COLONIALISM AND THE BROOKE ADMINISTRATION: INSTITUTIONAL BUILDINGS AND INFRASTRUCTRE IN 19TH CENTURY SARAWAK

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This paper argues that hybrid processes were reflected in Sarawak's institutional architecture and infrastructure from 1841, showing a different colonial encounter to that of the Straits Settlements. British colonial settlements replicated European architectural templates that contrasted with indigenous models to convey colonial authority, reinforced by the agency given to the 'creators' of those colonies. Sarawak's Brooke rajahs are often considered similarly, however their architecture and infrastructure evolved from an awareness of the local context, engaged with local cultural systems, and involved indigenous actors in their design and implementation. This paper will compare the architecture and infrastructure of Sarawak with those of Singapore and Penang in order to investigate how Sarawak is positioned in terms of British colonialism in 19th century Southeast Asia. This paper aims to show that Sarawak offered a different reading of the colonial encounter, by looking at how built form resulted from engagement with local cultures.

KUCHING TODAY

The colonial urban morphology of Kuching (now the capital of the Malaysian state of Sarawak) was similar to the Straits Settlements of Penang and Singapore. Their ports were lined with warehouses, adjacent to a parade ground (*padang* in Malay) that was surrounded by institutional buildings, and with ethnically defined commercial and residential areas beyond. The institutional architecture and settlement patterns of the Straits Settlements were the spatial and built expressions of policies and practices, which deliberately divided the settlement along ethnic lines and colonial hierarchy. The centers were reserved for colonial institutions, designed according to European architectural norms. The Straits Settlements was part of the larger British colonial project, which aimed to gain commercial superiority. Much agency is given to individual administrators, who are celebrated as the 'founders' and 'creators' of those settlements, such as Francis Light in Penang and Stamford Raffles in Singapore. The contribution of non-European actors in the establishment and administration of the colonies was rarely considered.

Sarawak, under James Brooke, should have followed this pattern, as he was a product of the colonial system and was inspired by Raffles' aims. However, Sarawak's history is different, as it became a colony of Britain only after World War 2. Before then, it was ruled by the three rajahs who were not answerable to the British. Although the achievements of the first rajah James Brooke are often compared to Raffles and Light, Sarawak histories often point to more engagement and negotiation with indigenous actors, which suggest hybrid approaches. A closer look at Kuching reveals that its *padang* does not have the same urban relationship as the *padangs* of Penang and Singapore, and it is not part of a European urban plan. Also, Kuching's institutional architecture does not follow metropolitan styles strictly. To more fully interrogate these differences, Sarawak needs to be positioned within the broader context of colonialism in Southeast Asia.

SARAWAK AND COLONIAL SOUTHEAST ASIA

Sarawak's history from 1841 until WW2 is often referred to as 'colonial', but this simplification belies the complex and unconventional role of Europeans there. Unlike colonial Southeast Asia, it was ruled by three rajahs of English origin. James Brooke, Charles Brooke and Vyner Brooke were the sovereign rulers of Sarawak from 1841 to 1941, and considering them as colonisers is problematic.

James Brooke was a product of the colonial system. He spent most of his formative years in India and joined the army of the East India Company (hereafter referred to as EIC), serving in the 1st. Anglo-Burmese war before he resigned his commission. [1] He travelled to northwest Borneo where he acquired the Sarawak and the title of 'Rajah' from Brunei. Like Light and Raffles before him, he indigenised himself by adopting local cultural practices to gain political control. Light and Raffles acknowledged and were sensitive to indigenous cultural systems during negotiations, but imposed European systems once indigenous cooperation was no longer needed. In 1841, James Brooke acquired the Sarawak *Raj* in exchange for negotiating a settlement between local insurgents and Brunei where he adopted indigenous customs and strategy. [2] He was trying to emulate Raffles in unofficially acquiring territory for the British. His aim was to turn Sarawak into a commercial powerhouse and strategic port like Raffles had done in Java and Singapore respectively. [3] However, he was unable to convince the British to establish Sarawak as a colony, [4] and began to modify his political trajectory by extending his indigenization to governing Sarawak. This was unusual as colonial policy of the time frowned upon 'going native' and promoted a sharper distinction between the colonizers and the colonized. [5]

