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The Old Kuching courthouse architecturally considered

Sarawak, now a state of Malaysia has a unique history when compared to the other states of the country. Unlike the others that were under British colonial control, Sarawak was ruled by a dynasty of white rajahs by the name of Brooke from 1841 until 1941, when the country was occupied by the Japanese during World War 2. Unlike the colonial architecture of the colonial states of the region, little has been written about Brooke-era architecture. What is written is usually part of travelogues and histories of the Brooke period, or briefly as part of a colonial heritage in postcolonial histories. The term 'colonial' is often used to describe the architecture of the Brooke administration but it was not part of an imperialist¹ program. Rather, they were the legal rulers of a sovereign state. The architecture of the Brookes in Sarawak is interesting as it was not generated out of a colonial system and therefore developed in different ways to the official colonial architectures of what is now Indonesia, India and the rest of Malaysia.

Sarawak is located on the northwestern flank of the island of Borneo which it shares with Brunei, Indonesian Kalimantan and the other Malaysian state of Sabah. Sarawak did not become a British colony until after WW2 when the third white rajah, Vyner Brooke (1874-1963), ceded it to them. He was the last of 3 white rajahs who ruled Sarawak. The first, James Brooke (1803-1868), was ceded sovereign rule over Sarawak by the previous ruler, the Sultan of Brunei. He was given of what is now the Kuching division of Sarawak by putting down an indigenous rebellion on behalf the Brunei sultanate, and subsequent land acquisitions were made in exchange for dealing with warring indigenous tribes and putting down rebellions for Brunei. These rebellions usually arose due to the inability of the Brunei Sultanate to institute or negotiate law and order with their subjects and/or administrative agents. Unusually, Brooke granted clemency to the rebels rather than have them executed (as a colonial power might have done) which had the effect of bringing them onto his side. These (and others that were also granted clemency during the reign of the Brooke rajahs) formed the paramilitary forces of the Brooke Raj.

James Brooke was a British national who spent most of his life in Asia. He was born in India, where his father was a judge² in the Benares High Court for the colonial administration of the East India Company (EIC). He joined the East India Company, in the capacity of a military officer where he trained and led a body of indigenous Indian cavalry horsemen³. He resigned his commission after he was wounded during the Anglo-Burmese war, when he felt that he was unfairly treated by a superior in Madras⁴.

Armed with his inheritance, James Brooke set off from England on a voyage ostensibly to explore south east Asia on his own terms. His acquisition of Sarawak was not part of the existing south east Asian colonial systems (either British or Dutch), whose primary objectives were economic gain. Rather, it seems his main

aim after becoming rajah was to be there for the good of the natives⁵, and he understood that the cooperation of the natives was paramount. He was trying to avoid in Sarawak the cultural and economic injustices levied against the natives as he had witnessed in the British colonies of India, Malaya and China. He also sought to deal with what he considered the unjust practices of and between the indigenous peoples⁶ (slavery, headhunting and war) and provide a stable state for the incremental development of Sarawak. The second rajah, Charles Brooke (1828-1917), shared his uncle's dislike for the EIC and colonial systems in general, with their highly involved regulations, paperwork and red tape. He felt that the colonials tried to compensate for their inadequate knowledge of the country and people by framing elaborate regulations which the indigenous peoples could not understand⁷. In the regulations for officers and cadets of the Sarawak administration, he talks about "proper deference" to the natives, and that "they are not inferior, but different"⁸. They were also reminded that the administration was not trying to impose English law and values on the natives, rather that they were there to keep the peace and must respect all the different *adat* (customary law) of the natives. While it must be said that they were also imposing a foreign political system of law and order on the indigenous and migrant peoples of Sarawak, it must also be said that for their time their attitude towards their subjects can be seen as highly progressive.

