

## NOT SO BLACK AND WHITE

Atbara at No. 5 Gallop Road has always been touted as Singapore's first black and white bungalow. But architectural and heritage experts tell **Chantal Sajan** that is not the case. **C2&3**

The team from Kay Ngee Tan Architects, led by Mr Tan Kay Ngee (centre), who worked on restoring the heritage landmark.



DESIGN: MARLONE RUBIO ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

### Making architectural gems shine



**Chantal Sajan**  
Senior Correspondent

In 2016, the National Parks Board awarded the tender for the 8ha Gallop Extension to Kay Ngee Tan Architects, led by founder and principal architect Tan Kay Ngee.

The scope of the award included the conservation of Atbara at No. 5 Gallop Road and Inverturret at No. 7, as well as creating a dipterocarp-themed arboretum which houses endangered rainforest trees, a children's play garden, a cafe and an events space.

Even before being awarded the contract, Mr Tan's team had conducted exhaustive research on the site since early 2015.

Both houses also had to be reimagined to function as public spaces for the Forest Discovery Centre @ OCBC Arboretum at No. 5 Gallop Road and the Botanical Art Gallery at No. 7.

Over the years, the two houses passed through several owners. They were bought by the Straits Trading Company in 1923, which leased the two houses to the French government for its embassy and ambassador's residence from 1939 to 1999.

Although both properties were acquired by the Singapore Government in 1990, the French Embassy rented them until 1999. After that, the houses were locked up and restored in 2012 by SA Chua Architects.

"It's only once in a lifetime that you get a chance to work on a project like this, so our team was very motivated from the outset," says Mr Tan, 64, who started practising architecture in Studio Tomassini in Italy and later joined Arup Associates in London. He also taught

practising architecture in Studio Tomassini in Italy and later joined Arup Associates in London. He also taught design at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London.

He assembled a team of consultants in Singapore in 2016 to study the blueprints which the original architect, Regent Alfred John Bidwell, had drawn up in 1898 for Atbara and in 1906 for Inverturret.

"Both Atbara, which had been damaged after years of disuse, and Inverturret, which had broken windows and missing floor tiles, among a host of other structural challenges, took more than five years of extensive restoration, using architectural 3D remodelling and on-site work by specialists," says Mr Tan, who founded Kay Ngee Tan Architects in London in 1990. His firm is represented in Singapore, London and Istanbul.

To retrace Bidwell's footsteps, Mr Tan's team of more than 20 - which includes architects, engineers, quantity surveyors and curators - studied the original plans, as well as the refurbishments and alterations made over the years, to get a feel of how Bidwell had envisioned the two houses.

In Atbara, there were 28 round arches in the original building back in the early 1900s with two more added later. These had mostly disappeared over 100 years of frequent modifications to expand usable areas.

In the final design, 29 arches were reinstated for a more authentic spatial experience.

"Room enclosures were planned along these round arches to minimise (visitors' having to) bending over when crossing them," says Mr Tan, the project's lead architect. "Glass panels with minimal colour distortions were also used to allow maximum porosity across these arched frames."

"In the original 1898 building, there were five en-suite bathrooms placed within these arches. Today, they have been replaced with modern public washrooms, public engagement offices and terrarium displays."

For Inverturret, a lift was added discreetly in the heart of the building, so it did not look out of place with its early 20th century design, which features verandahs - unlike at Atbara - and has a more pared-down Victorian sensibility.

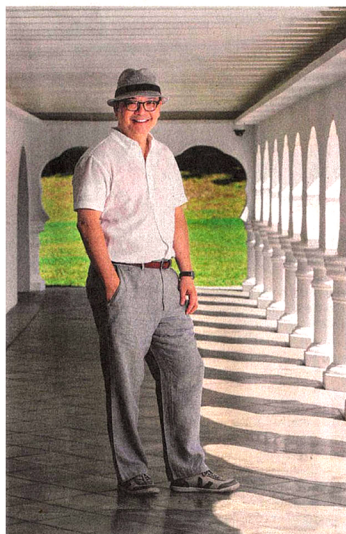
Adds Mr Tan: "What is most invaluable is that the two houses, designed by the same young and talented architect at the turn of

the last century, represent two rather differing approaches to English residential architecture of that time. One is more playful and contemporary, the other is more classical in returning to Palladian orders - but with a twist in the middle."

chantal@sph.com.sg



The process of conserving Atbara. Go to: [str.sg/lyZw](http://str.sg/lyZw)



Mr Tan Kay Ngee (above) and his team reimagined No. 5 and 7 Gallop Road as public spaces. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY



## Why it's not all black and white with Atbara at Gallop Road

Experts set the record straight about the 123-year-old bungalow often mislabelled as Singapore's oldest black and white house



**Chantal Sajan**  
Senior Correspondent

SINGAPORE - Is Atbara Singapore's oldest black and white house? The answer from experts is an emphatic "no".

No. 5 Gallop Road, or Atbara, is technically not a black and white bungalow.

Architectural historians Julian Davison and Yeo Kang Shua would like to set the record straight about Atbara, which has been hailed in newspaper reports, online media and even in Google's search engine as "Singapore's oldest black and white house".

