

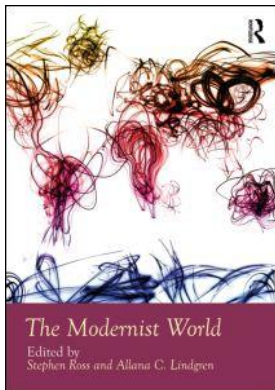
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## **The Modernist World**

Stephen Ross, Allana C. Lindgren

### **Building Forwards and Backwards in Time**

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Peter G. Rowe

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## CHAPTER TWO

BUILDING FORWARDS AND  
BACKWARDS IN TIMEArchitectural modernism in East and  
Southeast Asia

*Peter G. Rowe*

When discussing modernism in the architecture of East and Southeast Asia, it is customary to divide the topic into two regional components. One, normally referred to as East Asia, is comprised of China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, and is collected together generally under the auspices of a shared Confucian culture. The other, referred to as Southeast Asia, now composed of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, is less culturally coherent and made up of different ethnic groups, languages, religions, and social identities.

In East Asia, the impetus to modernize arrived forcefully on the shores of China and Japan around the middle of the nineteenth century, primarily in the form of gunboat diplomacy in the hands of Western powers. These disruptions were essentially about trade and the prospects of burgeoning markets for products of surging Western industrial development. A result was decidedly unequal treaties and humiliation for the locals. Response in China came through the Self-Strengthening Movement from 1861 to 1895, followed by subsequent attempts to reform until the fall of the Qing Dynasty around 1911 (Fairbank 1953). In Japan, response was embedded in the Meiji Restoration from 1868–1912 (Irokawa 1985 [1969]). Central to the Self-Strengthening Movement was the concept of ‘Chinese learning for essential values and western learning for practical applications’, manifesting an attempt to fend off contamination, while attempting to acquire, unsuccessfully as it turned out, wealth and a strong army believed to be essential for untarnished survival (Feng 1964 [1960]: 48).

By contrast, the Japanese embrace of modernization was both more pro-active and thoroughgoing. Comparatively, the legacies of tradition handed down from Shogunate Japan were more conducive to modernization along Western lines, whereas those from dynastic China proved to be too static, backward, and passive to respond effectively to threats from the West (Liao 2006: 10). Japan also enjoyed early success in the Sino–Japanese conflict concluded in 1895, followed by success in the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–5, the annexation of Taiwan and Korea in 1895 and 1910 respectively, and substantial encroachment into Manchuria shortly thereafter. Further away in Southeast Asia – with the exception of Thailand, which remained a monarchist redoubt – all the other countries, in their various guises and at various

times, were directly colonized by the Western powers of Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, and the United States, as well as by Japan during its pursuit of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere between 1933 and 1945 (Lin and Anderson-Wu 2010: 252). Moreover, these colonial circumstances remained in place until after the Second World War and sometime later in several cases.

## EARLY MODERN ARCHITECTURE

During the Meiji Restoration, the architecture of Japan began to westernize in a manner that became synonymous with modernization. This shift occurred through local encounters with industrialization and Western lifestyles, as well as through the introduction of new types of buildings in the service of foreign trade. As Japan itself modernized, new administrative headquarters, railway stations, ministries, schools, and military barracks were constructed. In most respects, the architectural style of the Meiji Restoration was a version of the then post-1850 European building and architecture, with differences reflective of Japanese climate, technology to the extent it existed, material availability, and prevailing local customs (Stewart 2002: 15). With few exceptions it was not particularly remarkable to Western visitors, although probably quite the opposite to locals. The modern profession of architecture was first institutionalized in a Western manner with the Imperial College of Engineering and the creation of the architecture programme around 1876 (Stewart 2002: 33).

