



ENCOUNTERS WITH AND DISCUSSIONS ABOUT ARCHITECTURAL MODERNISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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I. Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism

A History of Architecture by Banister Fletcher Sr. and Jr., a worldwide classic of 20th century architectural education, was first published in 1896. According to Johannes Widodo, who teaches architecture and urban history in Singapore, this book illustrates the West’s ignorance about the architecture of entire regions of the world—a condition that persists to this day. For years, Widodo has been promoting the work of various efforts in Asia—such as the mASEANa (modern ASEAN architecture) Project, founded in 2015—which are helping to rewrite history by reappraising Southeast Asian architectural modernism in particular. Fletcher’s book focuses on European architecture from the Romanesque to the Renaissance, but also mentions the buildings of the British colonies and the United States as “historical styles.” The architecture of India, China, and Japan, on the other hand, is classified as “non-historical styles.” He visualized this limited and strongly colonialist perspective in 1905 with a family tree of architecture, where the superior European building culture is located in the lush treetop, while the architectures of the rest of the world are depicted on dead side shoots (see Johannes Widodo’s article in this issue).

Fletcher’s position is not an isolated one; the list could be extended at will to standard works of the late 20th century—such as Kenneth Frampton’s *Modern Architecture. A Critical History* from 1980 or Leonardo Benevolo’s *History of the City* from 1980—which, while claiming a global, universalist perspective, utterly ignore the Southeast Asian region. Johannes Widodo presented his critique in August 2019 at the symposium *Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism* in Berlin, where he was joined by a number of other architects, historians, artists, and curators from Southeast Asia, who accepted our invitation to discuss the treatment of architectural modernism in Germany and Southeast Asia, and how it relates to global and local political and social developments. The symposium was the kick-off of our multiyear exhibition, event, and research project, which, as the project title suggests, we developed as actual encounters, together with our curatorial partners in Jakarta, Indonesia; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Singapore; and Yangon, Myanmar. From October to December 2019, the project provided a platform for exchange between local professionals and

interested parties in the four cities mentioned above. But why did we, having dealt with the region and/or subject matter in various ways for quite some time, initiate this project in the first place? As the Bauhaus centenary in 2019 drew near, we saw an opportunity to advance what we see as an equally fascinating and long overdue exploration of architectural modernism in Southeast Asia, and to share this with a wider audience. In the countries of Southeast Asia themselves, postcolonial architectural modernism is, in some circles, a hotly debated topic. In Germany and the rest of Europe, on the other hand, it is barely present. It is important to close this gap, not least because discussions about the architectural heritage of modernism are currently being conducted both here and there in a surprisingly similar ways. The question of how to position oneself as a Western European in a project seeking to address colonialism and postcolonialism in Southeast Asia without reproducing hierarchies is subject to constant reflection within the team. This does not always go smoothly. At the *Encounters* symposium, Farid Rakun, part of the curatorial team from Jakarta, offered concrete approaches for a new kind of collaborative practice. In his presentation, “De-Modernizing the School in Practice,” he spoke about the ideas developed by the ruangrupa collective and the Gudskul initiative they cofounded. Rakun explained how they are collectively managed like “ecosystems” and seek to deconstruct established thought structures in order to enable new insights (see ARCH+ features 104 inside this issue). In conjunction with the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus, several projects, such as *bauhaus imaginista* and *projekt bauhaus* (see ARCH+ 222, 230, 234), had already shaken up the established narrative of an architectural modernism that began its worldwide triumphant march from the West. *Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism* took its own approach. Instead of focusing on the lives of students, famous Bauhaus teachers, or their artistic and architectural legacy, we looked to political and social upheaval as catalysts for change. This can be observed in Germany, both in the example of the Bauhaus during the Weimar Republic and in the period of reconstruction in both German states after the Second World War. It is also evident in many countries of Southeast Asia: when the colonies and protectorates of France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands gained their independence, these upheavals led to new ideas about structure and form. In this historical situation, the young nations were faced with the task of establishing themselves in the international arena, and this was often accompanied by a desire to express their new beginnings through architecture and urban planning. In the architectural language of international modernism, many countries found a form that reflected their hopes for progress and prosperity and at the same time signaled their emancipation from former colonial rule. During the tour that followed the *Encounters* symposium, the experts from Southeast Asia were less impressed by the icons of modernism in Dessau and Berlin than by their encounters with activists and initiatives that, for various reasons, are committed to the preservation and revival of postwar modernism in particular. One place that made a particularly strong impression was Haus der Statistik at Alexanderplatz in Berlin, where the exhibition *Contested Modernities* is planned for 2021.

