

Asian architecture in the new millennium: A postmodern imagery

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His numerous writings and lectures on a wide range of subjects relating to architecture, urbanism and culture in Asia as well as on current issues relating to the postmodern, "glocality" and social justice, are compiled in nine books, some of which have been translated into Japanese and Thai. Furthermore, he is co-author with Tan Hock-Beng of Contemporary Vernacular: Evoking Traditions in Asian Architecture (1997), co-editor of vol. 10, Southeast Asia (1999) of World Architecture: A Critical Mosaic 1900-2000, and Editor of Postmodern Singapore (2002). The paper that follows is an edited and revised – in terms of illustrations – version of a document which was included in part 2, chapter 2, p. 63 of the author's book Asian Ethical Urbanism and was made available to all participants of the international symposium on "Globalization and Local Identity" organized jointly by the World Society for Ekistics and the University of Shiga Prefecture in Hikone, Japan, 19-24 September, 2005.

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 necessity to actively participate in contemporary cultural discourses on the larger issues of the postmodern, glocality and social justice, particularly in their applications to countries in the Asian region. With conscious efforts, 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 a western modernist agenda, notwithstanding that effective contestation has made impressive progress in many disciplines from geog-

raphy 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 on Asian architecture and urbanism. The issues are:

- Eurocentric Modernity;
- Jenck's Postmodernism; and,
- 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. It includes 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 encounter with civilizations of different religions and value systems often resulted in disastrous and tragic consequences. 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 nation-states, and did not apply in any effective manner to the non-western *Other*.

By the last quarter of the 19th century, the entire South and East Asia with the exception of Japan and Thailand were colonized or semi-colonized 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 inspiration of the early Modern Movement in architecture were clearly evolved from the incredible dynamic period of art creation based firmly on the European creative orientation as well as their stylistic and aesthetic traditions. Much of modernism in the colonies before WWII was really a testing exercise particularly by the younger generation of western architects. After decades of de-colonization, the dominance and exclusivity of Eurocentric modernity has continued unabated. Besides Japan, non-western architecture is still sup-

posed to remain as the *other* in global discourse, even if its works are being increasingly 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's architectural programs.⁶ However, many controversial issues have remained. They include the unequal relationship between center and periphery,⁷ and modernity of the *other*⁸ as well as concepts of rights and justice.

Since the early 1960s, many critics have already lamented the great blight of dullness, boredom and the sterile environment of cities arising from inhumane and rigid modernist planning. In subsequent decades, US-dominated capitalism and globalization have intentionally exploited and unscrupulously 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 effortlessly.

Asian intellectuals – particularly those educated in the West – are often unable to divorce themselves from the influence of western thought, social and cultural theories, and the western mode of thinking 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 re-read 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 “listening 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 the 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 architecture¹¹ and the UK architectural historian Charles Jencks symbolically declared the death of modernism with the demolition of the *Pruitt-Igoe* housing development in St. Louis on 15th July 1972. Collectively, they were successful innovative promoters of postmodernism in architecture. However, I must agree with David Harvey that “the 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' 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, its theories and projects were given considerable prominence in architectural discourses. The early heroic projects with image-making pseudo-historicism were done in considerable seriousness. However, most of later projects de-

teriorated into theme-parkish ludicrousness. 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 theme-parkish interpretation, 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 scholars were confused. The expression of postmodernism in architecture did little justice to the essential broader essence of postmodernity; 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 L.A. – to the broader agenda and discourses of postmodernity.¹³ The architecture of postmodernism 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, including 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-conceptualizable – 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-territorialization between modernity and postmodernity. The postmodern is a global cultural phenomenon. Its dynamism and distinctiveness are globalized 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 rapidly changing conditions of the contemporary, together with the inclusion of the progressive enlightened interpretations of ethics and social justice, have yet to celebrate their post-modern 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 Phillips: “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 a similar spirit, Chang

Yung Ho's *Micro-Urbanism* has contested the necessity of *tabula rasa* – a 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 globality and rapid development of information technology, contemporary architecture has many similar characteristics with the wider art communities. According to Hou Hanru, the peripheral 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-identity or general de-territorialization. According to Arjun Appadurai: “There is an urgent need to focus on the cultural dynamics of what is now called de-territorialization ... 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 as essential anchorage for 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. The implementations are increasingly interlaced into the rapidly changing urban fabrics as well as the cultures, values and lifestyles with their 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 unilinear 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 significant Asianness 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

