

Architecture and the Asian Cultural Dilemma in the Age of Globalisation

By Tay Kheng Soon for Arcasia Congress to be held in Kuala Lumpur in September 2000:

SYNOPSIS:

The issue is topical. Globalisation is but a new name for an old phenomenon, that of transnational capitalism. Architectural practice in its present form is in crisis due to more effective penetration by foreign actors and certain inherent weaknesses. The old defense strategy of architects is based presumed intimate local knowledge. This argument is a cultural political argument. This will no longer work, as culture is itself changing due to globalised influences. The problem to the Asian architects is caused by open global competition of strong against weak, a competition of unequals. What needs to be done? We need to look at ourselves if there is a condition of underdevelopment in the architecture profession in Asia. If so, this is where attention must be addressed and solutions must be found to place Asian architectural development on par with the rest of the world. The problem exists, besides many unfavourable practice factors, because of a certain freezing of culture in Asian consciousness. This problem is a defensive reaction against encroaching Western cultural hegemony. It exists in the thinking and educating of Asians, including architects. While many external factors related to architecture cannot be addressed, education and thinking issues can and therefore must. The gravest problem in thinking about what is to be done is the prevailing misunderstanding of Modernity, Modernism and Modernisation. Thus modernity is associated with the West and thus is falsely posited as somehow antithetical to Asian heritage. This positioning causes a cultural and intellectual limbo, which freezes Asian, consciousness. Asia must be able to distinguish Modernity in itself as distinct from its manifestation in Western history to free itself from the West versus East dilemma. Asia will then discover the roots of its own Modernity in its ancient and more recent history in terms of the moments of autonomy and intrinsic realisations. When it is able to embark on this, the false dichotomy between East and West will dissolve and a new vigorous scientific and aesthetic culture can emerge. In doing so, it will unfreeze the auto stereotyping of its own cultures done for the sake of maintaining identity. If Asia does not do this, it cannot liberate its own cultural and intellectual energy. Asia must therefore launch its own Asian Modernity Project. Without this, Asia cannot effectively break away from dependence on Western intellectual and aesthetic initiatives. The Asian Modernity Project can be launched in Asian Architecture Schools where there is relative autonomy and need to detach from the embrace of Asian Cultural and political conservatism and traditional authoritarianism to acquire autonomous modern aesthetics. It is this authoritarianism that stifles the growth of a culture of autonomy and therefore modern abstract aesthetics. Since learning architecture is primarily about learning the abstract aesthetics of form and space besides the technicalities, architecture schools are the natural venue for the Asian Modernity Project to start. Once the Modern Project is launched, Asian Architecture schools and the profession can take a leading position in the modernising of Asian culture itself. Architecture is then well on the way to becoming a causal force in society rather than remaining in the backwaters of development made more rapid and coarse by globalisation.

INTRODUCTION

The reason to discuss the issue of globalisation is a gnawing concern that architectural practice, as we know it and as we cherish it, is under threat. We know that it will have to change but in what direction? A quick scan suggests that there are four key dimensions. Politics, economics, culture and environment. I will not discuss value chains and possibly value webs, not because these are unimportant but because of the constraints of time. Value chains and webs are vital within the mechanics of project realisation. This paper will only focus on the cultural dimensions such as political culture, autonomy, aesthetics, and education. Contrary to the pragmatist view, my feeling is that if we can get the aesthetics right, other issues can fall into place. Much of the discussion in this paper will be on aesthetics. Aesthetics will be taken to mean the total capacity to give order to form and space in both axiomatic and programmatic senses.

I feel that among the many issues that affect our profession, there are those we can affect and there are those totally outside our influence. Aesthetics is certainly one we can affect. Thus, we need to theorise the situation accurately if we are going to come to terms with the issues and even shape the outcomes satisfactorily. Favoured topics of concern such as new design styles, identity, tradition etc. are mostly embedded in cultural and professional politics. Much of the past two decades of discussion in Arcasia have been focused this way because it is believed that problems of loss ground lie in cultural defense and professional tie-ups. What if the logic of globalisation ultimately subsumes culture in a borderless world and culturocentrism is out of place, where then does the cultural argument stand?

