

Ekkehart Keintzel:
White Building, Phnom
Penh, Cambodia, 2015

After Cambodia gained indepen-
dence in 1953, the country
developed its cultural identity
and, with it, a lively art and
architecture scene. The photo
series *Khmer Concrete* by
Ekkehart Keintzel, created be-
tween 2012 and 2016, shows
buildings from this period in a
state of transition between
regulated and improvised use,
as well as the threat of disap-
pearance. Lu Ban Hap’s White
Building from the 1960s,
pictured here, was considered a
landmark of Khmer modernism,
and was demolished in 2017.
More photographs from the
series can be seen in Ekkehart
Keintzel, *Khmer Concrete*
(Berlin: The Velvet Cell, 2020).



EDITORIAL

At Home in Modernism

Text: Anh-Linh Ngo

Architecture and urban planning have always been instruments of identity construction. Not only does this apply to the reconstruction of lost historical buildings and city ensembles—much of which is currently being undertaken in Europe with underlying right-wing agendas—it also applies in a special way to the epoch of modernity. The vision of an ideal past and the design of a better future are two sides of the same coin. This political context serves as the backdrop for this issue’s understanding of architectural modernisms in Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Singapore as an expression of these societies’ struggle for a postcolonial future.

Taking a political angle opens up this topic to more than purely archi-
tectural and historical considerations, bringing it into the present-day
discourse. Indeed, the relevance of this issue is that it reminds us, in
our encounters with Southeast Asian modernisms, how closely archi-
tecture and ideology are intertwined, for better or worse. For worse,
because modernism has been used, top-down, by rulers of various
stripes to advance their nationalist interests. For the better, because
designing the future was always associated with some progressive
notion of society. Given the triumph of the depoliticized International
Style in the wake of the Second World War, it is exciting to discover just
how politically charged modernism was in Southeast Asia.

But to view architecture solely from the perspective of ideological
superstructures would be to overlook the decisive aspect of its agency.
That would mean, as Indonesian curator Setiadi Sopandi aptly notes
in this issue, “reducing the complexity of architecture to a mere rep-
resentational function.” Among all human cultural products, architecture
stands out in that it is an embodiment of both the ideological super-
structure *and* the economic base, as Marxist architectural theorist
Douglas Spencer pointed out in ARCH+, *The Property Issue* (p. 130).
Not only does it shape our thinking as a social narrative, it also intervenes
as a substructure—as the material basis of everyday life, in the reality
of the lives of the people who live and work within it. Because of this
dual nature, architecture is able to transcend not only ideologies but
cultural boundaries as well. The original invention, interpretations,
and adaptations of modernism in Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar,
and Singapore, which are presented and critically discussed in this
issue, impressively illustrate this balancing act.

Finally, the examination of Southeast Asian modernisms reminds
us, once again, that the modern movement was not an exclusively
Western development, but multivoiced, multilayered, and globally
integrated. However, this is not about the cultural appropriation of
stylistic features alone, but also, and even more importantly, about
the openness of modernism to adaptation in order to meet the life-

styles of its users and inhabitants. Architecture only becomes
effective on a local level if it enriches people’s lives from the bottom
up. This insight—which is not at all new—also makes clear what task
still lies ahead of us: balancing the tension between universalist
claims and specific social contexts. Only then can we become at
home in modernism.

PS: As we wrap up this issue, democratic protests in Myanmar are
being brutally put down by the military. The struggle for an emanci-
patory future continues. In shedding light on a hitherto little-known
side of the country—the struggle for a local modernism—we express
our respect and solidarity with the people of Myanmar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This issue owes much to the pioneering work of the *Encounters with
Southeast Asian Modernism* project by Sally Below, Moritz Henning,
Christian Hiller, and Eduard Kögel, who initiated and curated the project
in 2019 to explore the many important voices and perspectives on
modernism(s) in Southeast Asia as part of the Bauhaus centenary. I
would like to thank them, as well as all the contributors, for their fruitful
collaboration as guest editors. A big thank you also goes to the
ARCH+ team for transforming this body of knowledge into an excep-
tional issue, first and foremost Mirko Gatti (project manager), Nora
Dünser (managing editor), Max Kaldenhoff (creative director), Melissa
Koch (editor), as well as Julius Grambow and Leonie Hartung (editorial
assistants).