British colonial aims in Southeast Asia then were to facilitate metropolitan commerce by establishing political control of trade routes and their key ports, under the positivist guise of the modernisation of native life. [6] The term 'colony' is derived from the Latin *colonia* of antiquity, a settlement of Romans on contested territory won from hostile indigenous peoples. [7] However this was not the case with Singapore, Penang and Kuching, and the definition needs to be expanded. Under the control of the EIC, Penang and Singapore had the five characteristics of colonialism put forth by Balandier:

> '....(I) the domination by a foreign minority, racially (or ethnically) and
> culturally different, of an indigenous population, inferior from a
> material viewpoint; (II) the linking of radically different civilizations
> in "some form of relationship"; (III) the imposition of an industrialized
> society onto a non-industrialized society; in (IV) "an antagonistic
> relationship" where colonial people were "subjugated as instruments of
> colonial power"; (V) with the need, "in maintaining this domination,
> not only to resort to force but to a system of pseudo-justifications and
> stereotyped behavior." '[8]

Colonial control did not always produce the positive effects proposed by the doctrine of modernisation. While good for British commerce, side-effects emerged, such as the creation of a landless peasantry, the breaking down of organically developed indigenous cultural systems, and alienating indigenous traders and tradesmen with migrant workers.[9] The side-effects of colonialism were often ignored in the positivist imaginings of its administrators, but Brooke chose to tackle them through the Government of Sarawak.

Eurocentric histories and narratives of the period claim Brooke as one of theirs, portraying him as a heroic and romantic figure - an Englishman who is given a native title and dedicates his life to civilizing and modernizing his native subjects. While he remained a British subject during his tenure as *rajah,* he saw his position as independent of Britain. While the British did not interfere in Sarawak during the 19th century, they did not have reason to - it was not high on the colonial agenda, it did not figure in regional geo-politics and did not affect trade. Brooke's stated aim was to develop ideal policies and practices to govern an eastern state,[10] to avoid the negative aspects of colonialism. He set about to partly modernize Sarawak with new laws and policies. While the laws were deliberately separate to most customary law, he did not extend his indigenization to all aspects of his rule. He chose ignore the ritual meanings associated with activities that he considered as piracy, slavery and murder.[11] Some of his subjects to reacted antagonistically, especially when otherwise-banned activities (such as headhunting) were allowed for indigenous collaborators on maneuvers against recalcitrant groups. And while he adopted indigenous methods of warfare, he was also quick to call upon his colonial navy contacts to employ warships on his behalf. His attitudes to the indigenous peoples as "different but not inferior...."[12] represent an alternative viewpoint to the social Darwinism employed by the colonials, however his approach to the indigenous peoples could be paternalistic, especially when they did not agree. He and his successors would use their knowledge of local cultures both for and against the indigenous peoples in order to achieve their aims.

Unlike Penang and Singapore, migrant settlers in Sarawak also included indigenous peoples. Chinese settlers were controlled as not to impact on indigenous groups negatively, but the migration in large numbers of indigenous groups to new areas lacked control and impacted on the demographics of local populations. European settler colonies associated with large-scale commercial agriculture or plantations were not permitted, but neither were indigenous

peoples encouraged to develop agriculture commercially to augment their subsistence practices.

The Brooke rajahs were trying to address the ills of colonialism but it is problematic to consider them as completely benevolent. While they were trying to protect the indigenous peoples from the effects of colonial development, they also neglected to address the health and educational welfare of most of the indigenous peoples. And while the government eventually developed a long term goal of a Sarawak ruled by local peoples, they did not prepare their subjects to deal with the issues of a globalizing world. Indigenous groups were governed directly on all non-religious matters, in a manner that was a hybrid of western principles and indigenous customary law. However, the relative autonomy of self-government that the migrant Chinese communities had in pre-colonial times was taken away, and their customary laws were not accommodated.

STRAITS SETTLEMENTS: PENANG

Colonial policies and practices included those that segregated colonizers from colonized, and different colonized groups from each other. Settlements were divided into functionally specific zones, informed by colonial hierarchy. These forms of division intentionally contrasted with, and replaced, indigenous practices and power structures. Similarly, the European architecture styles of institutional buildings reflected colonial superiority.

