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Crosssing Boundaries

Architecture, identity and cultural sustainability in contemporary Southeast Asian cities

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Abstract: Distinctive architecture, which once served to identify peoples and places, has now, across the world, been subject to the standardising forces of history. Built environments still reflect the conceptual, spatial and physical construction of communities, though straightforward correlations between particular forms of architecture, places and people can no longer be taken for granted. This article explores these notions through discussion of several Southeast Asian examples, seeing how the relationship between architecture and culture might be framed by each of them, and then how definitions of culture might be differently expressed depending on each context. The first context is the village. Here, recent buildings are produced within a traditional, rural culture, generally without recourse to architects. Indigenous symbolism is overlaid, but not necessarily subsumed, by imported typologies and ideologies. The second context is urban and more formalised and involves self-conscious architectural attempts to straddle tradition and modernity, as well as notions of broader collective identity. The third context is one of a more diffused globalisation. Issues of conservation and heritage are complicated by the imperial or colonial histories of many urban environments, as well as by the pressures of economic development and population growth. In cultural terms, however, it is the life of cities that is foregrounded here. This disparate collection of architectural projects and agendas reflects a region where the forces of essentialism and fragmentation continue to be in creative tension (Ashraf 2005).

In the past, the relative autonomy and isolation of local cultures and traditions meant that architecture could readily be identified with particular places and peoples. Most locations, however, have now been

overlaid by expressions of colonialism, global religion, nationalism and, most recently, multinational capitalism and consumerism. Consequently, built environments have become arenas where national and cultural identity is tangibly negotiated in a context of globalisation, population growth and technological change. Built environments provide locations for complex negotiations between multiple communities, as they draw on their own cultures and histories as well as adopting elements from their surrounding environment and the wider world. Built environments remain integral to the conceptual, as well as the spatial and physical construction of communities, whether these are connected by kinship, shared experience or the imagined connections of civic or national identity (Anderson 1991), but straightforward correlations between particular forms of architecture, places and people can no longer be taken for granted. As a recent general review notes:

> a building can symbolically represent the development and[/] or values of particular factions and therefore play a positive role in reinforcing notions of community identity. However, it can have the opposite effect, and polarise and exclude by reinforcing and validating a particular view of the past (Worthing & Bond 2008:49).

This statement provides clues to some of the complications and disruptions that underlie the relationship between culture and built environments, a relationship grounded in the spatial nature of human interaction, as well as in the symbolic power of physical surroundings to influence, and be influenced by, the actions and intentions of those within. As well as providing shelter, architecture represents conceptions of belonging and identity. Individual buildings may be produced with differing levels of self-consciousness, but their resultant arrangement of form, material and space still circumscribes certain ritual and cultural outcomes. A building makes concrete the set of conditions that has produced it. Within this, culturally specific meanings are affected by economic and socio-political factors. A work of architecture is thus a literal example of what Bourdieu calls a 'self-structuring structure' (Bourdieu 1990). 'On the one hand, buildings exist as stand-alone artefacts, and on the other, they are artefacts that express the deep meanings, aspirations, and social order of a culture'

(Howard 2006:95). Moving into the broader context of Asian built environments, ICOMOS' *Nara Document On Authenticity* (2004) relates culture to the maintenance of traditional skills and craft traditions, stressing the use of traditional methods in the renovation of building fabric in the context of ongoing or cyclical maintenance by local communities. In Logan's discussion of the cultural roles of cities in Vietnam, he provides a similar view, referring to 'values acquired by a community over time that encourage, reinforce, modify or restrict economic and political activities occurring in and shaping the nature of cities' (Logan 2006:49). In such statements, the importance of the intangible aspects of heritage, of ritual, rather than physical fabric, are emphasised. Also noted are the complications of framing cultural heritage in relation to architecture purely in terms of the preservation and conservation of historic buildings and streetscapes, especially where such streetscapes date from a colonial past (Howe & Logan 2002:249). Worries about the loss of 'Asian' identity in the wake of modernity and globalisation are not new. Neither are attempts to problematise the notion that the distinctiveness of Asian cities lie solely in their traditions (Logan 2002:xii). As contemporary built environments continue to develop, however, identity remains contested, as does the notion of cultural sustainability in relation to architecture. The question remains: in a contemporary environment, can architecture engage with its traditional role as the embodiment of cultural symbolism (updated to include contemporary cultural flows), while at the same time remaining open to constant re-interpretations, re-imaginings and re-appropriations of its fabric, its spaces, and its surroundings?

