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BETWEEN TRADITION
AND MODERNITY

Hongkong Bank Building
in Hong Kong and Shanghai,
1870-1940

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Hongkong Bank, Shanghai 1923: façade facing the Bund
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CHEMINEMENTS



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BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY



Hongkong Bank Building in Hong Kong and Shanghai, 1870-1940

Iain S. Black

This paper is part of a wider project concerned with reconstructing the historical geographies of banking, architecture and empire at a variety of spatial scales. One distinctive theme has focused specifically on the role of banking and bank architecture in shaping the built environment of the City of London in the interwar years, situating the architectural analysis of large-scale building projects within a late imperial discourse of finance and empire.¹ Another, developed more recently, extends these concerns to a consideration of wider 'imperial geographies', particularly through analysing the diffusion of British banking culture overseas via the development of networks of branches in regions of the British Empire and elsewhere.² Taken together, these themes comprise a research agenda that is stimulated directly by a concern to take seriously the social practices embedded in the production of architecture as an important dimension of the long-term development of the global economy.³

It is now widely recognised that the globalisation of business is the most significant economic process shaping the contemporary world economy. However, the increasing interdependence of regional markets through the circulation of finance and trade, which lies at the heart of globalisation, is a direct result of the long-term diffusion of western business practices across the globe and their encounter with other social and cultural worlds.⁴ Recent research on the formation of international business has begun to address the economic imperatives behind such business expansion overseas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵ With specific reference to banking,

Geoffrey Jones's seminal work entitled *British Multinational Banking 1830-1990* provides a comprehensive account of the business strategies of British overseas banks and their evolving relationship with the rise and fall of the British Empire.⁶ By contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to the detailed social and cultural practices developed by emerging international banking groups to establish, consolidate and transact their business abroad. Jones hints at these problems, remarking how in the nineteenth century "those banks active outside the British Empire had to contend with alien political, legal, and cultural systems".⁷ It could be argued too that in many areas within the empire, such problems were also present. One key strategy used by British overseas banks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to negotiate business within these radically different social and cultural contexts was to represent themselves through the design and building of distinctive office spaces. Yet the significance of private commercial architecture to wider debates over British imperial expansion has hardly been recognised.

Formal colonial architectural projects, such as the building of Imperial Delhi by Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker, have received detailed attention of course.⁸ Crinson, in his recent book *Empire Building*, has also pointed to the role of architecture in the establishment and maintenance of British power overseas, focusing on civil government and religious building in the Near East during the nineteenth century.⁹ But the wider consequences of such 'empire building', especially by commercial and financial companies that were ostensibly

private, though dependent upon the wider imperial project, remain to be explored. These concerns can be usefully linked to recent work in cultural and historical geography that focuses upon reassessing the commonly accepted categories of core and periphery in the formation and transformation of the world economy in the modern period. Jacobs, for example, argues that whilst:

the economic dimension of imperial expansions (be they colonial or 'newly' global) is undeniable ... explanations that rest too heavily upon this logic work only to re-centre the metropole by incorporating 'the world', and all that happens in it, into the accumulative logic of the core. The contingency of this logic, its need to negotiate an often reluctant and almost always transformative periphery, is clearly lost within narrow political economy accounts.¹⁰

Similarly Stoler and Cooper, in a critique of Wallerstein's world systems theory, argue that although:

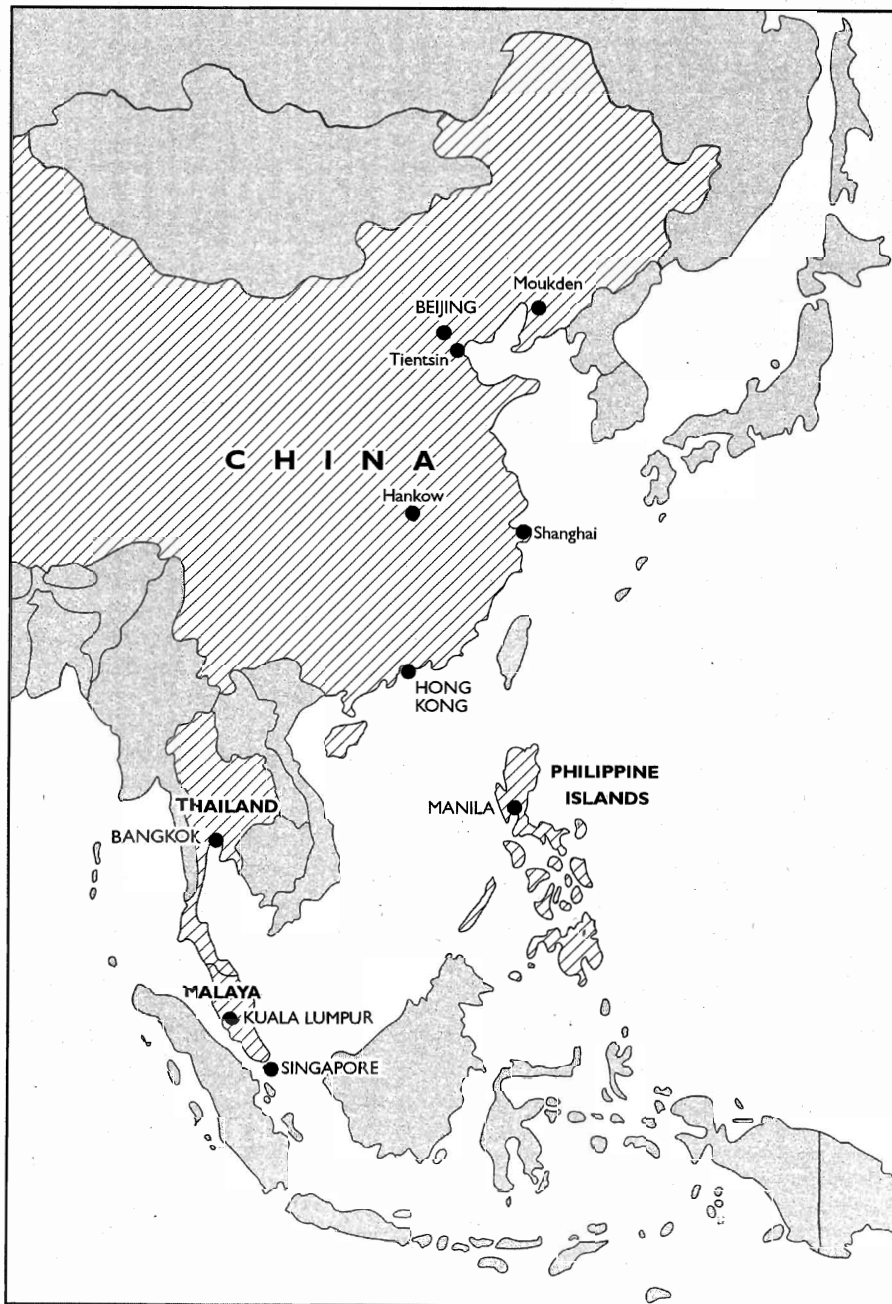
there is no question that economic motivations played a large part in colonization ... a more fruitful line of inquiry may be to focus on the forms of power lodged in particular institutions and worked out in particular colonial projects, on the conflicting visions and practices of settlers, corporate leaders, and colonial officials, and on the [ways] in which economic and cultural power was deployed and deflected.¹¹

