



<b>Title</b>	<b>Contesting Space, Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore: Book reviews</b>
<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Hill, RD</b>
<b>Citation</b>	<b>Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998, v. 29 n. 2, p. 463-464</b>
<b>Issued Date</b>	<b>1998</b>
<b>URL</b>	<b><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10722/44397">http://hdl.handle.net/10722/44397</a></b>
<b>Rights</b>	<b>Creative Commons: Attribution 3.0 Hong Kong License</b>

first published 1977) also raised this issue. However, for a full answer to emerge, we would need a synthesis not only of racial, imperial and “British policy” questions, but also of Japanese history. We need to know not just what could Britain have done, but what might the Japanese responses have been. For instance, had Britain sent more equipment to Malaya, could it have staved off at least humiliation? Or would Japan have responded by increasing the forces arrayed against Malaya? Such questions require an additional Japanese-centred or regional strand of analysis, rather closer to that found in H. P. W. Willmott *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942* (London: Orbis, 1982).

Such overarching syntheses, however, are built on the foundations provided by specialist studies such as Ong’s. These reflections are therefore intended not so much to criticise, as to place the book in context of the existing literature, and of the overall “problem” of why Singapore fell as it did. Ong’s book must be judged for what it is. In adopting a “British policy” approach, Ong has provided a chronology of and a focus on Matador, reminding us how central this plan was to the Fall. He has attempted to “cover” a well-defined set of British archives. This he does effectively in archival though not in historiographical terms, providing a clear if dry account. The result is a useful reference book on Matador. The Foreword’s and cover’s suggestions that the author will provide local insight, however, should be ignored and the book bought for what it is, namely: a traditional, empirical, archival, military and planning history of “Matador”, which sheds a useful spotlight on the changes in Malayan defence plans in 1937–41, and just happens to be written by a Singaporean academic, politician and businessmen.

*Nanyang Technological University*

Karl Hack

**Contesting Space, Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore.** By BRENDA S.A. YEOH. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996. Pp. xxiv, 351. Figures, Plates, Index.

What a splendid book this is! Well-organized, well-written, wide-ranging — it truly illustrates the dictum of historian M.M. Postan, that studies of the local and particular should be truly microcosmic, bearing within them insights into larger worlds. Here the larger world is colonial, a world of conflict and negotiation over the use and control of space, in this case urban space.

The work begins with a broad overview of power relations and the built environment in colonial cities and this is followed by a possibly somewhat over-extended essay on Singapore’s municipal authority, 1819–1930.

The real meat of the book lies in two contrasting but related sections of “Sanitizing the private environment” and “Ordering the public environment”, each in three chapters. These work out, in satisfying detail, not merely the basic political negotiation over space, but the manner and results of such negotiation. At the heart of these was the implicit view in the colonial government that its ways were “better” and that human behaviours could, eventually, be changed via changes in the built environment. (This battle continues as these with vested interests in British built environments refuse to countenance the

now well-documented links between anti-social behaviours and the specifics of their design.)

While Yeoh, with Jim Warren, argues that it was easier to build monuments than to clean up the city, and sees people and government as being in a contest, she nevertheless points to the seriously bad conditions of life especially in the poorer parts of the city where disease, especially tuberculosis, overcrowding and insanitary conditions prevailed and rates of illness and death were high — certainly higher in a pre-antibiotic age than in the countryside. Here the colonialist perception of the “dirty Asiatic” was daily experienced. Here, too, there was little realization by government of either economic realities or Asian views and susceptibilities, multifarious as these were — more multifarious than Yeoh actually chooses to examine. Thus, for example, the marginal existence of many could hardly result in anything other than residences being used for, sometimes rather nasty, business or for their “invincible determination” to live near work. Likewise, the construction of kitchens, bathrooms and latrines required under planning regulations were clearly not in accord with Asian cultural practices. Whether they could have been made so, especially given the wide variety of those beliefs and practices is not really discussed though it is clear that Raffles’ original town plan, based upon ethnic segregation would, had it been enforced, have allowed a closer meshing of regulation and cultural diversity. The latter-day answer is, of course clear. Ethnicity, diversity of practice and regulation are ignored in favour of one rule for all — “Live in a flat”.

Ask not what academic discipline this book belongs to. It incorporates elements from political science, sociology, public health, town planning, architecture, culture history — even geography — all set in an historical context. Rather buy it and read it.

*The University of Hong Kong*

R.D. Hill

## THAILAND

**Shadows of Life: Nang Talung, Thai Popular Shadow Theatre.** By SVEN BROMAN. Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 1996. Pp. viii, 105. Illustrations, Bibliography, Index.

The study of Southeast Asian shadow puppet theatre has long been dominated by the analysis of Javanese and Balinese genres. Thai shadow puppetry in its two main forms, the large static figures of the Central Thai *nang yai* and the smaller articulated *nang talung* have received minimal attention by authors. This lack of proper documentation and analysis of the *nang talung* is regrettable, given the genre’s popularity among Thai-speaking inhabitants of the southern Thai peninsula. Performances of *nang talung* staged by renowned performers (*nai nang*) attract hundreds of enthusiastic viewers in both rural and urban settings. Sven Broman’s richly illustrated book on the *nang talung* is a commendable effort being one of the first works in the English language specifically devoted to the art form. The main part of the book lists *nang talung* figures from four collections, two in Bangkok (the Thongbai and National Museum collections) and two in Stockholm (the Rolf de Mare donations of the Dance Museum and the Ethnographical Museum of Sweden).