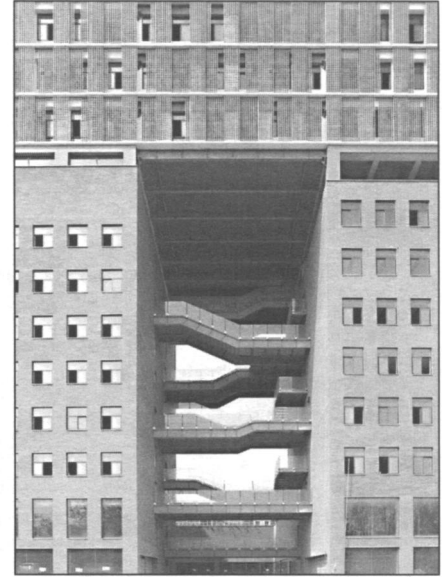
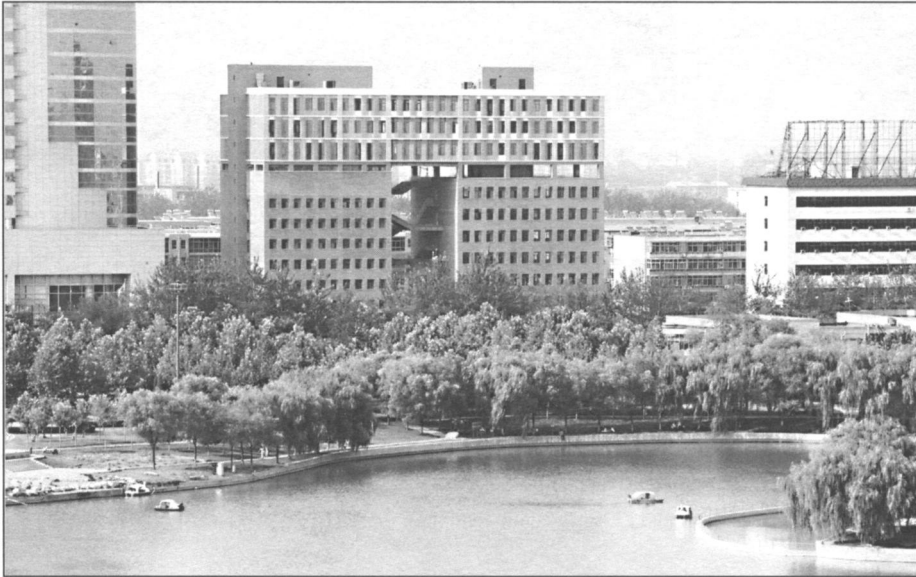
In the meantime, contemporary vernacular has now been increasingly accepted as an effective urban instrument towards

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

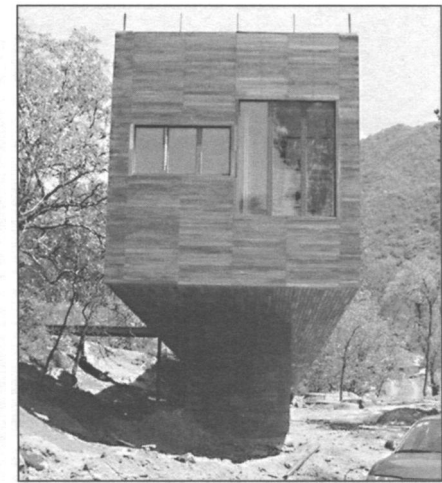
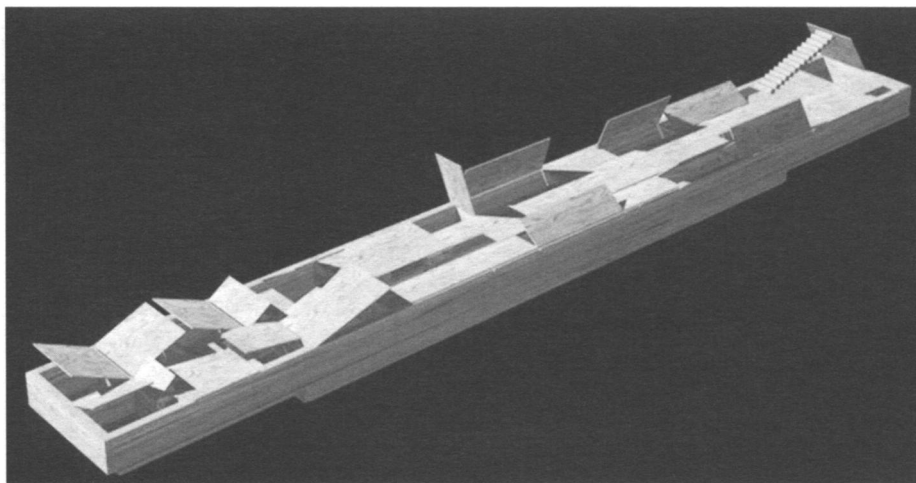
In 1988, the Thai architect Sumet Jumsai, who designed the Bank of Asia headquarters in the form of a robot, wrote a controversial book. His thesis was that the early Asian settlements could be generated by the aquatic instinct and tradition. In the process, he contested that the cultures of the South 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 ‘exchanges’.”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 Malaysia²⁷ and Tay Kheng Soon of Singapore²⁸ have extensively and successfully theorized the bioclimatic approach of cities and by examples the tropical skyscrapers. However, Abidin Kusno has critically examined at some length this architectural phenomenon from a broader post-colonial 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 application of selected heritage elements have created architectural myths of tropical paradise which are surprisingly well-suited for adaptation to resort hotels everywhere.

