

CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES IN DESIGN PEDAGOGY

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INTRODUCTION

In common with other Eurocentric English-speaking countries Australia is a key destination for students seeking accredited qualifications in architecture. Curtin University offers its architecture course through its partner campuses in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Darwin in Northern Australia as well on its main campus in Perth. Currently in excess of 50% of students studying architecture in the total program are of South-East Asian origin, primarily from Malaysia, Singapore and to a lesser extent Hong Kong, Taiwan and Indonesia.

The Architecture Faculty at Curtin is committed to the idea that design education for students from South-East Asia provided in both the Perth and Kuala Lumpur programs is suitable to their needs as well as to developing an effective regional focus for Australian graduates.

Frampton (1983) in his essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" offered the following:

The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place. It is clear from the above that Critical Regionalism depends upon maintaining a high level of critical self-consciousness.

The debate over Critical Regionalism in architecture still continues, particularly in Asia. This paper accepts the concept or at least the need to ensure that the essence of regional culture as expressed in architecture is not totally subjugated by the more powerful universal principles that pervade contemporary architectural philosophy in particular those which accompany economic imperialism.

The challenge is to find a way to relate the Eastern "mystical/intuitive" and the Western "scientific/rational" searches for reality. To some extent this entails overcoming the world of opposites and the fusion of two paradigms. It is rather like the interplay of the Chinese yin and yang.

In educational terms, it is the element of Critical Self-consciousness referred to by Frampton that is all important. Students must believe that what they bring to the design process from their own cultures and experiences is of value and can be used to inform the more universal and abstract constructs of contemporary design theory.

The educational process must ensure that the outcome is more than just a superficial layering of vernacular forms. Such superficiality merely serves to trivialise and mock the whole idea of appropriate symbolism for cultural referencing in contempo-

rary regional architecture.

Graduates in architecture from Australian universities returning to practice in Malaysia have, in the past, expressed concern over the difficulty in translating what they have learned about designing into an appropriate regional language.

The Malaysian government in the late 1970s decided that a stronger national identity needed to pervade Malaysian architecture. Not surprisingly they were not really able to define what this meant and desperate attempts to get academics, practitioners and others together to formulate policy guidelines proved to be futile. High-rise buildings with over-scaled Malaccan houses serving as entrance appendages were an early response. The general feeling was that this push resulted in creating a completely false reflection of Malaysian culture. (Hegvold 1990)

The superficiality of this approach particularly when used for the design of government buildings, clearly went against the grain of architects trained in Australian schools with the freedom of thought which that environment had encouraged.

More recent discussions with senior practitioners in Asia, in particular Malaysia, indicate that the notion of critical self-consciousness has started to pervade their thinking. This is evident in the following quotations:

"What I find disturbing is a tendency to create this regionalism by whole-scale re-invention, by so-called innovation. That is the opposite of regionalism. I don't think we need to re-invent the wheel; we just have to learn how to adjust"

Hussein Humzar, Past-President, Malaysian Institute of Architects, graduate of Curtin University 1972

Let's be honest, we are no different from anywhere else and many of our architects are regurgitating stuff they see in magazines and saying that this is Malaysian architecture. They don't look and observe what we have around us. I believe that the architecture in Malaysia will have to be developed from observation of our environment, our climate, our life-style, culture and traditions etc. I think that the younger generation of architects will be more concerned and more sensitive to this. Then, all Malaysians will identify with it and when a Malay looks at a building and says 'this place reminds me of some of the things I can see from my past memories' then we will have achieved an appropriate regional characteristic."

C.S. (Jimmy) Lim, Past-President, Malaysian Institute of Architects, graduate of the University of New South Wales, 1967

These concerns are currently relevant to the teaching of design in Malaysian schools of architecture where the dominance of technology and Western philosophy has all but swamped any remaining vestiges of regional expression.

The author recently examined the final design projects of 22 final year students as external examiner to one of Malaysia's three government schools of architecture. Only two students had drawn appropriately from Malaysian architectural heritage in framing their design solutions. The remaining 20 students chose to explore idiosyncratic forms drawing heavily on "high-tech" imagery and in many cases unrelated to their context in terms of culture, appropriate response to climate etc.

This approach to design is well summed up in a quote from one student's written thesis:

As a Centre of Transportation, it would have to appeal to something in the Malaysian people that was already awake—not to the conventional idea of culture, not to the conventional image of what a traditional museum looks like or feels like—something to really go for.

