

Memory, Mutilation, Matter:

A Conjectural History of the Shophouse, with reference

No.54/56 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Malacca

by

Iyan Darmaja Mulyadi

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Abstract

The writing of “standard” history in post-colonial contexts may face the problem of an asymmetric representation of voice resulting from the general abundance of records produced by the colonisers compounded by its lack from the perspective of the colonised. In response to this inherent bias, Brenda Yeoh proposes the construction of an alternate narrative based on an examination of ‘place’, derived through the reading of architectural and urban artefacts. This dissertation proposes a reading of the shophouse deriving from this framework, through exhuming fragments otherwise embodied within the domestic envelope of the shophouse.

Domesticity, as “mimetic” dialogue between spatial envelope and its occupying body, is here explored as an act of inscription. In doing so, the dissertation does not seek to legitimise a speculative history drawn from random material facts, but instead to establish relationships between occupant and architecture. In doing so, the dissertation aims to illuminate the performative significance of material form and configurations, enabling the shophouse to be situated within the dynamics of colonial society.

No.54/56 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, an adjacent pair of shophouses located in historic Malacca, shall be examined through three themes – ‘Memory’ revisits texts the founding of Malacca and Singapore in distilling the emergence of the typology; ‘Mutilation’ explores its walls as palimpsests; and ‘Matter’ inspects a legal case when the shophouses functioned as a maternity home. These themes are portrayed as ‘operations’ that posits the shophouse as body, both symbolic and ontological. Architecture is thus read as both product and producer of colonial social structure, as a membrane that includes and excludes, whose external and tangible symbols serve as anchors maintaining strictly-defined identity categories. Ultimately, this reading intends to demonstrate a new and critical relevance to these architectural artefacts on merits other than their age.

Dissertation Supervisor: Dr. Lilian Chee