Historical Land

SINGAPORE SHOPHOUSE SURVEY

Nos. 32-38 SULTAN GATE

© Julian Davison/Historical Land Pte. Ltd. 2014
Sultan Gate is one of the oldest thoroughfares in Singapore, whose origins date back to the very earliest days of the settlement when Sultan Hussein Mua’zzam Shah of Johor (r.1819–1835) built his first palace or istana at Kampong Glam in early 1819. On 6 February of that year, Sir Stamford Raffles concluded a treaty with the newly-installed Sultan Hussein allowing the British East India Company to establish a trading post on the island of Singapore. As part of the agreement, it was decided that Sultan Hussein should set up an establishment for his followers and royal household in the vicinity of Kampong Glam where there were already existing Bugis and Orang Laut settlements. At this moment in time, the island of Singapore as a whole was under the overlordship of the Sultan and the British were restricted to a limited and carefully prescribed area. This extended along the coastline of Singapore from Tanjong Katong in the north, to Tanjong Malang in the south, and as far inland as the range of a cannon shot. The Sultan’s proposed compound at Kampong Glam actually lay within the territory granted to the British for their factory, but had a kind of autonomous status — a bit like the Vatican, one supposes. Since the precise extent of the Sultan’s land had yet to be defined, left to his own devices Sultan Hussein Shah simply cleared some of the jungle between the shoreline and the Rochore River, put up a stockade around it, and then started work on the construction of a palace or istana. The latter, a large timber structure with attap roofs, was completed by the end of May 1819. Although no more that a pathway leading from the shore to the sultan’s front door, it is at this point in time that Sultan Gate has its beginnings.

1 The Bugis were famous seafarers, warriors and merchant adventurers, who originally came from Sulawesi. By the late eighteenth century, they had established themselves in various parts of the Malay Archipelago, including Riau and the West Coast of the Malay Peninsula, where they took advantage of the inherently unstable political situation to acquire considerable political and commercial influence in the region.

Orang Laut is a generic term for a diverse group of Malay peoples spread across the Riau and Malay Archipelagos who traditionally derived their livelihood from the sea, primarily fishing, but also engaging in other maritime activities such as the trade in sea slugs and sometimes even piracy. Some groups lived on their boats, others in coastal communities, like the people at Kampong Glam. The latter were called the Orang Gelam and they derived their name from the gelam tree (Melaleuca leucadendra), which grew at this location in great profusion. The bark of this tree was used by the Orang Laut to make awnings and sails, while its timber was used for constructing boats and also served as firewood. The dried fruit, ground up, could be used as pepper — merca bolong — while the leaves, boiled and concocted, made cajuput oil, a traditional medication used to treat rheumatism and cramps.

2 During the colonial era, trading posts were typically referred to as “factories” because they were supervised by a “factor”, the term being derived from the Latin factor, meaning “who or which acts”
Although we have no visual references, the first istana at Kampong Glam probably looked something like this in terms of the general form, materials and construction techniques.

Modest though it may have been at this early stage, the pathway that became Sultan Gate was actually the principal axis for setting out the rest of the royal compound. Running perpendicular to the shoreline it extended inland as far as the entrance to the sultan’s palace. Traditionally, the typical Malay palace complex comprised an enclosed compound in which were situated several pavilions, each of which was identified with a particular function or purpose. The most important structures were the sultan’s own private quarters and the main audience hall or balai, which were located directly opposite the main gate — the Sultan’s Gate — to the compound. They were fronted by a large open area or public square, the padang, where important state ceremonies and public rituals were held. The royal mosque was situated on one side of the padang, while on another side would be the main bazaar or market place. Various buildings associated with the functions of government would also be clustered round the main square, together with the homes of Malay nobles, their proximity to the royal residence being a reflection of their own elevated status in the social hierarchy.
This arrangement was highly significant because Malay palaces were traditionally conceived in terms of cosmological principles — the Malay palace complex was in effect a microcosm of the macrocosm. In this scheme of things, the sultan’s residence and the main pavilion where he held audiences with his ministers, was situated at the centre of the royal compound, which in symbolic terms constituted the epicentre of the universe — being quite literally at the centre of things, confirmed the sultan’s position ultimate source of secular power and moral authority in this temporal world. His paramount status was further endorsed by the situation of the royal mosque close at hand, which legitimised his rule in religious terms — a kind of affirmation of the Almighty, one might say — as well as the close proximity of his loyal followers who also lived round about.

It is an ancient model, one that dates back to the Hindu-Buddhist era before the coming of Islam to the Malay Archipelago when the ruler of a kingdom was variously identified as either an incarnation of Siva or Vishnu, or else a bodhisattva, an “about-to-be-Buddha”, depending on the predominant religion at the time. In those days, temple complexes like Borobudur (Buddhist) or Prambanan (Hindu) in Java were like gigantic mandalas that served to endorse and legitimise the rule of their divine kings (devaraja).
The Royal Palace or Kraton at Jogjakarta, fronted by the alun-alun (the Javanese equivalent of the Malay padang) with a ceremonial entrance, the Pageleran Gate, and a succession of courtyards leading to the main pavilions and the residence of the sultan at the centre of the royal complex (nos. 12-16); the axial symmetry of the layout of the compound is clearly evident.

