

Asian Architecture in The New Millennium - A Postmodern Imagery

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Introduction

Decades of committed interest in Asian architecture and urbanism and their rapidly changing conditions have caused me in recent years to become acutely aware of the need to actively participate in contemporary cultural discourses on the larger issues of the postmodern, glocality and social justice [1], particularly in their applications to countries in the Asian region. With conscious effort, I have since broadened my theoretical knowledge in order to continuously develop, enforce and reformulate my ideas, through extensive reading and frequent intellectual communication, particularly with scholars outside my own professional discipline of architecture and urbanism.

Until recently, discourses in architecture and urbanism have been totally dominated by and have operated within Western modernist agenda, notwithstanding that effective contestation has made impressive progress in many disciplines from geography to the social sciences. It is in this context that I wish to share with you my critical observations on three dynamically inter-related issues, and their impact and influences upon Asian architecture and urbanism. The issues are (1) Eurocentric Modernity (2) Jencks's Postmodernism and (3) Spaces of (Post) modernity. This analysis is done in the spirit of Saskia Sassen's statement that "epochs of transition such as this we live in demand taking theoretical risks [2]."

Eurocentric Modernity

Modernity is understood in the West as the process of historical transformation that has taken place in Europe and later in the United States. They include the concepts of freedom, human rights and individuality as well as democracy and the rule of law. The West

has experienced many conflicts and much pain in realizing its modernist democratic systems. However, its encounters with civilizations of different religions and value systems often resulted in disastrous and tragic consequences [3]. It is therefore important to put on record that the democratic applications of modernity in the West were only practiced within the boundaries of their nationstates, and did not apply in any effective manner to the non-western *Other*.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the entire South and East Asia with the exception of Japan and Thailand were colonized or semicolonized (as in China and other protectorate states). It is vitally important to recognize that "colonization does not simply involve political and economic coercion, but also ideological and cultural imposition [4]." In the colonies, important architectural traditions had been debased and re-interpreted in the image of the colonial powers. "In the unequal architectural encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, the lineage of Western architectural theory governs the limit for all possible architectural identifications [5]." Furthermore colonial aesthetic dominance in the realm of civic projects, urban planning and public spaces has greatly distorted the visual images of the Asian urban environment and appreciation of our own past, well beyond the end of colonial rule.

The main characteristics and aspirations of the early Modern Movement in architecture clearly evolved from the dynamic period of art creation based firmly on European creative orientation as well as stylistic and aesthetic traditions. Before World War Two, modernism was little more than a series of experiments being carried out in the colonies, particularly by the younger generation of Western architects. After decades of decolonization, the dominance and exclusivity of Eurocentric modernity has continued unabated. Besides Japan, non-Western architecture

is still supposed to remain as the *other* in global discourse, even if it was being increasingly being presented internationally. Hassan Fathy, Geoffrey Bawa, Charles Correa and many others would perhaps not be recognized internationally today without the active and successful interventions of the Aga Khan Foundation's architectural programmes [6]. However, many controversial issues have remained. They include the unequal relationship between centre and periphery [7], modernity of the *other* [8] as well as concepts of rights and justice.

Since the early sixties, many critics have already lamented the great blight of inhumane and rigid modernist planning, which has resulted in dullness, boredom and the sterile environment of cities. In subsequent decades, US dominated-capitalism and globalization exploited and hijacked the modernist vision of skyscrapers, mega-structures and major highways particularly in rapidly developing economies. Their footprints and corpses are littered everywhere. Furthermore, this planning approach is also widely adopted in East Asia, where the dimension of ethics and social responsibility of the Modern Movement is conveniently put aside. Profits and greed reign supreme. Applications of modernist inspired master plans with rigid zoning and usage control etc often become effective tools for business and political cronies to make their enormous fortunes.

