

Cosmopolitan Urbanism and Architecture & Paradigm Change in Research and Education in in Asia

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Abstract

The genesis of human settlements is a continuous process of production and layering of spaces in different scale levels across historical periods. The architectural production in our Asian context is always cosmopolitan, hybrid and eclectic, due to historical links and inclusive cultural attitude. Our common building typologies – and also our modernization processes - are the product of the cosmopolitan communities, the articulation of the multi-layered tangible and intangible traditions, and the direct response to local micro-climate of this region. Diversity, eclecticism, fusion, acculturation, adaptation, can perhaps best describe the nature of our architecture and urbanism.

Our architectural education now is in dire needs to develop a design-research culture to deal with social and environmental changes. Contemporarily we are in an urgent need to find resolutions to address serious problems posed by the climate change, ideological conflicts, economic greed, depletion of resources, and social justice. Research in architecture should be based on the reality on the ground and not just based on alien theories. Design should be based on the understanding of the real contextual problems, to formulate sensible, sensitive, and holistic solutions.

Learning the lessons and wisdoms from our cosmopolitan architecture and urbanism is an important and necessary step towards the improvements and paradigm change in architectural education, research, and practice in Asian context.

COSMOPOLITAN CITIES AND ARCHITECTURE IN ASIA

In Asia the cultural and geographical boundaries are always blurring, overlapping, or intersecting, and cannot clearly be defined. People in different places, islands or continents are moving around as continuous flux, communicating, and intermingling from past till present, contributing to each other, and producing hybrid, fused, diverse architecture and material culture. For generations many communities in Asian region have demonstrated their ability in preserving some of the settlements' primary elements, basic morphological patterns and layers, and the intangible layers, such as: urbanism, cultural collages, interweaving of community diversity, hybridity in the built-forms and the material culture, persistence and permanence of urban patterns and artefacts, etc.

The cosmopolitan culture has been formed through complex layering processes of various cultures, ideologies, economies, and ecosystems sustained over a long extended historical period and clearly manifested in the complexity and hybridity of the production of its settlements' morphology and architectural typologies. Asian societies and cities are characterized by rich and complex collage and interweaving of cultural diversity, hybridity in the built-forms and variety in material culture.

Early cosmopolitan settlements that bore the seeds of urbanity appeared at the connection point between the outside worlds with the interior hinterland through rivers. The forested hills and mountains provided steady supply of fresh water through the riverine systems to the community living in these settlements for their daily life and cultivations. The choice of location for the built-up area of the settlement is carefully considered against natural and supra-natural factors, in order to ensure the harmonious relationships between human, nature, and the spirits. The forests and

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water sources are protected against violations and destructions through rituals and social rules to ensure the survivability of the community's existence and its livelihood.

The vernacular building traditions of Asia is the results of adaptation to physical land- and waterscapes, local climate, available materials, building techniques, and creative integration of belief, function, and form to provide physical, functional and spiritual comforts for people who live within it. The traditional timber construction system using flexible joints are perfected for generations as adaptation and protection of life against earthquakes, especially around the "Ring of Fire" which are continuously rocked by active volcanoes and the movement of continental plates.

On the land based farming settlement around the tropical Asia for example, there is a strong indication that the vernacular stilt-house was developed out of the rice growing culture in the warm-humid tropical region, originated from granary architectural typology, which was then further developed into dwelling places. The attic under the roof works as a storage for rice, goods and valuables, while the middle space is meant for living. It is a direct respond to the forces of nature, creative innovation in using available resources, and manifestation of belief in supra-natural powers by special ornamentations placed on the roof.

From the earliest vernacular traditions, we learned that local architecture and native urbanism are able to offer the best and holistic solution towards human needs in their relation with nature, social, and supra-natural environments. It is the medium for human survival in both physical and spiritual worlds, by reconciling the power of nature and the desires of human being.

