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## COVER

The eye-catching tower of the 'Fin' or 'Rocket' Shophouse (1938), Singapore - see Peter Sheridan's article on page 21

*Image: Peter Sheridan*

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# SINGAPORE'S ART DECO ARCHITECTURE

Peter Sheridan AM



Singapore is a bustling modern city with a skyline that reaches further and higher every year. The panorama of high-rise commercial and residential blocks is occasionally offset by grand Victorian buildings which echo the city's British colonial past. In the shrinking areas of cheap low rise built in the first half of the 20th century, elements of Art Deco can be found in the facades and decorative features. So much of Singapore has been redeveloped that there are few major buildings remaining from the 1930s and 1940s. The few iconic examples of Art Deco architecture which have been specifically preserved are often associated with huge modern developments that surround and overlook them. A recurring theme in five of the eight Singapore city buildings featured in this article is the use of integrated shade overhangs over the windows which are decorative as well as functional. They are curved or straight, all cantilevered and constructed of the same material as the building.

## THE ASIA INSURANCE BUILDING (1954) RENAMED ASCOTT RAFFLES PLACE

The former Asia Insurance Building is located on Finlayson Green near Raffles Place in the core of Singapore's downtown area. The building was renamed Ascott Raffles Place when it was redeveloped into 146 serviced

apartments in 2008. In 1954 it was the tallest building in South-East Asia. The building was designed in the 'modern style' by one of Singapore's pioneer architects Ng Keng Siang, although perhaps some 15 years after the style was prominent in the USA and other countries such as Australia. The Ascott has an L-shaped facade with a strong central vertical element surmounted by a concrete crown on the top of the building. The rows of windows with cantilever elements provide a strong horizontal contrast.

## CATHAY BUILDING (1939)

The Cathay Building, located at the foot of Mount Sophia in the Dhoby Ghaut area was, prior to 1954, the tallest building in Singapore. It used to house the Cathay cinema, Cathay Hotel and Cathay Restaurant. The Art Deco styled cinema was opened in 1939 in the front building, while the main tower behind was completed in 1941. The 1,321-seat cinema had black marble pillars, green-tiled floors and gold ceilings. It was also the first public space to be equipped with air-conditioning in Singapore. The opening film was the British adventure

**LEFT:**  
Art Deco (former)  
cinema façade of the  
Cathay Building (1939)

**RIGHT:**  
The Asia Insurance  
Building (1954) renamed  
Ascott Raffles Place





**LEFT:**  
'Fin' or 'Rocket'  
Shophouse (1938)



**CENTRE:**  
Bank of China (1954),  
street view



**RIGHT:**  
Lions at entrance of  
Bank of China

movie, *Four Feathers*, starring Ralph Richardson and C. Audrey Smith.

In the early years of WWII, the Cathay Building housed the offices of the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation. After Singapore fell to the Japanese in 1942, the building became home to the Japanese Propaganda Department. At the end of the war it was the headquarters for Admiral Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander of Southeast Asia, from November 1945 to November 1946. Following a major redevelopment, the building was reopened in 2006 as The Cathay. The original cinema entrance with its classical serrated Art Deco styling and signage has been retained as well as the front facade of the building with its wonderful curved sections and cantilevered shading over the windows.

#### **BANK OF CHINA (1954)**

The old block of the Bank of China Building was built in 1954 with a total of 18 floors. It was designed by P & T Architects & Engineers Ltd (otherwise known as Palmer and Turner) of Hong Kong. The building has many Art Deco elements interspersed with classical western and Asian touches.

The pair of lions guarding the entrance is a work by Rudolfo Nolli. The building vied with the Asia Insurance Building as the tallest building in the central business district of Singapore from 1954 till 1974. The additional new block was completed in 2000. Elegantly complementing the original building, the new section has 36 floors and a height of 168 metres rising immediately adjacent and behind the old block and sharing a common podium.

#### **CAPITOL THEATRE (1930)**

The Capitol Theatre was designed by Keys & Dowdeswell and completed in 1930. The theatre was part of a complex

which included the Namazie Mansions named after the owner, Mirza Mohamed Ali Namazie who was part of a prominent Persian family. The style of the building is eclectic neoclassical but with obvious Art Deco features at the angled front in the elements relating to the signage for the theatre. The Capitol was one of the very few air-conditioned theatres when it was built, originally to host live shows. By the mid-1930s, there were ten cinemas in Singapore, of which the Capitol was the largest and the newest.

During the Japanese Occupation, the theatre operated under the name Kyo-Ei Gekijo. English-language movies were later forbidden by the Japanese who replaced them with their own films and orchestras. The theatre operated until 1944, when a bomb planted by the anti-Japanese resistance damaged it and the Mansions itself.

The Namazie Mansions was restored and rebuilt in 1948 and renamed as Shaws Building. The adjoining Capitol Theatre became the organisation's flagship theatre with 1,686 seats. The patrons had the choice of gallery, stalls and circle seats which were priced at S\$1, S\$2 and S\$3 respectively from the early post-WWII years until the 1970s.

#### **'FIN' OR 'ROCKET' SHOPHOUSE (1938)**

This building at the junction of Circular Road and Lorong Telok, was designed in 1938 by Ho Kwong Yew, one of Singapore's well-known architects. Although Art Deco in many respects, this shophouse may also be considered in the Expressionist style. In an area with predominantly two storey low-rise buildings, the building dominates the corner position. The tower at the apex of the V shaped building extends three storeys above the main building and is topped with large cantilever concrete shades edged in pink tones.





