

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BEB-15

Stayin Alive

23 Jalan AU5 C/3
Lembah Keramat
Ulu Kelang, Selangor
Malaysia
14 March 1983

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

On the door is affixed a small bronze plaque bearing the legend: Southeast Asian Cultural Resources Programme (SEACURP). Inside, the room is small, white, air-conditioned and functional, filled to overflowing with file cabinets and shelves holding banks of slides and row upon row of white, unadorned photograph albums. Here and there, wall gauges measure relative humidity. The remaining space is taken up by two desks, some chairs and two people, a researcher and a secretary, who spend their work days wading through stack after stack of photographic material: sorting, filing, collating, organizing and storing. But photographs of what? One wall, a bulletin board of sorts, gives some hint of the nature of this visual library. Here are tacked brochures, memos, notes and more photographs - photographs of Southeast Asian village homes. One large blow-up depicts a wooden Burmese monastery. And here too are maps and charts, describing a criss-crossing journey through insular and mainland Southeast Asia, a trip that touched on well-known cities like Jakarta, Saigon, Bangkok and Singapore, but also obscure places such as Gunungsitoli, Ringlet, Buluk Monga, Makale, Kapit and Marudi. One map indicates how many times each village, town and city have been visited: once, twice, thrice, some even twelve times. But to what end?

This room is really a shrine of sorts, a tribute to the work of Dorothy Pelzer, an American architect who spent the last years of her life, 1962 to 1972, compiling a photographic record of traditional Southeast Asian house forms. With an architectural degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology complimented by design study at the Bauhaus, Pelzer had an abiding interest in Southeast Asian architecture, art, culture and religion. She believed that the traditional Southeast Asian home, threatened by neglect, economic, social and ecological change, not to mention war, might be doomed to oblivion unless recorded in photographs and measured drawings. Thus, with the assistance of the John D. Rockefeller foundation, Pelzer spent eight years travelling and recording in Burma, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. One and a half subsequent years were spent in Malaysia's Cameron Highlands trying to piece the photographic record into a comprehensible and publishable form. Circumstances were difficult: Indonesia was in the midst of the violent shift from the Sukarno to the Suharto regimes; Vietnam was in the throes of war. The yearly monsoons made some areas unreachable for months at a time. Often, transportation, by boat, truck, jeep or bus was unreliable or simply unavailable and the only way to reach some remote village with an important (perhaps the only) example of a traditional house might be to walk. Yet despite these difficulties, Pelzer managed to gather over 15,500 black and white photos and 7,000 color slides of traditional Southeast Asian homes and related cultural artifacts.

Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia. His current interest is architecture.

Though not comprehensive, the record is substantial and in a few cases, invaluable: Pelzer's photographs of Huế, Vietnam, for example, documented the house forms of that city before its partial destruction during the latter part of the Vietnam War. Elsewhere, traditional houses photographed by Pelzer have since collapsed due to neglect or disaster or have been replaced by more contemporary structures. Pelzer's efforts have been vindicated and complimented by a recent resurgence of local architectural interest in traditional house-forms as evidenced in the measured drawing and photographic documentation programs now underway in universities and technical institutions in Malaysia (BEB-9), Indonesia and Thailand.

Dorothy Pelzer died in 1972, long before she was able to complete or publish her record of Southeast Asian house forms. The task of organization and preservation of this arduously collected record fell to Pelzer's friend, Datuk Lim Chong Keat, an internationally-renowned Malaysian architect with a long-standing interest in traditional Southeast Asian architecture. Pelzer had hoped that her architectural record could be housed in Southeast Asia, where it would be accessible to local architects, historians and others interested in traditional housing. After much searching, Datuk Lim was able to find a temporary home for the material at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Pasir Panjang, Singapore. Thus, in July 1981 SEACURP was born. Datuk Lim is the project chairman, commuting frequently to Singapore from his base in Penang, Malaysia. The Pasir Panjang office is staffed by Ong Choo Suat, a research assistant, and Ruby Low, a secretary. Sani Hussein, a photographic technician, works at nearby Star Point. Datuk Lim explains the genesis of this small organization:

Dorothy Pelzer drew me into this field. She left notes to the John D. Rockefeller Foundation to try to get me to finish her work. The long and short of it is that we have managed to get a grant from the Toyota Foundation for three years to document traditional architecture in the Southeast Asian region. With the Toyota grant we have been able to extend the Pelzer work and more than that: we are trying to bring together researchers and interested persons to contribute material for the Center. By accumulating documentary material we can share it.