This paper develops these themes within the specific context of bank office building by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (Hongkong Bank) in its two principal cities of operation - Hong Kong and Shanghai - between the later 1870s and the 1930s. In particular, it will emphasise a concern with a broadly conceived architectural history which includes a consideration of sources of design, the aesthetics of exterior and interior construction and the organisation and use of internal spaces, to assess the significance of the building of this particular form of commercial architecture for the diffusion and negotiation of western business practices in the Far East.

Hongkong Bank

The origins of British multinational banking are found in the Chartered Banks established from the 1830s, which were typically headquartered in London and subsequently built up their branch networks in specific regions of the emerging world economy.¹² As Jones

Figure 1: Hong Kong and Shanghai in regional context: principal branches of the Hongkong Bank built in Pacific-Asia, 1900-1940



notes "until the 1850s these banks went almost exclusively to regions under British imperial control. The timing of the promotion of banks, and the region of their specialisation, were intimately connected to patterns in British imperial expansion, in the incorporation of outlying regions into the world economy, and in the discovery or exploitation of precious metals and primary products".¹³ The regional interest of each banking group was governed

by their specific charter restriction. A classic example was the Colonial Bank established in 1836, with clearly defined operations in the British West Indies and the financing of the colonial sugar trade. It was only in 1917, following amendments to its charter, that operations were widened to incorporate British West Africa too, focusing on the finance of trade in agricultural products and precious metals.¹⁴ The Hongkong Bank

however was different, being established and headquartered in the British Colony of Hong Kong. Its head office was opened in Hong Kong on 3 March 1865 and, despite opening a London office some four months later, it remained a bank firmly rooted in, and controlled from, its colonial base.¹⁵ Jones distinguishes it from typical 'local' banks founded in other regions of the British Empire, such as Canada or South Africa. In the nineteenth century these were generally owned, headquartered and managed from the colonies by local directors. Although they may have been 'imperial' banks in the broadest sense, they cannot be considered as early examples of British multinational enterprise, possessing as they did a significant degree of colonial autonomy.¹⁶ According to Jones, Hongkong Bank was a major exception, as although registered in Hong Kong upon its foundation in 1865, its senior management from the outset was drawn from the United Kingdom, where much of its shareholding was held for long periods.¹⁷

Hongkong Bank was formed to meet the needs of the business communities of the China coast, in particular through the provision of efficient and secure means of financing trade within the region and beyond. Until the bank's formation, most such trade finance had been organised by the 'hongs', or European merchant trading houses.¹⁸ The HSBC's *Brief History* notes how "the new company was the inspiration of Thomas Sutherland, then the Hong Kong Superintendent of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, who produced a prospectus for a locally based bank operating on sound 'Scottish banking principles'".¹⁹ Importantly, the legal status of the new bank was special:

Rather than operate under existing British or colonial regulations – which would have required a London head office – the bank's directors persuaded the Treasury in London to accept incorporation under a special Hong Kong ordinance. This allowed the bank to maintain a head office in Hong Kong without losing the privilege of issuing banknotes and holding government funds.²⁰

Following its establishment, the bank proceeded to develop a network of branches and agencies around the world, though remaining firmly focused on the Pacific-Asia region, with new branches in Japan (1866), Thailand (1888), India (1867), the Philippines (1875) and Singapore (1877). In many of its new branches the bank played a key role in the diffusion of

modern western banking practices to the Far East, becoming the leading bank in the region by the early-twentieth century.²¹ In addition to commercial banking activities, it was closely involved in government finance too, by the 1880s "acting as banker to the Hong Kong government and as sole or joint banker for British government accounts in China, Japan, Penang and Singapore".²² It also issued bank notes throughout its spheres of operation. Also, from the outset, the bank was managed by "a distinctive cadre of managers and staff ... many of whom had begun their careers with English or Scottish joint-stock banks ... [being] trained in London before taking up appointments in Asia".²³ Cain and Hopkins suggest that the managers of the Hongkong Bank before the First World War provide a classic example of the 'gentlemanly capitalists' whom they suggest played a key informal strategic role in extending and managing the business of empire.²⁴ It is clear that there was a close partnership between the British Foreign Office and the bank in managing Britain's financial relationships with China, where "this special relationship was the product of converging interests and was sealed by a process of osmosis which absorbed the Bank into gentlemanly culture".²⁵

These economic and financial functions, combined with the particular culture and organisation of banking business practised by

the Hongkong Bank, provide an important context for the interpretation of the bank's programme of branch building in the Far East between the 1870s and the 1930s. Figure 1 shows the location of some key branches built or rebuilt in this period.²⁶ The paper will now consider in more detail the architectural discourse of Hongkong Bank building in Hong Kong and Shanghai, beginning with the first purpose-built offices constructed for the Corporation in the 1870s and 1880s and the shift from tradition to modernity encountered in their rebuilding in the 1920s and 1930s.