Asian intellectuals-particularly those educated in the West are often unable to divorce themselves from the influences of Western thought, social and cultural theories and lifestyles. To interpret non-Western realities, it is essential for Asian intellectuals to consciously challenge the voices behind the theories, if not the theories themselves. It is also important to radically and continuously reread the texts, because their presentation, meaning and relevance are often predetermined by the dominant

culture and the powerful at different historical moments. One example is the theory of *Critical Regionalism*. I fully agree with John Clammer that we need to "listen not only to the texts, but also to both the voices from the field and those from other disciplines... where similar issues are being raised and are often rooted in harsh reality [9]."

Jenck's Postmodernism

Richard Ingersoll, a critic and architectural historian wrote: "The social upheavals of the 1960s, including civil rights conflicts, student protests and the anti-Vietnam war movement, had a significant impact on the culture of architecture. On one hand International Style and Urban Renewal were condemned for their insensitive scale and ruthless destruction of communities, while the New Brutalist style was vilified for its wasteful formalism [10]." It is in this context that Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown broadened the debate with their book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), the New York Five exhibited and challenged the uninspiring functionalist architecture [11] and the British architectural historian Charles Jencks symbolically declared the death of modernism with the demolition of the *Pruitt-Igoe* housing development in St. Louis on 15 July 1972. Collectively, they were successful innovative promoters of postmodernism in architecture. However, I must agree with David Harvey that "social conditions in *Pruitt-Igoe*-that great symbol of modernist failure-were much more at the heart of the problem than pure architectural form [12]."

The architectural approach offered by Jencks's postmodernism did indeed seduce many architects as it provided a sense of liberation against the formalism and austerity as well as the aesthetically over-coded design process and the rationality of

modernism. For many years, postmodern theories and projects were given considerable prominence in architectural discourses. The early heroic projects with image-making pseudo-historicism were done with considerable seriousness. However, most of later projects deteriorated into ludicrous themeparkism. Fortunately, these stylistic exercises failed to attract widespread serious professional and academic support outside the USA. Unfortunately, great damage is continuously being done in the name of postmodern architecture. With increasingly fetishistic and themeparkish interpretations, countless visually offensive and tasteless buildings of all scales and usages are being built. They are being occupied and sold to the gullible public everywhere. At the same time, this has provided a great opportunity for the neo-conservatives in the US and elsewhere to embrace stylistic revival in the more wealthy gated communities.

For decades, the public and even the academics were confused. The expression of postmodernism in architecture did little justice to the essence of postmodernity, which in fact allows a broader space for interpretation. It was adopted as nothing more than a superficial stylistic design tool. Scholars like Fredric Jameson, attempted and in my opinion failed to connect theories and major projects of postmodern architecture—such as John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel in LA—to the broader agenda and discourses of postmodernity [13]. The architecture of postmodernity comprised only ironic expressions of various historical styles or visual gymnastics of little consequence rather than aesthetic expressions for the complex essence of the postmodern. Let me quote Michael Dear: "The burgeoning postmodern architecture was disturbingly divorced from any broad philosophical underpinnings, taking the form of an apparently random cannibalizing of existing architectural archetypes, and combining them into an

ironic collage (or pastiche) of previous styles. Called "memory architecture" by its detractors, postmodernism's obituary was published embarrassingly soon after its birth, testimony to the vacuousness of treating it solely as a matter of aesthetics [14]." This disembodied interpretation of architectural postmodernism does great disservice to the understanding of the pluralistic, tolerant and humane philosophy of the postmodern.

Finally, the demise of Jencks' postmodernism has provided new intellectual spaces for the repositioning of those, particularly within Europe, who are out of the Eurocentric mainstream—such as Second-modernism, Hyper-modernism and Super-modernism—in the context of the increasingly important emerging discourses on architecture and urbanism of (post) modernity.

Spaces of (Post) modernity

Spaces of (post) modernity are all embracing and multi-conceptual—from the intellectual, spiritual, artistic, and cultural to the physical and virtual. The word (post) modernity clearly signals the complex relational fluidity, hybridity and de-territorisation between modernity and postmodernity. The postmodern is a global cultural phenomenon. Its dynamism and distinctiveness are glocalised and all embracing. Notwithstanding the intellectual and theoretical demise of modernism, modernism has not diminished its incredible omnipresent influence. On the other hand, the postmodern is everywhere, particularly in the arts, lifestyles and changing values of the younger generation. However, the exciting and rapidly changing conditions of the contemporary, together with the inclusion of progressive and enlightened interpretations of ethics and social justice, have yet to celebrate their postmodern dreams.