The rajah was the hub of an administrative system that seemed to be a reaction to the centralist systems of the colonial powers and was very decentralised. Great independence was given to the 'Resident', the mostly English chief administrative officers appointed by the rajah to run a certain area of Sarawak, which he called a 'Division'. The Resident was assisted by handful of local Malay officers drawn from local prominent families. He believed that, like himself, all his residents must be able to speak the main local languages of the division. Like him, they were also required to have an open door policy in administering justice for the conflicts that the natives and the small population of Chinese migrants brought to them. There was little paperwork and the residents were expected to render justice based on individual cases and relevant *adat* rather than on the complex legislation that was invented and imposed in the colonial world. The Brookes were "trying to form a model of what Asiatic rule might be"⁹, one that respected the 'Asiatics' and considered them (and their laws and customs) as equals to the white man.

It is probably of no surprise then that their buildings were not reproductions of what was familiar, standard or acceptable in the mother country. Unlike much colonial architecture of the time, they adapted local architectures, used local materials and construction methods and workers in their buildings, particularly the early forts. Their workers were ironically mostly Iban, as the warring tribes they were trying to deal with were also Iban. This came about due to the pre-existing rivalries of different Iban sub-tribes, with one trying to use or help the Brooke administration to their own advantage. The forts varied somewhat from the longhouses of the native Ibans, but there were many similarities. Longhouses are linear buildings that contain the communal and residential functions of communities of up to 150 families (or 500-600 people) in a single raised pile structure¹⁰. This allows for a minimal perimeter and also a raised dwelling platform that assisted in the defense of longhouses during the technological period of swords and spears. The indigenous peoples mostly practice shifting cultivation on the relatively unfertile soils of Borneo, with their longhouse being the center of their operations. Each plot would be farmed for a period of 5 years, before they moved on to

another area also within half a days' walk of longboat ride of the longhouse. Once the soils of the greater area had been exhausted, the main structure of longhouse could be dismantled and transported to a more fertile location. The materials used for decking and cladding were generally less durable materials that can be made from commonly available materials in the rainforest.

The timber forts of the Brookes had the same ability to be dismantled and moved to another location where it might be needed, as was the case with Fort Alice in Simanggang (now renamed Sri Aman). Proposed as a prototype¹¹, it was first built on the banks of the *batang* Lupar (Lupar river) near the tributary of the Skrang river in 1849, and moved downriver to its current location in 1864¹². Being clad with thick *belian* (Sarawak ironwood) planks, they were more strongly fortified than longhouses. These walls also extended all the way to the ground, where the walls of longhouses generally stopped just below the dwelling platform. They bear many other similarities to longhouses, for example functioning as multi-purpose self contained structures containing courts, armoury, residential, dispensary and tax functions. Certainly the manner in which they deal with the issues of weather, climate and environment are very similar, with deep eaves to keep the rain off the walls and air-permeable materials for the floors, walls and roof to promote ventilation and to reduce heat build-up. The fort also had a courtyard, open to the sky at the front part of the building, much like the *tanju* (roofless common space) of longhouses. In some ways, its planning can be read as a slightly modified cross-sectional slice of a longhouse.

They were also culturally specific in their adaptations. In Kuching, where it had all begun, James Brooke's own residence, 'Government House'¹³ as it was known, was originally adapted from the local Malay *kampong* (village) houses, responding in similar ways to the local culture and environment, and tempered by his own culture. The main town grew up on the other side of his house, and he took over an abandoned Lutheran mission building¹⁴ as his courthouse and office, to be more accessible to his subjects¹⁵. While it is questionable that the architecture of James Brooke was intentional or just convenient and expedient, certainly when Charles Brooke became the second rajah, their political intentions became clearer in their architecture. Many of the early pressures were no longer there, and he could build on the political stability that James Brooke had started to achieve. Charles Anthoni Johnson was the son of James Brooke's sister, and changed his name to Charles Johnson Brooke¹⁶. He was appointed by James Brooke as successor and became Rajah upon the death of the first rajah. He was well familiar with the architecture of the Brooke raj as he had been an outstation cadet and officer in Sarawak for 16 years before he became rajah.