Until the 19th century, British colonial settlement was established with a stockade beside the port, and adjacent to non-European settlements. In Penang's case (occupied in 1786) the stockade and fort were originally built from timber, and was adjacent to a Chinese fishing village. The timber stockade was soon replaced with whitewashed stone fortifications, replicating European models. Masonry forts and fortified towns were introduced to Southeast Asia by the Portuguese with the 'A Famosa' fort in Malacca (begun 1511). It replaced the sultan's timber stockade, and expanded the area which it covered to include most of the town south of the river. The masonry fort proved impregnable to the returning *sultan*, and use of masonry construction for forts and stockades began to be controlled by local regents for fear of losing control.[13]

The fort's impenetrability would have been a potent symbol of permanence and power to indigenous groups. It contained administrative and institutional functions, which were re-

located to larger premises around the adjacent parade ground when more space was needed. The parade ground was a rectangular grass field, reserved for daily military parades and European social uses such as cricket and polo. These displays reminded the residents of European control. A grid of streets (Fig. 1) was laid out to the south from the European area which contained the fort and parade ground, which incorporated the main street of the fishing village and determined the pattern of development for the town. The grid also allowed for social control of the polyglot migrant races,[14] as they could be segregated into specific streets.

SINGAPORE AND MALAY POWER

Forts were no longer used by the time colonial Singapore was established in 1819, but the pattern of a parade ground surrounded by institutions and a grid which directed development continued to be used. Singapore's existing settlement had a heterogeneous population of about 1000 inhabitants (mostly Malay but also about 150 sea gypsies and 20 to 30 Chinese settlers).[15] It was a vassal of Johor, led by Temenggong Abdul Rahman, who negotiated with Raffles for Singapore to be acquired by the EIC. Singapore was what John Miksic calls a 'heterogenetic' (trading) settlement, and had previously been an 'orthogenetic' (royal) settlement in the 14th century.[16] Temenggong Abdul Rahman's house was built in solid timber, in contrast to the houses of his followers (typically built with less permanent materials). Like other houses there, it would have been regulated by ritual alignment for Malay houses,[17] and was located near the market and the mosque. It would also have had a rural, green character from the trees planted in between houses for subsistence production of fruit.[18] This form of settlement was not familiar to Europeans or Chinese,[19] and was not recognized by Raffles as a settlement.

To present Singapore as European territory, Raffles ordered a zoned city grid over the site of the village and Temenggong's house, where the land was high.[20] The Malay population was displaced to the edges, away from the new locus of power. Loss of land can be considered as loss of power, but the Temenggong and his followers saw this rather as the acquisition of partners. Seeking out powerful partners was an approach that Malays in the region had employed for hundreds of years, for example with the Perak sultanate and the Dutch, and the various kingdoms that went into partnership with the Chinese through Admiral Zheng He.[21] The Malay conception of power came from control of manpower rather than land ownership. For Raffles, the establishment of a European settlement represented the institution of a

modern order over a pre-modern people, but it is questionable whether or not Malays saw it similarly.

Temenggong Abdul Rahman would have seen his relationship with Raffles as adding to (rather than eroding) his power and prestige within the sultanate and the region.[22] What was important to the sultanate was maintaining manpower and influence to control of trade routes which Singapore was central to. They did not react as if threatened, as traditionally their priority was to preserve power and reacted by retreating strategically rather than losing manpower through warfare.[23] Raffles had used his knowledge of Malay culture and hierarchy in order to annex Singapore, but also needed to maintain the Temenggong's support. Before 1824, Singapore was technically within Dutch colonial territory, but Raffles used the Temenggong's support to keep the Dutch at bay. Raffles has been held up as a heroic individual who single-handedly overcame the problems of setting up a colony, a reading that excludes the collaboration of the local Malays that was crucial to the establishment of colonial Singapore.[24]

The Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824 saw the Dutch and British agree on colonial boundaries in Southeast Asia, which saw the Malay peninsular and as Singapore come under the British. The cooperation of the Malay gentry was no longer needed and the British were then able to move beyond their compromise position and establish full control of Singapore. A new treaty was drawn up which saw a vastly reduced role (and revenue) for the temenggong and his followers. The political desires represented by the gridded city plan only came true after the Malays were politically dispensable.

The city plan (Fig. 2) was designed to control the development of the settlement.[25] Raffles ordered that all non-conforming buildings built in the first three years of settlement be demolished and rebuilt according to the geometry and zoning of the grid.[26] The design was much more comprehensive than Penang's, but similarly had a parade ground at its centre, surrounded by European style institutional buildings. The main commercial areas were located in a different zone. The grid allowed for the segregation of the population, with one Malay area for the Sultan at Kampong Glam on the north side of the river, and another the Temenggong at Teluk Belanga south of the river. The migrant Chinese areas (located beyond the commercial zone) were further segregated by province of origin, dialect group and clan.

