

Balconies

Balconies in Singapore

Offspring of the window, the balcony has lately been the subject of neglect by many architects, despite the importance of its role. This can be seen in the countless ugly protrusions from many a modern building today. The typical manner in which most modern balconies are constructed is simply a crude expression of outward or inward space. The balcony is often just added on to the building as an after-thought more than anything else.

The balcony is however, more than an extension on the face of a building. It is a living space. Like its parent, the window, the balcony links a building's inside to the outside. But here, the similarity ends. The balcony is more than a link or an interface. It is an intermediate space, a relief to the suffocating enclosure and provides an opening for light and ventilation which gives it a sense of spaciousness.



This aspect of openness and spaciousness is important, especially in today's densely-populated cities where urban living has forced many people to live in high-rise buildings. Of which Singapore is no exception since about 70 per cent of its 2.4 million people live in public high-rise flats. Hence the need for a sense of open space — which the balcony fulfils perfectly.

Besides providing relief to the congested enclosure by expanding the living space, progress has also evolved several other sub-roles for the balcony in land scarce Singapore which is approximately 618 square kilometres in area. One such diversion is the service balcony which is increasingly seen in the newer high-rise apartments in town. Actually not much more than a glorified yard, the service balcony serves to glamourise the function traditionally played by the yard.

Another offshoot is the access balcony. This came about as a result of the government's mass housing programme leading to its widespread use in housing estates. The access balcony has usurped the external common corridor and taken over its role.

In actual fact, usage of the balcony is often varied, colourful and frequently far from its original intention. One common example is where the balcony is transformed into a junkyard where all the family junk is collected and left to rot away. Another use is a drying yard where rows and racks of clothing are hung out to dry naturally in the hot and humid air. This peculiar local practice can be seen almost everywhere, even in exclusive apartments!

Yet another diversified function of the

Left: Cantonment Road Flats. A balcony with a mixture of Colonial legacy and Chinese heritage, Chinese Baroque.

Below: Dickson Road Residence. Colour is used to emphasise the balcony's decorative motives to merge it with the rest of the building.



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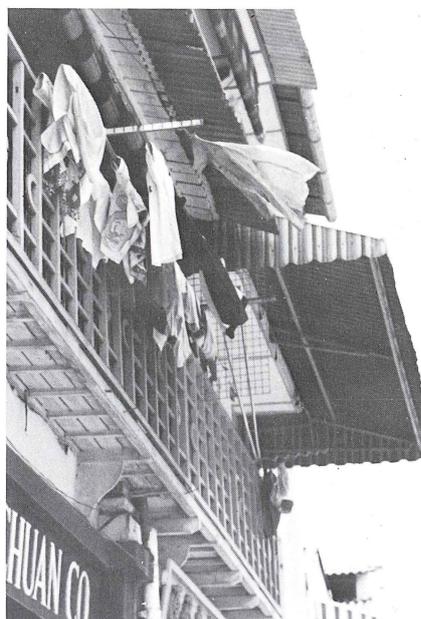
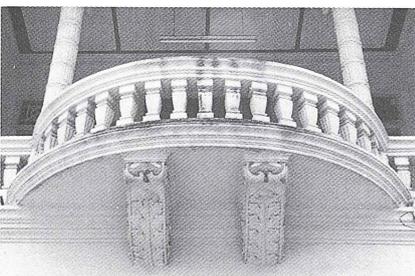
balcony resulted from the government's zealous drive to make Singapore a garden city. This has led to many households populating their balconies with potted plants, creating a multitude of instant gardens in the midst of the concrete jungle. One rather unusual improvised function of the balcony is its use as a worship hall where the ancestral altar with its accompanying deities is placed.

Mysticism has long influenced architecture, particularly in the East, where many modern buildings still bear its imprint. As the balcony is only a small element, most of this influence is largely translated into decorative motives and colours of symbolic significance. Many such motives are common among the older Chinese balconies but are rarely seen on newer buildings.

But no matter what shape, colour, size and function of the balcony, the fact that it is used testifies to its importance as a living space.

Right, above: Victoria Street Shopflat. Use of differing balcony sizes to define upper and lower levels, and to establish a sense of rhythm and order on the facade.
Right: HDB access balconies. Long horizontal bands of access balconies decorate many of our housing estates.
Below: Pandan Valley Condominium. Modern condominium balconies with sloping concrete parapets covered with brightly coloured tiles.





Balconies in Beijing

Towards the middle of November in Beijing there is the last harvest of Chinese cabbage, or *bai cai*. Intellectuals, civil servants, workers are busy aiding the peasants so that in a span of two days the *bai cai* is collected, distributed and stocked. This vegetable, which is rationed, is practically the only one available during the cold season in Beijing, and therefore is sought by every family.

Dwellings generally have minimal standards for habitable space. It is only recently that storage space in a dwelling has been taken into account in designing apartments. However, this supplementary space for storage which is at such a premium, nevertheless exists and, thanks to the extremely cold winters (-10° Centigrade) in Beijing, the balcony has become an ideal place for storing *bai cai* or other things.

The inclusion of a balcony for every dwelling unit only became systematic in 1959. This element was often absent in the first housing designs of the Republic, and when balconies appeared after 1956, they tended to be on the facade primarily for aesthetic reasons. As the only exterior space immediately adjacent to apartments in high-rise blocks, the design treatment of a balcony is important in obtaining a high standard of liveability.

In China's present housing situation, the balcony is extra square metres of living space. The Chinese neither use it for having tea nor taking a breath of air. On the other hand, they show considerable imagination and ingenuity when it comes to finding old wooden boxes, tree branches, or old windows in order to transform the balcony into valuable living space in summer and storage area in winter. Beds are brought out in summer, as it is an old Chinese custom to sleep under the stars when the weather in Beijing is very hot and humid. And, *bai cai*, coal and other items fill balconies in winter — when it is not the annual period for drying and airing one's linen!

This search for extra space 'from the interior towards the exterior' is especially striking in ground floor apartments.

The question arises whether these diverse uses of the balcony may in fact jeopardise its very existence in the long run. The answer, it would seem, is probably negative. As additional living area at little cost, the Chinese balconies allow users with imagination to give a touch of the unexpected to the facades of apartment buildings.

Beijing Balconies

Right above: The diverse uses of the balcony: from a storage space to a drying yard.

Right: The balcony is used to store *bai cai* or Chinese cabbage.

Singapore Balconies

Top: River Valley Road Flats. Inadequate weather protection in the tropics invariably results in such makeshift do-it-yourself solutions.

Centre: Eng Hoon Street Flats. Pre-war flats with balconies of highly expressive brick masonry further emphasised by the white bands on top and below. Also relegated to the role of a storeroom, the balcony sometimes presents a sorry sight to passers-by.

Above: Clemenceau Avenue Residence. Balcony with supporting brackets decorated by bats or "Pien Fu" symbols, emblematic of happiness and longevity.

Right: Common to dry clothes from balconies.