Charles Brook was educated in the English public school system before joining the navy at age 13. He resigned his navy commission in 1852 to join the Sarawak administration as a cadet, eventually becoming the Resident at Simanggang. In many ways he was very different from his uncle¹⁷, much more stoic and reserved where his uncle had been flamboyant and personable, but they shared the love and concern for the indigenous peoples of Sarawak. The buildings built during the reign of Charles represent in a more solid and tangible form the philosophy of the Brookes, in terms of their mission and how they dealt with things. The Old Kuching Courthouse (The original timber building was demolished when construction of the current building

began in 1868¹⁸) is perhaps the best representation of their government. Built during a period in south east Asian history when the Dutch and British colonial systems can be considered to be at their peak, the architecture of the Old Kuching Courthouse forms a stark contrast to the imperial architecture being constructed at the time.

The British in India had been perfecting their palette of imperial architecture, an architecture that symbolised in built form the political and cultural dominance of the British over the previous rulers of the sub-continent at the turn of the nineteenth century. Most of the architects of the colonial buildings in India were officers of the East India Company, and in that sense were 'gentleman architects', self-taught in architecture. It is likely that their architectural knowledge of Victorian neo-classical architecture was gleaned from the many pattern books of architecture available at the time¹⁹, documents that they would have come across during their English public school education. This resulted in ancient Greek architecture being adapted to suit the climate and programs of 19th. century British public buildings and then transferred wholesale to the colonies. The ancient Greek classical orders were also appropriated, with the most sophisticated orders (Ionic and Corinthian) being used to represent secular power, rather than the regional or spiritual aspects that might have been important in ancient times.

This imperial architecture was universal in that no allowance was made for the geographical, cultural and environmental differences between the mother country and the colonies. The architecture of the Town Hall (1813, by Colonel John Garstin) of sub-tropical Calcutta was fundamentally similar to the architecture of Robert Smirk's British Museum of 1846 in temperate London. This is despite the hot and rainy Indian climate turning the Town Hall into a high maintenance facility with less than ideal thermal qualities. In England the cold could be dealt with heating, but in India, air conditioning had not yet been invented for cooling, resulting in the layer of rooms exposed to direct sunlight heating up and staying hot on sunny days. Needless to say these concerns were secondary to the representative powers of the buildings, and that those in power were located in the more comfortable and protected (physically, environmentally and bureaucratically) parts of the building.

In the 1870's, the architecture of the colonies began to change somewhat. The 'Indo-Saracenic'²⁰ style (an effort to be more 'accommodating' towards local cultures) became popular. It took visual references from some Indian, west Asian and Moorish architectures, but the planning and construction of the buildings remained as before. Vague local references were reduced to façade-ism. Rather than being more inclusive by referring to the many public architectures of south Asia, it was probably a reflection of the fashionable popularity of fetishistic and fantastic (Orientalist²¹) eclecticism in Britain, and therefore was just another appropriation of someone else's architecture and therefore culture. The Indo-Saracenic (or 'Mohammedan'²²) style was also employed in the public buildings of late 19th century Malaya²³, with perhaps the best example being the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in Kuala Lumpur, now the capital of Malaysia.

The planning of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in Kuala Lumpur is a study in layers of protection and impenetrability, a bureaucratic and architectural filter carefully devised to enforce an arbitrary class system with the British on top, followed by the indigenous Malay administrators drawn from the local royal families. The migrant Chinese and Indians formed part of the administration mostly as labourers and not white-collar workers. The colonials were in the process of securing their economic might while segregating the population and paying inappropriate lip-service to the indigenous peoples, and while they spoke of independence, there was no real intention of giving the peoples of Malaya full economic independence and control. This is clearly seen from figures that show that in 1970, 13 years after the British gave Malaya independence, they still controlled about 90% of the Malaysian economy, reduced to 30% after 20 years of nationalisation of Malaysian corporations on the part of the government²⁴.