People living incosmopolitan settlements and cities in Asia had been learning from Indian philosophy and cosmology since the first century, and applying the formal and spatial ordering principles – known as *Mandala* to their architectural typology and settlements morphology. This is understood as the tri-partite divisions of the cosmos in macro-, meso-, and micro- levels. This tri-partite cosmological divisions or hierarchy corresponds to the metaphor of the human body (the head, the torso, and the feet), and to the metaphor of the universe: the sky where the divine spirits reign, the ground where the human lives, and the underworld where the evil spirits dwell. It may be seen in two-dimensional plane, or applied to three-dimensional space and form.

Traditional planning of the settlements in many local contexts in Asia follows this ordering principle, by situating the village in between the mountain and the water body (sea, lake, or river). The most important building or function (like temple of origin, chieftains' house, or ancestral graves) is placed on the vantage point of the village or towards of the mountain. Functions associated with death or impurities (like temple of death, or waste disposal) are placed down towards the opposite direction. In many cases the rice barns – the most important function for the rice growing community – are situated on the eastern side of the village facing the sunrise, symbolizing life.

Traders from various places had been passing through and many had settled down across continental and maritime Asia since the establishment of the maritime trading route between China, Ryukyu, India, Arabia, Africa and Europe. Traders entered and travelled across Asia through two different main trading routes: the Silk Road in continental Asia, and the Ceramic Road across Indian Ocean. The transition and transformation processes took place peacefully and naturally through absorption of the old craftsmanship and building traditions, and integration with the new architectural and technological vocabularies and innovations. The artists and builders from different racial and cultural groups worked together and blended their artistry and skill into new and unique building tradition and architectural forms. Community groups of different religions and origins lived together side by side in close-knitted settlement fabric with strong cosmopolitan character.

From the fifteenth century onward, various European colonial entities (Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British, German, and French) entered Asia. Within Asia itself nations colonized other territories (e.g. Japanese, Chinese, etc.) for economic expansion and cultural domination.

Many new typologies and functions were introduced into urban infrastructures, design, and architecture, such as boulevards, streetscapes, façade, building techniques, and new functions (military establishments, public buildings, churches, urban squares and plazas, markets, railroads, stations, plantation houses, and many more). At the beginning, "alien" design was directly copied or applied into tropical and sub-tropical regions of Asia without or with minor modifications, resulting in a not so comfortable living condition within the building. Responding to this, later more responsive design solutions were invented, by adapting building and urban design into local climatic, aesthetic, and social-cultural conditions. New building typologies with mixed design features were evolving into unique and hybrid styles.

In many cases, ideological and political intents of colonialism were also manifested through the superimposition of new geometries (e.g. axis, grids, etc.), demolition of existing buildings and urban sectors, insertion of new urban fabric and architecture, and alteration of the whole cultural narrative.

During the late colonial period, in the colonialist's controlled cities, segregation policy of dwelling areas according to different races or social strata was implemented in cities around Asia. In many cases there was no clear physical boundary which separated the different racial zones, although in some cases there were rivers, walls, or roads which functioned as the physical boundaries. In many cases the segregation policy had caused an internal densification process within each restricted quarter. The over-densification would later push some of the colonial cities into environmental disasters and worsening of public health conditions.

In early twentieth century the European colonial policies shifted to a more ethical treatment towards their colonies, in parallel to the rise of ethics and socialist movements in Europe. New housing areas were planned and developed inside and around the city, to accommodate the rapid increase of urban population. Infrastructure and housing improvement programs were implemented to improve the wellbeing of all segments of the urban population. City beautification, Garden cities and hygienic housing typologies were developed in the capital cities, municipalities and smaller towns. Modern building codes and regulation were introduced in order to improve sanitation condition and public safety in the inner city. New building types were created and old building typologies were improved following the new regulations to provide pedestrian arcades, open backyard with utility functions, fire escape, etc.²

With the opening of new architecture and planning schools in the Asian colonies, new regionalism discourses were actively debated and practiced by young architects and urban planners in the region. Fresh ideas from modern urban planners and architects were manifested into city plans, urban designs, and architectural styles – blended with the elements from the local, environmental, and cultural contexts. A large dose of idealism and hopes were put into the transformation and the future of the coastal cities around the Mediterranean Sea of Asia in early twentieth century.

