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Architecture and Urbanism
09:11

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Kerry Hill
— Crafting Modernism in Asia Pacific

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Thoughts on Site, Space and the Future

Colin Seah, Chang Yong Ter and Tan Cheng Ling

座談会：ケリー・ヒルと若手建築家

敷地、空間、未来

コリン・シア、チャン・ヨン・ター、タン・チェン・リン

中田雅章訳

a+u: Kerry, how has building in an extensive variety of contexts informed and enriched your architecture as a whole?

Kerry Hill: I have consciously allowed the otherness of different places to influence our decisions, but we do it in the sphere of our own architectural inspiration. Essentially it is about allowing the nuances of different cultures to inform our architecture, and hopefully to enrich what we do without resorting to replication. I would like to think that we are modern architects, making our own way and exploring our own fields of interest.

Tan Cheng Ling: You are forced to look at it in a new way, because you have got fresh context and constraints. This will then help you in creating your own explorations.

Colin Seah: The reality of construction also informs what you do in other countries. We realized that there are limitations, nuances, idiosyncratic building techniques or material details that then precludes certain things from being done. We have become more humble, and approach it more respectfully now.

a+u: Colin, as a young firm that has already ventured overseas, how do you keep each project “delightfully surprising yet relevant, distinctly local but still globally appealing”?

Seah: There are a couple of things packed into this sort of mini “manifesto”, but the genesis of this is really from being a Singaporean trying to also understand the world around him, which is also one of the challenges we face as young designers. The notion of rootedness and thus being distinctively local has traditionally been very important, yet ideas are being exchanged at a global level all the time. For instance, at the New Majestic Hotel and the villas that we are now working on in Thailand, it was about creating an experience that would be instantly recognizable for a global nomad, but that also taps into something distinct and contextual. It may not be an aesthetic thing. In the Thai villas, it was the concept of the “sala” space – an open breezeway – and how the whole villa becomes a breezeway with minimal walls. Conceptually, it is very Thai, yet aesthetics and material-wise, it is globally accessible.

Hill: That applies to every foreign place, particularly for those with a very strong indigenous form of architecture. In each place, the designer’s role is to understand the essence of what the indigenous architecture is, and then to abstract what this architecture might become. There is a big difference between that and merely trying to emulate how the place actually looks. Anybody can do that.

a+u: Kerry, is it harder when you work in more urban areas, because perhaps the cultural nuances are not so strong?

Hill: Perhaps. You have a much more open book, and there is more uncertainty in making choices. I personally enjoy a state of uncertainty. It gives the freedom to explore, imagine and dream.

Seah: I find that in the cities it is very different. When we work in China, they are asking for the converse of being contextual – something they have never seen before. Where then is the place for relevance?

Hill: It has to do with how much architecture is part of the culture of the place. That is something many new Western and evolving new Asian cities do not have. For them, new is always going to be best.

a+u: Like the notion of tabula rasa – a new slate – in Singapore?

Seah: Tabula rasa is, I think, almost a state of mind here, not so much the real situation. Actually, there is quite a bit to draw from, but the sense of tabula rasa comes from that pragmatic mode of operation here. Let us just start again because it is more efficient. There is this immense practicality that we embody.

Tan: It is about economics.

Seah: Yes. Design is now thrust into the forefront because it is recognized as something profitable.

a+u: Yong Ter, your works are all local projects but still refreshingly creative. How do you work with the confines of the local context where there are perhaps less cultural cues to draw from, yet constantly find ways to innovate?

Chang Yong Ter: I would say that the confines actually contribute to a certain built culture that becomes identifiable locally, over time. That is why each time the planning or building authority has a new rule, you will find new building forms that arise from attempting to exploit that. To me, confines could help to define and also call for innovations. I see them as stepping stones rather than rocks that stop you.

a+u: One strong theme I have found when looking at all your works is the importance of the spatial experience that drives the architecture. Could you discuss your approaches to creating particular spatial qualities in your architecture?

Chang: For me it is about working with feelings, and how feelings are evoked by senses, such as sight, sound, smell, touch, also one's memories and past spatial experiences. For example, it is about having one space and how it relates to subsequent ones – the experience could be sequential, or it could be about holding a space, or releasing a space. I believe that space – which is intangible – is the essence, while form is the by-product. However, spatial qualities are defined by the planar qualities of the form – in terms of texture, the placement of structures, etc. It is also about generating perceptions, timing space, and spacing time.

