

# The Rise and Fall of the Bungalow

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## **Abstract**

*The distance between the floor of the bungalow and the ground has varied with both time and distance. This paper first looks at vernacular houses raised off the ground in Sri Lanka and the reasons for this arrangement. It then looks at the different reasons behind elevating the tea planter's bungalow, which were to do with seeing and being seen to be seeing. When the bungalow first arrived in the UK in 1869 as a coastal, holiday second home for the wealthy it hit the ground with novel protection to avoid rising damp. Although since coming down in the world to the point where the term 'bungalow' is somewhat pejorative, the UK bungalow has tended to stick to the ground. The bungalow also arrived in Queensland in 1860 when it began a process of gradually lifting itself off the ground until main living occurred at first floor height. The reasons behind this evolution are explored.*

## **Introduction**

Briggs' well known comment that "A Cottage is a little house in the country, but a Bungalow is a little country house—a homely, cosy little place, with verandahs and balconies, and the plan so arranged as to ensure complete comfort with a feeling of rusticity and ease"<sup>1</sup> sets up the nature of the bungalow as being something less formal than a conventional house. It also includes spaces that mediate between indoors and out, thus making outside living an important aspect of daily life. Given that many settlers came to New Zealand in search of a life that was perhaps less formal than the one left behind the popularity of the New Zealand bungalow should not be a surprise.<sup>2</sup> However, this paper is not about the New Zealand bungalow as its history has been well documented,<sup>3</sup> but rather looks at how the distance between the natural ground and the floor of the bungalow has changed from its colonial origins, using examples from Sri Lanka, its arrival in the UK, and then in Queensland.

## The Bungalow in Sri Lanka

The two principal features of the Sri Lankan vernacular house are its high-rising roof and the 'pila' a raised base platform on which the house sits. Both features are a direct response to the intense tropical heat of the day and the monsoonal downpours which inundated the land, often causing flooding. The vernacular roof, a steep domineering canopy stretches out well beyond the outer walls and extends down towards the ground to shade and cool the house. The height of the pila varied to suit the contextual situation and was both the foundation of the building and the base of the outer walls<sup>7</sup> and generally wide enough for sitting and sometimes for walking.<sup>8</sup> While features like the roof, veranda and courtyard are the key focus in architectural literature, the raised platform and its socio-cultural significance, particularly in domestic architecture is only briefly discussed. The reason being the pila, essentially "an elevated semi-outdoor space protected by a roof overhang"<sup>9</sup> is often confused or interchanged with the verandah, an Anglo-Indian term introduced to the country by its European colonisers. Fortunately Bandaranayake's 1974 study of historic monastic buildings of the ancient capital 'Anuradhapura' from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and considered the golden age of Singhalese architecture, devotes an entire section to the base platform and its moulding details.<sup>10</sup> From this study and Sansoni's<sup>11</sup> and Lewcock's<sup>12</sup> studies on vernacular domestic architecture from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries we know the significance of the pila did not just end with its protective functions. Rather its detailing and the design of related architectural elements like the entrance steps, doorway, wall-face and columns contributed to reinforcing the symbolic significance of the building and social status of the occupants.

In the simple wattle and daub homes of peasant farmers the pila would rise a couple of steps above the ground and extend outwards at the front and sometimes to the back to form a threshold between the house and the landscape.<sup>13</sup> Often enclosing the front pila, but setback from the edge, was a short wall which served as a protective base for the timber columns supporting the roof, a security barrier against wild animals and intruders, and a seat elevated above that formed by the pila. The partially enclosed pila was the main living space where family gathered, tasks related to livelihood were carried out, and guests were entertained with visitors of a lower social status sitting or standing on the ground beyond the pila. The grander homes of village headman, feudal chiefs, and royal courtiers, the walavva,<sup>14</sup> and the much simpler monastic residences of the Buddhist clergy, the vihara, were also elevated on platforms. Davy (1821), a British medical officer based in the newly captured central Kandyan hill province from 1816-1820 writes of the residences of the Kandyan aristocracy "their best houses, those of the chiefs, are of mud and tiled roofs, raised on a low terrace and always of a single storey".<sup>15</sup> The more durable construction materials used in the

walavva such as stone and mud brick enabled sturdier foundations, wider external and internal walls, and larger columns to support the longer timber members of the larger and heavier terracotta tile or thatch roof. This created a wider external pila where guests could be entertained and business conducted, and a wider internal pila around courtyards where household duties and family activities could occur. In these vernacular homes the pila was a socio-cultural threshold and an architectural element essential for maintaining social etiquette associated with caste structures and 'rajakariya', responsibilities in service to the monarch.