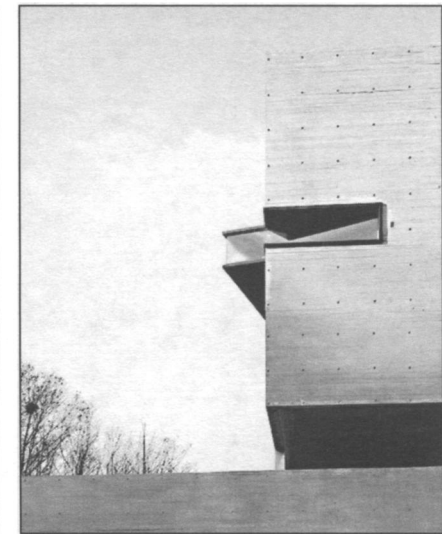
In my opinion, more challenging and exciting is the recent phenomenon that Asian architecture and urbanism have with great speed generated incredible complex urban images and structural dislocation beyond the broadest agenda and scope of modernism. This is particularly evident in China and countries 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 paper one should attempt to illustrate numerous highly fragmented and pluralistic design approaches. They are being implemented often with disjunctive flows and without any connectability to one another or any overall direction. One could select projects ranging from product design to urban visions and one could present them 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 it is firmly anchored in local peculiarities, this disjointing postmodern imagery is the natural by-product of de-identity and de-territorialization. It is in this context that I undertake a visual presentation of the complex and fragmented multi-directional postmodern imagery of Asian architecture in the new millennium. With limited time and space for presentation, I have selected projects from available materials to illustrate a broad range of ideas (figs. 1 to 16).



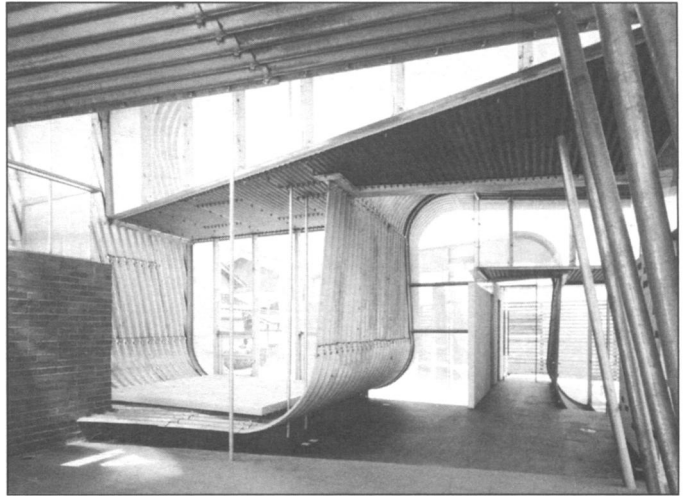
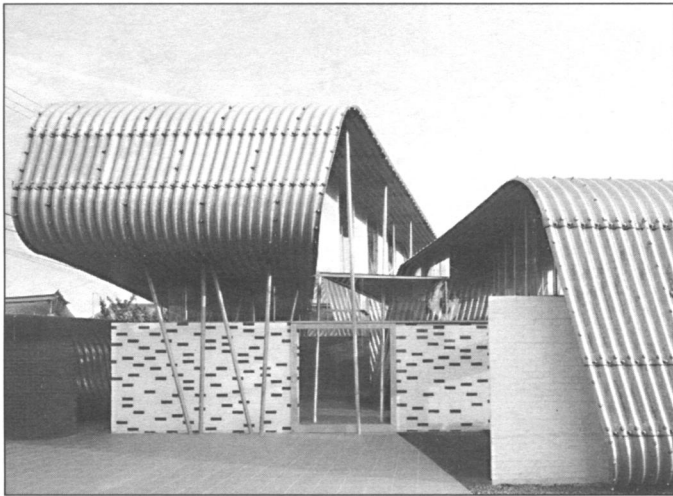
Figs. 1 and 2: Hebei Education Publishing House, 2004. (Source: Chang Yung Ho (China) Atelier FCJZ).