Although colourfully dressed in the Indo-Saracenic (complete with copper clad onion domes) and looking quite Oriental, the Sultan Abdul Samad building carefully follows classical *parti* in terms tri-partite horizontal division, sub-divided into horizontal layers of plinths and arches that diminish in size as they go up the building towards cappings such as friezes and domes. It bears no real relation to either indigenous Malay *kampong* or *astana* (palace) architecture, but there was no tradition of large administrative buildings in the Islamic Malay kingdoms. It does draw a thread from west Asian mosque architecture but this architecture was developed from pre-Islamic region specific local architectures and cannot be considered an 'official Islamic architecture'. Perhaps this can be seen as a lost architectural opportunity to develop an architecture that might include aspects from both cultures out of which some idea of a regionally specific hybrid might be created, but again, this was not the intention of the colonial system. It was in their interests to maintain their carefully conceived *status quo*.

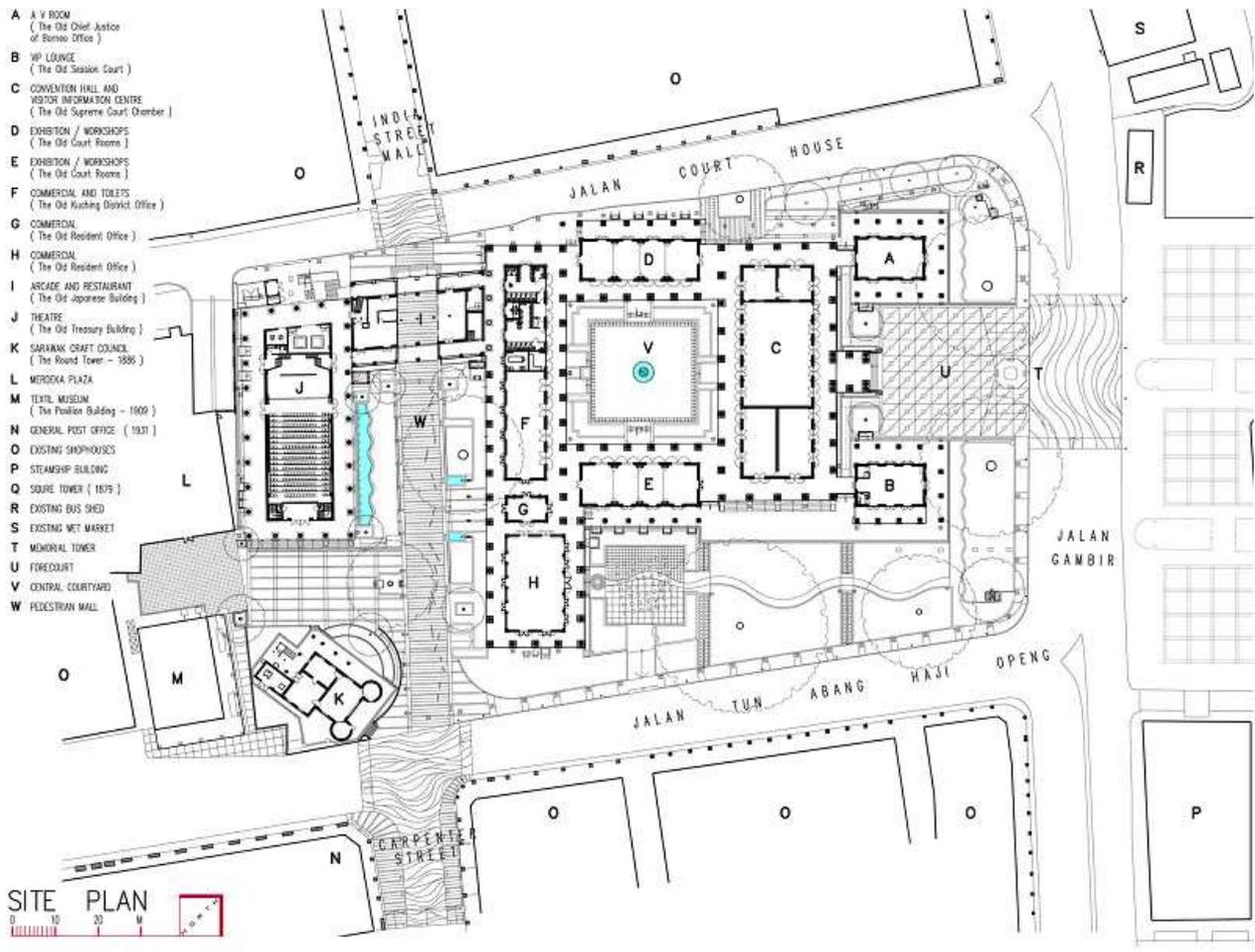
The Old Courthouse in Kuching has been developed around a different set of concerns to the public buildings of the British in India and Malaya. It has yet to be confirmed who exactly designed this complex of buildings (any records, let alone architectural ones, are sketchy), but it was certainly one of the European officers, if not Charles Brooke himself. It fits in with Charles's dislike for the official, formal and late 19th century imperialism²⁵, and his familiarity and respect for local design, construction and materials. Although western references are made with the use of colonnades of classical columns line the verandahs, it was not the more metropolitan Ionic nor the Corinthian as the colonials would have chosen in India and Malaya in the early-mid nineteenth century, but rather the provincial Tuscan. The Tuscan is referred to in the translations of Vitruvius's 'Ten Books of Architecture'²⁶ and quoted in Banister Fletcher's 'A history of architecture'²⁷. What have been used are only the columns of the Tuscan temple, as described in words and drawings by Vitruvius²⁸ and confirmed by Fletcher through the archaeological discovery of burial-urn models²⁹. The entablatures and gable roof forms are not used, and neither has the relation between the columns and the plan form.



