

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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BdB-2

Art and Architecture in the Lion City

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Dear Peter,

When I first visited Singapore in 1973, the island was in the midst of a frenetic construction boom. From a vantage point atop one of the downtown Orchard Road hotels one could look in almost any direction and see the steel superstructures and attendant bamboo scaffolding of skyscrapers-to-be jutting from the red-tiled cityscape. Perched atop each of these buildings was the inevitable mobile boom-crane spinning to and fro as it hauled girders, concrete and an occasional worker skyward. Intermittent puffs of smoke rising from the ground marked pile drivers, hammering home new foundations. At street level the incessant hiss-clang of the pile drivers, accompanied by the din of jackhammers, concrete mixers, compressors and traffic noise produced a truly memorable cacophony.

Singapore was undergoing urban renewal, pursued with vigor by the island's Urban Redevelopment Authority. Subsequent visits to Singapore saw new changes. The island was fast losing its colonial-era face: shop-houses were being razed and replaced with high-rise emporiums; jumbled hawkers stalls were being transformed into well-ordered eating plazas; kampungs (villages) were giving way to high-rise apartment complexes, the government's preferred alternative to single-family residences; even traffic circles were fast becoming anachronisms, replaced by cloverleaves and multi-tiered interchanges.

Singapura (Sanskrit for "Lion City") shares a common colonial heritage with Peninsular Malaysia to the north, though the island has always maintained some degree of autonomy. Originally under the nominal control of a Malay sultan, Singapore was under some form of British rule from 1819 onwards first as a trading station, later a Straits Settlement and finally a Crown Colony. In 1963, Singapore became a state in an independent

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Malaysia, but the marriage proved to be an unhappy one. Singapore was expelled (or seceded, depending on your source) from Malaysia in 1965.

Though now a sovereign nation, Singapore remains somewhat uneasily linked with the peninsula. The island continues to depend on Malaysia for much of its food, water, trade goods and workers. Time is another common bond. This January 1st, when Peninsular Malaysia moved the clock back one-half hour to be in step with East Malaysia (the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak), Singapore followed suit. The Malaysian tiger remains with the Singapore lion on the island's coat of arms, as does the Malay phrase Majulah Singapura: "Let Singapore Flourish."

Singapore's present florescence has been directed by Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, the nation's Prime Minister since 1959. Under his tutelage Singapore has become what is reputed to be the cleanest, safest and most efficient metropolitan area in Southeast Asia. His government, though democratically elected, is in practice rather authoritarian. Decisions come from the top. This is undoubtedly due in part to the island's limited resources, small size and dense, multi-racial population (the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian populace of 2.5 million live on a land area of only 239 square miles - a density of 10,460 persons per square mile). Singaporeans must be pragmatic to survive. The citizenry are continually exhorted to Be Courteous, Save Water, Be Productive and Have Only Two (children). The results are impressive: Singapore has the highest per capita income and lowest birthrate in Southeast Asia.

Progress has its critics, however. Concern has been voiced at home and abroad that Singapore may have sacrificed cultural development for material gain. In Southeast Asia, a region rich with dance, music, drama and art traditions, Singaporeans are sometimes thought to be the cultural paupers, their traditions bulldozed into the ground with the hawker stalls and kampungs. Critics complain that urban redevelopment has produced a clean, but sterile

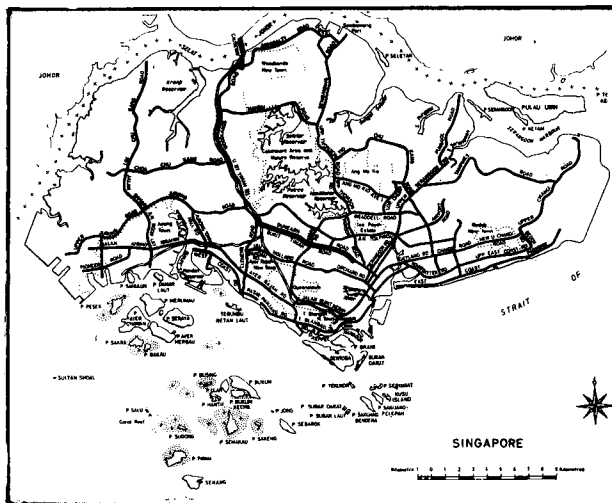


Figure 1

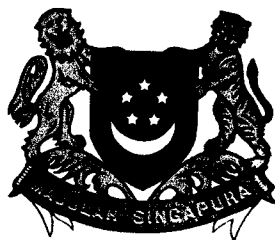


Figure 2

city, with little cultural relevance. The new buildings are said to be practical but impersonal, useful but inelegant.