The modern buildings and architecture of the Self-Strengthening Movement, reflecting China's defensive posture towards westernization, were largely confined to Treaty Ports – the spoils of gunboat diplomacy – and to factory and military installations in the hands of local reformers. Foreign architects also drew up proposals to house the Qing's belated reforms and some local architects built in a Western manner (Rowe and Kuan 2002: 24–54). Still, it was in Treaty Ports, like Shanghai, with their foreign jurisdictions, that modernization was more thoroughly introduced in the form of technology, industry, scientific management, and contemporary lifestyles. It was also where modern architecture materialized most, again as in Japan, largely through new building types in an eclectic array of Western styles ranging from the neo-classical Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank of 1923 through the *art deco* of the Sassoon House of 1929 to the *moderne* Embankment Building of 1933 (Rowe and Kuan 2002: 55–86). Given the strong territorial distinctions between one nation's 'concessions' and another's, architectural expression also differed but tended to follow styles current in the home country. Local modern professional education and practice also flourished, although starting more recently in China than in Japan, around the 1920s with the return of the first generation of Chinese architects trained abroad (Rowe and Wang 2011).

During the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea and Taiwan, architecture, particularly of public buildings, followed models from Japan. Interestingly though, when it came to modern city planning and building, the Japanese accomplished more abroad in their version of modernity than they did at home, where entrenched interests and disasters, like the Kantō Earthquake of 1923, hindered local efforts (Jung 2013: 3–22). Typically this modernity took the form of axial arrangements of diagonally intersecting boulevards, emanating from neo-classical *rond points*, or traffic circles, along with a uniform grid of streets and blocks. Further, legibility was

introduced in Western fashion by placing prominent buildings around the traffic circles in the overall plan. Later on, these practices were more strongly manifest in Japan's Manchuria and in cities like Changchun (Buck 2000).

In Southeast Asia, religion and a shared tropical climate largely decided the styles of traditional architecture that emerged of any lasting significance. Modernization coming with Western colonization initially involved the transplantation of commercial activities and institutions housed in new building types as in East Asia. Moreover, they were usually built in an architecture closely resembling prevalent styles in colonial home countries but also in a manner that responded to local climate, particularly with regard to sun-shading, natural ventilation, flash flooding, as well as available materials (Lin and Anderson-Wu 2010: 252–53). This response, in turn, led to otherwise Western-style buildings with long eave lines, arcades, verandahs, atriums and sometimes, multi-layered roofs.

## ARCHITECTURAL MODERNISM AND BEING MODERN

What is often referred to as 'orthodox' or 'avant-garde modernism' that appeared in both China and Japan in the 1930s and elsewhere in Southeast Asia sometime later essentially originated in Europe in the 1920s, if not before. It was closely associated with the new realities, or *die neue Sachlichkeit*, of advanced technology and material for building, alongside of scientific understandings of building processes and functional layouts, all tied up with rational modern lifestyles (Lane 1968: 131; Rowe 1993: 97–101). Indeed, dictums like 'form follows function' and 'less is more', emphasizing efficiencies, were also often associated with this form of modernism, as were mechanistic analogies like 'dwellings are machines to live in' (Banham 1960). In addition, there were Le Corbusier's 'Five Points' comprising supports, roof gardens, free design of the ground plane, horizontal windows, and free design of the façade, all implying an entirely new kind of building (Conrads 1970: 99). Further, there was a claimed universality involved, regardless of local or regional circumstances. In effect, the modern movement was a reaction to past and sometimes contemporary architecture in period styles that were often highly ornamented and contained concepts of functionalism rooted in the organic complexity and holism of building shapeliness and articulation of parts and wholes, rather than with technical and material efficiency. In East and Southeast Asia, 'orthodox modernism' or 'avant-garde' was a way of strongly expressing and symbolizing becoming modern and entering into a brave new world, beyond being contemporary, like the Banchō Seidlung of 1931 in central Tokyo and the Victoria Nurses Dormitory of 1930 in Shanghai.

Nevertheless, as Hegel eloquently put it, there are two sides to the 'modern', as he called it. For him, if the 'modern' represents a newly emerged present, then it should have the aspect of the present aiming towards the future, or brave new world, as well as the aspect of the present fading back into the past (Habermas 1987: 5–6). Therefore, as East Asia was opened up to a not entirely benign Western influence and began to catch up in so many ways, along with Southeast Asia in its post-colonial incarnations, both regions effectively entered into a 'new present'. Furthermore, the 'presencing' that came along with these emergences set in train two aspects in architecture: one in 'orthodox' or 'avant-garde modernism' and the other in regional 'revivalisms'. As time wore on, however, the tensions between these two rather

extreme positions gave rise to another conceptual space, where ‘orthodox modernism’ came to exist with regional inflections and ‘revivalism’ became tempered by contemporary circumstances. The ‘folding in’, as it were, from both sides towards the middle in different times and in different places, yielded a number of ‘modernisms’ and not just one.