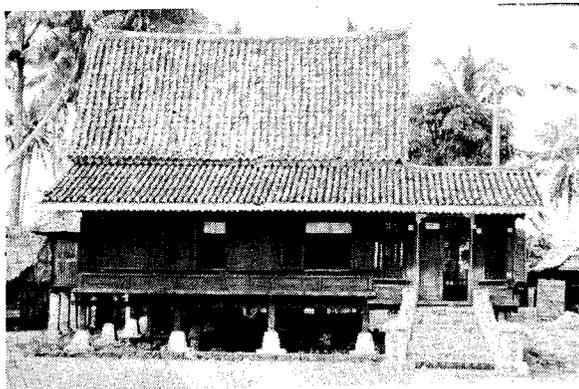
SEACURP is still in its infancy. Those unadorned, white photo albums contain Pelzer's photographs in the order taken. Thus far, little rearrangement has been attempted. Thus, homes and architectural details are interspersed with shots of people, baskets, weaving and Pelzer's special interests: cats and clouds. Some regions are mixed together in several volumes: a bit of Malaysia, a bit of Thailand, perhaps a few shots of Indonesia, depending on Pelzer's travels with that particular roll of film. Though these idiosyncracies make the collection, as currently organized, a trifle cumbersome to use, they also imbue the photos with a curious humanity, as if Pelzer herself had just left the room and would presently return. Eventually, the work may be combined with current SEACURP attempts to fill in the gaps in the Pelzer documentation. Datuk Lim also hopes to extend SEACURP's work beyond mere preservation:

We are not just interested in taking photographs of a dying breed of building. We are also interested in keeping a living tradition alive and flourishing at its own pace. The impact of modernization is a problem of change and it has got to be understood in all its ramifications because if we do not understand the process of change we're going to be flapping our wings about futilely; the heritage meanwhile will be destroyed.

Much of Datuk Lim's current documentation efforts are thus devoted to recording changes in traditional houses, the progressive effects of modernization, remodeling, reconstruction or progressive deterioration, as recorded in a living dwelling:

In Malacca we find the basic pondok [hut or shed] form that is endemic throughout Southeast Asia. Malacca is an important cradle of Malaysian heritage as it is truly a multi-racial place. Within the Malacca house you can see the elements of Malay tradition, with a large contribution from non-Malay craftsmen, the use of tiles, imported from Europe, similarly the roof-tiles. Here we have a happy marriage of cultural inputs, yet done in a very distinctive Malacca way. This mixing was a traditional form of urbanization, the modernization of the past, modernization in the form of changed materials. For example the replacement of atap [palm thatch] with corrugated iron, used sensibly, in a utilitarian manner. Used in this way you achieve a combination that is still to the eye acceptable.

Now the implication here is that in the modernization process adaptations and changes are acceptable up to a point. There's a limit past which the tradition is gone; as we say here, a 'gone case.' With sensible changes and sensible materials you can still feel the heritage.



1. The Malacca house, par excellence, before...



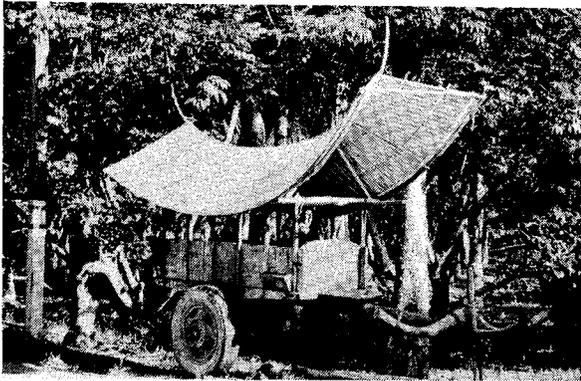
2. ...and after.

Unfortunately, some of the best examples of the Malacca house are gone. One particularly good example, the Malacca house par excellence, I photographed first in 1959. In 1971 it was still in pretty good shape. By 1980 the house was abandoned and today it is no longer there. Now we do have photos but this is dead information. Instead of one of the showcases of Malacca we have a patch of lalang [grass] up for grabs for speculative building.

Datuk Lim believes that modernization is an inevitable process, however he deplores the rush some of today's traditional home dwellers to change and "update" their homes:

Change must come. Certainly, new materials like plywood are being used all over. Many of the long houses are replacing their walls with plywood. But unfortunately, many of these modern adaptations are bad adaptations, indiscriminate borrowing. I said that architecture is a language and in many cases these new buildings are illiterate. They're giving up their old lamps for new, a la Aladdin. Old lamp, a genie, new lamp, no genie.