One is left to wonder whether this is the inevitable outcome of any nation seeking an architectural form which symbolises that they have "arrived," that they are "successful," using the Western idea of "success" meaning an architectural expression of power and wealth and the spurning of traditions.

THE KEY ISSUES

With the rapid expansion of Curtin's involvement in architectural education in Asia, the Architecture faculty has taken steps to address what it sees as the critical issues in cross-cultural education.

A recent study by Efford (1995) carried out in the School of Design at Curtin University indicated that a focus on cultural sensitivity at all levels is a key determinant to encouraging students to work together and to bring their own cultural background into the design process.

Four dominant cultural groups were identified as being of importance:

- The "Australian" cultural group, which itself is from varying backgrounds
- The "International" cultural group, mainly from South-East Asia
- The varied cultural background of the academic staff
- The "Culture" and language of the discipline of architecture

In order to devise a strategy to develop cultural sensitivity within the faculty to allow critical self-consciousness to develop in the design studio, three factors were examined:

1. Curriculum development addressing the "culture" and language of the discipline as it is taught within the Faculty
2. Staff selection and preparation—addressing the cultural background and mix of staff
3. Student preparation—addressing the needs of the various cultural backgrounds represented in the student cohort

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

A number of shifts were gradually introduced into the curriculum including a greater focus on the history, theory and culture of South-East Asian countries. Introductory courses were provided at the 1st year level dealing with Asian traditions eg the Chinese tradition of geomancy (or Fung Shui) and its importance to architectural design. Most Chinese acknowledge the importance of Fung Shui in the design and placement of

buildings to harmonise with their environment and many will not consider occupying a building which does not have propitious signs.

Two high-profile buildings where the architects have had to deal with Fung Shui are the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank by Sir Norman Foster and the Bank of China by I.M. Pei.

The Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank occupies possibly the most propitious site in Hong Kong. It has a large space in front of it, it overlooks water, has a mountain at its back for protection and has on its axis Lion Rock in Kowloon. Nevertheless, the geomancer (or Fung Shui master) required the escalators which penetrate to the 1st Floor through the suspended glass septum to be moved on axis from the rectilinear grid to a point several degrees off axis. This, I understand was to control the outflow of energy. This change posed almost insurmountable difficulties to the catenary suspension structure holding up the glass "floor" through which the escalators passed however it had to be done to satisfy the geomancer and therefore the client.

In the case of the Bank of China by Pei, this building has two "faults" which have caused considerable concern to the Hong Kong Chinese. Firstly the building presents itself as a sharp "dagger" piercing the sky which is seen as aggressive and not fortuitous. In addition the building has fountains at its base with water flowing away from the building which, in Fung Shui terms, informs potential investors that their money will flow out of the building.

The importance of such traditions and philosophies in their own cultural context cannot be underrated hence their introduction early in the program.

For newly arrived students in Perth, initial group exercises are arranged for learning teams containing students from more than one academic year. The intention is to use group inter-action in resolving design exercises and as a means of breaking down cultural groupings by ensuring that the learning teams comprise students from both the Australian and Malaysian cohorts. This exercise in itself helps to engender cultural sensitivity between groups of differing backgrounds as well as introducing new students to the culture of the school.

A particularly useful and revealing program was based on cross-cultural critiques of architecture.

This program centred on the proposition that architecture is essentially an embodiment of cultural, historical, political, social, environmental and technological contexts. The author of the project, Xing Ruan (1995), required each student to undertake a series of drawings to examine a particular piece of architecture which was outside of the student's cultural experience. Students were asked to examine through drawing, the physical and spatial conditions, history, culture and local conditions, the embodiment of ideas, ritualistic postures and the transformation of the complex into a contemporary interpretation.

Initially this project proved to be difficult for students to comprehend however, once they understood the intention, the outcomes began to crystallise allowing students to reveal the "other" culture to themselves and to their colleagues. Through this exercise students dealt with a range of cross-cultural issues such as an understanding of architecture and its cultural and social norms across different cultures, re-configuring the traditional and the contemporary, insight into regionalism against a background of the global cross-cultural context and simply developing the sensitivity to each other's views and backgrounds.

Apart from these content and attitude changes to the curriculum, students in their final semester are encouraged to pursue their major design "thesis using topics which are relevant to their own cultural focus. As a result a growing number of projects undertaken in the final year address problems of various kinds in South-East Asia using actual sites and addressing regional issues. The school's staff, including those drawn from the region, have also developed the capacity to supervise such projects.

