

THE FORTS OF SARAWAK — A brief outline

The forts of Sarawak are spread across the state from Kuching to Baram. Through them can be traced the expansion of the Brooke regime and its interaction with the local communities that came under its umbrella. They changed the landscape as each successive fort established new communities, but yet conformed to it through their blending of east and west architectural traditions.

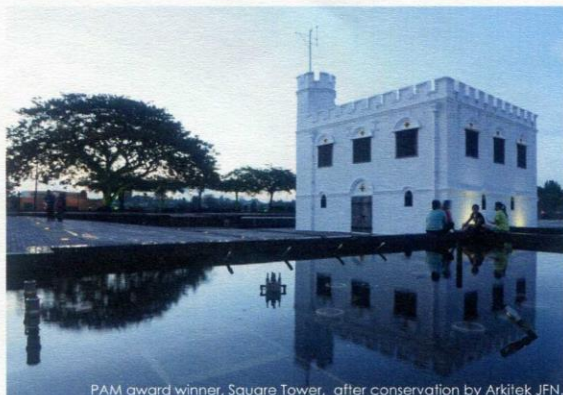
Over 20 forts were constructed, all of them in a strategic place on a river or at the river mouth. The goal, following a Malay practice, was to control river access, historically the primary form of communication at that time. In reality, the forts were called upon to serve a vast array of different purposes, functioning as courts, dispensaries, barracks, officers housing, jails, tax and post offices, stores and, even in one case, a residence for a visiting Brunei Sovereign.

Without fail, the establishment of a fort brought with it a metamorphosis in the local area. Generally, each location was chosen near the site of an existing Malay settlement or central to a group of longhouses. But each fort would draw in indigenous settlers to trade with it and, of course, Chinese settlers to trade with them. In fact, most major towns in Sarawak settled before 1941 conform to this pattern.

In terms of construction, the forts share certain broad similarities. With the exception of Fort Margherita and the Square Tower in Kuching, all outstation forts were originally timber construction. They were all barn-like structures with internal partitions, allowing for a flexible plan that suited their flexible purposes. Beyond that, they diverge into a number of 'types': single, double or even triple storey(s); some with attic roofs; some with look-out towers at the corners; some raised from the ground.

Only 14 remain today in varying states of repair, reconstruction or dilapidation. Out of those 14, however, only 8 are gazetted on the Sarawak Heritage List. These forts are among the most historically significant examples of the built architecture in the state, representing the architectural, social and political tradition of the Brooke regime and its impact on the state we live in today.

(Reference:
John Ting,
"The Forts of Sarawak An Outline",
Journal of The Malaysian Institute of Architects Vol.21, issue1, 28-33.)



PAM award winner, Square Tower, after conservation by Arkitek JFN.



Fort Alice, Sri Aman, 1864



Fort Margherita, Kuching, 1879



Square Tower, Kuching, 1879



Fort Sylvia, Kapit, 1880



Fort Lily, Betong, 1885



Fort Charles, Kabong, 1895



Fort Lama, Limbang, 1897



Fort Hose, Marudi, 1898



Fort Lio Matu, Lio Matu, 1911



Fort Arundell, Lubok Antu, 1912



Fort Long Akah, Long Akah, 1929



Fort Tebekang, Serian, 1929



Fort Emma, Kanowit, 1951



Fort Brooke, Meluan, 1935

(Photographs of surviving forts, courtesy of Jabatan Museum Sarawak (except Fort Charles by Mike Boon).)