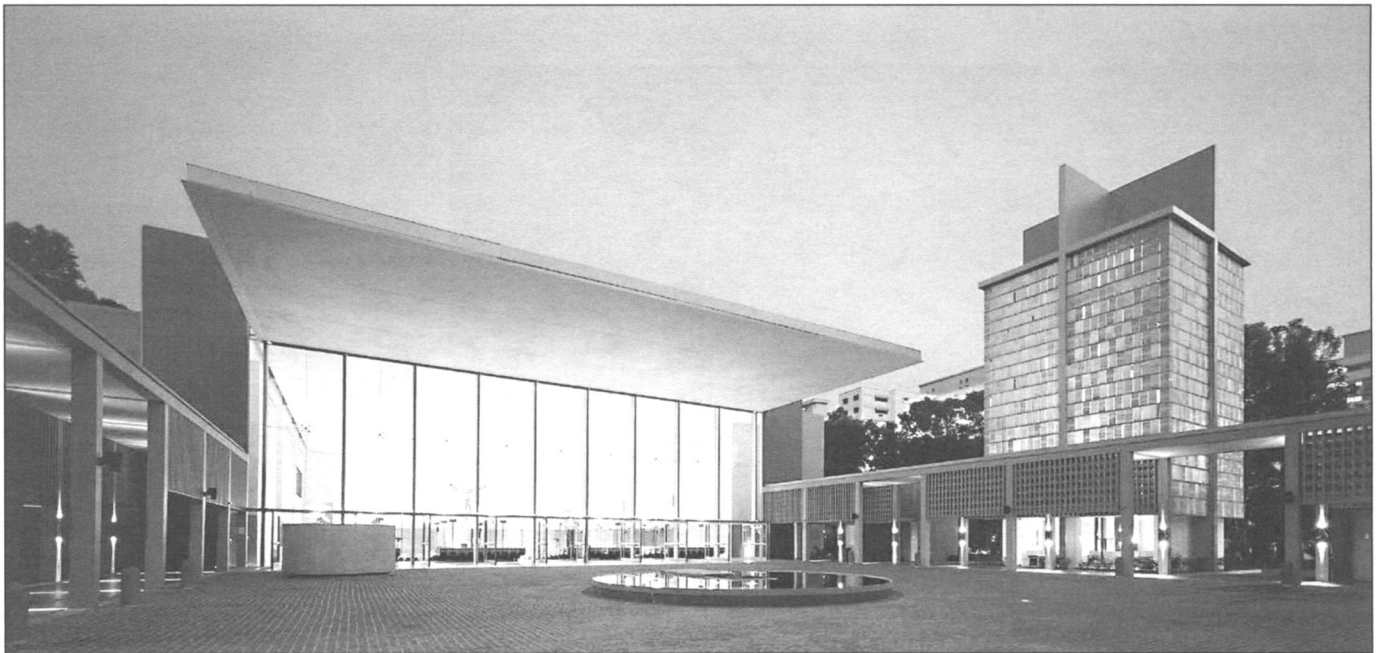
Figs. 3 and 4: Suitcase House, 2000. (Source: Gary Chang (Hong Kong) Edge Design Institute Ltd).



Figs. 5 and 6: Studio Asylum, 2004. (Source: Architect Hun Kim, South Korea).



Figs. 7 and 8: Springecture B, 2002. (Source: Shuhei Endo (Japan), Shuhei Endo Architect Institute).



Figs. 9, 10 and 11: Church of St Mary of Angels, 2003. (Source: Richard Hassell and Wong Mun Sum (Singapore) WOHA Architects).