The United Nations' 2002 Kanazawa Resolutions provide some useful definitions for discussion of this question. These resolutions were formulated as the result of a series of United Nations conferences on the relationship between culture and sustainability, and their definition of cultural sustainability forms a useful basis for this paper's discussion. The Kanazawa Resolutions argue that sustaining cultures in terms of contemporary life is a matter of 'dialogical coexistence' (Nadarajah & Yamamoto 2007). They take the notion of cultural heritage into a contemporary and globalised context by linking

it to ideas of cultural diversity and pluralism, similar to Sharon Zukin's notion of cities as a 'fluid process of forming, expressing, and enforcing identities of individuals, social groups, or spatially constructed communities' (Zukin 1995:289). The resolutions argue that cultural sustainability is not just a matter of the preservation or reinvigoration of the past, but an ongoing dialogue between a locality and its people (Nadarajah & Yamamoto 2007).

In this essay, I explore the premise of 'dialogical coexistence' in relation to Southeast Asian built environments, as a means for discussing the complex relationship between contemporary architecture, culture and identity in the region. I will discuss several examples, looking at how the relationship between architecture and culture might be framed by each of them, and how definitions of culture might be differently expressed depending on each context. The first context is the village, involving recent buildings produced within a traditional, rural culture, generally without recourse to architects. Here, contemporary buildings have form and detail suggestive of layers of meaning. Indigenous symbolism is overlaid, but not necessarily subsumed, by imported typologies and ideologies. The second context is urban and more formalised. Moving from village to town or city, this context involves self-conscious architectural attempts to straddle tradition and modernity, as well as notions of broader collective identity, whether in the service of nation-building, or, in the case of the Thai architect Sumet Jumsai, constructed imaginings of a contemporary pan-Asian future. The third context is one of a more diffused globalisation. While, of course, globalised forces are implicit in conceptions of both regionalist and nationalist architecture, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century flows of material consumption, human migration and technological change have led to further questioning of contemporary identity and the roles of tradition, locality and architectural expression. Issues of conservation and heritage are complicated by the imperial or colonial histories of many of Asia's urban environments, as well as by the pressures of economic development and population growth. In cultural terms, however, it is the life of cities that is foregrounded here, in terms of how the vitality of Southeast Asian streets can be sustained. While the

informal architecture of villages in the first context gives way to architects' formal explorations in the second, here it is the interaction between the formal fabric of cities and the informality of life within them that is emphasised.

Village contexts: the authenticity of new traditions

Traditionally, Southeast Asia has had many different ethnic groups, each with its own architectural tradition. How these groups have managed to translate and redefine their traditional relationships with the built environment in a contemporary context? Is it possible, or desirable, to negotiate symbolic identity, cultural history and the needs of current society as a means of forming contemporary architectural expressions, as well as maintaining traditional ones? Can indigenous traditions survive, not just as cultural artefacts or marginalised memories, but as active components in contemporary built environments?

Amos Rapaport once suggested that 'what makes tradition is meaningful repetition' (Rapaport 1969:35). Traditional societies, in Rapaport's view, lived in relative isolation from other societies, and so relied on their own social conventions. These, in turn, constrained behaviour, fostered a collective rather than individual outlook, and cemented activities in habitual and ritual ways. This collective outlook also meant a reduced need for spatial differentiation and specialisation, as well as for separation between individual people. In a contemporary society, increased individuality, fostered by greater literacy and exposure to choices, leads to a breakdown of customary rules and a questioning of the authority of traditions. Even in the absence of active persecution of indigenous beliefs, their loss of authority through exposure to other world-views weakens the social and physical fabric of traditional communities. For instance, if a house-form is derived in part from a particular cosmological outlook, what relevance can it have once that outlook has been undermined or overturned?

Architectural discussion about traditional buildings tends to be a commentary on the struggle between the opposing forces of conservation/preservation and destruction/debasement, with authenticity the likely casualty of such a struggle (Oliver 2003:243). As

postcolonial critics have argued, however, authenticity is intimately connected with authority (Trinh 1989:88). James Clifford has described a general attitude — originally Western but now more widely adapted — of nostalgic regret towards the vernacular cultures of the world (Clifford 1989). In this view, traditional cultures are inevitably undergoing 'fatal' changes as they come into contact with modernity. Most will be subsumed by it, except those aspects that can be protected, isolated or 'salvaged' as Clifford puts it. Such cultures stand in the 'ethnographic present' outside the flow of history. They are intrinsically static, so any change to them must be externally derived (Clifford 1989:76). Indigenous traditions can only resist or yield to the forces of change; they do not have the power to innovate. The mission of the enlightened West, and more latterly, the enlightened nationalist governments of the East, is to realise that progress inevitably involves the dissolution of traditional cultures, unless attempts are made to save or preserve them. This mission is based on what Clifford describes as a 'salvage paradigm', a desire to rescue 'authentic' cultures being destroyed by historical change (Clifford 1989:74). The more optimistic side of Clifford's argument, however, is his suggestion that authenticity can be produced as well as salvaged. He argues that what is important is not so much the authority of sources, but the agency of people. If a community is able to reinvent or adapt their own traditions, the ensuing culture is authentically theirs, whatever its relation to their past. While this position might seem to elide some of the realities of political and social disruption (suggesting that what may appear to be debased or even kitsch can actually be authentic), the idea that contemporary authenticity does not depend on a salvaged past is also potentially liberating.