Intelligent change, however, is not unknown:



3. Malacca bullock cart

Now the Malacca bullock cart is a kind of halfway house: tradition is alive; modernization is taking place functionally, sensibly. The bullock cart still has the graceful roof but the tires and the axle are modern. Now do we say, "change the bullock cart back to the old uncomfortable wheel? You can't stop this kind of modernization because, functionally, the guy knows he'd going to get a much better ride with those tires, but he still appreciates his roof.

Now roofs are probably one of the most changeable traditional housing forms, because the roof is fairly susceptible to ecology. In the last 300 years in some areas there has been a change from traditional materials to tiles. Now roofs are being made of galvanized iron. Initially, this is much cheaper, not only because the villagers don't know how to make roofing out of traditional materials any more but also because the materials are no longer available cheaply. The urban world has already encroached into their supply source. In the Batak area of Sumatra, for example, they can no longer have the ijuk roof, because the sugar palms are all dead, whereas in Sulawesi you can still get bamboo roofs because there is still plenty of bamboo. Once the bamboo goes they won't be able to do that kind of roof. In Bali, the lalang roof is much more expensive than a tile roof, twice as expensive, because the hotels can afford to pay more, and shoot the price up. It's hard to transfer the traditional technology too. There's lots of lalang in Malaysia, for example, and it makes a better roof than atap but we've had little success getting villagers here to use that material.

Not only are traditional materials in short supply in some parts of Southeast Asia; traditional skills are at a premium as well. Urbanization and concurrent incursions of exotic building techniques - like the use of nails - and house-styles are all too often seized upon by village carpenters, and in a generation or two the old skills become history. Says Dattuk Lim:

There have been tremendous simplifications in the current state of the art. Change of materials, change of tools. They cannot select the wood so discriminatingly. They have to use cheaper wood and they cannot spend so much time on carving, so the details deteriorate. These simplifications are part of the modernization process. The carpenters are too lazy to make the joints properly, in the traditional way, so they use nails. Unless the owners tell the carpenter 'we want this type of joint' they're going to lose the habit.

Often, when someone wants to build a house, he delegates his sense of tradition and aesthetics to the contractor. All he's worried about is whether he can pay in installments. Now this delegation is an abandonment of tradition. When you think in terms of an owner who merely buys construction skill, you're already changing to an urbanized condition. In the kampung house at its best, at least a portion of the house, if not a substantial portion, is done by the owners themselves. The community participates in the building. In the Malay community there are still people that can do this. But of course if they have to clock in and clock out at a factory or play football they don't have time for all this. It's a choice of time expenditure.

Part of the SEACURP research program is devoted to identifying the extent of traditional carpenters in Southeast Asia. The results are not encouraging. In the Minangkabau area of Sumatra, a three-day survey by Datuk Lim turned up only one carpenter, whereas in Malacca quite a few of these traditional designer-builders remain, though most are occupied building modern, not traditional, houses. Laments Datuk Lim:

You see beautiful photographs of Minangkabau houses, but there are only two or three of them left. One is in the zoo and the other is in Jakarta. Similarly, you have the Batak architecture rapidly disappearing. So go and see Lake Toba now, before the houses are all converted. The best Batak house today can be found in the garden of the Hilton Hotel, Jakarta.

As carpenters disappear, so too do carvers, roofers and other traditional specialists. Thus, as traditional homes age it becomes difficult to maintain them in the original style, even if the owners so desire. Modern replacements must be used: galvanized iron for atap, glass louvers for carved shutters. Too, the labor-intensive nature of traditional architecture is often just not compatible with the urban condition. It is easier, faster and cheaper to buy something at a hardware store than seek out an expensive, time-consuming carpenter. Also, the inhabitants of an elaborate traditional home may themselves no longer be wealthy:

The original families are no longer affluent in the old economic framework. Maybe the key person is already dead, the children already working in pineapple factories or plantations and nobody is giving time to the house. What I'm suggesting is not that it's a question of absolute poverty, but a change of priorities. The money that once went into house pride has gone into buying a Vespa, buying a refrigerator, buying an air-conditioner.

