

Architecture and Globality

The 80th year of the Bauhaus must be an appropriate occasion for celebration as well as for critical self-examination. Perhaps, it is also the moment for the institution to formulate dynamic new directions to meet the challenge of the new millennium. For an outsider from Asia, the Bauhaus must have been, during those glorious interwar years, an incredible educational institution for the immensely productive and creative energy of the *avant-garde* art community of Europe. It challenged the traditional aesthetic of the establishment. It explored radically different new frontiers, including the Brave New World of Modern Architecture. It generated an architecture which was technically inspired, aggressive, Euro-centric and confident. The urbanism of its pioneers, particularly Le Corbusier, with its futuristic images and rational analysis, continued to inspire generations of architects and urbanists, notwithstanding the humanistic concerns of critics like Mumford and later more frequently by Jacobs and others. However, it is interesting to note that Le Corbusier himself had consciously deviated from his own design principles during his later years, particularly in the Capital Complex at Chandigarh.¹

These Modernist ideas about cities have also been implemented in many developing economies. The best examples are Chandigarh, Brasilia² and Singapore. With the imposition of usage separation, motorways criss-crossing downtown and planning orderliness, the usual chaos and fuzziness as well as the unexpected and surprises are lost. This has subsequently increased the serious spatial income segregation in the poor countries arising from the elimination or non-provision of fringe spaces for the poor and marginalized in the downtown areas. This has resulted in extensive squatter settlements located at the urban outskirts, often out-of-sight and unprovided for even in basic services.

The early years of globalization after World War II by us companies had soon resulted in the standard styling of modernism by corporate architectural practices to serve their new masters. This was in line with the prevalent Modernist doctrine which considered that the mass produced uniform object was the most efficient and socially beneficial method of production.

In the late sixties, the Post-Modernists in architecture consciously introduced *historicism*, *localism* and *pluralism* – challenges to the de-humanizing and soulless International Style. In my opinion, its manifestation was based on or closely related to three factors:

- the existentialism of Sartre and Camus – widely popular during the fifties with the intellectuals in the American east-coast academic community,
- the American cultural values and lifestyle revolution from Blacks, women and gays in the sixties, and
- the philosophers of Post-Modernity from Derrida to Foucault.

However, the present us style globalization is totally ruthless in the pursuit of generating wealth. The buzzwords are take-overs, mergers and downsizing. It is clearly elitist and anti-welfare. Increasing income disparity within and among countries is an unavoidable result of its successful application. The inherent characteristic of impermanence extends beyond family relationships and job insecurity to culture, values and lifestyles. Even urban landscape becomes inherently impermanent, as continuous redevelopment is the driving force of this late capitalism. History and visual memories have no meaning, as those can always be re-invented by reconstruction and theme-parkism. American architectural theorist Michael Sorkin quoted an advertisement leaflet for an American theme park which said: "If you want to see Europe, take a vacation to Virginia ... its all the fun of old Europe... but a lot closer."³

In the meantime, the pace of globalization increases with the rapid development and application of information technology. To survive in this age of forced universality, the stylization of the various isms of architecture appear inevitable. Corporate towers are introduced as symbols of wealth and power. Density of development increases and streets are widened correspondingly. In many urban centres of Asian emerging economies, mega-towers are now being built. They are uneconomical and do not contribute to the vitality and dynamism of urbanity. In fact, they are anti-urban and destructive to vibrant urban life.

Notwithstanding the heroic efforts by many individual architects to keep alive the rebellious and radical spirit of the *avant-garde* of post-modernity and deconstructivism, these have not been spared by the global forces of *universality* and *commodification*. It is therefore not surprising that Frampton recently described the present state of Western architecture as one which "largely oscillates between high-tech instrumentality and the spectacular."⁴

There are now many theories of resistance; in particular, I refer to the impressive Manuel Castell's trilogy on *The Information Age*. He argued convincingly on the necessity to provide viable alternatives in the effective use of the information technology.⁵ David Harvey elevated the discourse on environmental justice to an a priori criterion in assessing the effectiveness of urban actions.⁶ Fredric Jameson identified the adverse impact of commodification in the present mode of globality.⁷ Even George Soros⁸ and Paul Krugman⁹ have recommended the need for constraints in the excessive free flow of funds. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad repeatedly questioned the negative roles of Western financial institutions.¹⁰ A recent book, *False Dawn*, by an English academic critically examined the impact of the present globalization in different countries.¹¹ The reduction of welfare in Europe and the increasing job insecurity in Japan are presently major

sources of resistance. The impact on unemployment by rapidly de-nationalizing state industries, and the incredible magnitude of internal migration to the major cities are at present serious concerns of China. The forces of resistance have recently begun to surface in many countries of the East Asian region, as the worst of the economic crisis appears to be over.

It is in this context that we must accept the inevitability of rapid globalization. However, its characteristics may yet become more responsive to people's needs and social justice. It is possible to identify important areas of active interactions between architecture, urbanism and globality. They are

- memories and urban spaces,
- urbanism and environmental justice and
- architecture and Asian emerging economies.