The contemporary architectural adaptations undertaken amongst the Toraja in the highlands of West Sulawesi in Indonesia provide some illustration of this argument. There are several groups of Toraja, the most distinctive of which, the Sa'dan Toraja, occupy the area that includes the government and market centres of Makale and Rantepao. The Mamasa Toraja live in a more isolated area some fifty kilometres to the west, and also retain a distinctive local architecture. While most Toraja are now nominally Christian, their indigenous

culture has remained somewhat less affected by outside influences than that of many other minorities. A sizeable minority still adhere to their traditional animist belief system *Aluk to Dolo* ('the way of the ancestors'), which is most spectacularly characterised by elaborate funerals involving buffalo fighting and sacrifices, as well as extended embalming and interment rituals. Also spectacular are *banua Toraja*, traditional Torajan buildings, in particular their *tongkonan* or 'origin houses'. *Tongkonan* are ancestral homes, though their significance extends further than conventional understandings of this role. They are not only places for a family to live and meet, but are also integral in the ritual affairs of the community.

> To the Toraja, the *tongkonan* is more than just a structure. The symbol of family identity and tradition, representing all the descendants of a founding ancestor, it is the focus of ritual life. It forms the most important nexus within the web of kinship. Torajans may have difficulty defining their exact relationship with distant kin, but can always name the natal houses of parents, grandparents and sometimes distant ancestors, for they consider themselves to be related to each other through these houses (Dawson & Gillow 1994:137).

Tongkonan are architecturally distinctive due to their immense saddleback roofs. The origin of these roof-forms has been the subject of much speculation and they have been likened to the forms of both buffalo horns and boats (Kis-Jovak and others 1988:38). A corollary of these symbolic identifications is that the *tongkonan* is seen as a living entity, not just the seat of the ancestors, but an ancestor itself. *Tongkonan* each have a personal name, being considered as part of a lineage of *tongkonan*. As a family multiplies, the *tongkonan* they construct are referred to as daughter-*tongkonan* of the mother-*tongkonan*. *Tongkonan* can even 'marry' each other (Kis-Jovak and others 1988:36).

While many new Toraja houses are conventional lowland style buildings — a kind of pan-Indonesian/Malay timber building with a raised floor and a low hipped-gable roof — or rectangular concrete bungalows, others hybridise this imported typology with local traditions. The most common is a double-storey dwelling, the first storey of which is treated like a hipped-roof timber bungalow, either on the ground or raised on piles, perhaps with a front or perimeter

Figure 1. House in Pakkassasan village near Mamasa, West Sulawesi, Indonesia

veranda (figure 1). The second storey is then constructed as a full *banua* or *tongkonan* rising out of the roof of the bungalow, the spaces within it serving as sleeping areas. The saddlebacked *tongkonan* roof-form is also no longer restricted to traditional building types. Government buildings have prow-like protrusions coming out of their otherwise conventional hipped roofs or otherwise have full saddleback roofs rendered in concrete. Saddleback forms similarly sit atop shops and offices, even on church towers.

The church near Rantebuda in Mamasa, for example, has a composition that at first glance seems a crude grafting of the *tongkonan* form on to the steeple of a Christian church (figure 2). As, however, Roxanna Waterson suggests of this form, 'it still continues to function as a vivid and condensed symbol, with which all can identify, of what it means to be Toraja' (Waterson 1990:238); the traditional form evokes a transference of meanings. When used in place of a steeple on the church, the saddleback roof-form suggests the relocation of the ritual

Figure 2. Church, near Mamasa, West Sulawesi, Indonesia

and social centre of the community. A different world-view brought by Christianity is symbolically legitimised due to its identification with the inherited meanings within the *tongkonan* form. As a hybrid building, the church has both a contemporary global, and a local specific identity. 'Traditions', as Anthony Giddens puts it, may have once indicated the existence of 'formulaic truths', known only to the insiders of a given group and required for sustenance a privileged view of time and space; now, however, there are obligatory choices to be made about how to interpret traditions (Giddens 1994:75, 80), and these have been made by the community of this church.

Urban contexts: modernity, nationalism and pan-Asian identity

Many architects, being still versed in the rhetoric of Modernism, look for more abstracted ways of creating contemporary buildings that respond to the particularities of location, identity and contemporary life, linking the regionalist idea of locational specificity with the

universalising mission of modernism. Termed 'critical regionalism' by the architectural critics Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre and given widespread recognition by Kenneth Frampton, critical regionalism attempts to link modernism and regional identity, taking what Frampton described as

> an arrière-garde position, ... one that distances itself equally from the Enlightenment myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the preindustrial past (Frampton 1983:20).