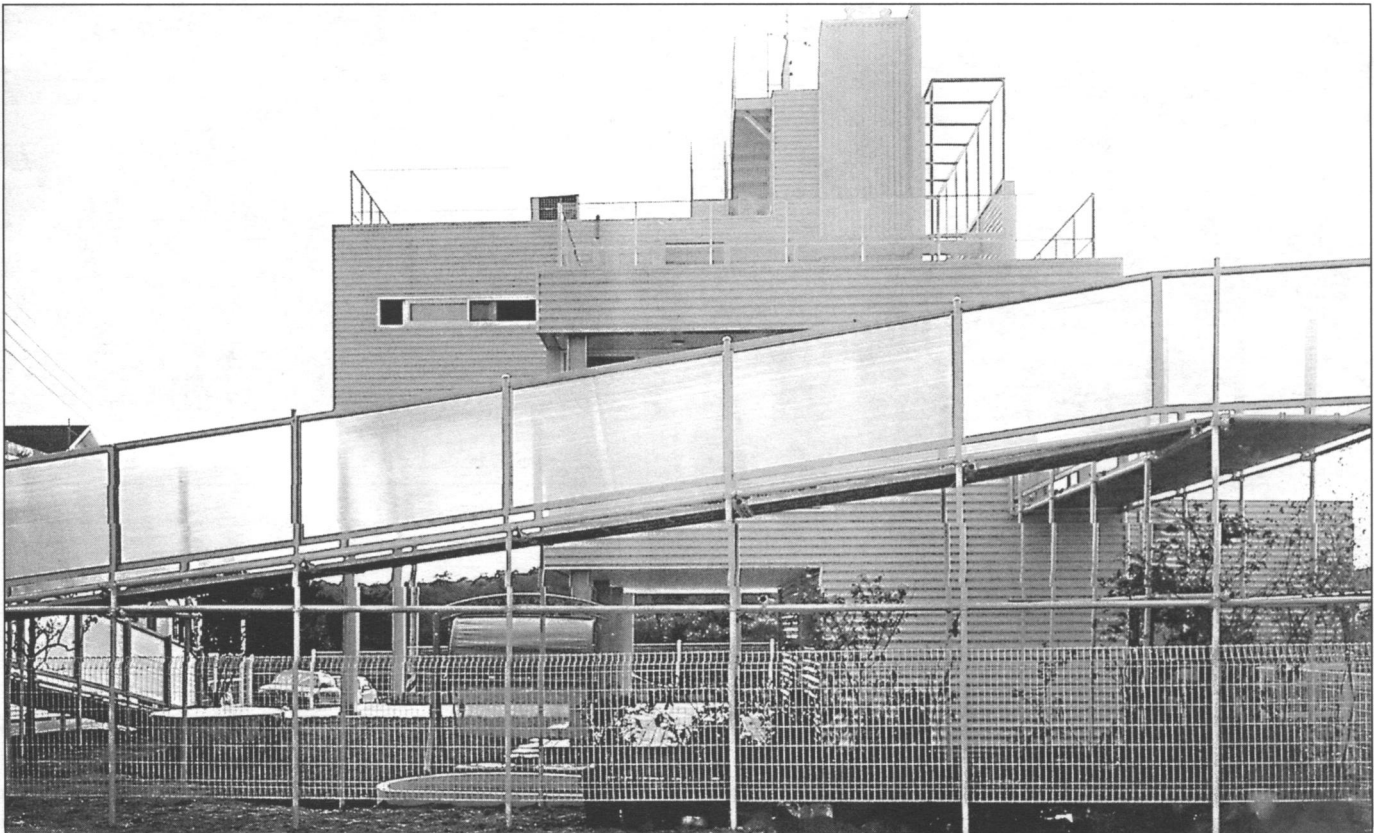


Fig. 12: Spiral House, 2001. (Source: Minh Sohn Joo (South Korea) Wega Architects).