Shanghai 1877

Shanghai, following the Nanjing Treaty of 1842, quickly developed into the most important of the treaty ports on the China coast. Its position at the mouth of the Yangzi River encouraged the establishment of European trading houses articulating the entrepôt trade between China and the wider world.²⁷ The Hongkong Bank established a branch in Shanghai in April 1865, which from the outset was seen as a crucial site for the bank's business. By the 1870s business had flourished to such an extent that the bank commissioned a new, purpose-built office on the Bund, to be designed by the Scottish architect William Kidner (1841-1900). Little is known about Kidner, though Izumida has pieced together a few details about his career in the Far East, which appears to have begun

Figure 2: Hongkong Bank, Shanghai 1877: new office designed by William Kidner



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

Figure 3: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1886: Head Office designed by Clement Palmer



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

in 1866 in Shanghai.²⁸ The new bank building (see Figure 2) was, however, the subject of a brief notice in *The Architect* on 6 October 1877. Remarking upon the façade, the correspondent noted that “apart from its architectural merit it is of considerable interest as showing in its way the importance of our settlement in the Far East, and also of the manner in which Chinese workmen can adapt themselves to the carrying out of European requirements”.²⁹ Further, it was noted how “the building stands in its own compound, entirely isolated from others, with the exception of those subsidiary to it, and has a frontage to the Bund - facing the harbour - of 110 feet, and a depth of 90 feet, the height from the ground to the eaves being 56 feet”.³⁰

Behind the imposing classical façade was a complex division of internal space that reflected some of the social and cultural divisions of labour encountered by the Hongkong Bank in the negotiation of its business in China. *The Architect's* correspondent indicated that “the ground storey, 24 feet high, is devoted to business purposes, and contains a general office 80 feet by 60 feet, besides offices for the manager, sub-manager, brokers' room, stationery store, book safes, & c., the Compradore's offices, treasurers, & c., being

provided for in an attached building in the rear”.³¹ Marking off the Compradore's space from that of the European bank was significant, pointing to the ways in which the

internal divisions of architectural space both reflected and reinforced a special set of business practices developed by the Hongkong Bank to establish and transact a western form of banking business in the radically different social and cultural context of the Far East. The term ‘compradores’ derived from the Portuguese ‘comprar’ and originated after the founding of Macau as a trading port in the sixteenth century.³² The compradores were required because of the difficulties foreign merchants had in understanding the Chinese language, customs and business practices. Far from the Hongkong Bank ending the compradore system, by taking over their role as middlemen, compradores played a vital role in the banking system, assuming responsibilities for all the bank's business with its Chinese customers. Their continuing role in the performance of the bank's business continued to exercise a strong influence upon bank office design well into the interwar years.

The new bank was more than simply a space for business however, with extensive arrangements made to accommodate the manager of this principal branch in some style. *The Architect* noted how:

the two upper storeys are the manager's residence; the first floor, 17 feet high, containing large reception rooms; and the second floor, 15 feet high, bedrooms; each bedroom having a dressing-room and a bath-

Figure 4: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1886: façade facing the waterfront



Source: HSBC Group Collection

room [while the] servants' offices are provided in a storey built over the Compradore's offices, and are connected with the main building by a covered way on the level of the first floor. A godown, stables, kitchens for natives, and living rooms for coolies, shroffs, & c., are contained in a detached building at the back of the compound.³³

These architectural and social adaptations to the cultural and environmental context of the Far East were remarked upon by *The Architect's* correspondent, wherein "the arrangements generally are found most convenient for the business of the bank, which, of course, differs greatly in its requirements to what is common in this country".³⁴

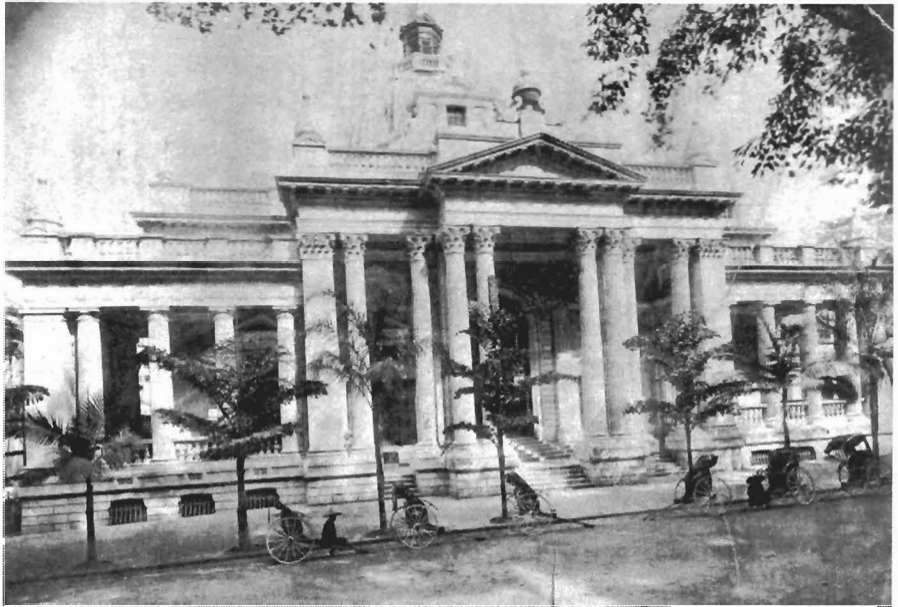
Hong Kong 1886

From the establishment of the bank in 1865, Hong Kong was the administrative hub and emotional heart of the organisation and by the 1880s had begun to play a dominant role in the colony's economic and business life. This status was clearly reflected in its first purpose-built headquarters, designed by Clement Palmer of the architectural firm of Wilson and Bird (see Figure 3).³⁵ The project's inception and spirit, however, owed much to the bank's then Chief Manager, Sir Thomas Jackson.³⁶ Opened in 1886 the building effectively merged two distinct structures to form a hybrid architecture known as 'compradoric', which was common along the China coast in the nineteenth century and drew its inspiration from earlier Anglo-Indian building projects.³⁷ The opening of the new building was covered by the *China Mail* on 9 August 1886. In addition to providing some general assessment of the aesthetics of the new building, particularly its two principal façades to Queen's Road and the Praya, or waterfront, the paper also gave a detailed account of the layout and use of internal space within the new three-storey structure.

The façade facing the waterfront (Figure 4) clearly indicated the adaptation of western classical style to the climatic conditions of the Far East, in an era before the advent of air conditioning, with windows opening onto a series of loggias to gain shade and the best of passing breezes. Further details were provided by the *Mail's* correspondent:

The main door which is about 14 feet above the level of the Praya is gained by a flight of steps, over which is a handsome portico. The building from this side appears as a solid three-storeyed structure, the ground floor of

Figure 5: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1886: façade facing to Queen's Road



Source: HSBC Group Collection

*Doric architecture, the first floor Corinthian, and the upper floor, Composite, forming all together an imposing and beautiful classical design.*³⁸

Meanwhile, the main entrance in Queen's Road (Figure 5) was a more orthodox affair, with grand columns and portico announcing the home of Hong Kong's premier financial institution. Here, though, the *Mail* noted how "the beauty and full effect of its appearance from the Queen's Road side, are somewhat obscured by the closeness of the surrounding buildings, and it is only when one approaches near that the massive granite Corinthian columns and the imposing dome are seen". However "on the Praya side, the building naturally shows to greater advantage, and to visitors coming into the harbour it will doubtless form, when completed, one of the most interesting landmarks".³⁹