The colloquial term "black and white" is often used to describe colonial-era bungalows in British Malaya, which included Singapore.

They were built from the early 1900s to the 1920s, mainly for well-to-do expatriate families, members of the colonial administration and senior officers serving in the armed forces.

The design of these houses was influenced by the mid-19th century Arts and Crafts movement, which adopted traditional English building methods and a style sometimes referred to as Mock Tudor in recognition of its ancient pedigree.

In 2006, Dr Davison wrote about No. 5 Gallop Road in his coffee-table book, *Black And White, The Singapore House (1898-1941)*.

Although Mock Tudor references may be absent from the line-up, Atbara nevertheless draws on many of the same Arts and Crafts influences that inform the black and white house, and it was for this reason Dr Davison included Atbara in his book.

"It was almost certainly the earliest Arts and Crafts bungalow to be built in Singapore and, in this respect, it paved the way for the first generation of black and white houses which followed closely on its heels," he says.

"Unfortunately, the heading, when taken out of context and without the qualifying question mark, has created something of a false impression, namely that I was claiming Atbara to be the very first black and white house," adds the 65-year-old, who has written other architectural books such as *Swan & Maclaren: A Story Of Singapore Architecture (2020)*.

"Atbara is a very close cousin to the black and white house, not least because the architect who designed Atbara, Regent Alfred John Bidwell of Raffles Hotel fame, is generally acknowledged to be the man who introduced the black and white house to Singapore."

Dr Davison turns to another popular misconception, namely that the black and white house was largely the creation of the Public Works Department, which was tasked with designing homes for members of the colonial administration, the police and later the military.

He says: "I have looked through all the drawings in the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) that were submitted to the British Municipality for planning permission during the height of the black and white house fashion from 1898 to 1925."

"And I know for a fact that there were large numbers of black and white houses commissioned in the private sector - including houses for Singaporean luminaries such as Dr Lim Boon Keng - although I don't suppose he lived in it himself, as it was something to rent out or sell," he says, referring to the famous physician and intellectual, who died in 1957.

Since these properties were in private hands, they were torn down long ago to maximise the profitability of the land they stood on, he adds.

"The surviving record of black and white houses in Singapore is skewed in favour of the British government and military accommodation, which were handed over to and conserved by the Singapore Government when the British departed. This has created a rather lop-sided view of the architectural record we currently have."

There is another interesting point arising from his examination of the plans in the NAS archives, most of which are hand-coloured.

At the peak of their popularity between 1918 and 1925, the classic black and white houses designed by Swan & Maclaren, Singapore's oldest architectural practice, for its corporate clients tended to be painted yellow ochre or cream, with brown - the natural colour of wood - for the timber frame and shutters.

"The ubiquitous black and white scheme came only later," observes Dr Davison.

Existing records show that accommodation designed by the Public Works Department for members of the colonial administration were colloquially called "black and white" bungalows from around the 1920s onwards.

These houses were characterised by black timber frames contrasting against white stucco in-fill walls in the half-timbered main or upper storey.

According to the Urban Redevelopment Authority's Conservation Technical Handbook series, co-produced with Singapore experts such as Mr Ho Weng Hin of Studio Lapis and Prof Yeo - an architectural conservator and associate professor at the Singapore University of Technology and Design - the exposed timber frame was coated in black tar paint, also known as bituminous paint for its preservative, pesticidal and waterproofing properties.

While Singapore's black and white houses are numerous, not all colonial-era houses here were constructed in this way or had such a limited palette.

"However, it has become a trend to indiscriminately apply this colour scheme for a thematic 'look', often on historic structures that are not even half-timbered, obscuring their true heritage character," says Prof Yeo, 46, who adds that it is important to carry out paint analysis to determine the true historic colour scheme of a heritage building.

According to him, the term "black and white" is a contemporary term and a loaded one, as most of the black and white houses were historically not painted in just black and white.

"Personally, I would refrain from using the term, from an academic standpoint," says Prof Yeo, who is also president of the International Council of Monuments and Sites Singapore, a professional body that Unesco consults on matters related to World Heritage Sites.

"From historic paint analyses, from the current data of buildings we have analysed, not all of these so-called 'black and white' bungalows have such a monochromatic colour scheme."

He says there is a lack of evidence that the houses dubbed "black and white" had a consistent monochromatic painting scheme from the start of construction, or featured raised half-masonry and half-timber structures.

"Because we are unable to answer these questions, we cannot say definitively that it has or has no monochromatic painting scheme. It is futile to ask if the house is the oldest or not the oldest."

"But Atbara is certainly one of the oldest residential houses that still exists today," he adds.

"For example, do you consider Burkill Hall a black and white house? Or do we call it an Anglo-Malayan plantation house? Burkill Hall is also not painted in black and white historically, and it is older than Atbara," says Prof Yeo, referring to Burkill Hall, which was completed in 1868 and is part of the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

In reality, the earliest bungalow types in colonial Singapore were the plantation bungalows, commonly built around the Tanglin area from the middle to the late 19th century, he says.