While critical regionalism attempts to take into account aspects of location, in particular topography, climate, and local materials, its 'critical' aspect depends on a filtration through a Modernist architectural vocabulary. The 'distancing' referred to by Frampton is premised on the idea of 'universal civilisation', as derived from a post-Enlightenment Western world-view. Alternatively, Nihal Perera has proposed a 'critical-vernacular' position. This, he describes in terms of his native Sri Lanka as not

> referring to a mere 'style,' the main trait of which is that it is visually distinguishable from others, but to a cluster of broadly defined design practices that draw upon historic Lankan concepts of space in creating culturally, climatically, and technologically more appropriate buildings in independent Sri Lanka (Perera 1998:144).

The 'critical' aspect of critical-vernacular is that it contests the authority of Western models of modern architecture, instead investigating indigenous models for their adaptability to contemporary conditions, looking for ways that a contemporary Asian society can actively reconnect with its own pre-colonial past, the period of colonialism being seen as a time of societal rupture rather than progress. Critical-vernacular not only values historical continuity but steers a fine line between respect for local traditions, reinterpretation of tropical design principles and contemporary space-making. The best examples of neo-vernacular architecture operate as test-cases for the coexistence of old and new ways of thinking. While satisfying the needs of the present, they reference the local past, and arguably reinvigorate building traditions that have been displaced and marginalised by imposed ideas.

While, however, there are many types of buildings adopting local building traditions in the manner outlined by Perera, the most publicised examples of tropical neo-vernacular architecture are luxury villas or resorts. Their architecture serves to create a romantic sense of locality, while, as some argue, demonstrating a 'genuine reinvigoration of traditional craft wisdom' in their forms and details, as cultural production is encouraged or revitalised by touristic interest in local culture (Lim & Tan 1998:31). On the other hand, giving tourists an exotic oriental fantasy is a different thing to maintaining culture as it is (or even used to be) lived, particularly in the increasingly crowded and rapidly developing urban conditions of Southeast Asian cities. So much neo-vernacular architecture seems designed for a pre-urban arcadia (Pieris 2005:22–33). The commonly recurring typology of linked pavilions has yet to be translated convincingly into mass housing, commercial or institutional buildings in urban environments.

The neo-vernacular can also be employed on a national scale, and here typological appropriation may be augmented with motifs, decorative details, and symbolic elements, not always derived from architectural sources. For instance, several of the new buildings designed to house Malaysia's major public institutions make symbolic reference to culture. The roof of Malaysia's National Library refers to the *songket tengkolok* (folded traditional Malay headgear) (figure 4). while that of the Istana Budaya or National Theatre evokes the *sirih junjung*, a traditional table arrangement (Fee 1998:130) (figure 3). Most recently, the roof of Malaysia's national pavilion at Expo 2010 in Shanghai has taken the distinctive buffalo-horn profile of the traditional Minangkabau house. Such buildings 'deploy architecture and urban design as signs of national transformation' (Yeoh 2005:950). When architecture is asked to engage with national identity, the use of symbolic reference to that identity is a selective and politically charged process (Vale 1992). Political forces tend to encourage architecture that reinforces the notion of the unitary nation, with underlying assumptions about clearly defined and defended territories of identity and belonging. As public projects, nationalist buildings attempt to construct an architecture whose legitimacy is based on notions of localised authenticity. The deployment of recognisable forms and

Figure 3. Istana Budaya (National Theatre), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

motifs on a national scale, however, is more problematic than doing so within a small community. Selective promotion of motifs in official situations is often disingenuous, employing folkloric aspects of particular ethnic cultures while eliding the social and political tensions among minorities within the nation-state. Beyond the conflation of nationalism, ethnicity and political power, it is questionable how much overt use of cultural symbols can really influence the culture of the broader built environment.

An alternative is to embrace a broader notion of contemporary culture. The implications of this within an Asian context have been outlined by Koichi Iwabuchi who specifically discusses the exportation of Japanese technology and pop culture, and more broadly describes the late twentieth-century realisation that Asia is no longer the passive recipient of globalised culture, but now actively produces it and exports it (Iwabuchi 2002). More recently, Iwabuchi, Muecke and

Figure 4. National Library, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Thomas argue that 'what has become more prominent ... is the emergence of popular Asianism and Asian dialogues whose main feature is not Asian values or traditional culture but capitalist consumer/popular culture' (Iwabuchi, Muecke & Thomas 2004:1).