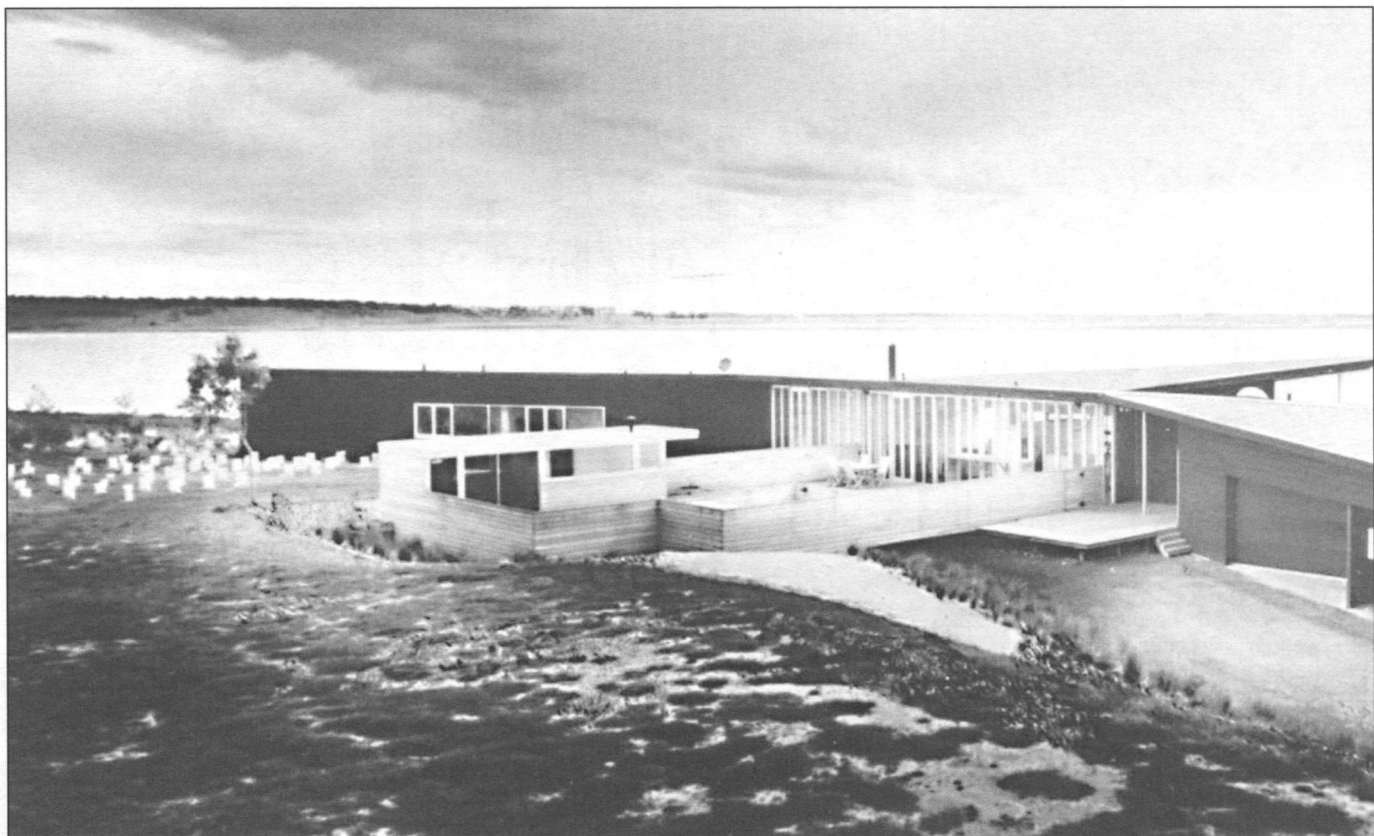
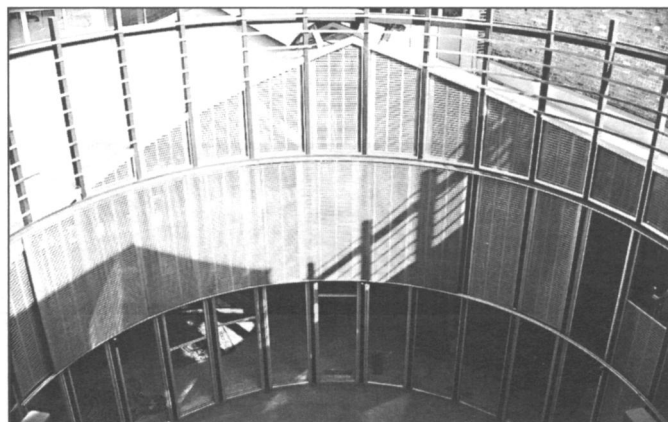


Fig. 13: House at Lake Conneware, 2002. (Source: Kerstin Thompson (Australia), Kerstin Thompson Architects).