These early buildings in British Malaya incorporated features of Malay houses, such as homes raised on timber posts for better ventilation, topped by an imposing hipped roof with deep eaves.

The raised house has generous verandahs that run around the home or at both the front and back, with stunning views of the estate.

More permanent brick piers later replaced timber posts, and the ground floor eventually became a full-height storey for additional rooms and sitting areas.

This formed the basis for other suburban, rural and coastal houses or holiday homes built as private residences, company lodging or government and military housing.

But what makes Atbara stand out from the rest as a Singapore heritage treasure is its eclecticism, says Prof Yeo. "Its Gothic style with Norman round piers and foliated cinquefoil arches - which some attribute to Moorish influences - and its timber-framed body with masonry in-fill and timber roof truss are really what makes Atbara special and a reflection of Singapore's history."

His words resonate with Dr Tan Puay Yok, group director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, who says the Gallop Extension - where architectural gems Atbara and Inver turret are located - is a significant addition to the gardens.

The site, which opened last month, supports the gardens' mission in research, conservation, education and outreach.

One of its key features is its role in heritage conservation, which boosts the gardens' status as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Dr Tan says the Gallop Extension conserves not just the natural heritage of the site, but also Singapore's cultural landscape.

"This is in the form of the overall landscape, which exemplifies the English Landscape Movement style for which the gardens are recognised, and the two conserved buildings, which are among the most prominent and recognisable early examples of tropical architecture."

chantal@sph.com.sg



New gems of the Gallop Extension.  
Go to: [str.sg/gallop10](https://str.sg/gallop10)

# THE STRAITS TIMES

SATURDAY, APRIL 10, 2021

## A Tale of Two Houses

Atbara and Inverturret were designed by British architect Regent Alfred John Bidwell after he joined the architectural practice of Swan & Maclaren in 1895, and was given the choicest projects to experiment with.

His use of Gothic style references for the carriage porch and the arches of the basement floor at Atbara signalled a radical departure from the tropicalised Classicism of the 19th-century Singapore house.

However, when it came to Inverturret - commissioned in 1906 - Bidwell opted for a more traditional approach with wrap-around verandahs not seen in Atbara, as well as pared-down Classical detailing.

### Atbara (1898)



No. 5 Gallop Road (1,110 sq m)

**Architect:** Bidwell

**1898:** Atbara was built by John Burkinshaw, a British expatriate and co-founder of Singapore's oldest law practice, Donaldson & Burkinshaw LLP. He commissioned British architect Regent Alfred John Bidwell from Swan & Maclaren to design the house. The land on which Atbara and Inverturret were built originally formed part of the Cluny estate, which was granted to Burkinshaw in 1883.

**1903:** Charles MacArthur, chairman of the Straits Trading Company, bought the property from Burkinshaw. The Straits Trading Company gained international recognition for tin smelting in the 1900s, with its Pulau Brani smelter producing "Straits Tin", known as the purest tin in the world.

**1916:** Atbara was sold to W. Lowther Kemp, who was an unofficial member of the British Legislative Council in Singapore, from FW Barker & Company.

**1923:** The Straits Trading Company bought No. 5 Gallop Road, which it owned for 67 years, leasing it out to the French government for most of that time.

**1939:** As lease tenants, the French government converted Atbara into the French Embassy for 60 years.

**1990:** The Singapore Government acquired the building from the Straits Trading Company and the surrounding property was converted to state land.

**2012:** The Singapore Land Authority (SLA) carried out restoration works on Atbara and Inverturret.

**2016-present:** The National Parks Board (NParks) awarded the contract for restoration works for the Gallop Extension to Singapore firm Kay Ngee Tan Architects in 2016. The development of the site is ongoing.

**Current use:** The Forest Discovery Centre @ OCBC Arboretum

### Inverturret (1906)



No. 7 Gallop Road (1,270 sq m)

**Architect:** Bidwell

**1906:** Straits Trading Co chairman Charles MacArthur commissioned Bidwell to design No. 7 Gallop Road after he acquired the land in 1903.

**1916:** Inverturret was sold to Adamson Gilfillan & Company. The founding partners, Scotsmen Samuel Gilfillan and William Adamson, first appeared in Singapore's commercial records in 1854. They became wealthy merchants exporting local produce, such as tin and spices, to Europe.

**1923:** Inverturret was acquired by the Straits Trading Company for 67 years. It bought the two houses in 1923 along with the adjacent land, where it built three more houses: No. 15, 17 and 19 Gallop Road.

**1936-1938:** Inverturret became the home of new tenant Lord Arthur Tedder, Commander-in-Chief of the Far East Air Force. He later became Deputy Commander to United States General Dwight Eisenhower in 1944.

**1939-1999:** The Straits Trading Company leased out No. 7 Gallop Road to the French government. It served as the French Ambassador's Residence for 60 years.

**1990:** Inverturret was acquired by the Singapore Government.

**2012:** SLA carried out restoration works on Inverturret, working with local firm S A Chua Architects.

**2016-present:** NParks awarded the restoration of Inverturret to Kay Ngee Tan Architects in 2016.

**Current use:** Singapore's Botanical Art Gallery