Figure 6 shows an early photograph of the principal banking hall:

Passing in at the main door we find ourselves in the bank proper – an immense hall which might be considered as a building apart from the rest. It is roofed by a large octagonal dome, the apex of which is 100 feet above the floor. This dome rests on arches supported by eight massive Corinthian pillars of polished red Aberdeen granite, and is lighted by a series of circular windows filled with stained glass. The bank building is cut into two equal halves

*by a corridor which run (sic) the whole length of the structure from Queen's Road to the Praya. On the right hand side is the general office for Europeans, while on the other side is the compradores' office, where the Chinese will do business. These offices have each broad counters in front of them, bending inwards at the centre of the passage so as to give more space for moving out and in to the Bank. They have doors opening on the verandah, and on the left or Chinese side the verandah will be utilised for the money-counting stalls.*⁴⁰

Though the inspiration for this grand domed banking hall clearly stems from British bank design tradition, particularly Soane's work at the Bank of England between the 1780s and the 1820s, the layout of the floor plan was sharply influenced by the need to accommodate two banks – the 'Western' and the 'Chinese' – within the same overall ground plan.⁴¹ Away from the main banking hall the divisions of the interior continued the theme of spatial separation on ethnic grounds with, on the right hand side of the centre corridor, a series of offices for the largely British 'Eastern' staff comprising Correspondents' Room, Sub-manager's and Manager's room, while on the left hand side, the rooms were largely devoted to Chinese officials, including the Head Compradore's room.⁴²

Segregation by race was evident on a vertical axis too, as different floors within the building were allocated specific functions. As

the *Mail's* correspondent noted, the basement floor:

is mainly taken up with the rooms of the Chinese employéés (sic). These rooms are of a thoroughly Chinese type, done up in a way to suit the taste of natives. They occupy almost the whole of the floor, the only other rooms being two strong rooms ... there is also on the basement floor a large European kitchen with communication by means of a lift with the upper storeys of the building, besides a Chinese kitchen and store rooms.⁴³

Meanwhile, the grand staircase led to:

the first floor, where are the mess rooms of the junior clerks. This floor is divided into two equal parts by a wide passage that runs from end to end. On the one side is a large dining room ... looking out on the Praya. There are also two store-rooms ... three bath-rooms, and two bed-rooms ... looking out on the dome of the general office. On the other side of the passage there is, opposite the dining room, a drawing room of similar size, looking out on the Praya, with a billiard room adjoining ... the centre of this side is taken up with a large bed-room ... with a linen dressing room in front and other three bathrooms, while at the further end are other two bed-rooms, looking out on the dome of the Bank.⁴⁴

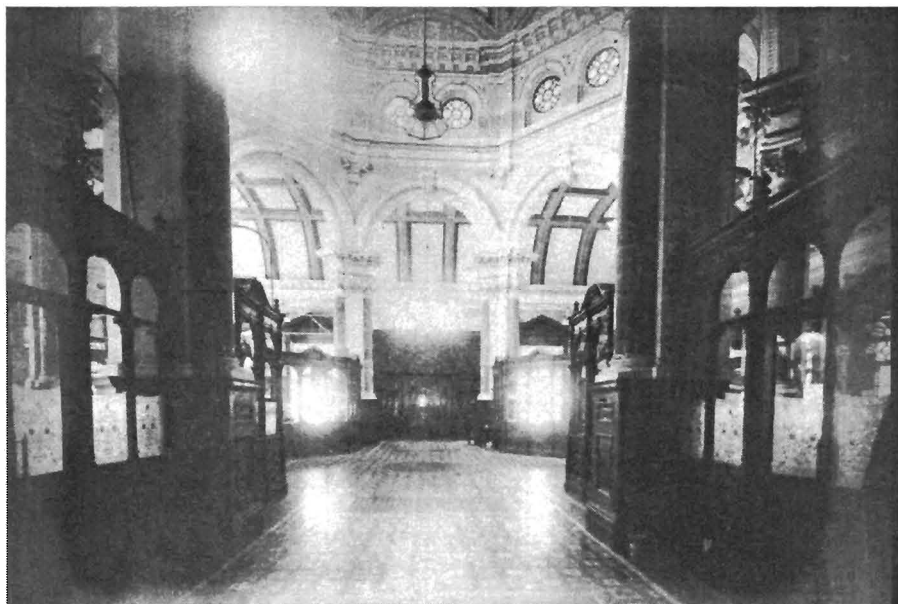
Finally, on the second (top) floor:

we find this floor almost entirely taken up with bed-rooms of various sizes ... [whilst] a wide corridor as on the other floors runs along the centre. There are also a number of bathrooms on this storey, which, like the others, are supplied with cold and hot water.⁴⁵

The Hong Kong head office was, therefore, a complex architectural and social space. Its design drew upon hybrid notions of architectural style to present a broadly western classical image within the tropical climate of the colony, whilst its internal spaces were shaped by the need to incorporate both western and Chinese banking traditions within the same building. The office clearly served multiple social and domestic purposes too, with extensive accommodation provided for a range of employees, supported by servants.

The two principal branches built for the Hongkong Bank in Hong Kong and Shanghai in the later-nineteenth century indicated the prestige of the institution in Eastern banking and its self-confidence at a time of growth and expansion. Though seen as rather lavish at the

Figure 6: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1886: principal banking hall



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

time of their construction, with the Hong Kong Head Office becoming known as 'Jackson's Folly' for example, by the 1920s the question of their rebuilding was being posed.⁴⁶ The increasing scale and complexity of business required more office space, whilst the need

to match or surpass the prestige of competitor buildings was ever present. The remainder of this paper will discuss the two major rebuilding projects undertaken by the bank in the interwar years: Shanghai in 1923 and Hong Kong in 1935.