## REGIONAL TRENDS TO AND FROM MODERNISM

When avant-garde modernism appeared in Japan in the 1930s, it also took place alongside an official nationalistic style of architecture in a traditional revivalist form of architecture known as Imperial Crown Style (Stewart 2002: 107–11). Between these was a relatively bland, masonry-clad, block-like commercial architecture, sometimes referred to as *moderne*. During the immediate post-Second World War period, international style modernism flourished in Japan, including some monumental projects honoring war victims and associated with public buildings like the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Complex of 1955, followed in the 1960s by several sculptural works of modern architecture for the Tokyo Olympic Games (Bognár 1995). Shortly thereafter, the ‘metabolists’ emerged as a strain of radical modernist thinking, especially with regard to cities, which they saw as developing in a manner, like metabolic processes, embodying change and renewal (Lin 2010; Mori Art Museum 2011). In the period of rising affluence during the 1970s and well into the 1980s, formalism and architecture for its own sake took precedence, alongside efforts to genuinely broaden the scope of architectural modernism, particularly with inclusion of Japanese manners of spatial appreciation. Much of the architecture in the 1980s was also full of post-modern quotations, reacting as elsewhere to a need to move beyond what had become perceived as a bland rationalism to an architecture replete with symbolism and a sense of history and tradition (Rowe 2006: 25). Then, with the bursting of the economic and property asset bubble in the early 1990s and the horror of catastrophic events like the Kobe Earthquake, an interest in urban circumstances returned to architecture, along with a more transparent and simple modernism (Igarashi 2010: 192). Today, although local culture is certainly important, Japanese architecture transcends the usual regional boundaries and is modern in a more universal sense of belonging to the contemporary world (Daniell 2008).

By the 1930s in China, besides a penchant for *moderne* and *art deco* in architecture, particularly in Treaty Ports like Shanghai, several local and foreign firms designed in an orthodox modernist manner (Rowe and Kuan 2002: 81). Also, as in Japan, this was accompanied by an official nationalistic revivalist style promoted by the Nationalist government, ‘glorifying China’s past while building in an otherwise modern manner’ (Rowe and Kuan 2002: 73–76). The post-Civil War period of the 1950s commenced with the so-called ‘Big Roof’ architecture, embodying ‘socialist content and national form’, before sliding almost by default into a modernist stance under deteriorating economic conditions, with an increasingly debased modern architecture of ‘function, form, and appearance when circumstances allow’ (Liu 1959: 3–12). Immediately after the opening up to the outside world around 1978, the arrival of ‘Culture Fever’ gave rise to ‘modern content and Chinese form’ and a return to revivalist expression, alongside a continuation of Chinese architecture’s allegorical aspect of being expressive of something else, sometimes mistaken for post-

modernism, like the Beijing West Railway Station of 1996 (Li 1988: 52; Chen 1992). As time went on into the 1980s and the new millennium, urbanization intensified as did the appearance of many iconic hyper-modern buildings, largely in the hands of foreign architects and at the behest of state sponsors, with an exaggeration of many of the ensemble of modernist architecture's inherent characteristics, marking the arrival of a 'new China' on the world stage (Rowe 2011: 19–73). Recently, a third stream of architecture has emerged alongside corporate and state-sponsored show pieces representing a 'new modernism' of *xiao* (small), *qing* (clear), and *xin* (novel) features and concerns for China's 'new realities', including a certain modesty of means in the nation as a whole to be found in a project like the Bridge School in Xiashi Village of 2008 (Rowe and Kan 2013: 8; Zhou 2013).