Figs. 14, 15 and 16: Drum House, 2001. (Source: Kerstin Thompson (Australia), Kerstin Thompson Architects).

Notes

1. William S.W. Lim, *Alternatives in Transition* (Singapore, Select Books, 2001).
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3. Mark B. Salter, *Barbarians & Civilisation in International Relations* (London, Pluto Press, 2002).
4. Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1996).
5. Gulsum Baydar Nalbantoglu, "(Post) Colonial architectural encounters," in *Asian Architects*, vol. 2 (Singapore, Select Books, 2001), pp. 18-27.
6. [The Aga Khan Foundation sponsored three very important architectural programs: 1) MIMAR publications, 2) Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 3) Aga Khan Programme for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) at Harvard and MIT. For further information, please refer to email: suha.ozkan@akdn.ch].
7. Leon van Schaik, "Architecture in Asia: Province and metropolis," in *Asian Architects 1* (Singapore, Select Books, 2000), pp. 14-29.
8. William S.W. Lim, "Modernity of the other," in *Alternative in Transition: The Postmodern, Glocality and Social Justice* (Singapore, Select Books, 2001), pp. 34-48.
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 12. David Harvey, "The condition of postmodernity," in Michael J. Dear and Steven Flusty (eds.), *The Spaces of Postmodernity: Readings in Human Geography* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002), p. 172.
 13. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism," in Michael J. Dear and Steven Flusty (eds.), *The Spaces of Postmodernity: Readings in Human Geography* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002), pp. 142-149.
 14. Michael J. Dear and Steven Flusty (eds.), "Introduction: How to map a radical break," in *The Spaces of Postmodernity: Readings in Human Geography* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002), pp. 1-12.
 15. William S.W. Lim, "Spaces of indeterminacy," in *Alternative (Post)Modernity: An Asian Perspective* (Singapore, Select Publishing, 2003), pp. 11-18.
 16. John Phillips, "Introduction – William Lim: The evolution of an alternative," in William S.W. Lim, *Alternative (Post)Modernity: An Asian Perspective* (Singapore, Select Publishing, 2003), pp. 1-9.
 17. Hou Hanru, "Filling the urban void: Urban explosion and art intervention in Chinese cities," in *On the Mid-Ground* (Hong Kong, Timezone 8, 2002), pp. 176-191. [Chang Yung-Ho's position of urbanism as described by Hou Hanru.]
 18. Hou Hanru, "They dwell in movement ... Evelyne Jouanno and Hou Hanru," in *On the Mid-Ground* (Hong Kong, Timezone 8, 2002), pp. 200-213.
 19. Arjun Appadurai, "Global ethnoscaples: Notes and queries for a transnational anthropology," in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (London, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 48-65.
 20. William S.W. Lim, "The dynamics of East Asian new urbanism," in Hubert-Jan Henket and Hilde Heynen (eds.), *Back from Utopia: The Challenge of the Modern Movement* (Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2002), pp. 198-205.
 21. Abidin Kusno, "Chapter 4: The violence of categories – Urban space and the making of the national subject," in *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 97-119. [Another interpretation is by Kusno: "Driving through the elevated highways suggests an experience of flying over the top of the city, escaping from its congested roads and leaving behind the 'lower' classes who are routed through the crowded street at ground level."]
 22. Umberto Eco, Stephen Jay Gould, et al., "Signs of the times: Introduction" in *Conversations About The End of Time* (London, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999), pp. 171-215.
 23. William S.W. Lim, "Contemporary vernacular," in *Alternative (Post)Modernity: An Asian Perspective* (Singapore, Select Publishing, 2003), pp. 127-135.
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. Sumet Jumsai, *NAGA Cultural Origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1988).
 26. William S.W. Lim, "Introductory essay – Southeast Asia: Nowhere to somewhere and beyond," in Kenneth Frampton, William S.W. Lim et al. (eds.), *World Architecture: A Critical Mosaic 1900-2000, vol. 10, Southeast Asia and Oceania* (New York, Springer-Verlag Wien, China Architecture & Building Press, 1999), pp. 17-29.
 27. Ken Yeang, *The Skyscraper Bioclimatically Considered* (London, Academy Editions, 1996).
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 29. Abidin Kusno, "Chapter 8 – Spectre of comparisons: Notes on discourses of architecture and urban design in Southeast Asia," *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 190-205.