Thus, I feel that it is wise to take a close look at ourselves first before we look elsewhere. And this is what I shall do in the time I have. The tone of what I shall say will appear rather self-critical but it is to urge creative realism and informed action. It is by no means defeatist. It is to prepare for effective measures.

MODERNITY, MODERNISM AND MODERNISATION

At the outset, it is necessary to clarify these three terms as they are crucial to our discussion and upon which there is much confusion. Modernisation is simple the process of technology transfer and incorporation. Modernism, is the term commonly used interchangeably with terms such as, "Modern Architecture or Modern Art". These terms refer to the style characteristics of the designed objects of the 1930's to the 1960's and even beyond. Modernity is the critical concept. It is a set of values. It is not a style and not a technology. It is a revolutionary set of values that overturned all traditional values especially in relation to autonomous modes of inquiry and relationships. Thus modernity can be summarised as the culture of autonomy arising from the notions of autonomy of reason, aesthetics and morality.

THE ASIAN CONTEXT

Situations of rapid economic growth are by definition highly artificial. Politics is the great driving force. Politics in new states in the present era is premised on modernisation within a slowly changing set of traditional social values and attitudes. There is a gap between the modernisation process and the relative lack of modernity of the culture in which it is taking place. Thus, politics in new states experiences a fundamental contradiction between old attitudes and the emerging new modern ethos. Ruling elites therefore have fundamental dilemmas in managing the contradiction, though this is concealed. In this sense therefore, any discussion about the prospects of architecture and architectural practice in new states is likewise subject to the dilemmas of politics. The dilemma for the artistic and creative community is that politics is the antithesis of

aesthetics and therefore, redress from politics is inconsistent and contradictory. It is thus often inadequate and inappropriate.

The dilemmas, in their broadest sense, are therefore cultural dilemmas projected onto systems of governance, social control measures and the result is a coarsening of human values. This context is underpinned, despite differences in political ideology by pre-existing Asian political culture that is essentially authoritarian. We need to understand the dynamics of our cultural/political milieu if we are to understand the materiality of our aesthetic practice. So please bear with me as I take you on an excursion through the cultural/political landscape of our present Asian times.

ARCHITECTURE IN A SITUATION OF MODERNISATION WITHOUT MODERNITY

Without modernity, architecture and cultural expression is predicated on token gestures and ritual responses. Architects have to make appropriate gestures towards traditionalist values. Simple refined designs are not appreciated. Designs must reflect the latest trends and be encrusted with details and decorations. The operating expectation is that designs must be bigger, brighter, louder and more.

Within the modernisation paradigm, architecture is thus merely a commodity signifier of the power and pomp of the sponsor. For most architects, architecture is a service industry and less a matter of personal conviction. Thus, aesthetics is a matter of addition, multiplication, enlargement and ornamentation. Desired symbols, stylistic features, whatever these may be, are applied, enlarged and exaggerated, overstated, emphasised etc. The intention is to aggrandize the image both for the client and the architect. This design attitude is not modern. It is traditionalism practiced in the contemporary free for all situation.

Historically, Asia never experienced a separation of powers in political space. Thus there never existed the necessary preconditions for autonomy and democracy to arise as it did in Europe from the 15th Century onwards. In Asia there never was an autonomous mercantile class, to sustain independent power capable of offsetting and balancing against the prevailing power. Ideology and circumstance prevented such a development for hundreds of years. For example, when a fledgling trading merchant class began to emerge and to threaten to finance rebellion in South China against Northern domination, the Northern authorities put a swift end to all shipping and foreign trade by decreeing the burning of boats and shifting of coastal settlements inland. This occurred during the late Ming Dynasty. No economic autonomy, no cultural autonomy.

Thus, the theme of suppression is a common enough feature of the Asian political landscape to need more comment. Asia's political system remained centralised and authoritarian in all its reflexes through to the present time. Despite institutionalised democracy in some of Asia's new States after de-colonisation, the authoritarian culture is still deeply embedded and still practiced within and sometimes without the institutional framework. What has this to do with architecture, one will ask? This is where the inquiry must enter into an examination of culture and aesthetics.