The old gods may have been displaced by the spread of Islam through Southeast Asia from the thirteenth century onwards, but the idea of the palace complex as a microcosm of the macrocosm with the ruler symbolically situated at the centre of the universe survived, as can be seen in my reconstruction of the layout of the royal istana at Kampong Glam (above) before North Bridge Road was driven through the Sultan’s compound in 1825. The latter act severed the royal cemetery from the rest of the palace complex — royal burial ground at Kampong Glam was aligned on the same axis as Sultan Gate — and has been interpreted as a deliberate attempt on the part of the British to undermine the authority of Sultan Hussein — the mandala was smashed and the sultan’s power and prestige in the eyes of his followers diminished.

3 The boundaries of Sultan Hussein Shah’s settlement were not formally established until 14 March 1823, when Raffles, on his final visit to Singapore (his official position in the East Indies was Lieutenant-Governor of the British Settlement of Bencoolen on the west coast of Sumatra), posted an advertisement setting out the extent of the Sultan’s land: “To the east of the European town and lying between the Rochore river and the sea; measuring in front along Beach Road 731 feet; at back of Chulia Campong and along Rochore river about 1,200 feet; in depth from Beach Road to Rochore river 2,100 feet. Estimated to contain 56 acres.”
The first *istana* at Kampong Glam, the one completed for Sultan Hussein in May 1819, was probably a fairly rudimentary affair, an attap-thatched timber building surrounded by a wooden palisade, perhaps with a moat. Certainly it doesn’t seem to have been a very durable construction for by 1830 we find the sultan’s establishment described as “a poor looking bungalow surrounded by high walls, exhibiting effects of age and climate” (see illustration, page 2).

Three years later, the same visitor to Kampong Glam, a British-born Australian naturalist by the name of George Bennett, found the situation considerably improved. He writes:
The buildings of his highness and followers were now much improved, being surrounded by a neat chunamed wall, and entrance was by a gateway of brick, which had only recently been completed. Since my last visit his highness had caused a house to be constructed after the style of the European residents at Singapore, and it was situated exterior to the boundary of his old domain.

Bennett continues: “… Besides the new residence and wall, he was erecting a new residence and wall for himself, neat and extensive in construction, and in something of a Chinese style of architecture. The building was certainly wanting, for the old thatched palace near it seemed ready to fall about his ears.”

This new building in a “Chinese style of architecture” was evidently the second istana to be built, but it too was superseded in the early 1840s when the present Classically-styled building was erected by Sultan Hussein’s heir and successor Sultan Ali Iskandar Shah. No one knows for sure who designed the new 1840s istana. The filleted band at the bases of the arches of the central portico is a characteristic feature in the architecture of Singapore’s first and for long time only professional architect, Irishman George Drumgoole Coleman, but as the late Lee Kip Lin has pointed out the Kampong Glam istana is in most respects “a plain and simple edifice without any other evidence of Coleman’s handiwork. Even the date of its erection is mere conjecture.”

---

4 Chunam, a kind of hard-wearing stucco of local manufacture.
Rather grander in scale and conception is the so-called Gedung Kuning or “Yellow Mansion” just outside the gates of today’s istana compound. Built around 1860, the building is sometimes referred to as the Rumah Bendahara or Prime Minister’s House. It is believed to have been commissioned by Tengku Mahmoud, one of Sultan Hussein’s grandsons — the fact that the building has traditionally always been painted yellow, which is the Malay colour for royalty, would seem to support some kind of connection between the building and the descendants of Sultan Ali.

Again no one is sure who designed the Gedung Kuning. There are two entrances, the older one being on Sultan Gate, the second entrance, which opens onto Kandahar Street, being added 1919, when the house belong to one Haji Yusuff, otherwise known as “Haji Yusuf Tali Pinggang” on account of him having made his fortune from the design, manufacture and sale of a broad belt or sash made of green cloth with a little pouch for stashing money, worn by Muslims who have performed the haj. The style of the earlier Sultan Gate elevation, which would have been the original front of the building is quasi-Palladian though not very expertly executed.