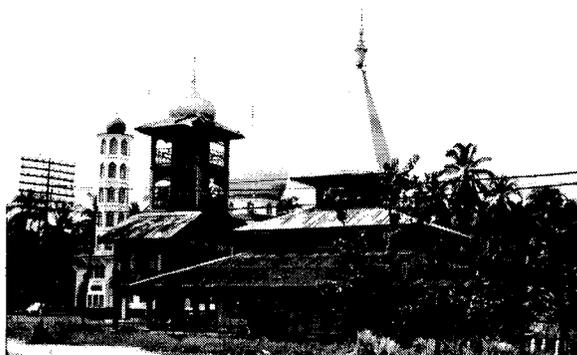
And this brings us to advertising, yet another aspect of modernization, accelerating change. It is blasted at people from newspapers, from the television and so on. Cutting out cigarette ads is not enough. You've got to think of the impact of advertising on the village. Cheap sales are the most dangerous thing of all, purveyors of cheap building materials selling horrible stuff to villagers at cheap prices.

Museums, tourists and antique dealers contribute to this type of change as well, buying up traditional houses piecemeal (a bannister here, some step-tiles there) for collection or resale. Though the house-owner may get a fistful of cash for that carved lintel, he has little choice these days but to replace the hole in his wall with plywood. Lake Toba's souvenir shops, on the island of Samosir and the Sumatran mainland, are filled with carved finials, gables, doorposts and other elaborately decorated ornamentation from traditional Toba Batak homes. Many of the houses themselves have been stripped bare in the process, reduced to plywood and galvanized-iron husks.

First stripped, then neglected, a traditional structure may finally be abandoned altogether as a still-affluent family moves into a modern concrete townhouse. Communal village structures can also suffer this fate, as in portions of northern Malaysia visited by Datuk Lim:

In the last two months I've recorded mosques between Kuala Kangsar and Penang to document their state of deterioration. I wish the Sultan of Perak would worry about preserving these ancestral mosques instead of the land [a reference to the Sultan's recent boundary disputes with Penang state] because these mosques are going to disappear, the best examples of pelupoh [woven bamboo] construction in the country. Woven bamboo and its in danger of falling down. You see what happens is that the villagers have asked the government for a new mosque and the new one is built to the side of the old mosque. The old, traditional structure is abandoned to the white ants. With proper planning, it could be incorporated into new construction.

Faced with this type of situation, what should one do? Go to these people and try to educate them? Say, 'knock this down and do it more traditionally?' Obviously we don't have the time or resources to go around telling people what to do. In the end the community has to be lucky in other ways, holding up good examples of traditional architecture for people to admire and emulate.



4. New concrete mosque and its deteriorating ancestor near Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

Such encouragement is not all that far-fetched. In late 1982 the Penang State Cultural Council's Art and Architecture Committee organized a "Best Traditional Rural House and Best Traditional Urban House Competition," with first prizes of M\$2000 (US\$869) in each category, plus M\$2000 worth of materials for improvement and assistance in re-painting, restoration and landscaping, as well as a plaque identifying each of the winners. Runners-up

received M\$500 (US\$212). Sponsorship for the competition came from the Penang Municipal Council and the Malaysian Institute of Architects' northern chapter. According to Datuk Lim, who was involved in the contest, the organizers and sponsors hope that the competition and the publicity generated by it will inspire Malaysians, at least Malaysians in Penang, to take pride in their traditional dwellings and preserve them for future generations to enjoy. Better yet, with such encouragement, perhaps some of the traditional skills - atap thatching and wood carving for instance, can remain viable, living crafts, not to be saved, but to be used, improved and enjoyed. Dorothy Pelzer would be pleased.

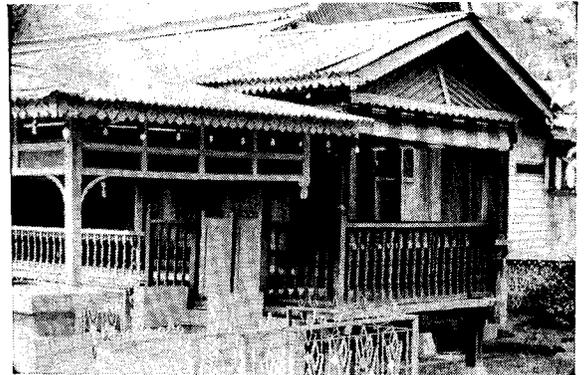
Sincerely,



Bryn Barnard



5. Deteriorating traditional structure in Negeri Sembilan.



6. Modern additions to a traditional Malay home: wrought-iron fencing, store-bought sun-shade, galvanized-iron roofing and ornamental edging, colored roof lights.



6. A well-kept Malay village home with galvanized iron roof and ornamental fenced-in stilting



7. A traditional Malay home with atap roof in Penang.

All photographs are from Datuk Lim Chong Keat's personal collection and are reproduced with his kind permission. Photographs from the Dorothy Pelzer collection are not yet available for reproduction without special permission from the Pelzer estate.