Indeed, the sustaining of such a political culture by brut power alone is not viable without an acquiescing, if not condoning polity. Thus one needs to find the underpinning values mass culture. This can be found in the family. The authoritarian culture is mirrored in family socialisation practices almost uniformly throughout Asia. Though this has been widely discussed in sociological and political science literature, there has not been any

discussion of the effect of this authoritarian culture on non-verbal knowledge and aesthetics. Perhaps, Asia's rich cultural and artistic heritage has masked the problem. Fictions of Asian Heritage also mask the hidden tyranny from consciousness.

Because of this, a distinction between traditional aesthetics and modern aesthetics has also to be drawn. The problem is this. High standards in traditional aesthetics were achieved through refinement of fixed conventions evolved over time and not through the exercise of abstract aesthetics because there was none. The contemporary situation is totally different. Much of new designs are unprecedented if we want to take into account ecology, density, climate and cultural significance all together. Thus there is need for a new approach to planning and aesthetics, capable of making coherent and consistent forms and spaces and poetic expressions in our high density and rapid-change contemporary urban situation. In this the West and our own traditions have no direct precedents for us. This is the difficulty.

Thus, Asia needs a new capability to make form. Only mastery of modern aesthetics can provide the tool to do so. Only autonomous individuals can become consciousness of and master intrinsic aesthetics. This is the critical nexus.

The contemporary Asian crisis in design is the inability to make coherent and consistent form. And a new aesthetics is not theorised and therefore not teachable. I believe that if new aesthetics is teachable and actually embarked upon in our Asian schools then, Asia will have a powerful cognitive tool to realise its own design programs and cultural revitalisation in conjunction with forces arrayed to assert Asianess in the Globalised world. Failing this, Asian designs will continue to take the cue from Western intellectual and aesthetic initiatives. Why would Asian sponsors buy derived designs once they can afford to buy the originals? This is a root cause of the Asian architect's dilemma.

COGNITIVE LEARNING

Modern aesthetics is aesthetics that which is derived from consciousness of intrinsic formal and spatial properties generally and in particular structures made for human habitation. Aesthetics is an autonomous field of knowledge about the formal order that carries the cultural meanings of all objects be they traditional or contemporary. Aesthetics therefore stands on its own as the systematics of sensibilities about form separate from the dictates of power, piety and conventional or derived meaning. Aesthetics is therefore not about beauty or taste. These are social constructs. Aesthetics is indeed, unconnected to any universe of meaning. It is the vehicle of meaning. It is not the meaning. It is therefore not referenced to any canon of taste. It is a consciousness of intrinsic formal and spatial properties arising from the nature of materials, geometry, structure, functionality and connectivity comprehended as autonomous cognitive categories in and of themselves.

Modern aesthetics is thus the vehicle upon which any burden of meaning may satisfactorily be carried. It is precisely here that a break with the superficial features of past aesthetics must be made if the deep principles of its order are to be extracted. If only Asian designers are free to address the specific issues of place and time they can become, with their sponsors and allies true change-agents in the making of a new Asia. The aim is therefore not anti West but claim the right to parity.

The problem is how to uncover or discover the new modern aesthetic. It is not an issue in the West. This is why it has not been pursued there. In Asia, it is a must. It is no simple matter because cognitive learning, while it can be systematized, has to be acquired in an

embodied manner, i.e., involving the whole person and certainly not through rote. Otherwise, such learning is merely another indoctrination process, subtle though it may be.