Haus der Statistik (House of Statistics) establishes a direct thematic link to the architectural, artistic, and activist approaches of our project partners in Jakarta, Phnom Penh, Yangon, and Singapore. Built around 1970 in what was the heart of East Berlin, it originally served as a representative administrative building for the East German government. After German reunification it stood empty for many years and was pegged for demolition. But thanks to civic engagement and open-minded allies in politics and the city administration, the building could be saved, and is currently being used for exhibitions and events. In the future, this model project will combine art, culture, social services, education, affordable housing, as well as a new town hall and public administrative uses. The building’s history and future development offer exemplary approaches to exchanging knowledge and practices between the initiatives working in Southeast Asia for the preservation and reprogramming of modernist buildings.

II. Phnom Penh, Jakarta, Yangon, Singapore

Each of the curatorial teams involved in *Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism* explored the significance and preservation of modernist architecture in different ways. The program kicked off in Southeast Asia in September 2019 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, with the exhibition *Folding Concrete* curated by Vuth Lyno and Pen Sereypagna. The title refers to three aspects of Cambodian modernism: the new design possibilities opened up by building techniques imported from the West in the 1960s; the multiple “folded” building elements that have become a kind of emblem of Cambodian modernist architecture; and less linear, more polyphonic approaches that emerged from the meeting of tradition and modernism. The transdisciplinary concept of the exhibition is prototypical for *Encounters*, and also manifests itself in this issue.

In addition to artistic works, research projects, and surveys of modernist buildings, a central theme was the so-called White Building in Phnom Penh, an apartment building from the 1960s whose history somewhat parallels that of Haus der Statistik in Berlin. It was built in a political system that no longer exists, and its demolition was long debated. But unlike Haus der Statistik, the voices of protest by its residents and numerous architects and artists were not heeded, and the building was knocked down in 2017. Vuth Lyno and Pen Sereypagna curated community-based projects in the White Building for many years, which in turn gave rise to other initiatives.

Occupying Modernism in Jakarta, Indonesia, curated by Avianti Armand, Setiadi Sopandi, and Rifandi S. Nugroho, was also based on artistic research: a comic artist, a graphic designer, a product designer, and a painter/publicist/writer were invited to take a subjective look at how people in Indonesia have appropriated modernist structures. According to Sopandi, this approach made it possible to bypass the usual confrontations in architectural discourse. In his speech at the exhibition’s opening, he posited that architectural history (in Indonesia) has always been written in terms of dualisms: modern vs. traditional, colonial vs. non-colonial, left vs. right, urban vs. rural, national vs. foreign (see Setiadi Sopandi’s article in this issue). This binary thinking runs throughout history, at least since the exoticization of local building methods by Dutch colonial exhibitions. But it could also be felt in the struggle for independence, when colonial architecture was



attacked. While these dualisms subsided in the first years after independence under President Sukarno, they reemerged under the authoritarian New Order regime of Suharto in the late 1960s.

A parallel project was launched at Gudskul in Jakarta by Farid Rakun, JJ Adibrata, and Grace Samboh with Hyphen –. Under the title *From, by, and for whom?* it examined the interdependence of politics, art, architecture, and design, using dioramas by artist Edhi Sunarso depicting key scenes from Indonesian history as a starting point. Found at monuments and museums, Sunarso’s dioramas play a key role in educating the public, and disseminating an idealized and politicized version of national history. This is also true of the dioramas at the National Monument on Merdeka Square in Jakarta, which had been commissioned by Sukarno. After Suharto came to power, Edhi Sunarso continued his work on the dioramas, although now according to the guidelines dictated by the New Order regime. To this day, the dioramas are an integral part of the visitors program aimed at school groups, families, and tourists. As part of a seminar led by Grace Samboh, students developed podcasts that reveal the political dimensions of the dioramas and discuss them in reference to contemporary issues (see Hyphen –’s article in this issue).