The Second "World War" and the invasion of Japanese Imperial army to other parts of Asia brought an end to the European colonialism history around the region, and changed its course of urban history and morphology. The decolonization process was followed by emergence of new national states, and soon the region entered the period of "Cold War"³. It was during the Cold War polarization, that an alternative political movement emerged. In 1955, the 1st Afro-Asian Conference (Bandung Declaration, forming the Non-Aligned movement) was held, a unique culmination of the anti-colonial agenda led by newly independent nations. This was an exciting period when

² Such as cities in Dutch Indonesia, British Malaya, French Indochina, etc.

³ "Cold War" was attributed to the political and ideological conflict between the Communist and Capitalist blocks, where the "hot" wars were fought in Asia (such as Korea peninsula, Indo-China region, Malaysia, Indonesia, etc.)

architectural design and aesthetics gave way to functional and rational architectural styles. The Spirit of the Age was firmly *Rational-Socialistic Modernism*: in its own way breaking away from colonialism & neo-colonialism by following a more contemporary identity through variations of the International Style, as expressions of the spirit of modernity, nation building, and independence.

Fifty years after the World War II, the wave of globalization and consumerism sweep across Asia and the rest of the world. Many of the national and regional capital cities around the Mediterranean Sea of Asia have risen into metropolis, megalopolis, and world city, which play indispensable roles in the interconnected global market and economy. Unfortunately this rapid growth has accelerated the cultural and physical transformation process, which often speeding up the fragmentation and destruction of old urban fabrics and creating serious problems of cultural identity of its citizens. Gross ignorance of sustainable environmental and cultural practices has created many problems, including extremely large carbon footprint, wasteful and irresponsible lifestyle, fragmented identity, cultural break down, social conflicts, and other ethical issues. More recently, the growing economic prosperity in some Asian countries has become push factor for the proliferation of "iconic" architecture, construction of "chauvinistic" identity, gentrification of old districts, and commoditization of heritage. All of these developments are against the spirit of cosmopolitanism.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND CHARTING THE FUTURE

For more than two millenniums of its urban history, many cities in Asia have been demonstrating their ability in preserving its primary elements and basic morphological patterns, tangible fragments and intangible traces, linkages, and connections, while continuing to be transformed and reborn. All of these can be learned, understood, adapted and appropriated, decoded and reconstructed, to enrich our inventory and vocabulary to educate future generation of scholars and professionals. It may provide the keys to common understanding of the sustainable nature of architecture, urbanism, and environment, which may serve as the starting point to change our paradigms towards a more sensible, sensitive, and contextual actions.

Our cosmopolitan cities are the tangible 'textbook' of unity in diversity of lesson on coexistence in harmony and of shared cultural heritage. It should be preserved, conserved, and nurtured for the sake of present and future generations. Disintegrative forces – be it ideological, political, social, or economic - which threaten our cities and communities should be prevented and stopped at any cost. The damaged elements and segments should be restored, the dead-artefacts should be revitalized, the forgotten- should be remembered, the surviving should be preserved, and the propelling elements should be enhanced.

Our Asian cosmopolitan built-heritage has many layers: morphological, sociological, and symbolical (form, function, and meaning). It is in the intersection of many disciplines from art to science, from philosophy to engineering. Therefore inter-disciplinary approach is necessary in dealing with the current issues and problems. To ensure continuity and sustainability we need to empower the ordinary members of the community through training and education. The vanishing or dying craftsmanship and traditional skills should be revived and revitalized, and have to be updated with the current technological advancement and contemporary innovations. Designers, academics, scholars, trainers, professionals have special role as facilitator in community education through various ways. They should help the community to respect and to be sensitive to their own legacy, to teach them in understanding the existing ordinary fabrics and artefacts, to train them in discovering their own heritage, and to maintain the tradition and to promote the contemporary appropriation of their own inheritance.

