

How construction technologies, materials, and labour made Macanese architecture.

# RUINS OF ST. PAUL'S [RUÍNAS DE SÃO PAULO]



## BUILDING

**Architect:** Carlo Spinola  
**Date:** 1602-1640  
**Location:** Calçada de São Paulo, Macau  
**Owner:** Society of Jesus (Jesuits) [formerly] Gov't of Macau; Cultural Affairs Bureau [currently]  
**Contractor:** Unknown [original unknown] Skilled Japanese & Chinese artisans [redesign/construction]

**Cost:** 30,000 taels of silver [originally]

**Function:** College [original] Historical landmark [currently]  
**Area:** Santo António parish, Macau  
**Current state:** Well maintained

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Ruins of St. Paul's in Macau stand as a powerful symbol of cultural fusion and historical resilience. Originally constructed in the early 17th century, the site was part of a grand Jesuit complex that included the Church of Mater Dei and St. Paul's College.

**1573:** Italian Jesuit Alessandro Valignano arrives in Macau. He later founds St. Paul's College, the first Western-style university in East Asia.

**1602:** Construction begins on the Church of Mater Dei, adjacent to the college. This grand Catholic church was part of a Jesuit complex that included the college and Mount Fortress.

**1637–1640:** The church's elaborate granite façade is built, showcasing Baroque architectural style with Asian influences.

**1835:** A fire destroys most of the church and college buildings, leaving only the stone façade and a few foundations. This event marks the transformation of the site into "The Ruins of St. Paul's".

**1995:** Restoration efforts are undertaken to preserve the façade and archaeological remains, led by the Macau Cultural Bureau.

## MATERIALS & SYSTEMS

- MATERIALS USED [THEN AND NOW]

Granite: The grand façade was built from granite blocks, chosen for durability and visual impact.

Wood: Interior structures and roofing were made of wood, which unfortunately contributed to the fire.

Lime Mortar: Used as a binding agent in masonry, typical of European construction at the time.

Plaster and Stucco: Decorative elements and interior finishes may have included lime-based plaster.

Gold Leaf and Paint: For religious iconography and embellishments, especially within the church.

- CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES

Baroque Architectural Style: The façade reflects Italian Baroque influences, with Corinthian columns, intricate carvings, and layered symbolism.

Jesuit Engineering: The Jesuits brought European construction methods, including stone carving and vaulting techniques.

Chinese Labor and Craftsmanship: Local artisans and laborers contributed significantly, blending European design with Chinese building practices.

Tiered Façade Design: The five-level façade was built to resemble a retablo (a decorative altar screen), with niches for statues and symbolic carvings.

## WORKERS & SKILLS

- TYPES

Jesuit Missionaries and Architects: A cross-cultural coordination of designers, supervisors, and symbolic planners with Baroque architecture skills and religious iconography. Notable figures are Carlo Spinola (architect), and Alessandro Valignano (founder and strategist)

Chinese Craftsmen: Skills and roles were stone carving, masonry, woodwork, and decorative detailing

Japanese Christian Artisans: Responsibilities were lacquer and metalwork, carpentry, and religious art, lacquer and metal techniques. Many were refugees from Japan's anti-Christian persecutions.

Laborers and Porters: Provided construction support by transporting granite blocks, mixing mortar, and site preparations. They were likely local recruits from surrounding villages, or Jesuit-supported communities.

- FORMING

Jesuit-Led Coordination: Jesuits acted as project managers, combining European architectural vision with local execution. They recruited skilled workers through missionary networks and local Christian converts.

Cultural Integration: Teams were often multilingual and multi-ethnic. Jesuits trained local artisans in European techniques while adapting to local materials and styles.





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