The realization of the exhibition *Synthesis of Myanmar Modernity* in Yangon, Myanmar, was influenced by a complex political situation even before the events currently taking place in the country. For decades—as explained by the curatorial partners Pwint, professor at the Faculty of Architecture of Yangon University of Technology, and Win Thant Win Shwin, an architect and planner in Mandalay and Yangon—the discourse on modernist architecture and urban planning in Myanmar was relatively dormant. Since the pro-democracy political reforms in the country began in 2011, however, interest in the modernist era and its architecture has been growing. A younger generation has been asking about the historical significance and current value of this architectural heritage. But in a multiethnic society, with a population that speaks hundreds of different dialects, renegotiating modern architecture is hardly a simple task.

Despite the challenging situation, Pwint and Win Thant Win Shwin made it possible for us to visit buildings in Myanmar that are seldom accessible to outsiders, and which, until now, have not been discussed in the context of national or international architectural history. However, the promising developments that began to emerge during our project suffered a tragic setback with the unexpected death of Pwint in January 2020. And with the military seizing power again in a coup on February 1, 2021, the already fragile development of democracy is once again at stake. The future is uncertain, and at the time of writing it is completely uncertain whether and how this fruitful collaboration can be continued. For it is clear that the discussion of some of the buildings featured here in this issue, as well as the interviews with two Myanmar architects captured by filmmaker Christopher Chan Nyein as part of the 2019 project and reprinted here, can only provide a first glimpse into the country’s complex architectural history, in the hope of inspiring further research.

In Singapore, the curatorial team was led by Johannes Widodo and Nikhil Joshi and headed by Ho Puay-Peng, all from the National University of Singapore. Their focus in the exhibition *Housing Modernities* was on early modernist settlements and multifunctional complexes, such as the People’s Park Complex and the Golden Mile Complex, both of

whose future is uncertain. Since the early 1960s, when the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was established under the leadership of the People’s Action Party, the economic ascent of the city-state has been flanked by public housing programs. The goal of providing adequate housing for the entire population was quickly achieved. However, a process of displacement has been underway for years, with early neighborhoods and iconic buildings threatened with demolition. In addition to the focus on *Housing Modernities*, the concluding symposium that took place at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Singapore addressed current perspectives on the narrative of modernity that the exhibition curators had developed and presented for discussion.

Tay Kheng Soon (see the interview in this issue) as well as William S. W. Lim and Lim Chong Keat are key figures in the architectural development of both Singapore and the wider region. The works of Lim Chong Keat were presented by Shirley Surya, curator of Design and Architecture at M+ Museum in Hong Kong, on the basis of the museum’s collection (see Shirley Surya’s article in this issue). Lim Chong Keat’s approach to culture and design were shaped by his international network, which included Buckminster Fuller, and his broad interests that went far beyond the discipline of architecture. The same applies to William S. W. Lim, who has been an important source of reference for curator Ute Meta Bauer, founding director of CCA at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore since 2014, in her internationally oriented and transdisciplinary work (see the interview in this issue).

The discussion at the symposium at NTU CCA, which concluded the event tour in December 2019, once again highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary and regional exchange. Each of the places we visited has its own history and a narrative that stands on its own—a fact that is obscured rather than conveyed by the use of the geographical construct “Southeast Asia.” These distinct histories are reflected not least in the curators’ very different contributions, and in the diverse spaces where the exhibitions and events took place. In Phnom Penh, many young and culturally curious people gathered in a freshly renovated apartment located on the upper floor of a typical residential building in the Chinese Quarter. The otherwise private location was kindly made available by the owner, an art collector. In Jakarta, the project was present at both Gudskul, co-initiated by ruangrupa, and at Kopi Manyar, a café and cultural meeting place designed by the renowned architect Andra Matin. In Myanmar, the exhibition and accompanying symposium were hosted by the Goethe-Institut in Yangon. In Singapore, there were again two venues: the government-run Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) for the exhibition, and the NTU CCA for the closing symposium.

In order to connect the cultural and architectural heritage to the here and now, each location, each situation with its specific characteristics, requires targeted and critical consideration. It is also necessary to develop a mutual sense of understanding between these countries that can challenge the dominant Western perspective. This task remains a challenge, because, at least in Grace Samboh’s estimation at the closing symposium, the countries are still too busy negotiating their own history to look beyond their national borders. But networks like the mASEANa project, launched in 2015, are doing significant work that is transcending these boundaries.