View of the courtyard of the Old Kuching Courthouse during restoration
(Copyright John Ting)

Charles Brooke and his son Vyner (the third Rajah) built the Courthouse from 1868 until 1927. The original building (Blocks A, B & C on the plan below) brought all the government departments under the one roof, being:

1. Courtroom
2. Resident's Office
3. Treasury
4. Post Office
5. Shipping Office
6. Auditor's Office
7. Government Printing Press



Plan of the recent restoration / adaptive re-use
 (Reprinted with permission, copyright Akitek JFN)

As these functions outgrew their allocated areas, more wings were added, and photographs of the period show that the next 2 wings to be built were Blocks D & E, followed by Blocks F, G & H. At this time, the exact date when they were built is not known, but photographs taken during the construction of the recent restoration and adaptive re-use of the building (by the Kuching architectural firm of Akitek JFN) show different construction methods and materials for sets of wings that confirm the construction stages as suggested. Preliminary studies by the author also show that the proportions of the Tuscan columns as drawn in the measured drawings of the existing conditions for the sets of wings above vary according to the suggested stages and beyond what might be considered allowable construction tolerances. Block J was built in 1927 (as confirmed by dates found on the building during the restoration), and unlike the earlier wings, was constructed from reinforced concrete, with the floor being constructed from precast concrete self supporting "T" section floor panels, rather than with the timber construction of the earlier wings. The architecture of all the wings to 1927 are very, very similar, and contrasts starkly with Block I (which connects Block J to the rest of the complex), built by the Japanese during their occupation of Sarawak from 1941-5.

The Courthouse has a courtyard, formed by Block C north side, Blocks D & E to the east & west, and Blocks F, G & H to the south. The relationship between this courtyard and the outside of the complex are different

from descriptions of the Tuscan atrium³⁰, which has its entry from the street through the middle of the wing that runs along it. In the Old Kuching Courthouse, the courtyard is formed by the 4 main wings of the building and the continuous roof over them. The wings themselves are not connected, with permanently open and accessible (but roofed) spaces between the wings of the building. In fact, the courtyard can also be read as an occupiable center, where there might be the most important and central space in either a Victorian or colonial building here there is a courtyard that is open to the sky.