During Korea's developmental period after the Japanese occupation and civil war, roughly from 1960 to 1988, architecture slowly emerged, although again in at least two directions (Song 2012). One coincided with international style modern architecture, whereas the other adhered to the military regime's policy of 'creating new national arts based on traditional culture', mandating traditional forms for new public buildings (Jung 2013: 82). Apartments, which became the dominant type of middle-class housing, were almost uniformly modernist in high-rise and slab-block configurations. From the full rise of democracy in South Korea from 1993 onwards, architecture entered a new phase, similar to China around the same time, and was divided among work mainly by foreign architects and later by the emergence of Korean architects. Again, a mix of hyper-modernist commercial and iconic special-built projects was constructed, where many of the ensembles of modernist architectural characteristics were amplified, particularly with regard to engineering prowess and material finishes, as at Boutique Monaco in Seoul of 2008 or the Incheon International Airport of 2002 (Chung 2010). Among local architects, by contrast, a 'new realism' emerged around urban, material, and topographic aspects, alongside time-honoured conditions now interpreted in a contemporary manner (Park and Hong 2012).

Taiwan, under its militaristic regime until the late 1980s, went through similar trends in architectural development. On the one hand, modernist high-rise and commercial buildings dominated Taipei's urban landscape, whereas on the other, large institutional structures included copious traditional architectural references (Roan 2013). However, although the incorporation of an expression of tradition in contemporary Korean architecture had run its course by the onset of the democratic period, the same cannot be said for Taiwan in the contemporary era, which also started with the emergence of true democracy in the 1990s. There, work by the so-called Taiwanese Vernacular Clique is a prominent form of architectural thinking that purportedly straddles and blends 'East' and 'West' but also bears a striking resemblance to post-modernism earlier in the West and particularly the United States, which is very apparent in Taipei 101 of 2003 (Rowe 2011: 130).

The evolutionary pattern and trajectory of the modern in architecture in Southeast Asia began with 'colonial modern' and largely Western styles of architecture synonymous with practices of the time in home countries, with noticeable manifestations to accommodate tropical and less familiar climates (Nas 2006). During the post-colonial era up to about the 1980s, architectural expression in the region became pre-occupied with establishing national identities and was oriented in two rather distinct directions (Lin and Anderson-Wu 2010: 252). The first, often

mandated by the powers in charge, as in Sukarno's Indonesia and in Thailand, was towards recovery of a traditional-appearing authenticity replete with copious imitations of elements of older indigenous architecture like temples, mosques, and palaces. The second, by contrast, was steadfastly modern and pointed in the direction of the future rather than the past but also in a manner where a conspicuous effort to scale up the architecture of public buildings was made, in places like the Philippines and Malaysia, to somehow match the grandeur of those in the past, resulting in a 'monumental modernism' clearly on display at the Theatre of Performing Arts in Manila of 1969 (Polites 1977). Then, as time moved on into the 1990s and the new millennium, two further strains appeared to share the region's architectural scene. The first, common throughout other parts of Asia, comprised a globally familiar and actively promoted mix of commercial architecture and iconic, mainly hyper-modern buildings primarily under state sponsorship, as in China, that became most conspicuous in Singapore (Rowe 2010). The second strain, resistive to the first, was a 'vernacular modernism' that strove to ally and merge local building resources of both spatial and material kinds, with longstanding expressions of being modern that sought clarity and honesty in function, structure, and material substance (Lin and Anderson-Wu 2010).

## ARCHITECTURAL MODERNISMS AND GLOBAL CULTURE

In spite of the division that is usually made between East Asia and Southeast Asia in these kinds of discussions, at least with regard to architectural modernity, there are some broad similarities. In both cases, 'modern' was initially directly equated with westernization and the adoption of Western practices introduced by foreign and colonial powers. Also, the swing in architectural expression, typically between a version of national identity, alongside or actively embracing being modern in the world, took place at regular intervals in both places. One outcome of these swings was both a locally tempered architectural modernism and a restrained architectural revivalism. Over time, the bombast and comparatively extreme position-taking of both kinds of architecture has diminished, if not become exhausted, at least locally, where it really counts. In today's global culture, localism, certainly in East and Southeast Asia's 'new architectural modernisms', is no longer in opposition to some universal condition. Indeed, to the extent that such a global condition might be said to exist, its architectural contents and trajectories appear to be defined now by increasingly interconnected local cultures and architectural modernities.

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