It is crucial to recognize the importance of spaces of indeterminacy [15]. They are in-between spaces—left behind from the existing or left over from new developments. Their characteristics are pluralistic, fuzzy, complex and chaotic. To quote John Philips:

“These spaces emerge whenever an urban area of property falls out of economic favour. With dilapidation comes a level of chaotic freedom, which gives these spaces the flexibility to withstand rapid changes in use ... By focusing on such spaces Lim can address issues of social justice outside the paradigms and rhetoric of technological progress [16].” In similar spirit, Chang Yung Ho’s *Micro-Urbanism* contested the necessity of tabula rasa—complete destruction in the course of urban transformation. Instead, he prefers to “scrutinize the real demands of the changing reality of urban life itself and redesign the organizational order of the old areas in order to inject them with new vitality [17].”

To meet the incredible challenges of the complex world of glocality and rapid development of information technology, contemporary architecture shares many similar characteristics with the wider art communities. According to Hou Hanru, the peripheric avant-garde, the non-conformist outsiders and the non-western migrant art community in Paris—what he calls *exile*—are a dynamic artistic force outside the Eurocentric mainstream which has effectively contributed towards the fight against the worldwide tendency of neutralizing *criticality* [18]. Globally, particularly in the Asian rapidly developing economies, the population today is going through a serious identity crisis and a process of de-identification or general deterritorialisation. According to Arjun Appadurai: “There is an urgent need to focus on the cultural dynamics of what is now called deterritorialization ...

The loosening of the holds between people, wealth, and territories fundamentally alters the basis of cultural reproduction [19].” However, notwithstanding the impact of globality and the increasing blurring of economic, social and cultural boundaries, territories of nation-states are still very real and their interest and actions must be reckoned with. Furthermore, in contesting the universality of global capitalism, the embeddedness of appropriate localism and their peculiarities function as essential anchors, while ethics and social justice must be recognized.

Compared to art production, the larger scale and the complexities of architecture offer greater possibilities as well as more constraints. Their implementations are increasingly interlaced into the rapidly changing urban fabric as well as cultures, values and lifestyles with local peculiarities. In Asian cities undergoing rapid economic development and structural changes, radical and unprecedented transformations are creating an innovative and fantastic vision for a new model of urbanism [20]. The architectural and urban expressions are complex, pluralistic, uncoordinated and chaotic. They are beyond the accepted stylistic and aesthetic norms of modernism. For example, the huge elevated expressway interchanges in Shanghai may generate a sense of pride in their dramatic urban forms or of shame in the brutal destruction of the existing environment [21]. These architectural and urban statements are in the realm of the unexpected, out-of-the box and sometimes beyond the cutting edge. Their sustainabilities are uncertain and many will fail. However, they cannot be easily perceived based on the cyclical Eastern philosophies and their relativities or Western uni-linear conception of continuous progress. Like *yin* and *yang*, they are neither good nor bad, utopian nor dystopian. Let me quote Umberto Eco: “Infinite progress does not exist, nor is there, as traditionalists wish to believe,

a circle which we will for ever travel round and round. We are faced with spiral shapes or explosions [22].” Perhaps, we should pause to carefully examine the wisdom of this controversial statement.

Conclusion

In the last few decades, Asian architects are increasingly involved in debating and searching for an identity with distinctive Asian-ness and local peculiarities. The importance of historical and environmental conservation is now better understood. Examples include the incredibly sensitive conservation of Cheong Fatt Sze Mansion by Laurence Loh (Malaysia) as well as the numerous writings and adaptive reuse project of Xin Tian Di by Luo Xiaowei (China) [23].

In the meantime, contemporary vernacular has now been increasingly accepted as an effective urban instrument towards the development of local cultural anchorage particularly during periods of rapid economic development and indiscriminate urban destruction. Examples include the numerous writings of committed advocates like Wu Liangyong (China) and William Lim (Singapore) as well as demonstrative projects such as Integrated rehabilitation of courtyard houses by Wu and Vidhan Bhavan, State Assembly—an incredibly successful blending of localization and the contemporary—by Charles Correa (India) [24].