Memories and Urban Places¹²

Cities have enormously complex communal histories and memories. They are the sites of many conflicting forces of money, power and energy stretching across the various social, political and economic spheres. Each city is unique and evokes different feelings in its residents and visitors. Each city is attractive to individuals in different moods and at different times of their lives. Fuzziness, surprises and the unexpected are essential ingredients in generating a memorable identity.

When time is equated with money, and you have so little time, memories are often seen as superfluous, nostalgic and irrelevant. Certainly, memories by their nature are abstract and life is full of absurdity, tension and contradiction. Some die along with the people who remembered them. Sometimes, memories change unconsciously over time as people remember differently, for political or cultural reasons. The different layering of memories reflects different interests, people and time periods. These differences surface as a series of power struggles that determine, in the end, whose histories, memories and heritage are preserved.

The politics of memory, involving active forgetting and deliberate inventing, create genuine problems for historians and the society in general. Official history tends to reflect what the rich and powerful have chosen to remember. In developing economies, memories of the poor and marginalized can often be seen as counter-productive to the quest of attaining a Western-based modernity. While versions of history other than the official version are outdated, subsumed or repressed, they are not always erased from the collective memory. Furthermore, in a contemporary democratic society, pluralism and tolerance will ensure the survival of alternatives.

An accomplice of the simplification and distortion of collective memories is commodification. The main reason behind this commodification of place

and culture is clearly the force of globalization. In the process, differences are levelled to a common denominator so as to operate competitively in this global market.¹³ Theme parks and Disneyland-like projects are created essentially for commercial purposes. Theme park industry sells seductive images and concocted experiences. The uniqueness of any locality is negated, because it can always be replicated anytime, anywhere. The greatest worry is not that the caricatures appear real, but that the caricatures totally replace the real. However, memories of the people cannot be quantified and assigned an exchange value. As such, the loss of place and the proliferation of theme parks in our urban landscape must be contested.

Urbanism and Environmental Justice

Policy-makers and many intellectuals in their discourse on globalization and human rights often conveniently omit issues relating to environmental and social justice as well as basic needs of food, health and education in the less developed economies. David Harvey argues "...that social justice is impossible without environmental justice (and vice versa)."¹⁴ He also quotes the statement that "Environmental philosophy and decision making has often failed to address the justice question of who gets help and who does not; who can afford help and who cannot."¹⁵

Globality and information technology have generated unprecedented pace of change and serious disruption of the prevailing social contracts everywhere. Urban societies in developed countries are experiencing increasingly stressful conditions such as crime, drugs and homelessness. In Asian emerging economies, population explosion has further created unacceptable burden on existing urban infrastructure. Rapid economic development has resulted in massive new construction and rapid destruction of existing structures as well as traffic chaos and excessive pollution. Furthermore, in-migration from rural hinterland to urban centres has created a huge underclass of marginalized people. This phenomenon is now one of the most serious problems confronting China today. With faster economic development, similar conditions will soon occur in India and other densely populated poor countries. With changing values, lifestyles and expectations as well as the implications of home-based and self-employment, the present standard quantitative criteria to measure the relative success of urbanity is no longer enough. To identify the quality of life and happiness of the citizenry, a more socially-oriented and value-loaded method should be considered. Environmental justice is one such viable option.

Using the criterion of environmental justice, we need to re-assess existing Master Plans, zoning and planning regulations and the provisions for housing,

transportation and other public amenities. For example, in major urban centres, can we justify the allocation of land for golf courses instead of public parks and recreational facilities, or to increase the width of main roads for additional car-lanes instead of providing bicycle paths and wider pedestrian walkways?

A great public transport system must go beyond providing excellent infrastructure. A holistic assessment should be based on affordable cost and personal mobility as well as travel time and time-based availability for everyone, particularly the young, the old and the handicapped. The high residential prices in major urban centres have often neutralized the qualitative improvement in living conditions of the middle-income families. It is clearly the responsibility of the authorities to ensure the delivery of affordable housing by providing adequate supply of land and enforcing the necessary regulatory devices.

Urban land must be recognized as an essential community resource. How land is allocated, for what purpose and for whose benefits are vital policy issues. When land is made available, even the very poor can always provide shelters for themselves. There is no excuse for either the widespread homelessness in affluent countries or the disgraceful squatter settlements in developing countries. In the small island-states of Singapore and Hong Kong, land sales and incremental development taxes generate very substantial revenue. However, authorities everywhere continue to assign land and development rights at very favourable terms for favoured projects and to the powerful and well-connected individuals.

Architecture and Asian Emerging Economies

In Asia, only two countries – Japan and India – have long traditions in the development of Modern Architecture. The architecture of Japan has achieved international status for many decades. Corb's enormous influence in India has inspired many to produce significant architecture and to contribute towards the international discourse of Modernism and beyond. However, the architectural development in other Asian countries has in recent decades been greatly disadvantaged by their own historical and colonial legacies as well as the imposed or even self-generated post-colonial dependency. In many Asian emerging economies, the drive to be modern, Westernized and globalized has wide aesthetic and cultural implications. In architecture, it often means the marginalization of efforts by local architects to achieve their own identities. The authorities and even many in the professions as well as local architectural publications are often more than willing to endorse the currently fashionable stylistic interpretations by foreign corporate architects in response to the perceived ideological and visual correctness in the production of urban images of globality.