This intentional possibility of occupation by the entire symbolic center of power has parallels with the system of Brooke administration. They saw themselves as the protectors and partners of the natives, their customs and cultures, and believed that they could only run the country with the full cooperation of the natives. Charles Brooke also saw a need to prepare for a time when Brookes might no longer be able to run Sarawak, and when the natives would be in control. The implementation of the State Representative Council of Sarawak was his first move in this direction. In his final speech to the Council, warned the natives of being cheated of their landed birthright by 'strangers and speculators'³¹.

When compared to the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, the architecture of the Kuching courthouse is quite different in how local traditions and methods (in terms of planning, thermal loading, ventilation, materials, rain protection and so on) seem to have influenced its design and construction. The planning of the courthouse is more akin to how a Malay *kampung* (or village) might be laid out, with a series of independent houses or pavilions laid out around a common space. The difference with the courthouse is that all the individual roofs are have been connected to form one common roof form over all the pavilions, or wings, and forms a courtyard open to the sky in the middle. Kuching is a Malay area, unlike the forts which were mostly built in Iban areas.

The lack of an entablature and the use of a 1 in 2 pitched hip roof allowed for deep eaves, which assisted in keeping the sun off the walls, minimising heat gain and thermal loading from direct sunlight. The roof lining are *belian* timber shingles, a relatively low maintenance (when compared to palm thatch) and breathable material used by the local Malays as well as the Ibans. It has low thermal mass allowing it to lose what heat it does absorb quickly. In the KL building, there are many exposed walls made of brick (which has high thermal mass) which when exposed to direct sunlight will heat up to such an extent that it never really cools down until the monsoon rains arrive. Needless to say the hottest rooms were quite uncomfortable, and are now the ones that work their air-conditioning the hardest. The use of non-breathable corrugated iron sheet for the roof lining does not promote heat dispersion either.

The roof at the courthouse also assisted with protection from the rain, and the lack of gutters allows rainwater to fall freely away from the roof. The employment of colonnaded verandahs all sides of each of the wings also offered protection from the rain, and offered alternative access to the other wings when the rain was wind driven. Most of the wings of the building are one room thick, and where they are 2 rooms thick, they are always on corners. This was possibly to promote cross ventilation through the building in order to

further reduce heat gain. The cement rendered and whitewashed walls and columns were made of locally fired bricks, the first brick building in Sarawak³² in line with new building regulations brought in after a number of unstoppable fires in Kuching due to timber construction.

The Old Kuching Courthouse has just been restored and adapted for use as a conference and tourist facility, a testament to the interest that this building continues to hold in Sarawak, 59 years after the last rajah, Vyner Brooke, ceded the state to the British. The high esteem in which the Brookes are held in this Malaysian state and the unique nature of its cultural and political reality are largely a legacy of the Brooke dynasty of Sarawak. The Brooke era was at its height in the early 20th century when in Java, the Dutch colonial government instituted the Ethical Policy which was devised to counter growing nationalist sentiments borne out of 300 years of colonial rule. Dutch colonial architects such as Henri Maclaine-Pont and Thomas Karsten who were sympathetic to this policy attempted to create an architecture that respected and referenced local architectural and construction methods while also employing modern Dutch architecture. They were trying to create a hybrid architecture that would take them into the new Netherlands Indies where the colonisers and the colonised lived harmoniously and equally (for all things except economically). This was not to be, as this *arrear-guard* action was too little and too late to undo 3 centuries of oppression. Architecturally, their work is closely related to and chronologically parallels that of Frank Lloyd Wright, especially in terms of looking for a hybrid of non-western and western architectures. In many ways the architecture of Kuching Courthouse encompasses the aims of those architects, except that it was built 40 years earlier and that it was a reflection of the ethical policy of the Brooke administration.