Figure 7: Hongkong Bank, Shanghai 1923: façade facing the Bund



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

Shanghai 1923

By the early-twentieth century the bank's office on the Bund in Shanghai was becoming cramped and in need of repair and in 1919 the bank's directors chose the colonial architectural firm of Palmer & Turner, then based in Hong Kong, to design a new building.⁴⁷ The driving force behind the Shanghai project was the bank's then Chief Manager A. G. Stephen and its conception and grand design reflected Stephen's own vision of the bank and its role in the emerging financial metropolis of the east. When the architects requested a further one million dollars to enhance the building, Stephen replied "spare no expense, but dominate the Bund".⁴⁸ George Wilson, chief architect on the project, designed the Shanghai branch in the 'Grand Manner', representing a translocation to the Far East of contemporary architectural fashion in England where Imperial Baroque styles, drawing upon Wren and Vanbrugh, were often favoured for major public building projects (see Figure 7).⁴⁹ That the bank, clearly a private company albeit with a number of quasi-public functions, preferred such a style, indicated its desire to underscore in architectural form its vision as the dominant institution in Eastern banking. A critic writing on the occasion of the bank's opening noted:

The building is of the type known as Neo-Grec, and to achieve the dignity with simplicity which that name implies the Architects have eschewed the use of carving or sculpture almost entirely and relied upon proportion and line. The frontage of approximately three hundred feet to the Bund and two hundred feet to Foochow Road formed the ideal site for this memorial to the commerce and prosperity of the world. Rising one hundred feet to the long line of the roof and a further eighty feet to the finial of the massive dome, the whole building stands out clear to the view of the merchant ships of all nations sailing up and down the Huang Pu, a recognition of their courageous industry which has made possible all that this memorial stands for.⁵⁰

The new bank did indeed dominate the Bund skyline. Even the building of the new, taller Custom House adjacent to the bank in 1927 did little to challenge the richly expressive architecture of Wilson's design, which a contemporary remarked "has been called the biggest and grandest commercial house in the Far East, and possibly is not excelled by any foreign building other than the various Government houses in India".⁵¹

Figure 8: Hongkong Bank, Shanghai 1923: octagonal entrance hall



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

The interior of the new bank was of a scale and richness far beyond most financial headquarters in the City of London at the time.⁵² The interior not only gave further clues to the bank's vision, but also to how it negotiated the practical problems of translating western business practices into a radically different socio-cultural context. Passing through the arched entrances one entered a large octagonal hall with a central dome supported by eight Sienna marble columns (Figure 8). Above these, eight panels showed decorative motifs of the principal banking centres of east and west: London, New York and Tokyo, together with Paris, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Bangkok and Calcutta. This octagonal entrance hall controlled

the flow of people through the complex layout of the ground floor business areas, where:

from the South-East archway of the octagon is reached the Brokers' Room. South of that is the Manager's suite consisting of Manager's Office, Manager's Private Room, Waiting Room, Telegrams, Books, and Stenographers' Room, with a private corridor giving access to each. The Accountant's Department is approached through the North-East archway [whilst] the remaining five archways ... open upon the Main Banking Hall.⁵³

Figure 9 shows one-half of the banking hall running parallel to the façade facing the Bund. The critic continued his description:

*the first impression of the Banking Hall is of the grandeur of sheer space and proportion and light. This Hall, which occupies practically the whole length of the building, has an area of twenty-one thousand five hundred feet. The walls and columns faced with soft-toned grey Italian marble ... the counter, over three hundred feet in length, is faced with marble and has bronze gates. Above the counter top the bronze grille is of a solid dignity of design.*⁵⁴

The marble work drew particular praise, especially in view of the fact that much of the design work was completed in Italy and shipped out in sections to Shanghai. At the southern end of the banking hall, a marble staircase led up to the mezzanine floor, which comprised a series of private rooms, including stationery and record stores, the "Manager's Changing Room ... Tiffin Room ... [and] Staff Changing Rooms including five Lavatories with shower baths".⁵⁵

The composition and organisation of the bank staff at Shanghai clearly influenced the design and disposition of internal spaces within the new bank. The main distinction was that between the British 'Eastern Staff' and the Chinese, though Portuguese, too, staffed the banking hall. The manager, Mr G. H. Stitt was accommodated in a richly decorated private office (Figure 10) with elaborately

Figure 9: Hongkong Bank, Shanghai 1923: principal banking hall

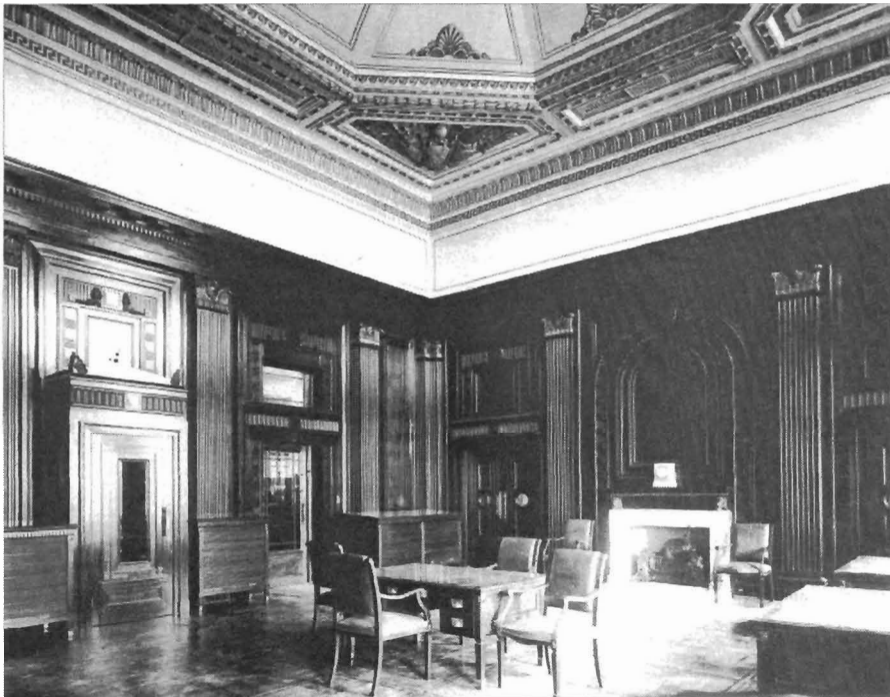


Source: HSBC Group Collection.

coffered ceilings and teak panels with fluted pilasters. This office provided considerable difficulties for the architect as it functioned as a room forming the hub of the entire bank,

where "the walls had to be so broken with doors and windows [the architect] might well despair of achieving the dignified aspect which the Manager's Office should present". However "the difficulty has been overcome by a combination of large proportions and richness of detail which has a most happy effect".⁵⁶

Figure 10: Hongkong Bank, Shanghai 1923: Manager's Office



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

The conduct of banking business with Chinese customers relied, as previously discussed, upon the compradore system. Figure 11 shows the Chinese Bank, accessed through the marble archways at the south-west corner of the main banking hall. The cultural significance of this hybrid architecture was clear to contemporaries, the bank's official opening brochure remarking how:

*one is arrested on the threshold [of the banking hall] by the totally unexpected sight of a blaze of Chinese decoration. This is the Chinese Bank. The Architect has attempted here the boldest scheme of decoration ever tried in a modern building [while] the design, both in the mass and in its details, is entirely new, one feels the influence of the best traditions of fourteenth century Chinese art in this gorgeous Oriental decoration of a Hall of twentieth century Western construction.*⁵⁷

Passing through the Chinese Bank the Compradore's outer office was reached. Here:

one's joy sobers to smiles of appreciation of the intricacy of the gilded ornament of the beams, the gold, and red and black ... thence to the Compradore's private room. The brightness is dimmed. The reds and greens and yellows have gone. Here the splendour curbs all smiles. Black and the dark blue of calm; the fit setting for the dignified office of Compradore of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank.⁵⁸

There were a further four storeys above the ground floor and mezzanine level described above. These were designed as suites of offices, for rental, echoing a practice long-established in the City of London. On the top floor two residential apartments were built, each with a colonnaded roof garden, though it is not clear whom these were designed for. The upper echelons of management had purpose built houses elsewhere in Shanghai, whilst junior staff found accommodation to rent in the city. These developments indicate a marked shift from the more inclusive 'compound' of Kidner's bank building (1877), where business and related domestic spaces took precedence over the creation of floorspace for rent by external clients.

Hong Kong 1935

By the later 1920s the Hongkong Bank's head office of 1886 was becoming too small to house the head office functions of a rapidly growing organisation. A leader in the *South China Morning Post*, discussing the rebuilding project, commented:

The old building was by common consent one of the Colony's most pleasing examples of the architecture of the period. In its day moreover, it was an imposing structure, not dominating its neighbours but offering itself with quiet confidence as an artistic contribution to the appearance of the district. It is significant of Hong Kong's rapid growth that, in a short fifty years from its erection, the old building became inadequate for the Bank's needs.⁵⁹

Significantly, too, it was felt that the new Shanghai office was beginning to overshadow the group's headquarters. As the *Post's* leader continued "for some time now the Colony's pride in the Bank has been reduced to the fact that Hong Kong is the Head Office, the magnificent Shanghai Branch having usurped the primary claim to structural grandeur".⁶⁰ For these two reasons – space and status – Sir Vandeleur Grayburn, then Chief Manager, decided the bank needed a new head

Figure 11: Hongkong Bank, Shanghai 1923: the Chinese Bank



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

office building in Hong Kong. The decision to rebuild was made shortly after the Wall Street Crash and was also intended to provide a stimulus to the local economy of the colony at a time of increasing economic depression. Employing George Wilson, who had designed the new Shanghai branch in 1923, Grayburn instructed him simply "please build us the best Bank in the world".⁶¹

The structure designed by Wilson showed an obvious debt to the stylistic innovations of the modern movement (see Figure 12). Crucially, though, it was not England but North America, specifically the high-rise commercial architecture of Chicago and New York, that Wilson turned to for inspiration.⁶² There were no comparable projects in England to draw upon, London remaining a relatively low-rise city until after the Second World War. Such observations challenge the conventionally accepted notions of 'colonial dependence', where colonial architectural styles are often read as simple transplants from the metropolitan core. The Hongkong Bank's new headquarters, whilst clearly a product of western architectural practice, was a considerable stylistic innovation seen in the context of, for example, the City of London in the 1930s.⁶³ The dimensions of the new building were approximately 220 feet square, with the main

tower also rising 220 feet from its base. The Moderne style used by Wilson allowed motifs to be applied to the basic geometrical forms which cloaked the building, as appliqué rather than structural elements. Sculptured heads of Men of Vision surmounted the buttresses of the tower, flanked by lions' heads, symbolic of strength and also a traditional reference to the guardians of British commerce.⁶⁴ Each was carved from a five-ton granite block.

A contemporary critic wrote how:

Following the modern trend in architecture ... the design is simple and dignified with practically no ornamentation. It is built of the wonderful local granite with the result that it stimulates the imagination and satisfies the eye. The strong vertical treatment above the horizontal base gives the impression of great strength and stability, which has always been associated with this Banking Corporation.⁶⁵

The question of symbolism was also referred to by Mr N. L. Smith, the Colonial Government's Presiding Officer at the opening ceremony:

I wonder if it is too fanciful to suppose that buildings do in some degree reflect the characteristics of their occupants; perhaps I

Figure 12: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1935: Head Office designed by George Wilson



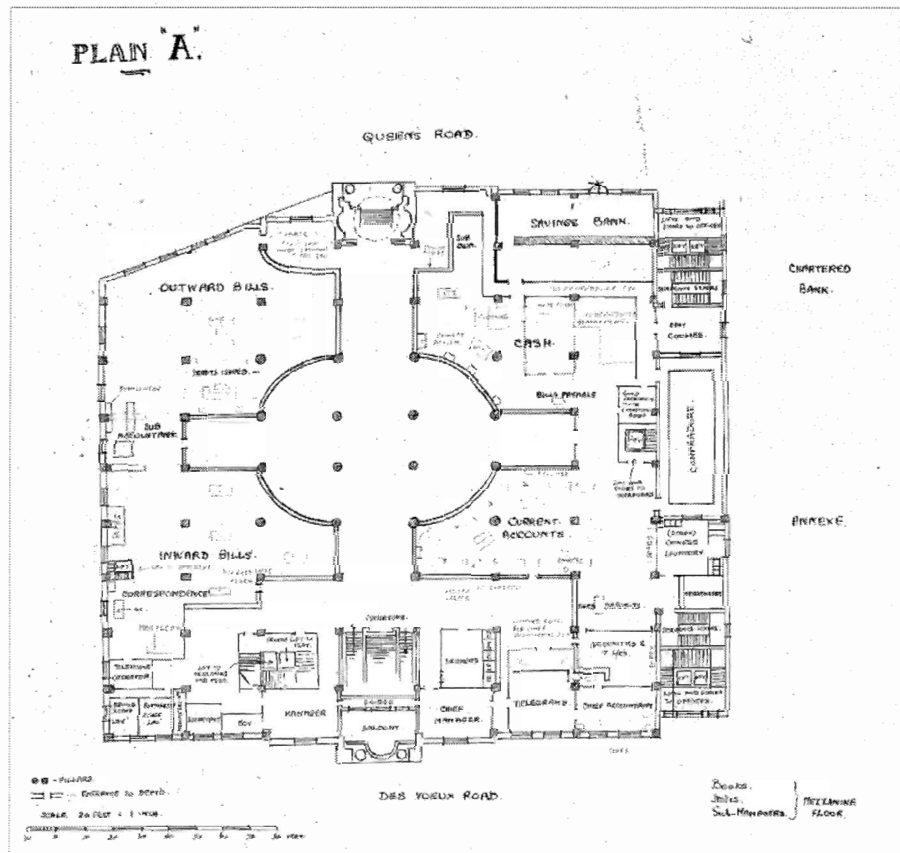
Source: HSBC Group Collection.