MY EXPERIENCE IN TEACHING AESTHETICS

What can be said from my experience of 'teaching' aesthetics is that it requires great flexibility, lucidity and sensitivity on the part as the 'teacher' in establishing the discovery process with the students without indoctrinating them with my own tastes. From my experiments in cognitive learning with architecture students, I have realised that it is possible to involve students in an aesthetic self-realisation process. To avoid indoctrination, the process has firstly to invoke innate cognitive capability. Each student has to recognize that he or she possesses such capabilities. In their socialisation, knowledge has always been presumed to come from outside. It is a totally new experience for them to discover knowledge encoded from within themselves. Once they realise this, the enthusiasm and energy is released prodigiously. The process requires a carefully planned sequence of exercises of appropriate cognitive challenges and situations in order to elicit genuine cognitive responses and a watchfulness on the part of the teacher is necessary to head off closure as students will strive for a new comfort zone prematurely. The danger of this premature closure is that it may develop false confidence and this can be damaging to the further development of sensitivities of the individual. All experiences and cognition have then to be consciously *re-cognized* by the student through the discipline of precise verbalisation. I have found that this process is a very difficult task because students tend to fall back onto accustomed catchwords and phrases *to re-cognize* their sense discoveries. This thwarts the learning process of the power of the primary realisation for the individual. The process of linking accurate descriptions with visual and sense categories is thus not easy but through persistence, possible.

Personality is no doubt challenged in the process. The break away from habituated symbolic cognitive categories which have substituted for real cognitive categories represents a break from the normal comfort zone of consciousness. Unlocking the ritualised habits of symbolic substitution requires patience and skill on the part of the teacher and courage and confidence on the part of the student. Fortunately, the cognitive learning process is intensely joyful when authentic self-realisation occurs. The discomfort has therefore its own intrinsic reward. Thus the cognitive learning process has an inherent liberating and edifying effect on individuals.

The subsequent difficulty is that for the learning to be deeply embodied there has to be a long period of positive reinforcement in the general studio design culture. During the entire period of architecture study, the aesthetic cognitive felicitations must be transferred and echoed in all the other educational activities so as to connect naturally to other fields of knowledge. The entire educational environment has thus to be redesigned around the primary cognitive learning experience to reinforce it and to tap the new energies it releases. Half measures will not do.

Still, the studio design culture in any architecture school is a micro-culture within the total culture. But this is the only space within a modernising traditionalist society where it is possible to make the necessary breakthrough. In the mainstream culture outside the school, aesthetics as primary cognition is a series of learnt rituals and symbols; a series of stylisms. Aesthetics is thus politics. It is stultifying. It inhibits free cognition and critical thinking and sensing. But, the problem is that it is not immediately obvious how cultures do this. Cultures, in their nature, conceal consciousness of its own workings. In the

relative freedom of a studio-design culture, there is a chance for real learning and change to occur.

AUTHORITARIAN SOCIALISATION AND COGNITION

Traditional socialisation under authoritarian conditions has persisted into the present time for pragmatic and practical reasons. Cognition is therefore a crucial subject in thinking through how to strengthen our profession. Lacking independent cognitive capability, Asian designers will always have to be derivative in their design approach. They thus cannot be freely inventive in finding coherent and consistent design languages to address design problems unique to their setting. Presently, images rather than issues drive most Asian designers and they have to premise their aesthetics on Western derivatives because they cannot articulate their own. Cognitive rigidity and conservativeness cause this.

Cognition is affected by culture. Filial piety, as one of the key values in Asian culture is therefore a candidate for study. Psychologist, David Y.F.Ho (1993 and 1994) of Hong Kong University reports research on this topic that, **"....people holding filial attitudes tend to adopt a passive, uncritical, and uncreative orientation towards learning; to hold fatalistic, superstitious and stereotyped beliefs; and to be authoritarian, dogmatic and conformist – a constellation of attributes pointing towards cognitive conservatism"**. Is this more finding generally applicable to other traditionalistic Asian societies? If so, these characteristics would explain the lack of critical spirit and the general discomfort with anything unfamiliar. My supposition is that cognitive conservativeness and rigidity must have a negative effect on aesthetic ability. Having said this, the pattern of socialisation is explainable in terms of its survival value. It ensures that individuals can cope with adverse situations with persistence and fortitude and individuals socialised this way are more able to defer immediate gratification for future gain. They have the capacity to suffer.