In 1988, Thai architect Sumet Jumsai, who designed the Bank of Asia headquarters in the form of a robot, wrote a controversial book. His thesis was that the early Asian settlements could have been generated by aquatic instinct and tradition. In the process, he contested that the cultures of South East Asian region were only a by-product of Indian and Chinese cultural influences [25]. His proposition was

also supported by the author's article Southeast Asia: Nowhere to Somewhere and Beyond, where Clarence Aasen was quoted: “Most important, and increasingly explored and accepted, is the possibility that there have been significant indigenous underpinnings for their cultural developments: that they were not entirely, or even primarily, derivative, and that the foreign factors should be viewed less as ‘influences’ and more as ‘ex-changes’ [26].”

In response to the challenges of rapid economic development together with the forceful introduction of the visually standardized and boring modernist skyscrapers, Ken Yeang of Malaysia [27] and Tay Kheng Soon of Singapore [28] have extensively and successfully theorized a bioclimatic approach to urban design and their manifestations in tropical skyscrapers. However, Abidin Kusno has critically examined at some length this architectural phenomenon from a broader postcolonial cultural perspective. “By defining the tropical skyscrapers as a distinctive structure of the region ... all other levels of difference have to be suppressed to give way to the distinctiveness of climate as culture.” He further states in his conclusion: “To this extent, the architecture of these Southeast Asian architects has tended to be incorporated into, and adapted for, the order of the world-economy, rather than to provide a site to interrogate it [29].” At the same time, others have focused on the theories and practices relating to critical regionalism, tropicality and contemporary vernacular. Their appropriate applications are still being hotly contested. Therefore it is interesting that this sort of hybridized fusion, together with fetishistic applications of selected heritage elements have created architectural myths of tropical paradises, which are surprisingly well suited for adaptations to resort hotels everywhere.

In my opinion, more challenging and exciting is the recent phenomena where Asian architecture and urbanism have with great speed generated incredibly complex urban images and structural dislocation beyond the broadest agenda and scope of modernism. This is particularly evident in China and countries in the East Asian region. To give a lecture on Asian Architecture today using a rational and analytical format of modernism is therefore an impossible task. In this lecture, I attempt to illustrate numerous highly fragmented and pluralistic design approaches. They are being implemented often with disjunctive flows, without any connection to one another nor with any overall direction. The selected projects range from product design to urban visions and they are presented in a chaotic organized manner of a postmodern imagery. This imagery in the context of the present global processes of the arts, architecture and urbanism is something critical, dynamic, exciting and disturbing. Though they are firmly anchored in local peculiarities, this disjointing postmodern imagery is the natural by-product of de-identification and deterritorialisation. It is in this context that I include a visual presentation of the complex and fragmented multidirectional postmodern imagery of Asian architecture in the new millennium. With limited time for presentation, I have made a selection from available materials to illustrate a broad-range of ideas.

A Postmodern Imagery of Asian Architecture in The New Millennium

1. GEOFFERY BAWA, Sri Lanka

Geoffrey Bawa is Sri Lanka's most prolific and influential architect. His work has had tremendous impact upon architecture throughout Asia and is unanimously acclaimed by connoisseurs of architecture worldwide. His attention to landscape and vegetation reveals the intense devotion he has for composing his architecture in an intimate relationship with nature-the crucial setting for his architecture. His sensitivity to environment is reflected in the careful attention accorded to the sequencing of space, and creation of vistas, courtyards, and walkways, as well as his use of materials and treatment of details.



Figure 1 St Bridget's Montessori School Colombo, 1964.



Figure 2 New Parliament Complex Kotte, Sri Lanka, 1982.



Figure 3 Kandalama Hotel Dambulla, Sri Lanka, 1994.

