

Father Wallace, the Catholic Church of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, Jalan Serindek, Ipoh Garden, Ipoh and me. It was back in 1967 when I first met the tall, slim Catholic parish priest Father Wallace, he of the invariably smiling demeanour coupled with an almost palpable aura of kindness, perhaps the epitome of an ideal spiritual leader.

I had returned to my hometown Ipoh after an abortive stab at finding employment after tertiary studies in the federal capital, and managed to secure a job at Architects Incorporated. As it turned out, the principal Wong Soon Lee was the son of crusty ACS teacher Wong Hean Lin who taught art, and I thought that was provident.

Back in the mid 60s, Ipoh Garden, a 200 acre / 80 ha suburban housing scheme, was then being developed, and the firm I joined was one of many consultants for the project. Soon I was dishing out what are known in the jargon as "sketch plans" for the client's approval, though I had little say in the layouts.

I remember manually setting out from scratch what are called "perspective drawings" in the trade AKA "artist's impressions" to the lay person. These were inked monochrome drawings that would be used in sales brochures, enabling house buyers to visualize their purchases.

In time, I was introduced to Fr Wallace and since I was the only person (apart from the principal) who had any formal training in design, soon began drawing up the priest's vision for a church to replace the tiny old one in then Tambun Road (now Jalan Raja Di Hilir).

Fr Wallace initially wanted a handfan-shaped worship hall complete with a curved sanctuary: apparently that novel configuration in vogue 60s worldwide would offer an exemplary experience to his flock. Back then I knew next to nothing about the Roman Catholic faith but recorded the design brief as best I could.

For reasons best known to my Protestant principal, he declined direct involvement in the project but instructed that those drawings be sent to his former professor at Northern Polytechnic, London, a Maurice Hardstaff. Within weeks, there came a series of the most exquisitely hand-drawn proposals I had ever seen: each set being a refinement of the previous one.

The proposals were nowhere like Fr Wallace's fan, but had interlocking walls set in complex relationships; though there was a hint of a wedge in plan that could be interpreted as a counter proposal to the priest's original requirements.

Those were exciting yet demanding times for a newby like me, especially since the drawing office lacked air-conditioning and staffers depended on stand-fans to keep cool while working next to immense glass windows that opened out onto the hot concrete roof of the then Mercantile Bank building in Station Road (now Jalan Maharajalela). You can imagine how those fans blew all the sheets of large drawings helter-skelter!

But the imminent arrival of a consultant from London meant the installation of air-conditioning that my colleagues and I welcomed.

I did not know it at the time, but one of Ipoh Garden Sdn Bhd's associate companies needed a suitably experienced professional, and in due course Hardstaff turned up at Architects Incorporated, bringing in tow two of his then students: the rather good-looking Keith Horn and Norman Bigley Warren.

They brought along more dramatic drawings of the church to gawk at, and I recall Messrs Horn and Warren making painstaking revisions to them under Hardstaff's supervision.

But reality set in when he met Fr Wallace.

An architect's vision needs to be executed and it was clear that the London academic's flamboyant proposals would prove too expensive. Before long, a relatively pedestrian if very practical design was hammered out between the two protagonists.

"As a rule of thumb, any building project would need to take as long to plan as it is to build," Fr Wallace suggested, and it soon proved true.

But by this time, my principal Wong decided for reasons of his own to close his otherwise very viable practice, and his staffers were offered alternative employment in Ipoh.

I had the fortune (or misfortune, depending on what you had for your last meal) to continue work on the church together with a colleague under Hardstaff's supervision. We relocated to 2-storey mansion on Thomson Road, and had the luxury of a large lawn dominated by a majestic rain tree with branches that reached almost to the car porch. And since we were in the tree-lined suburbs, we had little need for air-conditioning!

Hardstaff who was about the priest's height and had light blue-grey eyes spaced less than an eye's width apart, (not to mention a generous waist and a lit pipe clamped in his large jaw), demanded the highest standards in the production of technical drawings but the two of us drafters were up to the task. Like the parish priest, he too possessed that invisible aura of benevolence, coupled with a robust yet subtle sense of humor, and once gave an instruction that could not be taken seriously. But since it was the next thing to be done that morning, I had little choice in the matter.