ASIA'S FIRST DILEMMA

Asia's struggle for self-determination was achieved through identification between its elites and the masses. Once independence was attained, that initial populist spirit had to be reigned in, in the interest of state and the economy. How this was done constituted the first Asian Dilemma. It is how to rein in the creative impulse of the people without seeming to breaking faith with them. And so, the fledgling culture of autonomy, liberated in the run up to independence, was diverted if not truncated, by what ever means expedient in the consolidation of state power and the forging of favourable investment climate. In cases where the efforts generated rapid economic growth, the shift of values legitimised the ruling ideology and leadership. Thus the old authoritarian cultures persisted but under much changed circumstances. Most people submit to the new order so long as the benefits justify it. Deficiencies in human development and the truncation of the culture of autonomy were put aside until recently, in the wake of the 1997 currency crisis. In countries where economic benefits left much to be desired, the economic crisis, of course, turned into a political crisis. In the better managed nation-states, the portent of a 'new economy' premised on knowledge, initiative and entrepreneurship brought about a realisation that it is time to open up the culture. This is the second Asian Dilemma.

ASIA'S SECOND DILEMMA

Thus those Asian Tiger and Dragon economies which have caught-up are now attempting to liven-up neglected critical and creative human capacities. To do this, Asian ruling elites have to allow space for human autonomy in the political and cultural environment for spontaneity, aesthetic sensibility, inventiveness and smart-work to happen. They also need to attract "smart" money and smart minds who go with it. Such minds are intolerant

of heavy-handed command and control cultures. Asian ruling elites want to achieve this transformation but they do not want to risk the political and cultural order on which the present growth and their very existence depend. This is the new, second Asian dilemma. Thus, it is within this dilemma that there are possibilities in liberating a new aesthetic discourse, essential to healthy growth of architectural practice. The old politics cannot engender creative realism and sensitive aesthetics. These are produced by free minds and unfettered senses. We as architects, of course, cannot address the political issues, but there are issues within our profession and particularly in our schools that we can. These, we therefore must.

RECONSTITUTION OF HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY BY TRANSNATIONAL CAPITALISM

Globalisation is nothing new. It is a process that began in the age of exploration, the industrial revolution and the period of colonialism. Globalisation is but a new name for an increasingly extensive transnational capital. In its present form, transnational capitalism insinuates itself into every crevice of life everywhere. It therefore has the potential to affect everything as never before. Even time is changed. Present time is a conflation of time. There is now a contemporanisation of values and perceptions. All values are open to media influences emanating from economically and culturally powerful sources as never before. No value is sacred. There is no tranquility. Thus, there is need to theorise the present if one wants to navigate it. In the meanwhile, all traditions are in decline with little that is indigenous and authentic to replace it. Since there is no aesthetic capability of coping with the barrage of media conveyed images coherent cultural expression is also in disarray. Thus Asia passively continues to be successively washed over by the changing tides of Western taste. This is the persistent condition of post-coloniality and now globalisation. The other response is kitsch.

POSTMODERNISM AND KITSCH

While kitsch is the security blanket of new middle classes everywhere, in Asia, at the present time, it draws courage from the Post Modernism of the West. For the West the reasons are different. The blandness and the ubiquity of industrial or mechanist modernism had run its course. The reaction is post modernism; a reaction against the instrumental rationality of the previous century. But legitimate Western philosophical battles only serve as backdrop for the new stylism sweeping across Asia and the entire non-western world. In Asia, the new taste is driven by the new middle-class's penchant for kitsch not philosophy. Kitsch is the taste for cozy images of classiness.

Thus, from the '80s Asia saw versions of Aldo Rossi's stripped-down contextual classicism but without the context; Ventury's complexity and contradiction but minus the complexity and certainly without contradiction in the simplistic regurgitation of style. Then there are versions of Charles Moore's lyrical recollections except, in the context of Asia; there just is not the basis for such recollections, at least not in terms of Moore's images. Yet again, Michael Graves's ironical pastiche has triggered off a whole rash of look-alikes but undertaken without any irony. The list goes on as each month's architecture journals arrive to stimulate new appetites and as Asians travel and see more.