Education involves three inseparable aspects: affective, cognitive, and psychomotor. Overall, education of professionals should be based on ethics. Ethics planning, design, and conservation education and practice should be based on the understanding of self, openness towards the universal value of humanity, responsibility towards natural environment, and acknowledging the divinity. It is crucial for us to consolidate the ground for a better research and training, by

understanding of self by knowing the local history, paradigms, and practices in relation to the general history of humanity; replacing the narrow-exclusive-chauvinistic paradigms with more open-inclusive-reflective paradigms; revitalizing the discourses and debates on the local identity in relation to the universal aesthetical and ethical values; rediscovering links, layers, and continuity of nature, culture, and architecture across cultural and social boundaries; intensifying efforts to build a comprehensive database and critical assessments of our legacies and heritages; and continuing efforts in the training and production of culturally sensitive, socially responsible, environmentally sustainable social and physical constructs. By these continuous efforts, the memory of place may be preserved and actualized into the present, and its survivability into the future is well ensured.

To ensure the survivability and meaningful presence of our heritages in the present context continuous efforts such as: comprehensive inventory, extensive documentation, intensive discourses, sensitive planning, and effective intervention need to be done pro-actively by reaching out all stake holders and actors, especially to the younger generation. Comprehensive Inventory⁴ is the fundamental “backbone” or prerequisite in knowing, understanding, and appreciating our own tangible and intangible heritages. It is an essential prerequisite for a foundation for establishing a sound discourse in theory and praxis in heritage conservation and future developments. The inventory would be used to facilitate further description, definition, narration, reflection, and theorization of Asian cosmopolitanism, Asian modernity and the modernization process of Asia. However, it is absolutely necessary to define a new set of criteria - as a common base - to classify the architectural typology and urban morphology of our local and regional cosmopolitan heritages.

Public awareness and appreciations of social, urban, and architectural history should be promoted using various mediums and ways. In addition to traditional mediums for publication such as books, magazines, movies, newspapers or journals, internet-based Web publication has opened up many new possibilities. Local databases and productions can be presented using interactive methods through the Web and other means of digital information technology, to facilitate global exchanges and discussions among scholars and general public worldwide. In this sense education has special meaning and new role in nurturing the community cultural continuum for the present and future generations, for the sake of restoring and reinventing the cosmopolitan spirit of our cities and citizens. Efforts should not be spared to educate future generation in appreciating, protecting, and extending the meaningful presence of our heritage in Asia.

Our architectural education now is in dire needs to develop a design-research culture to deal with social and environmental changes. Contemporarily we are in an urgent need to find resolutions to address serious problems posed by the climate change, ideological conflicts, economic greed, depletion of resources, and social justice. Research in architecture should be based on the reality on the ground and not just based on alien theories. Design should be based on the understanding of the real contextual problems, to formulate sensible, sensitive, and holistic solutions. We should repent and to reconsider our present practices, i.e. to reflect on, to interrogate and perhaps to present alternatives to our existing paradigm of design, building, planning and engineering. In order to reconsider our present, we may have to re-examine our past practices and learn from our cultural traditions.

To overcome the crisis in architectural research and education in Asia, we need to invest in the collaborative efforts among academics, authorities, practitioners, and communities at large in various fronts,

- To understand our self by knowing the local history, paradigms, and practices in relation to the general history of humanity
- To replace the narrow-exclusive-chauvinistic paradigms with a more open-inclusive-reflective paradigms

⁴The ever growing efforts and programs such as comprehensive inventory workshops, documentation projects, walking tours, and fieldworks have been conducted in some Southeast Asian cities (e.g. Malacca in Malaysia, and Jakarta in Indonesia). Such as projects championed by mAAN (www.m-aan.org)

- To revitalize the discourses and debates on the local identity in relation to the universal aesthetical and ethical values
- To rediscover links, layers, and continuity of nature, culture, and architecture across national boundaries
- To intensify the efforts to build a comprehensive database and critical assessments of Asian Architectural legacies and heritages
- To continue the efforts in the training and production of culturally sensitive, socially responsible, environmentally sustainable designs
- To reinstate inherent relationships of ethics, art, science, and technology in Architecture
- To build networks, cooperation, links between different level of people and organizations for strengthening exchange, mutual understanding, and synergy
- To restore Design as the core of Architectural education
- To become "knowledge producer", not "knowledge consumer" anymore
- To share knowledge, not monopolizing it
- To restore ethic in research and education

About the author

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