Sumet Jumsai's former Bank of Asia (now United Overseas Bank) and Nation buildings in Bangkok both explore this notion in an abstracted, yet multivalent manner. The former Bank of Asia building is one of the most distinctive sights on the Bangkok skyline. Approaching its twenty-storey bulk from a distance, the building looms as a stack of giant cubic forms (figure 5). On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that this stack of cubes is actually a giant robot. The building's tripartite vertical division can be distinguished as 'legs', 'body' and 'head', each articulated by strips of curtain walling. On each side of the 'legs,' ground-floor openings are surrounded by canopies that mimic robot tank-track feet (figure 6). Oversized 'bolts'

Figure 5. Former Bank of Asia, Bangkok, Thailand, overall view

emerge from higher up, while at the front of the head facing the street, there are reflective glass 'eyeballs' partially covered by louvred 'eyelids' and twin antennae. Designed as the headquarters of the Nation Multimedia Group, the Nation building shares with the Bank of Asia an anthropomorphic composition. Its overall form is described by the architect as being 'like a "head" with cut-outs for "eyes" that peer over the road below' (Jumsai 2000:62). Otherwise, it is composed as a vertical sandwich, with two flat facades that are delineated with a graphic treatment derived from the architect's idea of a 'built painting'. The painting alludes to a number of possible sources for its content: 'the profile of the chief editor working on a word processor, or perhaps a graphic artist working on a page layout, sitting on a stool; electronic circuitries surfacing here and there' as well as references to

Figure 6. Former Bank of Asia, Bangkok, Thailand, close-up of ground floor level

the robot and cubist painting (Jumsai 2000:65). The use of architectural form to express a mixture of messages can be read as a critique of the pastiche architecture so prevalent in the region, whether neo-classical apartment buildings in Bangkok or office towers in Kuala Lumpur wrapped in Islamic patterning (Brace Taylor & Hoskin 1996:16).

These two buildings are also Jumsai's means of dealing with the non-context of unplanned urban sprawl typical of fast-growing Southeast Asian cities. This suggests a relationship between image and content that is removed from Western ideas of superficiality/essence and architecture/non-architecture. Instead, the graphic nature of the former Bank of Asia and Nation buildings' facades suggest a belief in the power of the surface to influence content. More specifically in

relation to the Thai context of the two buildings, the role of the skin recalls the sometimes intensely decorative but highly symbolic skins of traditional Thai *chedi* (stupas), encrusted with the symbolic meanings of Theravada Buddhism (McGrath 2003:79). At the same time they resonates with Thai values of *sanuk* (fun sensibility), *sabai* (contentment) and *kreng jai* (deferential consideration) (Cornwel-Smith 2005:120). The former Bank of Asia and Nation buildings are also 'urban, plastic and commercial, and thus pop, which suits another aspiration: looking *dern* (modern)' (Cornwel-Smith 2005:120).

Globalised contexts: cultural heritage versus real life in the city

For the majority of Asian urban dwellers, rural life is a memory. Yet as Lee and Lam note in their cinematic exploration of future cities, the present generation of Asian city-dwellers are often the first to be completely removed from the agrarian world of their ancestors (Lee & Lam 2002:113). While their cultural traditions are still embedded in this past, and indigenous building typologies are part of this remembered life, most contemporary city inhabitants will never return to the countryside for their livelihoods. These traditions are, however, coupled with desires to develop societies that can compete in a contemporary world of material and technological advancement, and this coupling means that Asian cities owe far less to indigenous pasts than their European counterparts. A major factor in this, of course, is that most of Southeast Asia's urban streetscapes are essentially colonial constructions, into which indigenous traditions of town planning and architecture have long been subsumed (Lim 2004:72). As well as this, the inequalities of power and influence between colonisers and colonised remain a legacy of postcolonial nations. Western conceptions of cultural preservation and the worth of colonial-era heritage prevail, and 'the lineage of Western architectural theory governs the limit for all possible architectural [and urban] identifications' (Baydar Nalbantoglu 2001:18). Similarly, Yeoh notes how 'the colonial encounter often takes on a ritualized form whose maintenance is dependant on the export of notions, systems and practices which displace indigenous forms or recreate them in the image of the colonial power' (Yeoh 1996).

While nationalist projects construct particular images of the past, and Jumsai's buildings are suggestive of an imagined pan-Asian future, heritage guidelines also reinforce particular relationships between buildings, culture and people. The publication *Streetwise Asia: A Practical Guide for the Conservation and Revitalisation of Heritage Cities and Towns in Asia* (Vines 2005) provides an example. Under the heading 'Developing A Conservation & Heritage Upgrade Strategy' advice is given, on the one hand, to 'cater to the continuation of street life', but on the other. to 'minimise visual clutter' and to 'provide guidelines to owners and occupiers of properties, so that commercial activities continue to thrive within an agreed framework of clear signage and building uses' (Vines 2005:7). In the same book, images are used to compare 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' signage on buildings, the former being discreet and applied to a building so as to make its underlying form and material still evident, and the latter tending to prominence, sometimes to the point of obscuring large parts of the architecture (Vines 2005:18–21). In a section on 'corporate responsibility', an Indonesian service station with a 'traditional' pitched roof and muted signage is favourably compared with another with the standard corporate flat roof and extensive signage (Vines 2005:22–3). Consultation and working with the inhabitants of buildings is promoted, so long as the locals can be convinced to alter their own buildings in an 'appropriate' manner. An example to avoid is provided in which the locals were provided with incentives to re-paint their buildings, but then chose 'inappropriate emulsion paints and strident colours' for the job (Vines 2005:43). This criticism does not imply that removal of the historical context would be preferable, but, as Coté suggests in his discussion of the colonial architecture of Semarang, that placing sites into a local historical context requires 'understanding of the broader everyday culture which constituted the colonial domain for their grandparents' generation' (Coté 2002). It is appreciation for this everyday culture, and its possible continuity, that may generate appreciation for built environments otherwise associated with colonial pasts. Urban landscapes, however, are arenas for extensive social, political and technological changes, so it is inevitable that they are subject to these changes (Kim, Douglass & Choe 1997:1). Preservation