THE ASIAN MODERNITY PROJECT

Thus, there has been a void in the Asian emancipative discourse after the explosion of independence energy. Aesthetic dysfunctionality is now the symptom of intellectual neglect. The misfit between mainstream traditional Asian values and the new modernising situation remains unbridged. The void is filled by makeshift, make-do styles.

Once the means is available, Asian building sponsors will buy Western designs by Western designers. This is cultural cringe.

Modernisation has been occurring without modernity. In Asia, Modernity has not been distinguished from modernisation and, in turn, from Westernisation. Because these distinctions are not made, the conscious makeover of history and culture has not progressed. Asia does not excavate its own past to become conscious of its own incipient modernity. The spontaneously autonomy and intrinsic philosophies remain buried. Thus Asia remains suspended between a fictional past and an ever-receding future. Confusing modernity with westernisation Asia robbed itself of the chance to recognise and reconstituting its own modernity. Thus, Modernity is not de-coupled from Western history. The culture of autonomy of reason, of aesthetics and morality could not evolve in Asia. Its possibility is an exciting prospect.

At the "We Asians, Between past and Future", conference in Singapore early this year, the prospect of an Asian Modernity was the topic of discussion. In a keynote paper by Dipesh Chakrabarty, a historian and specialist on culture noted that an Asian Modernity can grow from an analysis and identification of Asia's precocious moments of autonomy in Asia's past. He makes the point that Modernity is not the monopoly of the West. There have been moments of Modernity in Asia that can be constituted as a contemporary consciousness of Asian Modernity. This is the challenge.

Once the legendary debate between LaoTse and Confucius is understood as a debate about intrinsics versus extrinsics and about the autonomous versus the formulated, the process of cultural review of Chinese culture and values can begin with vigour. For culture and tradition to be causative in contemporary time culture must not be frozen. It is because it is auto-stereotyped in the interest of identity self defense. A new revitalised Asian consciousness and creative sensibility is possible.

When Buddha's compassion is seen as an intensely modern personal existential quest; when Tagore's transcendental poetry and his art is seen the metabolising of other cultures into his own is understood as the workings of a autonomous sensibility and when Rizal's deliberate sacrifice of his own political self can be seen as an existential choice is contrasted against the mutuality of his intimate relationships as manifestations of his modern morality, and when Kartini's efforts in emancipative education are integrated into Asia's everyday consciousness as endogenous modernity, a new modern Asia will be born out of the ashes of its past and the murkiness of the present. It is then that Asians will be able to freely metabolise all "outside", influences even as they can freely contribute towards others in a coherent and consistent manner. Only when Asia claims Modernity as its own, will Asian contemporary consciousness triggers a vigorous new creativity from within its own newfound confidence. Innovation will then come naturally, invention; discovery, architecture, poetry and literature will grow alongside the economy and politics. False categories such as East and West disappear. Autonomous sensibilities and intelligences make no such distinctions. Any distinctiveness in expression arises purely from real emotions derived from experience and commitment to place and time. Aesthetic capability is a natural extension of human intelligence, not the contrived province of mystical aesthetes and charlatans. Aesthetic capability cannot therefore be imported: it has to grow from within. The conditions for its growth depend on the fostering of a culture of autonomy. Thus, a new integrative and functionally complex imagination can come out from the responsible, intelligent and sensitive living of everyday life. Architecture has a role to play in this.

LOCKING AND UNLOCKING SENSIBILITIES

Chakrabarty's account of Tagore's visual aesthetics is telling. That he was able to metabolise Japanese Ink Wash technique into the aesthetics of his painterly activities is significant for it illustrates that despite the obvious differences between Tagore's painting tradition, Tagore's modernity allowed him to transcend his own aesthetic field to embrace and metabolise a new and unfamiliar influence successfully. Surely, this is a powerful illustration of the possibilities of a new modern aesthetic. Modernity is the key to integrative new sensibilities.