Although the colonial Dutch are credited with the idea of communitarian segregation, pre-colonial settlements in Southeast Asia self-segregated into adjacent communities of Malay and non-Malay migrants (primarily Chinese, but also Indian and Arab).[27] The form of indirect rule employed by the EIC was not new either, which gave ethnic headmen responsibility for governing their specific communities, who in turn dealt with the governors of the settlement. What was new was the level of colonial determination of the city, particularly in terms of use, function and form: no longer were settlements organically negotiated between communities, rather the EIC who controlled the city's operation and habitation.

The lack of a familiar settlement structure and form allowed Singapore's colonizers consider it as *terra nulius*, a clean slate for modern development, without pre-colonial land tenure. This was rationalized as a modernizing project despite colonial aims to control trade in Southeast Asia. However, Carl Trocki argues that despite the modernizing image, these systems were developed from existing indigenous trading systems. They were actually just the most recent in a long line of imperial powers in the region that tapped into existing trade networks and power structures.[28]

KUCHING

The settlement on the Sarawak River started off as a Malay village of about 800, with a handful of about 20 Chinese traders.[29] Unlike Singapore, pre-colonial Sarawak could be only considered a trading settlement, as it was on the periphery rather than being at the centre of influence. While Singapore's importance at the beginning of the 19th century was one step removed from the Sultan, it still played a primary role within the network of the sultanate, to control the sea routes around Singapore. Sarawak on the other hand, was a peripheral, riverine settlement - it was never a center of influence in pre-colonial times.

When James Brooke arrived at Sarawak, it was a vassal state of Brunei, who was interested in Sarawak's antimony. However, Brunei was in decline and did not have enough power to bring the Sarawak Malays under their authority. When Brooke arranged for a settlement with the local Malay gentry, the sultan's representative, Rajah Muda Hashim, saw him in the same way as Temenggong Abdul Rahman had seen Raffles - as a powerful and valuable 'partner', and as someone who would be able to reinstate Brunei's authority in Sarawak, adding to Brunei's power. Brooke used a combination of his influence with Brunei and 'gunboat

diplomacy' to gain the title of Rajah. He then began to expel Bruneian officials from Sarawak, while reinstating Sarawak's Malay gentry in Kuching.

Brooke also indigenized himself in terms of housing - his first residence was a Malay house. Rajah Muda Hashim was still trying to win Brookes' support when he had the house built. In keeping with Brooke's perceived rank, the house represented a command of manpower which demonstrated ritual power and influence. Ritual power is also based around the idea of *semangat* or 'life force', which is believed to exist in all things.[30] It is transferable which is why an individual deemed to have strong *semangat* attracted others who want a part it. There are many indicators of *semangat*, including wealth, fertility and power, and James Brooke's command of a large armed ship and gifts of value was considered to be well endowed with it.[31] Raja Muda Hashim recognized Brooke's *semangat* and wanted to tap into it - Brooke's house was located next to his on the north bank.[32]

Like the Temenggong's house in Singapore, it was not built in an ordinary vernacular way, but from solid timber. The house was not a palace, but still represented Brooke's power. It is described as being about 16.5m long by 16.5m wide with bedrooms on each corner and a 'large dining room' in the middle, more likely an audience hall used by the Malay aristocracy and their entourage to receive guests.[33] While Brooke might not have indigenized himself to the extent that he fully comprehended the Malay conception of power, he also did not replace the house with a European one until it was burnt down in the 1857 attempted coup - unlike Light and Raffles, Brooke was not compelled to impose European architecture and urbanism.

Kuching grew when the Sarawak Malay gentry returned from local exile in Lida Tanah.[34] They settled on the south bank adjacent to the mosque which became known as *kampong masjid* (mosque village). They also settled next to Brooke's house on the north bank, called *Kampong Bedil*.[35] Brooke appointed Datuk Patinggi Ali to be part of the government, and Kuching expanded further with the arrival of Southeast Asian Malay migrants. These groups settled in Kuching adjacent to the existing Malay communities, according to their ethnic origin and position within Malay hierarchy. The *kampong*s were laid out in the traditional vernacular and ritual way, and were not controlled by the government.