Although the original purpose of the pila was functional, in a feudal society strictly defined by caste, the domestic vernacular architecture was a medium through which authority and social status was practiced and maintained. Ancient building codes established through royal decree reinforced these traditional practices. A visitor of a lower caste would stop at the pila venturing onto it or beyond only if invited. Although colonisation may have undermined and gradually eradicated some traditional practices, colonial administrators saw and grasped the opportunities thus presented for asserting and maintaining their own authority on the colonised. Pieris commenting on the appropriation of feudal structures of authority by colonial administrators writes "in the maritime provinces the rural walawwa culture lost its authority and was appropriated for colonial forms of symbolic capital."<sup>16</sup> The colonial plantation, a production unit isolated by unrelenting hilly terrain, unsophisticated communication networks and distance from administrative centres, was a patriarchal micro colony governed by a plantation manager. Although much like the traditional pre-colonial production unit, without traditional caste structures and the 'rajakariya' system, authority had to be commanded at a high cost. As the plantation bungalow, an Anglo-Indian import of the 1830s lacked the implicit authority of the traditional walavva, as had its counterpart when first introduced around 1800 to the British administrative centre, the Colombo Fort, and from which by 1803 the natives and their vernacular architecture had been prohibited, symbolic authority was acquired in both situations through architectural appropriation, scale and strategic positioning for visibility.<sup>17</sup> Elevated well above the line-room plantation labour housing, the fields and the factory, the spacious plantation manager's bungalow commanded authority, reinforced social status and controlled through seeing and being seen to be seeing (Figure. 1), as the bungalow within the fort did over its surroundings.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 1.** Managers Bungalow, Lansdowne Estate, Ratnapura, circa 1917 (Leslie Marshall. 2000)

Early plantation bungalows were speedily built for hastily employed bachelor planters from the ranks of soldiers after the Crown Lands Encroachment Ordinance Number 12 was passed in 1840. Under this act 13, 275 acres of land was confiscated from local peasant farmers and sold to British government officials, businessmen and the clergy.<sup>19</sup> Their design reflected the struggles of establishing an industry of which they had no previous experience.<sup>20</sup> Several poorly constructed basic bungalows needed extensive repair or were demolished<sup>21</sup> following the gradual change of management from private ownership to agency houses and to the more profitable production of tea. This occurred from the 1850s and after coffee cultivations were destroyed by disease in the mid-1880s.<sup>22</sup> During this time plantation bungalows reached a new level of architectural grandeur and became the main incentive for attracting managers and their families from Europe to a volatile industry that paid basic wages, and to a job made harder by continued labour issues even after south Indian workers replaced the reluctant Singhalese,<sup>23</sup> and isolation increased as the industry penetrated deeper and higher into the central hills.

Elevated on the plantation, the manager's bungalow was often raised on a platform or foundations, and entered through a ceremonial path surrounded by terraced and landscaped gardens (Figure 2). A porch, entrance steps, verandah and (or) an enclosed entrance hallway defined the multiple thresholds of entry. Each threshold was utilised through gradual elevation and increasing enclosure to manage class differences and maintain etiquette, and to give the plantation manager the status once enjoyed by the owner of the walavva. Even well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, higher ranked administrative staff rarely ventured beyond the front verandah, and labour only approached the bungalow from the rear where the kitchens, garages and domestic staff quarters were located. However, diverging from the walawwa the

staff spaces were removed from the main living areas of the bungalow but connected by a roofed or enclosed hallway. This was both for privacy and to separate the spaces of the indigenous domestics from those of their European manager and his family.<sup>24</sup> The bungalows of junior managers further reinforced the superiority of the manager by their lesser degrees of elevation and architectural detailing, although they too were strategically positioned on the plantation for visual surveillance and control.<sup>25</sup> Pieris elaborating on this situation writes “colonial society had only two major concerns when it came to domestic architecture—the facilitation of social rituals that maintained ‘European’ superiority and the segregation of Europeans from their native servants.”<sup>26</sup> However, the European adaptation of the traditional single storey form was sufficiently attractive to become an architectural import in both the UK and its dominions.