Curtin's architecture program on all three campuses operates on a 2 x 14-week semester system. The core curriculum in design undertaken on all campuses will, from 1996, include a two-week segment which allows staff on each campus to address local issues and to involve themselves in community projects. These two-week projects in each semester from each of the two campuses (Perth, Kuala Lumpur and Darwin) will form the basis of a travelling exhibition which will further help to inform students on each campus of specific local issues which students are addressing through their design activities. These projects are also being used to improve local community relationships and to provide promotional material relevant to regional interests. Students will also exchange between campuses for these 2-week projects.

These programs are supported by a common body of contemporary theory relating to the science and technology of producing buildings.

STAFF SELECTION AND PREPARATION

The staff of the faculty represent eight nationalities including four Asian nations and, although the largest number are Australian born, they represent less than 50% of the staff.

Recently the school has been seeking to employ staff to teach in the architectural design area who bring with them an already internalised cross-cultural approach. One such recent appointment was of a Chinese architect with a Master's degree from China and a PhD from New Zealand.

The faculty's experience in South-East Asia has enabled it to draw on its own high quality and experienced Malaysian graduates to teach in the Malaysian School and to help inform the cross-cultural program.

Staff members in the design and theory areas together with others in technology, history and culture spend periods of one week on several occasions each year teaching at the joint Curtin/Limkokwing Institute School in Kuala Lumpur. This allows staff to pursue the same curriculum as used at the Perth campus with the inevitable regional overtones that come with the use of local examples and the acknowledgment of local needs, climate, material, life-style, customs etc. This experience also helps staff to obtain an understanding of the Malaysian students' culture and socio-economic environment before their arrival at the Curtin campus in Perth.

During the teaching visits staff get to know the students and are encouraged to understand their needs and expectations before the students merge with Australian students in the 3rd year of the course on the Perth campus.

Prior to undertaking teaching visits to Malaysia, staff are given a cultural briefing relating to their destination. Assistance is also provided where necessary by the faculty member who is located in Malaysia as head of the Kuala Lumpur programme.

STUDENT PREPARATION

The student cohort in Perth comprises Australians and Australian Permanent Residents (80%) and international students from Europe and Asia (20%). The Australian Permanent Resident group itself represents a large number of ethnic groups.

The Malaysian student cohort of approximately the same size (40 students per year) is almost entirely Malaysian Chinese with a small number of Indian and Bumiputra students.

Students from both campuses have already undertaken two years of study utilising identical programmes in terms of scale, complexity and learning objectives presented with the bias which is automatically generated by the use of local case studies, local staff, and its traditional ideas of form, meaning and symbolism.

On arrival in Perth, the Kuala Lumpur students are given a special three-week orientation focussing on living and studying in the Australian cultural environment and in particular at Curtin University. Learning teams comprising both cohorts are established for initial project work and every attempt is made to get the two groups working together as a team.

The success of this team-building exercise is variable and experience has shown that small groups of students from each of the different groups will tend to prefer working and socialising together. This seems to be inevitable given the long-standing ties which students within each group have developed and ultimately students' choice in this regard must be respected.

Students in this combined 3rd year are all encouraged to value what they bring to the design process from their own cultural background and experience and consequently to the symbolism and significance of their design solutions. While a critical environment is certainly maintained in the design studios, every attempt is made to encourage sensitivity to different cultural approaches and to draw out that critical self-consciousness of which Frampton spoke.

CONCLUSIONS

The Faculty of Architecture at Curtin University has already graduated in excess of 250 architects who are now practicing in South-East Asia. Despite this considerable experience with students from South-East Asian countries, the Architecture Faculty has taken the steps outlined in this paper in order to further sensitise itself to regional issues and to ensure that the education process is not used to further the dominance of Eurocentric ideas to the exclusion of influences from the long-standing cultural traditions of South-East Asia.

The recent intensification of cross-cultural curriculum development and its affect on design teaching has resulted in many South-East Asian students undertaking major design projects and honours theses focussed in their own country. This has allowed the solutions to be informed by both their own cultural background as well as the educational process they have undergone in Australia.

The approach described above is aimed at changing the culture of design pedagogy within the Faculty and to sensitising staff to cross-cultural issues in particular Malaysia and Australia. The intention is to establish a pedagogical climate which will provide a shift in Curtin's academic program toward producing a truly regional graduate capable of practising in both Eurocentric and Asian cultural environments

with sensitivity to tradition, mores, aesthetics, meaning and symbolism as well as a regional sensitivity to climate, materials and sustainable design.

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