In 1850 Kuching also saw an influx of Chinese refugees from west Dutch Borneo. They expanded the existing Chinese areas along the south bank. The attempted coup of 1857

resulted in a crackdown against the autonomous institutions of Chinese self-government, and therefore the whole *kongsi* or clan system.[36] Although the Chinese community was directly ruled, the pattern of settlement of Kuching's Chinese migrants was more negotiated and less directed, and its form and location within the city was largely determined by the settlers rather than by the government.

Unlike the Straits Settlements a grid of streets was not established, nor were Chinese groups controlled in the same way. They self-segregated into communities based on dialect, which resembled colonial segregation of Singapore and Penang. However, the streets in the Chinese bazaar followed the curve of the river, and developed in layers back from the riverfront in the manner that is similar to other coastal and riverine settlements of the ethnic Chinese in pre-colonial Southeast Asia.[37]Another indication of the lack of control is the Siew San Teng shrine, located on the riverfront. The location was based on traditional Chinese spiritual *fung-shui* principles,[38] and was allowed to remain there despite the development that went on around it. In contrast, the colonial authorities in Penang reconfigured the Chinese community according to their urban plan. Although there would have been a similar shrine in Penang when Light got there, it was moved and later shrines and clan houses in urban Penang were located inside shophouse quadrangles. The locations with the best *fung-shui* were appropriated by the colonials for their institutions.

Government House (Fig. 3) was built after Brooke's first house was burnt down during the 1857 coup attempt. It was also built in timber, but used the Malay practice of using ironwood roofing shingles (rather than thatch). The double-pitched roof is reminiscent of the Malay house type and it is likely that it was built by Malay carpenters. The rest of its design is reminiscent of an Anglo-Indian bungalow that has been adapted to equatorial conditions, with deep verandahs and deep eaves. It also included a fireproof masonry tower for a library and panic-room. It is actually the third building built by the government, but the first in Kuching. The first two were Fort James (1849) at Skrang and Fort Emma (1851) at Kanowit, both of which were outside Sarawak's nominal borders of the time. Here, Brooke adopted the indigenous strategy of establishing control points along key waterways to limit the movement of recalcitrant groups.

James Brooke had moved his office out of his house to the south bank of the river in 1848, when he occupied an existing abandoned building. It was located between the Indian and

Chinese bazaars. The office was replaced by the courthouse, established by the second Rajah in 1874. Unlike the old Singapore courthouse (1867), it was embedded in the urban fabric, and was not isolated to an institutional zone. The Singapore building was deliberately located within the European zone and on the edge of the *padang*, and aligned to the colonial urban grid. Kuching had no *padang* when the courthouse was built, and it was aligned to a different urban order (Fig. 4).

Architecturally, the two buildings demonstrate different approaches. Both are second generation buildings, built to replace *ad hoc* buildings. Both were designed as courthouses which also housed other functions. However the Singapore courthouse is a European classical building, in plan and elevation, and does not show local influences, nor does it respond to the local climate. The Kuching courthouse is a result of hybrid processes, where European, Malay and Chinese architectural and construction traditions are used. Both started off as one building and, in Singapore, the building was extended with new attached wings added to the front and back of the original building. The Kuching building was extended by adding pavilions that are connected with deep eaves that form covered walkways. These allow the pavilions to be accessed when it is raining, but also keep the rain off the whitewashed walls, for less maintenance. Similarly to how they are employed in the Malay house, the eaves also keep direct sunlight off the walls to help control thermal loading and the internal comfort of the building (Fig. 5). The Singapore building, with parapet walls, seems to put the display of European architecture ahead of climate and maintenance concerns.

Kuching developed in layers southward, and eventually reached the *padang's* location. Like the parade grounds of the Straits Settlements, it was renamed *padang Merdeka* (independence field) when Malaysia was formed in 1963. Sarawak had been a British colony since 1946, so it is not surprising that this space developed a similar meaning and use to those of the Straits Settlements and Malayan colonies. However, unlike Penang and Singapore, Kuching's *padang* was not established at the beginning of European influence in the town, but in 1920, 79 years after James Brooke had been made Rajah.[39] It was originally reclaimed from swampy land and configured as a municipal park called 'The Esplanade' (Fig. 6). The rectangular park had paths that ran diagonally from the corners, and a bandstand. The bandstand's location made it inappropriate for parades, and it was demolished when Sarawak became a colony. There was a military parade ground in Kuching, but it was on the outskirts, which suggests that military parades had different meanings than in the Straits Settlements.