Speed greed and density is probably an accurate summing up of the rapid development being carried out in the major urban centres of the emerging economies in the East Asian region. The impact of these factors has created historically unprecedented conditions that are totally different from what has been experienced in Western countries. Perhaps, Asian cities are still able to maintain their attractiveness and dynamism because of their chaotic order, pluralistic richness and unintended complexity.¹⁶

In the meantime, a recent publication entitled *Contemporary Vernacular* illustrates efforts by Asian architects to interpret and modernize the vernacular in the context of developing regional identities.¹⁷ Furthermore, in the midst of the chaotic urban explosion and much architectural idiosyncrasies, we can identify radical urban innovations in the Asian region, such as the extensive second-level pedestrian connection system in downtown Hong Kong and regulating urban development with the annual land sale in Singapore as well as the emergence of many Asian architects, whose quality of work has recently been described by Kenneth Frampton as "equal to the best being produced anywhere."¹⁸

Many Asian countries are presently experiencing a protracted, step-by-step battle with Modernity. The most painful is in Indonesia today. In the process of transformation, these countries must painfully confront, re-construct and even re-invent their past – both the distorted colonial legacies and their recent past. Furthermore, with the different historical and cultural traditions, it is inevitable that their transformation to and perceptions of Modernity will have distinctive Asian characteristics.¹⁹ This must have inevitable impact in the development of new directions in Asian architecture and urbanism.

Conclusion

International competition in information technology should ensure the need to maximize creative opportunities. Indeed, a truly global economy is being created by the worldwide spread and rapid development of technology and not by the free market and flow of funds. An open, pluralistic and tolerant environment and the rebellious spirit as well as the whole package of Post-Modern values, including even idiosyncrasies, must be tolerated if not encouraged. These conditions are essential to generate the energy for creativity and to provide a suitable environment for the avant-garde. Open and critical discourse cannot be confined within academic institutions and the four walls of research laboratories.

However, it must be recognized that architecture has often been manipulated by and is an effective instrument of the rich and powerful. In fact, the most liberating projects of the avant-garde are often done in the service of the privileged. Irrespective of styles or forms, the built environment does not

inherently oppress or liberate. It is people who oppress people, not forms or places. Indeed, it is often difficult for architects to accept the limited influence of their work in participating in the debate and improvement of the human condition. However, spaces and buildings do become available at certain moments as tools and media of oppression or of liberation. Architecture can therefore still contribute towards and facilitate an increasingly tolerant, pluralistic, fuzzy and complex urbanity and a richer and better quality of life for all.

Furthermore, the strength of resistance in architecture is inherent in the essence and philosophy of Post-Modernity. Let me quote from a recent article entitled Revolution: "If there is one certainty in the Post-Modern perception of architecture... there are many kinds of architecture, even within one designer's or office's output, and even within one building."²⁰ In contemporary society, pluralism and

continuous experiments in new directions in architecture everywhere are therefore inevitable. Notwithstanding the forces of globalized universality, the spirit of avant-garde architecture continues. In the meantime, the uncontrollable urban explosion in many Asian emerging countries has generated incredible creative energy and dynamism. Perhaps, it is time for East and West to respect each other and take each other much more seriously. For over a decade, Koolhaas has focused on research into and flirtation with Asian urbanity. Recently, he is reported to have said, "To become Asian is very radical [in architecture and urbanism]. But maybe the time is right in Europe to take drastic steps."²¹

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Notes:

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- 4) Frampton, Kenneth (1999), *Inside endpaper. Asian Architects* 1, Singapore: Select Books.
- 5) Castells, Manuel (1996–1998), *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. 1–3, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
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- 14) Harvey, David (1998), "Whats Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?", in: Fredric Jameson & Masao Miyoshi (eds), *The Cultures of Globalization*, London: Duke University Press, p. 351.
- 15) Bullard, Rober D. (ed.) (1993), *Confronting environmental racism: Voices from the grassroots*, Boston, Mass.: South End Press, p. 206. As quoted by Harvey (1998) p. 350.
- 16) Lim, William S. W. (1998), "Asian New Urbanism", in: Lim, William S. W. (1998), *Asian New Urbanism and other papers*, Singapore: Select Books, p. 14–33.
- 17) Lim, William S. W. and Tan Hock Beng (1997), *Contemporary Vernacular: Evoking Traditions in Asian Architecture*, Singapore: Select Books. Also refer to Chew, Christopher C. W. (ed) (1998), *Contemporary Vernacular: Conceptions and Perceptions*, Singapore: AA Asia.
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- 19) Lim, William S. W. (1999), 'Modernity of the Other', unpublished paper delivered at the Architectural Workshop, Tianjin University in June 1999.
- 20) Borden, Iain, "Revolution", in: *Blueprint: Architecture, Design and Culture*, (163) July/August 1999, pp. 37–38.
- 21) Koolhaas, Rem as quoted by Marcus Field in: "Architecture and the New World Order", *Blueprint: Architecture, Design and Culture* (164) September 1999, p. 40.