Figure 7. Urban street vendors
top left: Jakarta, Indonesia
top right: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
left: Hoian, Vietnam

of existing streetscapes can only go so far in sustaining culture and, when mixed with the needs of tourism, preservation as an end in itself can override the changing needs of the communities who would otherwise live and work in them.

> The global marketplace of tourism needs to sell distinctive localities in order to sustain itself: the historic built environment is a particularly powerful way of presenting this essential imagery of the 'indigenous'.

> But of course this iconography of the built environment reinforces a preservationist ideology since reality must replicate the preconceived image of the 'authentic' (Zetter & Watson 2006:16).

More pointedly, the street remains the primary arena for urban culture in Southeast Asia. While buildings may be good, bad or indifferent examples of architecture, what largely occupies inhabitants, workers, vendors and visitors in its cities and towns happens in front of, in between, beside and underneath buildings (figure 7). What gives Southeast Asian cities their vitality is the street. As any inhabitant of a city will attest, formal architecture can be rendered inconsequential by a vibrant mixture of stallholders, mobile food carts, street vendors and crowds of people. Vendors and service providers can occupy footpaths and laneways to the point where the permanent buildings can hardly be seen at street level. While individual elements of this profusion are often ephemeral, their collective presence is constant. In the Malaysian context, for instance, the cycles of the *pasar malam* (night market), *pasar sehari* (one-day market) and *pasar tani* (farmers market) are critical to sustaining the life of the urban environment (Sulaiman and Shamsuddin, 2001:139). As cities rapidly develop, threats to the future of these markets also threaten the continued existence of street-based social interactions. The most unpromising and marginalised of locations such as railway embankments and freeway undercrofts can be brought to life by habitation and commerce. The role of architecture in this context is debatable. Does it actively engage with the constantly shifting, often improvised nature of street life (in which case its composition and character matters, even if this is only subconsciously sensed), or does it merely passively facilitate such life? Considering this, the Malaysian architect Ngiom has described Kuala Lumpur as a *kueh lapis* (a type of local layered cake). Its layers, in his metaphor, have two identities. One is constructional:

> the tiers of urban forms — the uppermost of [these] tiers house transient events such as the wet markets, the roadside stalls and the sidewalk cafes. The tier below is made up of forms of permanence, such as restaurants, bookstores, cafes and convenience stores. The layer below comprises of the larger-scale urban forms, such as the rows of shophouses, rising to residences, hotels and offices. The

lowest and the thickest layer is an independent layer, which forms the base for the Kueh Lapis: it is the dead, fossilised thick prehistoric layer which has no life (Ngiom 2008: 67–8).

The other metaphor for Kuala Lumpur as *kueh lapis* is to do with the temporal, situational, nature of people's interactions with the city.

> The lower layers of KL, the city, are encrusted historical time. The uppermost layer is the daily events that make the city alive, and when recent events are concretised, they are encapsulated at the second tier into memories. Collectively, the concretised memories affect collective behaviour to become the local culture (Ngiom 2008:66).

The uppermost layers in both analogies suggest ingenuity in inhabiting and adapting the gaps between the formal spaces of the city. They represent a resource from which much can be learned about creative appropriation of space, structure and materials, and the spatial and temporal configurations adopted in the streets of a number of Asian cities have been the subject of many studies (Shelton 1999; Suzuki 1999, 2001; Kaijima, Kuroda & Tsukamoto 2001; Chi 2002; Bootsita 2003; McGrath 2003; Gutierrez, Portefaix & Ruggeri 2005; van Helmond & Michiels 2007). Ti-Nan Chi, a Taiwanese architect, relates the transience of Asian street life to Sun Tzu's classic Daoist military manual *The Art of War* (Chi 2002:86). Feints, detours, deception and camouflage are all techniques used by those make a living on the street to cope with the uncertainties of their daily existence, a series of small spatial manoeuvres that make up what he and Urban Flashes, a loose group of mostly East Asian architects, refer to as 'micro-urbanism'. Urban Flashes see the Asian city as a patchwork of many micro-scale activities and situations. Most of the people who live in the Asian city are engaged in 'tactics' rather than planning, making the most of the limited space and resources at their disposal to make a living (Chi 2002). Similarly, the relationship between environment, usage and interpretation can also be seen in how people inhabit buildings, no matter what their architects' or owners' intentions. Paul Chang notes this in the Singaporean context, recording the ways in which Indians, Bangladeshis, Myanmese and Thais inhabit and appropriate the city's spaces. He draws on Bachelard's notions of home to see how