**Figure 2.** Westward-Ho Bungalow, Labukalle Estate, Nuwara Eliya circa 1883. (Raji de Sylva. 2001)

### **The Bungalow in the UK**

The bungalow arrived in the United Kingdom in 1869 in the form of a small settlement of houses on the Kent coast designed by the architect John Taylor.<sup>27</sup> Although in 1793 the artist William Hodges had described the Indian bungalow as “...generally raised on a base of brick, one, two, or three feet from the ground...”<sup>28</sup> when it came to Kent it was firmly built on the ground, and even given a cellar and a private tunnel to the beach. What made these new seaside houses bungalows rather than houses or cottages was their simple rectangular form and the addition of verandahs, although the latter were not designed to keep the sun out as in the colonial examples, but rather as sheltered places for sitting out. Professor Erasmus Wilson bought one of these early bungalows from Taylor and his endorsement in the form of a letter written to Taylor in 1870 is worth quoting in full.

I find everybody charmed with my Bungalow, and I believe if there were many Bungalows, there would be many buyers. The house is a novelty, very convenient, fitted for a single family [Professor Wilson though married had no family], and easy as to price. The idea of Bungalows seems to take people's minds immensely. They are novel, quaint, pretty, and perfect as to sanitary qualities. The best sanitary home for a family is a Bungalow.<sup>29</sup>

This endorsement of the sanitary quality of the bungalow came from a noted surgeon and specialist in skin diseases, who also treated the poor for free and is credited with instituting the daily bath in the pursuit of health.<sup>30</sup> Professor Erasmus Wilson is also known for bringing Cleopatra's Needle to London and for the 1878 statement that electric light would die with the closing of the Paris Exhibition.<sup>31</sup> Although wrong about the latter his idea that the bungalow was associated with healthy living looked back to the Indian bungalow and other colonial examples whereby with the belief in airborne disease the isolated, well ventilated bungalow sat in the middle of its compound offered a healthy way of life.<sup>32</sup> A holiday home by the sea enabled the new wealthy middle class to escape the soot and pollution of the city and enjoy the benefits of coastal pastimes, including salt water bathing. The early Kentish bungalows developed on land owned by Taylor's architect partner John Pollard Seddon came equipped with croquet lawns as well as private access to the beach. Seddon is better known as an architect for his gothic revival work and as a designer of the decorative accoutrements of architecture, such as metal work and stained glass, about which he also wrote.<sup>33</sup> His later Tower Bungalows of 1881-82 at Birchington-on-sea still exist and others designed by him have applied decoration (Figures 3 and 4).





**Figure 3.** Tower bungalows, Birchington-on-sea, designed by J. P. Seddon (Robert Vale, 2017).



**Figure 4.** Bungalow Birchington-on-sea with decorated frieze by J. P. Seddon (Robert Vale. 2017)

### **Birchington-on-sea bungalow details**

In his book Briggs set out the essence of the bungalow as having fewer rooms for entertaining than the country house, and he promoted the use of the combined hall-sitting room. He also advocated rooms at least partly within the roof form as an economical form of bungalow building.<sup>34</sup> From the start, therefore, the bungalow in the UK was not necessarily single storey and both types exist in the early bungalows along the Kent coast. The first of these bungalows were single storey under one roof and only one example survives from 1874 built at Birchington-on-sea (the earlier ones in Westgate have been demolished).

Essentially these early bungalows were second homes for the increasingly wealthy middle class with easy access by rail from the nearby station. The less well-off seeking the seaside attractions such as donkey rides and afternoon tea would continue onwards to Margate.<sup>35</sup> As such the dwellings were commodious with room for servants. Mayhew in his 1881 account gives a plan of a two storey bungalow with the comment "...Mr. Taylor has given a capital reproduction of a cool, spacious, Indian-like hill-dwelling."<sup>36</sup> The plan is roughly square with a central circulation zone containing the stair and leading through to the offices (coals, scullery, and larder) with to one side a cloakroom with WC, library and kitchen and on the other music room opening into drawing room and dining room. Upstairs the central circulation zone leads to nine bedrooms, with the two for servants together with another WC over the offices. The bungalow came with both heating from a boiler to the drawing room as well as the normal fireplaces. The larder was equipped with cooling whereby shelves could be lowered into a space that connected two wells on the property to the effect that "...when

lowered the cold is so great in summer that butter becomes quite hard and provisions of all kinds can be kept for a length of time, whilst so cold is the draught that not a fly will remain in it.”<sup>37</sup>