Up until the beginning of the last century, what we think of today as the heart of Kampong Glam, that is to say the area in the immediate vicinity of the istana and Sultan Mosque — Bussorah, Kandahar, Muscat and Baghdad streets — did not exist, or at least not was we know them today, and the three structures that I have described here (there would have been others) would all have been located inside the palace compound which extended from Jalan Sultan in the east, to Arab Street in the west, and from Beach Road all the way back to the Rochore River, the impertinence of North Bridge Road, and later Victoria Street, notwithstanding. By now, however, the royal lineage of the Johor Sultanate as constituted in the personages of Sultan Hussein and his son Ali had effectively come to the end and the title of ‘Sultan of Johore’ had passed to the Temenggong of Singapore’s family instead. In the time of Raffles, the Temenggong of Singapore was a kind of
local chieftain or headman, often with close connections, either by marriage or descent, to the royal family. Traditionaingly they owed their allegiance to the Sultan of Johor, but after the death of Sultan Ali in 1877, the position was reversed and the then Temenggong — a very able man by the name of Abu Bakar, who had taken the title of Maharaja some years previously and was installed in his own palace on the other side of the Johor Strait — was recognised by the British as the new Sultan of Johor.5

With this transfer of power, the royal line of Sultan Hussein Shah had effectively come to an end, which meant — at least in the eyes of the British — that Kampong Glam was now the property the British Crown, as the legal heirs to the East India Company on whose behalf Sir Stamford Raffles had concluded the original treaty with Sultan Hussein back in 1819. Provisions were quietly made under the terms of the Sultan Hussein Ordinance of 1905 for the descendants of Sultans Hussein and Ali then living at Kampong Glam, allowing them to continue to reside there.

5 For several years prior to his death, Sultan Ali had been living on the mainland in the vicinity of Muar having effectively renounced his right to his Singapore estates. When he died there was considerable confusion as to who was his legitimate successor with different local factions supported different sons. This allowed Abu Bakar who was by far and away the dominant political force in the southern Malay state of Johor to step into the breach and claim the title of sultan for himself, a position that the British were quite happy to endorse since Abu Bakar not only spoke perfect English, but had to England and even had tea with Queen Victoria.
and to receive a modest gratuity from the state,\(^6\) at which point the British set about redeveloping the area formerly enclosed by the royal compound. Walls were torn down and new streets laid out, resulting in the map of Kampong Glam that we are familiar with today. It is also at this point that we see the development of Sultan Gate, which up until then had served as a kind of ceremonial driveway leading up to the \textit{istana}, the Singaporean equivalent of The Mall in London, if you like.\(^7\)

As it happens, Nos. 32 to 38 Sultan Gate may actually date back earlier than this since they are unlike the kind of shophouse that was typically being built around the turn of the last century — see for example Nos. 29 to 35. We know that Sultan Ali was leasing out plots of land within the royal enclosure from 1845 onwards in order to sustain his gambling losses and support his otherwise profligate lifestyle and possibly they were erects around this time. Certainly, the style of architecture is one that reaches back to the middle of the nineteenth century, though admittedly shophouses like this continued to be erected, mainly for reasons of economy, well into the twentieth century — see for example Nos. 18 to 22 Baghdad Street. That said, given the fact that Sultan Gate has been around since very earliest days of the settlement, it is not unreasonable to suppose that these shophouses are actually quite old and may date from some time during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The same goes for Nos. 37 to 43 on the opposite side of the road, which are very similar architecturally.

\(^6\) There were still descendants of Sultans Hussein and Ali living in Kampong glam a hundred years later, when the Istana and adjacent properties were acquired by the Singapore government for a Malay Heritage Centre.

\(^7\) The Mall is a tree-lined avenue leading from Trafalgar Square to Buckingham Palace. Though open to motorcars during weekdays, the road is closed to traffic on Sundays, public holidays and for ceremonial occasions, including royal weddings, jubilee celebrations, parades and state visits.
The latter row of shophouses were occupied for the longest time by blacksmiths, right up until 2006 in fact, which is when the last smithy burnt down. In Hokkien, Sultan Gate was traditionally referred to as “The street of the Iron-smiths” (Phah Thi Koi), or, alternatively, as “Small Town Iron-smiths’ Street” (Sio Po Phah Thi Koi).8 and this connection between Sultan Gate and blacksmithing is evidently a very ancient one because as far back as the early 1830s, we find British author, navigator and empire builder, George Earl, mentioning that at Sultan Gate “Chinese mechanics [are] busily employed forging ironwork, making furniture or building boats.” There were stonemasons, too, some of their creations no doubt destined for the royal graveyard bordering the Rochor River.

8 In the nineteenth century Hokkien Chinese referred to the Chinatown side of the Singapore River as ‘Big Town’ (Twa Po) and the northern side of the river, including Kampong Glam, as ‘Small Town’ (Sio Po).
One feature which points to an older date for both rows of shophouses on either side of Sultan Gate is the single window with a simple wooden shutter — no louvers or glazing — for the upper storey. The vast majority of Singapore shophouses have two or three windows, with either louvers or glazing, often both at the same time, plus a fanlight or fretwork transom over the top of the window head. And they have done at least as far back as 1884, which is when architectural records, in the form of submissions to the Municipality of planning permission, begin. It is evident, though, from sketches, paintings and old prints made earlier in the nineteenth century that many shophouses at that time had just the one window with simple shutters comprising a couple of planks, in other words the same configuration as the shophouses in Sultan Gate. This feature suggests that they may well be of a similar vintage, that is to say, mid-nineteenth century. More than this we cannot ascertain, but either way Nos. 32-38 Sultan Gate are old buildings in a very old street and in this respect they constitute an important part of Singapore’s history and architectural record.