**WATER HOUSE (1941)  
RENAMED FULLERTON WATERBOAT HOUSE**

In 1941, a three storey Art Deco style Water House was built on the former site of the Master Attendant's office which in the late 18th century supervised all water activities on the harbour. The Water House was designed by Swan and Maclaren, the oldest architectural firm in Singapore and the most prominent when Singapore was a British colony in the early 20th century. The Water House was built to supply fresh water to incoming ships in Singapore.

The Water House features a prominent curved facade and a semi-circular tower-like structure facing Fullerton Road. It was awarded the 2005 URA Architectural Heritage Award for the restoration works, which included recovery of the original grey Shanghai Plaster finish and addition of a new glass annexe.

**TANJONG PAGAR RAILWAY STATION (1932)**

The Tanjong Pagar Railway Station has architectural importance, rich history and social impact. With its mix of Art Deco and neoclassical design by Serbian architect D. S. Petrovitch, the three-storey building probably looked out of place when opened in 1932 in the heart of the British colony.

This was the final stop for passenger and goods trains run by the Malaysian rail operator KTM. Rickshaws and horse-drawn carts hauled cargo from the steamships moored at the docks at Tanjong Pagar and the trains arriving at the station. The goods were carried up the 700km-long KTM West Coast line terminating at Padang Besar railway station near the Malaysia-Thailand border in Perlis, Malaysia. For more than 60 years until 1993, the upper floors of the station housed a 34-room hotel, where many dignitaries from Malaya and Britain stayed.

Due to a 1918 legacy ordinance by the British colonial government the railway station was under the control of

Malaysia after World War II. In 2011 the last train, driven by the Sultan of Johor, departed from the station and Singapore gained ownership of the land. Currently the site is unused, but there are plans to redevelop the station as part of the Singapore underground network.

**TIONG BAHRU HOUSING DEVELOPMENT (1936-1954)**

Tiong Bahru estate was developed as one of the first public housing programmes of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT). Between 1936 and 1954, blocks with three to five stories were built providing approximately 2000 units. After WWII the estate's population tripled and it was no longer considered an exclusive place to live. The first SIT flats in Tiong Bahru were completed in 1936 and consisted of twenty-eight flats and four shops. Similar style development extended over several blocks in the next few years. The modern nature of the development can be seen in archival images from the late 1930s.

Between 1948 and 1954, a second wave of flats was built to ease Singapore's acute housing shortage. These featured a different design from their pre-war counterparts, but quintessentially Art Deco in style. These very popular blocks of flats were built on an 'open development principle' with integrated open spaces such as grassy plots and playgrounds served by footpaths between the blocks. The architecture of the estate is mainly the work of architect Alfred G Church and is a mixture of Streamline Moderne and local Straits Settlements shop-house styles. Many of the blocks have shops on the ground floor and residences above. Inspired largely by technology and the speed of modern travel, buildings were designed to look like automobiles, trains, ocean liners and aeroplanes, complete with the sweeping, streamlined and aerodynamic lines that were so characteristic of these forms of transport.

**LEFT:**  
Prominent curved facade and semi-circular tower of Water House (1941) [renamed Fullerton Waterboat House]

**RIGHT:**  
Capitol Theatre (1930) featuring a striking fin on its corner facade





**UPPER:**  
Tiong Bahru Housing  
Development (1936-1954),  
'1<sup>st</sup> wave' 1936

**LOWER:**  
Tiong Bahru Housing  
Development (1936-1954),  
'2<sup>nd</sup> wave' 1948

The flats have rounded balconies, flat rooftops, spiral staircases, light wells and underground storage and shelters. All the streets in the estate are named after Chinese pioneers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Another unique feature in the Tiong Bahru flats is the use of brick work on some of the balconies. These fair-faced (unpainted) facing bricks are laid out in pleasing patterns of darker and lighter bricks. The use of curved corners and cantilevered shades gives the buildings a modern, pleasing appearance. A corner of Tiong Bahru was called '*bird corner*'. The owners of song birds such as Prinias, Robins, and Shrikes would gather at the corner to meet and chat over tea and coffee.

Many of the blocks built between 1936 and 1941 had air-raid shelters in the basements.

#### **A SHORT HISTORY OF SINGAPORE**

Singapore is a cosmopolitan and modern combination of island, nation and city located just off the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia in Southeast Asia. It has a rich history starting in the 13th century when the first settlements were established, with the city being known as Temasek ('*Sea Town*').

The name Singapore (*Lion City*) was introduced in the 14th century when a lion was seen in the vicinity and





thought to be a good omen. At that time the city was ruled by the five kings of ancient Singapura and being the natural meeting point of sea routes, the city flourished as a trading post for vessels such as Chinese junks, Arab dhows, Portuguese battleships, and Buginese schooners.

Modern Singapore begins in the 1820s with British colonisation under the aegis of Sir Stamford Raffles who established Singapore as a trading station. The city quickly grew as an entrepot trade hub, attracting immigrants from China, India, the Malay Archipelago and beyond. At the end of the Japanese occupation during WWII Singapore became a British Crown Colony. In 1959, the growth of

nationalism led to self-government, and the country's first general election. The People's Action Party (PAP) won and Lee Kuan Yew became the first prime minister of Singapore. In 1963, Malaysia was formed, comprising of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah). Two years later in 1965, Singapore left Malaysia to become an independent and sovereign democratic nation.

Many Australian travellers utilise Singapore as a stopover on the way to and from Europe. For the Art Deco enthusiast Singapore offers some memorable highlights and the occasional unappreciated gem.

**UPPER LEFT AND RIGHT:**  
Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, detail

**LOWER:**  
Tanjong Pagar Railway Station (1932)