



BLACK
and WHITE

THE SINGAPORE HOUSE 1898-1941

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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First Published in 2006
by Talisman Publishing Pte Ltd
52 Genting Lane #06-05 Ruby Land Complex 1
Singapore 349560

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ISBN 981052739X

Publisher: Ian Pringle
Design & Layout: Chin Wei Woon, Talisman & Topographica
Copy Editor: Wu Xueyi

Typeset in VAG Rounded Thin, Helvetica
Printed and bound in Singapore by Saik Wah Press Pte Ltd

Captions for pp. i-xi:

Crest from Bididari Cemetery gates possibly designed by David McLeod Craik (p. i); House for R. Pears Esq., Chatsworth Road, Swan & Maclaren (1913) (p. iii); Public Works Department bungalow, Malcolm Road (c.1925) (pp. iv-v); interior, military black and white, Ridley Park (c.1920) (pp. vi-vii); Public Works Department bungalow, Goodwood Hill (C.1910) (pp. viii-ix); Sub-Manager's house, Hongkong & Shanghai Banking Corporation, Mount Echo, Swan & Maclaren (1902) (pp. x-xi)

House and Garden

A large part of the charm of black and white houses lies in their setting — typically on rising ground or at the summit of a modest eminence, a swathe of green lawn in front with a dark wall of trees behind, dense thickets of jungle undergrowth, a tall stand of *nibong* palms, their feathery fronds silhouetted against the sky. The dominant idea here was that of the ‘garden house.’ The term ‘garden house’ had been coined in British India, where an elegant residence set in spacious grounds was seen as appropriate recompense for a life ‘in exile’. Garden houses could be found stretched along the esplanades in Madras and Calcutta in the nineteenth century, and they provided the archetype for the colonial house in Singapore and the Straits Settlements. In terms of the actual landscaping, the park-like setting was quite consciously modelled on the English country estate, that is to say, in the eighteenth-century manner of William Kent and Capability Brown. The perimeter of the property was typically planted up with dense vegetation which provided privacy from one’s neighbours and passers-by, while the layout of the garden was informally arranged with stands of trees — *tembusu* (*Fragraea fragrans*) was a popular choice — separated by undulating lawns and brightly-coloured flower beds planted with canna lilies, orchids and the ubiquitous *Heliconia* in all its myriad forms. A long driveway, cut between mossy banks and ferns, led up to the house where one alighted from one’s carriage or automobile in the shade of the *porte cochère*. In the case of the government and corporate estates, the houses were typically grouped together in little enclaves, the low-rise forerunner of today’s condominium lifestyle.

► Tennis and squash courts, Alexandra Park (right, top and middle).

A great deal of social life during the black and white era revolved around sporting activities, either at home or at ‘the club’. Tennis parties were especially popular. J. D. Ross, writing in 1898, observed that “the amount of tennis played in Singapore is something astonishing.” This was deemed to be no bad thing, for “all this promotes social relations between the sexes.”

► Driveway at Temenggong Road (right, bottom).

A black and white house without its garden would be like a ship on dry land. Gardening was an enthusiasm embraced by many a colonial *mem*, encouraged no doubt by Singapore’s super-luxuriant tropical vegetation and colourful flora. Of course, it was also handy that arduous tasks like digging flower beds could be safely delegated to the *kebun*.

►► PWD bungalow, Nassim Road (c. 1910) — verdant lawns and mature stands of trees — the archetypal setting of the black and white house.

