history of the Museum design as having come from an image of an Adelaide girl's school building in Australia, which the Rajah had seen in a magazine.⁶ Banks cites the picture from Shelford's book as the pre-version of the Museum he means (Figure 1.)⁷ He goes on to say that the architectural source for the Curator's House was similarly sourced, from an image of a Swiss chalet that the Rajah had seen in another magazine. While the architecture of the Curator's House does resemble vernacular Swiss chalets, the Adelaide Girl's School reference, together with the Queen Anne style; is odd. When the museum was designed by the P.W.D. in the late 1870's, the prevailing style for schools in Australia was the Gothic.⁸ The Adelaide Girl's School, by the architect Woods, was built from 1873-1876, so an etching from a photograph may well have been published in a magazine, and seen by the Rajah when he was considering the design of the Museum.⁹ From Figures 2 and 3 below, there are some similarities, with the two end gabled wings being connected by a cloistered element, or a stone veranda. However, the building is clearly single storey and in the Gothic style (as evinced from the pointed arches,) in contrast to the double storey museum and its Queen Anne style.

Figure 2 appears to be an etching of the photograph of Figure 3, a common method of reproducing images in print before the technology to reproduce photographs for publications was developed. A similar etching in *Colonial Architecture of South Australia* gives us a better clue as to what the Rajah

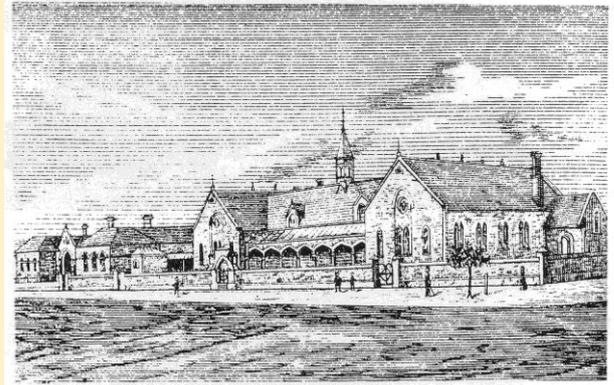


Figure 2: Adelaide Girl's School, in about 1876. (Source: *Colonial Architecture in South Australia: A Definitive Chronicle of Development 1836-1890 and the Social History of the Times.*)

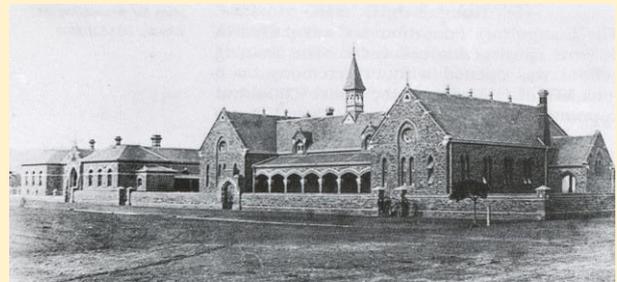


Figure 3: Adelaide Girl's School, in about 1876. (Source: *Heritage of the City of Adelaide: An Illustrated Guide.*)

might have seen in the magazine he was reading, which undoubtedly had etching illustrations. An etching for the proposed Adelaide Children's Hospital, (Figure 4,) on page 647 bears a remarkable similarity to the original Sarawak Museum building. The Hospital was completed in 1879, and demolished in 1962.¹⁰ While it is longer, and has a large, central dormer window, bell-tower and chimneys, (which the Museum building does not have;) it has verandas on both of its levels, dormer windows, and a central staircase to the front of the building. The staircase in a photograph of the building (Figure 5) suggests that Figure 4 was a design drawing rather than an etching of a photograph of the completed building. It is also similar in format to the one at the front of the Museum. The Hospital also has stepped

⁶ Banks, *Reminiscence of a Curator*

⁷ Shelford, *A Naturalist in Borneo*, Plate XXIII

⁸ Banks, *Reminiscence of a Curator* 59

⁹ Jensen and Jensen, *Colonial Architecture in South Australia*, 453; and Marsden, Stark, and Sumerling, *Heritage of the City of Adelaide*, 188.

¹⁰ Burden, *Lost Adelaide*, 98

gables and rectangular windows without pointed arches, suggesting the Queen Anne style. Health buildings in Australia at that time did not have the same attachment to the Gothic style that educational buildings did.

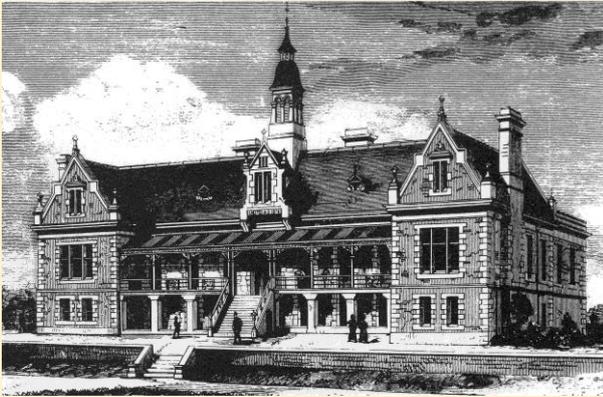


Figure 4: Adelaide Children's Hospital, in about 1878. (Source: *Colonial Architecture in South Australia: A Definitive Chronicle of Development 1836-1890 and the Social History of the Times.*)

Furthermore, the arrangement of the windows on the end wings at the front elevation is very similar in both buildings, as was the quoining around the ground floor windows and at the corners of the end wings. There are also differences – amongst others, the Hospital uses slate roofing shingles, while the Museum's shingles are belian; and the Hospital was constructed in stone, where the Museum is 'plastered' (cement rendered) brick. I suggest that it was an image of this building that the Rajah saw, and that it was in the same magazine as the etching for the Adelaide Girls School (Figure 2.) This would explain the confusion between the School and the Hospital. As the building was designed by the P.W.D., the magazine would not have been with them rather than the museum staff, and perhaps the Adelaide Girls School was mistakenly communicated as the source image.



Figure 5: Adelaide Children's Hospital in 1889, photograph by Ernest Gall. (Source: State Library of South Australia - image reference: SLSA: B 1563 – Adelaide Children's Hospital, North Adelaide, 1889. Image courtesy of State Library of South Australia)

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