However, the real technical triumph came in the length Taylor took to keep the damp at bay in a bungalow sitting on the ground. In a paper read to the Royal Institute of British Architects Taylor stated “I have introduced into my Birchington Bungalows, a foot above the ground, an invention of mine which I call a damp-proof course.”<sup>38</sup> Made of vitrified brown stoneware this was moulded with numerous air spaces that allowed free circulation of air under the floor. In 1910 Henry Adams in *Cassell’s Building Construction* had four drawings of varied patterns of stoneware damp proof courses all labelled “Taylor’s” (Figs, 175 -179, with 178-9 being two tiles to be combined into a DPC) but the one most like Taylor’s Birchington invention is Fig 181, labelled “Jenning’s Damp-proof Course”.<sup>39</sup> At Birchington Taylor also considered water penetration of walls, being disparaging of iron ties used in cavity brickwork. His solution was an L-shaped facing brick that supported a full brick resting on the foot of the L and an inner brick leaf to create a cavity. This idea seems to have disappeared by the time Adams was writing, although Fig. 194 is a solid brick wall faced with “Taylor’s vitrified stoneware facing”, which are perforated thick and thin ‘tiles’ on the outer face of the wall.<sup>40</sup> Taylor also wanted a bungalow free from rain penetration and for the roof he used a tapering interlocking tile that could be laid at a low pitch like slate but still keep out the rain. These patented tiles were sold by the Broomhall Company<sup>41</sup>, and still look good today (Figure 4). By the 1930s Taylor’s innovative stoneware damp-proof course was dismissed as being “somewhat more costly” than the conventional alternatives of lead, slates or bituminous felt,<sup>42</sup> although the bungalow was still going strong as “...a labour saving form of structure.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Going up in Queensland**

Queensland worker’s dwellings in the two decades after free settlement were modest in size, typically of two to four rooms with a square floor plan and pyramidal roof, often having a lean-to roof at the back accommodating the kitchen and ablutions and generally having a verandah on the front, facing the street. While competing with Georgian, Tudor and Victorian architectural influences, many worker and larger homestead dwellings in the second half of the nineteenth century may be considered as derived from the Indian Bungalow. Bungalow design was probably influenced through the migration of British officers and merchants with experience in tropical and sub-tropical areas of India, South East Asia, the Caribbean and the Southern States of America. However the term ‘bungalow’ was not commonly applied at the time, first occurring around the late 1860s. Charles Allen writing in 1870 says “I stayed



many months in a Queensland bungalow, built somewhat after the model of those in India and which may be taken as a type of the best of the bush houses."<sup>44</sup> These early bungalows were close to the ground on low stumps.

By the late 1880s the term bungalow was in common use. A traveller to Brisbane in 1888 describes what this paper terms the Queensland bungalow.

One of the first features which strike the attention of the stranger approaching Brisbane, especially by the river, is the architecture of the dwelling house. The prevailing style is, with modifications, that of the Indian bungalow – a single, sometimes double, storeyed cottage, generally of wood, with pyramidal roof and surrounded by broad verandahs, upon which open many French doors or low windows.<sup>45</sup>