I was therefore quite interested to learn that the University of Singapore School of Architecture recently introduced a program in aesthetics. The man in charge of the program is Mr. Kanaga Sabapathy, an art historian and art columnist for the English-language Straits Times newspaper. Sabapathy was educated at the University of Singapore, University of California, Berkeley, and the School of Oriental and Asian Studies, London. Until 1980 he was an art history instructor at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pinang. The following are excerpts from an interview I held with Sabapathy in December 1981.

BEB: Why did you choose to begin writing for the Straits Times?

KS: I did it for a number of reasons, most importantly to let people know that I am around. I had been away from Singapore for seventeen continuous years.

Of course I also wanted people to know that I had something to contribute, and that I had amassed some knowledge not only on art, but particularly art in this region.

At Universiti Sains I had taught a course on modern Malaysian art, which included a component on Singapore art. So it was quite easy for me to tune myself into the conditions in Singapore, because it's not all that different from what's happening in Malaysia, or for that matter, what's happening in the rest of Southeast Asia, possibly even all of Asia, with the possible exception of Japan. The tensions between modernity and tradition are similar.

BEB: So your articles concern various aspects of modern Singaporean art?



Figure 3

KS: My articles are of two kinds. The first is what I call a feature article. I started writing on the Nanyang School [a venerable but, until recently, relatively unknown artists group and art school], with each article profiling a different artist. The second type of article provides straightforward reviews of exhibitions.

BEB: Does anyone else in Singapore provide this type of reportage?

KS: Not that I know of.

BEB: Were your articles in part responsible for your recent appointment in the School of Architecture?

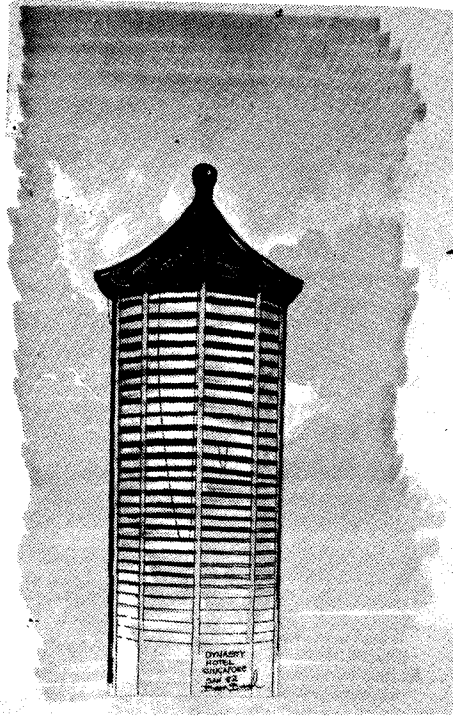


Figure 4

KS: My articles were part of a fortuitous chain of events. Earlier this year, the University of Singapore introduced a revised curriculum in the School of Architecture, which was to include coursework on art and aesthetics. Apparently the whole thing was prompted by a statement made by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, some moons ago to the effect that Singapore architects have no conception of beauty. Like so many things which happen in Singapore, anything which is said by the Prime Minister is taken up immediately and implemented immediately.

The Prime Minister's observation was given a boost by an external examiner from the University of Hong Kong who came in and was asked to assess the School of Architecture's curriculum. His statement was comparable to that of the Prime Minister. In fact he went further. He visited the National Museum and Art Gallery and made some rather devastating comments, all absolutely true, that the walls needed a fresh coat of paint, the presentation of the paintings was shabby, et cetera.

BEB: This is in comparison to the pristine state of the arts in Hong Kong?



figure 5

KS: He made no comparison. He merely said that such a state of affairs should not exist.