The exhibition at Haus der Statistik in autumn 2021 brings together the positions of these curators from Southeast Asia in order to compare and contrast them, and to intensify transnational collaboration.

III. Contested Modernities

The title chosen for this issue reflecting on the project *Contested Modernities*, refers to a lecture given by Vuth Lyno at the 2019 inaugural symposium in Berlin, titled “Exhibiting the Contested Modern in Cambodia.” In it, he illuminated the competing narratives in the modernist discourse and its promise in Cambodia by looking at several exhibitions held in Phnom Penh between 1955 and 1967 promoting the benefits and achievements of the modern world. Based on the many discussions we have had in the course of our encounters in Germany and Southeast Asia, this term seemed ideal for representing the current state of the discourse on the various (not only) Southeast Asian modernisms in all their diversity.

“Contested” refers to something that is disputed, fought for, or even doubted. In our case, it refers, among other things, to the historical situation—the struggle for independence in many countries in the region and the accompanying process of modernization; the complex dynamics of separation and self-determination yet continued reliance on the former colonial powers (see the contributions by Benjamin Bansal, Michael Falser, and Moritz Henning in this issue); and how this newly gained independence awakened the superpowers’ desire for regional influence under the auspices of the Cold War. On the other hand, *contested* also refers to the political upheavals that followed independence—such as the anti-urban and anti-modern attitude of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; the military dictatorship in Myanmar (at that time still Burma); and, not least, as reflected here in this issue, the struggle to author one’s own architectural history. Of course, *contested* also refers quite specifically to the danger faced by important modernist buildings in many places—due not only to rapid urbanization in many Asian metropolises, but also to reappraisals of local (architectural) history, which often go hand in hand with the political tides.

Finally, *contested* refers to the concept of modernism. On the one hand, its use implies the existence of a unified movement that originated in the West and was then “exported” to other regions as a civilizing project. Despite the positive light in which it is always framed, this common understanding is historically unfounded. The diversity of architectural, political, and social moments in the region that came to be under the umbrella of modernism clearly demonstrate that a revision of this view is urgently needed.

For the exhibition in Berlin, it is also important for us to take a look at Germany’s role in the process of modernization in the region. An exploratory review by our team reveals the complex relationship between West Germany (FRG) and East Germany (GDR), as exemplified by their respective policies for “developmental aid” and “socialist solidarity” in faraway Southeast Asia. Although Germany did not have any colonies there, there were various points of contact with the region in the second half of the 20th century. Budding architects from Indonesia studied in the FRG, while students from Myanmar were trained in the GDR. The architectural historian Julius Posener, who emigrated from Germany during the Nazi era, helped to establish the

Faculty of Architecture in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia in the 1950s before returning to Berlin (see Eduard Kögel’s article in this issue). While the GDR helped to rebuild cities that had been destroyed during the Vietnam War, the FRG assisted through construction projects in South Vietnam and Cambodia. It is clear that the projects were initiated not only for humanitarian reasons, but also out of geopolitical and economic interests. Earlier in ARCH+ 226, Christina Schwenkel examined the reconstruction of Vinh, a city destroyed by the war, whose reconstruction was supported by the GDR, and the tensions between the rationalist ideas of German architects, the culturally specific wishes of local inhabitants, and the Vietnamese government’s plans to modernize its society.

The fact that the Western architects’ ideas were not always met with undivided approval is illustrated by a debate between Julius Posener and the Malaysian architect Lim Chong Keat. Excerpts from their written exchange, which was conducted over the course of several articles in architectural magazines, can be found in Eduard Kögel’s essay in this issue and are also intended to open up an important perspective in the exhibition, as they exemplify the debate about architectural modernism and the political reality in the transition to independence.

This publication both summarizes and complements *Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism* and *Contested Modernities* and was produced in close collaboration with the ARCH+ editorial team. Additionally informed by their own critical perspectives, it documents and expands on our own ongoing research process spanning several years and countries. Our approach is based on our ambition to create a shared, international discursive space with the architects, scholars, artists, curators, and activists who have worked in Southeast Asia to preserve and find new uses for modernist architecture in their cities. We see this as a long-term project, in which local urban practices become networked with one another, and narratives about the past, present, and future of modernism are corrected, expanded, or created in the first place.