Ubiquitous elevated timber dwellings became known as 'Queenslanders', their form and character being distinctively different from other types in Australia. The surrounding verandahs of these dwellings, directly accessible from inside rooms, provided shaded comfort from harsh sunlight, protection from driving rain, access to the prevailing breezes, semi-outdoor informal shelter for sleeping and relaxation and places from which to engage with nature and those passing by. The Queensland bungalow expressed the informal relaxed lifestyle of the population. While their development and refinement took place in Queensland they were not invented there. Precedents for their elevation above ground abound from plantation dwellings and vernacular settlements in other parts of the world. The Port Essington (NT) settlement (1838-1848) is the first recorded Australian location where buildings were raised on high stumps. The first buildings were prefabricated in Sydney to be set on stumps for the purpose of providing additional sheltered storage which would be later built in. Several years after initial settlement, a raised building which had been enclosed underneath was found to be infested with white ants, yet other buildings that were not, while not escaping white ants, allowed for observation and their destruction. In 1864 in the establishment of the settlement of Somerset on Cape York Peninsular, building designs were prepared in England and forwarded to Queensland colonial architect Charles Tiffin for estimates and prefabrication.<sup>46</sup> The Somerset buildings were elevated some five feet (1.5m) above ground. This history demonstrates that colonial administrators and engineers recognised certain benefits of raising buildings on stumps and it seems reasonable to conclude that such knowledge passed through to civil society, probably reinforcing settler experience from elsewhere.

Several practical reasons have been put forward for the elevation of Queensland bungalows. Miles Lewis concludes that “There is no simple explanation of the source of the stump, the ant cap or the high - set house, but there are interwoven strands of evidence which largely explain them”.<sup>47</sup> From reference to historical accounts, Bell (p99) provides four main reasons for the adoption of high stumps “defence against malaria, improved ventilation, control of termites and increased space at low cost”.<sup>48</sup> Roderick compellingly advances the desire to be above the ‘miasma’ as the principal driving force for the medium elevation of the Queensland bungalow.<sup>49</sup> Miasma is the unhealthy vapours emanating from the ground believed at the time to cause disease but later refuted, requiring the floor level to be at least about four or five feet above ground.

From the late 1860s dwellings were regularly raised on high stumps in Queensland mainly for the practical reasons of creating useable space under and coping with sloping land.<sup>50</sup> Most of the early examples were simple, if not crude in execution, and most likely designed and constructed by local carpenters to the requirements of the owner. In contrast, many other early Queensland bungalows were designed by architects and pre-cut manufactured then shipped to their destination, this industry continuing the long British tradition of prefabrication of buildings especially for remote settlements (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Typical Worker's Cottage circa 1890s, Chelmsford Avenue, Ipswich. Modest Bungalow of the type that was prefabricated (Gordon Holden. 2018).

In the decade or so leading to Federation of the Australian States in 1901, the intellectual, political and social energy that was present provided an environment for design refinement of the bungalow by professional architects. This was a search for a distinctive style of architecture that responded to the climate, culture and place and which expressed optimism

worthy of the new nation (Figure 6). With its simple elements of an overarching roof and sweeping verandahs the elevated Queensland bungalow form remained the clearest architectural style of this period, albeit one that was not particularly respected by some architects; Robin Dods, arguably the most talented architect of the time, was appalled by “those unsightly houses set on a forest of black stumps.”<sup>51</sup>



**Figure 6.** “KAMERUKA” 1917, Roderick Street, Ipswich, demonstrating the high point of the development of the 'Queenslander Bungalow (Gordon Holden. 2018)

Following the First World War the numerous variations of the elevated Queensland bungalow developed through the adoption of gables, porches and decoration all of which disturbed the simplicity of the original form. Dwelling designs had largely abandoned the range of Federation styles in favour of influences from California, considered to have a similar climate to Australia. Versions on the elevated Queensland bungalow style continued to be built in lesser numbers up to the Second World War, after which the type was more or less abandoned in favour of low set dwellings built of brick.

## **Conclusion**

If the bungalow had its origins in the British Empire, the discussion of those in Sri Lanka showed that the colonisers adopted a highly developed house form of great cultural significance. However, this significance was lost both in its original adoption and the later architectural interpretations of the bungalow in the UK. These were no more than holiday homes of a simplified form that made them both affordable and reflected the idea of life on holiday being less complex than life every day. In exporting the bungalow to the Dominions it was perhaps the simplicity of the form that was key, together with the way that form could be organised to respond to local circumstance. This ability of the bungalow to cope with climatic

differences is already apparent in the near freezing temperatures of Figures 3 and 4 and the 40°C+ of Figures 5 and 6. In Queensland elevation allowed for management of white-ants and floods, access to breezes and the convenience of under-house storage. None of these exported examples, however, had the cultural richness of the original Sri Lankan *walawwa*, suggesting that copying form alone is perhaps never a good idea.

## Endnotes

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