Fr Wallace would drop in occasionally and if any decision had to be made, would pace off on the floor the size of the space under consideration. He also had a habit of cupping his chin in hand, underscoring his concern and interest in his 'baby'. He was so keen on keeping the project moving that he would grumble *_sotto voce_* to me, how Hardstaff seemed to dawdle on some matter or other.

Perhaps he may have said that to me when I cycled to his quarters next to the tiny old church down in Tambun Road, as I recall that I was there a few times to deliver documents for him to endorse in his capacity as parish priest.

In due course, we obtained planning approval from the City Council and tenders were called for the erection of the design. Back then, I lived behind the post office, in what was then phase 2 of Ipoh Garden, and the church ground stood forlornly 600 m away, surrounded by expanses of bulldozed ground devoid of tree or grass. But it was ridiculously easy to get there during the construction phase, and my photog father was tasked with taking photos as work progressed.

There were the usual hiccups of course but the edifice was completed on schedule and within budget.

One evening I walked over to the site and clearly recall Hardstaff, with another of his London proteges, Andrew Rushton Green, standing in the red-carpeted main aisle of the hall, with all the lights switched on. They were taking in the floodlit sanctuary, dominated as it was by a crimson swath of carpet that ran up the back wall, with the silver lotus-shaped shroud over the tabernacle striking a dramatic contrast. The pristine white altar was fixed then, as was the gleaming stainless steel baptismal font, but the shrine, dedicated to Mother Mary, had yet to be defined. (Catholic churches take their names after their Saints.)

When Bishop Gregory Yong consecrated the building April 1972, I took a seat on the balcony and was most impressed by the vibrantly colored ceremonial robes and regalia installed for the occasion.

Many years afterward, I happened to drop in casually and even met Fr Wallace briefly. The lotus, inspired by those found in Ipoh's Buddhist temples, had been repainted gold, while the baptismal font was no longer in use.

Apparently the sanctuary would be the stage for mass baptisms Easter and so the concrete altar was replaced by a movable table.

More significantly: the ventilation trough running down the length of the roof had been sealed: the high-level air vents proposed by Hardstaff evidently let in rainwater, as did the large openings along the upper walls. The lower roofs had been extended, and the grille doors moved outward in tandem.

But the excellent acoustics afforded by a suitably insulated "cathedral" ceiling remain a reference for other large indoor spaces, at least in the city.

By this time the community hall with ancillary structures had been built sometime in the 80s, including a _Wisma Liguori_ named after the founder of the Redemptorist Order.

And so I have come full circle, having been baptized 2005 and integrating myself fruitfully with the parish.

As I write this revision, state of the art air-conditioning works have been installed, apparently in answer to the parishioners' pleas, together with some 200 photo-voltaic panels covering almost the entire roof of the community hall. Amid general concern worldwide about the effects of global warming and climate change, this must count as one of the more forward-looking decisions made by the administrators.

Footnotes:

1. The original name of the parish was "Catholic Church of Our Mother of Perpetual Succour" evidently simplified by Fr Wallace for the ordinary parishioner.
2. While the Malaysian gomen's policy of having only nationals in positions of authority meant the gradual disappearance over the years of such expats as the Australian parish priest and his colleagues..
3. Apparently a noted historian based in Singapore has reason to believe that the architectural seed could have been sown there for a new church to replace the charming but woefully overcrowded one in Ipoh. That could well be true since the Redemptorist Fathers have a headquarters in the republic. [needs confirmation]

But as far as I know, Wong Soon Lee, A.R.I.B.A., of Architects Incorporated Ipoh with consultant Maurice Hardstaff, F.R.I.B.A., were the only professionals involved.

References.

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Church of St. Alphonsus, Singapore

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Parish (Catholic Church)

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parish_\(Catholic_Church\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parish_(Catholic_Church))

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