Seah: I remember visiting Peter Zumthor's Thermal Baths in Vals (*a+u* 98:02 special issue). For the first time in my life, I had to lay down my sketchbook and camera, and just soak it up through the body. Conceptually it is very strong, but it ceases to exist at that level alone. It was so much more corporeal.

Hill: I do not believe that great architecture is about space alone. Zumthor's Baths is a very good example of how space, materials and light come together. Each is deficient on its own. Louis I. Kahn was right when he said, "The wall did not know it was a wall until the sun struck it".

Seah: Currently, our work tends to be more concept driven. Space, the choice of detailing, materials, and sequences of experiences then all fall in line according to that. But I am starting to wonder if somebody misses the purpose of the building at the conceptual level, is it still a rich experience?

Hill: Design is as much by intuition as it is by rules. It is about the senses and the experiential qualities of the building. Often, theory comes after the building is finished, if you want theory that is. For us, we are not so interested in having one.

Also, do not just think of space as being inside a container. Space also includes the external space between buildings. In our architecture, the space between buildings is as important to us as the space inside the building. These spaces are never accidental or residual. They are shaped quite deliberately by the buildings.

a+u: You have been practicing in Singapore for a good 30 years. What have been the changes in the local architectural scene from the time you first started till today?

Hill: Earlier we talked about the current demand for good design. This has to do with the modernization and the exposure of a population. When I started university in the 1960s, the architecture section in the library probably had ten books about architecture. Today, there is an explosion of architectural media around the world. It is a part of the design education of the younger population. Growing affluence helps too, since design often does not come cheap. Developers have learnt that good design sells. This is good, because younger architects are being commissioned to do more projects.

There has certainly been a growing sense of architectural community in Singapore, with an increasing awareness and development of a design culture, particularly in the last 10 years. This is healthy, and I am optimistic about the future of architecture in Singapore. Increasingly, there are young Singaporean architects who are doing good, interesting

work, though not always up to the standard of Yong Ter's Elok House (*a+u* 09:04). It is a new typology for medium density housing in the tropics. So I think it is a particularly interesting benchmark. But there are others too.

I think it is a pity that there are so few architectural competitions here in Singapore, because that is the way that younger architects can move forward into a variety of projects. Hopefully, with the development of a greater design culture, that will come.

a+u: As part of the young generation of Singaporean architects, what are other contemporary challenges and issues that you face in your practice?

Chang: These will always be changing. Ultimately it is really personal – what I perceive these issues to be, either as challenges, or opportunities for explorations. I believe that there is no meaning in everything, except the meanings I give to it.

Seah: A current phenomenon is the multi-disciplinary nature of some practices. For us, we are beginning to recognize possibilities between the lines. As architects, we are now no longer just the conductors, but are also playing an active role. I find that a challenge because your focus is now taken more upstream, and then architecture and space begins to become an product of the more upstream focus.

a+u: How have these shifts in the architect's role occurred?

Seah: I am not quite sure how it happened. There is perhaps this curiosity to know what others are doing. The context in which we now discourse is richer; there is mutuality in the comfort level in discussing ideas and concepts. I found that if the concept is rich and upstream enough, it could almost drive a whole bunch of things – architectural space, fashion, and product even. Perhaps, that has led certain firms to say, "What if we extend our services even more? I have an opinion on it already anyway". Do you all find that as well?

Chang: I find that architecture is still the mother of all arts. That is why it is able to draw interest from other disciplines. They find relevance in architecture itself.

a+u: Kerry, what would be your advice for younger architects who have projects in foreign countries?

Hill: Well, serious architects produce serious architecture wherever they are. We are architects, there to design the best building we can. When building in exotic areas, you should absorb the nuances of a place, but remain completely focused on your role as an architect and try not to get sidetracked by peripheral issues. You also need to approach projects elsewhere in the same way that you would design at home. The fundamentals of architecture are as valid there as they are here. So remain focused and committed to the discipline.

September 1, 2009, Kerry Hill Architects, Singapore