BEB: Especially in a country as developed as this?

KS: Especially in a country which prides itself in emulating excellence in other spheres. Why not in architecture? He proposed a revised curriculum which required an instructor in the area of aesthetics and the history of culture, ideas and so on, to inject a liberal note into the program. Until this time, the University had approached architecture from a purely technological/pragmatic point of view.

This coincided with my with my writing. A friend of mine mentioned my articles to the Dean of the School. I was called in for an interview and eventually hired.

BEB: Were you briefed by the School as to the kind of courses they had in mind?

KS: No I have been left pretty much on my own. At present I am teaching a course quite similar to the one that I taught at Universiti Sains: Introduction to Art. This is a compulsory course taught to first, second and third year students. It include a smattering of Chinese calligraphy and painting, Islamic calligraphy, the Siva Nataraja and Buddha image, as well as a Western component, from Impressionism to the modern day.

BEB: Is this the only course you teach?

KS: In 1983-84 I will also teach History of Architecture. This is something which I'm really looking forward to. Although I studied architecture in school, I have neglected it these past years with my focus on art, art, art. Here's a chance to revive that interest.

I will also be teaching something that is even more attractive and compulsive: the History of Southeast Asian Architecture. This will include the big monuments: Borobudur [a Buddhist stupa built by the Javanese Sailendra Dynasty in the 9th century A.D.] and Prambanam [a Hindu monument built by the Javanese Mataram Kings in the 10th century]. I can hardly wait to get into the whole thing.

Later, I'll be introducing a course called the History of Ideas that explores the concept of modernism and modernity. My intention is to impress upon the students the idea that no human activity can occur in a **vacuum and that human activity** is of a heterogeneous rather than a homogenous nature. There are always numerous forces, influences and ideas that are constantly pummeling, bombarding and impregnating any kind of activity. So, it is the responsibility, indeed the obligation, of anyone in such a socially decisive activity as architecture

to be aware of these influences. You are proposing values. You are proposing monuments. You are either persuading or intimidating behavior.

BEB: So then, architecture is not merely a reflection of the surrounding culture.

KS: No. You're making and shaping that culture. This is all the more reason for you to be constantly and acutely aware of the context of your work. I'm not mentioning which is preferable to what. I'm not suggesting. I'm just trying to open the students up and make them aware of the fact that for every architectural entity there has always been a model.

If someone says that they are going to put a tower block on a podium and I ask them, which was the first tower block on a podium and if they say they don't know, they really have no basis from which to work. One must be aware that this is only one of a series of tower blocks on podiums starting from year x to the present day. Why am I building this? Why am I building it in such and such a way? These questions can only be asked if one is aware of this whole series of linked models.

BEB: So your class concentrates on chronological history?

KS: History in the creative sense, not history in an anti-quarian sense. I want the students to know that they are a part of this process and that they can activate this process either by working within it or by rejecting it. The latter is an enormous responsibility, because then you have to undertake this whole idea of innovation. This is a very modern trait. We're always innovating these days. But then you can only break away from something if you know what it is you are breaking away from, else...

BEB: you reinvent the wheel?

KS: Right. The consideration of modernism and modernity takes us straight into some of these issues and problems. One of the reasons I chose this course is because it's one of the most crucial, discussable debates in the context of developing countries. One can put it in a very journalistic sense by saying modernity versus tradition. The Malay world has a multitude of traditions: animism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam. Which is the "correct" tradition.

Modernity is seen by some as a sort of neo-colonialistic, imperialistic hangover. It is a sort of veiled way in which the West continues to exert influence over the former colonies. Such opinions are frequently expressed about modern art. How to integrate modernity yet maintain tradition.

What I find most interesting is that these are all very real issues. They are not dreamed up by some fanatic in a

student organization. They are discussed by a very large segment of the population, and I do not think only in Malaysia. Tradition versus modernity are important issues, even in the West.

BEB: How is your course on the history of ideas structured?

KS: I've divided the course into two parts. The basic assumption is that modernity is a Western creation. The first part of the course covers Europe and the period 1850-1950, with emphasis on the breakdown of the Church and other institutions, the assertion of the individual, et cetera.