> two concrete bollards set up a living room; the road-side railings define a balcony; walls along the corridor is a day-bed; steps become a lounge; an escalator landing acts as alcove; the shopping alley as kitchen; and the rugged modern atrium becomes a dining room (Chang 1999:35).

While in all cities there are areas where the forces of centralised power have imposed a degree of physical and visual order, this is often subverted. In Jakarta, for instance, grand thoroughfares link the major state monuments but, away from these, the city has been described as a *desakota* or *kampungkota* (both Indonesian terms meaning village-city) indicating the dense but de-centralised mix of agricultural and (sub)urban uses that is characteristic of settlement patterns in Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (McGee 1991; Sihombing 2001). Its shifting and informal physical presence is more like a conglomeration of compacted villages than a centrally planned and zoned entity. In Indonesia, it has been estimated that over seventy per cent of workers are in the informal sector of the economy, suggesting a direct correlation between informality of usage and economics. As such, attempts to prettify or preserve building facades in the name of cultural preservation seem rather less important than maintaining the ongoing life between them.

The visual artist and architect Stani Michiels provides a photographic analysis of the megalopolis of Jakarta (Michiels 2007). By taking serial photographs during numerous *becak* (cycle rickshaw) rides around the city, Michiels captures an urban environment almost endlessly unfolding, its identity being revealed not only in its official monuments and infrastructure, but also in its traffic jams and the people crowding its shopfronts, markets and streets. The relentless horizontality of his images reinforces the sprawling quality of the city, and fluidity of its form and inhabitation;

> low-rise areas that gave the impression of a village, complete with chickens running across the road, whilst not so far away were prestigious office buildings. Further on, Chinese districts could be recognised by the grilles around the buildings. (Michiels 2007:28)

This demarcation of space and purpose extends to the more intangible and ephemeral elements of the city. In Tadié's study of the territorial

demarcations of Jakarta's Senen Market, he observes that the specialisation of stalls within the formal market extends to the streets around it. Groups of traders occupy particular locations, based not only on the goods that they are selling but also their own ethnic or geographical origins. One area is occupied by meat and poultry vendors from Banten, another by clothes sellers from Padang (Tadié 2002:403). Without official sanction or acknowledgement, life on the street is spatially demarcated.

Even within permanent structures, the nature of spaces changes according to the situation; businesses combine with dwellings, restaurants double as living rooms, public and private spaces are demarcated by the time of day, rather than by territorial boundaries. Brenda Yeoh uses the example of Singapore's massive Suntec City convention centre as a place that has been extensively appropriated by a wide cross-section of the local community for uses quite unrelated to the intended purpose of the building (Yeoh 2005:954). She outlines the 'official' ways in which an ostensibly modern building claims connections with Singaporean, and more broadly, Chinese culture, including allusions to geomantic associations and traditional configurations of space as a means of connecting it to cultural traditions. She also notes how contemporary usage of the building largely happens in ways that seem oblivious to this. Yeoh's suggestion is that the living aspect of the building is informal, operating in the interstices between official narratives (Yeoh 2005:954). This apparent multiplicity of incongruous uses is indicative of the nature of contemporary society. The building's success is that it allows for this unintended engagement with its spaces, not that it evokes history or culture consciously in any of its diverse users. Where culture is implied, it may be in ways unrelated to historical origins. An example is the apparent resemblance of Singapore's Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay complex, designed by English architects Michael Wilford and Partners, to giant durians. In reference to this, Yeoh discusses the way in which meanings are 'not always hegemonic but constantly inflected, unsettled and challenged by the possibility of alternative readings on the part of others (consumers and social groups with different interpretations and claims on the landscapes)' (Yeoh 2005:952).