2. CHARLES CORREA, India

Charles Correa is an Indian architect, planner, activist, and theoretician who studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the University of Michigan. Correa is known for the wide range of his architectural work in India and for his works on urbanisation and low-cost shelter in the Third World, which he articulated in his 1985 publication, "The New Landscape". His architectural designs have been internationally acclaimed and he has received many awards including the Royal Institute of British Architects Gold Medal in 1984, the Indian Institute of Architects Gold Medal in 1987, the International Union of Architects Gold Medal in 1990, and the Praemium Imperiale for Architecture from the Japan Art Association in 1994.



Figure 4 Vidhan Bhavan Bhopal, India, 1996.



Figure 5 Vidhan Bhavan Bhopal, India, 1996.



Figure 6 Vidhan Bhavan Bhopal, India, 1996.

3. CHANG YUNG HO, China

Chang Yung Ho is a leading architect from China. After studying and teaching in the US for 15 years, he went back to his native Beijing to establish its first private architecture firm, Atelier FCJZ (“Fei Chang Jian Zhu” or unusual architecture), in the early 1990s. In the unprecedented process of rapid and radical

modernization and urbanization in China, the questions of international influence and Chinese tradition, as well as globalization and local specificity, have become the main issues in architectural and artistic debate and practice.



Figure 7 Urbanizing Bamboo 7th Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2000.

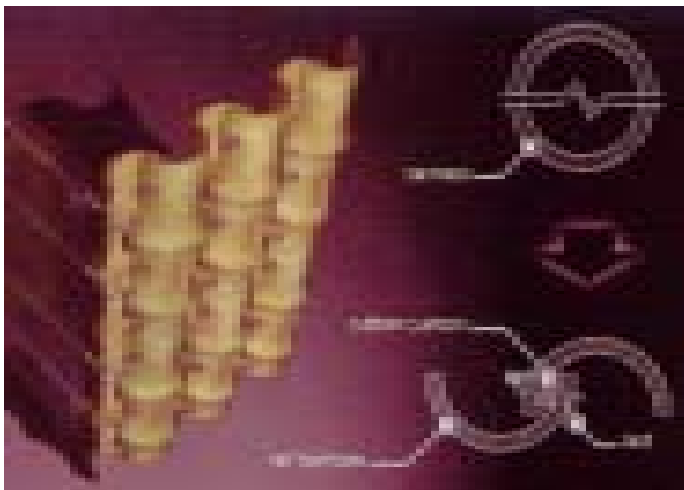


Figure 8 Urbanizing Bamboo 7th Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2000.

This work was demonstrating what bamboo actually can do in terms of ways of interpretation in the context of contemporary architecture.



Figure 9 Urbanizing Bamboo 7th Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2000.



Figure 10 Split House Commune by the Great Wall, Beijing, China, 1996.

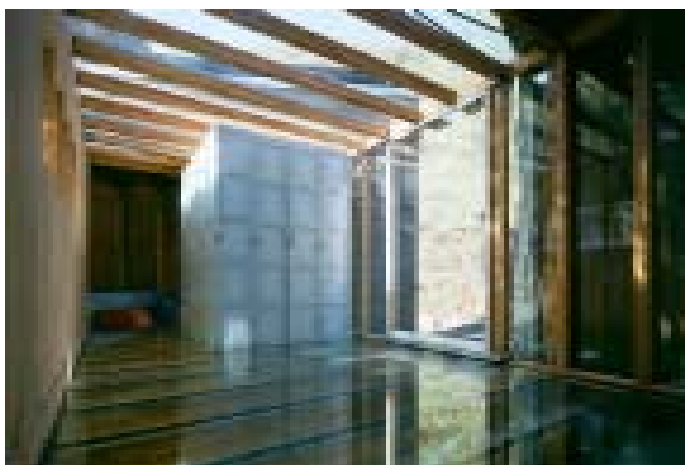


Figure 11 Split House Commune by the Great Wall, Beijing, China, 1996.