There are some institutional buildings around Kuching's *padang*, similar to Penang and Singapore. However, there are also other types of buildings in addition to institutional ones, with shophouses to the north and a hotel to the east. These institutional buildings were actually built in that location before The Esplanade, with the Police Station and Post office being the only two Sarawak Government buildings built after. The other ones (The Government Printing Office, 1908; and the Sarawak Museum, 1891) form a different pattern of institutional development that began at the banks of the Sarawak River, and developed southwards. The shophouses to the north of the *padang* further indicate a different pattern of the development of Kuching's institutions, as it splits Kuching's main cluster of institutional buildings from the *padang*, a different pattern to Singapore's where the institutions were gathered in one location.

CONCLUSION

The institutional architecture and settlement patterns of the EIC in Penang and Singapore were rationalized as part of a modernizing project which in turn provided for a greater level of governmental control of the colonized. Hybrid practices were denied for the sake of colonial propaganda it was not in colonial interests to acknowledge their indigenous collaborators, only to 'celebrate' the cultural superiority of their modernizing project and their individual heroes. In the case of Sarawak, an alternative approach was taken - while similar in many ways, it also differed fundamentally in that the hybrid approaches that produced their institutional architecture and settlement patterns were deliberate and acknowledged. Their approach was sometimes similar but often contrasted with colonial practices, especially in their approach to trying to control the emerging global economy that colonialism was bringing, and the negative effects that went with it. While it is questionable whether or not they achieved their aim of creating an alternative and ideal Asian kingdom, the different experience of Sarawak during the height of colonialism in Southeast Asia can be read through the architecture and settlement patterns of Kuching as one that demonstrated possibilities in policy, practice and built form in a more inclusive partnership that recognized and involved its many actors.
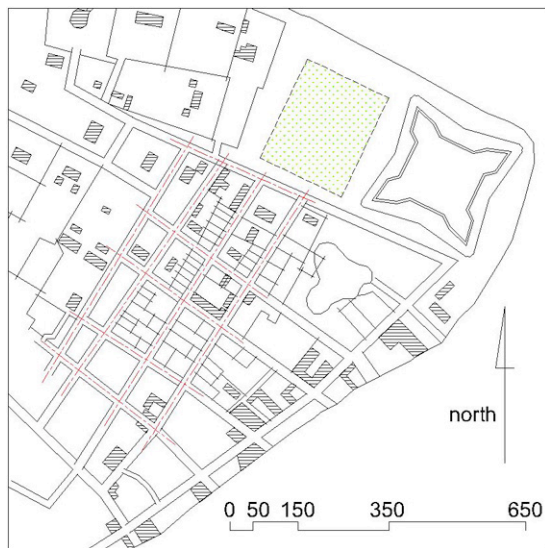
FIGURES

Figure 1 - Plan of Penang circa 1800, by the author. The parade ground is in green.

Figure 2 - Jackson's plan of Singapore (c.1822) by the author. The parade ground is in green.

Figure 3 - Government House today. The central wing was the original building, and the roof was replaced in 1868. Photo by the author.
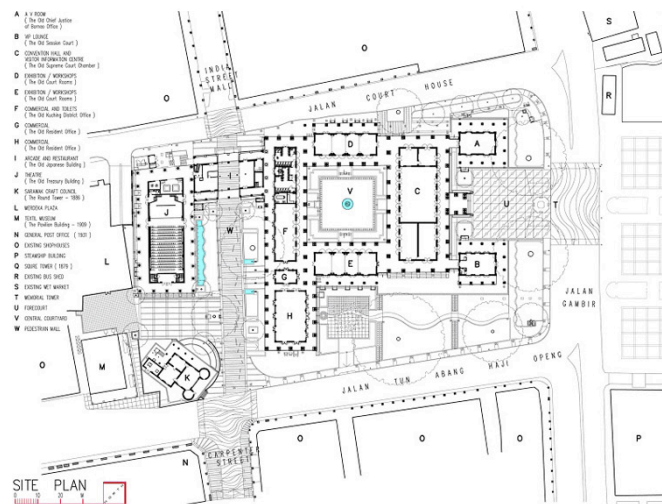
Figure 4 - The Kuching Courthouse, reprinted with the permission of Akitek JFN.

Figure 5 - A contemporary photograph of the courtyard of the Old Kuching Courthouse, showing how 2 pavilions meet. Photo by the author, 2006.

Figure 6 - Plan of Kuching, circa 1920, by the author. The Esplanade is indicated in green, and institutional buildings in red.

Endnotes

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