have got this the wrong way round. But look at the Law Courts across the way; do they not embody the dignity and solidity of Sir Atholl MacGregor and Mr. Justice Lindsell? Look a few yards further at the Club, typically superior and uncomfortable and die-hard. Now the building which I have to-day had the very great honour of opening seems to me to be in the first place completely efficient; it is up-to-date, not to say quite a few minutes ahead of the clock; it has imagination and above all else it is honest. I do not think that I could discover a better epitome of the characteristics of Mr. Grayburn and his wonderful staff.⁶⁶

Like Shanghai, the Hong Kong Head Office was staffed by a predominantly British 'Eastern' staff and Chinese compradores. To accommodate their differing social and business requirements the building's modern shell cloaked an interior of considerable complexity (Figure 13). This plan, though not in fact the final version, nonetheless indicates the challenges faced by the architect as he attempted to incorporate the 'European' and 'Chinese' banks within one general ground floor space. The central area of the floorplan was here divided into departments dealing with bills (inward and outward) on the left-hand side and those dealing with cash and current accounts to the right. In the top right corner was the savings

bank. The far right hand side of the building, adjoining the Chartered Bank, was to be devoted to the Chinese bank, with the comprador's office placed in the centre, flanked by rooms for the chit coolies and a Chinese staff lavatory. Further spaces were used for messengers, servants' stairs and lifts. The space behind the frontage to Des Voeux Road was to be reserved for the principal managers' offices, including the Chief Manager, Manager and Chief Accountant. These functions to be supported by brokers and secretaries, together with rooms for telephones and telegrams. Finally, besides a private lift for Grayburn to reach his flat, separate lavatories were to be provided for British and Portuguese Staff respectively. Such evidence provides an extremely valuable means of reconstructing the detailed micro-spatial practices and social relations involved in the organisation of this major head office building, which needed to respond to a distinctive interplay between different ethnic groups in the prosecution of a wide range of banking business.

Figure 13: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1935: preliminary ground floor plan



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

The banking hall itself captured the imagination (Figure 14). A contemporary reaction on the bank's opening noted:

On entering this fine spacious hall, one is immediately impressed by its vast and simple grandeur. The walls are lined with highly polished Botticino marble which contrasts pleasingly with the dark rich Ashburton marble of the columns in the Public Space. Looking up into the barrel vaulted ceiling over the Public Space one sees that it is finished in Venetian glass mosaics.⁶⁷

The mosaic was designed by Podgoursky, a Russian émigré artist from Shanghai, and contained approximately four million pieces, which were made in Italy, pasted onto paper by Italian craftsmen and shipped in sections to Hong Kong for fixing.⁶⁸

In contrast the management rooms, including the Chief Manager's office shown in Figure 15, reflected the restrained and unadorned style of the Bank generally, and were "finished with unpolished marble on the walls, travertine floors and simple plaster ceilings", with all the doors and the furniture of metal, designed by the English company Roneo with an Art Deco quality.⁶⁹ Upper floors were again designed as offices for rent, with the exception of the ninth floor, which contained a flat for the Chief Manager.

The new head office was clearly an exceptional building, towering above the predominantly Victorian 'compradoric' architecture in Hong Kong's harbour setting (Figure 16). When finished it was the tallest building between Cairo and San Francisco and incorporated the latest in building technology, including the use of a special high tensile steel known as Chromador and an advanced air conditioning system.⁷⁰ Symbolic of the bank's position not only in Eastern banking, but also worldwide, the building was officially opened on 10 October 1935. The presiding Government Officer captured the mood:

I should like to give my opinion for what it is worth that, in the view of all honest men of taste, this magnificent building is of such a quality that generations yet unborn will gaze at it with something of the same gasp of admiration that we to-day bestow on, let us say, Durham Cathedral. I do not mean the interior conveniences or even the mosaics; I mean simply the lines that will be seen from the Star Ferry or whatever its equivalent may be a century or two hence.⁷¹

Figure 14: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1935: principal banking hall



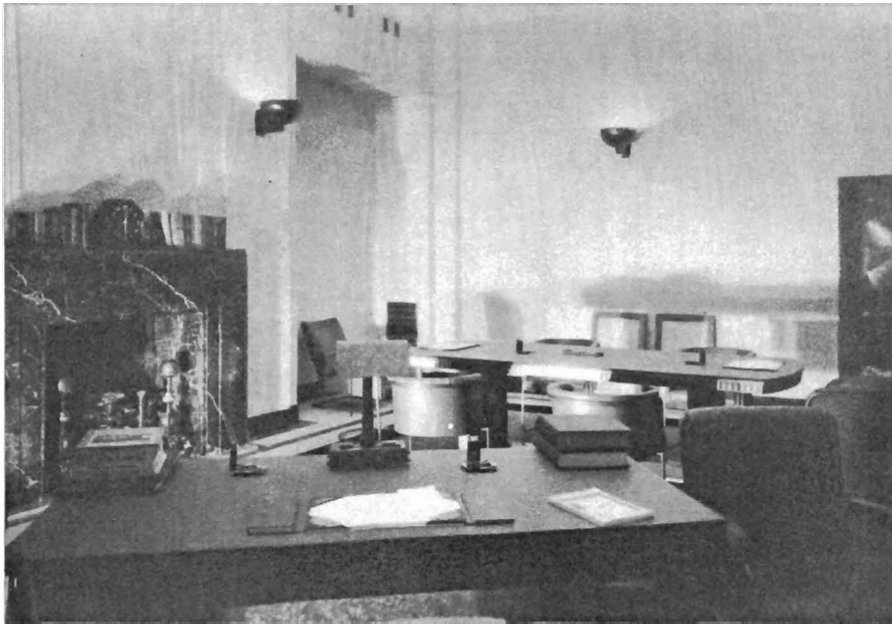
Source: HSBC Group Collection.