4. DONALD BATES, Australia

Donald Bates received his bachelor degree from the University of Houston in 1978. In 1980 he undertook a Masters degree at the Cranbrook Academy of Art under the leadership of architect Daniel Libeskind. He acted as associate architect to Libeskind on both the Berlin: City Edge competition entry, as well as the extension to the Berlin Museum competition entry

(now referred to as the Jewish Museum). He has taught at the Architectural Association (1983–89, 93–95) and founded the independent architectural school, the Laboratory of Primary Studies in Architecture (LoPSiA) in 1990, operating in Paris and at the Le Corbusier Unite d'habitation at Briey-en-Forêt.



Figure 12 Federation Square, Melbourne, Australia, 2002.



Figure 13 Federation Square, Melbourne, Australia, 2002.



Figure 14 Federation Square, Melbourne, Australia, 2002.

Donald Bates won this international competition. It is a very incredible building, highly fragmented, and many statements put together. It is one of the buildings that cannot be judged by looking at the picture. It is needed to walk through, and to experience.

5. WILLIAM LIM, Singapore



Figure 15 Marine Parade Community Centre, Singapore, 2000.



Figure 16 Marine Parade Community Centre, Singapore, 2000.



Figure 17 Marine Parade Community Centre, Singapore, 2000.



Figure 18 Marine Parade Community Centre, Singapore, 2000.

6. WILLIAM LIM & TANG GUAN BEE

Arguably the most avant-garde architect of his time, **Tang Guan Bee** is Principal Architect of TANGGUANBEE ARCHITECTS. His firm has won many awards including the first prize in the Eco-Building Architectural Design Competition, the SIA Design Award, and ICI-SIA Colour Award (Gold). He has

contributed significantly to the Department of Architecture of National University of Singapore as external examiner and visiting critic, and served as member on the Board of Architects and council member of Singapore Institute of Architects.



Figure 19 Gallery Evason Hotel, Singapore, 2001.



Figure 20 Gallery Evason Hotel, Singapore, 2001.



Figure 21 Gallery Evason Hotel, Singapore, 2001.

7. KANIKA RATANAPRIDAKUL, Thailand

Kanika Ratanapridakul was born 1962 in Thailand. She graduated with a Masters of Architecture in 1991 at SCI-Arc. She is part-time Instructor at King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thonburi (1996-present) and lecturer and critic at various universities

(Chulalongkorn University, Silpakorn University, King Mongkut's University of Technology, Ladkrabang, Rangsit University, ABAC, Bangkok University, Chiangmai University, Khon Kaen University and Wongchaowalitkul University).



Figure 22 House U3, Bangkok, Thailand, 1997.



Figure 23 House U3, Bangkok, Thailand, 1997.

UTOPIA / DYSTOPIA?



Figure 24 Expressway Shanghai, China, Presentday



Figure 25 Expressway Shanghai, China, Presentday



Figure 26

A poster submitted for the exhibition theme *utopia*. The poster is called *utopia – dystopia: have you been to Shanghai?* All we see in Shanghai are expressway and this is the future – *utopia / dystopia* - the architecture of today and tomorrow. The question of the modernist is the question of undefinable, of chaos, of disordered; and it depends on how we perceive it whether this is exciting or distressing.

Shanghaied [sha[ng]-'hi-ed] was a cultural term used to describe how sailors were put by force or threat of force into or as if into a place of detention. Today however, that phrase must take on a new meaning altogether.

The intersection of Yan'An Grade Crossing presents a huge infrastructural spectacle. Vehicles zoom by on ribbed-bar concrete clouds 10 meters above your head. On the ground, waves upon waves of buses bearing mandarin advertisements of utopic idioms whiz past. Throngs of people, each making individual fashion statements flood in and out of subway entrances, and onto the ringed pedestrian walkways under the expressways. At night, the blue-lit expressways become more arresting, more seductive. From a distance, a forest of highrise buildings crowned with gothic themeparkish rooftops glower with radiance.

Shanghai demonstrates once again its continual challenge of traditional definitions of utopia and dystopia. It's daredevil, no-holds-barred spirit embraces an urban aesthetic that turns the predictable norms of modernism on its head.

Does the celebration of this multi-layered vehicular interchange against you? Would you have been seduced to appreciate the citizen's zealous lust for an intoxicating potpourri of noise, lights movement speed and density?

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