Notes

¹ In terms of their lack of economic or financial exploitation of the indigenous peoples, as outlined in Alan Bullock, Oliver Stallybrass & Stephen Trombley, Eds, *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, London: Fontana Press, 1988, p.409

² Robert Payne, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986, p.16

³ Payne, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, p.18

⁴ Payne, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, p.21

⁵ The term “native” is still used today by the indigenous peoples of Sarawak, who have the majority of seats in the elected State Legislative Council of Sarawak. This term is preferred by the people of Sarawak, and does not carry the same derogatory colonial connotations.

⁶ There are about 28 different ethnic groups in Sarawak, all with related but different cultures and languages. The largest group is the Iban, Followed by the Sarawak Malays. There is the most difference between the coastal Sarawak Malays and the nomadic Penan/Punan of the interior. Ethnicity in Kalimantan is also similar, although the difference in governance has led to different modes of naming and spelling. Generally speaking the groups that are deepest in the interior are the ones that have had the least contact (and therefore influence) from beyond Borneo.

⁷ A.B. Ward, *Rajah's Servant*, Ithaca: Data Paper No.61, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1966, p.vi

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- ⁸ Ward, *Rajah's Servant*, p.34
- ⁹ Ward, *Rajah's Servant*, p.19
- ¹⁰ Charles Hose, *Natural Man – a record from Borneo* Singapore: first published in 1926, reprinted by Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, Part 2, Ch. 3
- ¹¹ Steven Runciman, *The White Rajahs: A History of Sarawak, 1841-1946*, Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1960, p.205
- ¹² Ward, *Rajah's Servant*, p.28
- ¹³ Originally the house of the representative of the Brunei Sultanate, this house has been rebuilt twice during the Brooke administration, the final version of the 1870's now serves as the Astana, which houses the Governor of Sarawak.
- ¹⁴ W.J. Chater, *Sarawak Long Ago*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1994, p.69
- ¹⁵ Alice Yen Ho, *Old Kuching*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.19
- ¹⁶ Bob Reece, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak – A Borneo Dynasty*, Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2004, p.45
- ¹⁷ Payne, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, p.119
- ¹⁸ Ho, *Old Kuching*, p.28
- ¹⁹ As outlined by Jan Morris (among others) in *Stones of the Empire – the Buildings of the Raj*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p.20
- ²⁰ Giles H.R. Tillotson, *Orientalizing the Raj – Indo-Saracenic Fantasies* in Christopher W. London, Ed. *Architecture in Victorian and Edwardian India* Bombay: Marg Publications 1994, p.30
- ²¹ after Edward Said's book of the same name
- ²² V.F. Chen, *Architecture*, a volume of *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia*, Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 1998, p.82
- ²³ 'Malaya' is the term coined by the British colonials generally used to describe the combined 'Federated Malay States', being the 9 states with royal families under British 'protection', and the 2 territories controlled directly by the British (Penang and Singapore)
- ²⁴ As quoted from Malaysian Government figures by Amos Hee in a lecture given to RMIT students involved in the 1994 Department of Architecture Study Tour of South East Asia (led by Richard Fooks and John Ting).
- ²⁵ Runciman, *The White Rajahs: A History of Sarawak*, p.227
- ²⁶ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, (translated by Morris Hicky Morgan) New York: Dover Publications, 1960
- ²⁷ D. Cruickshank (Ed.), Sir Bannister Fletcher's A History of Architecture 12th edition, Oxford: Architectural Press, 1996
- ²⁸ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, p.120
- ²⁹ D. Cruickshank (Ed.), Sir Bannister Fletcher's A History of Architecture 12th edition, Oxford: Architectural Press, 1996, p.230
- ³⁰ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, p.176
- ³¹ Payne, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, p.144
- ³² Chater, *Sarawak Long Ago*, p.70