Some recent architectural approaches to developing localised architecture on both a cultural and an infrastructural level within a Southeast Asian context might be found in entries for the Gotong Royong City competition. Developed as part of the 2009 International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, this architectural competition was named after the Indonesian term for mutual assistance. Its aims were broadly to explore kinds of architectural interventions that might generate *gotong royong* in contemporary Jakarta, and so to consider cultural sustainability as an 'indigenous principle for thinking and action' rather than a set of visual, physical, or material gestures (*Gotong Royong City* 2009). The winner, by NUNC architecten, is a literal interpretation of building as machine. Visualised as a 'Vertical Cleaning Kampong', it is innovative in its incorporation of waste processing as both physical structure and employment generator for its impoverished inhabitants and acceptance of commercial reality in the use of its facade for advertising. As a vertical village, however, it is otherwise a curious echo of Singapore's HDB blocks in its aim of creating green space by the relocation of its previously shanty-dwelling population into the sky, a green space that presumably will not last long unless Jakarta's population pressures are eased. The second prize-winner, mamostudio + UPH University, led by Indonesian architect Adi Purnomo, posits 'Jakarta Sponge City'. This is a far more diffuse conception, which involves collecting a large proportion of the city's otherwise wasted water through a variety of methods, applied, depending on the typology of the buildings, in different parts of the urban area. The third prize-winner, GAPBA Architects, propose a 'Field Estate' consisting of circular platforms for a variety of purposes: farming, water collection, energy production, playground, etc., which would also act like a series of large umbrellas to provide shade for the informal activities below. The second proposal, the only Indonesian place-getter, is the least tangible in terms of visual image or physical gesture. Its strength is in its evocation of an inhabited watershed landscape, but underlying this is a proposal for the enhancement of the existing physical built environment, rather than replacing it or covering it over with new infrastructure.

Conclusions

The Kanazawa Resolutions' concept of 'dialogic coexistence' implies a closer reading of the relationships between people and the specific urban landscapes they inhabit, as well as the broader development of an increasingly diffused contemporary culture. The creation and acceptance of contemporary identity, however it is defined, is part of a process of gaining control over subjectivity. Whether self-conscious or not, it is a process of negotiating the parts of 'traditional' contemporary cultures which can be used to define a new position; a position that is necessarily partial, always problematic and under constant pressure to prove its political or cultural legitimacy. Such identities might be described as hybrid, but there is a 'fundamental difference between hybridity as a comfortably given state of being and hybridity as an excruciating act of self-production by and through multiple traces' (Radhakrishnan 1996:159). Hegemonic nationalism, atavistic (often religiously-based) cultural/ethnic essentialism, and post-national hybridity meet in a three-way tussle. There is no return to 'pure sources', not only because they never existed, but because the attempt is futile in a world of ever greater communications and linkages. Translation, however, can be about gain as well as loss (Rushdie 1991). There are moments and locations where, potentially, new signs of identity are emerging. Bhabha has long suggested that the moment of encounter between different cultures is important, rather than the authority of antecedents, and that such moments occur within specific locations (Bhabha 1994:35). It is in the interactions between cultures that hitherto unnoticed meanings can be uncovered and newness can be gradually wrought out of moments of contact. This suggestion goes against notions of discrete cultures or discrete selves, notions which are deeply ingrained in the narratives of nations or 'peoples'. These notions are the instruments by which power is exercised by those who see themselves as the arbiters or guardians of 'their' culture. The propagation of ideas that define 'discrete cultures' serves to normalise them, so that their basis goes unquestioned. The suggestion here is that by understanding the structure within which such power is exercised its 'regime of truth' can be exposed (Bhabha 1994:67). Ambivalence can be productive. This is, however, not a desire

for fragmentation or assimilation, but for integration, the desire 'to join', to remake social solidarity out of the elements of both tradition and modernity.

The approaches surveyed in this paper exist within built environments where, currently, the prevalent construction paradigms are corporate consumerist modernity and economic pragmatism. An alternative architectural response to these paradigms is to evoke the pre-colonial past through the use of pavilion typologies, sometimes providing beautiful spaces and forms, but ones with limited application to urban contexts. Both approaches seem indifferent to the qualities of Southeast Asian cities evident in observations of life on their streets. The UNESCO resolutions argue that cultural sustainability is not just a matter of the preservation or reinvigoration of the past, but an ongoing dialogue between a locality and its people (Nadarajah & Yamamoto 2007). By definition, dialogue complicates this as it involves two definable entities and so implies a degree of consensus over of what constitutes the identities of each. The disparate nature of the architecture discussed in this paper suggests that such identities cannot be so readily categorised, that definitions of local identity are plural and contestable. This does not completely negate the usefulness of the UNESCO definition, but does indicate that older definitions of cultures as discrete entities still resonate within its conceptualisations of cultural heritage. The question remains: is active engagement with the constantly shifting, often improvised nature of the Asian street necessary to make architecture culturally relevant in this context? Or, alternatively, will it passively facilitate such life regardless? Perhaps the implication of both the analyses of Chi, Ngiom, Michiels and others, and the architectural approaches found in Jumsai's work and the Gotong Royong competition, is that architecture needs to engage with its traditional role as the embodiment of cultural symbolism (updated to include contemporary cultural flows), while at the same time remaining open to constant re-interpretations, re-imaginings and re-appropriations of its fabric, its spaces, and its surroundings.

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