The more serious effect on Asian contemporary culture is auto-amnesia. This is the dynamics of the auto stereotyping of one's own cultural identity to cope or react against the world. The example of Edwin Reishauer's "Memorandum on Policy Towards Japan", 1942 as cited by Naouki Saki, a professor of comparative literature at Cornell University, is illustrative of the conscious manipulation of cultural symbols for inter state purposes. The USA policy to prevent Japan from going communist and to ensure that she never becomes a militaristic power again was first enunciated by Reishauer who became the first US ambassador to Japan after the war. The recommendation was paradoxically to reinforce Japanese cultural identity as symbolised by the Emperor. Though everyone knows that mobilization of the Japanese war effort was based on the divine inspiration of the Emperor, yet Reishauer's advise was never to sully the name of the emperor in the post-war scapegoating process. This would embitter even the liberals among Japanese against the victors and lead to undesirable reactions and consequences. In effect, Japanese culture was reinforced and exonerated but it could be argued that a certain freezing of Japanese identity also occurred and this prevented Japan from evolving cultural soft power globally. Had the Japanese internationalised their mastery of world languages and culture, the shape of globalisation today would be very different. Identity can be a limiting force.

When consciousness has been shunted and stunted by dwelling on fictions of Asianess the process stultifies the imagination. It stultifies creativity. Without the creative revitalisation of culture especially revisiting its stultifying aspects, consciousness and confidence and creativity to build human internal resilience anew would be slow. As such, Asia, even as it develops materially, opens itself to be recolonised and enslaved in other ways. It is useless to blame the wolf if the lambs continue to wander around aimlessly bleating for the shepherd's protection.

THE EFFECT ON ARCHITECTURE DUE TO TIME-COMPRESSSION

If hegemonic forces are so powerful, what can establish a frozen national culture do, caught, as it is between kitsch and cultural deep-freeze? What is the role of architecture in such a context? Is it hopeless? If architecture is to play any positive role in shaping a new Asian cultural consciousness rather than just being icing on the cake, architecture has to be at the centre of a cultural-epistemological resurgence. And it is worth remembering that architecture has one tremendous asset compared to other forms of discourse. It is a highly visible, experiential form of knowledge. It therefore has great potential for mass impact. Conversely it can also serve for cultural stultification. The choice is up to the architects and their allies.

But first, let us consider this question in terms of, what I shall call, the 'time compression effect'. Asia is moving out of its past at an unprecedented speed after the initial Nationalistic phase beginning prewar WW2 and accelerating immediately after the war. Time is compressed in many ways. Concept of time itself is being homogenised into linear sequential time – i.e., industrial-commercial time. It is also telescoped. Past,

present and future are pushed together. Modernisation is juxtaposed against traditionalist attitudes and ideas and post-modernism is set against modernity. There is no time to digest all the new influences and new business is layered over unfinished business. Different segments of society are in different time zones. The present is thus a compressed layering of different attitudes. There is no time to distinguish proximate from ultimate effects and causes, modernisation and modernity. The politics of rapid economic growth grants legitimacy to traditionalist regimes cloaked in modernisation guises. Sins are glossed over so long as material benefits are offered.

But concealed within current political and economic folds are the seeds of the past. Sterile seeds and fertile seeds and seeds of buried genius. These may sprout unpredictably. And ruling regimes are ever vigilant to nip things in the bud. Aspiring power seekers may exploit the situation for their selfish aims. This is another aspect of the compression-effect, as such, modernity; the culture of autonomy runs parallel with the authoritarian reflexes. Consciousness of Asian modernity is being sacrificed to pragmatism. Modernity is thus the neglected child of the Asia's economic 'miracle'. Until modernity is seen as natural to Asian culture, the Asian cultural dilemma remains unresolvable. To be or not to be Modern is the Asian Dilemma. This is the cause of the Asian 'cultural and technological cringe'.