Little did he know that the post-war growth of Hong Kong's central business district would begin to eclipse the prominence of the Hongkong Bank's head office from the 1960s and that by the mid-1980s a new and radically different headquarters was built.⁷²

The Hongkong Bank's two major rebuilding projects of the interwar years, in Shanghai and Hong Kong, posed a common design problem: they were the pre-eminent branches in the group and needed to establish a clear

identity within their local setting to impress their customers, shareholders and competitors; they both also occupied waterfront sites, the Praya in Hong Kong and the Bund in Shanghai. Yet they seemed to offer quite different architectural solutions. This judgement rests more upon the aesthetics of the two schemes than their overall plan. Yip notes how "the Head Office that Palmer & Turner designed cloaked a very traditional plan and massing in a contemporary veneer". Comparing the design to Wilson's Shanghai branch,

Figure 15: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1935: Chief Manager's Office

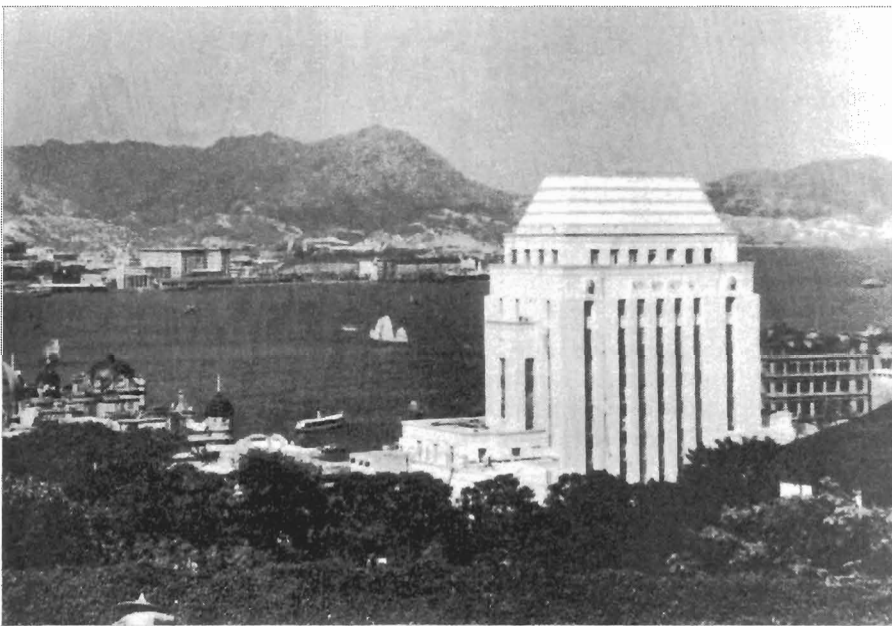


Source: HSBC Group Collection.

he suggests that "both elevations show a medium rise block with a high focal element ... whereas the Shanghai Branch had a dome, the Hong Kong Head Office used a tower block".⁷³ Though both schemes were based on neo-classical principles however, they articulated quite distinct symbolic qualities. The Shanghai branch drew upon established modes of authority, echoing the Imperial Ba-

roque styles popular in Edwardian England for important public buildings, such as Edward Mountford's Central Criminal Court (the Old Bailey).⁷⁴ The new head office in Hong Kong, by contrast, eschewed British architectural tradition by drawing upon the new wave of corporate styles produced in Chicago and New York in the early decades of the twentieth century.⁷⁵ With their modern

Figure 16: Hongkong Bank, Hong Kong 1935: view to Victoria Harbour



Source: HSBC Group Collection.

constructional techniques and appeal to modernity, tempered by the familiar neo-classical lines dressed in Art Deco style, the North American skyscraper model fitted the requirements set by Grayburn to build the best bank in the world.

Conclusion

British overseas banks have played a prominent role in the long-term development of the global economy, not least because of their close relationships with British imperial power. This imperial context, especially between the 1830s and the 1930s, provided an important political-economic structure for the extension of British banking practices and techniques to large parts of the world, many of whom had little or no indigenous tradition of formal banking. Yet, despite a considerable volume of recent research detailing the economic motivations for the expansion of imperial and colonial banking, remarkably little is known about precisely how the physical infrastructure for this international banking business was put in place. This analysis of some of the key bank branches built by the Hongkong Bank in the Far East, between the 1870s and the 1930s, has emphasised the considerable extent to which western architectural principles were negotiated in the radically different social and cultural contexts in which the bank operated. Before the advent of air conditioning, this process of transformation of western models was reinforced by the need to cope with the challenging climatic conditions that prevailed in the different regional settings. Both internally and externally the bank's architects made significant modifications to traditional design solutions to provide extended areas of shade and to increase the circulation of air. Overlaying these environmental requirements was the need to design complex divisions of internal space to facilitate the operation and interaction between the 'Western' bank staffed by Europeans and the 'Chinese' bank controlled by the compradores. In these examples, the design and building of the physical infrastructure for international banking was central to the successful negotiation of western business practices in a distinctive and different cultural environment. These claims serve to set a distinctive research agenda in historical geography. For while there have been many studies of colonial architecture as a form of cultural imperialism or cultural diffusion, remarkably little attention has been paid by scholars to the significance of the commercial office environment – its external

form, internal design and functioning – to the diffusion of western business culture overseas. Detailed studies of the range of building projects conducted by international banking groups can help situate such localised transformations of the built environment, in different regional contexts, within wider networks of corporate, institutional and political power. In this way British bank building overseas can be seen as a key process in the reordering of space at both a local and global scale in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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I would like to thank Mr Edwin Green, Ms Sara Kinsey and the HSBC Group Archives, London, and Ms Margaret Lee and the HSBC Group Archives, Hong Kong, for their continuing help and advice in connection with this project. Earlier versions of this paper have been presented to the London Group of Historical Geographers, the European Association for Banking History and the Metropolitan History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. I would like to thank the various audiences involved for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

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Iain S. Black

Recherches historiques

En mars 2001, le Laboratoire de géographie historique de l'Université Laval, composante du Centre interuniversitaire d'études québécoises, était l'hôte du Dr Iain S. Black, du King's College, University of London.

Spécialiste de géographie historique, le Dr Black s'intéresse à l'histoire bancaire de la Cité de Londres et de l'Empire britannique aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles, qu'il aborde sous l'angle des rapports entre finance et architecture.

Ce texte donne un aperçu de ses travaux. Et comme ils rejoignent les préoccupations de plusieurs chercheurs du Centre, spécialisés en histoire économique et culturelle, nous en avons fait un terrain d'échanges sur la place Québec dans la construction du Québec au XIX^e siècle.

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