The second part of the course tests the assumption that modernism is western by taking case studies from Asia, in particular, China, Japan and mainland Southeast Asia. Is there really a mainstream concept of modernism, or is modernism really provincial, parochial and localized? Right now my intuition tells me that the latter will be the case.

BEB: Aside from your coursework, what other responsibilities do you have in the School of Architecture?

KS: I have also been involved in a sort of ad hoc manner in critiques for the fourth and fifth year architecture students. The architecture students here take a five year course. The fourth and fifth year students are required to produce different projects each month, with models, drawings, et cetera. The staff acts as a panel of judges, a sort of Inquisition, to really pick apart each project.

The heavy workload forces students to make practical architectural decisions quickly, incorporating what they have learned from the more academic first, second and third years. My role, at this late date in their tutelage, is to try and make them aware of their role as architects, to take responsibility for the architectural decisions they make, and to try and understand the reasons for those decisions.

They use words like "concept" and "symbol" without really understanding what these terms really mean. They talk about "communicative imagery" without the least notion of what it is. The same goes for "cultural identity." It is all just jargon to them, to justify arbitrarily made decisions.

Let me give you an example. One of the fourth year students chose to do a project on an ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] Cultural Complex. I was asked to help him out. He had



Figure 6

designed a main presentation area ringed by subsidiary rehearsal rooms. Most of the architectural emphasis, however, had been placed on the peripheral areas of the complex. Here he had placed eating stalls.

"Eating," he said, "is very much a part of Southeast Asian culture. If you go to a wayang kulit shadow play performance you usually have a bag of kacang [peanuts] in one hand and sit on the ground. Very informal."

That was his concept. His notion of informality was lack of European-style structure. In traditional Southeast Asian theater there are often no designated seats, no concert doors, no auditorium, no proscenium. But there is structure nonetheless, often more formalized than the most rigid Western theater forms. It turned out that this student had never attended a traditional Asian theater performance. No wayang, no mak yong [dance drama], no gamelan [percussive orchestra].

BEB: So his assumptions were based on ignorance. How did he fare in the critique?

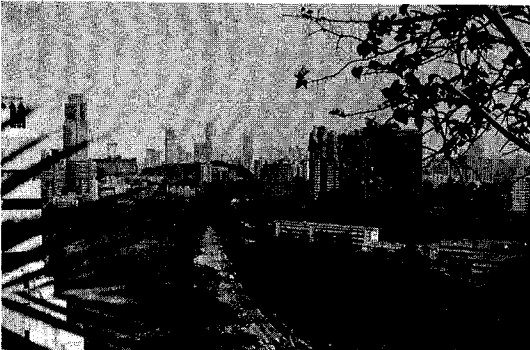
KS: He was shot down quite badly. I had suggested books to read, changes to make, but in the end he went for the eating stalls. Technically his presentation was perfect, but his concept was flawed from square one.

This was the Prime Minister's fear. Singapore was producing architectural technicians with no understanding of their craft and with no conceptual frame for their technical expertise.

BEB: Has your addition to the University staff made any difference in the type of work produced by the School of Architecture?

KS: Its still too early to tell. One must be realistic, however. My teaching is only a small part of the architecture program. I don't expect to radically alter student thinking, or for that matter, their future designs, with a few art history courses. But it is input and it is a start.

Perhaps with more input like Sabapathy's, Singapore may eventually be not only clean, modern, and efficient, but enviably liveable as well.



Sincerely,


Bryn Barnard

List of Illustrations

1. Map of Singapore; Singapore Facts and Pictures 1980; Information Division, Ministry of Culture, Singapore
2. Singapore coat of arms; Ibid.
3. Kanaga Sabapathy; photograph, 1981; BEB
4. Sketch; Dynasty Hotel tower under construction, Orchard Road, Singapore, 1981; markers, ink and gouache; BEB
5. Sketch; "Merlion" statue/fountain, Port of Singapore, 1982; pencil; BEB
6. Singapore fire station, a survivor of urban renewal; photograph, 1981; BEB
7. View of Singapore from Orchard Road hotel; photograph, 1981; BEB

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