DEVELOPING A SERIOUS ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DESIGN: BEYOND ECO-STYLING

Instead of developing capacity to become an equal player capable of transforming the deadly game of global environmental destruction into one of environmental repair through intelligent use of resources, Asia may simply be volunteering its markets and resources to accelerate the damages. One of the most appropriate arguments is environmental protection since this has to be a global responsibility. This is what Koichi Nagashima calls the Glocal approach. While environmental technologies are basic knowledge and are universal in their principles, application in a specific building type and to a specific location and environment requires plenty of local knowledge. This ensures true multidisciplinary collaborative effort in a design. Thus, local Asian architects should develop real expertise in environmental design. Obsession with styling or such superficialities erodes the possibility of a collaborative scenario of allied specialisations. Time compression here is help in equalising opportunities. Asia, like all other countries are not absolved from global environmental responsibility especially when doing more with less is now a real technical possibility. As it is, "design" in Asia seems to be understood by building sponsors as the addition of idiosyncratic coverings, doing less with more!

ON HEALTHY COMPETITION

If there is open competition among equals, the results can be edifying. Contests between unequals is pure murder. It is a sport for the cruel. Is there an inequality in ability between Asian designers and their Western counterparts? There will, of course, be no agreement, even if this is so, in which areas and in what aspects. Most Asian designers will however stake a claim on superior sensitivity to their own culture and their own environment against foreign competition. But no one will admit aesthetic inadequacy. Especially in the post-colonial world of equality among nations, no one culture will grant superiority to another even if inferiority is felt to exist in any area. Indeed, it is also difficult to agree on what aspects of difference to measure and what criteria to apply in the evaluation especially in subjective areas such as architecture, design and aesthetics. But deeds reveal. Thus, in the globalisation of the construction industry and the globalisation of architectural practice presents an intractable problem to national

architects who stand by watching the plum projects go to foreign architects, often aided and abetted by their own governments and big developers. The Asian architectural community might as well admit that such an undeclared perception exists among the senior levels of their own governments and the corporate leaders of their own big businesses, that is if they want to address the issue rather than gripe. Invoking nationalist sentiment in a globalised economy is shooing the wolves. It will only receive scorn.

ON THE ROLE OF NATIONAL ARCHITECTURE INSTITUTES: IMPROVING THE PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH:

These list of issues are some of the key issues being considered by architecture institutes in Asia. Until there is a coherent theoretical basis for their consideration, the measures proposed may not be effective because they are defensive. What I am advocating is a more activist approach starting from addressing our internal weaknesses. Only then can there be strength and moral high ground.

Architect selection procedures

Paying architects to be surrogate patrons

Remunerating through factoring

Taking the moral high ground

Taking a stand on architecture and urbanisation

Striking up alliances with end-users

Alliances with technological innovators

Design-Architect led building consortia

New Architecture schools premised on a new learning by doing and theorising strategy

ASIAN ARCHITECTURAL INTELLECTUAL RESOURCES

Finally, I must make a plea, especially in the context of media deluge emanating from the West that Asia systematically publishes its thoughts on Architecture and disseminate these widely. For a start, all Arcasia papers and conferences should be published and put on websites. We must go beyond image, style, gesture and symbol in our architecture efforts. We owe it to ourselves to re-imagine the present and re-invent our profession.

REITERATING THE CASE FOR DEEP REVIEW

Colonialism, forced treaties and various forms of inveiglement and seduction have added to the legacy of unfinished cultural business in Asia being left unfinished. Until Asia recognises that this unfinished business is key to its creative future, it will continue to labour within its long-standing internal weaknesses despite draconian institutions and secondhand lifestyles grasping at the trappings of modernism now attempting feeble adjustments in the light of new global imperatives. Asia needs and can address its own issues.

The past three decades of rapid economic growth have concealed inherent Asian weaknesses for all the vaunted claims of Asian Democracy and Asian Values. But since these have succeeded so well in the catch-up phase of the economy, these values have enjoyed strong endorsement from foreign investors and also legitimisation from those citizens, who have benefited from the economic growth engendered, little has thus changed. The occasion for change in culture, politics and values comes now in the wake of the 1997 currency meltdown and revelation of the fragility of the kind of social policy and economy practiced. Thus there are calls for change. It must start with the mind.